

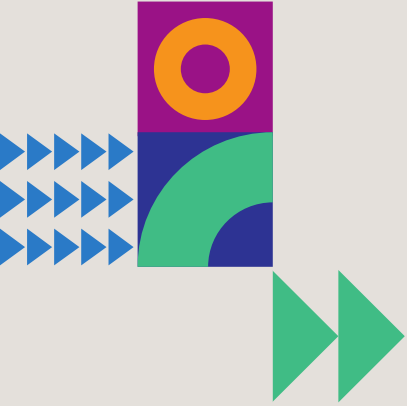
Enabling critical thinking in social work



Dr Joanna Rawles

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A presentation and discussion for anyone who has a role in supporting and enabling social work students and practitioners to embed critical thinking into their reflection

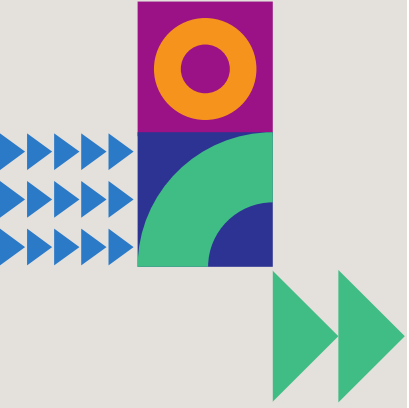
- Based on the following book chapter

*Rawles, J. (2023) 'Critical thinking and reflective practice' in Parker, J (ed) (2nd Ed) (2023) **Introducing Social Work: London. Sage/Learning Matters***

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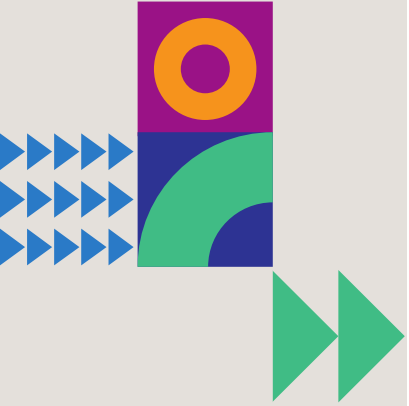
The following approach to developing the habit of critical thinking can be adapted to different learning environments

- How might your learning environment lend itself to this approach?
- How could you adapt it?
- What opportunities could it bring?
- What challenges might there be and how might you overcome them?
- How could you help the learner make connections between learning environments?

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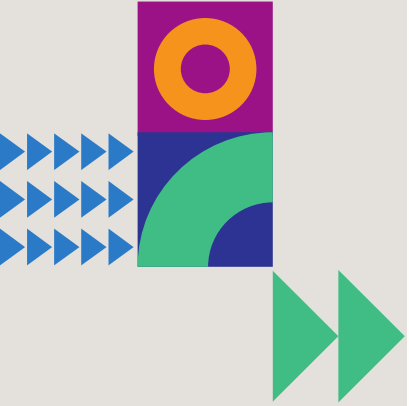


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THE PRINCIPLES BEHIND EFFECTIVE LEARNING

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Learning is enhanced by a learner's autonomy being supported

Research:

Autonomy-supportive teachers generally encourage students to pursue self-determined agendas and then support students' initiatives and intrinsic motivation. (Reeve 1998 p312)

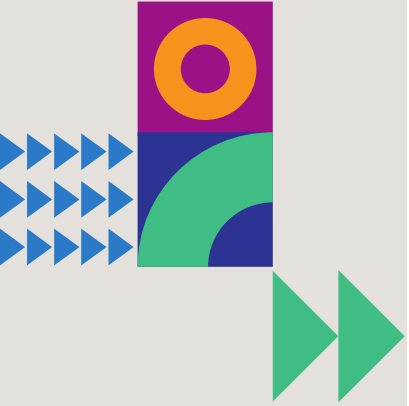
- Social work students learned best in practice when their autonomy was supported

- Professional responsibility
 - Facilitation of the professional voice
 - Learner agency
- (Rawles 2021)

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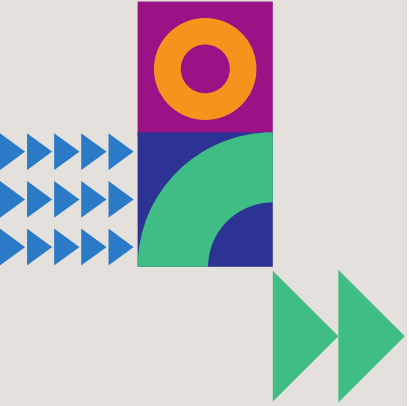


