Beating the bounds: RE-locating the reflective practitioner in a learning landscape

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Abstract

Higher education and vocational training in the workplace provide different contexts, cultures, and opportunities for adult learning. Boundaries between them may have weakened as learners and teachers demand more flexible approaches to their professional needs, but they remain distinctive in significant ways. This paper, which is informed by perspectives from both “locations”, considers the place of reflective practice in adult learning. It draws extensively upon work (Cross & West 2002) undertaken by two professionals who inhabit the neighbouring settlements of university teaching and independent training/development consultancy. It serves to model the dynamic process that it discusses, and illustrates how reflective practice is best conceived not as an end in itself, but as a mere beginning.

Introduction

On the Rogation Days, which occur immediately before the Feast of the Ascension, God’s blessing was asked for the sprouting crops. Clergy and people processed around the fields and paused to read, pray or sing at significant points on the parish boundary. This was known as “beating the bounds”. The Calverton parish website recorded how the local boys suffered some indignity

…to imprint the boundary-mark on their minds. Sometimes they were bumped about, pushed into the stream… thrown in a hedge or beaten with willow wands.

(Calverton)

Such processions reduced boundary disputes between neighbours and also enabled the locals to recognise and affirm their common identity. They marked progress from juvenile to adult member of the community and affirmed that, while in everyday relationships the boundary may be insignificant, its existence provides a framework for relationships within and between communities. Spatial metaphors occur frequently within the literature of adult learning (e.g. Edwards and Usher 1999)—“beating the bounds”, however, also foregrounds an historic, cultural practice, which used ritual to reinforce collective and individual identity, offer thanks, and anticipate fruitfulness. In this paper, I “beat the bounds” of reflective practice, and attempt to illustrate its contextual, practical, and cultural borders.

“Weakening” (or, at least, making more permeable) the boundaries which define the learning landscape may improve access, widen participation and promise economic benefits. However, it may also lead to a significantly weakened sense of identity for both teachers and learners (Cross 2006). Between 2000 and 2002, two members of neighbouring settlements (higher education and independent development/training
consultancy) chose to step together into the “swampy lowlands” (Schön 1983) and discover how it feels to live with a foreign tribe. We worked to situate our own reflective practice within the landscape of adult learning and professional development as experienced in both locations, contributing workshops to the Association for Management, Education & Development (AMED) conference in 2001 and the Universities’ Association for Continuing Education (UACE, now UALL) conference in 2002. In these workshops, we drew on our experiences identifying the “locals” of each tribe, considering their status, roles, characters and methods, and drawing on appropriate theory and practice (Cross & West 2002). We considered how our reflective practice helped us to bridge—to a certain extent—the gap between our two communities, and how a teacher’s “professional artistry” (Schön 1983) might be enhanced as a result.

Clare and I continue to work well together, and to enjoy our different (but complementary) perspectives. However, as my reflections continue, I’m prompted to reconsider whether our reflective practice was, itself, the key to the insights we gained and the developments that ensued. In this paper, I’ve decided to revisit some of our original thinking, therefore, and use my reflections upon it as a basis for consideration of the utility of reflective practice itself in a learner’s context. At the very least, the reflexive nature of this task will showcase the essential nature of reflective practice as:

…an iterative process, undertaken regularly, familiar but always changing, private in its meaning while public in its practice, enduring in its appeal and eccentric in appearance…an enigma” (Cross & West 2002)

In order to ground my reflection at least to a certain extent, I have retained much of the original structure of our paper for this version. I shall:

- Consider the role of reflective practitioner among the options available to the contemporary adult learner;
- Revisit a reflexive dialogue presented to participants in a management development workshop on new approaches to continuing professional development (CPD) and consider its effectiveness as a technique for learning; and
- Examine the resonances and dissonances between techniques, approaches and attitudes of independent trainers/developers and teachers in higher education.

