

Reflective Practice: a non-negotiable requirement for an effective educator

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This paper identifies the very personal characteristics of reflective practice and the importance of emotion in that process. It explores the nature of reflection served by solitary deliberation and engagement in communities of practice and identifies the individual attributes of reflection as defined by Schön and Brookfield (Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1986). Finally, this paper provides a review of several reflective models and suggests that personal transformation and reflective practice must form the basis for effective teaching.

It is impossible to become, and continue to be, an effective teacher without a personal commitment to reflective practice. The very notion of reflection is a contested one; reflection has become a desirable commodity and a necessary skill; for others it is a symbol of profundity. But whilst reflection has been given many different meanings, using these meanings has spawned multiple interpretations. Should we be cautious in addressing the question of reflection and cognisant of the things we don't know or is the ability to reflect innate? Can teachers support students to reflect or does it just need time? Indeed, how do we know when reflection occurs? How do we guide reflection, focus it, harness it and reuse it? Do people reflect about things in the same way? Is reflection culturally dependent?

In this paper we will not attempt to answer all of these questions, instead seeking to address perhaps a more modest goal of offering a limited contextual definition of reflection in the context of professional practice and suggesting how faculty can benefit from engagement with it. We do so in the hope that readers will, however, seek to answer the very relevant and pressing questions above for themselves within the sphere of their own practice.

In the closing years of the nineteenth century, John Dewey advocated that the learner should be actively involved in identifying problems, contemplating solutions, acting upon them and analysing the process. For Dewey, the reflection on the solution process meant being actively involved in problem solving, learning was about solving the problem or returning to the reflective process with a view to solving the problem (Dewey, 1896). This foundational definition of reflection is still useful today; novice and experienced faculty alike are engaged in a constant process of problem-solving, with that problem solving revolving around their own practice. This is not to suggest that each

individual's practice is 'a problem', but rather that the process of enhancement is inherently one of identifying an aspect of practice warranting improvement and the articulation of that aspect of practice as a problem to be solved. The reflective practitioner can be expected to see their practice in terms of this process and to do so in a transparent, self-evident and self-aware way.

The reflective process, an act of self-deliberation in order to make sense of practice, involves the use of previous experience and contextual awareness. This means both the development of the mechanism for recording or remembering experience, of valuing it as accumulation of 'reflective assets' and developing the affective skills to match and marry this repertoire to the contemporary situation.

This deliberative stage of the reflective process need not be solitary. Whilst Donald Schon's influential work has focused primarily on the individual, he indicates also the potential value of the expert view (Schon, 1986). Reflection can be seen as a foundational skill-enabling faculty to articulate personal philosophy of teaching which can be used as the basis for one's own development and an understanding of others belief systems (colleagues and students). Reflection can also serve as a benchmark to measure and observe others' professional practices, as a fixed point around which an individual can relate to the ethical understanding of teaching. The intricacies of these deliberative stages are also addressed in Brookfield's four critical lenses, described below (Brookfield, 1995).

It is perhaps because the concept of 'reflection' remains contested that the United Kingdom Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF) does not make overt reference to 'reflection'. Instead its Professional Values espouse the use of 'evidence-informed approaches' and it describes the need to acknowledge the broad contexts in which professional practice occurs. Its areas of activity describe the need to 'develop' and engage in multifaceted continuing professional development. Its core knowledge includes awareness of 'appropriate methods', and methods for 'evaluating effectiveness' as well as the term 'awareness'. The word reflection does not appear anywhere in the UKPSF (Higher Education Academy, 2011).

However nuanced our concept of reflection is, there is no doubt that the objective of the reflective practitioner is to be able to objectively view, to evaluate and to act on one's own practice based on previous experience and deliberative actions. Our contention is that in order to be an effective practitioner, one must be a reflective practitioner.

A PERSONAL LANDSCAPE FOR REFLECTION: EMOTIONS AND CONTEXT

Much of the literature on reflection suggests that the individual is somehow neutral, autonomous and already self-aware. Consequently, reflection might be seen as a generic skill applicable to many different contexts. However, individuals do not operate outside of a discernible context and the socially mediated and socially situated nature of all human activity suggests that awareness of context is essential to an awareness of self.