UNDERSTANDING WHAT CRITICAL THINKING IS – A THEORETICAL BASIS

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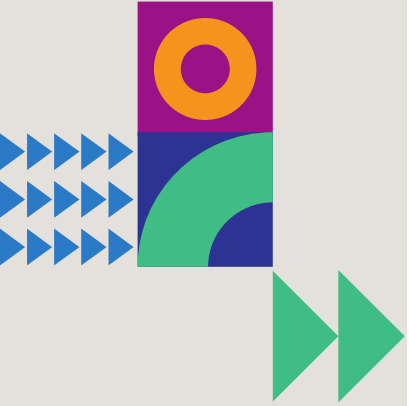
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“Social work is not just about doing: it is also about thinking. It is the thinking that makes the doing meaningful” (Rawles 2023 p102)



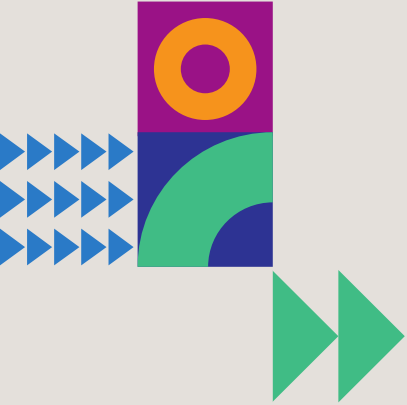
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And.....

“Thinking is informed by knowledge but it is also influenced by ..other things that we as human beings experience in our lives without even realising

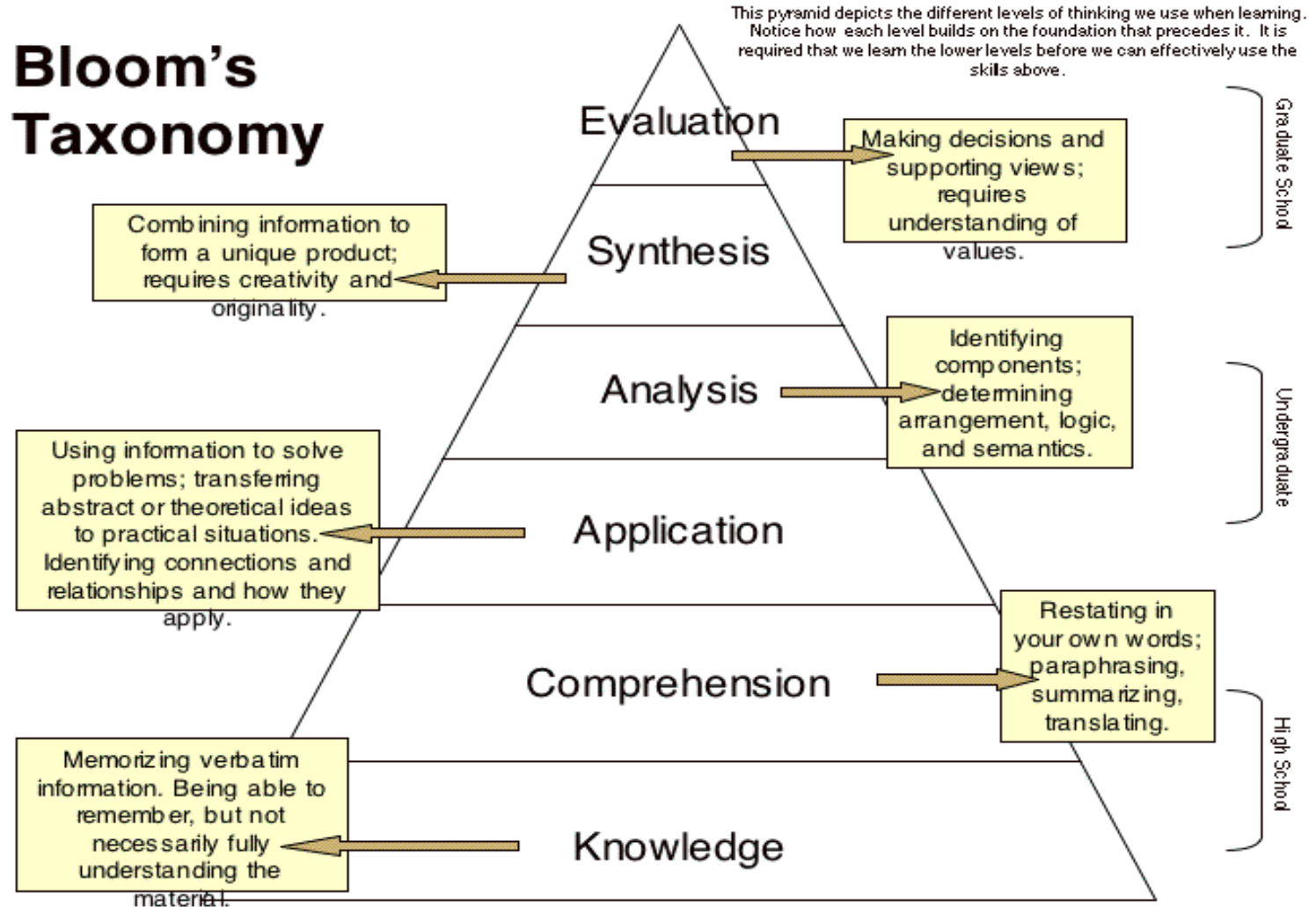
The key to effective thinking for social work is to be able to uncover and understand what these influences are. To make them explicit rather than leave them as implicit”
(Rawles 2023 p102/103)



