

Chapter 7

Conclusion: Rising to the Challenge

INTRODUCTION

In this final chapter we summarize the main arguments we have put forward and present our views on how best we can, individually and collectively, rise to the challenge of developing critically reflective practice in circumstances where, on the one hand, we have considerable misunderstanding and oversimplification of what it is all about and, on the other, strong resistance to making it a reality – for example, through organizational cultures that encourage staff (and managers) to ‘just get on with the job’.

What we have tried to do in this book is to steer a positive and constructive path in between these two destructive extremes. In terms of the oversimplifications and superficial understandings, we have tried to show the complexities involved and have suggested some ways in which these can be addressed. In terms of the difficulties we face in relation to resistance and obstacles, we have tried to be of assistance by highlighting some of the main problems involved and, once again, suggested some possible ways forward.

In doing so we have made every effort to blend theory and practice successfully and helpfully. In terms of theory, we have tried to do justice to the complexities involved without this becoming an advanced-level theoretical treatise. We see no problem with such an advanced-level treatise, but recognize that that is not what this book is about. In terms of practice, we have tried to provide helpful guidance, but without being prescriptive or giving the impression that simple, off-the-peg solutions have any value. If we had fallen

into such a trap, we would have been undermining the whole tenor of the book, as it is clearly a key part of the philosophy of reflective practice to recognize that each situation needs to be dealt with on its own merits and not in standardized ways – the reflective practitioner cuts the cloth of knowledge, values and experience to suit the circumstances of the practice situation being dealt with.

What remains for us to do now is to pull together our views about how to respond to the challenge of making critically reflective practice a reality (or, more of a reality than it is now). We do this by highlighting seven sets of issues that we feel are crucial underpinnings of what we are trying to achieve. We shall conclude, then, by summarizing our views on each of these seven areas in turn.

THINKING

A career in the helping professions is likely to be a demanding one, with a great deal of pressure involved. It is understandable, then, that people will be tempted to press on with *doing* their work and devote relatively little time to *thinking* about the work. However, we have seen that this can be a dangerous temptation, as it means that we can be practising without really understanding what we are doing and why we are doing it. We can fall foul of ‘mindless’ practice, rather than gain the benefits of an informed and mindful approach that allows us to:

- Draw on our extensive professional knowledge base.
- Be aware of potential pitfalls and dangers.
- Develop a good understanding of the complex situations we are dealing with.
- Be creative and not simply rely on habit and routine.
- Tailor solutions to the specific circumstances rather than deal with them in standardized ways.
- Be in a position to justify our actions if called upon to do so.

Adopting such an approach will, in turn give us:

- A greater sense of control and thus make us less prone to stress.

- A higher level of confidence based on the fact that we are able to practise at a more advanced level.
- More job satisfaction and thus a higher level of motivation and morale.
- A spur to learning and thus a solid foundation for continuous professional development.
- Greater professional credibility in the eyes of those we serve and of fellow professionals within the multidisciplinary network.

What it amounts to is avoiding BOB (the Bypassing Our Brain problem – an easy trap to fall into when we are busy and perhaps tired). Reflective practice does not mean that we must be concentrating fully at all times – that would be an unrealistic expectation – but it does mean that we should make every effort not to slide into a dangerous, unthinking and routinized approach, no matter how much pressure we are under.

But, reflective practice is not simply a matter of thinking in a general, unstructured way. It is more complex than this. Bruner (1996) argues that reflection is: ‘a process of sense making, of going “meta,” turning round on what one has learned through bare experience, thinking about thinking’ (p. 10, cited in Lyons, 2004, p. 37). ‘Meta’ is the Greek word for ‘above’, and so ‘going meta’ means getting an overview of the situation and our thinking about it (closely linked to the holistic approach referred to earlier as ‘helicopter vision’). Reflective practice is therefore more than ‘just having a little think’ every now and again. It involves having a focused, mindful approach to our work and the rationale for our actions.

A thoughtful, reflective approach should also make it easier for us to keep high-quality records of our work (an important aspect of professional accountability). This is because it is difficult (if not impossible) to write clearly if we are not thinking clearly. High-quality professional records therefore depend on a degree of clarity of thinking – and, as we have seen, clarity and focus are important elements of reflective practice.

