What we also need to emphasize is the interrelationship of these three areas – they do not operate independently of each other. What we think will be influenced by what we feel and by our values. What we feel will be shaped in large part by what we think and, again, by our values. And, of course, our values and our attempts to live and work in accordance with them will owe much to our thoughts and feelings. In turn, all three dimensions – thoughts, feelings and values – will be major influences on our actions, our actual practice.

It should be clear, then, that a good understanding of all three dimensions is a necessary underpinning for high-quality critically reflective practice. It is to be hoped that this chapter has provided a sound foundation for developing that understanding.

Chapter 3

Contexts for Reflection

INTRODUCTION

Chapter 2 was divided into three main sections, each relating to an important dimension of reflection. Chapter 3 is also divided into three main sections, this time relating to three different *contexts* for reflection. The structure is based on Clutterbuck's comments when he argues that:

> An important factor here is the creation of reflective space – time to focus on thinking, understanding and learning instead of doing. Reflective space is important at three levels: personal (quiet thinking time on one's own); dyadic (one-to-one); and as a group or team.
> (1998, p. 15)

Our subject matter in this chapter is therefore concerned with these three sets of contextual issues:

- **Personal reflective space.** How can I maximize my potential for guiding my own reflection and promoting my own critically reflective practice?
- **Dyadic reflective space.** How can supervision, coaching or mentoring be put to best use in terms of promoting critically reflective practice?
- **Group learning space.** How can we maximize the positive outcomes in terms of promoting reflective practice by the use of group learning experiences (training courses, for example)?

We shall explore each of these important areas in turn.

PERSONAL REFLECTIVE SPACE

While there are important organizational implications for developing reflective practice that we feel managers and policymakers should take very seriously, there is also the individual professional responsibility that each of us has to make our practice as reflective as possible. Sometimes we will have the support of others (through supervision or group learning opportunities, for example), but much will depend on our ability to make reflection a reality within our own working practices as part of our basic duties and responsibilities. In this section, then, we explore what individual practitioners can do to develop critically reflective practice.

Clutterbuck's (1998) notion of personal reflective space refers to our capacity to take issues forward in terms of the critical analysis and understanding that underpin reflective practice. Here we shall look at five different aspects of how we can make it a reality.

Managing work pressures

Hamer makes the very important point that:

> Work is what we do with most of our waking lives. Work is central to our happiness and feelings of self-worth. We see ourselves reflected in our work, in the outcome and importance of what we do. When we think about our lives we often define ourselves in terms of how we make a living. We spend an enormous part of our life working, trying to make a living and trying to express our individuality.
>
> (2006, p. 4)

We would therefore be very foolish to ignore the significance of work in our lives. A key element of this is the ability to manage effectively the pressures we face within our particular work setting. If we struggle to keep our pressures under control, then we will also struggle to create personal space for reflection.

The irony here, as we noted in Chapter 1, is that, if we do not manage to be reflective, then we will have difficulty in managing our work pressures. This can then create a vicious circle, in so far as a non-reflective approach can mean that we miss important opportunities to take things forward, we make

more mistakes than we need to, we give people the wrong message (that we are unconcerned about their problems because we have more important things to rush off and deal with) and we undermine our own morale and energy levels. These problems then create additional pressures and tensions which, in turn, make us feel overburdened and unable to find the time or space to be reflective and get a grip on our workload. Once such a vicious circle has been established it can be very difficult to break out of, even gathering momentum over time and therefore getting worse, with a very real risk of the individual concerned experiencing a significant level of stress.

It is therefore important that we take whatever steps are necessary to create the time and space for personal reflection. This will include seeking support from whatever appropriate quarters we can and making the best use of it. It also involves having faith in our own ability and a commitment to the value of reflective practice.

There are skills and techniques that can be drawn upon to help us manage work pressures as effectively as possible (see the *Guide to Further Learning* at the end of the book). Unfortunately, many professionals have not had the opportunity to learn about such matters, as it is not uncommon for professional education across the helping professions to provide little or no input relating to the knowledge and skills involved in time and workload management. It is as if it is being assumed that, by throwing people in at the deep end of workload pressures, they will learn to swim. Of course, the reality is that some people learn to swim, but perhaps very badly and inefficiently, while others sadly learn how to drown (hence the very high levels of stress in the contemporary workplace). A more sophisticated approach that pays serious attention to these issues is called for in the longer term, but in the meantime individual practitioners and managers would do well to explore the literature on managing work pressures and undertake relevant training where possible (although it has to be said that a significant proportion of the training on 'time management' that is available is of a simplistic nature that does not do justice to the complexities involved).

