

There's No Such Thing As Reflection

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SUMMARY

Despite the enormous proliferation of literature on the nature and practice of reflection, still little is agreed about what it is, and that which is asserted is confusing and contradictory. Even the work of Donald Schön, which lies behind the debate on reflective practice in the professions, is problematic. Not only do Schön's own ideas tend to lack practical application to social work and to have been superseded by later theorists, but the entire oeuvre to date leaves more questions than answers. Yet social work education has become steeped in demands that students should demonstrate reflection in practice as a learning outcome. The danger this poses to vulnerable learners in the assessment relationship, when assessors' own conceptions of reflection may be poorly formed and may not match those of their students, is worryingly likely to compound the imbalance of power between them. It is arguable whether social work programmes should be assessing reflection at all. Until such time as we can state more clearly what it is, we may have to accept that there is no theory of reflection that can be adequately assessed.

INTRODUCTION

During the last 25 years, there has been a proliferation of educational literature on the nature of reflection (e.g. Mezirow and Karlovic, 1992; Short, 1994; Korthagen and Wubbels, 1995; Cole, 1997). More recently, this has transferred to allied professions such as nursing (Palmer *et al.*, 1994) and social work (Yelloly and Henkel, 1993; Taylor, 1996). Reflective learning has come to enjoy something of a cult following amongst curriculum planners and those responsible for professional education. Much of this recent trend can be attributed to the influence of Donald Schön, albeit a healthy scepticism is

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growing in relation to his main 'reflection-in-action' thesis (Schön, 1983). This paper will critique the debate in its historical context and will show that it falls far short of offering the epistemology of practice it claims. Indeed, the contention will go further and will support a developing view that theorizing to date has raised more questions than it has answered and that, in fact, rather little is known, even now, about reflection.

A consequence of this view is that social work programmes arguably should not be assessing reflective practice as a competence, and especially not as a purportedly measurable skill, readily available to standard assessment criteria. To assess students against such a vague conceptual notion is inequitable because it is likely further to oppress vulnerable learners who do not happen to fit into the assessors' own ideas of what they believe reflective learning to be. Alternatively, reflection could be assessed only against agreed criteria that are laid open to external scrutiny and verification.

Meanwhile, there is an urgent need to continue seeking an adequate theory of knowledge in practice to put at the service of social work education and training. It may be that an exploration of the origins of reflection as a concept may offer some elucidation of the task ahead.

THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF REFLECTION

The subject of professional knowledge is currently much debated in academic institutions, with course design not untypically owing a debt to Donald Schön's (1983) work on the reflective practitioner. (See also Edmonds and Teh, 1991; Hill, 1991; Leigh, 1992; Harris and Wear, 1993; Hamlin, 1994; Palmer *et al.*, 1994). Indeed, many academics regard Schön's notion of reflection as filling the void left by the abandonment of positivist research paradigms (Killen and Todnem, 1991; Crandall, 1993; Dona and Pitts, 1993; Tremmel, 1993) and of the logico-deductive method as an orientation to knowledge (Merger, 1992). His 'reflection-in-action' approach is more practice-oriented, aiming to tackle the way in which professionals confront demanding and problematic situations. Substantial reviews of Schön's work have been offered by Fenstermacher (1988), Munby and Russell (1989), Yaxley (1993), and in the context of an interview held with him by Connelly and Clandinin (1992). In contrast, a more critical view is expressed by Michael Eraut (1994; 1995), who has followed this through into his own original work (1996; see also Bengtsson, 1995).

