Re-imagining reflection: creating a theatrical space for the imagination in productive reflection

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Abstract

Recently, Boud, Cressey and Docherty (2006) reconceptualized the process of reflection at work and renamed it ‘productive reflection’. They extend ideas of reflection as an individualised examining of experience to a collective process within a workplace context. Productive reflection is seen ideally as being an integrated part of workplace practice and is designed to enhance the quality of workplace learning. Boud et al. (2006 p. 5) also suggest that “productive reflection is a key to unlocking vital creative forces in employees” and this helps workers deal with the changing demands of the modern workplace (Burns, 2004). Productive reflection can therefore provide a valuable framework for thinking how it is possible to move beyond conventional ideas of reflection and make reflection relevant to professional development and lifelong learning.

There is one area that is often absent in the discussions of productive reflection and that is the place of the imagination and creativity in the reflection process. Reflection can be seen as a creative process closely linked to imaginative thinking as it involves “re-experiencing something that happened earlier, projecting into the future or transforming someone or something through action learning” (Taylor, Marienau, Fiddler, 2000). Professionals involved in reflective processes are re-imagining their experience and therefore have to learn how to create images, to re-envision their experience. Whilst Taylor et al. (p.96) suggests that “imagining involves visioning at a deeper level than reflecting”, I will argue in this paper that this need not be the case and that productive reflection could benefit from a perspective that focuses on creativity and imaginative thought.

Once the elements of imagination and creativity are recognised as integral to the reflective process, it is possible to draw on theatre arts literature and ideas of the aesthetic to develop new reflective practices that can enhance workplace learning. Reflection can be seen as the process of creating imaginary pictures or scenarios of experience and as such have a theatrical quality. The reflective process, like theatre, re-imagines and fictionalises certain workplace experiences and ‘brackets them off’ for further noticing and contemplation.

In this paper I will use theories of productive reflection at work and theatre arts theory to examine the importance of creativity and the imagination in professional learning. I will illustrate the practical possibilities of this approach by describing how I used the ideas of theatre arts practitioners to create processes for helping...
adult educators not only reflect on their professional practice but re-envision it and imagine how it could be changed. This reflective process involved visualisation techniques and the development of workplace case-studies or ‘scenarios’. The use of peer learning and strategic questioning (Boud, Cohen and Sampson, 2001; Peavey, 1994) were also included as part of the process to add analytical depth and organisational breadth to the reflective process. Responses from two groups of adult educators to this reflective approach to professional learning will be included in the paper.

**Introduction**

Boud, Keogh and Walker (1998 p.19) describe reflection as being “an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it”. They argue that it is through this deliberate process of returning to an experience and the consequent conscious reconsidering of it that people are encouraged to make “active and aware decisions in their learning”.

Reflection has been presented as an essential tool for continuing professional development (Argyris, and Schon, 1978, Brookfield, 1990, 1995; 2005; Schon 1987, 1996) because it encourages professionals to be more conscious of their practice. Brookfield argues that this increased consciousness helps professionals change and continue their learning in the workplace. More recently, Boud, Cressey and Docherty (2006) introduced the concept of ‘productive reflection’. This provides a new model of professional reflective practice that goes beyond the individual to a collective process that is contextualised within work and has a particular focus on organisational learning.

This paper focuses on the creative and imaginative aspects of the reflection process within the framework of productive reflection. I propose that a creative approach to reflection can offer an extra dimension to ‘productive reflection’: an arts dimension. I will be arguing that reflection can potentially be seen as a creative arts process and will present a theatrical model of reflective practice that is designed to stimulate creative reflection in professionals at both the individual and the collective level.