Self-awareness

It is very easy, especially in highly pressurized work environments, to concentrate on the job at hand and lose sight of our own role in the process. The

point was made earlier that reflexive practice, which can be seen as part of the broader enterprise of critically reflective practice, involves becoming more aware of our own role in the circumstances we deal with – in effect, becoming more self-aware.

It is important to recognize that, in the 'people' professions in general (including human resources, for example) and the helping professions in particular, we work with people. This means that self-awareness is an essential component. This is because self-awareness contains two elements that can be summarized in the following two sets of questions:

- What impact am I having on this situation? How are my role, my personality, my values and my actions and attitudes playing a part in shaping what is happening?
- What impact is the situation having on me? Are there any aspects I feel uncomfortable about? If so, how is this affecting the situation?

Addressing these questions can be a significant part of creating and using personal reflective space. It is therefore important to make sure that issues of self-awareness are on our personal development agenda.

Taylor recognizes that having courage must be part of this: 'You need courage to look at yourself and your practice because it takes honesty and frankness to move outside your comfort zones' (2006, p. 49). This captures well an important aspect of self-awareness – being prepared to look critically at our own contribution and reflect on how we can not only improve it, but actually maximize our potential. This may involve, as Taylor acknowledges, moving outside our comfort zones – that is, being willing to take reasonable risks in venturing outside what we would normally do or how we would normally think. And that is precisely about courage.

Self-awareness can be developed through receiving feedback from trusted individuals, especially through mentoring, coaching or supervision (see below). However, we can also develop our awareness on our own by looking carefully at what we are doing (or what we have done or plan to do), why we have chosen to move in a particular direction, how we felt about the circumstances, *why* we feel like that, what impact those feelings are having on us, and so on. This is not a recipe for navel gazing that leaves us no time for actual practice. Rather, it is an argument for taking the opportunity from time to time to review our practice, our reactions to the challenges our practice presents us with and how we feel about all this.

In taking forward such opportunities for developing self-awareness, we can become:

- More aware of the strengths we can build on and the areas for development that we need to work on.
- More confident in our own abilities through a greater knowledge of what we have to offer.
- Less likely to drift and 'lose the plot' about what we are doing, however busy we may become.
- Less likely to become stressed as we will be in a better position to monitor the pressures we are under and recognize when remedial actions need to be taken to prevent pressures overspilling into harmful stress.

It should be clear, then, that using personal reflective space to develop self-awareness (and using self-awareness to create personal reflective space) is well worth the effort.

Being a free thinker

There is a strand in philosophical thought stretching back to the work of Friedrich Nietzsche in the nineteenth century that is critical of the tendency for people to meekly do what is expected of them and follow routines and patterns uncritically, without putting their own stamp on their actions and thus on their lives more broadly. Heller describes Nietzsche as: 'a man who so ferociously fought what had been handed down by the past, diluted as it was by routine and the enfeebled spirit' (1988, p. 174).

Nietzsche's work, and the school of existentialist thought that it in large part inspired, incorporates the important notion of being a 'free spirit' – that is, of not being bound by a mindless acceptance of convention, habit, routine and social pressures. This is clearly very consistent with the philosophy of critically reflective practice. What is also clear is that being a free spirit needs to incorporate being a free thinker – we cannot have the former without the latter.

In terms of personal reflective space, then, becoming a critically reflective practitioner involves using opportunities to forge our own ways forward.

While we may get helpful guidance from others, we also need to look at what is the distinctive contribution we can each make to the work that we do within the helping professions. This is not about being a 'maverick' and ploughing our own furrow, come what may. It is about recognizing that we can make a much more valuable (and rewarding) contribution if we bring a distinctive edge to the situation, if we are imaginative and creative and not simply interested in following routines and set patterns and offering standardized responses. Being a free thinker does not mean that 'anything goes', but it does mean that we can build up our skills in using the 'artistry' of which Schön wrote.

How, then, can we be free thinkers, creative professionals rather than convention-bound bureaucrats? Well, if we were to offer detailed guidance on this, we would be contradicting the whole notion of being a free thinker! What is much more important is for you to give your full attention to developing a positive, creative approach to the problems you encounter in your professional practice rather than looking for formulaic solutions, There are various tools available that can be drawn upon, and adapted where necessary, and put to good use in developing creative approaches (see Chapter 4 for a more detailed discussion of such tools and techniques).