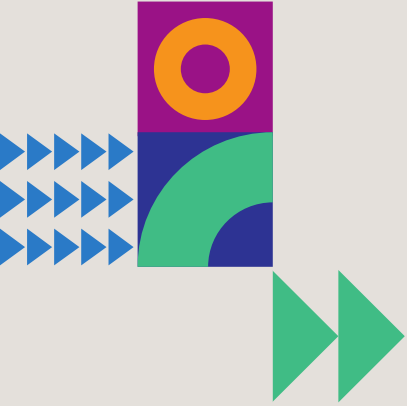
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Bloom's Taxonomy



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What do we NOT mean when we say critical thinking

Something negative

- They were always critical of how I dressed

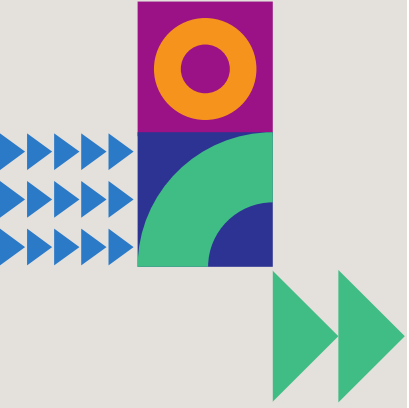
Something vital or serious

- It is critical we get these supplies by tomorrow
- The patient is in a critical condition

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What we do mean – A critique

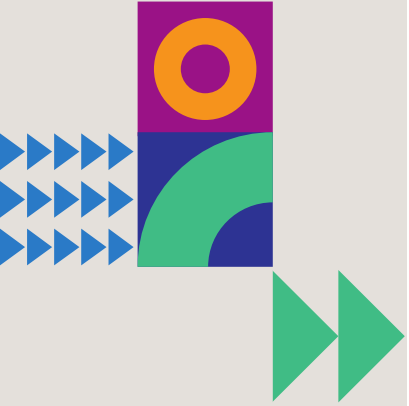
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Critical thinking means



“being sceptical and questioning everything that you read, see or hear, then analysing and evaluating it before drawing a conclusion” (Rawles 2023 p103)



Critical thinking derived from critical theory

- To disrupt the status quo – uncover those taken for granted assumptions – Hegemony
- Brookfield's (1997 p7-9) three components of critical thinking
 1. Identifying and challenging assumptions
 2. Exploring the importance of context
 3. Imagining alternatives

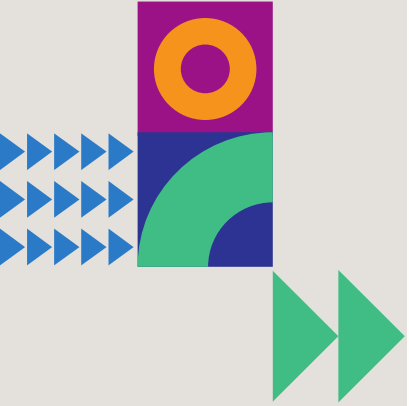
Leads to....

reflective scepticism

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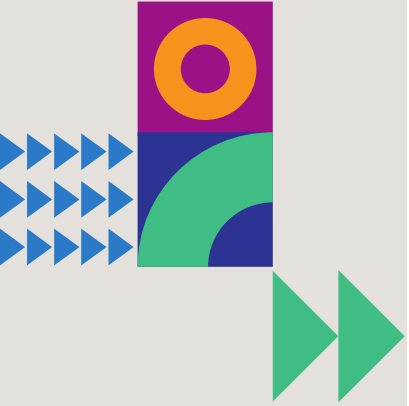
So whenever you encounter information you should ask yourself..