The other side of the coin is to make sure that the quality of our thinking is reflected in our writing. That is, it is possible to have clear thinking that is not apparent in the quality of the records. It is a pity when this occurs, as it means that we are not doing justice to the quality of our practice. It also means that others who may rely on our records in future may not benefit from the high-quality groundwork we have done.

THINKING CRITICALLY

Our argument throughout the book has clearly been that a thoughtful, reflective, well-informed approach is far preferable to an unthinking approach based on habit, routine, knee-jerk responses or simply copying others. However, we have also argued that our thoughtful, reflective approach needs to be a *critically* reflective approach – that is, it needs to be consistent with:

- **Critical depth.** This involves being able to identify underlying arguments and assumptions (which may be false, distorted or otherwise inappropriate). It is geared towards making sure that (i) our own thinking is not flawed and thereby potentially dangerously misleading; and (ii) we are not seduced by the flawed thinking of others.
- **Critical breadth.** Professional practice can easily become ‘atomistic’ – that is, too individually focused and thus neglectful of the wider social and political context of our practice (and indeed of the lives of the people we serve). Critically reflective practice therefore takes account of power relations and related processes of discrimination, stigmatization and exclusion.

In relation to the breadth aspect, Fook makes an important point in arguing that:

A critical reflective approach should allow . . . workers to interact with and respond to power dynamics in situations in a much more flexible, differentiated and therefore effective way. By making less ‘blanket’ assumptions about power, the critically reflective practitioner should be able to engage with the specific power dynamics of situations in more relevant and effective ways.

(2002, p. 157)

It would be naïve to assume that our professional actions do not involve power dynamics (Thompson, 2007). It can be dangerous not to be tuned in to such power issues – dangerous because:

- We may not spot the significance of discrimination in people's lives, and may thus do them a considerable disservice in failing to take account of such potentially crucial aspects of their circumstances.
- We may actually reinforce such discrimination, albeit unwittingly, and thus increase the levels of oppression, disadvantage and distress, rather than reduce them. We thus become part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

It is therefore essential that our practice is tuned in to such issues, that our reflection has this critical breadth. Without this, we could be hindering rather than helping.

In terms of the depth element, we are not expected to be experts in formal logic, but we would be very wise to take whatever reasonable steps we can to develop our understanding and skills in relation to recognizing, for example, the difference between a valid argument and a spurious one. This is something that you may find difficult at first, but it is a skill that can be developed over time. It is also something that does not have to be tackled alone. We can help each other develop our skills in this area. Returning to our discussions in Chapter 3 of the different contexts of practice, critical analysis skills can be fostered through dyadic reflective space (for example, supervision, mentoring or coaching) and/or group reflective space (training courses may be available in some areas around these issues).

We have presented the breadth and depth elements as different aspects of critically reflective practice, but it is also important to recognize that there are inter-connections between them. For example, the reason an argument or assumption may be flawed or distorted may be that it is being used to shore up a particular ideological position. It may be, perhaps, that unquestioned assumptions (depth) about male and female roles in society (breadth) are underpinning an individual's reasoning about a situation. The reason they are making these assumptions is that they subscribe to a value base that does not include a commitment to gender equality. Once we realize this, we can start to see why, from the value base of the helping professions, with its emphasis on the importance of equality and diversity, the assumptions they are making need to be challenged.

In effect, critically reflective practice involves not taking things at face value and therefore questioning the underpinning assumptions and broader processes that will be shaping the situations we deal with.

BEING SELF-AWARE

Just as work pressures can, if we let them, prevent us from adopting a thoughtful, reflective approach that enables us to draw on our professional knowledge base, workload demands can also prevent us from adopting a self-aware approach that enables us to draw on our experience and character. Work pressures can lead us into losing sight of who we are, what impact we are having on the situations we are dealing with and what impact they are having on us. In the helping professions, it is often the human element that makes the difference, the ways in which we, as individuals, can bring our own experiences and insights to bear, our personal warmth, empathy and concern.

This does not mean that, say, the reassurance and personal connection a nurse offers is more important than the medication given, but it does mean that the absence of the former could be just as significant as the absence of the latter. However, if we adopt an unthinking, non-reflective approach to our work, then we may find that this human dimension slips away, with the result that people experience our efforts to help as mechanistic and dehumanizing – once again, we run the risk of being part of the problem, rather than part of the solution.