**The role of reflective practitioner among options for the contemporary adult learner**

Reflective practice had surfaced as a common interest when Clare and I were colleagues, working within neighbouring fields. Despite motivation to practice in the ways that we were both recommending to clients, we’d found that making the time to do so ourselves was hard. We were both under significant pressure to perform and neither of us could find much time to invest in sustained professional development. We wanted to maintain our professional status (as Fellows of the CIPD), but also to ground our work with clients, students and colleagues more thoroughly in a widely used theoretical framework. To those ends, we agreed to explore the idea of “reflective practice” together, making the investigation itself an object for both reflection and action.
Our project was practice led. We recognised that we were both more likely to find the time necessary for professional development if it was of immediate relevance to our work and if we were motivated by the interaction with each other. We were well into an iterative process of professional discussion (both by e-mail and face-to-face) when a paper presented to a meeting of the BERA Higher Education Special Interest Group introduced us to current work on “pedagogic identity” as it featured in the literatures of adult and higher education (Malcolm and Zukas 2000, Zukas and Malcolm 2002.) This prompted us to explore roles and notions of identity associated with professional lifelong learning as they are enacted within work-place training and academic study.

We concluded that learner roles might be expected to correspond with pedagogic identities: the “reflective practitioner” can be included in both (Cross & West 2002). However, on re-reading the paper, the notion that a pedagogic identity has a straightforward “mirror” learning role seems wrong. It should not be understood that the roles available to adult learners which might correspond most obviously to the ‘pedagogic identities’ are determined inevitably by them. Rather, it seems likely that although there is a possible reflexive link in the way roles and identities develop in relationship with each other, it exists as one of a wider range of factors which contribute to the assumption of a learner role.

The very concept of a ‘pedagogic identity’ does, of course, anticipate a learner role. Indeed, many learners may select an event or programme because they expect a particular identity in their teachers and will therefore adopt a corresponding role for themselves (or vice versa). An “assurer of organisational quality and efficiency/deliverer of services to agreed or imposed standards” (Zukas and Malcolm 2002) tends to anticipate a client or customer role for the learner. This is a reasonably straightforward correlation and many examples of commercially provided training illustrate it. Other learners (and particularly those with a potential for self-direction and autonomy: the majority of mature professionals) may either be less limited in their expectations or may actively promote a repositioning or variation in roles (if not identities or status) as their learning progresses. Such flexibility and complexity makes a learning relationship more subtle than Clare and I had originally concluded in writing about our work together. It is now clear, however, that although we may not have articulated the dynamic relationship between identity and roles, we did in fact experience it. Although, despite our best intentions, we may have proven ourselves unreflective about this area of our practice in collaborative working, we reaped the benefit nevertheless. It is perhaps unsurprising that two experienced professional educator/teacher/developers would, when in sustained professional dialogue with each other, flex between roles to work responsively and dynamically together. Schön’s concept of ‘professional artistry’ is ambiguous (as, indeed, are various related concepts: see Cross & West 2002, drawing on Eraut 1995, Ecclestone 1996, Bright 1996, and Bleakley 1999) but we both recognised its presence from time to time within our work together. With hindsight, I realise that it was in this sophisticated crossing and re-crossing of boundaries (between action and reflection, theory and practice, virtual and real environments, academic and professional contexts) that much of the benefit and pleasure in our work was located. It also prompted unexpected outcomes which had
considerable consequences for me. Whether this boundary crossing activity did, in fact, stem from our reflective practice, or a result of some other factor, is hard to say.

Four years later, reflective practitioner has maintained its status as a popular conception for one of the roles for lifelong professional development. At its best, it continues to afford a useful description for the place where professional activity in the work place and learning intersect, boundaries become blurred, roles and identities mingle, sometimes merge and become adapted to meet new challenges. However, I would now want to assert the importance of social interaction in the reflective practice processes, or alongside it. Reflection, which was once considered as an essentially individual process of private retrospective review, is now often recognised as benefiting from a social context for its development and interpretation (Eraut et al 2002). In 2001, when we undertook to work together in this fashion, Clare and I thought that that we were doing something outside normal practice; that working together would help overcome some deficit in us as learners and professionals; that we were not capable of doing it “properly” as “grown-ups”, on our own. As the work progressed, however, we gained confidence in the benefits of working together and became ready to share our appreciation of working in company and not always alone. This was particularly important for independent developers, like Clare, who may work on their own for much of the time. As importantly, our “social” reflections (i.e. reflections mediated through another, forming a basis for discussion) led us to fresh perspectives.

