



AWARENESS → ACTION

A REFLEXIVITY FRAMEWORK FOR SYSTEM
DESIGN

MORGAN THOMPSON, PH.D.

AHEAD 2026

WARM-UP REFLECTION

-
- Think about a recent moment where you had to make a judgment call.
 - What were you weighing?
 - What felt uncertain?
 - What influenced your decision most?

AGENDA

- Introduce reflexivity as a systems design tool
- Identify hidden assumptions in everyday practices
- Examine real-world artifacts and tensions
- Apply a practical redesign framework
- Leave with one concrete shift

FRAMING: COMMON TENSIONS



- In Disability Resources, we are constantly balancing:
 - Supporting students
 - Interpreting policy
 - Navigating institutional expectations
 - Making decisions with incomplete information
 - Managing our own professional lens

OUR LENS

Our decisions are shaped by:

identities

experiences

institutional
roles

professional
training

personal
beliefs



These lenses influence interpretation, communication, assumptions, and definitions of “reasonable.”

WHY THIS MATTERS



- Every system answers three questions:
 - Who do we trust?
 - Who has power?
 - Who has to prove themselves?
- These answers shape student experience more than our intentions



WHEN VALUES BECOME SYSTEMS

INTENDED VALUES	SYSTEM EXPERIENCE
Flexibility	Conditional access
Support	Burden of proof
Equity	Consistency enforcement
Trust	Verification

SO, WHAT
CAN BE
DONE?

INTRODUCING
REFLEXIVITY

INTRODUCING REFLEXIVITY

Reflexivity is the process of examining how...

- assumptions,
- institutional pressure,
- positionality,
- and professional norms

...shape the decisions we make
— and the systems we build



WHERE REFLEXIVITY CAN HELP

Accommodation
letter language

Documentation
review decisions

Faculty
communication

Policy design

Student-facing
processes

ARTIFACT 1: ACCOMMODATION LANGUAGE

BEFORE:

- “Student is permitted up to 2 additional days...”

AFTER:

- “Student may utilize up to 2 additional days...”

SHIFT:

- Centers student agency
- Reduces gatekeeping tone
- Maintains clarity without reinforcing hierarchy

ARTIFACT 2: DOCUMENTATION REVIEW



- Common internal question:
 - “Is this enough documentation?”
- Reflexive shift:
 - Enough for what?
 - Based on which standard?
 - Who defines sufficiency?
- Moves the focus from gatekeeping → functional analysis

ARTIFACT 3: FACULTY COMMUNICATION

FACULTY EMAIL:

“I am concerned this creates fairness issues for other students and makes it difficult to maintain consistency within the course.”

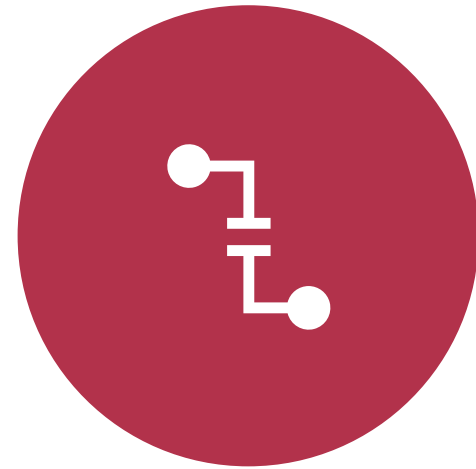
REFLEXIVE QUESTIONS:

- What assumptions about fairness are present?
- Who carries the burden?
- What institutional pressures are shaping the response?
- How could trust and clarity be strengthened?

TRANSITION



If we can identify these
patterns...



We can redesign them
intentionally

LET'S
PRACTICE

The Design Lab

THE DESIGN LAB



- In small groups, you will:
 - Analyze a shared artifact
 - Identify hidden assumptions and tensions
 - Apply reflexivity prompts
 - Redesign language, structure, or process

REFLEXIVITY DESIGN PROMPTS

Who is centered?

Who carries the burden?

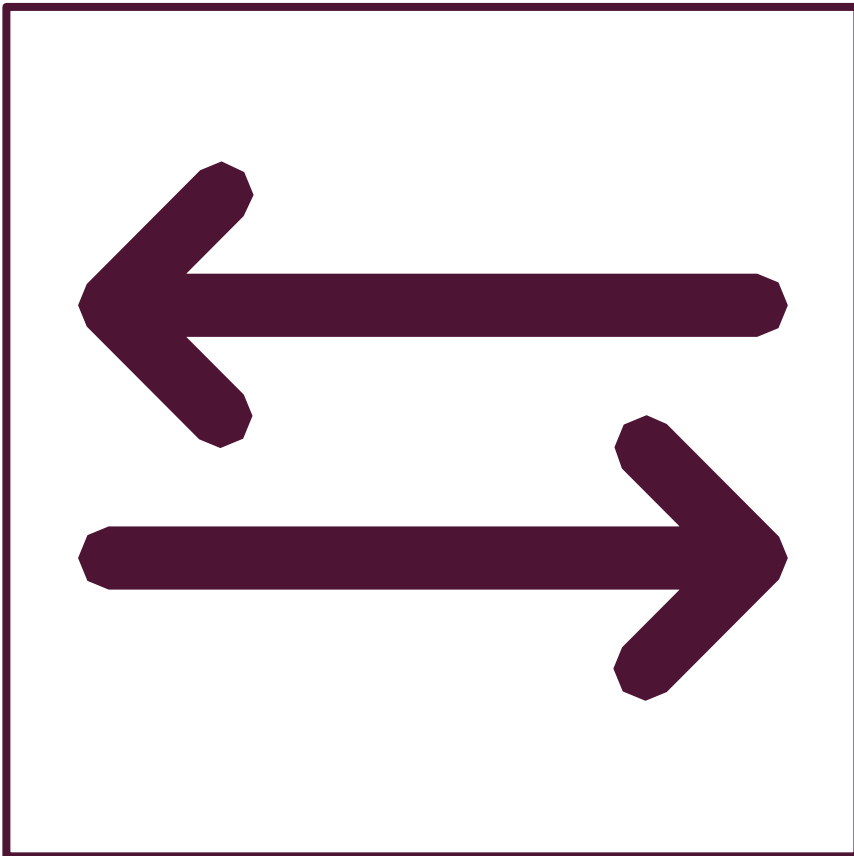
What assumptions are embedded?

