Relocating reflection in the context of practice: Rehabilitation or rejection?

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Note: this version of the paper is for conference discussion only.

Abstract

Notions of reflection and reflective practice have become well established in professional education since the late 1980s. While some applications of these ideas in courses have distorted their original intentions and taken an excessively instrumental approach to their use, they have nevertheless provided useful framing devices to help conceptualise some important processes in professional learning. One of the reasons why they were readily accepted is because they shared an individualised view of learning with the very programs in which they were used. In the 2000s we are however seeing a questioning of the individualistic view of learning previously associated with reflection, a focus on the nature of professional practice and an exploration of alternative conceptions that view reflection within the context of settings which necessarily have more of a group or team-based work-orientation. The paper questions whether we should reject earlier views of reflection, rehabilitate them to capture their previous potential or move to new ways of regarding reflection that are more in keeping with what we know about the context of practice. It suggests that the pursuit of each of these directions together is needed.

Introduction

Reflection and reflective practice have become commonplace terms in the vocabulary of professional courses. Reflective practice is regarded as good practice—unreflective practice is certainly bad!—And courses are supposed to promote the desirable features that are associated with reflection. These have become largely unquestioned assumptions. When they are considered in discussing courses it is normally with regard to the activities associated with them. These activities may be either not effective in promoting reflection, they turn reflection into a procedures, or, in the case of assessment, may be antithetical to the notion of reflection. These criticisms are all well addressed in the literature (e.g. Boud and Walker, 1998), though there may be a considerable gap between the solutions that are available and what occurs in any given course.

Alongside the particular problems of integrating ideas about reflection into courses, there has continued to be a more basic critique. Some of this is not new: the older philosophical position that the notion of reflection is unclear and in any case, may not be different from thinking is still asserted. And some of those from a critical social theory perspective have often argued that the only variant of reflection that is significant is that of critical reflection and the fundamental questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions. The hard
version of this position unfortunately establishes an inappropriate norm against which reflection is to be judged. And again, reflection has been criticised as being a too individualistic concept as for example represented in the writings of Schön and others and that in a world characterised by team working and cross-professional collaboration insufficient attention has been given to groups reflecting on common concerns (as distinct from the common practice of individual reflection in groups). There are some merits in each of these positions, but none are sufficient to lead to a wholesale rejection of reflection as a generative idea. Ironically, it is the ambiguous nature of reflection that challenges some of the overly instrumental ends to which it has been put.

I wish to suggest here that we need to review where we are in the use of reflection for professional learning. This review will lead to the rejection of some activities that go under the guise of ‘reflection’ but cannot be justified in terms of any articulated view of the concept, the renewal or rehabilitation of some older ideas of reflection and reflective practice, and the development of some new directions to meet some pressing needs of the current world of practice. The direction I take in approaching this review is to suggest that the idea of reflection should be relocated in the context of practice and that the consequences of that relocation should be followed through into courses that prepare professionals.

Some earlier ideas

Most ideas of reflection relate to the questioning of experience. That is, the exploration of 'a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt' (Dewey, 1933), or 'inner discomforts' (Brookfield, 1987), or 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1990) or ‘surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique’ (Schön, 1983). Although many years before Dewey was the person to bring reflection to the attention of those in education, serious discussion of reflection and reflective practice took root in professional education in the 1980s with a flurry of publications around this theme (e.g. Schön, 1983, 1987; Boud, Keogh and Walker, 1985). This was followed shortly thereafter with the taking up of these ideas in particular professional disciplines. They became inscribed into many professional courses notably in teacher education, social work, nursing and health-related areas. These ideas were particularly well received in professions in which there was a particular emphasis on a personal interaction between a professional and a client. I suggest the reason for this is that such professions embody practice more obviously than others and that, even at the earliest stages of this kind of professional practice, there is no doubting that practice is more than the exercising of technical skills and knowledge. Practitioners in these areas were receptive to a notion of reflection that went beyond Dewey’s (1933) emphasis on thinking to encompass feelings and emotions in practice settings.

The other reasons I suspect it was taken up so enthusiastically in professional courses is firstly because it fitted the individualistic culture of higher education, and secondly because it bridged the work of the academy and practice when many professions relatively new to higher education were looking for ideas that grounded them in the world of practice but which also used a somewhat more conceptualised set of ideas than
It was a time when professions such as nursing had moved organisationally from a technical to a communicative view of training for practice and needed practical ideas of a more constructivist and interpretive nature.

