The limitations of the reflective practitioner

Charlotte Meierdirk

University of Portsmouth

Charlotte.meierdirk@port.ac.uk

Abstract

Reflective practice has become the norm for student teachers but has it become too narrow? The student is entering a social field where they have to ‘fit in’ and ‘play the game’. Is the social environment of the placement schools, that the students find themselves in, constraining their ability to teach? This paper reviews the notion of reflective practice and its limitation on the education of teachers. The study reported on here is part of an ongoing study that is investigating the holistic reflective practice of student teachers through their training year and into their first few years of teaching. The study is built around case studies of student teachers, including questionnaires and interviews.
Reflective practice has a number of interpretations. The definitions range from the technical to the holistic. This holistic interpretation of reflective practice takes into account the role of reflexivity and criticality. The external factors that affect the agency of the student teacher have a large part to play in the reflective abilities of the student and for this reason reflexivity is an important part of initial teacher education.

One of the newest books on reflective practice to be produced for Initial Teacher Educators in England, is ‘Reflective Teaching and Learning’ (Dymoke and Harrison, 2008). The book does talk about how teachers should critically reflect but it is limited to a couple of paragraphs, along with the importance of identities. The authors encourage critical reflective practice by:

... (asking) yourself ‘How do I improve my practice?’ you are questioning what you do, how you currently do things and the value or what you are doing. (Dymoke and Harrison, 2008, p.26)

Asking student teachers ‘How do you improve your practice?’ is not necessarily going to illicit a response that is reflexive. Some theorists believe reflexive practice is a type of reflection (Bleakley, 1999). Reflexivity and the external environment gained importance towards the end of the last century with work by Bourdieu (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

For Bourdieu reflexivity is precisely what enables us to escape such delusions by uncovering the social at the heart of the individual, the impersonal beneath the intimate, the universal buried deep within the particular. (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, p. 44)

Bourdieu believed unless the individual questioned these structures that limit us, individuals are more likely to be the apparent subjects of actions (Bourdieu, 1989, p.47). Reflexive practice enables the individual to become aware of these structures that inhibit them. Are we true individuals? Are there forces that cause us to behave in certain ways and do certain things? As Beck (Beck et al., 1994) says individualism is not based on the free decisions of individuals. It may be an illusion that we are free to pursue the life and goals we want. All of us are subject to laws and regulations
that influence what we do – some written, some unwritten. Reflexivity, however, will make us aware of these structures.

According to Bourdieu (1992) society is made up of fields of play. These fields of play are a social space with their own rules and regulations. Individuals will compete and jostle within these social spaces and will try to change either the rules of the game within the field or try to preserve them. Student teachers are entering numerous fields as they progress through their teacher education. These social spaces may take the form of schools, staffrooms, subject departments and universities. The fields have their own rules of play and the students need to either adapt to these or, if possible, in some form change them.

The students will share common experiences across the school placements but it is their habitus that will cause the students to react and behave differently. All the students will possess different habitus made up from various backgrounds and lives. The habitus will itself be formed from rules and powers and fields that the individual students have engaged with (Bourdieu and Nice, 1977). In Bourdieu’s words habitus is:

...the strategy generating principle enabling agents to cope with unforeseen and ever changing situations....a system of lasting and transferable disposition which, integrating past experiences functions at every moment as a matrix of perception, appreciations and actions and makes possible the achievement of infinitely diversified tasks (Bourdieu and Nice, 1977, p.72, 95).

The habitus of the student is very important, as they are bringing their habitus into the schools and into the classroom. Habitus can change but it is moulded by the structures it belongs to and has belonged to. It is formed by the past, present and future and affects everything the students do and the way they behave (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992).

Habitus does change depending on the field it is in. The students’ habitus will evolve differently as they are placed in different schools and colleges. The fields they enter into will have different affects on the student which they themselves may not be
conscious of. Without reflexive practice there will not be an understanding of the structures that could in fact impede reflective practice. Holistic reflectivity needs to consider reflexivity and the position the students have in the school environment. Dewey (1998, 1909) believed reflection required criticality and a questioning of the norm. This criticality is missing from the technical process of reflective practice but is paramount to reflexivity.

Reflexivity is not the same as the five types of reflective practice already mentioned: Schon’s (1987) knowing in action, reflection in action, reflection on action and Ghayle’s (2010) reflection for action and reflection with action. The above types of reflective practice build on one another. Knowing in action occurs sub-consciously within the classroom as the student instantly reacts to situations. Reflection in action also occurs in the classroom when the student teacher ‘thinks on their feet’. Reflection on action occurs after the lesson, as the student looks back on the lesson and what has gone right or wrong with it. It is Ghayle (2010) who suggests the cyclical continuous improvement of reflection for action and the interaction with others for reflection with action. All these reflections are important for the development of the student teacher but they have a technical, narrow focus to them. These types of reflective practice do not allow the student to reflect on the broader workings of the school and education.

