

Contents

<i>List of Table and Figures</i>	x
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xi
<i>Introduction</i>	xiii
1 Profiles and Portfolios: The Health Care Context	1
Influences on the development of profiles	2
Statutory bodies	2
Reflective practice	5
Adult and higher education	6
Market forces	7
Uses within health care	10
PREP requirements	10
Job applications	10
Identifying personal goals	11
Focus for organising your own learning	11
Supporting learning from practice and clinical supervision	12
Tool for reflective practice	12
Achieving credit as part of a prior learning claim	12
Assessment for an educational programme	13
Lifelong learning	13
References	15
2 Profiles and Portfolios: The Social Care Context	16
Evidence-based practice, lifelong learning and portfolio development	18
Standards for social care	19
Occupational standards for social care	19
Continuing professional development	21
References	22
3 Getting to Grips with the Terminology	23
Lifelong learning	23
Lifelong learning and work	24
Continuing professional development	26
Profiles and portfolios	28
Experiential learning	30
Reflection	32

Learning outcomes	33
Multidisciplinary teams: the challenge for CPD	34
Progress files and personal development planning	34
Credit frameworks	35
Key skills	35
Glossary of terms	36
References	36
4 Some Common Themes and Questions Shared	37
Why do I need to compile a profile?	38
Should I buy a ready-made profile?	39
How do I decide which profile to buy?	39
What can I put into it?	43
How long will it take to complete?	44
Who owns my profile?	44
How do I know that the learning I am demonstrating is at the appropriate level?	44
How much information should I include?	45
What should I do if I haven't written for a long time?	45
Where can I go for help?	46
References	47
5 Getting Started: Creating Your Personal Profile	48
Taking stock	49
Developing a structure	58
Reflecting on past learning	60
Identifying significant learning	61
Proving what you know and can do	66
Constructing your profile	70
References	75
6 Profiles and Reflective Practice	76
Role of reflection in professional practice	77
Reflection and learning	78
Defining reflection and reflective practice	80
Reflection and profiles	81
Writing and reflecting	82
Confidentiality	83
Reflection – how do you do it?	85
Ideas for further work on reflection	91
References	92

7 Making Your Learning Count	94
Towards a definition of accreditation	95
Accreditation of continuing professional development	96
National Occupational Standards	96
National Vocational Qualifications	97
Key skills	99
Awarding bodies	99
National Qualifications Framework	100
Accreditation and your portfolio	101
Other awarding bodies	107
8 Helping Others to Develop a Profile: The Skills of Facilitation	108
Learning from experience	108
Assisting others with their profile	112
Blocks to learning	113
Facilitation skills	115
Planning the profile	118
Establishing ground rules	122
Progress chasing	123
Evaluation	123
References	124
9 Further Resources: Further Activities to Help You Develop Your Profile	125
Activity 1: Conducting a personal SWOT analysis	125
Activity 2: Mind mapping	130
Activity 3: Goal and action planning	132
Activity 4: Understanding your learning style	133
PEST analysis	137
Goal and action plan form	140
References	141
<i>Annotated Bibliography</i>	142
<i>Index</i>	151

Profiles and Portfolios: The Health Care Context

1

This chapter charts the history and identifies the factors that have influenced the introduction of profiles into the world of health care, focusing on nurses, midwives and health visitors, and health care assistants. It discusses some of the uses that have been identified for profiles in health care, and the benefits health care professionals can gain from developing and using a profile. Finally it looks briefly at developments within health care that add to the importance of using profiles.

All nurses, midwives and health visitors on the professional register have been required for some time to use a profile or portfolio to maintain their registration. The requirement was introduced in the 1990s by the profession's governing body of the time, the United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing, Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC) as part of its Post-Registration Education and Practice (PREP) initiative. This requires all practitioners to undertake continuing professional development (CPD). Their Personal Professional Portfolios are used to demonstrate that individual practitioners have fulfilled their PREP requirements in order to remain on the register.

Although health care assistants do not have a statutory requirement to use a profile, those who are undertaking NVQ courses need to do so to demonstrate their learning. This chapter sets the scene by identifying the factors that have influenced the increasing use of profiles in health care. While practitioners have to maintain profiles in order to meet their professional or educational requirements, there are other reasons for doing so. We hope this book will help you to understand why profiles can help you in your personal and professional development. Even if you do not currently need to use a profile for professional or educational reasons, we hope it will show you why it is a good idea and how it may help you in the future.

Influences on the development of profiles

Articles about the use of portfolios began to appear in the nursing and midwifery press in the early 1990s. However, like most major changes in professional behaviour, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly who started the ball rolling or when. The process was gradual, and was influenced by a number of factors such as:

- The requirements of statutory bodies
- The recognition that reflective practice can help professionals to develop their practice
- Market forces
- The requirements of educational institutions.

Statutory bodies

Statutory bodies have been influential in introducing the concept of profiles, and continue to support their use. This is interesting, because these bodies often lag behind the profession in educational and professional development, because of their necessarily slow decision-making processes. In the case of nursing, midwifery and health visiting, however, the professional body took a lead by making it a statutory requirement for professionals to use a profile.

The UKCC introduced the requirement for all registrants to use a portfolio in 1995. This was part of the introduction of PREP, which made it a statutory requirement for practitioners to undertake CPD within each three-year registration period. Each time they apply to renew their registration, practitioners must be able to show that they have fulfilled their responsibilities, which are set out in two PREP standards:

The PREP (practice) standard This requires practitioners to undertake at least 100 days (or 750 hours) of professional practice in the previous five years;

The PREP (continuing professional development) standard This requires practitioners to have undertaken and recorded at least five days (or 35 hours) of CPD in the previous three-year registration period.

Profiles – or Personal Professional Portfolios – were introduced as the method by which nurses and midwives could demonstrate that they had met the CPD standard. They had a few years to get used to the idea and to

develop their portfolios, but in 2000 practitioners were required to declare on their Notification of Practice form that they had met this requirement when they applied to renew their registration. The following year the UKCC began to audit compliance with the CPD standard. In 2002 the UKCC was replaced by the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC). The council also took over the functions of the four National Boards and continues to audit the CPD standard. Each month, up to 10 per cent of those applying to renew their registration are issued with PREP (CPD) summary forms. These are sent out between 14 and 90 days before their renewal date, and ask registrants to give a brief description of the CPD they have undertaken and its relevance to their work. The forms must be returned to the NMC before registration can be renewed. Midwives had been required to undertake CPD for some time before the introduction of PREP under Rule 37 of the Midwives Rules. In 2001, however, this was superseded by the PREP standards, bringing midwifery in line with nursing and health visiting. In order to help practitioners to make sense of their PREP requirements, the NMC has issued *The PREP Handbook* (NMC, 2002), which sets out in detail what it expects.

The handbook makes it clear that the CPD standard can be fulfilled in many ways. The important thing is that practitioners record all learning activities in their Personal Professional Portfolio, so that when they come to renew their registration they have a clear record of all CPD activities they have undertaken and how their practice benefited as a result.

The handbook also gives a number of case studies showing different ways of recording CPD and the different types of activities that are considered relevant. It clearly shows that the process of demonstrating fulfilment of the CPD standard is not complicated. However, without a Personal Professional Portfolio with clear records of CPD activities to refer back to, the task would be far more difficult!

The PREP Handbook makes the following points about CPD that are useful to remember:

- It does not have to cost any money.
- There is no such thing as approved PREP (CPD) activity.
- You don't need to collect points or certificates of attendance.
- There is no approved format for the Personal Professional Portfolio.
- It must be relevant to the work you are doing and/or plan to do in the near future.
- It must help you to provide the highest possible standards of care for your patients.

4 Profiles and Portfolios

Because there is no approved format for the Personal Professional Portfolio, it is up to individual practitioners to develop their own in a form that suits them. In order for it to be as useful as possible, however, it should be a reflective document, showing how reflection has helped the practitioner to make sense of learning – both through CPD and day-to-day practice.

