
1. Introduction

This assignment examines the nature of educational reflection.

It begins with a reflective analysis of significant learning events in my own professional and personal development. This focuses principally on the last six years, three of which have been spent in 'formal' teaching / training in post compulsory tertiary and adult education.

The account then examines the backgrounds to selected models of reflection, offers comparative critical comments on some, and where applicable an analysis of how and why I feel they can be applied to me and my teaching situations.

A conclusion is presented which contains an overall judgement of how effective and/or helpful reflective practice is to me, with observations on future directions.

2. Analysis and reflection on my professional and personal development.

Any consideration of reflection poses the difficulty of definition; many sources define it in terms of what it is not, or what it can do.

Perhaps one of the earliest, and most useful working definitions was given by Dewey (1933) who defined it as '*active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion is to which it tends*'.

Dictionary.com: defines it as:

Mental concentration; careful consideration

And: *A thought or an opinion resulting from such consideration.*

A calm lengthy intent consideration

From a relatively early age I have made use of diaries and personal and/or professional journals, although they may appear unstructured and at times infrequent.

Little formal use was made of them, although I do remember reading back through old diaries and being constantly surprised by the differences in my personal attitudes and feelings between the time of writing and the time of reading.

I regard this as an early and untutored form of reflection. I have always 'reflected', but not necessarily as part of a formal mechanism. It did, however, engender an appreciation of a mechanism for establishing an alternative, and possibly less subjective, set of perspectives on a given experience.

My largest overall learning experience is really made up of a number of smaller conjoined events. Each has resulted in my 'learning' things, about others and myself, and strongly raised the question of unconscious learning, which is considered later in this work. Conscious reflection, however, identified patterns and themes across these experiences, resulting in my formulation of 'sets of rules'; common approaches which I could choose to apply to similar circumstances.

This cycle of observation, reflection, formulation of rules and re-application is regarded as a fundamental aspect of learning in which the reflective process (conscious or unconscious) plays a crucial part.

There are various (and in some respects conflicting) models which explain the reflective process, but regardless of their particular stance they are all in a reasonable agreement about the generally cyclic nature of this process and some of the key elements within it. (These are discussed in a subsequent section - See for example Handy 1993, Kolb 1993, Schon 1983).

I was fortunate at that time to be involved with several key individuals who from their own different perspectives had introduced me to ideas of consciously thinking about my attitudes, beliefs, values and actions. One was a headhunting colleague who had involved me in a multilevel marketing operation and the associated culture and literature of self-dependency.¹

Another was my mother, with whom I collaborated on writing a series of self development training programmes based on certain (elementary) principles of clinical psychology, psychotherapy and counselling.

The principal lessons I learned were twofold.

First, I was introduced to the 'formal' processes of reflection: thinking deeply about a situation or attitude and in particular making this an objective process, i.e. separating (but not necessarily removing) the emotional components.

Second, this process was applied to real people and real situations, not least my own. In my current teaching area, management and personal and professional development, one of my strongest-held beliefs is that academic performance means nothing unless it can be applied usefully (the person applying it defines "useful"). I can clearly trace the origins of this belief back to the time spent taking ideas and theories, turning them into concrete action and evaluating the outcome. Although I was unaware that the time, this was a very clear demonstration of the cyclic learning process referred to above, and the part that reflection plays in that cycle.

These activities invariably touch on very emotional areas, and I have found that the process of reflection is invaluable for many reasons. First it allows, as before, removal of the emotional element. This increases objectivity, allowing me to focus on the issues, and makes me much more effective as an advocate for others. It also provides a mechanism for me to reduce any negative effects it may have on me. Second, an understanding of the relative complexities of influences on people's motivations and behaviour, some of which may have stemmed from a previous "learning" experience, allows me to spot potential problems when dealing with other people. That is not to say that I have access to an immediate solution for a problem, but it allows me to address it, and possibly reframe it².

Third, and most important in terms of my professional development, this allows me to do the same with others. During the past three or four years I have taken a strong interest in helping students to develop their own learning abilities, and to become more autonomous as learners. It is only by teaching others reflective practices that I have realised how difficult it is. I am fortunate to have had the learning experiences which enable me to do it. Furthermore, the picture which is emerging from own experience is that not only do most people not engage in conscious reflection but for some it represents a threat; on some level it interferes with their comfort has a student/learner and they actively resist it.