- Am I identifying and challenging **assumptions**?
- Have I explored the importance of **context**?
- Have I imagined possible **alternatives**?

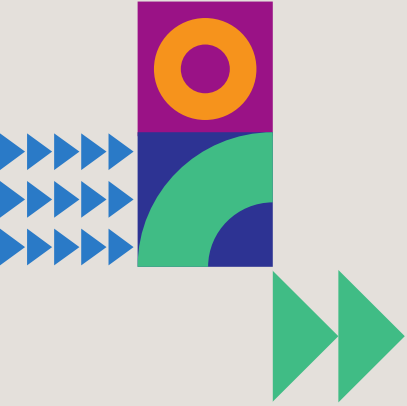
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WHY ARE THESE THREE COMPONENTS IMPORTANT FOR SOCIAL WORK?



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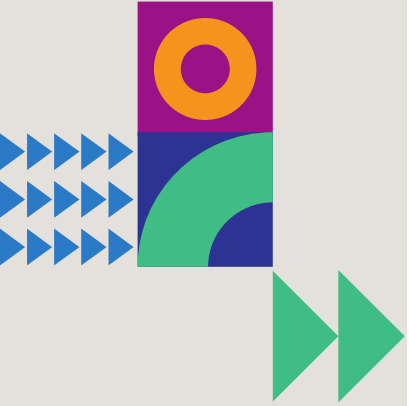
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1. Assumptions

- Social workers need to make decisions, judgements, recommendations
- Emotions are an intrinsic part of our decision making (Damasio 1994)
- We resort to heuristics to interpret information (Taylor 2016)
- We are therefore liable to rely on stereotypes to form our opinions

So...

- Decision making is not a value-neutral activity (Beckett, Maynard & Jordan 2017)
- We have all grown up with certain values and beliefs that create the lens through which we interpret the world. Challenging our own assumptions can be uncomfortable



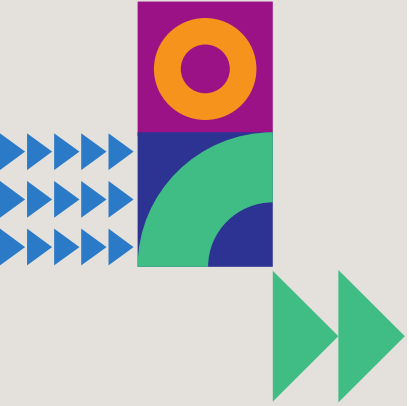
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2. Context

- Context is not just the physical, social, political environment in which we live but the culture we inhabit and how that culture intersects with the environment often creating cultural and structural disadvantage and discrimination
- Social work in the UK has historically taken an individualistic approach – “the individual failing of clients” (Jones et al 2008 p19)
- “the focus on changing the individual can often be at the expense of critically analysing the context” (Rawles 2023 p107)

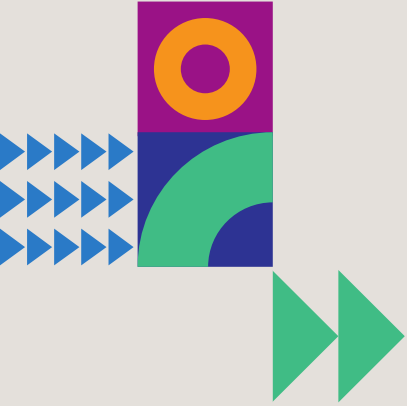


3. Imagining Alternatives

- Confirmation bias
- Availability – of information and of solutions or responses

It requires an approach that uses

- Professional curiosity
- Hypothesising
..and then re-hypothesising!



Professional Capabilities Framework

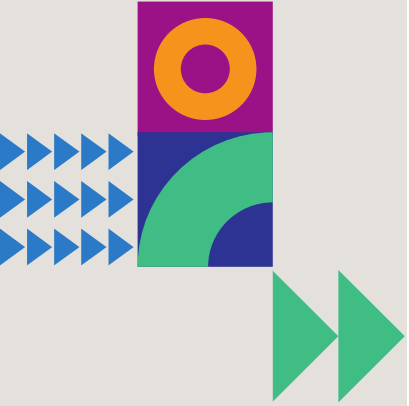
6. CRITICAL REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS - Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making

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Social Work England Professional Standards