British professional education during the 1980s and 1990s has used the concept of reflection to spearhead a revolution in adult learning. In the professions of nursing, social work and education, amongst others, reflection now features as a critical element in the enhancement of 'knowing for doing'. It claims to unlock the shackles of theory so that the learner can engage actively

with praxis (theory in practice). This is called 'reflective practice'. Yet, despite the fact that the term 'reflection' is so widely used, it is equally widely misunderstood (Kremer-Hayon, 1990). Indeed, a number of authors (Grimmett and Erikson, 1988; Calderhead, 1989; Feiman-Nemser, 1990) have claimed that everyone has their own personal understanding of what reflection is, to the extent that the term has become 'unusable' (Cole, 1997, p. 12). Boud and Knights (1996) similarly argue that substantial further work on it is urgently needed. Without this, the confusion will persist as individuals struggle to define the nature, substance and structure of the professional teaching and learning in which they are engaged (Killen, 1989; see also Korthagen and Lagerwarf, 1996, for the beginnings of an attempt at such a definition).

THE PRAGMATISTS

Although reflection can be traced back to Plato's *Meno* (see Grimmett, 1988), and more recently to Immanuel Kant (1889) in his *Critique of Practical Judgement* as well as the language work of Wittgenstein, it is the later work of the pragmatists, Pierce (see Hookway, 1992), Dewey (1910; 1933) and Popper (1994), that is most relevant here.

John Dewey's (1910/1933) publication, *How We Think*, is worth considering in detail as a grounding for a model of reflection, in that it can be used as a basis for understanding the later Popperian development of a notion of problematic knowledge. It also stands as a precursor to action research and to action learning such as the 'enquiry and action approach' (Burgess, 1992; Taylor, 1997).

Fundamentally, Dewey's idea hinges on practical problem solving. It is presented as a five-stage model. Dewey begins by stating that it is only possible to reflect authentically when confronted by material which is problematic, perplexing, and which presents what he calls a 'felt difficulty' (Dewey, 1910, p. 3). He goes on to say that all problematic material is 'cherished by the reflective practitioner as the only grounds by which they may be able to reflect' (Dewey, 1910, p. 74). This principle, that reflection can only occur when the issues faced are problematic, might be a useful pointer for organising the assessment in practice of social work students.

The second step of Dewey's model is that of observation and of refining the felt problem. Experience plays a major part in this process (Dewey, 1976). Often, these first two steps are fused together as one. In step three, the individual begins to develop a hypothesis. Through the use of suggestion and inference, he or she moves from the known to the unknown, creating a sort of cognitive disruption. Through imaginative thinking, a possible theory of conjectured solution is tentatively explored. However, this supposition must be held in suspension until such time as it is ready for realization. In reality,

for many professionals, the temptation to act instantly is too great and they jump stages, with poor results. This can be a common tendency amongst inexperienced students, who act on their instincts with little if any deliberation.

In step four, the professional applies reasoning to his or her supposition. This is the most important stage for the success of the model and prefigures the 'critical control' elements of reflection (see below) which are vital in transforming implicit knowledge into knowledge that can be part of a deliberate process of thought (Mezirow and Karlowic, 1992; Zeichner, 1990a; 1990b; Eraut, 1994). The last step in Dewey's five-stage process is what he calls 'experimental corroboration' (Dewey, 1910, p. 77), or verification of the conjectured idea as a 'complete act of thought'. Here, everything is put to the test through practical and mental implementation. This is the stage which equates with carrying out and monitoring practice intervention in social work.

MULTIPLE LEVELS OF THINKING

It can be argued, then, that within this reasoning process there are two potential conceptual levels pertinent to understanding the construction of reflection. On one level, there is what might be described by the earlier Kantian notion of 'pure reason' (see Scruton, 1996). This concerns analytical thought; a process of rational deduction. On another level exists those perceptions we construct through interpreting our experiences. Here, we consider how things appear to us, through definitions, assumptions and explanations. Moving between these levels offers fresh insight. It is the conceptual oscillation between the two that gives reflection its fascination. On yet another possible plane, analytic material transcends its pure form, through a process of inductive logic in which substance and structure interact with the senses. The ability to think at this level can release dormant creative capacities, transporting everyday ideas into a new sphere that Habermas (1974, p. 4) refers to as 'enlightenment', drawing upon a Kantian notion of emancipation from the bounds of political and empirical rules.