In 1998, David Walker and I examined what we saw then as common practices going under the banner of reflection (Boud and Walker, 1998). We expressed concern that much of what we had regarded to be of value had been lost. What had been put into practice was often far from the ideas that we or Donald Schön, or indeed any of the advocates of reflection in the literature would have wished to see. We identified problems including amongst others: reflection as recipe following, reflection without learning, over intellectualising reflection and uncritical acceptance of learners’ experience.

In looking back now, I see a connection between these problems and the teaching orientations of those people who were attempting to put reflection into practice. Prompted by Prosser and Trigwell’s (1999) work on higher education teachers’ conceptions of teaching one can notice that those teachers experiencing the greatest difficulties (and sometimes not even being aware of these difficulties) were often of a technical orientation that saw reflection as part of the apparatus of instrumental learning. Reflection did not fit their model of knowledge and skill transmission and acquisition and when prompted by colleagues, who saw the value of a more holistic view of learning grounded in experience and conceptual change, took up some of the superficial features of reflective activity while leaving out the core. These problems were compounded of course by inappropriate assessment procedures such as the marking of raw reflective journals that had the effect of driving away any reflection that might have been fostered by keeping a journal.

We can see various conceptions of reflection manifest by teachers in their practice: a technical/instrumental view, an interpretive/constructivist view and a critical view. These give rise to quite different teaching and learning activities, all of which are unhelpfully put in a single category and labelled reflection. The literature contained discussion of the second and third of these views of reflection, but if teachers were of an instrumental bent it was almost impossible for them to grasp the latter views and therefore they responded to reflection in the only way that existed in their conception of teaching and learning, that is, they adopted an instrumental approach. They therefore constructed the odd practice of reflection by numbers or checklists. They took the language of reflection—elements, stages, whatever—and turned these into procedures which they could identify as either being completed or not, as if we can ever tell when another person has reflected enough. An elusive and generative idea had been made functional! The language permeated professional schools, but it also gave reflection a bad name as colleagues saw what was occurring and decided, quite appropriately, that it was not for them.

Of course, we should not be too critical of this as it is also the fate of all educational ideas. They often arise in a particular context to address particular concerns. They are seductive because they enable us to name things we have a sense are important, without having fully thought through what was really important about them. They then get taken up and are used to label many things other than those for which their original proponents
developed them. They also get disconnected with the theoretical or philosophical assumptions that underpinned them and they may be bandied around as the latest educational fashion accessory. The appearance of engaging with them becomes more important that the educational work that they actually do. We can see this happening in so many ideas in higher education: learner-centred approaches, problem-based learning, self-directed learning and so on.

So what can we take from this brief analysis? Firstly, that there are some aspects of the use of reflection that we should perhaps reject. That is, use in instrumental and entirely procedural settings and its use by teachers who have a transmission or knowledge acquisition view of learning. Secondly, it is important to focus on what reflection as previously conceived attends to and not move beyond its legitimate scope. That is, it is a means to engage in making sense of experience in situations that are rich and complex and which do not lend themselves to being readily simplified by the use of concepts and frameworks that can be taught.

**Changing awareness of practice**

Such an analysis is insufficient though. It is not just a matter of tidying up previous poor practice. A fresh look at professional learning from initial preparation to ongoing practice is required. Is there still a place for reflection in this, and, if so, what should it be?

The place to start is in practice itself. There are now many studies of workplace practice in a range of settings and using a variety of research perspectives and an increasing number of ways of conceptualising practice. Indeed, practice is becoming an important lens through which to study many phenomena and the *Practice Turn in Contemporary Theory* (Schatzki, 2001) has been identified. This followed what we might call the earlier *reflective turn in contemporary practice*.

What is shared by many of the views of practice? Firstly, practice is necessarily *contextualised*. It doesn’t exist apart from a particular setting, a community of activity and a set of social engagements. Unlike some aspects of academic knowledge, practice is always particular. Professional competencies and orientations are applied to particular concerns at particular times. It is not meaningful to discuss practice independently of the range of settings in which it occurs: when it is disaggregated from its settings it loses many of its features of practice.