3. Be accountable for the quality of my practice and the decisions I make.

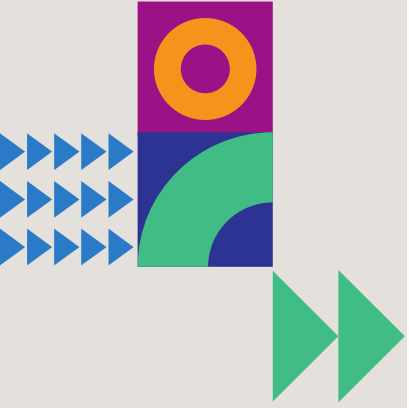


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HOW TO EMBED THE HABIT OF CRITICAL THINKING

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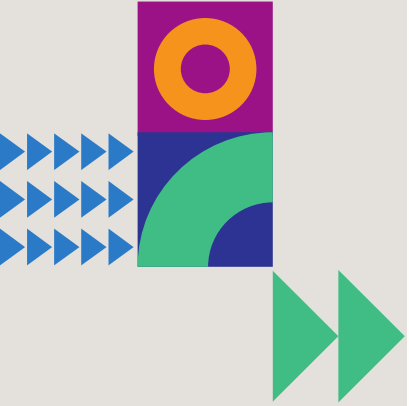
A re-cap on reflection. (what is your relationship with reflection as an educator?)

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“Experience creates the potential for learning but, in