

CONCLUSION

Producing and assessing reflective accounts can be demanding work, but it can also be very rewarding and productive. Both make an important contribution to maximizing learning and enhancing professional practice. We hope that the guidance and food for thought that we have provided in this chapter will be a valuable aid to your efforts in these areas.

As we have seen, there are no simple formulas to follow, but there are points of guidance that help us navigate our way through the complexities of developing critically reflective practice. In this respect, what is expected in terms of writing about, and assessing, reflective practice mirrors the process of reflective practice more broadly – mindfully working our way through the challenges that befall us in an effort to make a positive difference.

That process will often involve encountering obstacles, but we are then able to focus our critically reflective faculties on addressing those obstacles – and it is to this that we now turn as the subject matter of Chapter 6.

Chapter 6

Barriers to Reflective Practice

INTRODUCTION

Our experience of running training courses on the subject of critically reflective practice has helped us to identify a wide range of actual or potential obstacles to reflective approaches. These range from individual factors, such as attitude and skills, to issues about workplace culture and organizational expectations. In a short chapter such as this, there is not the space for us to mention every problem we have come across, and so we have chosen instead to highlight just a few of those factors and explore why they present significant obstacles; and provide some food for thought on developing strategies to address them.

We hope that these discussions inspire you to review your own situation and, if you are struggling with reflective practice, to identify where the problem lies in your particular case. Armed with this insight, you will be better equipped to formulate an action plan that suits both your needs and your timetable.

We have chosen six concerns as representative of the many obstacles, both real and perceived, that can get in the way of a reflective approach to practice. Given that the key premiss underpinning reflective practice is that there are no simple, 'off the peg' answers to complex issues, we cannot give you any definitive solutions to the obstacles you might face – nor would we want to. What we can do is to validate those concerns and provide a starting point for thinking about the strategies you can adopt in your own particular circumstances.

A common theme across the discussions presented in this chapter is the significance of the organizational context and the pressures it brings. It should therefore be borne in mind that many of the suggestions we make here relate to influencing that context – that is, not only shaping our own practice, but also seeking to influence the organization in a positive direction. Given the key role of organizational factors in either helping or hindering reflective practice, there is much to be gained by trying to think of tackling obstacles as a *collective* challenge as well as an individual one, with people pulling together to promote critically reflective approaches wherever possible.

TIME CONSTRAINTS

Perhaps the most commonly heard comment from practitioners attending training courses and workshops on the subject of reflective practice is: 'I'm too busy to take time out for reflection.' While many people feel reasonably comfortable in saying that, what this can amount to is an admission to practising in an unthinking or 'mindless' fashion. Busy schedules call for setting priorities, but for many people taking time out to think about what they are doing and how and why they are doing it is seen as a luxury – rather than as integral to the job of being a professional practitioner. Comments like: 'I'm a practitioner, not an academic' and 'If you've got time to think, then you obviously haven't got enough work to do' convey an understanding of practice and the theory and knowledge that informs it as two distinct and separate spheres. Where they are seen as separate issues, then the potential is high for one to be prioritized over the other, especially if the latter is conceptualized as not being 'real' work. But where they are seen as an integrated whole, then the reflective aspect no longer loses out to the practice aspect, but supports it. And, in informing practice, it can make that practice more focused and more effective, thereby saving time in the long run. It can also mean fewer mistakes, fewer complaints or other dissatisfactions and higher levels of morale and motivation. We have to ask ourselves, therefore, whether this oft-claimed barrier to reflective practice is perceived rather than actual. As we noted in Chapter 1, the busier we are, the more reflective we need to be. The issue of time is therefore a complex one, and we do ourselves (and the people we serve) a significant disservice if we reduce it to simple complaints that we 'don't have enough time'.

Practice focus 6.1

Jenny was the supported housing unit's duty officer on the afternoon that a referral was made by a community nurse who had expressed concern about Mr Roberts' independent living skills. As was the custom and practice, she made arrangements to visit Mr Roberts within the next 24 hours. Unfortunately this meant that she was unable to attend a meeting that had been called some time ago to discuss plans for a multidisciplinary response to crisis situations in the local area. She had been keen to attend but, as she was the only person available to make the visit, she sent her apologies to the meeting's convenor and went to see Mr Roberts.