Reflective practice involves being able to tune in to the specific circumstances we are dealing with and not simply applying a standardized or blanket approach to practice. To be able to do that we need a degree of sensitivity, the ability to identify the subtleties involved in terms of what is happening, what processes are contributing to what is happening and the implications of what is unfolding. We will, of course, be part of that unfolding – we will be part of the 'dynamic' that is shaping the situation and how it develops. We are not neutral, invisible and silent observers of the practice situations we encounter – we become part of them. We can play a part in improving the situation – working towards positive, valued outcomes – or we can be instrumental in the situation getting worse and resulting in negative, undesirable outcomes. If we are not sensitive to the part we play, to how we influence the unfolding of events, we place ourselves in a doubly dangerous situation. First, it can be dangerous in terms of the harm that we can do to the people we are seeking to help and, second, it can be dangerous in terms of our own credibility in the short term and our overall career development in the longer term. Given the important part we play in the situations we are involved with, self-awareness becomes an essential foundation of good practice.

Self-awareness involves recognizing that we are not infallible, that we will make mistakes from time to time. Self-awareness therefore involves a degree of humility and the recognition of the dangers of being too self-assured or overconfident. Self-awareness, then, should prevent us from adopting too fixed and dogmatic a view of the situations we deal with. Taylor and White warn of the dangers of a complacent approach that lacks such awareness:

armed with the comfortable belief that they have sure and certain knowledge, health and welfare professionals may be less likely to reflect appropriately on their judgements and decision making, thus making error more, rather than less, likely. Health and welfare professionals need to acknowledge the uncertainty, ambiguity and complexity that lie at the heart of their practice (Parton 1999).
(2000, p. 5)

Self-awareness, then, as part of critically reflective practice, has an important part to play in making sure that we do not become too inflexible in our approach. The flexibility of being able to tailor solutions to specific circumstances is, of course, at the heart of reflective practice.

As we noted in Chapter 1, individuals do not exist in a social vacuum. Being self-aware therefore needs to incorporate being *socially* aware, attuned to the wider contexts in which we work. In this way, self-awareness makes a positive contribution to the *critical* element of reflective practice, based on having an awareness of, and sensitivity to, the role of power relations, inequality and disadvantage in shaping the problems that form the bedrock of our work in the helping professions. Fook captures this point well:

Reframing our practice as contextual therefore means we reframe our practice as working *with* environments, rather than working *despite* environments. We see ourselves as part of a context, ourselves responsible for aspects of that context. In this way, we see possibilities for change, for *creating different microclimates within broader contexts*.

(2002, p. 162)

Self-awareness therefore needs to involve awareness of the social contexts in which we operate. Self-awareness is one of the foundation stones of critically reflective practice and, in turn, critically reflective practice supports and facilitates the development of greater self-awareness.

CAPITALIZING ON LEARNING

Every day we are presented with opportunities for learning: situations that enable us to practise and develop our skills; new information to develop our knowledge base; new experiences to learn lessons from (both the successes and the failures); challenges to our assumptions and ways of thinking that spur us to review and develop our approach; and opportunities to learn from others (through direct observation/co-working, discussion and/or reading). However, a combination of workplace pressures and an unthinking approach can mean that we miss a great many of these opportunities. As Clutterbuck confirms:

The result is that many people spend most of their working lives missing opportunities to learn. It is not just the workshop we could not attend, or the book we did not read, or the challenging project we did not put our name forward for. It is the continuous failure to tap into the views, perspective and knowledge of the people around us.

(1998, p. 14)

It is a great pity that so many people miss out on these opportunities for learning, and thereby fail to gain the benefits that accrue from continuous professional development: enhanced levels of understanding that can lead to enhanced levels of practice; greater confidence that comes from being better informed and better equipped; and so on.

But it does not have to be this way. By having a more 'switched on' approach to what is going on around us, we can significantly increase the chances of making the most of the learning opportunities that present themselves to us on a more or less daily basis. Reflective practice can help us to have this more 'switched on' approach, more tuned in to what is going on around us – especially the learning opportunities presented. Indeed, reflective

practice could be seen as *learning* practice, in the sense that a reflective approach helps us to learn, and being tuned in to learning will support the development of critically reflective practice.