What tone is communicated?

Where is power located?

What is implied but not stated?

YOUR GOAL



- Move from:
 - Transactional → Relational
 - Gatekeeping → Access-building
 - Compliance tone → Trust-building clarity

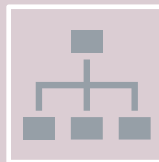
WORK TIME



10–15 minutes



Push beyond minor edits



Consider tone, structure,
assumptions, implementation,
and power dynamics

DEBRIEF



- Discuss:
 - What changed?
 - What surprised you?
 - What felt uncomfortable?
 - What became clearer?

COMMON THEMES

-
- Across redesigns, we often see:
 - Small language shifts create large impact
 - Tone directly influences trust
 - Clarity reduces conflict
 - Flexibility can still be structured
 - Institutional pressure shapes communication

FROM INSIGHT TO PRACTICE

Reflexivity is not a one-time activity

It is an ongoing design practice embedded in communication, supervision, decision-making, policy review, and systems design



Case debrief discussions



Language audits



Policy review cycles



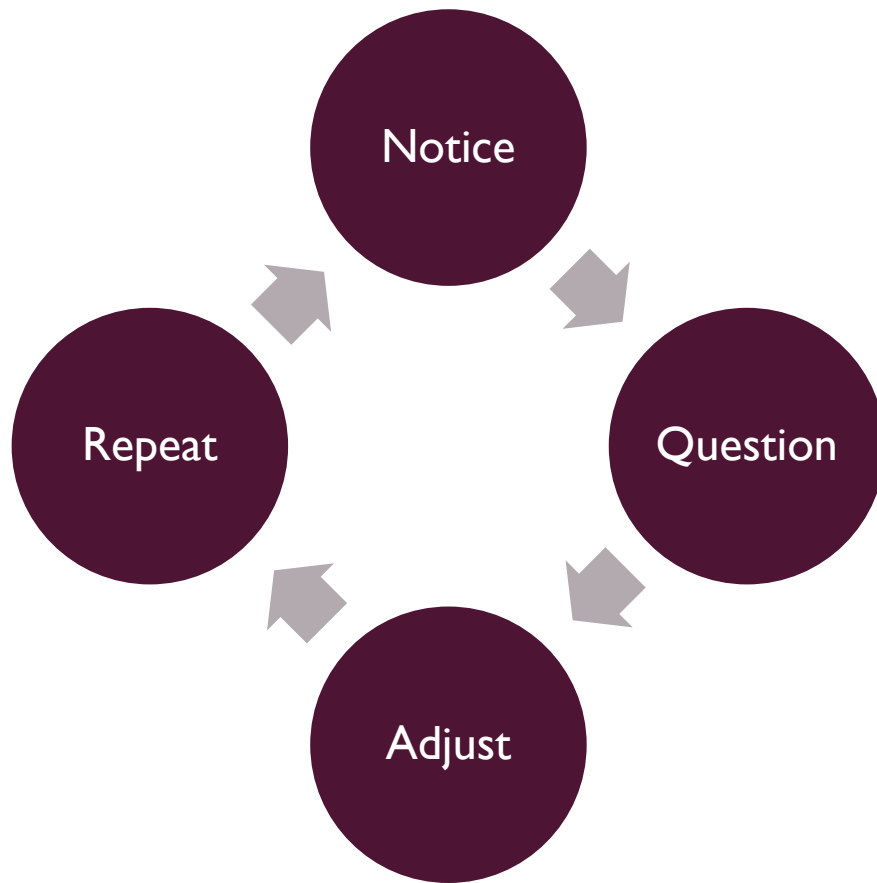
Peer challenge and reflection



Revisiting assumptions over time

EMBEDDING
REFLEXIVITY

REFLEXIVITY LOOP



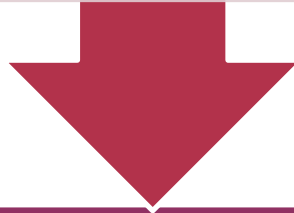
Continuous reflection
creates more
intentional systems

Identify one:

template you
will revise

decision
pattern you
will question

process you
will rework



Make it specific and
actionable

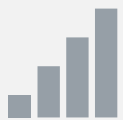
COMMITMENT



Students may never see
our internal intentions



They experience our
systems



Reflexivity helps ensure
those systems
communicate intentionally

FINAL
THOUGHTS



THANK YOU!

EMAIL: MTHOMP26@GMU.EDU