The challenge is in being able to access deeper thought processes, through the use of metacognitive, deliberative skills, whilst freeing oneself from the empirical constraints placed upon experience, and therefore values, by social and political influences. At the same time, language has to be shaped to act as a vehicle for conveying the ideas and thus the knowledge involved. Habermas argues that it is this synthesis of thought and language that is essential in framing the justification for moral action. He calls this process 'communicative competence' (McCarthy, 1984, p. 337). The relevance for social work and other professional practice, and indeed, for much of human social interaction, is self-evident.

We now have available, then, to pit against the empirical-analytical sciences which deal with a form of knowledge obtained through the technical control of data, a critical social theory suggesting that reality can only be grasped when individuals are seen as acting in a matrix of inter-subjective meaning, rather than from one social position (Held, 1980, p. 307). A useful critique of epistemologies for social work, relevant to this debate, can be found in the work of Mary Henkel, 1995, pp. 67–82).

Enlightenment theory, though, is itself fraught with difficulties, as Habermas (1983) implies, in attempting to explain the way in which the transformation of pure knowledge take place. Indeed, this entire area is contentious and the intention here is to signpost its complicated nature rather than to resolve it, as a basis for understanding later contributions to the debate. Much further work will be required before confident agreement can be reached.

THINKING IN PRACTICE: SCHÖN AND ERAUT, TIME AND PLACE

Schön's ideas stemmed from the earlier pragmatist work, initially via the theory of action research (Argyris and Schön, 1974). This involved a constant feeding back of learning into doing which was helpful to practitioners in establishing a clear link between theory and practice. Such a cyclical process of thought and action was actually more plausible for practice than Schön's later model, but has never been adequately developed in this context.

The publication of Schön's substantive work on *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), further illustrated through his later case studies (1987) and an anthology (1991), like the earlier theories outlined, substantially moved away from the traditional paradigm of technocratic rationality, regarding it as an inadequate framework for understanding the processing of complex material sufficiently rapidly to take action in problematic situations. What is now widely known as 'reflection-in-action' was first presented as a new paradigm for practice knowledge. Though Schön (1983, p. 42) identified the 'swampy lowlands' in which professionals must work, his own research was based on professions which were likely, in fact, to occupy the higher ground of rationality and predictability, and hence to be less challenged by the demands of rapid problem solving than is social work. Engineers and architects, for example, are arguably less often called on to take immediate action in the context of complex decision making. In social work, the practitioner is faced with fast changing and highly challenging problematic information, and is required to exercise judgement under extreme pressure, knowing that the consequence of not 'getting it right' can be a child abuse enquiry or a judicial review.

Though Schön himself never identified the dimension of time as a significant concept in any of his work, it can now be seen to have been highly significant. For Schön, reflection takes place even as the relevant experience occurs. When the professional engages in a practice situation and encounters a problem, he or she is able to reflect on it whilst remaining located in the original problem. Turning in on oneself to examine the perplexity of the material engendered results, in and of itself, in a turning outwards to take action.

But, whereas Schön assumed the time element of his conceptualization to be instantaneous, this was later challenged. Eraut (1995) argued that, as soon as one turns it on oneself, one has cognitively, if not physically, left the action. The reflection is then on, rather than in, the action. The individual examines the issues by reflecting back to him or herself because the experience has already happened, even if he or she is still in the environment of the original action. This theme is one that Bengtsson (1995), too, examines in his opposition to the new discourse of reflection. He sees reflection-in-action as an interruption of action, rather than a reflection on it.

One explanation of what is happening during such reflecting in action is the application of what Eraut and others (e.g. Polanyi, 1958) have regarded as 'tacit knowledge'. Intuitively and unconsciously, the practitioner takes instantaneous action in a situation demanding an immediate response. Under such circumstances, it is normal to be unable to describe the knowing our actions reveal. If the knowledge used to decide upon certain action is tacit, then the manner in which the cognitive faculties interrogate the relevant material is not so much critical as passive. In order to move beyond this, and to reflect on the situation in hand whilst also being aware of one's knowledge in use, necessitates taking critical control of one's own thinking activity (Habermas, 1974; Kemmis, 1985)—a metacognitive ability. Eraut (1994) calls this the use of 'process knowledge' in expert knowledge domains.