Practice focus 3.1

Simon had got to the point where his work was largely of a routine nature. He had lost his initial enthusiasm and was now experienced enough to deal with most situations in a fairly straightforward way. However, the more routinized his work became, the less satisfying it was and he was now bored with his working life. This prompted him to think about doing an evening class – to give him something interesting and stimulating to do to balance out what had become a boring job.

He had been quite interested in philosophy when he was at university, but he never had a chance to study it in any depth. He therefore welcomed the opportunity to register for a philosophy evening class at his local adult education centre. On the evening they discussed Nietzsche's philosophy in general and the idea of being a free spirit in particular, he began to realize that this is where he had gone wrong. He had allowed himself to get into a situation where he had failed to 'stay fresh' in what he was doing; he had allowed himself to develop a set of 'tramlines' in his work by doing everything in a routine, unthinking way. He had lost sight of the values and commitment that had brought him into the helping professions in the first place. No wonder, he reflected, his work had become so boring and unsatisfying. He therefore started to think about how he could adopt a more free-spirited approach to his work so that it would not be so unstimulating. He also recognized that he would probably be more effective in his work if he were less bored and disillusioned.

Helicopter vision

Butt helps us to understand that: 'Understanding properly involves what Dilthey (1988) saw as a "hermeneutic circle": moving from part to whole and back to part again in order to see how things fit together' (2004, p. 19). This is similar to: (i) the 'part/whole analysis' that Scheff (1997) writes of – that is, the idea that parts need to be understood in relation to wholes and vice versa; and (ii) dialectical thinking, as discussed in Chapter 2. What it boils down to is the importance of having an idea of how specific issues fit into the 'big picture'.

This is where the idea of 'helicopter vision' can be very useful. It refers to the ability to: (i) rise above a situation to get the overview of how the component parts fit together and how they create the overall situation; and (ii) descend back into it to be able to deal with it in an informed way. This is quite a skill, as it is relatively easy to get bogged down in the details of a situation and not have that broader, more holistic view. This means that we can easily be working on the basis of a partial, distorted picture and thus be missing out on some key information, understandings and insights.

Sometimes, having that broader picture or overview can be immensely helpful. In some circumstances, it may be all that is needed. For example, we may have a situation where someone is grieving but does not realize that this is what is happening (see the discussion of grief in Chapter 2), in which we are able to help that person understand what they are going through as part of a broader picture of mourning a loss. Gaining this insight may be enough for that individual to feel more in control of the situation (now that they understand what is happening) and thus confident enough to deal with it without the need for professional intervention.

Helicopter vision is a useful basis for personal reflective space. It can be used as a way of forming a view of the overall picture so that we can reflect on what our role needs to be in general and what specific steps we need to take. It is our experience that, when our practice is unproductive (or even counterproductive), it is often because the practitioner concerned did not have an overview of the situation he or she was dealing with.

Creating the space from time to time to develop a meaningful overview of not only the specific situations we are dealing with, but also our workload and duties as a whole is therefore an important skill to develop. It is a very worthwhile use of our time. This reinforces the point made in Chapter 1 that, the

busier we are, the more reflective we need to be. If we do not create the space to gain the overview we need to form an adequate understanding of the situations we are dealing with, then we make our jobs much more difficult, we make our practice much less effective and rewarding, and we contribute to a sense of powerlessness and lack of control and thus to our own demoralization.

Clarity and focus

Busy people run the risk of 'losing the plot', of becoming so busy and distracted that they lose sight of what they are doing and why they are doing it. Extremely busy people run a very significant risk of doing so. It is therefore important that we have sufficient presence of mind to make sure that we retain a clear focus on what we are doing. The discussion of systematic practice in Chapter 4 will help to give a clear picture of how this can be done. Systematic practice can be a useful framework for making sure we are not drifting away from what we are supposed to be doing.