The difference between being able to perform a reflective act, as simple as recalling an event and suggesting how future action may differ, and engaging or enacting in reflection as a process, is worthy of attention. Emotions play a vital part in the development of faculty, their awareness of self and their ability to translate the purpose of learning to the context of learning. Faculty bring into their classrooms not only the emotional state of any given day but also a repertoire of emotion

derived from both their own formal educational history, however distant, and their emotional relationships to students, past and present. Understanding the relationship between personal emotions, their relationship to belief systems, assumptions and attitudes, and the professional and cultural context in which teaching is taking place is often taken for granted, when in fact it is both complex and critical.

Quality assurance systems often pay little heed to the affective dimensions of teaching and yet most practitioners in their personal reflections find it difficult to disentangle 'the head from the heart'. Simply because the emotional state is not measured in any evaluation of a learning experience by students does not make an understanding of it any less important. Indeed, the emotional state is not an uncommon feature in peer observation of teaching, although often described in restrained emotional terms as befits our cultural limitations, but nonetheless addressing issues such as confidence, empathy, engagement and using terms such as friendly, supportive and caring, all of which are descriptions of emotional states.

Whereas teaching might be perceived by many educational managers as the development and deployment of skills, most faculty regard teaching as a personal, emotional act and frequently cite issues of care, relationships, and even concepts of social justice. In education for the professions there is a broader emotional context in which faculty perceive themselves as responsible for nurturing entire generations of future professionals. There is frequently a tension between a managerial definition of teaching quality focused around standards and instructional technique and an emotional definition of teaching dominated by concepts of nurturing and care.

A professional is able to overcome this false dichotomy and to bring together the personal affective condition and the contextual limitations which might be imposed. Becoming a reflective practitioner is not entirely about an awareness of one's personal emotional state in the classroom but rather an awareness of reflection, deliberation and action within a cultural and institutional context. Carol Rodgers outlines Dewey's notion of reflection as 'a complex, rigorous, intellectual and emotional enterprise' in which open-mindedness, personal responsibility and wholeheartedness should be present (Rodgers, 2002, p. 844). Schön also advocates an openness to emotions such as 'surprise, puzzlement, or confusion' (Schön, 1986, p. 86).

The relationships between students and teachers are clearly critical both for the professional well-being of the teacher and the learning efficacy of the classroom. Positive relationships between students and teachers often centre on teachers' notions of feeling comfortable, of being 'a friend' and of being personally available. Managing those emotional relationships can become difficult when students bring faculty into personal situations in which they become emotionally engaged but over which they have no control (Lev, Kolassa & Bakken, 2010).

Peter Kugel identified two distinct phases in a novice teacher's development as an effective practitioner, from an emphasis on teaching to an emphasis on learning (Kugel, 1993). The emphasis on learning itself sub-divides into three stages, from a focus on self, to a focus on subject and finally a focus on the student. Only once the practitioner has achieved this focus on the students can they move into the second phase with an emphasis on learning. Here too, Kugel suggests a three-step progression with the student as receptive to the teacher, the student as an active participant in their learning and finally the students as an independent learner.

Moving 'beyond' oneself, beyond the focus on teaching, can be a significant challenge. An affective concern for many teachers is their perception that the teaching that they are required to support is less than meaningful. Teachers' belief about the meaningful nature of teaching has a profound effect on their practice; teachers who find note-taking dull may make every effort to avoid it in their practice to the detriment of those students who find this a useful form of learning support. Conversely, a teacher may replicate their own teaching experience to the detriment of those with alternative learning preferences (Riding, 2005).

Another important affective dimension is the desire on the part of many teachers to make a personal impact. The individual may have both admirable intent and profound conviction, but an awareness of the motivation for wishing to make a personal impact is often absent. Yet the desire to affect others, to impact on others' lives in profound ways, is not one to be taken lightly. Many teachers set very high expectations of themselves and are intolerant of colleagues who appear to do less than them.