We can capitalize on learning in a number of ways, linked to the three contexts of reflection discussed in Chapter 3:

- **Personal reflective space.** This can be linked to the discussion above of self-awareness (and social awareness), where the value of being more alert to our part in the situations we deal with was emphasized. The same process of awareness can be used as the basis of learning. We can ask ourselves: What can I learn from this situation? What new knowledge or skills are involved? How can this situation help me develop my existing knowledge and skills? Does this situation tell me anything about values?
- **Dyadic reflective space.** One-to-one situations, such as supervision, mentoring and coaching can be invaluable opportunities for learning – for example, by reviewing our practice and drawing out the learning from it; by integrating theory and practice and so on. A skilled supervisor, mentor, coach, practice teacher or tutor can be extremely helpful in supporting learning. We should therefore make sure that, as far as possible, we make the most of the learning that can be gained from using such support to the full.
- **Group reflective space.** Training courses and other group learning experiences can be a more or less complete waste of time, or they can be extremely stimulating, rewarding and fruitful learning experiences that broaden, deepen and reaffirm our knowledge base, extend and strengthen our skills base and provide a basis for examining and exploring our value base. They can boost confidence, increase motivation and provide valuable food for thought about how to develop our practice. Whether the event is predominantly negative or predominantly positive will depend in part on the other participants and the event leader, but our own part in the proceedings will also be crucial. How much effort and concentration we put in, whether we do any preparatory work beforehand and whether we make the effort to transfer the learning to our practice (with or without the help of a supervisor or mentor) after the event will all be significant factors in determining whether or not we are able to make the most of the learning potential on offer.

Capitalizing on learning has huge benefits for relatively little investment of time and effort. What is crucial, though, is having a positive mindset that is geared towards learning, one that sees the value of growth and development and involves a commitment to drawing out the lessons to be learned from the work we do.

SUPPORTING OTHERS

At various points we have made it clear that developing reflective practice is not something we have to do alone. There is much to be gained from supporting one another and collaborating in whatever ways we can to make critically reflective practice a reality as a fundamental underpinning to our work.

It is undoubtedly the case that much of our educational system is based on competition (who is going to get the highest grades?) and, while that may arguably have some value, the price we pay for it is that so many people associate learning with competition, rather than cooperation and collaboration. To maximize the potential of reflective practice, we therefore need to place the emphasis on collaboration (working in partnership) rather than competition.

But, this is not just an individual responsibility. Organizations too have some degree of responsibility for trying to ensure that learning and reflection are encouraged and supported, and that these are seen as shared endeavours, rather than simply solo projects. Clutterbuck supports this view:

One of the aims for the organisation of the early twenty-first century must be to create a climate of development where helping others to learn is natural, expected – and hopefully – quite unremarkable. That will not happen with current piecemeal approaches. It is time that the learning alliance took its place alongside more formal approaches to learning, as a fundamental driver of business and personal change.

(1998, p. 134)

The term 'learning alliance' refers to the dyadic reflective space discussed earlier. Clutterbuck sees this as central to organizational learning. We would agree, but would also want to emphasize the broader role of leadership. While individual employees can play a significant part and so too can supervisors

and managers, there is also the role of the organizations' leaders to consider. Leadership is about shaping the culture of the organization and motivating staff and managers to fulfil the organization's goals. If we apply this to critically reflective practice, we can see that leaders have great potential for shaping a culture that is supportive of learning and reflection and creating a spirit of collaboration in that direction.

BEING PROFESSIONAL

Working in an uncritical, non-reflective way is a pretty poor basis for professional practice. Being professional involves drawing on professional knowledge and value bases and having professional accountability. Each of these is very relevant when it comes to critically reflective practice. We shall consider each of them in turn.

Drawing on a professional knowledge base

Central to the notion of reflective practice is the idea that it is *informed* practice – that is, it is rooted in a professional knowledge base, rather than just guesswork, habit or prejudice. In particular, it is important that this knowledge base should be, as far as possible, an *open* knowledge base – that is, one that is open to scrutiny and challenge (and is therefore not dogmatic) and can grow and develop over time.