itself, it teaches us nothing directly. It is what we *do with* experience that is the best teacher”

Thompson & Thompson (2018 p57)



“Helicopter Vision”



“Rise above a situation to get the overview of how the component parts fit together and how they create the overall situation”

Thompson & Thompson (2018 p57)

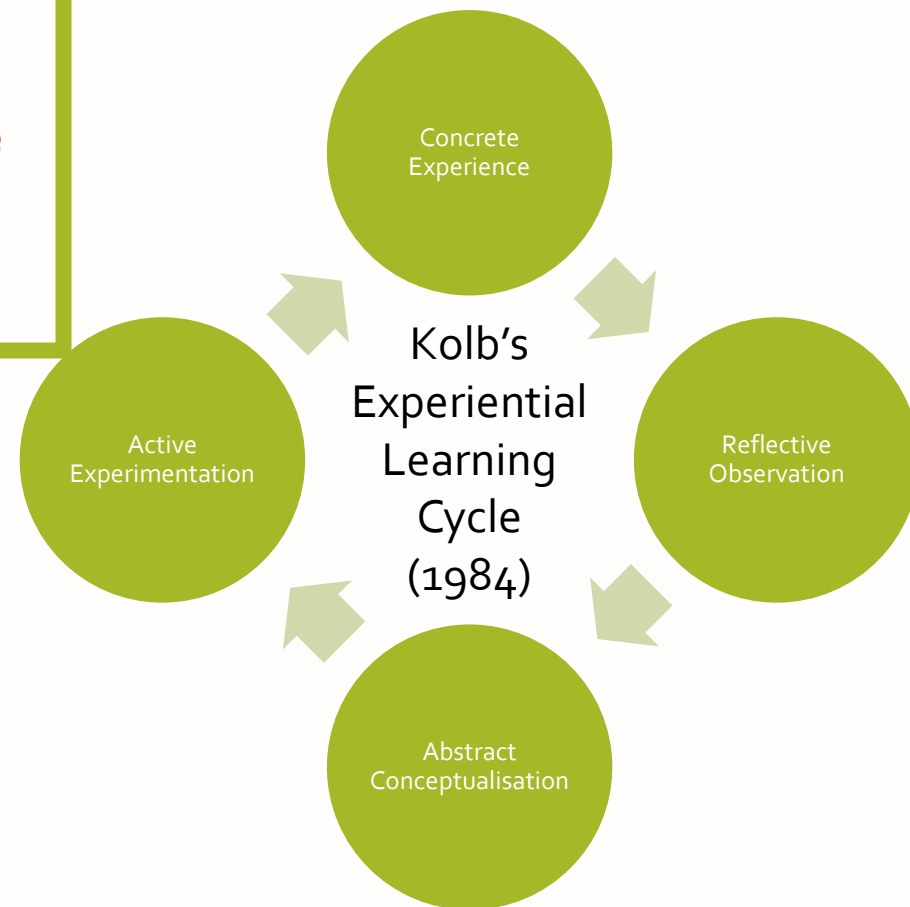
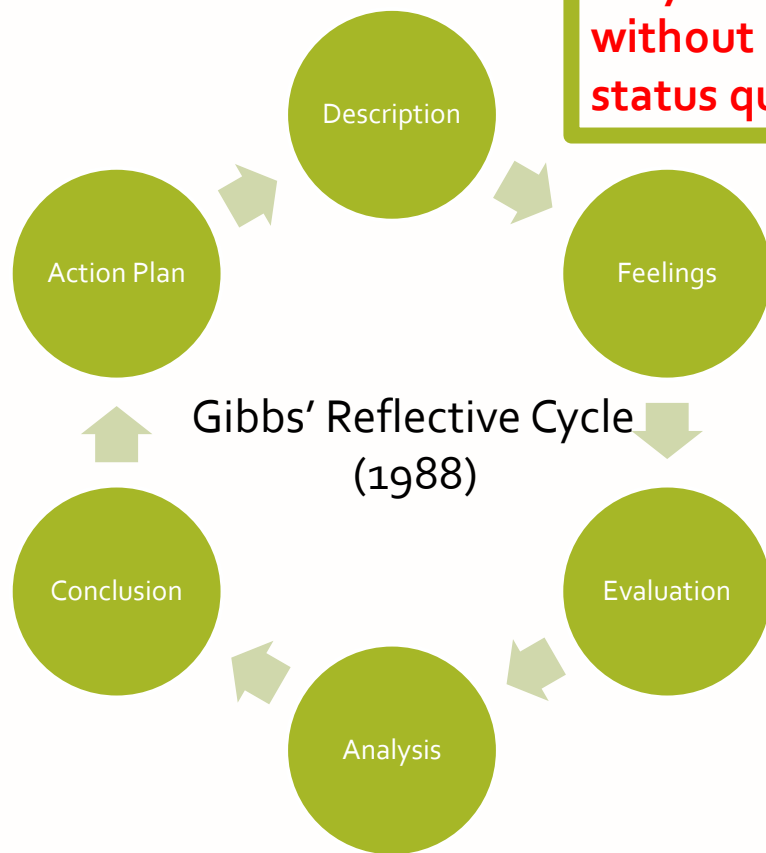
But.... “We must guard against placing ourselves outside the reflective gaze”
(Rawles 2023 p121)