There is also an interesting relationship between professional self-awareness and confidence. The practitioner able to draw on a repertoire of experience and act accordingly has a confidence that many novices do not, not because their technical skills are necessarily greater but because they have self-assurance in their ability to respond to the unforeseen.

REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONERS AND COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE

There are a number of terms used to describe collegial support in the context of the University, from the term 'collegiality' to the popular concept of communities of practice and the notion of 'intellectual neighbours'. Developing professional contexts that blend the educational and the external professional values and culture is particularly difficult.

Situated learning emphasizes the relationship between the social context of learning and the subjectivity of learning itself (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Situatedness has become synonymous with notions of authenticity, however we may choose to question this relationship. Situatedness suggests that any activity, such as reflection, exists within a social context and makes use of socially mediated tools and practices that exist within that context. Personal reflection is no less personal for being situated within the professional context. By definition, professional reflection is that which takes place within a defined professional context. It is, therefore, the nature of this professional context that requires some attention. At its most basic it might be seen as one's place of work, one's immediate colleagues and this year's assigned cohorts.

It is also useful, we believe, to consider other definitions of the broader social context that might inform our own personal appreciation of the breadth and depth of the professional context in which we reflect. Etienne Wenger describes the communities of practice in which the professional self develops (Wenger, 1999), Bruno Latour explores the concept of the actor-network, in which the individual practitioner is an integrated but not wholly autonomous actor (Latour, 2005) and Yrjö Engeström proposes complex inter-related activity systems in which there is a constant dialogue between myriad parties (Engestrom, Miettinen, & Punamaki, 1999). More recently, and with reference increasingly to the digital environment, James Paul Gee discusses situated learning evolving within new complex digital landscapes in the context of affinity groups (Gee, 2008). Whichever interpretation of the collective social structure one chooses as most suitable to one's

own understanding, a common theme emerges of individuals coming together in some shared, conscious or unconscious, co-construction of context.

In the context of professional education, in which as educators we retain a close affiliation, sometimes a parallel identity, to our professional communities, perhaps the most useful definition of this collective social culture is the concept of the discourse community. As a concept, this allows for a discourse to cross the boundaries between a profession in its educational form and a profession in its practice (Ovens & Tinning, 2009). A discourse community does not only define the relative roles and relationships of individuals but also the ideas and theories that provide shared meaning to actions. Discourse community in this sense might bridge different communities of practice. A lawyer who also identifies themselves as an educator effectively 'speaks two community languages', and the ability to transition between these different languages is a skill not to be underestimated.

The nature of the individual and their reflection, and discourse community and its collective reflections, are distinct and complementary. The individual might best understand his or her own process with reference to a shared community perspective. Whilst this risks a perpetuation of existing inequalities and prejudices within any given discourse community, it also provides the individual with the most evident of situated experience. Discourse community that is open to challenge and reflection might also benefit from the dissension inherent in counter-reflections. The issue of conformity is also pertinent for those new to reflection, and those seeking to enter into a discourse community, as there is always the risk that individuals enact reflection in order to suit the social context in which they are situated, to distort their reflection in order to belong.

It is possible that the affective dimension defines the boundary between training and teaching. Communicating emotionally decontextualized information could be said to characterise many aspects of training. Teaching is recognisably different, combining not only the development of knowledge but also the cultivation of the individual. Where training may be seen to impart, teaching seeks to transform.

BROOKFIELD'S FOUR CRITICAL LENSES AND THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Stephen Brookfield argues that excellent teachers are those who continue to refine a very personal 'authentic voice', suggesting that this instils both value and dignity in teaching practice. A continuous process of self-critical reflection produces a confidence that is the foundation to inspirational teaching and the basis for sustained achievement of teaching goals. As a consequence, Brookfield believes, students themselves become critically reflective (Brookfield, 1990).

Brookfield's four critical lenses provide multiple, distinctly different, vantage points from which to review practice. The autobiographical, student view, collegial (peer) perspective, and the scholarship of teaching and learning, present four distinct but complementary perspectives. The autobiographical lens, typified by the creation of the personal teaching philosophy and maintenance of the teaching log, provides the basis for much of the reflective process advocated by Brookfield. Exploring previous experiences as a learner and relating that to the experience of being a teacher ensures that faculty 'become aware of the paradigmatic assumptions and instinctive reasonings that frame how we work' (Brookfield, 1995, p. 30).