**Creativity, the imagination and reflection**

One of the qualities of productive reflection that is identified by Boud et al. (2006 p.22) is that reflection is a dynamic “open, unpredictable process” that changes over time. This refers to the creative nature of reflection. It is the creative quality of reflection that is crucial to the learning that can emerge from reflective practice because it encourages learners to deal creatively with ambiguity and with change. When reflection is considered in these creative terms it can be viewed as a space for professionals to re-imagine their practice and re-vision it. This can be seen as a particularly important quality for professionals to develop in the uncertain conditions of the globalised workplace.
If the imaginative aspect of reflection is neglected then there is a danger that it
becomes an instrumental tool, little more than a task focused ‘ticking the box’
exercise (Boud et al 2006). Heron (1992 p.139-40) also stresses the importance of
the imagination and warns if this dimension of thought is absent there is a danger
that an “intellectual approach to problem solving, with its fixed assumptions and
head-on strategies” will be adopted.

It is easy to see, however, why the creative aspect of reflection may not be at the
forefront of discussions on reflection and professional development. Creativity is
an extremely difficult concept to describe and is often viewed as a quality that is
impossible to measure (Athanasou, 1999 p.201). Heron (1992 p.139) has
attempted to capture the essence of creativity focusing on the “imaginal nature of
the creative process”. He attempts to describe what imaginative thinking might be
and links it to reflection in his ‘up-hierarchy of the four modes’ which is a
dimension of his psychological theory of the person (Heron, 1992 p.20). By
looking at Heron’s ideas of the imagination it is possible to gain a better
understanding of imaginative thought and its place in the reflection process.

For Heron (1992 p.21) the imagination is a ‘presentiment’ that is felt by the person
doing the imagining. Feeling is at the heart of the imagination. It is packed with
latent meaning but this meaning is apprehended through metaphor or analogy and
is therefore not fully comprehensible.

There is a play of imagery in the marginal mind which is felt to be
inherently meaningful and this felt meaning has to be brought to a
certain point before it can be expressed in linguistic and logical terms
(Heron 1992).

The ability to create mental images is seen as a key component of imaginative
thought. Heron (1992 p.139) suggests that this imaging is ‘pre-conceptual’ and
should firstly be sensed, ‘divined and received’ rather than logically dissected as
this kills creativity. He stresses the value of promoting imaginative thought:

The imagination has the capacity to sense what you do not know, to
intuit what you cannot understand, to be more than you know.

The valuing of creativity and the imagination in the reflective process allows the
experience of the professional to be ‘mulled over’ and apprehended first before it
is analysed in detail. The ability to apprehend images, to be present in the
imagined moment links reflection to aesthetic understanding. Once the ability to
imagine becomes as a key component of reflection then it is possible to align
reflection to the arts because the capacity “to think in images and then transform
them into other dimensions of reference is vital to art” (Thompson in Heron, 1992
p.138).
In the next section of the paper I will examine ideas of the aesthetic and the arts in more detail and show how they can be connected to the imaginative process of reflection. Then I will look at the concept of ‘self-spectatorship’ created by the drama-in-education specialist, Gavin Bolton and explore whether this theatre arts perspective could add a new dimension to reflection. Finally I will show how I tried to put theory into practice and describe a reflection exercise I developed from researching these areas. I used this exercise with a small group of professional adult educators and evaluated their responses.

**The aesthetic experience and reflective imagining**

The term ‘aesthetic’ derives from the Greek word aesthetika which refers to “things perceptible through the senses”; for Abbs it denotes “a kind of bodily knowledge, an apprehension of patterns through the power of sensibility, especially as it is formally expressed and developed through the arts” (1989 p.172). Nicholson highlights that “aesthetics is more than an arid branch of philosophical discourse; it is an attempt to explain how and why art matters, to find words to describe the special powers with which the arts can illuminate, move and excite” (1999 p. 81). Therefore aesthetics is not just concerned with the study of what constitutes art, but also the way art engages both feeling and reason to help people “make sense of the sensuous” (Abbs 1987 p. 61).

Art can be defined as “the creation of forms symbolic of human feeling” (Langer 1979 p. 40). Abbs believes that art “embodies the invisible logic of the life of feeling and sentience and, in so doing, brings it to conception and consciousness” (1994 p. 224). In other words, art makes the intangible (feelings, sensibility) knowable (conscious) through its creation of ‘significant form’.