We will discuss reflective practice on page 5 and in greater detail in Chapter 6. Although they no longer exist, two of the National Boards did play an important role in influencing and increasing professional awareness and understanding of the use of profiles and portfolios. Even before the introduction of PREP, the Welsh National Board produced a Professional Profile Folder, which it made available in 1991. This used a similar format to personal organisers, which were becoming widely used at the time. Many practitioners have found this a useful way of keeping a profile or portfolio, as it enables them to keep material in clearly defined sections for ease of reference.

Soon after, the English National Board produced a framework for continuing professional education (ENB, 1991), which has helped many practitioners to clarify what constitutes CPD. The framework was designed around 10 key characteristics of professional practice, which are said to represent the benchmarks of expert professional practice and remain relevant today – not only to nurses, midwives and health visitors, but to all health care professionals. These key characteristics relate to:

- Professional accountability and responsibility
- Clinical expertise with a specific client group
- Use of research to plan, implement and evaluate strategies to improve care
- Teamworking and building, and multidisciplinary team leadership
- Flexible and innovative approaches to care
- Use of health promotion strategies
- Facilitating and assessing development in others
- Handling information and making informed clinical decisions
- Setting standards and evaluating quality of care
- Initiating, managing and evaluating clinical change.

Although the framework ceased to operate when the NMC replaced the ENB, these key characteristics can be helpful in planning your CPD – if your learning activities fulfil one or more of the characteristics it is relevant to your PREP requirements.

Terminology

Some readers may be wondering about our apparently inconsistent use of terminology to describe profiles and portfolios in this chapter. We have used different terms such as 'Personal Professional Portfolio' and 'Professional Profile Folder' as they are or were applied by the different statutory bodies. So, the NMC refers to a Personal Professional Portfolio, but in our experience, the terms 'profile' and 'portfolio' are used interchangeably, and often inaccurately.

Chapter 3 discusses the terminology associated with profiles and portfolios in some detail. At this point terminology is not important except to note that within health care there seems to be some confusion and inconsistency. From now on we will use the term profile unless we are talking about a specific product that calls itself a portfolio.

Reflective practice

While the use of profiles was growing in nursing and midwifery, a parallel development was the growing acknowledgement of reflective practice as a tool in professional development. We will discuss reflective practice in more detail in Chapter 6, but here we will discuss it in the context of its influence on profiles.

Any readers who have recently completed a nursing or midwifery course at either pre-registration or post-registration level are likely to have been asked to complete a reflective journal or diary. Some NVQ students may also be asked to do this. Most commercially available profiles encourage their owners to reflect, and to use the profile to store the outcomes of the reflective process. Some also give advice on how to develop skills in reflection.

By encouraging reflective practice, profiles generate further interest in reflective practice. Equally, since reflective practitioners need to write about their reflections, reflective practice encourages the use of profiles, which are the ideal place to do this. However, even if you have a commercially developed profile that gives advice on reflection, it is unlikely to be comprehensive, and you are likely to need to supplement it with further reading on the subject of reflection and reflective practice. Chapter 6 is a good place to start.

Professionals often express concern about how confidential and secure a record of reflective practice can be within a profile. Once you have committed the outcomes of your reflections to paper or computer disc, who does it belong to? Who has the right to see it? There have been some occa-

sions where the contents of personal diaries or reflective journals have been subpoenaed as evidence within cases of professional conduct or litigation.

Confidentiality is a difficult issue when it comes to reflection. In most situations, you can keep sections of your reflective writings just for yourself, and should not be expected to show it to anyone else. You may need to generate sections that demonstrate how your reflections have helped your professional development and that you are happy to show to others such as tutors and managers, but it is quite normal to have a 'private' section.

However, in cases where you are called upon to give evidence, a court or disciplinary committee may require these private sections. Of course, you need to remember that in such a situation you would in any case be expected to tell 'the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth' as a law-abiding citizen, so it should not be a problem to show your reflective journal. You may even find the journal helpful in jogging your memory, since hearings often happen months after the incident in question.

This requirement to tell the truth means that even if you do not write about an incident in your reflective journal, you may be asked to give evidence about it. Just because you did not write about an incident does not mean it did not happen, so you could still be asked to give verbal evidence about it.

Putting aside the spectre of giving evidence for a moment, under normal circumstances you have a choice about what you record in your reflective diary and profile. You also have a choice about what parts you share, when and with whom. The issue of confidentiality is discussed in more detail in Chapter 6.

We believe the outcomes of reflective practice and the learning that occurs as a result is professional knowledge in the making. In the past nurses, midwives and other professionals depended on information in textbooks and articles to help them to know what to do and when. However, this knowledge can also be developed through the insight gained during reflective practice, which has the benefit of being grounded in clinical practice, and therefore relevant to your work. Journals and books are increasingly using reflective material, for example in the form of case examples in which the author or another practitioner discusses a case and reflects on how it might influence their practice in future.

Adult and higher education

The development and use of profiles within health care has been heavily influenced by educationalists in adult and higher education. The professional preparation these people received in order to become teachers,

tutors or lecturers has made them aware of the ways in which profiles are used in other contexts, both within health care and other spheres. These applications include:

- as a profile approach to assessment
- as part of a claim for prior learning within a credit accumulation and transfer scheme
- the use of learning contracts within profiles
- the student-centred approach that profiles encourage.

Many educationalists working in health care also find the use of profiles attractive because it enables students to take an open learning approach, where they identify their own learning needs. This enables educationalists to become facilitators, encouraging students' professional development and helping them to define and meet their learning needs, rather than simply teaching all students the same material, regardless of their learning needs and prior knowledge and experience.

Market forces

When the use of Personal Professional Portfolios became a statutory requirement for nurses, midwives and health visitors on the register, a number of publishing houses produced profiles. The quality and approach of these commercially produced profiles varied – particularly since the UKCC at the time did not give rigid instructions as to what format they should take.

A number are still available, both for nurses and midwives and for health care assistants. While practitioners are free to develop their profiles as they see fit, many find it helpful to have a ready-made structure to follow or to adapt to suit themselves. Many also find it helpful to have advice and guidance contained within the profile.

If you have not already bought a commercially available profile for your own use, this book should help you to understand more about why and how you might use one. It should therefore help you to decide whether you want to buy a profile or develop your own, and to evaluate the commercially available ones to see which is best for you. Chapter 4 gives more information on this subject.

Some commercially available profiles are little more than ring binders with dividers and a place to record personal and professional details. Others help you to develop self-awareness and reflective skills. For example, Unison (2001), the public sector union, has developed *The HCA*

Profile: A Personal Development Pack, which is designed to help health care assistants to identify and clarify their skills, knowledge, values and beliefs, aiming to help with both personal and professional development. Yet more are linked to specific CPD programmes, and are driven as much by educational and commercial considerations. *The Profile Pack*, developed by Emap Healthcare Open Learning (1994), links with EHOL's open learning programmes, which can be undertaken in partnership with a number of universities. Some educational institutions have also developed profiles, which are usually sold to students. Some practitioners are understandably unsure whether they can develop their own profile, or whether to buy a ready-made product. The answer is that it depends what suits the individual. Provided a profile meets the requirements of the relevant professional body or educational institution, it does not matter whether it is home-made or off-the-shelf.

One criticism of ready-made profiles is that they look too smart. Some people have said they are apprehensive about writing in them for fear of making them look untidy. Many users do prefer to keep such profiles for special occasions, such as to show at a job interview or for a presentation of their work. It is true that one file or folder is unlikely to be enough to hold all the information and observations you will acquire over your professional life. It may therefore be a good idea to have a 'special' profile folder to keep information you are likely to want to 'show off' whether or not this is a commercially available profile.