We had, initially, worked in an atheoretical space, simply describing and questioning our own and each other’s perspectives on the professional tasks of the time. In due course, our review extended to some of the literature on the topic—although not as far as the significant literature on different ways of writing (including autobiographical and collaborative texts) within which we might have positioned and refined our own work (e.g. Miller & West 1998). Reviewing recent literature (including papers published in the Journal of Reflective Practice) I appreciate more fully how reflection, whether in initial or continuing professional development contexts, may be effective as either an individual or a collaborative activity. Working with other people adds value in a range of possible ways. For me it works by motivating me to do the work I have agreed to undertake, challenging assumptions which had remained hidden or avoided, providing alternatives for consideration and sharing in the pleasure of progress made. That which so often seemed worthy but unattractive to me becomes productive and enjoyable.

While we were working with the reflective practitioner as an identifying concept on either side of the learning boundary, Clare was also considering undertaking further postgraduate study. Her search for a suitable modular, part-time Masters programme (i.e. one which was built around reflective practice supported by academic processes which would add value to her business by analysis and critical reflection upon relevant theory) uncovered a gap in the market. She could not find a programme which met her needs. Through consultation with other professionals in different contexts, I became aware that she was not alone in her interest in such a programme and began to explore the potential to design and offer one. I designed and implemented UCL’s MA in Adult Learning & Professional Development (see further: http://www.ucl.ac.uk/calt/masters/maalpd.html)
accordingly, aiming to meet the needs of those professionals who, often without any specific training for their new role (and hence maintaining a ‘pedagogic identity’ which is secondary to their primary role as, for example, lawyers, doctors, clergy, curators, nurses, linguists, physiotherapists), find themselves responsible for the development (both initial and continuing) of others.

In creating and teaching the programme, it has become clear that reflective practitioner, peer tutor, mature student, researcher, self-directed learner, facilitator, action learning set adviser, critical friend, “reasonable adventurer” (Heath 1967), colleague and fellow-traveller are all roles which can be usefully adopted by its participants. At different points in their journeys they will recognise themselves in any of these possible roles. Most importantly they will be in company of others struggling to combine professional lifelong learning with living long and very full lives. More than even the most useful practical tips or fascinating theoretical arguments—or, indeed, guided reflection upon their practice, they value the company of one another. Professional isolation is an abiding concern for many and studying in the right place can do much to alleviate it.

Revisit a reflexive dialogue presented to participants in a management development workshop on new approaches to continuing professional development (CPD) and consider its effectiveness as a technique for learning;

The reflexive dialogue presented at the AMED conference in 2001 was an outcome of the sustained process of reflective practice undertaken for our own CPD, as outlined above. The decision to submit tentative outcomes of the process to the critical reflection of our community of peers at two conferences was opportunistic and pragmatic. Each conference included participants from one of our primary professional territories. The AMED one came first and encouraged an active and participative approach. UACE suggested a more academic style, requesting submission of a paper in advance for discussion in a workshop setting. That paper (Cross & West 2002) includes an account of how we used the dialogue which we had developed over a substantial period of months (by e-mail and meeting in person) as a basis for the reflexive dialogue presented at the AMED conference. It may be useful to say a little more about it here, however.

The process of using reflective practice to investigate itself had been very natural, informal and organic. Even e-mail correspondence discussing both practical and theoretical matters on our topic could be conducted in a comfortable, chatty style. Having been accepted as contributors to the AMED conference, we decided to experiment with constructing a script based upon our work to date. It was a rather more contrived version of our original material which was intended to provide stimulus for the workshop. It included some of the theoretical material (which may risk dismissal as obscure and irrelevant to practice by those who attend such events), with more personal and grounded description of our processes of reflective practice in action. The dialogue was deliberately constructed to accentuate the differences in language and style which might be expected of an academic and a vocational trainer/developer in conversation. Participants in the workshop were encouraged to respond to the dialogue and then select from a choice of activities designed to enable them to work in different media. The activities enabled
engagement with the material through participation in group or individual tasks, in reflective or active mode and with a ‘scholarly’ or ‘work-related’ orientation.

As with many innovative approaches to training and development, the dialogue itself received a mixed reaction. Some participants denied that any tensions might exist between academic and professional interests in reflective practice, while others recognised the dilemmas which we represented all too well. However, all the reactions (both warmly positive and more resistant) were used productively within the workshop space. Evaluations at the time were good. We were however also interested in motivating participants to undertake subsequent experimentation within their own practice. We needed to remain in touch with them if we were to see if we had achieved our aim. As with many such attempts at tracking outcomes, it proved to be impossible.

Examine the resonances and dissonances between techniques, approaches and attitudes of independent trainers/developers and teachers in higher education.

