

Reflective Practice

What does it mean to be a professional?

It is because professionals face complex and unpredictable situations that they need a specialised body of knowledge; if they are to apply that knowledge, it is argued that they need the autonomy to make their own judgements. Given that they have autonomy, it is essential that they act with responsibility - collectively they need to develop appropriate professional values

Furlong et al, 2000 cited by Robson, (2006) in Teacher Professionalism in Further and Higher Education

Professionalism is a contested and complex concept involving three elements:

- autonomy
- professional knowledge
- responsibility

Some common-sense views of reflection

- Links between reflection and learning eg reflect upon something to consider it in more detail
- Usually for a purpose but can occur spontaneously and sometimes be linked with intuition
- Complicated mental processing for which there is no obvious solution
- Being reflective suggests a certain distance – well considered – something which enables the taking of a critical stance
- in its most advanced stages, reflection may make links with moral judgement and the ability to acknowledge there is 'no right answer' / ability of coping with uncertain knowledge
- King and Kitchener (1994, cited in Moon, 2000 : 6) distinguish between reflective thinking and critical thinking where the latter is linked with problem-solving and working towards a solution while in reflective thinking there is an added dimension of being able to cope with uncertainty
- Reflection is about questioning the given – to bring about clarity in unclear situations
- A difficult process, especially when it supports changes in behaviour and it is something that needs to be taught
- Often linked with criteria associated with wisdom

Dewey and Habermas

Dewey's perception of reflection was linked to educational processes and the general understanding of the human function, while for Habermas it was about epistemological issues in the sociology of knowledge.

Reflective thinking for Dewey is 'Active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it leads ... it includes a conscious and voluntary effort to establish belief upon a firm basis of evidence and rationality' (Dewey, 1933, cited in Moon, 2000: 12) Reflection is about making sense of the world through education.

For Habermas reflection is a tool used in the development of particular forms of knowledge linked to emancipatory interests and leading to the emancipation of social groups, hence the development of knowledge via critical thought or enquiry leading to an understanding of the human condition and beyond that to empowerment and change.

Van Manen (1977) draws on Dewey and Habermas and relates reflection specifically to curriculum development. Reflection is described in terms of a mental action that distances the person reflecting from events in order that things might be viewed in a more objective manner.

He describes different levels of reflection:

1. Based on thinking and acting on an everyday basis
2. More specific reflection on incidents / events
3. Development of understanding through interpretation and personal experience
4. Way in which we reflect leads towards an understanding of knowledge and its nature linked with possibilities for emancipation.

He distinguishes between reflection on experience and reflection on the conditions that shape experience, creating an ongoing awareness / thoughtfulness or a 'mindfulness' in pedagogical situations

Kolb and experiential learning

Kolb (1984) 'experiential learning is not just a series of techniques to be applied in current practice, but a program for profoundly re-creating our personal lives and social systems'

Problems:

- Defining experience – 'a workshop, a field trip, a lecture ... an event arising from a personal study project or a totally unplanned occurrence in daily life' (Keogh and Walker (1985))
- Relationship between reflection and learning

Donald Schön (1983) Reflection in professional practice

Mismatch in education between means and ends; process and product so that sometimes there is a separation between knowing and doing which Schön refers to as the potential gap between technical-rational knowledge learnt as theory during training and the reality of real-life practice where theory can often be inadequate in dealing problems that arise.

reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action

'artistry is the competence by which professionals handle the indeterminate zones of practice ... an exercise of intelligence, a kind of knowing, though different in crucial respects from our standard model of professional knowledge. It is not inherently mysterious; it is rigorous in its own terms' (1987: 41)

professional rules – based on routine, situations met in the day-to-day work of the professional

knowledge used in practice must be derived from espoused theory – 'know-how' when knowing and action function simultaneously – 'knowing-in-action' describes the orderly response to a situation in which expectation of the effect of an action accords with the action that arises and its

actual effects, but when something does not accord with expectations & there are surprises, then we might respond through the activity of reflection-in-action in contrast to trial and error in that it has 'a form, an inner logic according to which reflection on the unexpected consequences of one action influences the design of the next one' (1992: 42)

reflection-in-action has a critical function – involves restructuring of the relevant understanding, a reframing of the problem and the development of a new way of performing that is enacted.

knowing-in-action is tacit and not immediately available to the conscious mind (Polyani, 1966); if it cannot be described, then it is not amenable to being taught.

difficult to separate reflection-in-action from knowing-in-action because of the tacit nature of the latter and Schön avoids the mention of the role of the imagination in reflection-in-action.

Learning to practise professionally is a matter of contextualising the professional knowing-in-action into the particular socially and institutionally structured context of that profession.

Summary of Schön's main points:

- Practitioners draw on developed 'theories in use'
- Two main forms of reflection used by the professional, namely reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action
- Reflection-in-action occurs in association with action and guides the process of action via knowledge in use and only occurs in situation where the action yields unexpected consequences when things don't go according to plan
- Reflection-on-action is the form of reflection that occurs after action and relates to thought – narrow concept informing action and theory building
- Ambiguities between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action
- For the education of the reflective practitioner, the student is coached to respond appropriately to situations posed by developing a capacity to process information during action i.e. reflection-in-action

Summary of criticisms:

- Difficult to define the real world of practice
- Tacit nature of personal theory and knowledge is problematical – cannot be tested
- Reflection-on-action not contentious but appears to be narrow – how can a practitioner learn about this in a formal situation or use espoused theory?
- Reflection-on-practice should take into account ethical, social and political issues to enable personal and professional development to take place
- Reflection-on-action is part of Kolb's experiential learning cycle as the processing of experience
- Time frame of reflection is helpful – some suggest that reflection takes place in anticipation of an event but this could equate to a combination of reflection-on-action/s and imagination
- Reflection-in-action seen as response to unexpected events and knowing-in-action controls action generally with the former guiding action
- 'stop and think' periods represent reflection-on-action but different from reflection-in-action

Moon, J (2000) *Reflection in Learning and Professional Development*, Kogan Page

Developing the skills of reflection

Developing skills of reflection follows similar stages to any new learning experience.

1. unconscious incompetence – not knowing what you don't know
2. conscious incompetence – recognising the gap in your knowledge
3. conscious competence – being able to do things that you couldn't do before, but needing to think these through carefully
4. unconscious competence – able to do something skilfully without having to consider everything closely

Models and theories to support reflection

Flanagan (1954): Critical incident analysis

Posing questions & answering them from the point of view of another, for example:

- What emotions did I feel in that situation
- How did I want or need others to behave?
- What did their actual behaviour signal to me?
- What were my main worries and concerns about the situation?
- What might have been the best course of action to take to protect or help myself?

DATA process (Peters, 1994)

- Describe the issue or practice problem

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- Analyse what has been described in order to uncover any assumptions that are being made about the incident or the choices available to solve it
- Theorise potential solutions
- Act on the best potential solution to emerge from the process

Critical lenses (Brookfield, 1995)

Reflect on specific events from different perspectives

- from your own perspective
- as viewed by your colleagues
- from the perspective of your learners
- from the perspective of theoretical literature

Hitching, J (2008) *Professional Development in the Lifelong Learning Sector Maintaining Your Licence to Practise*, Learning Matters