¹ this encompasses a large body of what has come to be called "popular psychology" but much is based on the practical application of clinical and behavioural psychology. See for example Jeffers (1987).

² 'reframing' refers to restating or redefining a problem in order to approach it differently and possibly generate alternative approaches/solutions. See Handy (1933 p.52).

Further study, interaction with my professional peers and of course reflection are helping me to develop strategies for dealing with such students.

In a relatively short time (four years) my teaching experience has included students with a wide range of ages and abilities. These have ranged from XXXXX, to XXXXX.

Experience has also included acting as pastoral tutor to a similar age and ability range.

Since developing a more formalised reflective practice, my learning experiences are becoming more frequent, smaller and much more highly defined, until the experiential and reflective learning cycle mentioned above takes place on almost daily basis.

3. Models of reflection.

Theory into practice: application of reflective practice paradigms to my personal practice.

As alluded to above, the study of theories and recommendations for reflective practice has helped me significantly in understanding and modifying my own practices. By reflecting on these and comparing them with personal experience I choose what elements to accept/apply and which to reject.

It is difficult to consider the reflective process alone since it is an important component of many learning models. These contain significant amount of detail and differences of approach which lie beyond the scope of this work, but I have tried to reflect some of the more widely accepted models, and those which I feel are useful to me in explaining observed phenomena or offering a 'tool' to meet a specific teaching need.

Most considerations of reflective practice begin with Dewey (1933) is who attempted to define reflection in terms of how it might support teaching and learning, and broke it down into a process of five states of thinking.

These moved from **Suggestion** (an emerging solution), to **Intellectualisation** (a definition of the problem experienced), using **Suggestions** (to guide experiments in collecting factual material), **Reasoning** (mental elaboration) and **Testing Hypothesis** (i.e. carrying out an experiment).

His other significant proposal, which formed the theoretical basis for many subsequent theorists, was to contrast 'routine action' with 'reflective action'.

Cyclic experience.

A number of theorists have integrated the reflective process into a wider model of learning, refining Dewey's approach in two fundamental ways. First, the process is seen as cyclic (as opposed to Dewey's somewhat linear approach), and second it sees the experience as fundamental to the process. One of the most influential works is that of Kolb et al 1975, with refinements or significant reinforcements to the same basic premise by others (e.g. Boud 1985, Handy 1993, Schon 1991). This is represented, with significant simplification, in Diagram 1. Here, reflection (i.e. forming theories about an experience) allows a modification of approach to a repeat or similar experience, which in turn 'updates' the experience allowing a further reflection, etc, as the cycle repeats itself. This can be generalised as a useful way of approaching learning, where it is regarded as a continuous process grounded in experience.

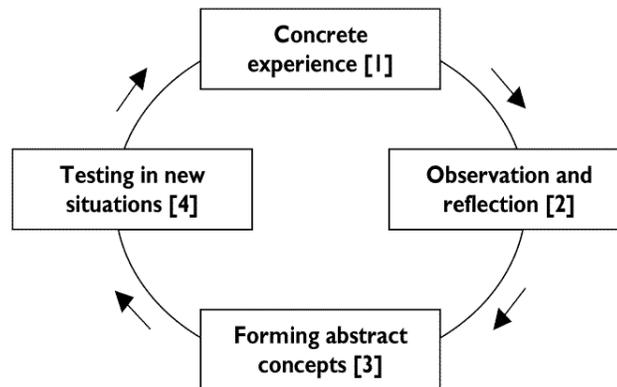


Diagram 1. Representation of the Experiential Learning Cycle (Based on Lewin (various) in Kolb 1975).

The two key aspects of this model are a) the use of immediate experience to test theories and ideas, and b) the use of feedback to modify those theories and ultimately change practice. These approaches seem to sit intuitively within the learning establishment, and have prompted significant activity in associated ideas of reflection in order to make sense of the experience.

A significant development of this model was promulgated by Boud et al (1985), where emotions attached to the experience are dealt with. Reflection is essentially post-experiential, where the event is recalled. It then includes attending to (or connecting with) associated feelings, either to build on helpful emotions or removing obstructive ones. The experience can then be re-examined taking account of intent and also the emotional perspective. This is an approach which I find more applicable to everyday experience, since the emotional element can (and often does) have a very profound effect on the learning process.