Part of maintaining clarity of focus is to make sure that we have clear goals to aim for, and that these are shared goals, so that everyone involved can be pulling in the same direction (see the discussion of partnership in Chapter 2). If we are not clear about (and focused on) our goals, we are really going to struggle to achieve them. A key part of goal setting is 'problem setting' (or 'problem posing' as it is also known). Schön too emphasizes the importance of problem setting:

> But with this emphasis on problem solving, we ignore problem *setting*, the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen. In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations which are puzzling, troubling and uncertain. In order to convert a problematic situation to a problem, a practitioner must do a certain kind of work. He [*sic*] must make sense of an uncertain situation that initially makes no sense.
>
> (1983, p. 40)

This passage captures well the spirit of reflective practice. The problems we face in the helping professions are not 'given', they are not a finite set of

distinct situations we label as 'problematic'. Situations have to come to be defined as *problematic* in some way, and when this happens, then it would be wise for it to be based on an informed approach, having carefully considered the situation. If not, we run the risk of wasting valuable resources on situations that are unnecessarily seen as problematic, then we do ourselves, our employers and – most of all – the people we serve a major disservice.

Personal reflective space can therefore be put to good use in making sure that we have clarity and focus, even (or *especially*) when we are under considerable pressure. It may involve a certain amount of our time to establish and maintain such clarity and focus, but that will be nothing compared with how much time, effort and energy will be lost if we lose our focus and lack clarity about what we are doing, how and why we are doing it. The key, then, is the effective (reflective) use of our time – using time to save time and prevent a lack of focus from costing us time (and thus energy and, indirectly, morale).

DYADIC REFLECTIVE SPACE

There is much that a determined and committed individual can do to develop their own critically reflective practice by making the best of personal reflective space, as outlined in the previous section. However, this can also be supplemented by the benefits to be gained from what Clutterbuck (1998) calls 'dyadic reflective space' – that is, opportunities for reflection in pairs. This would include supervision, coaching and mentoring. Our focus, here, then is on how such one-to-one interactions can be used to maximize the potential for, and of, critically reflective practice. We shall explore four aspects of this, beginning with a discussion of the role of experience in learning.

Experience is not the best teacher

It is commonly said that experience is the best teacher. However, in reality this is not actually the case. For example, consider how many people there are who have a lot of experience, but have actually learned little or nothing from it. Experience creates the potential for learning but, in itself, it teaches us nothing directly. It is what we *do with* experience that is the best teacher. The experience provides a basis for learning, but experience alone is not enough. That

experience has to be 'processed' – that is, it needs to be translated into actual learning. We can do that ourselves to a certain extent – for example, through personal reflective space, as discussed above. However, what can be especially helpful is when we have the benefit of the support of a skilled and experienced learning facilitator (supervisor, mentor, practice teacher, tutor or coach). Such a facilitator should be able to play a proactive role in helping us identify the learning points to be gleaned from our experience, to facilitate drawing out whatever lessons could be learned from it – not least the following:

- Any mistakes we may have made and how we might avoid these in future.
- What we had done well so that we can build on our successes.
- What knowledge we used and whether it stood the test of being put into practice.
- What gaps there may be in our knowledge base that we will need to work on.
- What skills we used well so that we can make the most of them in future.
- What gaps in our skills that may have become apparent so that we can try to boost our skills in appropriate ways.
- Whether what we did was consistent with our values and, if not, what we would need to do differently next time

The question of finding time for reflection also arises in relation to dyadic reflective space. Drawing out the learning from experience will inevitably involve a time cost for both the learner and the learning facilitator. However, Clutterbuck again makes an important point when he argues that:

> facilitators of learning *create* the time, both for themselves and for others in the team, to support each other in their learning. They often do so in spite of severe practical difficulties.
>
> (1998, p. 14)

A skilled learning facilitator will recognize the importance of dyadic reflective space and will do a good enough time management job of making this aspect of their role a priority.

Voice of experienc...

When I joined the team I found ... more interest in my work than any... intrusive to begin with, but I soon rea... great deal. She kept asking me why I had ... my reasoning was and so on. But she also he... had done ideas about what I might do different... might learn from the case. Now it's quite clear to ... more here than I ever did in any of my previous jobs...

Sheila, a specialist chil...

You are not alone

While there is much to be gained from making effective use of perso... tive space, some people struggle to do it. They need someone else to 'b... ideas off'. As Harris comments:

> While some professionals have the capacity for unsupported reflection, the majority will require some form of assistance. Similarly, while some professionals learn from every experience, others learn from selective experiences which possess certain characteristics or features.
>
> (1996, p. 37)

It needs to be remembered, then, that there is no shame in feeling that we need help in order to be able to benefit from reflection. Potentially there are many ways in which we can benefit from other people's support:

- **Line management support.** Many managers can be extremely skilful learning facilitators, able to use supervision to excellent effect in promoting reflection (see below).
- **Clinical supervision.** Some professionals receive supervision separate from the line management role. This too has the potential for generating a dialogue that can promote learning and reflection.
- **Mentoring.** Increasingly these days mentoring is being used as an aid to learning and to promoting high-quality professional practice. For those

fortunate enough to have the support of a skilled mentor to draw on, there will be much to be gained.