Resonances and dissonances between our normal techniques, approaches and attitudes emerged as Clare and I worked together. They have continued to do so but we now recognize some as deriving from membership of our respective “communities of practice” (Wenger 1998), rather than necessarily being attributable to us as individuals. I would like to concentrate on three aspects of our work together which will illustrate something of what we hold in common and yet also discovered that we experienced differently.

Firstly, preparation for and participation in the conferences brought to the surface our own tribal identities. We spent time in each other’s professional space working with the other’s professional peers. Both of us already had experience of working with the other’s ‘clients’ but this was the first time we had each spent time (both events were residential) with the other and her colleagues. We both experienced the disorientation caused by not belonging on the other patch and being exposed to aspects of our close colleague’s professional behaviour, attitudes and identity with which we were unfamiliar. It was, with hindsight, all quite stressful.

Secondly, since writing and developing our thinking alone and together in the dialogue, I have become significantly more involved in exploring the ways that writing can enhance reflection and be undertaken collaboratively as well as individually. Writing in different ways is more commonly an academic practice than a workplace skill. Clare was very interested in, comfortable with and capable as a writer. Through our work together she realized that she could usefully experiment with setting writing tasks for the participants on a range of the work-place courses she runs for clients.

Thirdly, the MA programme which was designed and validated while I was engaged in the reflective dialogue with Clare has now had 28 participants. All are mature professionals. Many (including Clare) have taken modules or groups of modules for CPD purposes. The way this programme is taught is significantly influenced by the work
undertaken as we explored what reflective practice meant to each of us in company with one another.

I will expand just a little on each of these points, firstly dealing with the issue of our own professional identities and affiliations. Clare and I work very easily and effectively together to plan, prepare and deliver training and development to highly qualified professional participants. While we were working on the dialogue we were also delivering workshops to one of her clients (a social services department in South Wales) to train new members for participation in youth justice panels. Subsequently we have continued to work together on the delivery of career development workshops for research staff at UCL. We are both expert ‘boundary crossers’ in our practice. We did, however, discover that while Clare is interested in the theoretical basis for practice she has less tolerance for theorizing as it extends further from its practical use. She also found the constraints, pressures and regulatory frameworks under which professional academics currently work unacceptable. I enjoy practicalities and discovering where taken for granted practices or local beliefs originate, but also easily become absorbed in scholarship for its own sake. I am currently engaged in extended theory building on an aspect of adult learning which has little direct application to my other tasks and priorities. It simply fascinates me and has opened up intellectual spaces for further exploration which I would never have imagined I would find interesting. It is having a direct impact on a professional priority which is to explore my academic identity not in terms of my role as a teacher (where I am confident) but in my sense of self as a researcher where I am substantially less experienced. Developing an identity in research demands that I become accepted by the residents of a disciplinary location. I shall have to adapt in order to be admitted. For Clare, reflective practice provides a useful framework for criticality which, with its practical focus, helps to make sure that she doesn’t stray across the borders of her chosen territory. However, for me, reflective practice has done something rather different. My reflections have brought me to the border, and tempted me to cross. However, without some external influence, my ability to cross is by no means certain.

The second outcome is also personal to me. I have always been more confident while expressing myself in person than in writing. It is generally also the case that my best and most creative ideas come in dialogue with other people, preferably face-to-face. Writing e-mails to Clare, someone I knew well and whose job was not to criticise my writing but to engage with me in the sharing and refining of ideas, enabled me to begin to see writing differently. This was a user-friendly way into a process which gradually produced the refinements of thinking which I had been told came from writing as a medium, but never experienced. This looks increasingly important to the enhancement of professional lifelong learning. It is in writing (its scholarship and practice) that new ways of doing things with ideas, alone and in company with others, seem to be developing. ICT has had an enormous influence on the processes and electronic communication makes new ways of writing together possible. MA students use a wiki site for collaborative accounts and other shared writing tasks, but there is still resistance from some. It may be I am not the only professional who lacks confidence in my ability to write.
My engagement with writing is still quite fragile but since undertaking the sustained engagement with Clare (and writing about it for different audiences) my practice has developed in terms of working with writing in different ways with students (more below) and in my research I am experimenting with ethnographic methods (specifically experimenting with ‘thick description’ (Geertz 1973)), including explorations of autoethnographic processes. Writing is still a source of anxiety, but I have discovered ways to begin to work with those negative emotions which benefit my work as researcher and teacher.