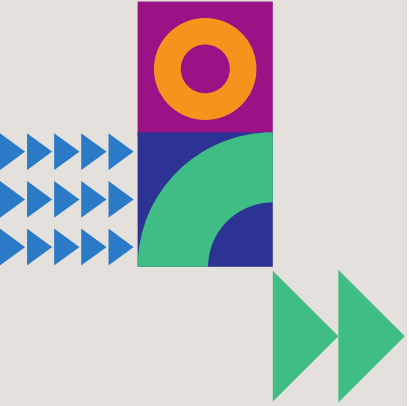
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Commonly used reflective cycles

Do they automatically make us think critically?
I would argue not because they can be completed without disrupting the status quo





Combining critical thinking with reflection

What I am suggesting is engaging in a point of critical scrutiny at each of the key stages in the reflective cycle

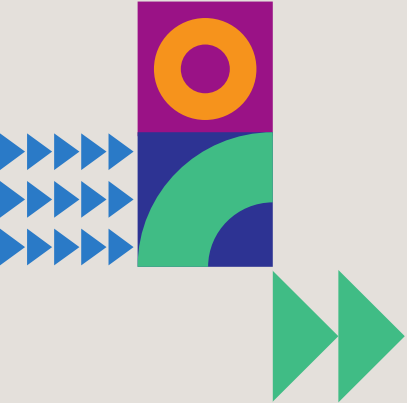
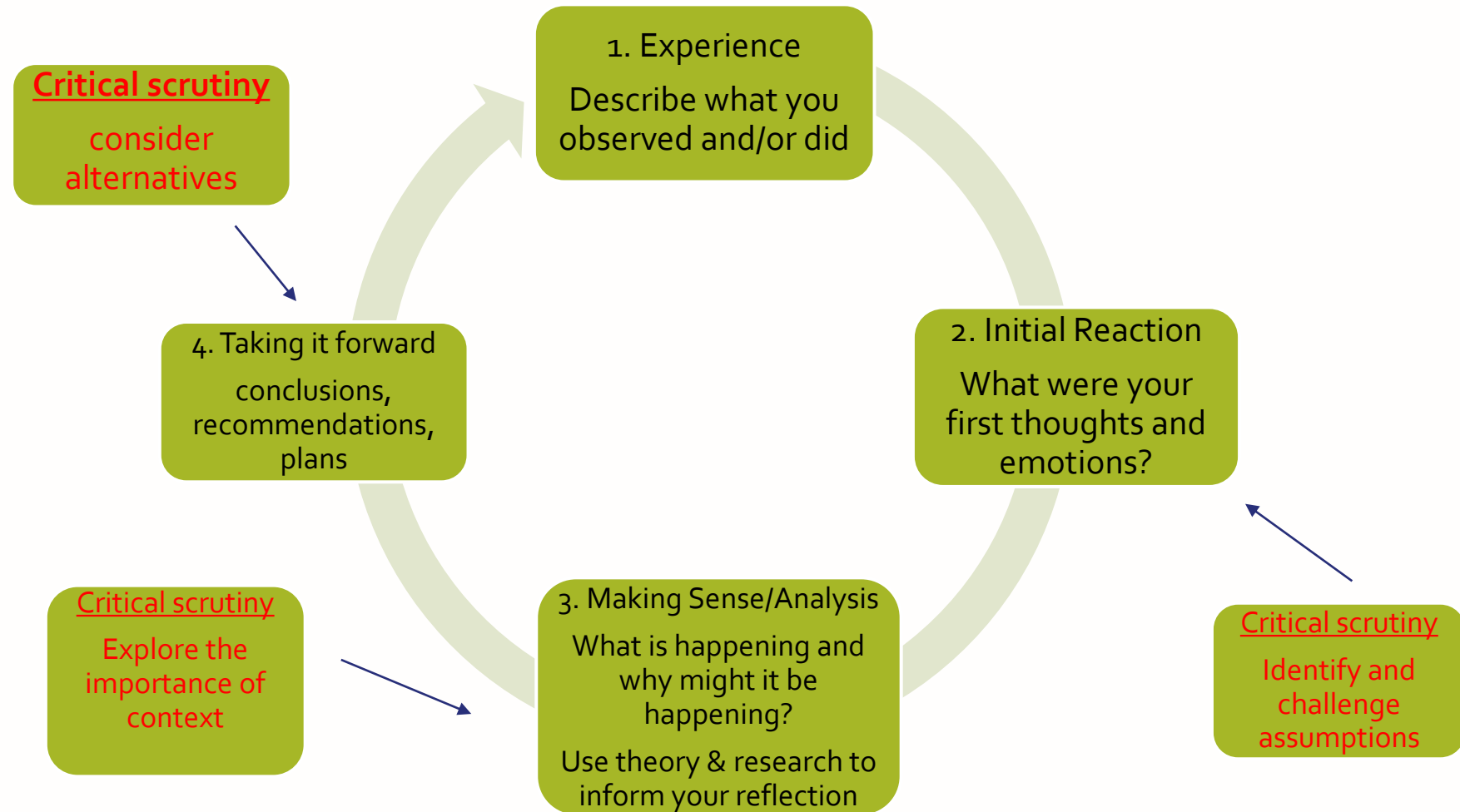
- A reflecting *back* on your reflection to consider assumptions, context and alternatives
- A *pause* – an opportunity to ‘stop and think’

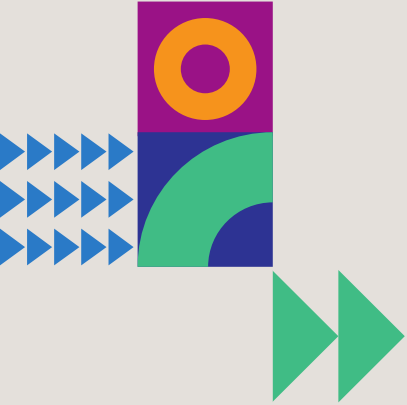
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The Critical Thinking Reflective Cycle (Rawles 2023 p125)





Taking it further

Using the points of critical scrutiny as a springboard to explore related concepts, theories, structures and ideas