Both Abbs and Langer identify feeling as being at the centre of the arts experience and this links the arts and the aesthetic to Heron’s ideas of imaginative thought. The symbolic nature of art is also relevant to the Heron’s description of the imagination as is the proposition that the arts and aesthetics are pre-lingual and reside in the senses. However, in addition, art frames the imagination and gives it form. It is this form that highlights or ‘brackets off’ images and makes what is imagined significant. Once imagined ideas become significant they demand to be looked at and contemplated and that is where the aesthetic dimension comes into play. Langer (1958 p. 5) argues that art allows us to “objectify feeling so we can contemplate and understand it”. While the ‘audience’ responds emotionally and engages with the work of art, they nevertheless see it as separate from reality, hence they are able to feel with conscious detachment. This process of aesthetic contemplation could be seen as a form of reflection.

If reflection is conceived as a creative process where the person reflecting creates an image of a past event it is possible to view this imagining as a form of art. Once pictures are conjured up in the mind and given form they take on a special quality because they are filtered into particular ‘scenes’ which are ‘bracketed off’ from the
chaotic mess of our everyday experience. This allows a situation to become like a scene from a play and as such it can be viewed differently and contemplated in a way that eliminates distractions. At this point there is the opportunity to engage in aesthetic responding. Through this response the imagined experience is felt but at the same time comprehended in an involved/detached manner. This process of aesthetic responding could add an extra dimension to reflective practice.

There is one aspect of art and the aesthetic that has not been discussed so far that has an impact on whether the arts are really relevant to reflection. This is the place of the audience in the aesthetic experience. Abbs (1987) makes it clear that if there is no audience then there can be no aesthetic.

If this is the case then it is important to question whether it is possible for a person to be both the creator of an imaginative image or scenario and audience to it during reflection. In the next section I will suggest that this is possible and explore Bolton’s concept of the spect-actor and its relevance to reflective practice.

Bolton’s concept of the self-spectactorship

The problem of theatre only existing if it has an audience is solved through Bolton’s (2000 p.24) concept of ‘self-spectactorship’. The idea behind this concept is that ‘whenever we make anything we are spectators to it’. He gives an example of a child drawing a picture of their mother and at the same time being the audience to what has been created. A self-spectator is looking at what they are creating or have created rather than being absorbed in what someone else presents to them. According to Bolton, self-spectactorship promotes a special kind of attention and noticing. This has already been identified as a crucial factor in aesthetic responding.

One of the ways that self-spectactorship is encouraged is through the placing of action in a significant space, for example, in a painting or a theatre space. Even if this space is allocated to the mind, it will still have a special focus and this will affect the concentration of the person who enters this space and the way they view the actions in the images created within it. As States (1985) points out, once an action is ‘put on stage’ it gains a particularity which it would not have in everyday life. He calls this area ‘intentional space’, because everything that is put in it has a special importance and becomes the focus of attention.

In terms of reflection once an image has been created in the mind’s space and developed into a scene like that from a play, this brings about a perceptual change and encourages the reflector to pay attention to it and look at it as an audience might do. Consciousness then ‘shifts into another gear’ and the displayed object or person is becomes “a signifying, exemplary image” (Carlson 1996, p. 40).

The same thing could be said to happen in reflective practice when a person begins to re-imagine their professional practice. When they look back and re-create a
training session they have just conducted or a team meeting that took place the previous week it is similar to the process involved in creating a play or scenario. It is the re-creation of an imagined reality.

Like a play in the theatre this imaginative re-creation can give the event a special focus and meaning. By re-creating the scenario the person reflecting will begin to consider how and why this event is important. Although a person reflecting on their practice is not an audience in the conventional sense, they are still observing the scenario, concentrating on it and reading significant meaning into it.