Once back she was asked by her manager why she had not attended such a crucial meeting. Jenny's response that she had been too busy did not go down well and prompted her to think about whether, in retrospect, there had been any choice in the matter. In order to help clarify her thoughts she took a sheet of paper and wrote down the possible costs and benefits of prioritizing one demand on her time over the other. This task took only 10 minutes of her day, but helped her to realize that missing the meeting was going to prove very costly in terms of her time over the coming weeks, because she would have to make the organization's potential contributions and constraints known to each of the other organizations' representatives, but on an individual basis now and six times over. She also realized that the 24-hour response had not only been unnecessary, as there was no official policy to that effect but also, after revisiting some client feedback about the frustration caused by the lack of a 'seamless assessment process', might even have proved to be counterproductive. What the day's events had brought home to her was that time used to take stock of a situation and to think through her objectives would be time well spent on future occasions.

If, for whatever reason, finding time is proving to be an obstacle, then you might find the following strategies useful.

Incorporating thinking time

Conceptualizing reflection as part of your workload rather than as separate from it should prompt you to incorporate time for reflection (whether it be reflection-for-action or reflection-on-action) into your workload plans. For example, if you are due to attend a meeting from 2 o'clock until 4 o'clock, then you could plan to take three rather than two hours out of your normal schedule, thereby giving yourself the time necessary to plan what you hope to achieve in that meeting and time afterwards to reflect on the implications that have arisen from it. In this way you have *made* the time to do the whole task (physically attending the meeting *and* getting the best from it). Thinking about

the meeting and the reflection as two different things may result in one being prioritized over the other if time is short, but seeing them as part and parcel of the same task should help prevent that from happening. It might help, when planning, to picture yourself acting out your diary or work plan. If you can see yourself rushing from room to room, house to house, department to department or appointment to appointment, and then trying to find time to make sense of it all by picking up the pieces later, then you might want to give this strategy some thought.

Spending time to save time

When we are under a lot of pressure it can be tempting to 'get stuck in' so that we can feel a sense of progress but, because working with people and their problems is unpredictable, it is highly unlikely that an unplanned and routine response will 'hit the spot' every time, if ever. If you have ever been in the position of having invested a lot of time in tackling something, only to find that the time has been wasted (perhaps because of a misunderstanding, for example) then you will appreciate how frustrating that can be. If you think that you do not have the time for reflective practice, then you might ask yourself whether you have time to waste, because that is the risk that we run if we rush into acting without thinking about what should inform that action, or fail to analyse it so that we can learn from mistakes and build on successes.

You might find it useful to think back over your own practice and see whether you can remember instances where you:

- wasted time in circumstances where you could have avoided this by spending time initially in ensuring that what you did was focused and appropriate; or
- despite being busy, invested some of that precious time in ensuring that the little time you did have was used most effectively.

This exercise, whether carried out alone (the personal reflective space referred to in Chapter 3) or with colleagues (in dyadic or group reflective space) can be very effective in bringing home the point that a reflective approach, while requiring a little extra time to begin with, has the potential to repay that investment many times over.

Taking control of your workload

In situations where work is allocated by a line manager, it can take courage to refuse to take on more work when you are feeling that you do not have the time to deal with what you already have on your plate. Similarly, if there is an 'open door' policy where you work, so that there is no mechanism for regulating the amount of work coming in, it can be difficult to suspend or stem the flow. However, if we do bow to the pressure, and that pressure to 'get things done' means that we do not have time to think about what we are doing, then the potential for things to go wrong is high. If we do not want to run the risk of practising dangerously, then it is important to be assertive about the right to have a manageable workload. The following example highlights the importance of taking responsibility for creating the time to practise reflectively – for ensuring that we do not have to take shortcuts to fit too big a workload into a finite number of hours.

Voice of experience 6.1

I feel like giving in my notice. All I seem to do is deal with emergency situations that only arise because I haven't got time to deal with the underlying issues that contribute to the emergencies in the first place. And that isn't a good situation to be in for me or my clients. I noticed that a colleague was reviewing her work projects by writing action plans for each one and I thought it would help me to do the same. I became even more demoralized when I realized that I had lost sight of my aims and couldn't identify them. I'm going to tell my manager that I won't take on any new work until I can deal appropriately with what I already have on my plate. I won't resign, but I will claim the time I need to be the reflective practitioner that I need and want to be – and that I know I can be.