You may also find it useful to keep a pocket-size notebook to jot down observations and reflections quickly during your working day or when you get home. This will need to be reviewed from time to time, which is a useful time to decide what you want to transfer into a more permanent file.

The NMC website contains some useful information about the requirements of profiles for nurses and midwives, some of which will also be helpful to health care assistants. The NMC says that there are three broad steps involved in developing a profile:

Reviewing experience to date

Think about what you have done so far, particularly in the past three years. Identify the areas of practice you enjoy most and do well, and those you may need to improve. Think about what you have done to improve your practice and how you intend to continue to do so. Consider relevant areas outside your practice, such as team leadership.

Self-appraisal

Based on the above review, step back and appraise your performance and standards of knowledge and practice. It may help to focus on one event and

to analyse critically what happened to and around you at the time. This event could be something that went well or badly. Describe what happened, identify what you learned and consider areas for professional development thrown up by the event. You may find it helpful to discuss the event with a manager or supervisor to focus your thoughts.

Setting goals and action plans

Once you have identified your learning needs you can start setting goals and developing action plans to help you to meet these needs, and evaluating the outcomes. Although self-appraisal should be a continuous process, it is particularly important to appraise your performance if you change your job, undertake an assignment or course, or are involved in a significant event.

The NMC leaves it to individuals to decide how they organise all this information. It says the main considerations to bear in mind are that it should be flexible, accessible and confidential – no patients, clients or carers should be identified in your profile. It also recommends that practitioners consider dividing the profile into two sections, one containing confidential information, the other containing material the NMC may require for audit purposes.

While registered nurses and midwives are free to develop their profiles as they see fit in order to fulfil their PREP (CPD) standard, those on particular courses may be asked to follow guidelines to meet the requirements of their course. This is also true for health care assistants undertaking NVQ training. For example, Guernsey's Institute of Health Studies provides NVQ training in Care at levels 2 and 3. Its website (www.cwgsy.net/community/mindinfo/nvq.htm) states that students' portfolios should contain the following:

- Contents page – with item numbers
- Witness status list
- National standards (copies of units, elements – performance criteria, etc.)
- Assessment plan
- Action plans (at least 2)
- Feedback reports (at least 2)
- Direct observations (at least 2)
- Witness testimonies (at least 2)
- Pre-set written questions and answers
- Other evidence
- All items of evidence must include the candidate's name, candidate number and date.

Uses within health care

You will have your own reasons for picking up this book – perhaps you want to know more about profiles in general, or you may have been prompted for a more specific purpose. While profiles are most widely used in CPD, enabling nurses and midwives to fulfil their PREP requirements, they are increasingly used in education and training. So, perhaps you are on a pre-registration nursing or midwifery course and want to get into the habit of using a portfolio, are undertaking NVQ training in care and want advice about how to develop your profile.

Whatever your reasons for picking up the book, it is likely that you will start using a profile for a particular reason, then broaden your use as you find that you can do more with it. For example, in 1995 the ENB demonstrated that profiles have many uses suggesting that they could be used as:

- a record of professional experience, therefore contributing to PREP requirements
- part of the process of applying for jobs
- part of individual performance review (IPR), helping to identify personal goals and how these are to be achieved
- a focus for organising individual learning
- a way to support learning from practice and clinical supervision
- a tool for reflective practice
- a means of achieving accreditation as part of a prior learning claim
- a way of demonstrating learning for assessment towards educational programmes.

PREP requirements

We have already discussed the NMC's PREP requirements for nurses and midwives to maintain a Personal Professional Profile. You can obtain more details of its requirements and how to fulfil them in *The PREP Handbook*. This is available free from the NMC at 23 Portland Place, London W1N 4QT, or you can download it from the NMC website (www.nmc-uk.org/cms/content/publication – in the section on Registration).

Job applications

It is now common, particularly if you are applying for a more senior post, to be asked to supply a curriculum vitae (CV) to accompany or replace the

traditional job application forms. If you keep records of all your educational qualifications and work experience in your profile you will certainly find it easier to construct your CV, and to keep it up to date. Expecting to remember details about courses months or years later, or to find elusive bits of paper can be a frustrating experience. By keeping everything together in your profile you can avoid this. You may find that it is worth adapting your CV to suit a particular job application, emphasising your experience and skills that are most relevant.

Some people now take their whole profile to job interviews. However, it is worth checking beforehand whether the employer requires this level of information. Most expect candidates to pick out experiences from their past career that have a particular bearing on the current job application. It may therefore be better simply to read through your profile before the interview to refresh your memory.

Identifying personal goals

Most staff in health care now experience some form of IPR. Each employer will have its own system for assessing and reviewing an employee's performance, and the frequency of reviews also varies. However, most IPR systems include an opportunity for you to look back on the previous review period and identify achievements and disappointments. They also have a section where you are asked to look forward to the forthcoming period and identify what personal development needs you may have to enable you to fulfil your role or to progress towards a more senior role. This process of looking back and thinking forward can be much easier if you have maintained a profile, as it is likely to contain details of formal or informal learning opportunities you have had during the review period. Your reflections on critical incidents will identify areas where you feel particularly confident and those where you may need further training or support. All this information can be extremely useful when completing a self-assessment exercise as part of the IPR paperwork.

Focus for organising your own learning

When you are enrolled on a particular course or programme of study or training, it is easier to organise your learning agenda around the demands of the course. However, this is not always the case when you are simply doing your job – you are working hard and have no particular focus for your learning or reason for writing about it. Keeping a profile can give you a focus for learning in a number of ways.

- It can store relevant articles and references.
- You can write regular notes about what you have learnt and what you need to find out more about.
- You can record the outcomes of any self-assessment and what you need to do to act on these.

Using a profile in this way means you have to discipline yourself to review its contents on a regular basis. This helps you to make sense of the contents – to see where you have been, say, over the past three months. Looking back on a range of experiences in this way can be a useful springboard to knowing what needs to happen next on your learning pathway. It can also be a great confidence booster, as it helps you to realise how much you have achieved and how much you are capable of.

Supporting learning from practice and clinical supervision

The points to be made here are very similar to those made above. One of the most effective ways of learning from your practice is to write about it. You will often find that the process of writing about something you did will help to clarify issues for you and focus your ideas. These new insights are often associated with points of real learning about how you practise. Nurses and midwives who practise clinical supervision often spend time writing up the process in their profiles. It is so easy to realise something when discussing a situation you experienced in a supervision session then forget it again in the busy activity of everyday work. Writing about it makes it more likely to be committed to memory, and therefore there is more chance that you will remember it and act accordingly when you come across a similar situation again.

Tool for reflective practice

This has already been discussed on page 5, and will be explored in greater detail in Chapter 6.

Achieving credit as part of a prior learning claim

It is becoming increasingly common for health care professionals to try to gain credit for prior learning and experience when applying to undertake further educational courses. Using the contents of your profile for this

purpose needs careful guidance and the ability to recognise what is relevant to your claim and what you should leave out. Some practitioners assume that getting credit for prior learning will be far easier than attending the whole course. This is not the case. We will look at the process of applying for credit in detail in Chapter 7 to give you a realistic idea of what is involved.

Assessment for an educational programme

You may be asked to submit sections of your profile as part of the assessment process for a course or programme you are following. In this case, you need to be quite clear what is expected of you, and the confidentiality of the information you hand in. The confidentiality section of Chapter 6 gives you more information on this.

Lifelong learning

The concept of lifelong learning is widely recognised, not only in health care but also in wider society. The government is keen to encourage people to see learning as something you do throughout your life, and it has set up a number of schemes to help people to get back into learning if they left education some time ago. The Department for Education and Skills has a website specifically looking at lifelong learning (www.lifelonglearning.co.uk), which was set up to help encourage people to take up educational opportunities

Lifelong learning does not just encompass professional knowledge – learning can be undertaken for personal reasons – perhaps you enjoy gardening but want to improve your skills, or would like to learn a language. These are perfectly valid aspects of lifelong learning. However, in health care, developments in knowledge and available treatments and technologies mean it is important for health care professionals to continue to learn throughout their careers. When you gain a professional qualification, you should see it as the first step in an ongoing learning process that will help you to ensure your practice stays up to date. This is the only way you can provide your patients with the high-quality care they need.