I have suggested that reflection can be likened to the creation of scenes from a play which we stage in our minds and then watch with the special concentration that theatre demands of its audience. Having put forward this proposition I decided to test it and developed a reflection exercise that would capitalise on the imaginative and theatrical possibilities in reflection. I also considered how this kind of reflection could be given a broader collective and organisational focus so that it could meet the demands of productive reflection set out by Boud et al (2006).

**Putting theory into practice**

I am a lecturer in adult education working on a Graduate Diploma program in Vocational and Workplace Learning. The participants on this program are all experienced, mature students who are working as professionals in areas of adult education as diverse as nursing, information technology, events management and TAFE.

One of the subjects that I facilitate is called ‘The Practice of Workplace Learning’. As the title suggests this subject is designed to help students reflect on their practice and by doing so enhance their professional development. The students are encouraged to use a range of different reflection strategies such as keeping learning journals and being part of a learning partnership. Throughout the program I set aside time for reflection and use a variety of exercises to help stimulate the imagination as I find some students find the process difficult to engage with.

The exercise I developed from this research had three stages. The first stage involved a visualisation exercise and the second the development of a case-study from the visualisation. The third stage was a peer-learning exercise where the case-study was interrogated through the use of ‘strategic questioning’ (Peavey, 1994). This stage was added to give the reflection the wider collective focus demanded of productive reflection. The three stages also indicated a move from imaginative thinking to a more analytical mode of reflective thought.

The visualisation was designed to create a theatrical space for imaginative reflection. This space was designed to prompt students to notice aspects of their professional practice in more detail and contemplate it as an audience might a play. I was hoping that this approach to reflection might stimulate an aesthetic
response from students and concentrate their focus and attention on the event so it became more significant to them.

As the facilitator of the exercise I asked students to close their eyes and imagine they could see the curtains of a traditional theatre before them – red plush with gold trim! They were told that the curtains before them were closed and that when they opened in a few seconds there would appear on the stage a scene from their professional practice. Once the curtains were open the students were asked to imagine what the scenery was like in this scene, the furniture and props that adorned the stage and the actors who were part of it. Then they were asked to look at the dramatic focus of the scene and consider what made it significant. Gradually students were encouraged to flesh out a dramatic scenario in their imaginations.

After the visualisation students were asked to share their image with their learning partner and then go away and write a short case-study based on what they had seen in the visualisation. The following week students worked in their learning partnerships and read each others case-studies. After doing this students took turns in using strategic questioning to further interrogate their partner’s professional practice.

The strategic questioning approach is designed to help people think more deeply about an event by moving them from ‘what was’ to ‘what might have been and what could be’. This focus on what may be possible involves imaginative speculation and is another reason why I added this approach to the reflection exercise. After the strategic questioning exercise was completed I asked students to fill in an evaluation sheet that asked them to comment on the reflection exercise as a whole.

The evaluation form was designed to find out if the visualisation exercise had stimulated imaginative reflection in the participants. It also explored whether the visualisation helped students to concentrate on the imagined event so it became significant for them. The form also looked at whether the visualisation exercise acted as a creative force in developing the case-study and explored the impact of the strategic questioning exercise and what was learnt from it. Finally students were asked to comment on the strengths and limitation of the exercise in terms of their professional development.

Four questions eliciting a ‘Yes’ ‘No’ or ‘Neutral’ response were provided for each stage of the reflection (12 questions in all) which allowed for some quantitative evaluation of the data. For example, in the section dealing with what happened after the visualisation exercise, students were asked if visualising the scene from their professional practice helped make the incident more significant. The rest of the form asked for qualitative responses on the strengths and limitations of the exercise and on what was learnt.

**Student response to the reflection exercise**
Only a small sample of students participated in and evaluated the reflection exercise, ten in all, so I can only give a tentative indication of how the reflection exercise was received by those students who took part in it.