Fran, a community psychiatric nurse

WANING COMMITMENT

Denying or minimizing the value of reflective practice can prove a difficult barrier to overcome. This is because, where something is not valued, it is unlikely to be seen as useful or a worthwhile investment of time and effort. The lack of commitment can manifest itself at an individual level for some people, but it is also not uncommon for it to pervade the culture of a team or

staff group or even of a whole organization. Where colleagues fail to value reflective practice, then those who do take time to plan and evaluate can get singled out as 'thinkers' rather than 'doers', which can then lead to a culture of blame when workloads are high and reflective time is perceived as a luxury. Where a routinized and uncritical response from staff is not only accepted, but actually sanctioned by managers, then this can prove to be a significant barrier to those who see reflection-for, reflection-on and reflection-in-action as crucial to their role as members of the helping professions and therefore as a legitimate use of time, *especially* when workloads are high.

We also have to think about commitment in terms of accountability. Professionalism incorporates accountability at a number of levels (for example, to the client, to the profession and to society), and so an approach that relies on 'common sense' and untested assumptions to address problems runs a very high risk of compromising accountability. How can we account for decisions made and actions taken, or not taken, if we are unable to account for what informed those actions or decisions?

Furthermore, where there is little or no commitment to critical and informed practice, there is often also a degree of complacency about the efficiency and effectiveness of the work being carried out. Routines have their place, but the world of the helping professions is a complex and changing one where the uniqueness of each situation is unlikely to be adequately met by a routine response. Routines tend to be based on long-held assumptions, such as: 'We've always done it this way here – things have gone well this far, so why change things now?' There is an element of arrogance in this type of approach, as it assumes that the 'way it has always been done' *is* as effective as it is made out to be. How can we *know* that in any objective sense, unless it is opened up to the critical analysis that underpins a reflective approach? (See the discussion of open vs. closed knowledge in Chapter 1.)

Strategies for overcoming such barriers will obviously differ according to where the lack of commitment lies, and so the following suggestions reflect this.

Document your learning

Where the lack of commitment is your own, we would once again stress how useful it can be to get into the habit of keeping a reflective log or diary, even

if only for a short time. If you devise a system for highlighting key issues, learning points and so on (perhaps by using a highlighter pen, or writing keywords or questions in the margin – see Jasper, 2003, or Rolfe, Freshwater and Jasper 2001, for more ideas about this), then you will find that you can 'surface' (that is, make explicit) the factors that make your work harder or easier, more or less effective and so on. In this way you are likely to become more and more convinced of the benefits of, and become more committed to, adopting a reflective approach.

Show by example

Where there is a lack of commitment to reflective practice, it is often because of a misunderstanding of what it is about and why it is important (see Chapter 1). Where you are committed to it, but colleagues are reluctant to accept that a reflective approach could enhance their practice, a useful strategy is to show them examples of how it enhances your own. Where there is cynicism about the relevance of 'theory' to practice, seeing how it can inform practice in a positive way can help to overcome this. Planting the seed in people's minds in this way can be more effective in terms of overcoming a lack of commitment than quoting the very works that those who 'stick to practice' tend to want to avoid.

Address accountability

We would hope that people come to see the benefits of reflective practice for its own sake – because they want to practise to the best of their abilities and continue to grow professionally. However, even where there is no commitment in that sense, then the need to be accountable for our actions can also constitute a 'push factor'. While we would not endorse a 'cover your back' approach to practice, it can nevertheless be useful to challenge a lack of commitment by talking to colleagues about accountability (perhaps putting the subject on the agenda at a team or staff meetings) and letting them know how practising reflectively has contributed to how you feel confident that you would be able to account for your actions, should you ever be in a position where your competence is challenged (see the discussion below about professional registration).

ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE

We have seen that the negative attitude of some individuals can be a factor in downplaying the importance of reflective practice, and how this can be reinforced by team or organizational cultures that see reflective practice as a threat or a nuisance. However, a lack of commitment, or even active resistance, to it at an organizational level can also be a significant barrier to progress. As Thompson argues:

In terms of integrating theory and practice, a culture characterised by negativity and helplessness will stand in the way of a positive practice premised on critical reflectivity . . . A negative culture is therefore a serious barrier to integrating theory and practice, as it relies on routine standard responses to problems and situation, rather than reflection, critical analysis or creativity.