The past few years have seen increasing emphasis on the concepts of clinical governance and evidence-based practice in health care. Clinical governance is a process of looking at the way care is delivered and the outcomes for patients. It is undertaken on a national scale by bodies such as the Commission for Health Improvement and the National Institute for

Clinical Excellence, which investigate and report on health care providers and treatments. On a local scale, individual hospitals and trusts monitor their own performance and compare it with previous years and with the performance of other organisations, to give them information on their standards of care.

Evidence-based practice involves using the results of high-quality research and acknowledged best practice to develop and improve practice. In the past, health care delivery tended to develop within individual organisations in particular ways depending on the knowledge, skills, experience and even preferences of individuals within the organisation who had decision-making powers. This is not a systematic way to ensure care is appropriate and based on current knowledge. Health care professionals have been encouraged to change the way they develop care practices and processes, and to ensure they take account of the latest evidence and acknowledged best practice. They are also expected to continue to keep up with developments in their field so that they can adapt their care in the light of new research or practice evidence. These developments mean that, more than ever before, health care employers demand and expect their employees to be flexible, self-motivated and able to transfer skills into new situations with ease, so that they can meet the demands of clinical governance and evidence-based practice. They also expect employees to understand their own strengths and weaknesses, identify their learning needs and ensure they never undertake practices and procedures they are not capable of doing safely. In addition, health care professionals need to demonstrate problem-solving abilities and decision-making skills. This all requires personal confidence and, of course, it requires professionals to be up to date with current knowledge and practice.

There is not enough funding for CPD to enable all health care professionals to meet their learning needs at their employers' expense, while staff shortages can make it difficult to get time off work to attend courses and study days. This means for many health care professionals that the most effective way of meeting most of their learning needs is to do it through their day-to-day practice. By identifying your needs as you go along, and meeting them – by, for example, gaining help, support and advice from colleagues or reading relevant literature – and then putting the learning into practice, you can make your working day a learning opportunity.

The skills involved in developing and maintaining your profile will help you to develop as a lifelong learner. We hope this book will encourage and inspire you to develop a profile that meets your needs, and show you the many ways it can help you meet your professional and personal goals.

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Index

Notes: f = figure; n = note; t = table; **bold** extended discussion or heading emphasised in main text

- accommodators (learning type) **112**
accreditation xvi, 25, 26, 71, 94–5, 99, 142
 claiming credit for prior learning (four stages) **102–6**
 continuing professional development **96**
 portfolios **101–7**
 towards a definition **95**
Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) 18, 28, **36**, 63, 102–3, 105–6
Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL) **36**
action plans *see* goal and action plans
activities
 lifeline 53–4
 professional values 54–5
 useful 145
activists (type of learner) **133**, 136f, **136–7**
admiration (professional value) 55
adult education xiv, **6–7**, 46, 99, 147, 149
 ‘adult learning’ xvi, 113
 ‘evening classes’ 25
 ‘further education’ 12, 46, 147
Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education (AVCE) 101t
advising (facilitation skill) **116**
aesthetics 88, 89
age 54, 97, 114
anger 84
APEL *see* Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning
apprenticeship systems 31
art portfolios 28
articles (written) 71, 73, 74, 104
aspirations 73, 74, 145
assessing (facilitation skill) **116**
assimilators (learning type) **112**
AVCE *see* Advanced Vocational Certificate in Education
awarding bodies 38, **99–100**, **107**
awards *see* post-qualifying awards

Basic Skills 28
Belenky, M., *et al.* (1986) 46, 47
 Clinchy, B. 47
 Goldberger, N. 47
 Taroule, J. 47
beliefs 64, 65f, 79, 114, 149
benchmarking 18, 70
best practice 17
bias-avoidance 104
bibliography (annotated) xiv, **142–9**
 career development 144–6
 interactivity 143, 144, 148
 profiling documents and texts 142–3
 reflective practice 76, 88, 143, 144, 146, 148
 study skills 143–4
 ways of learning 146–9
 biography 40
Blunkett, D. 23–4
Bolles, R. 144
Boud, D. 33, **146**, 149
Boud, D., *et al.* (1985) 33, 36, 76, 92, 122, 124, **146**
 Keogh, R. 36, 92, 124, **146**
 Walker, D. 36, 92, 124, **146**
boundaries
 academic versus professional 31–2
 professional and service 18, 27
Boyd, E. M. 80
Boydell, T. 145
Brookfield, S. D. 146–7
Brown, R. A. 28–9, 142
Build your own Rainbow (Hopson and Scally, 2000) 145
Bulman, C. 148
Burns, S. 148
Business and Technical Education Council (BTEC) 107
Buzan, T. 130

cadet schemes **27**
campaigns 73
cancer 138, 139
care 10, 13–14
 domiciliary 17
care in the community 64
care homes (registration) 138
care plans 72
Care Standards Act (2000) 19, 96, 138
Care Trusts 16
careers 18, 52, 54, 91, 137
 see continuing professional development
carers/caring 9, 19, 51, 127
Carper, B. 88
 ‘patterns of knowing’ 88–9
case studies 82, 145, 147
Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work (CCETSW) 22
certificates of attendance 104
child care 17
child-raising 50, 52, 65f, 110, 126
Chinese proverb 49
choice 38, 89
Churchill Livingstone Professional Portfolio for Nurses, Midwives and Health Visitors (1993) 142
City and Guilds 107
Clarke, B. 77
clients 9, 17, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32, 33, 89, 97
Clinchy, B. 47
clinical governance 13
clinical supervision 12, 77
Code of Practice for Social Care Workers 19
Cohen R. **146**