It is important to go beyond self-reflection and to draw on different perspectives that inform, strengthen and provide validity for a more holistic reflection on the teaching process. Student

evaluations of their learning experience, particularly those garnered during the course of the module rather than as end of module reviews, provide an invaluable insight into the effectiveness of the learning being offered. Student evaluation also occurs through every encounter in the form of natural feedback and responsiveness to learning opportunities and the attentive teacher draws on this unconscious evaluation to inform their practice. For Brookfield, it is this student perspective that reveals 'those actions and assumptions that either confirm or challenge existing power relationships in the classroom' (1995, p. 30). In a professional education context, the negotiation of these power relationships is often critical to the effectiveness of learning and students' comfort and sense of safety in the learning environment is an important characteristic.

Many teachers will engage with these two lenses, the autobiographical and the student, as part of self-aware practice. They may also engage with the third, the collegial lens, in the form of formalised peer review of teaching. However, the formality of such processes risks undermining their true value, as it is through dialogue with peers that one is able to highlight hidden assumptions about one's own practice. Identifying shared assumptions, and misassumptions, is an important part of this peer perspective, as Brookfield suggests it is through observing others that teachers might realise 'idiosyncrasy failings are shared by many others who work in situations like ours' (1995, p. 36). In addition to peer observation, the routine processes of course review, team marking, programme evaluation and other opportunities for training and development, all offer valuable insights into one's own practice.

For many practitioners, it is the fourth lens that appears the least accessible. Scholarly literature on higher education can seem alien to the discipline and institutional context of many practitioners. This is particularly true to those in professional education where the stress may be on professional identities outside education, their 'first language' community. However, Brookfield suggests that teachers who undertake scholarly research, presentation and publication develop an advanced vocabulary that describes, and comes to support, their teaching practice in such a way that it provides an important context for this critical fourth perspective.

DONALD SCHÖN AND THE REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER

Donald Schön has made a significant impact on the debate about both the process of reflective practice and its impact on organisations and learning cultures. Much of his early work, from the 1970s onwards, was concerned with organisational learning and focused around collective notions of practice and response. His later work introduced concepts such as double loop learning and the notion of differentiation between reflection-on-action, taken retrospectively, and reflection-in-action as something reflecting mastery of self-aware practice.

Donald Schön has provided significant insights into the development of notions of the learning society. As society has changed to allow for increasing proportions of free time and there have been rapid changes in how occupations were fulfilled, it is perhaps unsurprising that society perceives specialists and generalists, and the learning evolution of both, in new ways.

The loss of the stable state means that our society and all of its institutions are in continuous processes of transformation. We cannot expect new stable states that will endure for our own lifetimes.

We must learn to understand, guide, influence and manage these transformations. We must make the capacity for undertaking them integral to ourselves and to our institutions. We must, in other words, become adept at learning. We must become able not only to transform our institutions, in response to changing situations and requirements; we must invent and develop institutions which are 'learning systems', that is to say, systems capable of bringing about their own continuing transformation.

The task which the loss of the stable state makes imperative, for the person, for our institutions, for our society as a whole, is to learn about learning.

What is the nature of the process by which organizations, institutions and societies transform themselves?

What are the characteristics of effective learning systems?

What are the forms and limits of knowledge that can operate within processes of social learning?

What demands are made on a person who engages in this kind of learning?

(Schön, 1973, pp. 28–29)

Schön's relevance is, therefore, not only to the individual process of reflection but also that taking place to counter the 'dynamic conservatism' of institutions, including the professions. There is a delicate balance between the preservation of identity and values, shared by the members of the profession, and the need for constant renewal. The way in which organisations and institutions 'learn' in part defines their ability to transform and evolve, to remain contemporary. Schön identifies innovation as one example of how a learning organisation differs from the classical model, citing the change from the classical concept of innovation as a product or technique to its perception as a functional system. He identifies how fixed patterns of leadership move in learning organisations towards shifting centres of leadership. The transformation is one in which institutions previously defined by the scope of the resource and energy at their centre evolve resources and energy limited only by the technology that supports infrastructure (Schön, 1973, p. 168).