- **Coaching.** While mentoring is concerned with learning and development more broadly, coaching tends to be more specific, focusing on specific issues, perhaps for a fixed period of time. It offers great potential for making good use of dyadic reflective space.
- **Practice teaching/field supervision.** Students in some professional disciplines will be assigned a practice teacher or field supervisor for the duration of their work placement. Promoting reflective practice is a key function of this role.
- **Tutorials.** Students can benefit from one-to-one tutorials where these are available, as they can provide fertile ground for exploring key ideas and links between theory and practice.
- **Peer support.** Sometimes there are formal 'pairing' systems in place where individual colleagues are encouraged to support each other and help each other learn (these are sometimes referred to as 'buddy' systems). In addition, informal support systems can often develop whereby colleagues will run ideas by one another and support each other in making sense of the complex issues they face.

In principle, then, there are plenty of opportunities for making use of dyadic reflective space or one-to-one reflection. If in reality, however, you find that you are not having such support (or the support you receive is of poor quality), then it would be wise to explore other possibilities, as you will otherwise be losing out a great deal. While it may be disappointing when learning support systems that should be in place are not, we should none the less not allow the absence of such support to disadvantage us. We should not allow the absence of formal support to discourage us from drawing on informal support if that is all that is available to us.

The role of the line manager

In the current terminology people are 'human resources'. Some people object to this term as they feel that it is dehumanizing to see people as a resource. However, the positive side of this terminology is that it allows us to see that managers have a responsibility to maximize the potential of the people they

supervise (in the same way that managers have a duty to make the best use of any resources they have within their area of responsibility). Part of this process of making the best use of the human resources available to an organization is helping people learn – aiming to get the best level of practice possible by investing in staff development. Supervision can be central to this.

Clutterbuck's comments are again helpful:

> The reality today is that the line manager increasingly needs to be a *facilitator* of learning. This is a very different role from team coach, although team coach may be part of it. The facilitator of learning creates *the climate, in which the maximum relevant learning can take place.*
>
> (1998, p. 3)

This passage is doubly significant. On the one hand, one-to-one opportunities to facilitate learning can be extremely valuable, as the supervisor can help to draw out the learning points in a positive and constructive way. On the other hand, line managers, as holders of leadership responsibilities, have a critical role to play in shaping the organizational culture in ways that are supportive of learning and reflection.

Line managers can make good use of supervision to promote best practice. This can be done by:

- *Building on* existing strengths – making the most of them, extending them as far as possible; and
- *Building up* areas that are in need of development – sorting out gaps in knowledge and/or skills, working towards turning weaknesses into strengths.

Good supervisors, then, will be well versed in building on and building up, as these are vitally important parts of the supervisory role. Encouraging and supporting reflective practice will, in turn, be important underpinnings of these supervisory activities.

We shall discuss training courses and related matters below, but one important point to note at this point is that supervisors have an important part to

play in maximizing the learning to be gained from such activities – for example, by using supervision as an opportunity to prepare for training and to draw out the key learning points after the event by making explicit the links between course activities and discussions and actual practice situations.

However, despite all the good that supervisors can do, line managers can also unfortunately be unhelpful when it comes to promoting learning and reflection. As Clutterbuck comments:

> Much more insidious – and more common – is the manager who has largely given up on his or her own continued learning and for whom helping others to learn is a chore. The opportunity to learn from direct reports, peers and other people has few attractions to such managers – they can't see the point.
>
> (1998, p. 14)

This can be a significant barrier to progress (see the discussion of obstacles to reflective practice in Chapter 6). If you find yourself in such a situation, with a line manager who is not supportive of your learning, then at the very least you will need to think carefully about who else can support your learning (rather than simply accepting that you have to do without learning support), and you may also need to consider whether you need to start looking for employment in a more supportive and reflective setting. Obviously, such decisions should not be taken lightly, but significant damage can be done to our learning, our quality of practice and our morale in the short term and our careers in the long run if we allow ourselves to remain in a non-supportive environment for too long.