- colleagues 20, 64, 112, 122
 peers 47
 protection 83, 84–5
 senior 47, 139
 colour 130
 Commission for Health Improvement 13
 communication 25, 30, 40, 54, 62–3, 64, 73,
 74, 91, 139, 145, 149
 ‘key skill’ 35, 99
 oral 69
 written 69
 communication skills 146
 community care 138
 community groups 51
 competence 95, 97–8, 98t, 100t, 101, 102,
 106, 110, 119
 competence statements **66–70**
 competencies 59, 63, 71, 72, 74
 computers 118, 122, 139, 148
 computer packages 29, 71, 103
 concepts 40, 41, 65f, 130, 137
 conceptualisation 63, **111**, 112
 conferences 21
 seminars 51, 122
 workshops xiii, 73, 104, 147
 confidence 30, 50, 51, 81, 87, 113–14, 116,
 118, 128
 confidentiality 5–6, 9, 13, 47, 71, **83–5**, 143
 protection of diarist 83–4
 protection of patients and colleagues 83,
 84–5
 connections 41, 42, 49, **63–6**, 119, 128,
 130, 132
 Kolb’s learning cycle (adapted) 109f, **111**
 context 77, 84–5
 continuing professional development (CPD)
 xiii, 1, 2, 3, 10, 31, 41
 accreditation (national schemes) **96**
 annotated bibliography **144–6**
 core principles 27
 initiatives 27–8
 key characteristics 4
 lifelong learning 13–14
 multidisciplinary teams **34**
 ‘professional development’ 6, 9, 24, 30,
 38–9, 40, 44, **52–5**, 63, 73, 81, 108,
 116–17
 programmes 8
 social care context **21–2**
 terminology **26–8**
 useful points to remember 3
see also lifelong learning
*Continuing Professional Development: Quality
 in the NHS* (1999) 27
 conventional wisdom 111
 convergers (learning type) **112**
 courses 5, 11, 14, 39, 52, 60, 71, 104
 applications 55–6
 practical and theoretical 148
 short 47, 126
 taught 21, 46, 122
 Covey, S. R. 144–5
 CPD *see* continuing professional development
 craft guilds 31
 Credit Accumulation and Transfer Scheme
 (CATS) 22, 106
 Credit Framework (higher education) 96
 credit frameworks **35**
 critical incident analysis (Flanagan) 86,
 142
 critical incidents 11, 86, 90, 91
 cross-referencing 48, **72–3**
 culture 24, 49, 148
 curricula 46, 104
 curriculum vitae (CV) 10–11, 40, 142
 data 133
 decision-making 14, 16, 64, 70, 77, 95, 112,
 121, 145
 professional value 54
 demographics/demography 128, 139
 Department of Education and Employment
 17, 24
 Department for Education and Skills 13,
 24–5
 Department of Health 17, 19, 27, 28
 dependence 24, 117, 122
*Developing Critical Thinking: Challenging
 Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of
 Thinking and Acting* (Brookfield, 1991)
 146–7
 development process 61f
 Dewey, J. 30–1, 76
 diagrams 83, 87
 disciplinary committees 6
 discussion 32, 46, 81, 109, 146
 divergers (learning type) **112**
 doctors 19
 Downs, S. 147
 drawings 29, 72, 83, 104
 drugs (narcotics) 17, 138
 economic trends 138
 Edexcel 107
 education 10, 24, 25, 40, 142, 147
 formal 31, 62
 practice-based 32
 education system 49
 educational
 activities 51
 counselling (facilitation skill) **116**
 institutions xv, 8
 needs 48, 74
 programmes xvi, **13**, 94, 103
 elderly people 64
 elections 138
 Emap Healthcare Open Learning (EHOL) 8,
 81, 142–3
 emotions 31, 123, 134, 149
 empirics 88, 89
 employers 19, 30, 44, 96, 99
 employment 40, 109, 142, 147
 enabling (facilitation skill) **115–16**
 England 17, 19
 English National Board for Nursing and
 Midwifery (ENB) 4, 10, 26
 essays 65, 71, 148
 ethics 21, 65, 66, 88, 89
 evaluation (‘summative’ and ‘formative’)
 124
 Evans, N. 147
 events 50

- evidence 95, 101–2, **103–5**, 142
 direct **103–4**
 indirect **104**
 evidence-based practice **18**
 examinations 45
 exercises 41, 145, 147
 expectations 24
 experience 12, 14, 27, 33, 34, 37, 38, 41, 45, 48, **49–52**, 53, 59, 60, 62, 64, 65f, 70, 71, 73, 74, 77, 81, 82, 89, 94, 95, 104, 113–14, 118–19, 123
 documenting 60f
 Kolb's learning cycle (adapted) 109f, **110**
 learning from **108–12**
 life 130–2
 new 133
 personal 126
 professional 126
 reviewed to date **8**
 significant 61
 systematic reflection **102–3**
Experiential Learning for All (Evans, 1994) 147
 experiential learning 78, 80, **108–12**, 113, 145–9
 basic principles 31
 'making sense of ourselves in relation to world' 32
 'not merely theory but practice' 31
 terminology **30–2**
see also learning
 experiential processes xiv
 experimentation 49, 65, 112
 Kolb's learning cycle (adapted) 109f, **111**
 external verifiers 106
- facilitation **108–24**, 148
 evaluation 123–4
 ground rules 122–3
 learning environment 122
 planning the profile 118–22
 progress chasing 123
 questions 124
 taking responsibility 117–18, 123
 facilitation skills xvi, **115–17**
 advising 116
 assessing 116
 educational counselling 116
 enabling 115–16
 informing 116–17
 facilitators 7, 90, **113**
 first task 115
 role **121–2**
 fairness 145
 Fales, A. W. 80
 family 25, 47, 53, 95, 109, 118, 121
 feelings 45, 46, 81, 88, 134, 136
 positive and negative 87
 private record 48
 FHE Curriculum Development Project 66
 Flanagan, J. C. 86
 Foundation Degrees 28
 freedom to learn (Boud *et al.*) 122
 Freire, P. 149
 friends 25, 47, 90, 118, 121, 122
 fund-raising 51
 funding 14, 21, 138
 gaps 17
 General Certificate of Education: Advanced Level 45, 100t, 101t
 General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) 100t, 101t
 General National Vocational Qualification (GNVQ) 100t
 General Social Care Council (2001–) **19**, 96
 Gibbs, L. 18
 Gibbs' reflective cycle 78, 79f
 global village 149
 Goal and Action Plan Form 140
 goal and action plans **9**, 20, 45, 59, 60, 82, **120–1**, 125, 126, 132–3, 142, 145, 146
 long-term/short-term 132
Goals and Goal-Setting (Rouillard, 1994) 145
 Goldberger, N. 47
Good Study Guide (Northedge, 2004) 143–4
 Government (UK) 13, 24, 35, 97, 138
 government policy 128
 terminology 23
 graphs 104
 group involvement 147
 Guernsey: Institute of Health Studies 9
Guide to Learning Independently (Marshall and Rowland, 2001) 147–8
 guidelines 41, 70, 134
HCA Profile: Personal Development Pack (2001) 7–8
 health authorities 138
 health care xiv, 21, 94, 127, 139
 advances 128
 delivery 24
 PEST analysis 137, 138
 health care assistants xiii, 1, 7, 8, 9
 health care practitioners/professionals
 lifelong learning **13–14**
 single- or multi-disciplinary 143
 health care staff 24, 25, 26, 27
 Health and Social Care Occupational Standards 97
 health technologies 24–5
 health trusts 14
 health visitors/visiting xiii, 1, 2, 4, 7, 38, 81
 PREP standards 3
 heart disease 139
 helping clients (professional value) 54
 higher education **6–7**, 18, **34**, 99, 147, 148
 Hinman, J. 66
 hobbies 51, 53, 127
 Hoggart, R. 117
 holidays 58
 Hollingsworth, M. 66
 Holm, D. 88
 home care 138
 honesty 123, 145
 Hopson, B. 145
 hospitals 14
 housing 17
 Hudek, K. xii
 Hull, C. xiv
 human interaction 136