Eraut's, then, is a metacognitive theory rather than a theory on reflection. He offers a synthesis of mode of cognition (the use of various knowledge domains) with the concept of time. It is the ability to make rapid judgements and decisions in problematic environments, whilst harnessing appropriate cognitive levels, that is crucial. But recognizing this does not unravel its complexity for the learner. In other words, exactly how one teaches or measures choice of mode of cognition, speed of mental functioning, or the sustaining of critical control over one's ideas is not resolved.

Van Manen also regards critical, reflective thought as external to the time framework of action. Indeed, to him, the interruption of action is paramount. Practitioners can only reflect if they are able to 'slow down the pace of action, go back and try again, and reduce the cost and risk of experimentation (Van Manen, 1992, p. 61; also 1995). This is the next nearest thing to stopping the action whilst reflecting on it and then taking subsequent action as a result of that reflection. Rather than acting intuitively, one first gains an element of

control in thinking about the situation. This assumes a sort of role-play, where reflection is centred on action and is deliberately rehearsed for the purposes of trying out new action. Though, clearly, the principle of slowing down concurrent action is based in the here and now, it is seen as being guided by previous rather than current action, as was suggested in some of the earlier theorizing. This is not a new idea. Kuhn, in his debate with Karl Popper about crude empiricism (see Doyal and Harris, 1986, pp. 9–24), argued that any progress towards scientific knowledge is steeped in cultural tradition. Our preconceived ideas shape the way current action is framed rather than, as Schön saw it, experience being shaped by current action.

Further complications are that reflection is a social process (Heron, 1985) and a multi-process (Knights, 1995). Selecting from many contributions to this debate (Cruikshank, 1987; Courtney, 1992; Hammond and Collins, 1994; Orton, 1994), the significance of the social dimension was initially clearly demonstrated by Stephen Kemmis (1985, 1988) in his action research model. Moving beyond the individual element of thought and action, a range of social theorists have shown how the way we think—our relective processes—are socially, historically and politically influenced. Reflection, then, becomes a social construct—happening in place as well as time. Social constructionism is a relatively new paradigm that can be seen as a form of post-structuralism (Gergen, 1985), giving added weight to a strand in postmodernist thinking (Parton, 1994; Usher and Edwards, 1994; Taylor, 1996). Here, the changing nature of society and of professional education is viewed as having only one certainty, and that is the certainty of uncertainty, as higher education lives with a new supercomplexity in ever-changing circumstances (Barnett, 1997).

SOCIAL WORK AND THE ASSESSMENT OF LEARNING

In social work, the need to respond to daily changing situations demands something more than simply the skills to sit back and reflect on action (Pietroni, 1995; Batchelor and Boutland, 1996). The pressures engendered, for example, by daily conflicts between resource restrictions, public demands for protection, and the impetus to offer users greater independence present social workers with complex and morally contentious challenges. These require internal processing (cognition), so that external processing in the form of judgement, followed by decision making (action), can be combined in a speedy response. The difficulties of combining all these elements successfully mark social work out as different from other professions and suggest a need for training that focuses specifically on these skills. This necessarily takes us beyond Schön. Although he has more recently made reference to the specific demands of the social work profession (Schön, 1996), Schön's methodology has not moved on to take account of the more serious consequences of

delaying a decision in social work, as opposed to many other professional contexts.

Nor can one look to Eraut, who did take up the issue of the need for a speedy response, to solve the urgent problem of how the necessary skills can be taught or evaluated. The tools for the job may lie in his notion of deliberative skills as a way of 'turning back', 'fixing thoughts' and giving 'deep and serious consideration' (Eraut, 1994, p. 156), and he even proffered an explanation of this deliberative process (Eraut, 1994, Chapter 7), but he has really taken us no closer to identifying how someone can acquire these skills, apply them with speed, or make effective judgements as a result.