(2000, p. 131)

There are a number of reasons why an unsupportive, or sometimes even an 'anti-learning', culture may exist within an organization. These can include:

- A focus on what has come to be known as 'managerialism' operating at the expense of other interests. The rationalist approach to policy implementation remains an influential one in the helping professions (Baldwin, 2004), and its target-driven philosophy can stifle those who feel that a less directive and more value-driven approach is what is needed.
- The conceptualization of members of the helping professions as bureaucrats employed to carry out their employers' instructions, rather than as professional problem solvers with decision-making skills and the expertise to work with a degree of autonomy. The following comment by Baldwin offers a helpful perspective:

One of the tenets of effective organizational learning is that it is there to manage the uncertainties of organizational life and, indeed, to use them as a positive force for change and development. To attempt to manage out uncertainty is to destroy the potential opportunities for dynamic creativity present in managing uncertainty.

(2004, p. 48)

- A sense of mistrust about change. Fook (2004) highlights the diversity of interests which can exist within organizations and inhibit the development of a learning environment. Referring to the work of Argyris and Schön (1978), she makes the following point:

They presented as issues of diversity, the need to recognize the politics involved because of a diversity of interests, and how new practical issues may emerge and change during the course of implementation rather than being predictable beforehand. What is a welcome change to some will be a threat to others; what is experienced as empowering for workers may be seen as disempowering for managers.

(Fook, 2004, p. 72)

- Anti-intellectualism. In addition to workplace culture issues in their own right, there will be factors at the level of whole professions or disciplines, not least an emphasis on the 'practical' at the expense of the underpinning knowledge and values that are needed to make sure that such practice is safe and ethically acceptable.

Practice focus 6.2

Remy had been part of the team for over three years now and was becoming increasingly disappointed at the lack of enthusiasm for his suggestion to have a group discussion about the benefits of reflective practice. Directives about policy change were coming through to the team very regularly and he perceived them as cost-cutting exercises which had the potential to compromise the values that the team was meant to espouse. Few of his colleagues showed any interest, and his manager even told him to forget about 'all that college stuff' and concentrate on tackling the backlog of referrals.

Remy thought long and hard about the lack of interest he was encountering. To some extent he could understand the financial pressures, but struggled to understand why his colleagues were showing no concern about the implications of the new policies for the lives of the people they were supposed to be helping. This got Remy thinking about the culture of his workplace and how it had changed since he first joined the team. At one time there had been a strong sense of injustice which had led people to challenge policy decisions that would have unfavourable consequences for vulnerable people. Lately, though, there was a sense of defeatism and people were enacting the new policies without questioning whether there was a different and better way.

He wondered whether this could help explain the lack of commitment to his proposal. In making explicit the conflict between managerialism and professionalism, Remy would make the culture of compliance explicit, and no doubt provoke discomfort all round. But next time anyone said 'forget that college nonsense', he would ask whether they wanted him to forget about the injustice too.

So, what can we do when an unhelpful organizational culture stands in the way of promoting a critically reflective approach?

Have your say

If you are unhappy about the effects of a managerialist culture on your organization and the services it provides, then volunteering, where possible, to sit on planning committees and working parties can give you the opportunity to give your perspective on key matters, and also to argue for the voices of those we serve to be heard. While a diversity of interests can inhibit change, such involvement can provide a platform for differing perspectives to be heard and competing concerns appreciated.

Seek out like-minded people

Organizations are powerful entities and, while a lone voice can sometimes make a difference, a collective one can be much more effective. It can therefore pay dividends to make alliances with others who share your concern that a reflective approach is devalued in your workplace. Professional organizations tend to put up a fight when the principles on which a profession is built come under challenge and are therefore a potential source of support when trying to foster a culture of learning.

Use the right channels

When feeling demoralized it can be very tempting to have a good 'moan' amongst ourselves, but this rarely achieves anything positive and often just reinforces low morale where it exists. If our aim is to challenge an organizational culture that devalues what we value, then that challenge, if it is to have any chance of success, needs to be:

- targeted at those who have the power to make changes at that level; and
- presented as clear and constructive commentary that spells out what we object to and why.

Revisit professional values

It can be very heartening to remind ourselves of why we chose to work with people in the way we do as part of a commitment to our profession's aims. This can serve as a boost to morale and energize us to keep on trying to resist the pressure to work in situations where there is a danger that working practices, or the sheer volume of input expected of us, will compromise those values.

And finally, if we cannot change an anti-intellectual culture, then there is a lot to be said for ignoring it and continuing to plough our own furrow, as it were. If there is an expectation that we work in a bureaucratic way that compromises our professional principles and trivializes a reflective approach, then we can tell ourselves, 'I'm better than that!' and make sure that we do not allow what is happening around us to dampen our own enthusiasm or negatively affect our own practice.