- human rights 21
humanities 148
Hume, H. xii
- ideas 63, 64, 65f, 66, 79, 111, 127, 130, 132, 134, 137
new 40, 133
identity 49
individual performance review (IPR) 10, 11
inductive reasoning 112
industrial revolution 31
influence/s 53, 137
information **45**, 132, 139
extraction 66
presentation 66
information management 69
‘information processors’ 79
information technology
‘key skill’ 35, 99
informing (facilitation skill) **116–17**
institutions 70
integrity 145
interests 53, 54
interpretation 95
interviews 65f, 106
- James, C. R. xii, 77
job applications **10–11**, 40, 55–6, 58
job interviews 8, 11
job role: influence on learning type (Kolb) 112
job security (professional value) 54
job-hunting 144
job-task diversity (professional value) 54
Johns, C. 80, 85, 88, 89, 90
journals (academic) 21, 121
- Keeton, M. 78
Kelly, J. 77
Keogh, R. 36, 92, 124, **146**
key skills **35–6**, **99**
listed 99
website 99
knowledge 14, 17, 18, 26, 34, 39, 45, 46, 52, 55, 59, 61–5, 71, 73, 74, 94, 95, 96, 99–100t, 102, 103, 105, 106, 113, 118, 127, 134
analysis **68**, 70
application **68**, **69**, 70
challenges 114
four areas needed by nurses and midwives (Carper) 88–9
integration 112
interpretation **67**, 70
interpretation and application 27
personal 88–9
professional 77, 80, 81
standards 8
synthesis **68–9**, 70
tacit 77
transferability 43
understanding 67, 68
knowledge base 77, 87, 91
Knowles, M. 108, 149
Kolb, D. 31, 109, 134
learning types 111–12
relationship between thinking and experience 31
Kolb’s learning cycle 31, 78f, 78, 79, 109f, 110
L’Aiguille, Y. 85
language 41, 42
law courts 6
Learn How to Study (Rowntree, 1998) 144
learners 147
independence 118
learning 33, 38, 39, 41, 42, 45, 46, 52, **60–1**, 70, 71, 89, 101, 116, 119
A–Z 149
affective (subjective) 31
annotated bibliography **146–9**
articulation **62–3**
‘banking concept’ 109–10
blocks/obstacles **113–15**, 128, 147
cognitive (factual) 31
content 113
‘conversion’ of reflection into 90–1
effectiveness **xvi**, **94–107**
flexible approaches 94–5
focus for organising **11–12**
formal 43, 82, 94, 108, 146
identification **73**
informal 43, 82, 94, 102, 109, 146
knowledge **67–9**
level/standard **62**, 105, 106
method 66
nature 66
passive 109–10
producing competence statements **66–70**
professional values 54
recognition (identification) **62**
reflection and **78–80**
significant **61–6**, **103**
testing **63–6**
theory and practice 110, 111
under-utilised 109
ways **146–9**
see also experiential learning
learning (prior): claiming credit **12–13**, **102–6**
stage 1: systematic reflection on experience 102–3
stage 2: identification of significant learning 103
stage 3: identification of evidence to support claims 103–5
stage 4: submission of profile for formal assessment 105–6
Learning Age (Green Paper, 1998) 24
learning contracts **119–21**, 123
action plan 120–1
fundamental questions 119–20
goals and criteria for success 120
learning cycles 32, 65f, **109–11**
learning disability 17
learning environment **57–8**, 116, **122**
Learning from Experience Trust 66
learning how to learn (‘key skill’) 99
learning needs 7, 116, 147
identification xv
learning opportunities 61, 90, 116

- learning outcomes 63, 95
 terminology 33–4
- learning process 113, 146
 four stages 49
- learning skills 69–70
- learning styles 111–12, 125, 133–7
 activists 133, 136f, 136–7
 pragmatists 134, 136f, 137
 reflectors 133–4, 136f, 137
 theorists 134, 136f, 137
- learning theories 108
- learning types (Kolb) 111–12
 accommodators 112
 assimilators 112
 convergers 112
 divergers 112
 influence of current job role 112
- Learning at Work* (Downs, 1995) 147
- lectures 51, 122
- legislation 138
- leisure 54, 109
- libraries 47, 118–19, 122
- life
 ‘flowing process’ 117–18
 home/work balance 52–3
- Lifeline Pack* (Emap Healthcare Open Learning, 2000) 142
- lifelines 50, 53–4
- lifelong learning 13–14, 18, 19, 20, 100
 formal and informal 25
 fruits 26
 individual needs 25
 initiatives 27–8
 ‘key to prosperity’ 23
 profile approach 27
 terminology 23–6
see also continuing professional development
- Lifelong Learning* (website) 24
- lifestyle 24, 54, 138
- listening, active 115–16
- literacy 28
- literature
 learning from reflection 90–1
 learning styles 133
 structures for reflection 87
- litigation 6
- local authorities 138
- logic 137
- London University: Goldsmiths College 37
- Long-Term Care Charter 16
- Lucas, P. 80, 91
- Making Sense of Experiential Learning* (Weil and McGill, 1989) 148–9
- management 112
 junior/senior 98
 professional value 55
- management development
 social care 17
- managers 17, 147
- Managing to Learn* (Whittaker, 1996) 149
- Managing Yourself* (Peddlar and Boydell, 1999) 145
- market forces xv, 7–9
- market value 95
- Marshall, L. 147–8
- mass media 147
- McGill, I. 148–9
- McNiff, J. 148
- memory 50, 114
- mental health 17
- Mental Health Act 138
- Mezirow, J. 110–11
- midwifery xiv, 2, 5, 76, 114
 PREP standards 3
- midwives xiii, 1, 2–3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12, 38, 80, 81
 ‘Rule 37’ 3
- mind-mapping 125, 130–2
- Modern Apprenticeships (MAs) 28
- Modernising Social Care Workforce: First National Training Strategy for England* (2000) 17
- Modernising Social Services* (White Paper, 1998)
 implications for social care staff 16–17
- modules 33
- money (professional value) 54
- monitoring 18
- moods 50
- Moon, J. 143
- musical score 103
- National Boards 3
 ‘no longer exist’ 4
- National Care Standards Commission 96
- National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education 34
- National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ, 1986–) 97
- National Credit Framework 99, 99–100t
- National Health Service (NHS) 24–5
 staff 20, 27, 28
- National Health Service learning accounts (LAs) 27–8
- National Health Service Plan* (White Paper, 2000) 16, 19, 24, 27–8, 138
- National Health Service (NHS) Trusts 16
- National Institute for Clinical Excellence 13–14, 138
- National Learning and Skills Council (LSC), 35
- National Occupational and Service Standards 17
- National Occupational Standards for Social Care (NOSs, 2002–) 19, 96–7, 106
- National Open College Network (NOCN) 99, 100
- National Qualifications Framework (NQF, 2004–) 100–1
 aims 35
 essential features 35
 website 101
- National Training Strategy 17–18
 aim (social care staff) 18
- National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs) xiii, 28, 96, 97–8, 102, 106
 courses 1
 equivalences with OCN 100
 framework 98t
 health care assistants 1
 historical context 97

- National Vocational Qualifications – *continued*
 levels 98t
 National Qualifications Framework
 101t
 students 5
 training 9, 10
 networks
 local or regional 21
 newspapers 121
 NMC *see* Nursing and Midwifery Council
 NOCN (National Open College Network)
 99, 100
 Nonconformist chapel tradition 117
 Northedge, A. 143–4
 notebooks 8
 Notification of Practice form 3
 NQF, *see* National Qualifications Framework
 numeracy 28
 ‘key skill’ 99
 nurse practitioners 148
 nurses xiii, 1, 2–3, 4, 6, 7, 10, 12, 19, 21, 38,
 80, 81, 89, 90
 nursing xiv, 2, 5, 76, 87, 114
 PREP standards 3, 4
 nursing conferences xiii
 nursing curricula
 ‘central theme’ 76–7
 Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC,
 2002–) 3, 4, 5, 9, 44, 77, 90, 142
 address 10
 confidentiality of profiles 84
 requirements for profiling and reflection
 82
 website 8, 10
 nursing skills 78
 NVQs *see* National Vocational Qualifications
- objectivity 134
 occupational standards 102
 occupations 98
 Open College Network (OCN) 96
 credits 99–100
 equivalences with NVQs 100
 Open University 51
 organisational priorities 138
 organisations 20
- painting 50, 104
 Palmer, A. 148
 partnership working 18
Pastoral Care and Personal and Social Education
 (Cassell series) 149
 patients 9, 13, 17, 18, 24, 25, 27, 29, 32, 33,
 89, 97
 protection 83, 84
 patronage 117
 Peddlar, M. 145
 performance 8, 82, 97, 145
 personal development 52–5, 113
 planning 34
 website 34
 personal goals/objectives 69
 identification 11
see also goal and action plans
 personal professional portfolios 1, 2–3, 5, 7
 ‘no approved format’ 4
see also profiles
 personal professional profile 10, 81–2
 perspective transformation (Mezirow) 110
 PEST (Political, Economic, Social,
 Technological) analysis 125, 137–9
 photographs 50, 71, 73, 104
 physical changes 50
 pictures 73, 83, 87, 130
 Piercy, M. 46
 place (reflective diary) 85–6
 poems 71
 politics 51, 138, 147
 portfolio development 18
Portfolio Development and Profiling for Nurses
 (Brown, 1995) 142
 portfolios xiii, 2, 4, 34, 62
 accreditation 101–7
 content requirements 9
 relevance and quality 28
 terminological ‘confusion’ 28
 terminology 28–30
 types 29f
 usage xiv, 5, 30
 volume 28
 post-qualifying awards 33, 71, 104
 framework ‘under review’ 22
 listed 21
 Post-Qualifying Training 21
 Post-Registration Education and Practice
 (PREP) 1, 2, 4, 77
 CPD standard 2, 9
 implementation 81–2
 practice standard 2
 requirements 10
 summary forms 3
 power relationships 111
 practice 32, 43, 81, 83, 133, 146, 148
 clinical 104
 evidence-based 32–3
 improvement 80
 learning from 12
 lifelong learning 13–14
 role of reflection 77
 standards 8
 updating 21, 25
 practices 65
 practitioners 147
 pragmatists (type of learner) 134, 136f, 137
 PREP *see* Post-Registration Education and
 Practice
PREP Handbook (2002) 3, 10, 84, 90
 framework of questions 82
 preparation (of profile) 55–8
 environment 57–8
 time management 55–7
 presentation 70, 73
 Price, J. xii
 private sector 16, 27
 problem-solving 14, 69, 77, 109, 112, 136, 137
 ‘key skill’ 36, 99
 personal and professional 144–5
 professional:
 bodies 8, 44
 education 4
 knowledge 6
 record 47