Critical scrutiny

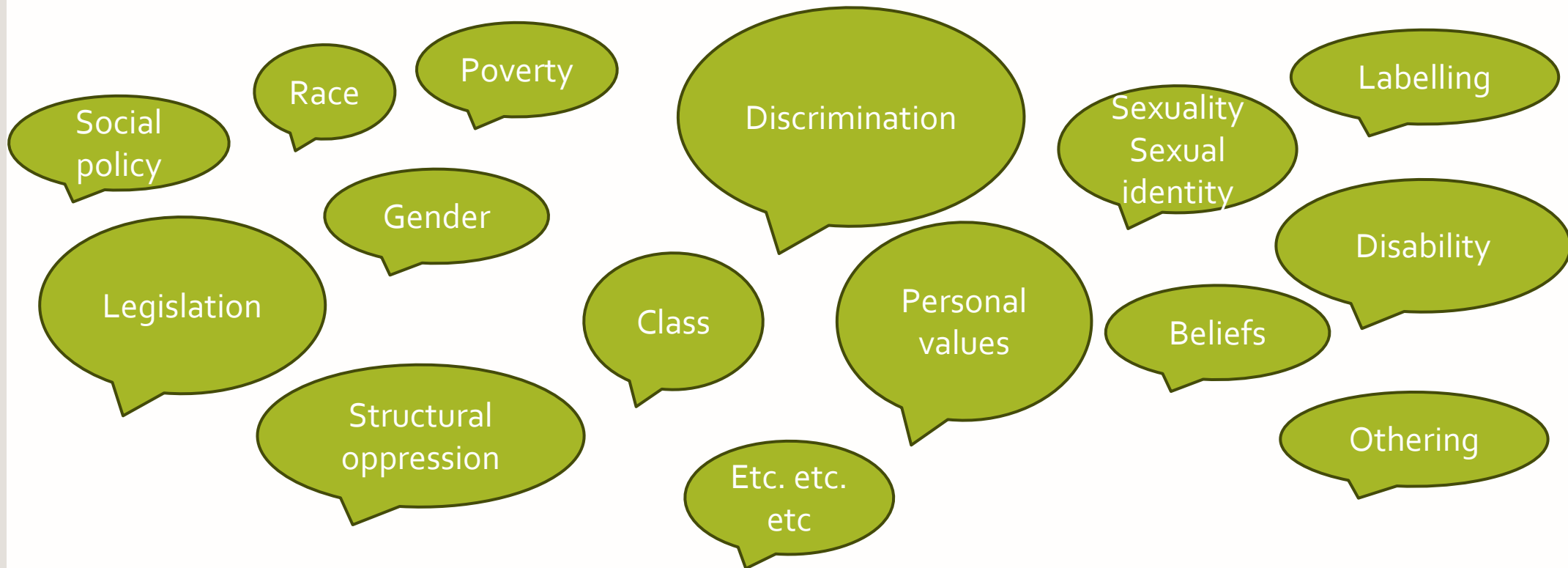
Identify and challenge assumptions

Critical scrutiny

Explore the importance of context

Critical scrutiny

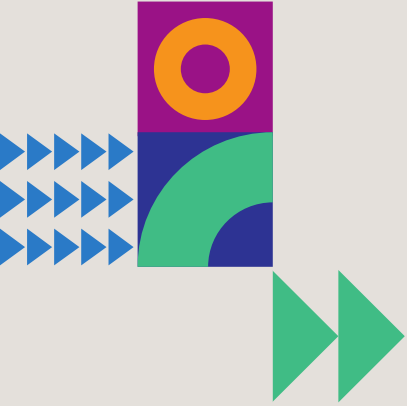
consider alternatives



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Enabling the development of critical thinking involves always asking the learner

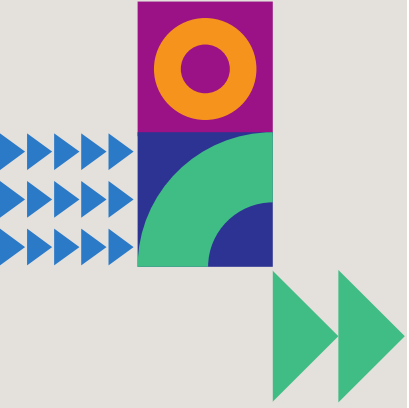
What do you think?
Why do you think it?

... this is what supports autonomy and, according to social work students, is often the lightbulb moment in them realising the power, authority and responsibility invested in their role (Rawles 2021)

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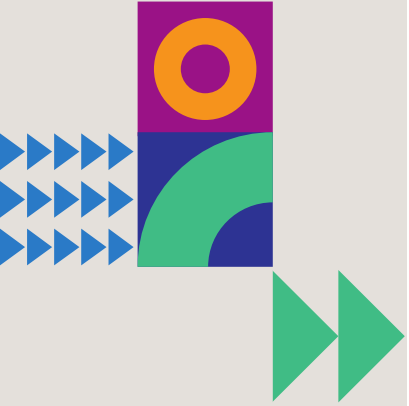
For the social work educators amongst you, I will leave you with this to consider

Does the current social work practice environment make it challenging for social workers to be assertive in disrupting the status quo? If so, how do you reconcile that with your role in enabling the next or current generation of social workers to be critically disruptive thinkers?

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