Voice of experience 6.2

Some of my colleagues are very negative about the registration requirements that have been introduced to monitor standards in our profession. But these requirements have given me just what I need to fight what I see as a threat to our value base. I can't meet efficiency targets without compromising the anti-discriminatory principles which underpin my profession. Now that I have to demonstrate that I am adhering to a code of professional behaviour in order to retain my professional title, I can cite this when I am asked to work in a manner that compromises a reflective approach.

Alex, a resource centre manager

A LACK OF APPROPRIATE SKILLS

High-quality reflective practice is a highly skilled activity. It involves a wide range of skills, some of which we will have built up as part of our general

education and life experience. However, other skills may need to be consciously worked on over time to build them up (indeed, this is part of reflective practice – concentrating explicitly on what needs to change and develop). Someone who lacks the necessary skills may therefore struggle with developing reflective practice. Such skills would include:

- **Analytical skills.** Being able to identify key issues and recognize patterns and interconnections are important parts of being reflective. It involves translating what can be very confusing, complex situations into relatively ordered and meaningful understandings of what is happening and what needs to happen.
- **Self-awareness skills.** Being able to appreciate what impact we are having on the situations we are dealing with and what impact those situations are having on us is what self-awareness is all about. Some people find this relatively easy, while others may find it difficult to develop the insights involved. Explicitly focusing on these issues will enable us to develop our skills over time, especially if we are able to secure appropriate support from sources we can trust.
- **Critical thinking.** This involves being able to see beneath the surface, to recognize the underlying reasoning and assumptions (the depth), as well as processes and dynamics that relate to power relations and the potential for discrimination and oppression to occur (the breadth). In some respects, this involves 'unlearning' what our socialization has taught us, as our upbringing will have involved taking certain issues for granted (the respective roles of men and women, for example).
- **Communication skills.** Reflective practice does not have to be a solitary activity. As we noted in Chapter 3, there is a lot of value in the shared learning that can arise from one-to-one or 'dyadic' reflection (supervision, mentoring or coaching, for example) or group reflection (training courses, team development sessions, learning sets and so on). Being able to communicate effectively in such settings will be an important part of making them a success and an effective use of our time. While we all have basic communication skills, the skills used in shared reflection may need to be at a more advanced level.

This is not an exhaustive list of skills, but should be enough to paint a picture of just how skilled an activity reflection is. If we are lacking any of these skills or do not have them at a suitably advanced level, then we may struggle to make

the most of our opportunities to develop reflective practice. However, this is not a cause for pessimism or defeatism. Skills, by their very nature, can be developed through practice. It is also possible to learn from others, to be able to see how they handle situations, for example, or to seek guidance from them.

Another possible scenario is that we may have the skills, but do not recognize that we have them. We may be so used to utilizing one or more of the skills that we are oblivious to the fact that we are operating in a particular way, drawing on particular skills in the process. This then adds further emphasis to the point made above about the importance of self-awareness, as part of this can be developing a clear picture of our strengths (so that we can build on them) and our weaknesses (so that we can build them up and, ideally, turn them into strengths).

Perhaps the most significant point to emphasize in relation to this particular obstacle is that we should not underestimate the skills involved in reflective practice, nor should we allow ourselves to underestimate our abilities to develop those skills over time, provided that we receive the appropriate support.

When it comes to addressing problems of a lack of skills, the following strategies should prove helpful:

Take the initiative

Given that we need to be proficient in a number of skills in order to practise reflectively, it can pay dividends to do a 'skills audit' on ourselves, so that we can work out where we need to acquire new skills or improve those we already have. Whether we do so through our own reading, attending training courses or taking advice from colleagues, it is important to remember that the learning needs to take place in the context of how these skills will help us to practise reflectively. The material may not be presented with this in mind, and so we need to make those links for ourselves if a more informed and reflective practice is our goal.

Claim 'me' time

Where a skill deficit is proving to be an obstacle, this can be raised with line managers as a learning need. After all, employers have a duty to ensure that employees have the skills needed to do the job they are employed to do. In

most situations, asking for 'time out' or study time to develop the skills that underpin reflective practice would not seem to be unreasonable, in our eyes.