Secondly, practice is *embodied* in the persons of practitioners. Practitioners enact practice with their whole person. Their practice occupies the wide range of dispositions, motives, feelings and ideas of themselves and it cannot be separated meaningfully from them. This is not to say that attempts to do this may not have occurred, but these have never been successful as they were based on a misunderstanding of what it means to practise with skill and expertise. The mind cannot be separated from the body but higher education institutions sometimes act as if it were only dealing with minds. As an illustration of one of many ways of thinking about this, we can look to the work of Hubert Dreyfus. Dreyfus and Dreyfus (2005) indicate the stages through which someone moves from being
unfamiliar with an area to be an experienced practitioner. His stages are: novice, advanced beginner, competence, proficiency, expertise, mastery, and practical wisdom. He draws attention to the importance of learning for the latter stages as they are often removed from consideration in initial professional education courses and an impoverished view of what is involved in learning a practice is used. For Dreyfus, embodiment is central. He argues that ‘loss of the ability to recognize relevance’ and that ‘[w]ithout involvement and presence we cannot acquire skills (2001, p 7). This leads him to be very critical of many uses of the Internet for learning and indeed any approach to learning that does not acknowledge that motives, commitment and actions are always involved.

**Changing context of professional practice**

It is not only the concept of practice that is evolving and becoming richer, but also the variety of settings in which professional practice takes place and the influences that impact on it. It was once assumed that practice continued more or less unchanged except for the influence of new knowledge and technology. These meant that the specifics of particular practices might change, but that the identity of the professional would not. This view is no longer valid and has not been so for some considerable time, but many programmes operate on the assumption that it is true.

The two major features of the changing context of practice are firstly those associated with its collective rather than individual nature, and secondly its multidisciplinary or often transdisciplinary character. It is rare for any practitioner now to work alone. Almost all work occurs in settings in which there are multiple players that need to cooperate closely with each other in order for them to each perform their own jobs. Professional courses have typically been designed on the assumption of individual practice. That is, the individual professional makes autonomous decisions and engages in their own practice uninfluenced by anyone other than occasionally senior colleagues. The defining feature of professions has been that they are collections of autonomous professionals that act together within their own profession to maintain standards of good practice. However, if we examine day-to-day activities in almost any area they involve groups of people acting interdependently and these groups often contain participants from different professions or occupations. Autonomous practice is a dangerous idealisation because by leaving out other practitioners within or outside ones own profession an unrealistic assumption about what is involved in practice has been made. And actions taken on the basis of unrealistic assumptions can be risky.

Not only do practitioners work closely with others in traditional areas (such as hospitals, schools, law firms, etc), but also professions themselves do not create the boundaries around most work in society today. Most large organizations in both the private and public sectors consist of people who may have trained in a particular profession or occupation, but they are mostly not engaged in that specialisation now. Most graduates do not undertake employment in areas immediately related to the subject of their degrees and those who do often migrate into other areas of work. High level demanding work is not held together by professions or disciplines but by the nature of the work itself.
Practitioners work in mixed settings that change over time and in groups that are often formed and reformed for particular purposes related to whatever the organization exists to do. These are not simply multidisciplinary groups, but transdisciplinary ones whose knowledge is not helpfully framed by the traditional academic distinctions between subject matter (Gibbons et al, 1994).

One further change in professional practice that relates to our concerns is that of the changing relationship between professional and client (patient, student, customer, etc.). In many areas clients are being increasingly regarded as co-practitioners involved in the co-construction of knowledge about themselves and their own situation. That is, they contribute as actively to the interaction as the professional involved as they are personally implicated in the outcomes of the interaction. Examples of this are in the co-construction of health that occurs between a patient and a health practitioner, particularly in areas of primary care and acute conditions, the contributions to learning that students must make in working with teachers, and in the mutual problem-solving that occurs between social workers and clients in case work. Not only are others party to professional practice, but also it cannot occur effectively without them. While much professional practice of the past has been based on the assumption that the professional necessarily knows best, this is not a view that is sustainable in areas in which the client is an active subject.

Implications for rethinking reflection

Some of these features of practice are well established so, for example, Schön’s descriptions of the reflective practitioner are rich in contextual detail. However, when we start to add to this the other elements we have discussed—embodiment, practice with others and transdisciplinarity—we see why out conceptions of reflection need to shift to encompass a wider range of practice than hitherto conceived. There are signs that this process is occurring and we are starting to see a new wave of writing about reflection that starts to engage with these issues (Reynolds and Vance, 2004; Boud, Cressey and Docherty, 2006). So far, this work has not taken up all of the issues considered here, but there is a fresh debate occurring about how we should think of reflection now.