Preventing drift

Supervisors, mentors, coaches or others involved in making use of dyadic reflective space are in a very strong position to help prevent or remedy 'drift'. By drift we mean the tendency referred to earlier to become distracted and 'lose the plot' when we are busy or otherwise under pressure. Critically reflective practice can help us to make sure that we remain focused and are clear about what outcomes we are working towards. Effective supervision can be

extremely important in monitoring working practices and making sure that they are suitably focused, and helping the practitioner to refocus if drift has set in. This can be done by the supervisor asking on a fairly regular basis what the goals are that the practitioner is working towards in a particular case or situation. It is important that these goals are expressed in a clear and focused way – that is, that they are not so vague as to be unhelpful.

One of the ways in which a supervisor can help to prevent drift is through establishing – and maintaining – clarity about goals. Schön's idea of problem setting is therefore also relevant here: 'Problem setting is a process in which, interactively, we *name* the things to which we will attend and *frame* the context in which we will attend to them' (1983, p. 40). People in supervisory or supportive roles can clearly play an important part in making sure that goals are named (that is, explicitly identified) and the context in which they are to be met is clarified – in other words, a plan will be developed for meeting those goals. Busy practitioners, as we noted earlier, can easily lose focus, and so dyadic reflective space can be put to good use in counteracting this.

Practice focus 3.2

When Ashleigh became Kevin's mentor, she quickly realized that he had a problem with staying focused. He was a very enthusiastic staff member, but he often allowed his enthusiasm to run away with him. This took the form of carrying out his duties without giving adequate thought to what he was doing or why he was doing it. It was as if he felt that his commitment to doing a good job would be enough on its own. Ashleigh therefore recognized that, if he was going to be able to learn and develop over time, she was going to have to get him to be much more reflective about what he was trying to achieve – what he saw as his goals in each of the pieces of work he was involved with. To begin with she saw this as a daunting challenge, but she was very pleasantly surprised at how responsive Kevin was once she started talking to him about the importance of goal setting. This helped her to realize just how powerful and helpful a tool mentoring can be in promoting reflective practice. She could see the value of what, on her mentoring course, had been referred to as 'dyadic reflective space'.

GROUP REFLECTIVE SPACE

In addition to solo and one-to-one opportunities for reflection, we also have group opportunities to consider, and these are precisely what we explore in this section – those situations where people have scope for reflecting and learning alongside others in a group setting.

Group learning opportunities

There are various group learning possibilities that can offer useful opportunities for reflection and therefore for learning, development and the enhancement of practice. The main ones are:

- **Training courses.** In-service training courses and workshops can offer excellent opportunities for debate, discussion and exploration of key practice issues, blending theory and practice and thus providing a platform for learning and development.
- **Conferences and seminars.** Although often more formal than training courses, conferences and seminars can none the less offer valuable group learning opportunities.
- **Learning sets.** Some organizations invite interested parties to form a 'learning set' about a particular issue or set of issues (the introduction of a new policy, for example, or a particular aspect of practice that is causing concern). The group will meet for a set amount of time over an agreed period of time to explore the topic in question and seek to use the opportunity (the group reflective space created) to learn about the subject matter and consider how best to take it forward. Learning sets are not simply policy planning or service development groups (see below), as their primary focus is on learning.
- **Team events.** Extended team meetings devoted to professional development and team 'awaydays' can provide excellent opportunities for group reflective space. They allow a set of colleagues to review working practices, the underlying values and philosophy and future developments.
- **Service development groups.** While the primary focus of such groups or 'working parties' is on *service* development, a useful by-product of working as part of such a group is that much personal and professional development can also be achieved as a result of the opportunity for a group of professionals to reflect on aspects of their working systems and practices.

In principle, then, there should be no shortage of opportunities to work in groups to promote one another's understanding of the work challenges we face. These can be an excellent source of learning, new ideas and insights and can also be very useful for confidence building.