Seek out a mentor

Although we may feel reluctant to express what we consider to be inadequacies, more skilled colleagues can be an invaluable source of support and guidance. We would stress here that the key word is *skilled*, rather than experienced, because the most experienced colleague may not necessarily be the most skilled – it could just be that he or she has been 'winging it' for longer! We would suggest looking for support from those who seem to know what they are doing and have critical awareness, regardless of the length of time they have been around.

And, finally, we need to remember that we are all 'works in progress'. When we become qualified and registered professionals, our certificates and diplomas indicate that we have the skills necessary to practise at a *beginning* level in our chosen field. Taking responsibility for our own ongoing learning is one of the bedrocks of critically reflective practice, and so we should see skills development as a positive goal, rather than as an obstacle to be overcome.

ANXIETY, FEAR OR LOW CONFIDENCE

One of the reasons an aspiring reflective practitioner may not have developed certain skills (or may not realize he or she has those skills) could be a lack of confidence. This, in turn, may arise from certain anxieties or fears relating to those skills or the areas where they are expected to be put into practice. Indeed, anxiety, fear or low confidence can in themselves be a significant barrier to developing reflective practice. Consider the following examples:

- **Using professional knowledge.** One of the important aspects of reflective practice that was discussed earlier is the process of *surfacing* or making the implicit explicit, particularly in relation to the professional knowledge base we are drawing upon. This can lead to concerns on the part of some people who may feel worried about surfacing an inadequate or out-of-date knowledge base – that is, they may feel that this process will reveal embarrassing gaps in their knowledge base. Consequently, they would

prefer the risks involved in 'winging it' to the relative certainties of being exposed as someone whose knowledge is wanting. There are, of course, two main problems with this approach: (i) *everyone* will have gaps in their knowledge base; it is unrealistic to expect anyone to have a complete grasp of the underpinning knowledge of a particular profession or discipline – especially as that knowledge base will grow and change over time; (ii) if we are not honest about the gaps and thus our learning needs, then we will not be open to learning – there is a very real danger that we will get stuck in a rut and not grow and develop over time.

- **Taking risks.** There are also the wider anxieties of taking risks. Some people may prefer to stay in their 'comfort zone' – that is, they may be unwilling to stretch themselves, enter new territory or try out new ideas or approaches. This will not only reduce their effectiveness by unnecessarily restricting the repertoire of steps they can take to make progress, it will also mean that they will not grow and develop over time – that is, it will become another obstacle to learning. Being prepared to go outside our comfort zone is therefore an important underpinning of reflective practice. This does not mean that we should be reckless or expose ourselves to unnecessary risks, but it does mean that we should not allow ourselves to become trapped in a narrow, 'safe' or 'cosy' approach to our work, as this clearly involves doing a serious disservice to the people we are trying to help or support.
- **Exposure to criticism.** There will be few if any people who enjoy being criticized, particularly where such criticism is unfair or unwarranted. It is therefore understandable that many people will be very careful and cautious in trying to make sure that their work is not open to scrutiny. However, not being comfortable with being open to challenge can be a costly business in so far as it can mean (i) we close off opportunities to learn from constructive and helpful criticism; (ii) we do not take the opportunity of how to respond appropriately to unfair criticism; (iii) there may be errors or false assumptions in our work that go undetected, possibly with disastrous consequences in some situations; and (iv) not being open to challenge can undermine both our professional credibility (that is, how much faith others have in us as competent professionals) and our ability to work in partnership – especially if our unwillingness to be challenged makes us come across as arrogant, dogmatic or not open minded. If criticism is offered constructively and appropriately, we should have the good grace to seek to learn from it. If it is offered

destructively or inappropriately, we should have the courage to challenge it. But simply avoiding criticism, scrutiny or challenge is a much more dangerous path to follow.

- **Role anxiety.** Some people may experience a degree of discomfort with using techniques and tools as frameworks for promoting reflective practice (see Chapter 4). For example, it is not uncommon for some people to argue, when being introduced to reflective practice tools and techniques (on a training course, perhaps), that: 'I am a practitioner. I'm not sure I would feel comfortable using training tools like these – I don't have a background or interest in providing training.' Of course, this is based on a misunderstanding, as the tools and techniques available, while often applicable in a training and development context, are not limited to that context. They are tools for reflection and learning and can be used just as effectively in a practice (or management) context as in a training room. We should therefore not allow this type of misunderstanding to prevent us from making use of some very valuable tools for reflective practice.