This means being able to integrate theory and practice: making sure that practice is informed by theoretical understanding and theory is tested by practice. Lovelock, Lyons and Powell make reference to: 'Lang's elegant notion of making theory "lived practice" and practice "lived theory"' (2004, p. 177). It is important that we do not return to the days of theory and practice being seen as separate, largely unconnected domains, as such a short-sighted approach fails to recognize how valuable theoretical insights can be for making sense of practice and how valuable practice can be for testing and extending theory.

A common misunderstanding is that theory 'belongs' to academics in universities, while practice 'belongs' to practitioners in the field. The reality is that theory belongs as much to practitioners as it does to academics. While university-based staff may well play an important role in teaching and, to a

certain extent, developing theory, practitioners are daily using theory (if not always recognizing that they are) and also, to a certain extent, playing a part in developing theory (by putting it to test and perhaps by writing articles and even books about their use of theory in practice).

Drawing on a professional value base

Just as theory influences practice, often without our being aware of any direct linkages between the two, values are also strong influences on the work we do, the approach we take to it and how we perceive the situations we operate in. Our values provide an ethical foundation for our work – they give us a sense of what is right and what is wrong, acceptable or unacceptable.

Our value base will tend to incorporate traditional, well-established values, such as confidentiality and treating people with respect and dignity, as well as more contemporary values that have emerged relatively recently – for example, a commitment to equality and diversity. Reflective practice involves becoming more explicitly aware of our values, as it is only if we are aware of what they are that we can understand how they influence us. Also, having a more informed understanding of our value base puts us in a stronger position to deal with moral dilemmas, clashes of values and other such complications that are never far away in the helping professions.

Once we start to look more closely at values, we start to appreciate just how influential they are in shaping not only our thoughts and actions, but also our feelings. We neglect them at our peril. Critically reflective practice therefore needs to be attuned to the values dimension of professional practice and, indeed, of the wider sociopolitical context in which we work.

Respecting professional accountability

Part of our professional value base is the recognition that we are accountable for our actions – it would be entirely unethical to fail to take account of this responsibility. However, without reflective practice, accountability becomes a significant problem. This is because being accountable means that, at any point, we may be called to account for our actions (or inactions). To be in a position to do this with confidence involves having clarity about what we did and why we did it (the underlying rationale). We will struggle to do this if we

have adopted an uncritical, non-reflective approach that simply involves standardized approaches and relying on routine and habit. To be able to justify our professional decision making, we need to be able to specify the process of thinking that informed the decision(s). If there was no real process of thinking, we will find ourselves defenceless if our practice is criticized in some way (as a result of a complaint, an inspection or litigation, for example).

By contrast, an informed, reflective approach puts us in a strong position to be able to justify why we acted in a particular way or adopted a particular approach to the case in hand. We will be able to say what influenced our decision making by reference to a professional knowledge base, a professional value base and a clearly worked out analysis of the situation. Even if, with hindsight, it turns out that we acted in error, it is likely that we will be respected for acting in good faith. However, if we make what turns out to be a valid decision purely by chance, and we are not therefore able to provide a professionally acceptable account of how we arrived at that decision, then we will be open to quite severe criticism and censure.

We are not recommending defensive practice. On the contrary, we are arguing that, if we practise reflectively and professionally, there is nothing to be defensive about.

MAKING PRACTICE WORK

We have presented critically reflective practice as a valuable approach to the demands of working in the helping professions. Our view is that it has excellent potential to be not only effective, but also rewarding and a basis for developing creative approaches. We shall discuss each of these aspects in turn.

Making practice effective

A participant on a reflective practice training course once remarked near the beginning of the day:

I'm not sure if I'm going to find today useful. I'm quite a practical person. I have a job to do and I want to get on and do it. I don't see the point of navel gazing. That doesn't get the job done, does it? And that's what it's all about, isn't it – making a positive difference?

We would fully agree with the final point, but not with the premises on which it is based. This person seemed to be assuming that reflective practice is more akin to navel gazing than to providing a firm foundation for informed and effective practice. At the end of the day she apologized to the trainer and said she had previously completely misunderstood what reflective practice was all about. She could now see that it was actually a very valuable approach that had much to offer. Reflective practice, then, is not an alternative to effectiveness, but rather a foundation for it.