- professional conduct cases 6
 Professional Profile Folder 5
 professionals 90
 behaviour 80–1
 health and social care xiii–xv
 professions 147
 characteristics 77
 profile classes 37
Profile Pack (1994) 8, 81
Profile Pack (Emap Healthcare Open Learning, 1999) 143
 profile process 38, 65f, 73
 profile-construction **70–5**
 appendices 73, 74
 bibliography of publications 73
 contents 71–2
 desirable characteristics 70
 organisation 72–3
 references and testimonials 73
 sample framework 74
 samples from reflective diary 73
 samples of work 73
 writing skills 74–5
 profiles xiii, 4, 27, 33, 34
 accreditation **101–7**
 advice and guidance 7, 116
 applications 7
 assessment criteria 105
 benefits 20
 bibliography (annotated) **142–9**
 comments 37
 common questions xiii–xiv
 completion time **44**
 compulsory element of professional development 38
 concise and direct 45
 creation (getting started) **xv, 48–75**
 deadlines for completion 44, 119, 123, 140
 evidence provided 45
 facilitation **xvi, 108–24**
 facilitator's role **121–2**
 'further resources' **xvi, 125–41**
 gaps **45–6**
 help sources **46–7**
 information to be included **45**
 learning level (standard and quality) **44**
 ownership **44**, 116, 117, 121
 planning **118–22**
 private section 40, 53, 71, 84, 143
 professional requirement xiii, 1, 2, 3, 38, 113
 public record 40–1, 84, 143
 purpose **38–9, 40**
 ready-made/commercially-produced 5, 7–8, **39–43**
 ready-made versus self-developed 8
 reflection and 81–2
 reflective practice **xv, 76–93**
 reviewing experience to date **8**
 self-appraisal **8–9**
 setting goals and action plans **9**
 strengths and weaknesses (personal) 40
 taking responsibility **117–18**, 119, 121, 123
 terminological 'confusion' 28
 terminology **28–30**
 themes and questions **xv, 37–47**
 'three broad steps' **8–9**
 two sections 9
 usage xiv, 5, 30
 use as learning tool 31
 uses within health care **10–14**
 'well worth the effort' 41
 profiles: creation (getting started) **xv, 48–75**
 case studies 50–1, 64
 deadlines 58
 developing a structure 58–60
 identifying significant learning 61–6
 preparation 55–8
 proving what you know and can do 66–70
 real reasons 50, 51, 52
 reflecting on past learning 60–1
 taking stock 49–58
 profiles: purchased **39–43**
 accessibility **41**
 aims and criteria 39
 binders 42, 143
 content **41–2**, 43
 cost **43**
 design and layout **42–3**
 dividers 42
 forms 42
 private record: communicating with yourself **40**
 public record: communicating with others **40–1**
 purpose **40**
 softest option (to be avoided) 41
 workbooks 42–3, 143, 148
 profiles: uses within health care **10–13**
 achieving credit as part of a prior learning claim 12–13
 assessment for an educational programme 13
 focus for organising your own learning 11–12
 identifying personal goals 11
 job applications 10–11
 PREP requirements 10
 supporting learning from practice and clinical supervision 12
 tool for reflective practice 12
Profiles and Portfolios (second edition)
 aims xiv
 authorial backgrounds xiv
 contents **xv–xvi**
 first edition xiii
 revision and updating xiii
 use xiv
 profiles and portfolios: health care context **xv, 1–15**
 adult and higher education 6–7
 influences 2
 lifelong learning 13–14
 market forces xv, 7–9
 practical issues xiii, xiv–xv
 reflective practice xv, 5–6
 statutory bodies xv, 2–5
 uses within health care 10–13

- profiles and portfolios: social care context **xv**, **16–22**
 continuing professional development 21–2
 evidence-based practice 18
 lifelong learning 18
 portfolio development 18
 standards for social care 19–21
 profiling xiii, xiv, xv, 18, 25–6
 importance 29–30
 reflective practice (two elements) 33
 short courses 47
 three steps 82
 profiling documents (annotated bibliography) **142–3**
 progress files (two elements) **34**
 projects 51
 promotion (professional value) 54
 public sector 27
 publishing xiv
- qualifications 13, 19, 21, 28, 29, 33, 40, 43, 52, 74, 95, 126, 128
 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) 19, 35, 106
 qualities 61, 62
 quality assurance 17
 quality of service 97
 questionnaires 145
- reading 51
 real-life situations 111
 received wisdom 114
 recognition
 professional value 54
 public 72
 recruitment and retention 17
 Redfern, L. xiv
 Redmond, B. 143
 referees 48
 references 59, 73, 104, 116
 reflection **xv**, 4, 5, 30, 33, 41, **49–52**, 53, **60–1**, 62, 64, 65f, 74, **76–93**, **102–3**, 112, 123, 144, 146
 alternative choices 88
 bibliography (annotated) 143
 confidentiality 83–5
 conversion into learning 90–1
 definitions 80–1, 91
 elements (Mezirow) 110–11
 five main steps 85–91
 fruits 81
 ideas for further work **91–2**
 individual or group work **90**
 Kolb's learning cycle (adapted) 109f, **110–11**
 learning 78–80
 profiles 81–2
 role in professional practice 77
 series of questions 87, 88
 structured (model) 89
 structures **87–90**
 terminology **32–3**
 two types (Schon) 77
 writing 82–3
Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985) 146
- reflection-in-action (Schon) 77
 reflection-on-action (Schon) 77, 82, 85
Reflection in Action: Developing Reflective Practice in Health and Social Services (Redmond, 2004) 143
Reflection in Learning and Professional Development: Theory and Practice (Moon, 2000) 143
Reflection Time (White, 2000) 143
 reflective diary/journal 5–6, 45, 59, 60, 62, 73, 75, 81, 115, 121
 avoidance of trivia 83
 choice of situation or event 86–7
 confidentiality 83–5
 critical reflection on situation or event 87–90
 details of situation 86–7
 experimentation 83
 five main steps **85–91**
 follow-up actions 90–1
 honesty 83–4
 identification of areas of learning 90–1
 'meant to be a workbook' 83
 motivation and commitment 86
 perseverance 83
 positive approach 83
 'private section' 6
 re-evaluation 91
 self-censorship 84
 spontaneity 83–4
 'things of significance' 83
 time and place 85–6
 tips 83
 ways other than writing 83
 reflective learner, autonomous 55
 reflective practice xiv, **xv**, **5–6**, 12, 26, 30, 32, **76–93**, 144, 148
 'central theme' of nursing curricula 76–7
 definitions 80–1
Reflective Practice in Nursing: Growth of Professional Practitioner (Palmer, Burns and Bulman, 2004) 148
Reflective Practitioner (Schon, 1984) 32, 76
 reflective practitioners 32–3
 autonomous 55
 reflective skills 7, 81, 82
 reflectors (type of learner) **133–4**, 136f, **137**
 registration (professional) 5, 21, 40, 126
 renewal 3, 58, 82, 84
 requirement to keep a profile xiii, 1, 2, 3, 38, 113
 regulations 70
 regulatory bodies 138
 rejection 108
 relationships 30, 51, 112, 147
 professional value 54
 reports 71, 72, 103, 104, 121
 research 72, 145
 lifelong learning 13–14
 published 81
 research and development 27
 research funding 139
 researchers 134, 148
 residential care 17
 rhetoric 117