It is understandable that anxiety, fear or low confidence can stand in the way of reflective practice. However, given the importance of reflective practice and the dangers of practising in a non-reflective way, it is important that we have the courage to address our anxieties and fears as best we can (with the support of others where possible), and have enough faith in ourselves to tackle the 'demons' of low self-confidence and self-doubt.

Tackling these demons can be done, in part, by means of the following.

Turn negative influences to positive

Where anxiety becomes an obstacle to progress it can set in motion a vicious circle where the anxiety saps confidence and the low confidence then feeds back into and reinforces that anxiety. Trying to change the nature of that process can therefore be a worthwhile strategy to work on. If we think in terms of the benefits that practising reflectively can bring – the feeling of being in control, knowing what we are trying to achieve, feeling positive about our roles, and so on – we can see that it is possible to turn the process around and into a virtuous circle (that is, the opposite of a vicious circle: one that goes

from strength to strength), whereby practising reflectively helps to make us feel more confident, which then serves to overcome or at least minimize the anxiety. This will not happen by wishful thinking, though, and we need to make that first step outside of our comfort zone if we are to break the vicious circle and set a virtuous one in motion.

Pat ourselves on the back

We have referred earlier to the fact that working in an 'anti-learning' culture can have a negative effect on confidence and commitment. It is therefore important that we do our utmost to resist cultural norms that hinder rather than help. For example, if the work culture is one in which comments such as 'We're all about practice here' or 'Forget about what they told you on your course, you're in the real world now' tend to go unchallenged, it becomes even more important to take pride in being a reflective practitioner and see learning as an essential component of critically reflective practice. It is easy to become demoralized in an environment where people are dismissive of what we see as fundamental to good practice. We recognize that this can put a strain on energy and morale, but like-minded people can be invaluable allies in reinforcing our belief in ourselves and our capacity to make a positive difference in people's lives.

Authenticity

Being authentic means being true to ourselves and not trying to find excuses elsewhere. In effect, it means taking responsibility for ourselves, taking ownership of our actions. If we want to tackle what is getting in the way of progress, we need to engage in a process of critical self-reflection in order to locate where the power to move forward with that aim lies. It is all too easy to blame those factors that are contributing to our fear or anxiety about reflective practice and use them as scapegoats to deflect away from ourselves the responsibility for addressing them. Some things are within our power to change, others we can only influence but, even where obstacles are not of our own making, there is always something we can do, even if that means moving out of a demoralizing environment and applying for a post where our own commitment to reflective practice is shared by our employer.

Practice focus 6.3

While preparing for an appraisal session Joan's manager, Safiya, realized that she never put herself forward for a place on training courses, nor did she interact very much with students or other visitors to the team. This struck her as odd, because she had always thought of Joan as a competent member of the team with a wealth of experience. When she broached the issue of Joan acting as a mentor to a newly qualified worker, Joan's reluctance prompted her to ask why she appeared to be so uncomfortable with the idea. It soon became apparent that Joan felt threatened by those who had qualified more recently than she had, and that she would not be able to 'hold her own' in discussions about theory. Safiya wondered whether Joan was conceptualizing the worlds of theory and practice as two separate spheres and persuaded her to attend a reflective practice workshop where she knew that the integration of the two concepts would be the major theme. This proved to be a turning point for Joan in terms of her understanding and also her confidence in her ability as a learner herself, and as someone who could contribute to the learning of others. She proved to be popular as a mentor because of her enthusiasm and commitment to making the learning journey a shared one, and was no longer 'afraid' of theory. She had come to realize that her practice had always been informed by a theory base, and that sharing her knowledge and insight with others was an excellent way to make sure that this continued to be the case.

MISUNDERSTANDING THE NATURE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

In Chapter 1, the point was made that there are various myths about reflective practice that can get in the way of its development. The prevalence of these myths can lead to a situation in which some people have a very superficial or misleading understanding of what is involved, and this in turn can lead to a situation in which reflective practice is blocked – prevented from developing by a failure to appreciate what it is really about. For example, some people seem to think that reflective practice is simply a matter of pausing for thought from time to time. They will therefore not appreciate what is involved in terms of, for example, connecting reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action or of making links between both them of them and the underlying professional knowledge base.

Another aspect of this problem is when people are called upon to provide reflective accounts (for example, as part of a portfolio of evidence for an educational qualification – see Chapter 5), but do not appreciate the difference between a descriptive account and a reflective or analytical one. In this way, they fail to get the benefit of having a genuinely reflective account to review and learn from.