Making practice rewarding

If we allow our working lives to become dominated by unthinking routines and habits, standardized responses and a more or less complete lack of imagination, then we should not be surprised to find that our work will be unrewarding and unfulfilling. We will struggle to find meaning or gain satisfaction in our work. Critically reflective practice, by contrast, offers us a stimulating and rewarding approach to our working lives. It offers us the chance for making a positive difference where we can; for learning, growth and development – not only while we 'learn the ropes' at the beginning of our career, but throughout it; and for developing new approaches, new ways of thinking and new understandings. It also offers a foundation for genuine collaboration with others. Routinized approaches cannot realistically form the basis of partnership working – habitualized responses and limited understanding are not really conducive to 'joined-up' thinking.

Making practice creative

'Necessity is the mother of invention' is a well-known adage. Being inventive is what creativity is all about. And so, the more pressurized we are and the greater the shortage of resources, the more inventive we need to be – the more important it becomes for us to be able to come up with imaginative solutions.

There is a great irony here, in so far as routinized and standardized practices can numb us and demotivate us so much that we find it difficult to be creative and, without being able to be creative, we become prone to falling into unthinking routines. What is also significant is that practices that lack

creativity and imagination can lead to the development of a culture that does not value creative approaches – and then creativity becomes even more difficult for those affected by such a culture. In other words, it is very easy for creativity to be stifled by habit and routine, even though creativity can be the ‘antidote’ to the malaise of unthinking, non-reflective practice.

CONCLUSION

Critically reflective practice clearly presents a number of challenges. However, we hope that this book has: (i) shown that the benefits of adopting such an approach (and the dangers of not doing so) make it a worthwhile commitment of time, effort and energy; and (ii) given helpful guidance about how to move forward in making critically reflective practice a reality.

We see progress in this area as being dependent on four sets of factors:

- Developing a more in-depth understanding of critically reflective practice, its basis, applicability and value – Part 1 was devoted to laying a foundation for moving away from the superficial understanding of these issues that we commonly encounter.
- Being able to integrate the theory underpinning critically reflective practice with actual use of critical reflection – Part 2 was devoted to exploring how these important links can be made.
- Professionals taking responsibility, both individually and collectively, for building on these foundations over time.
- Managers and policymakers – indeed, leaders of all kinds – taking responsibility for developing and sustaining workplace cultures that recognize the value of a critically reflective approach and the significant dangers of a ‘just get on with the job’ mentality.

We hope that the ideas we have put forward will help in relation to each of these four areas. In particular, we hope that the seven themes we have built the book around will make a contribution to developing a platform for understanding critically reflective practice and making it a reality.

To conclude, then, we see becoming a critically reflective practitioner as being based on:

- **Thinking.** It is important to be able to draw on our analytical powers to make sense of the complex situations we encounter in practice and to draw on our professional knowledge base.
- **Critical thinking.** This involves (i) being able to look below the surface of presenting situations to recognize the significance of the arguments and assumptions on which it is based; and also (ii) being able to see the wider picture of how social and political factors shape individual circumstances.
- **Being self-aware.** We need to be able to recognize the impact we have on the situations we deal with, and how they have an impact on us. Being self-aware also involves being socially aware, again appreciating the ‘big picture’ of how individual factors are shaped by wider social and political issues.
- **Capitalizing on learning.** Critical reflection is a basis for learning. Equally, continuous learning is a foundation for critically reflective practice.
- **Supporting others.** There are various aspects of personal responsibility involved in developing critically reflective practice, but we are not alone in these matters. We need to support one another in making critical reflection a reality.
- **Being professional.** This involves drawing on a professional knowledge base and a professional value base, as well as respecting professional accountability.
- **Making practice work.** For this we need to make sure, as far as possible, that our work is effective, rewarding and creative.

Rising to the challenge of critically reflective practice is by no means easy or straightforward. However, we believe strongly that it is well worth the effort to do so – especially if we work together and support one another. We wish you well in rising to the challenge of not only becoming a critically reflective practitioner, but also remaining one, despite the many discouragements that will come your way in a world in which critical reflection is not given the value and appreciation it deserves.

Guide to Further Learning

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

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