Thirdly, Clare’s desire for postgraduate study provided the major stimulus to create the MA. The design and delivery of this programme owes much to the processes and insights which were uncovered, explored and tested across the boundary between academic understandings of the implication of reflective practice and those rooted in work. Some brief examples follow:

- The modular part-time structure with a mix of face to face and independent study provides vital social opportunities while not demanding too much time away from the work environment.
- Each module draws participants from varied communities of practice - we explore in company with one another how the same concepts (reflective practice being an obvious one) have come to be interpreted differently in particular situations. As time elapses participants are surprised by how differently they see things, but then again, how much they have in common.
- Assessment serves the learning and is never permitted to get in the way of it… this is very hard to sustain in practice and may be jeopardized as numbers rise and there is pressure for MA teaching to be more cost-efficient.
- Life happens – planned and spontaneous events in the professional and personal lives of participants on the programme can enrich the learning or de-rail it. They learn to think differently about those events and incorporate that thinking into their practice.

Affective factors do influence motivation to begin and sustain professional lifelong learning. The language of continuing professional development, both among practitioners and within the literature tends to focus upon economic needs for competitiveness, duties to remain technically competent to satisfy the requirements of regulatory bodies and to ensure clients of quality in a competitive market. However, such demands may seem sterile and add to the stress which is already associated with contemporary professional life. The desire to counteract professional loneliness and isolation is reported as a strong personal aim for those professionals who participate in UCL’s MA in Adult Learning and Professional Development. This programme aims to be a part of the solution to stress not another cause of it. Academic standards can be rigorous without competition between students. Writing (alone and in class, on a common wiki site, in journals, portfolios, essays, reports, autobiographies, interviews) is important and needs to be supported as adults overcome the resistances which may have been acquired during and since childhood (Youell 2005). ‘Flow’ is situated between boredom and anxiety (Csikszentmihalyi 1975). Educators and learners, when we are professionals and peers,
need and expect to be challenged, encouraged, amused, baffled and stretched. Perhaps most of all we need to talk and listen to each other.

**Conclusion**

Clare and I continue to be near neighbours who occasionally become ‘migrant workers’ on each other’s patch. Since 2002, however, despite the disadvantages of each terrain, we have located our professional identities within our own borders. Our exploration of the boundaries between our communities has helped us to become more confident in what each of us contributes when we work together, and more able to enjoy (occasional) excursions into each other’s territory. Reflective practice provides a useful location for this common activity. However, it is the explosion of possibilities and ideas arising from the interaction of our different identities which triggered, for example, the innovation which led to my creating the MA programme. Similarly, “peak experiences” (Maslow 1976), which provide the energy and motivation for achieving success or rendering change, have their power to transform as much by their alien nature or emotional impact as by their intellectual, rational resonance with our own lives or practice.

“Reflection” is, by its nature, a limited idea: light bounces back from a surface. Idiomatically, when we imagine the phenomenon, it is even more constrained: the light bounces off a mirror straight back to us. We look into it, and we see ourselves. A hall of mirrors offers myriad variations but of a single idea. The notion of practice based upon reflection, while offering new possibilities, could be criticised as too conservative: unsatisfying as an aim for development, much less a method for truly “transformative” learning.

“Refraction”, however, might offer a richer model. The OED defines it as a phenomenon where:

…light, radio waves, etc., [are] deflected in passing obliquely through the interface between one medium and another or through a medium of varying density.

As with reflection, refraction allows our ideas (our “light” in the darkness) to be offered back to us. However, the interface with the refractive medium does more than merely return the light: it sends it in a new direction, splits it up, changes its colour. “Refractive practice” offers a model which recognises the powerful effect of boundary-crossing, peak experience, and other affective factors in learning, teaching and professional development. “Reflective practice” is about our own resolve, our intellectual grappling with our own work and the work of others, about an infinite process of refinement; “refractive practice” is about transformation, change and innovation—the “shock of the new”. It is a valuable, if perilous, tool—in the learning landscape, refraction can easily cause mirages. Nevertheless, in my own development since 2002, each gain has come from a combination of refraction (an injection of something/somebody new) and reflection (consolidation) in turn.
When “beating the bounds”, the indignity inflicted on novice members of the community represents the sudden, unexpected, perhaps intimidating refraction of their previous practice. However, despite their unparalleled knowledge of the parish boundaries from long years of roaming (their “reflection”), were they to lack such an experience, the children might never grow up.

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