Furthermore, the point was made in Chapter 1 that it is important to distinguish between an open knowledge base (that is, one that is open to scrutiny and which can grow and develop over time) and a closed one (an implicit knowledge base that is not open to challenge or development). Some people reflect on their practice, but without engaging with an open knowledge base, in the sense that they may identify the assumptions on which their work is based, but not go the necessary step further to question those assumptions, to subject them to critical scrutiny and to link them to other aspects of the knowledge base.

This significant obstacle emphasizes the importance of having a good foundation of understanding of reflective practice and not making do with a superficial or distorted perspective. In terms of tackling this obstacle, then, what needs to be achieved is a clearer understanding of what reflective practice actually involves. For you personally, it is to be hoped that this book will have done enough to ensure that you have a clear understanding of the nature of critically reflective practice. However, when it comes to trying to make sure that others do not labour under any misapprehensions of what reflective practice is all about, the following may be helpful.

Team or staff meetings

You could consider raising the issues at a staff or team meeting – especially if some of these meetings are designated as staff development sessions. You could perhaps find a suitable article or book chapter to photocopy and use as a handout to form the basis of discussion. Alternatively, if you feel confident enough (or you have a knowledgeable colleague who feels confident enough), you could arrange for a presentation to be made to the team or staff group on the benefits of critically reflective practice and the dangers and costs of uncritical, non-reflective practice.

Training courses

It could be a worthwhile use of your time to try and find out whether there are any courses on reflective practice available within your organization. If not, perhaps there are open courses not too far away and possibly the funding available to purchase one or more places on one of them. If neither is avail-

able, it may be worth contacting your organization's training department to encourage them to provide or commission appropriate training on this important subject.

Leading by example

The point was made earlier that, if we cannot change an unhelpful culture that is preventing the development of reflective practice, then at least we can ignore that culture and make sure that our own actions are not unduly influenced by it. In doing so, this gives us the opportunity to lead by example. If we make sure that our actions are consistent with critically reflective practice and show others how helpful this is in terms of, for example, avoiding the development of stress (through a sense of a lack of control combined with low morale) and achieving high levels of professional practice, then we can play a significant part as role models.

Student placements

If your team or staff group play host to students on placement from time to time, then this may be a useful opportunity for raising awareness of what critically reflective practice is all about. For example, it may be possible to have one or more students involved in a project relating to critical reflection that can help to raise awareness, to a limited extent at least, throughout the organization and, in the process, seek to clear up some of the common misunderstandings (as outlined in Chapter 1). Some students may not feel comfortable with this type of project, whereas others may very much welcome the challenge.

Good management

If you are a manager and misunderstanding amongst your team members is the barrier, then you should find it helpful to encourage them to read, discuss and get to know what the task is and what it is not – recognizing that *informed* practice is at the root of developing reflective practice. This can be done through supervision (dyadic reflective space), through, as mentioned above, team meetings (group reflective space) and in whatever ways present themselves over time.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored a range of obstacles that can stand in the way of developing critically reflective practice and provided some suggestions as to how these can be dealt with. Consistent with the philosophy of reflective practice, we offer no simple definitive answers, but rather, more realistically, some points of guidance to act as food for thought to encourage further development.

A key theme has been that we can be significantly helped in overcoming obstacles to critically reflective practice by reaffirming ourselves as professionals – that is, not just as bureaucrats who mindlessly follow procedure (Payne, 2000), but rather as individuals who have a knowledge base and a set of values to draw upon in wrestling with the complexities of the demands of working in the helping professions. We have known for some time that simply following procedures is not a workable response in the helping professions. This is because the work involves working with *people*, and therefore incorporates a significant degree of uncertainty and unpredictability.

Working with uncertainty creates a need to tailor responses to the specific circumstances, and does not fit comfortably with working in routinized, uncritical ways. It is therefore essential that we are able to overcome the barriers, rather than give up and sink into defeatism. It will not always be an easy journey, but the obstacles we encounter are not insurmountable if the commitment to good practice is strong enough to see us through.

This chapter, we hope, has gone some way towards establishing a foundation from which you can develop a better understanding of the barriers we are likely to encounter (the ones discussed here plus others that are likely to arise) and some ideas and insights about how we can rise to the challenge of removing or avoiding those barriers or, at least, minimizing their impact.