Group reflective learning opportunities can help us to take our thinking forward by exploring ideas together and seeing how other people address issues. Gould's comments are significant in this regard:

> reflective learning recognizes that a purpose of education is to facilitate people as (in Bateson's terms) double-loop learners who are able to challenge the normative context of practice, and to be non-defensive and adaptive learners within a constantly evolving professional environment (Bateson, 1973).
>
> (1996, p. 5)

Double-loop learners are those who learn how to learn – that is, who become self-directed learners who are able to deduce principles from their experience that can be applied to new situations. Senge (1994), referring to the work of Argyris and Schön (1978), points out that single-loop learners adjust their behaviour to suit fixed goals, norms and assumptions, while double-loop learners are involved in reviewing and, where appropriate, renegotiating those goals, norms and assumptions. Double-loop learners, as Gould indicates, are therefore better suited to dealing with changing professional environments. Group reflective space can be very useful for promoting double-loop learning, because it offers a variety of perspectives and thus the potential for broadening our outlook on how we tackle the issues involved. It can give us greater flexibility through having the opportunity to see a range of different responses to the same issues and, to a certain extent, can give us greater confidence in moving away from our established habits and preferred ways of working.

Voice of experience 3.2

I was a bit anxious when I was asked to join a 'learning set'; I wasn't really sure what to expect. But I'm really glad I joined. I met people who had a very different take on the situation. Being able to see the situation from different perspectives really opened up new possibilities for me. It made me realize that I have always tended to be quite conservative in my thinking, not really keen to explore different ways of understanding the situation or how to deal with it. It did me a lot of good.

Ronnie, an early years worker

Dimensions of learning

Group learning experiences, such as training courses, are not simply opportunities to learn new knowledge, to be filled up like a container. Knowledge development is part of what is involved in such events, especially where there is a need for new knowledge as a result of a change in the law or policy. However, a fuller picture would include other dimensions of group learning, such as the following:

- **Developing skills.** Learning about – and perhaps even practising – new skills can be a very worthwhile part of such activities. Having the opportunity to learn about how other participants use their skills can also be invaluable.
- **Developing values.** Developing a fuller picture of the values underpinning our work in the helping professions can be a very worthwhile pursuit, especially where there is the opportunity to explore value conflicts, moral dilemmas and some of the other complexities that can arise in relation to professional values.
- **Boosting confidence.** Reflecting together and learning together can be a very important source of confidence. Realizing that other people have anxieties too can make us feel better about our own limitations and concerns – it can help put things in perspective.
- **Affirmation, validation and consolidation.** Reaffirming our existing knowledge, skills and values can be an important function of group activities. Having the chance to be reminded about how extensive and important our knowledge base is, how wide ranging and significant our skills base is can be a very reassuring and helpful experience. In addition, revisiting our value base can be very affirming and even inspiring at times.

These are not the only ones but should be enough to show how varied group learning and reflection can be in terms of the functions it fulfils, the benefits it brings. Having this broader understanding can help us to appreciate the value of such group reflection opportunities and can perhaps help prepare us for making the most of such opportunities as and when they arise – as well as perhaps encouraging us to seek out or even create opportunities.

Making the most of opportunities

Achieving maximum benefits from group reflection situations can be divided into three parts; before, during and after:

- **Before.** Thinking ahead to try and anticipate what learning opportunities will arise can be of considerable benefit. For example, in advance of a training course, it can be very fruitful to look at the learning objectives for the course and consider how you can best prepare for the experience (perhaps by doing some pre-course reading on the subject or discussing the issues with your line manager or mentor). Those people who arrive at a course, having given the course subject matter no thought whatsoever are likely to get far less out of the course than somebody who is already 'tuned in' to the issues that are likely to be covered.
- **During.** This is a good opportunity for reflection-in-action – being able to concentrate carefully and focus on making the best of the situation while it is happening. Part of this is recognizing our own responsibility for learning and being proactive in seeking out the learning that can be gained. For example, there is much to be gained from trying to identify explicit learning points from the course activities and discussions. This involves using our analytical skills to make sense of the experience and relate the discussion points to our work roles. This is far more likely to produce valuable learning than taking a passive approach that involves sitting back and waiting to be 'enlightened' by the trainer.
- **After.** This relates to what is referred to as the 'transfer of learning' (that is, transferring insights from the course to our own practice settings). It links in with the discussion of 'transfer of learning' below and is also relevant to our earlier discussion about how supervision can be important in drawing out the learning from group learning activities.

What all three of these have in common is an emphasis on an active approach to learning, one in which we take responsibility for maximizing the benefits we can gain from the experience. It is unfortunately the case that many people have had an experience of the education system that has left them with a passive approach to learning – an expectation that others (teachers, tutors, trainers) will fill them with knowledge (what Freire, 1972, refers to as banking model of education: 'depositing' knowledge in relatively empty vessels). It

does not take much to work out that this is not consistent with the philosophy of critically reflective practice. In place of such a passive approach, we need to have an understanding of education, training and other group reflection opportunities that is more to do with actively seeking out the learning available – taking a professional approach to using group reflective space positively and proactively.