- risk 112, 137
 Rogers, A. 114, 119
 Rogers, C. 117–18
 Rogers, J. 116, 117
 role play 66, 111, 134
 Rouillard, L. 145
 Rowland, F. 147–8
 Rowntree, D. 144
- Scally, M. 145
 Schon, D. 32, 76, 80, 85
 two types of reflection 77
 school teachers 149
 science 112, 148
 sculpture 29, 50, 104
 Second World War 86
 Sector Skills Development Agency 107
 secure accommodation 17
 selectivity 70
 self-appraisal/self-assessment 8–9, 12, 82,
 90, 105, 116, 144
 self-awareness 7, 30, 118, 145
 self-knowledge 146
 self-management 145
Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (Covey,
 2001) 144–5
 Application Suggestions 145
 Sheckley, B. 78
 Sheckley and Keeton's learning cycle 78, 79,
 79f
 short stories 71
 shortages 14, 17
 Shuttleworth, A. xiv
 significant events 82, 83
 significant other 114
 skills xvi, 14, 18, 24, 26–7, 29, 33, 34, 41,
 43, 45, 46, 52, 55, 59–65, 65f, 71–4, 77,
 94, 95, 99t, 102, 103, 105, 106, 113,
 115, 118, 123, 127, 134, 142
 mix issues 17
 personal 40, 145
 updating 21, 25, 126
 small group work 122
 social activities 30
 social care xiv, 94, 127, 139
 advances 128
 continuing professional development
 21–2
 integrated 17
 performance culture 17
 PEST analysis 137, 138
 profiles and portfolios 16–22
 standards 19–21
 social care assistants xiii
 Social Care Institute for Excellence 96
 Social Care Register (2003–) 19
 social care staff 24, 25, 26, 27
 social inclusion 16, 24
 social justice 21
 social life 53
 social services: national objectives 16
 Social Services (England) 16
 social situations 109
 social work: international definition 20–1
 social workers xiii
 Sophocles 65
- standards 95
 social care practice 19
 social services 16–17
 statutory bodies xv, 2–5
 Stephenson, S. 85, 88
 Strategic Health Authorities 16
 strengths 82, 92
 students 7, 71, 117, 119, 148
 empowerment 144
 pre- and post-registration programmes
 84
 study days 14
 study programmes 11
 study skills/techniques 147
 annotated bibliography 143–4
Successful Manager series 145
 SWOT (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities,
 Threats) analysis 125–9, 137, 138
- taking stock 49–58
 case study (Marian) 50–1
 focus on personal and professional
 development 52–5
 interests and aspirations 50–1
 lifelines 53
 preparation 55–8
 professional values 54–5
 real reasons for developing a profile 50,
 51, 52
 reflecting on experiences 49–52
 talents 145
 Taroule, J. 47
Teach Yourself with Open Learning (Rowntree,
 1993) 144
 teacher education 147
 teaching 117, 149
*Teaching as Learning: An Action Research
 Approach* (McNiff and Whitehead, 1992)
 148
 team leadership 8
 team-building ('key skill') 99
 teams 20, 27, 33, 133, 134
 multidisciplinary 34, 72, 91, 138
 teamwork 25, 60f
 'key skill' 36
 technologies 13, 127, 139
 television 25, 51
 terminology xv, 5, 23–36, 106–7
 'confusion' 28
 continuing professional development
 26–8
 credit frameworks 35
 experiential learning 30–2
 glossary 36
 key skills 35–6
 learning outcomes 33–4
 lifelong learning 23–4
 lifelong learning and work 24–6
 multidisciplinary teams: challenge for CPD
 34
 personal development planning 34
 profiles and portfolios 28–30
 progress files and personal development
 planning (HE) 34
 reflection 32–3
 testimonials 59, 72, 73, 74, 104

- theories 63, 64, 66, 111, 134
 theorists (type of learner) **134**, 136f, **137**
 theory 112, 133, 146
 thinking 136, 137, 145
 thoughts 81
 private record 48
 time xv, 41, **44**, 59, 60, 81, 83, 101, 103,
 119, 121, 122, 123, 128
 reflective diary **85–6**
 time management **55–7**, 61f, 69
 family commitments 56
 grid 57
 prioritisation 56–7
 social life 56, 58
 study 56, 57
 unforeseen events 58
 working life 56
 TOPSS, *see* Training Organisation for the
 Personal Social Services
 trade unions 99
 training 10, 11, 18, 24, 25, 31, 40
 formal 21, 62
 informal 21
 social work 19
 training materials (evaluation criteria) 147
 Training Organisation for the Personal Social
 Services (TOPSS) 17, 22, 96, 106
 training outcomes 17
 travel 51
 treatment (new types) 13, 26
 trust 47, 90
 truth 6, 137
 tutors 117, 119, 122, 139

 uncertainty 112, 114
 understanding 99–100t
 unemployment 147
 UNISON 7
 United Kingdom Central Council for Nursing,
 Midwifery and Health Visiting (UKCC)
 1, 7
 auditing compliance with CPD standard
 3
 portfolio requirement 2
 replaced by NMC (2002) 3
 universities 8, 19, 126
 US Air Force 86
Using Experience for Learning (Boud, Cohen
 and Walker, 1993) 136

 values 19, 21, 64, 114
 grids 55
 personal 54
 professional **54–5**
 video tapes 29f, 29
 voluntary sector 16
 voluntary work/activities 51, 104, 109, 110,
 127

 Walker, D. 36, 83–4, 92, 124, **146**, 149
 weaknesses 59, 82
 websites 96

 Business and Technical Education Council
 (BTEC) 107
 City and Guilds 107
 credit frameworks 35
 Department for Education and Skills
 13
 Department of Health 28
 Edexcel 107
 Guernsey: Institute of Health Studies 9
 key skills 99
Lifelong Learning 24
 National Occupational Standards 97
 Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC)
 8, 10
 National Open College Network (NOCN)
 100
 National Qualifications Framework (NQF)
 101
 National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs)
 98
 personal development planning 34
 Qualifications and Curriculum Authority
 (QCA) 106
 Sector Skills Development Agency 107
 Training Organisation for the Personal
 Social Services (TOPSS) 17, 106
 Weil, S. 148–9
 welfare reform 16
 Welsh National Board: Professional Profile
 Folder (1991) 4
What Colour is your Parachute? (Bolles, 1998)
 144
Which Way Now? (Wright, 1996) 146
 White, L. 143
 Whitehead, N. 148
 Whittaker, P. 149
 withdrawal 114
 work 51
 stress-free 54
 work commitments 95
 workbooks 42–3, 143, 148
 workforce planning 17
 working conditions/hours (professional values)
 54
*Working Together – Learning Together: A
 Framework for Lifelong Learning in the
 NHS* (2001) 19–20
 core values and skills 24
 workplace 147
 Wright, B. 146
 writing 12, 32, 146
 fruits 82–3
 informal 46
 ‘permanent record’ 82
 and reflecting **82–3**
 writing skills 43, 48, 58, 59, 60, 61f, 73,
 74–5, 120, 143
 formal and informal 45
 writing style 40, 121
 Wyatt, J. xii

 Youth Offending Team 17