The concept promoted in the book with which I was associated is that of productive reflection. Productive reflection, as an idea, picks up concerns about the need for new ways of considering reflection in workplaces that are not focused on the individual independent learner. However, it also engages with the context and purpose of work and, most importantly, with the imperative that reflection is such settings cannot be an individual act if it is to influence work that takes place with others.

The key features of productive reflection (Cressey and Boud, 2006) can be summarised as follows.

1. An organisational rather than an individual intent and a collective rather than individual orientation. The focus is not on individual interests, but those of the purpose of the entity of which the practitioner is part. Unlike earlier conceptions in which others were present in reflective
activities solely to draw attention of the individual to matters they had not taken account of and to ensure that they were not fooling themselves, the emphasis now is on reflection that leads to action with and for others and for the benefit of the work involved. It also involves shared interests of the group or wider entity.

2. Reflection is necessarily contextualised within work, it connects learning and work. Reflective practices cannot be isolated from the context and organisational purposes for which they are used. These will necessarily differ from one situation to another. Work drives reflection and frames what is legitimate to do. It connects work and learning and operates in the space between the two. It provides a link between knowing and producing and is a part of change processes. Productive reflection leads to interventions into work activity to change what is happening on the basis of insights into what has occurred previously. While individuals will often act, it is to organisational action that productive reflection is directed.

3. It involves multiple stakeholders and connects players The processes and outcomes of productive reflection are not confined to one group within an organization. The group is a surrogate for what the organization does: the health care team is there to provide appropriate care for the patients for whom they are responsible not just to pursue their own learning interests. Each person has to take account of other perspectives if an outcome to satisfy all is to be sought; all need to find and operate on common ground.

4. It has a generative rather than instrumental focus This is not a new feature of reflection as discussed above. It has always been the case, even though this has often been misunderstood. The notion of reflection aims to generate possibilities that can be appropriated, not to project-manage a solution.

5. It has a developmental character Productive reflection is part of a range of organisational practices designed to simultaneously contribute to solving organisational problems of today while equipping members of the organization to be better able to deal with challenges that face them in the future. It does this through building confidence that those reflecting can act together in meaningful ways and develop their own repertoire of approaches to meet future challenges. It needs to nurture the group if it is to be sustainable.

6. Reflection is an open, unpredictable process; it is dynamic and changes over time As is common with all approaches to reflection, it cannot be predicted where it will lead. It necessarily has unintended consequences. If organizations or groups knew where they were going, then productive reflection would not be needed. It deals with matters that do not have a ready solution and are not clearly formulated, and as such it cannot be controlled and managed as a routine process.

The development of the idea of productive reflection occurred in a particular context: that of locating reflection within organizations in which reflection was not a priori a feature. Discussion of it here is a way of opening up debate on many other issues associated with
reflection and professional practice that need to be considered further. These include:
what does it mean to take the notion of embodied learning seriously, and how might this
challenge some of our assumptions about learning for professional practice? How do we
sufficiently account for the realities of practice in the activities that prepare learners for it,
and what does this imply for is highlighted in courses? How will we deal with reflection
in the context of co-construction of knowledge when the partners in the process have
radically different power positions and normal conditions for reflection are not obviously
met? How can we bracket the necessary imperative of operationalization to ensure that a
jealous emphasis on procedural requirements does not undermine the very process we are
trying to foster?

These are substantial issues in themselves, but they also need to be considered in relation
to each other. The question we must also consider is whether the notion of reflection is
robust enough to sustain such further interrogation. I suspect that the version of it we
have been using might not be sufficient and that we will need to bring other
considerations into our discussions. Reflection as we have been using it here is still
within the Deweyan tradition. What might fruitfully be considered are other more
sociologically oriented traditions (e.g. Giddens, 1991) and related ideas associated with
the practice turn (e.g. Schwandt, 2005)? As we move beyond the individual towards the
social context then these need also to be brought into the repertoire. We need to find
ways of rehabilitating some key aspects of reflection that have been eroded through
unthinking use while moving further to deal with these new issues. This is the challenge
from professional practice that confronts us.

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