This evolving stress on networks and infrastructure foreshadows the network theory work of Manuel Castells in 1980s' sociology (Castells, 1996) and twenty years later the Connectivism learning theories of George Siemens (Siemens & Conole, 2011). This stress on networks has impacted on the way in which individuals see themselves, on the interrelationships between teacher and student. Learning is redefined as being not solely an individual pursuit or even an individual within a social collective, but a very public and social experience. It is the social system itself that is capable of learning through a process of constant identity renewal.

In collaboration with Chris Argyris, Schön explored the individual's role in organisational learning by redefining the process of professional effectiveness. They suggested that individuals possessed mental maps of how to respond, plan, implement and review their actions in any given situation. Rather than act upon espoused theory, individuals in fact reacted according to predetermined notions of effective behaviour. These frames of reference, as Mezirow would later describe them (Mezirow, 2000, p. 16), are difficult to change and Argyris and Schön sought to illustrate just how difficult by dissecting these durable espoused theories.

Their notion of the difference between single loop learning, where goals and strategies are taken for granted, where the emphasis is merely on the incremental enhancement of established technique,

and double loop learning where the frame of reference and the learning systems that underlie those techniques are questioned, is a simple but powerful idea. Rather than having to go through a full cycle of planning, acting and reflecting as described in the reflective processes of Dewey and Kolb (Dewey, 1997; Kolb, 1984), the notion of double loop learning suggested that reflecting critically at any time on theory in action, or pre-existing frames of mind, would bring enhancements.

Donald Schön extended this idea of abstract reflection by differentiating between reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action. Reflection-in-action, referred to in the vernacular as 'thinking on your feet', may seem self-evident and yet for Schön the way in which new understandings are created in the moment is significant.

The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (Schön, 2009, p. 68)

One must be aware of one's own espoused theories in order to be able to engage with them in the moment, to draw on our repertoire of previous experience in comparable moments, in order to act, to reflect, in that very same moment. Criticisms of this differentiation between reflection-on-action and reflection-in-action centre on the notion of time, whether in fact there is time in the moment to truly reflect. Practitioners, however, are able to describe the process of thinking on their feet and often are able to articulate the reasons why they made particular decisions in response to an unanticipated event. The notion of reflection in action can be criticised for underestimating the adaptability of a repertoire of experience. The ability to deploy a variation on a previous experience certainly involves intellectual processes but this may not constitute what Schön calls reflection-in-action.

Despite the inadequacies of the research base to Schön's model of reflection, there is clearly a difference between the way individuals relate to an event after it has occurred and how they respond during the event itself. This difference between the on-action and in-action is surely worthy of deeper consideration. Professional practice requires not simply that individuals have the ability to be able to perform in the moment in a versatile and appropriate way, but also that they are able to articulate for others that process.

MODELS OF REFLECTION

Recent work by Del Carlo and colleagues has explored the relationship between qualitative research methods in education and teachers' reflective practices (Carlo, Hinkhouse, & Isbell, 2010). This work provides a useful summary of several of the different models of reflection that exist in the literature and which might be used to guide the reflective practitioner.

Technical reflection is largely behavioural, focused on skills acquisition measured against predetermined notions of best practice. Reflections on observation carried out superficially tend to focus on this technical performance and, whilst it is certainly useful to be aware of external definitions of best practice against which one might position oneself, technical reflection risks being limited to others' perception of quality rather than one's own.

Reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action are, as we have seen, terms introduced by Donald Schön and seek to move the practitioner beyond a reflection on technical performance and open up both issues of context and consequence. Reflection-on-action, best carried out immediately following a teaching engagement, most frequently involves a diary or journal reflection on a specific lesson or class with a view to identifying key points against a personal set of reflective criteria. Reflection-in-action follows the same reflective process but occurs during rather than after the teaching episode. Whilst the former allows for future actions to be modified, the latter ensures that modifications are made in the moment. Whilst there is still an acknowledgement of externally validated notions of technical excellence, the emphasis is on personal values, personal experience, and contextualised knowledge. Every individual's experience as a teacher differs and so the measure of reflection is internal rather than external.