Yet social work students are in fact being assessed on all of these things as outcomes of their learning. The problem is that we are now able to state what they need to be able to do, without ourselves knowing exactly how it is that people come to do these things or how they learn to do them better. Indeed, such is the underdevelopment of reflective methodology in general that there is little evidence of reflection training of any kind in the social work curriculum.

Furthermore, we simply do not have the assessment tools to measure what students are doing when they are reflecting. This is connected with the problematic relationship between thought and action (Hampshire, 1959). Hampshire regards people as able to operate at various levels in observing or recognizing action. The physical outcome of an internal thought would be one level, while the rehearsing in one's mind of a possible solution to a problem, filtered through one's previous individual and social experience so as to make sense of it, lies on another level. They can both be classed as actions, but only the former would generally be identified as such because it is observable and measurable by what is widely accepted as scientific method. In the dialectic of mind (thought and theory), there is no equivalent to body, action and practice, the latter being the observable or 'knowable' constituents of, in fact, a wider process. Yet action, in body or mind, is more than physicality; it involves a process of metacognition. We are able, in this way, to talk about the substance, structure and nature of reflection, for example in Hampshire's (1959, pp. 51–2) explanation of a theoretical dialectic, but we still come no nearer to knowing how to implement such an understanding in the form of better practice—which is what most social work practitioners and their managers, as well as students and their assessors, require. And, if we cannot do that, then how can we fairly assess its successful implementation?

CONCERNS ABOUT OPPRESSION IN THE ASSESSMENT OF REFLECTION

Such a degree of diversity in methods of understanding the acquisition and exercise of professional knowledge must engender pessimism as to the pos-

sibility of assessing social students fairly whilst this essential debate is taking place. A particularly loud note of caution must be sounded in relation to the fact that some commentators still inherently endorse reflection as a skill or competence that can be learnt through instrumental reasoning. This leads to the assumption that course planners need only structure assessment in such a way as to encompass a new outcome called 'reflection'.

An example is the design of portfolio construction to include narrative accounts (McAlpine, 1992; Olson, 1994; Connelly and Clandinin, 1995). In fact, these neither help the student reflect adequately, nor assess their ability to reflect, since they imply that learning is outcome-based, rather than a representation of the intellectual and interactive processes involved in achieving narrative accounts *per se* (Cornett and Hill, 1992). Moreover, even were it possible to measure reflection in action, what would be the necessary evidence indicators that could be identified to guide the assessor in arriving at fair and equitable results? What yardstick would be used to gauge reflective practice (Iser, 1997)?

If reflection is to be regarded as a core facet of individual professional competence, then we need to know far more about its structure, substance and nature before we can safely assess it in professional social work training. We need to agree whether the theorizing to date has served to inform or merely to confuse this quest. To continue as we are represents not only folly, but also inequity. Crucially, none of the work on reflection thus far has effectively tackled issues of oppression in the teaching and learning environment. This is not an uncommon problem in educational theory more generally. Even Freire has not gone uncriticized in this respect for, as Weiler states, 'he never addresses the question of other forms of power held by the teacher by virtue of race, gender, or class that may lead to antagonisms' (Weiler 1996, p. 133). As a consequence, the potential for discrimination had not been faced. And, where particular values or views are strongly held by assessors which could be detrimental to vulnerable learners, the potential for harm will be greatest at the point of assessment and especially when assessing concepts that are unclear and therefore hard to challenge.

Reflection cannot simply be placed on a par with propositional knowledge or with behavioural skills. Yet, in a context of measuring learning outcomes in social work, it is this very assumption that can be discerned in the new requirements to demonstrate professional competence (Central Council for Education and Training in Social Work [CCETSW], 1996). Whatever one's view of the wider querying of an operational approach to assessing professional learning (Hodkinson and Issitt, 1995; Barnett, 1996; Gibbs, 1996), it is clearly the case that the nature of reflection does not fit the competence model and, although CCETSW is right to include reflection as an overall requirement, there is not sufficient understanding of it in current theorizing to help programmes construct a suitable way of teaching it effectively or assessing it fairly.