**Method**

The narrow definitions of reflective practice do not consider the importance of the external constraints on the teacher. Reflexivity is, however, when the students reflect on their habitus and the social world they exist in. There is, therefore, another type of reflectivity that needs to be added to the development of student teachers. As discussed in Chapter 9 reflective practice does not occur within a vacuum it occurs within a complicated social field with competing habitus and micro politics that naturally affect students within the school environment (Figure 1).
The role the student plays in the fields of play contained within the schools and departments will have an effect on the reflective practice of the student. There will be certain rules of being a student, both written and unwritten that will constrain or bias the reflective practice that occurs. These rules may differ depending on the school or college the student is placed in. Student teachers do not exist in a vacuum; all their experiences are different because of the school environment they exist in, the colleagues (agents) they work with and their own habitus they bring to their education is all different. To understand the students’ reflective practice there must be an understanding of the social environment they exist in.

The methods used for this research consisted of semi structured interviews and the collection of reflective practice sheets. The semi structured interviews were conducted three times in the PGCE year. Within the semi-structured interviews the students engaged in narratives about themselves and their feelings. The students were encouraged to reflect on their identities and the way these changed over time.
The PGCE students found that their schools influenced their teaching in many ways and sometimes even constrained them.

Gareth who taught at an ‘outstanding’ school said after asked if anything stopped him from teaching the way he would like:

.. yeah, I’d say my mentors.....I can’t fault their idea of best practice and their grades prove that it works and you see the kids’ books and you see… and it works, it’s just… what I, I’m struggling to kind of … fully embrace it because I can see that it works but it’s just not my, my way… my idea, my ethos of teaching. (Gareth, Phase 3, 2011)

And when asked about the teaching in the department he said:

It’s… I would have to say it’s overly structured and overly regimented with not a lot of innovation or independent thought-provoking going on which is kind of the exact opposite of how I like to run my lessons and how I see education. I want to try different things and… I just think sometimes I’m kind of pushed down… Look, I’m used to this… these are standards, these are requirements, we need to hit them, and I completely understand that and I know I need to do that to pass the course, it’s like that with anything but… I like to try different things and just…. not be creative, innovative, to the point that everyone goes, ‘Wow, I was blown away by a lesson,’ but just try something different not only for the class but for me and I do feel I get a little bit held back. (Gareth, Phase 3, 2011)

Hannah, also in an ‘outstanding’ school replied:

I always feel that as an adult if you’re wrong you should admit you’re wrong and you should always treat children with respect, and I just feel a little bit sometimes that, you know, bailing them (the students) out over things just to make the point that you rule the classroom, which I can see exactly why you have to, it doesn’t fit with who I am. So that would probably be the thing
that would stand between me... (and the way I want to teach) (Hannah, Phase 3, 2011).

Rebecca (Phase 2, 2011) replied:

*I think at the beginning I thought that teachers... the whole environment would be much more (supportive) ... it wouldn’t be as target driven and so egotistical as I thought the business environment was and I’m starting to realise that may not be the case.*

These are just a few quotes by the students of some of the factors that inhibited the way they wanted to teach.

Consistent with the theory of grounded research it was decided that more research was needed into the constraints of the student teacher. A questionnaire was administered, to the whole PGCE group, to ascertain whether there were any trends across the year. The questionnaire was administered after the students had qualified and on the last day of the course. One hundred and five questionnaires were completed by English, Business, Geography, Maths, Modern Foreign Languages and Science students.

**The Questionnaire Design**
The questionnaire contained three open questions. The order the questions took was important and needed to be thought out. Questions that may cause bias by the respondent should be left to later in the questionnaire; otherwise if asked early on may skew later results (Oppenheim, 1968).

The early questions needed to be easy and impersonal, therefore settling the respondent down. The first questions did this: ‘What PGCE course are you following?’ are straightforward and easy questions. The students will find them approachable and they will hopefully help them to settle into the questionnaire.
There was one closed question ‘What PGCE subject are you studying?’ The other two questions have closed answers e.g ‘yes’ and ‘no’, however are supplemented by the question ‘why’ which gives the student an opportunity to give a reason for their answer. For example ‘Was there anything that stopped you from being the teacher you wanted to be? If yes, what?’ This allows the student a greater response but also gave the researcher quantitative data.

If a questionnaire is too long the respondent may get bored, however the use of all closed questions means it is difficult to gauge the respondents feelings on a subject, but the three questions seems succinct. When using open questions it was important to think amount how much space to leave for the response as this may determine the fullness of the answer (Oppenheim, 1968). On all the open questions I left enough room for a paragraph, but I did not want to go over 2 sides as this may give the impression of a very long questionnaire and give the students a negative attitude towards it at the offset.

Oppenheim recommended:

Looking now at the shape of the questionnaire as a whole, we might decide to put all checklist questions together at the beginning, followed by all free answer questions, and ending with a variety of projective devices. This may ease the task of the respondent and give the questionnaire a more uniform appearance (Oppenheim, 1968).