All the participants felt that the visualisation exercise helped make the incident more significant for them. Ninety per cent of students could see the picture vividly in their mind and found that the visualisation exercise made it easier to write up the case-study. Interestingly only sixty per cent of respondents found that the teacher’s prompts helped with the development of the picture in their mind. Given that most students were able to strongly visualise their scenarios, this suggests that the facilitator’s intervention in the visualisation process was not the most important factor. Every student found that strategic questioning helped them gain new insights into what they could learn from the case-study.

For the purposes of this paper I have decided to focus on the qualitative data received in the responses, in particular on what were the perceived strengths and limitations of the imaginative aspects of the exercise and what was learned from it.

**Strengths and limitations of the exercise**

Overall students felt the exercise helped them reflect more deeply on their professional practice. For example one student commentated on how the exercise had allowed “deepening insight (in)to specifics in my practice”. Another student noted that the strength of the exercise lay in “the concept that each event in our life can be reflected upon for development and growth”.

Some students noted how the exercise helped them remember the “strong links” to the event being recalled and the emotions attached to it. They could clearly recall “things such as faces” and “could see the impact I was having on people at the time”. This emotional connection is characteristic of imaginative thought and of aesthetic responding.

There were many different responses to what were considered to be the limitations of the reflective exercise. One person found the image of pulling back the curtains “very prescriptive” as “it doesn’t allow for other images to occur”. A couple of students found it hard to do the visualisation in the class and wanted to reflect in private but used the prompts to successfully reflect later. There was one student who commented on the need for preparing the students “psychologically, emotionally and physically” for the exercise.

**What participants learnt or discovered through the reflection exercise**

It is in some of the comments on learning that the connections between reflection and imaginative thought and the arts become clearer. The idea behind the exercise
was to create a theatrical space that would make what was placed in it significant and worthy of contemplation. That did seem to happen for some students:

It surprised me how much information I was able to recall, in significant detail from the reflection

….to be focused on detail initially – thicken the story – give it detail and strength

Another student appears to reinforce Bolton’s ideas that the creation of a theatre space can stimulate us into become a self-spectator, an audience to our imagined experience. The language used suggests the student was watching him/herself feeling. He/she was able to feel but with detachment which has been identified as an important aspect of aesthetic responding.

Seeing how I felt – what would I change to avoid the negative feelings?

The development of the case-study and strategic questioning exercise did appear to help some participants link their personal reflection to a wider context. One of the students was able to “think about strategies I could have used (if I’d stayed at the workplace) or could use in the future if needed”. They also noted that the reflection had allowed them to “think about self-change as well as strategies for bringing about external changes”. This focus on using the imagination to think creatively about change relates to ideas of productive reflection.

Another student noted that the strategic questioning exercise:

…revealed some interesting new facts/ideas for my learning partner’s case-study – which I could relate to my own experiences. Provided greater depth of understanding.

There is an indication here that the reflection that occurred during the strategic questioning stimulated reflection that led to some collective learning which once again is seen as a feature of productive reflection.

Conclusion

In this paper I have explored the imaginative dimension of reflection and stressed its importance in the reflection process. By doing so I have suggested that it could be usefully connected to aesthetic understanding and the arts. Aesthetic consciousness requires a person through focused contemplation, to be acutely present in the moment, a quality that is also relevant to reflective thought.
I have argued that an arts perspective can offer a framework that gives imaginative thought form and significance. One of the forms presented as being a useful aid to reflection was theatre form. Reflection, if viewed from a theatre arts perspective, can be seen as a process that uses the imagination to develop scenarios from a person’s past experience and at the same time observe these scenarios as an audience might watch a play. Theatre, even in the mind, can provide a special space that makes everything that is placed within it worthy of notice and contemplation.

I developed and trialed an exercise that used visualization as a strategy to promote the imaginative, arts dimension of reflection. This visualization exercise was then used as a platform to extend personal reflection into productive reflection. The sample of students who participated in and evaluated the reflection exercise I developed from my research was small and could only provide an indication of how an arts approach to reflection may contribute to productive reflection and professional learning. I hope however that this paper will stimulate further investigation into the imaginative nature of reflection and consider whether it really has dramatic potential.

References


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