The crisis in professional learning to which Schön (1983, p. 5) himself referred is still with us, which is why so many academics and professional planners of education are becoming more critical of traditional methodologies and are now challenging the established pedagogy. The postmodernist era is marked by the attempt to create a cultural revolution in our thinking (Rossiter, 1996) at a time of forced cultural, economic and intellectual change (Usher and Edwards, 1994). Yet the direction of that change is still uncertain. Knowledge in universities is the site of struggles between Lyotard's (1984) 'performativity', the continuing search for instrumental and technical reason to get things achieved, and the emancipatory forces of Habermas' (1995, pp. 115–18) communicative and dialogic reason (a collaborative search for the best argument for moral action). The way forward is no longer to teach knowledge. Rather,

the main aim has to be that of creating disturbance in the mind of the student and of enabling the student to handle that disturbance. That, in turn, requires something approaching a pedagogical transaction in which the student has pedagogical space to develop her own voice (Barnett, 1997, pp. 20–1).

If social work education is to survive, then tackling the issues raised in this paper becomes a priority. With the announced transfer of the regulatory responsibilities of CCETSW (1997), and the pressure on educational providers to cut costs and demonstrate 'best value', the fear is that reflection will become seen as a self-indulgent or 'soft' subject that cannot be afforded, that standards will fall, and that users will receive a poorer service as a result.

CONCLUSION

We do not know enough about reflection or how its intricate and complex cognitive processes can enhance learning to be able to assess it fairly. Much of what is asserted remains speculative and conjectural. The various paradigms of research and epistemology confuse, through their own diversity and thus contradiction, rather than offering a more coherent understanding of what reflection is. The 'Schön years' have given hope as many professional educators now believe the void left by the rejection of positivism can be filled by his concept of 'reflection-in-action'. There are problems with this, however, as later commentators have demonstrated, chiefly in that Schön offered only the opening up of a whole new field of understanding, and even that not as applied to social work.

The future may lie with theorists such as Michael Eraut who focus for the first time on the relationship between thought and action in the most professionally demanding situations, such as social work. Practitioners are seen as applying knowledge built up from their own experience which is

'tacit' and therefore difficult to access and discuss. Reflection aims to develop conscious control of knowledge in such circumstances, through a process of metacognition, so that professionals are able to self-analyse and learn to operate more effectively in demanding situations. In essence, this means that they develop transferable skills which are lifelong and not context-specific. This is the real substance behind reflection.

The critical work of Habermas perhaps holds another key in bringing several research paradigms together—the critical, the reflective and the hermeneutic (White, 1997)—into what might be seen as an emancipatory and holistic theory of 'enlightenment'. A professional is able to think about his or her own thought processes, as an aid and guide to future thinking, whilst maintaining this thinking under his or her own critical control. This is the area the present author regards as the most fruitful enterprise for future work, though the postmodernists reject it, regarding the consensual validation of truth as only a stage in a discussion—the continual creation of new ideas and rules of discourse—rather than as a goal in itself (Lyotard, 1984). This is a further challenge professional education may need to resolve, as Barnett warns the university sector more generally (Barnett, 1997, p. 8).

However one looks at it, the way forward is problematic and we perhaps should be mindful of Clift *et al.*'s (1990, p. 220) review of social work training over the past 20 years. They suggest that we have become so entrapped by technocratic processes of measuring outcome that we miss the point of reflection. The question should be, not 'What is reflective thought?', but, rather, 'What can reflective thought do?'. Reflection is a political ideology that is still no nearer to meeting the needs of the learners and practitioners it hopes to serve. Rather, it is being used to legitimate pedagogy in the field so that work-based learning can be accorded equal status to classroom-based education (Cervero, 1992), thus transferring the locus of control while also meeting financial and policy imperatives.

Unless we recognize this and tackle the real problem of elucidating reflective learning, including as it relates to potentially discriminatory aspects of assessment, the educational policy that claims to herald the age of the lifelong learner will in fact oppress the very learners it claims to champion.

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