Drawing in part on the tradition of activity theory and actor network theory, personalistic reflection is concerned with the direct relationship between teachers' actions and student response, and students' actions and teacher response. This requires teachers to have a significant understanding of their own epistemological beliefs, where they believe knowledge is made, resides, and under what circumstances it has authority, as well as an appreciation of the alternative perspectives that may be held by their students. Such reflection requires an examination of self-identity and an appreciation, and empathy, for the realities of students' identities, which is often problematic in mass education. An increasing appreciation of the diversity of the student body at a time of increasing student mobility and globalisation of higher education certainly provides teachers with an opportunity to reflect on their own beliefs in the light of different, alternative, conceptions of learning and self-awareness.

Educational literature also posits the notion of critical reflection as being relevant to the practitioner. Much of the focus for critical reflection is on the political and social dimensions deriving much of its substance from political philosophy. It extends personalistic reflection by reaching beyond the personal and immediate social milieu, and encompassing broader concepts such as social class, gender and ethnicity with the view to establishing socially just educational practices.

In both personalistic reflection and critical reflection, there is a stress on reaching beyond self and to leverage empathy as a powerful reflective instrument. However, whilst useful and effective in educational research, this process has less immediate impact on individual practitioners. A more useful and broader concept of reflection perhaps typified by Brookfield, is the notion of deliberative reflection in which numerous sources of information, from different expert viewpoints, are used by the teacher to enhance their practice. As well as the teacher's own values and beliefs, the student voice, the collegial voice and scholarship are all heard. Whilst the immediate 'solution' may be less easily discernible amongst these multiple voices, the richness of the reflection develops a sustainable and adaptable repository of experience (See Table 1).

Table 1 – Models of reflection

Type	Content of reflection	Criteria for quality reflection
Technical	General teaching behaviours based on research on teaching – ‘good practice’	Matching one’s own performance to external notions of ‘good practice’
In- and on-action	One’s own personal teaching performance	Decisions based on one’s own unique immediate situation
Deliberative	Range of teaching concerns including self, syllabus, teachings strategies, students evaluation and response and peers, and organization of the classroom	Consideration of competing viewpoints and research findings
Personalistic	One’s own personal growth and relationships with students	Listening to and trusting one’s own inner voice and the voices of others
Critical	Social, moral and political dimensions of Learning Contexts	Judging the goals and purposes of Learning in light of ethical criteria such as social justice and equality of opportunity

(Valli, 1997, p.75)

CONCLUSION

BPP University College has designed its Postgraduate Certificate in Professional Education around four 15-credit modules aligned to this model of professional reflection; each module in turn stressing one of Brookfield’s four critical lenses. Whilst several developmental instruments return throughout the modules, most notably peer observation of teaching as observer and observee, there is a development from a foundational module focused heavily on self-reflection and context (autobiographical lens), to a module focused on assessment and feedback with reference to the broader political and institutional context (peer lens), a module emphasising the student learning experience from the student’s perspective (student lens) and a final module focused on practice and evidence-based scholarship (scholarship lens). This embodiment of theory in course design is intended to provide a transparent and intellectually coherent approach to which future course modifications can refer.

It is also intended to support practitioners from one professional discourse (those familiar with one professional language) to access another. It is our institution’s stated goal to challenge and disrupt the status quo in education and the principles of critical reflection are, therefore, relevant to our reflective processes. We should be thinking about social justice, equality of opportunity and our role in different power dynamics. To have any hope of doing so we must move beyond the ‘technical reflection’ typified by end of module satisfaction surveys, become effective reflectors on-action and in-action and become deliberative reflectors. To be an effective educator in a complex of different professional contexts, in the ‘multi-discourse’ of an international higher education sector, we must be effective reflective practitioners.

We would go further and say, in our considered view, that reflective practice is a non-negotiable requirement for any effective educator.

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