Transfer of learning

For many years now, a recurring question in the world of education and training has been: how do we make sure that the learning that takes place in the classroom or training venue gets transferred to the actual world of practice? This is recognized as an important issue, as it is so easy for someone to return to their place of work and quickly become immersed in their day-to-day pressures and soon lose sight of whatever benefits they were able to glean from the classroom experience (or other group learning experience). Given that this danger is such an ever-present possibility, it is very wise to guard against it. This can be achieved, in part at least, by:

- Leaving the event with a clear action plan of what key points arising from it will need to be put into practice and how this will be done (or, if there is no time during the actual event, establishing such an action plan as soon as possible thereafter).
- Discussing such an action plan in supervision and obtaining support in making it a reality.
- Reviewing the action plan from time to time to make sure it is being implemented and has not been allowed to slip off the agenda.

This may sound as though it involves a lot of effort, but it need not do so as, once it becomes an established habit, it need not take up much of our time. Also, given the significant positive potential of this approach (and the great waste of effort if it is not adopted), then any such investment of time and effort will be handsomely repaid.

Benner, Hooper-Kyriakidis and Stannard makes an important point (relating specifically to nursing but applicable to the helping professions as a whole):

> We are alarmed by the discouragement and demoralization of nurses who are asked to do more than is possible and who are not given the time to do their caregiving work. When nurses are not given the time to be attentive, the large-scale health systems we have created become dangerous places.
>
> (1999, p. 22)

This shows how unrealistic expectations of staff can be not only problematic in terms of the potential for creating stress, but also as a barrier to transferring learning. People who return from a group event to an over-pressurized work setting will find it difficult to make a successful transfer of learning – ironically, then wasting the precious time they invested in the actual event. This brings us back to our discussion in Chapter 1 of the importance of recognizing that the busier we are, the more reflective we need to be. We can now add: the busier we are, the more important it is to make sure that precious time devoted to training or other such events is not wasted as a result of the learning not being transferred.

Gould is correct in stating that: 'There is always a danger that a concept such as reflective learning will become little more than a slogan' (1996, p. 2). We should therefore make sure that we do not allow difficulties in transfer of learning to add to this. The use of group reflective space becomes tokenistic if there is no real payoff in terms of transfer of learning.

Practice focus 3.3

Rachid had attended several in-service training courses since taking up his post after leaving university. They had all been reasonably enjoyable and stimulating events that he thought would be useful. However, something that happened on another course made him wonder just how useful (or otherwise) the previous training had been. Towards the end of this particular course, he was asked to work with a partner to review what had been learned from the day and what they might do differently in their practice in future as a result of the course. In introducing the exercise, the training facilitator commented that a lot of training is a waste of time because, no matter how hard the participants work and how interesting they find the discussions, so many people go back to work after the course and fail to implement any of the learning. The trainer used the term 'magical thinking' to describe this – assuming that, by having these discussions and going through the exercises, this would automatically make them better at their jobs. This trainer pointed out the naivety of this assumption and argued

that, if we do not have clarity about how we are going to behave differently or bear different things in mind, then there is a danger that no real learning will have taken place. This made Rachid realize that, although he had worked hard on previous courses, he wasn't able to identify a single, specific way his practice had improved as a result of attending. He realized now that he would have to be more proactive in transferring the training-room learning into his actual work, to make sure that he saw the process through. He knew now it would not happen 'by magic'.

CONCLUSION

Critically reflective practice involves, by its nature as a holistic approach (that is, one that appreciates the 'big picture'), developing a sensitivity to contextual factors. This chapter has emphasized the significance of context by clarifying, as far as we reasonably can in the space available, how the personal, dyadic and group contexts of reflection can be very significant. We would argue that developing a good understanding of these issues is an essential prerequisite for maximizing the potential of reflective practice. We have therefore presented what we see as a sound foundation for understanding the basics and for developing our understanding further. In doing so, we have shown how important it is to be sensitive to the different contexts for reflection and the different approaches that are needed for each, while also identifying, to a certain extent, at least, what these different contexts have in common.

Part 2

Making Reflective Practice a Reality