The questions that had more freedom to answer were left towards the end. All the questions asked served a specific research purpose. Before the questionnaire was constructed the main aims and from the research were revisited (Chapter 1). It was important all the questions had justification.

The students had trained in 210 schools altogether. All students have two school placements during the year. The questionnaire consisted of two open ended questions which asked if the student felt their teaching was constrained in any way during their placement.
14.2 Analysis of results

The following table illustrates the findings of the questionnaire:

Table 1: Number of students feeling they could not teach the way they would have liked:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Feeling constrained</th>
<th>Percentage of PGCE students (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1st or 2nd placement</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1st Placement only</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2nd Placement only</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Both 1st and 2nd placement</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Did not feel constrained</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As you can see the results clearly show that the majority of student teachers felt their teaching had been inhibited. In fact, just over 75%, felt something stopped them from teaching the way they wanted in one of their placement schools. On the positive side 30% of the students felt they were not constrained and could teach the way they wanted. A number of students liked the freedom and support they received:

Student A: *I had the freedom to be creative and experimental.*

Student B: *My mentors were outstanding and encouraged me to experiment with different strategies.*

Student C: *Lots of different teaching styles in department so as good to develop my own style...*

Having access to different teaching styles and allowing the student the freedom to develop their own style is seen as very important to the student, but this freedom is
only permitted by a minority of mentors. Table 2 illustrates the factors that the students felt inhibited their teaching.

Table 2: Reasons for feeling the students could not teach the way they wanted

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reason:</th>
<th>Percentage (%):</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mentor Constraints</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Policy</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilities</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Constraints</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly when asked what exactly stopped the student from teaching the way they wanted the subject mentor and other members of the department was the main reasons given. The following quotes were fairly typical responses:

I felt like I had to produce lessons my mentor would approve of (i.e. give lessons in his own style) in order to get a satisfactory Doc 9 (lesson observation). He didn’t like it when I tried new things, ideas or differentiated.

... and

I had to teach the way my mentor did. I had to use the school’s lesson plan and follow the school’s scheme of work completely. If my mentor thinks he would have done something a different way to how I did it he would grade me unsatisfactory.

These comments from the students were not uncommon and showed that the mentors, although supportive, had expectations of the students teaching the way they wanted. Keeping your mentor happy was very important for the students and they would change their teaching style to be in line with their mentors. There was a belief, among the students, that by teaching in a similar way to the mentor they would receive higher observation grades.
Lack of consistency or too much reliance on ‘Ofsted’ grading was the second most common factor to affect the students’ teaching:

Student D: *There was an over reliance on the Ofsted grading of an ‘outstanding’ lesson which meant all lessons had to stick to an unrealistic plan at all times that restricted creativity within the classroom for both teacher and pupils.*

Student E: *I felt like I could not be consistent with my behaviour management when using the ABM (school behaviour policy system). It potentially affected the relationship I was able to build with the classes. The system meant that I had to issue detentions etc...when I didn’t think some of the behaviour deserved it i.e chatter. I felt like I was able to deal with it better my way.*

A number of the ‘outstanding’ schools had rigorous frameworks for the teachers and students to work from, and although these policies helped maintain their ‘outstanding’ status they did make the students feel constrained. A number of students also talked about unrealistic behaviour management policies or policies that were ignored by all teachers.

Lack of facilities was a reason why 17% could not teach the way they wanted’, with lack of ICT facilities being the most common reason.

Student F: *...(there was a) lack of working printers, photocopiers to produce resources, shortage of papers, board pens, text books etc...*

A number of students were denied access to:

*...to working computers, printers, photocopiers etc...and also being denied access to these resources when they became available.*

Some students talked about it being a privilege to have access to some of these resources and one which they were not allowed as students. This made them feel like *outsiders or second class citizens.* In some schools there was just not the money
for these resources and this had more of an effect on science students. One science student teacher stated there were:

..no resources for science experiments (this) challenged the practical aspects I wanted to teach.

For some students they had to learn to teach with no resources and this of course affected their pedagogy. Personal constraints were given as a reason by seven students, including lack of confidence and family issues being raised.

**Conclusion**

These results, although preliminary, are indicating that the social existence of the student teacher can be very complicated. The students are reflecting but they are being constrained by the social world of the school they train in and belong to. The results presented here are indicating that the very person who reflects with the student (the mentor) may in fact be part of the constraining factor for the student. Of course, the mentor will influence the student teacher but to what extent are they actually ‘holding them back’? Are the social constraints in school pushing the student teachers to teach in a certain way? Reflective practice, in its narrowest definition, will not expose the student to the other social constraints they are under. In fact reflection, in its narrowest form, may actually help to reaffirm the same attitudes that already exist within schools. If the students are encouraged to engage in reflection on the social they may become more aware of the social environment they are entering into and the constraints these bring. As Boudieu said: unless individuals are aware of the social field they exist in they are likely to be the apparent subjects of actions (Bourdieu, 1989, p.47).

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