Schon (1983) refined these models and started to apply them to professional activities. In applying them to professional teaching, Schon's perspective used the "learned professions" as a prototype of professional expertise, as "*they operate in stable institutional contexts. Hence they are grounded in systematic, fundamental knowledge, of which scientific knowledge is the prototype, or else they have 'a high component of strictly technological knowledge based on science in the education which they provide'.*" (Glazer 1974 p.349 in Schon 1991).

Where Kolb may be criticised for lack of emphasis on reflection (Boud et al (1985)), Schon applies the reflective process firmly to two different aspects of experience, namely reflection in action and reflection on action. These can be regarded as developments of the cyclic models of Kolb et al and combined with the Boud approach, where the experience is evaluated both as it takes place ('reflection-in-action') and retrospectively ('reflection-on-action').

Having consciously carried out both processes, sometimes focusing on the same experience, I'm in little doubt that the two processes are distinct, and bring different perspectives to my teaching performance and what I learn about it. To be brief: reflection in action is a discipline which forces a practitioner to think about what they are doing as they do it. If some of the wider elements above are taken into account, they can be used to e.g. deal with an emotional element to the current experience, or link decisions on actions to desired outcomes. The most important factor here is that the practitioner does not operate from habit.

In recent years these models have been constantly refined, broken down and applied to teaching and training circumstances of increasing specificity.

See for example Moss (2002), who looks at reflection as part of personal development planning in social work; and Ekpenyong (1999), who reformulates experiential learning methods to make them appropriate for effective class room instruction in formal business education.

Two examples which are particularly relevant to my teaching area (XXXXX) are given by Griffith (1999) and Pithers and Soden (1999). In the former a reflective team is used to teach understanding and analysis of business case histories. Benefits cited include enhancing students' skills in areas of both process and knowledge application. In the latter a Critical Reasoning Test is used to help staff in the vocational education and training sector to develop tutoring skills which help learners to think effectively in work-related contexts. Compared with the early models, these approaches are more complex, but greater study brings greater definition and allows the reader to use / apply / understand parts of a model with increasing degrees of confidence. I have found this to be the case with my work, and some elements to be more applicable to personal experience.

When considering how to assist students engaged in a reflective practice, it is useful to extend the integration of different factors still further into behavioural and cognitive areas. This is legitimate when considering that the objective of reflective practice is to bring about a desired change in the practitioner's performance, i.e. behaviour.

If reflective practice, or at least a "reflective state" is key to "learning" then it must take place subconsciously (unconsciously) as well as consciously, since every human being learns things throughout their entire life (see Jarvis 1987, 1995). Some of these may be regarded as negative learned elements which may produce what are regarded as negative outcomes, such as fear of a particular situation. The negative effect of fear (and wider physiological and neurological conditions) on learning is well documented (see for example Hannaford 1995) but still depressingly absent from wider pedagogical practice.

It is not uncommon to encounter a student who has had one or a series of unpleasant experiences in their past, and has 'learned' a particular response to the stimulus: 'I hate maths', 'I can't spell', 'I don't like school' etc. A combination of approaches may therefore be required to provide a 'relearning' of appropriate responses before any curricular learning can take place. In this sense the approaches and Jarvis and Merriam & Caffarella complement each other.

4. Critical approaches to reflective practice.

Although undoubtedly forming a central part of educational theory, the establishment of reflective practice (in its considerable number of variations) as a dominant paradigm for teaching and learning is not without its detractors.

Cornford (2002) is of the opinion that there appears little solid empirical evidence to support the view that reflection results in superior teaching practices. The argument is made that problems of definition and competing paradigms of reflective practice has led to confusion over ideals and objectives, and *"it becomes impossible to operationalise a paradigm and translate it into practice"*.

In some respects a return is made to the early work of Schon and Kolb which focuses on activity in informed by theory, i.e. 'skill': *"Teaching, however, by definition involves more than just the acquisition of theory about teaching"* (Cornford 2002 p, 220).

The paper ends by recommending that rigorous empirical studies are needed before the implementation of new teaching strategies.

Bright (1996) is openly critical of existing professional practice, accusing government and professional educators as having "developed a neurotic and destructively dependent relationship with 'reflective practice'", and describes their motives as "to preserve the notions of local control, and professional discretion and the remnants of 'theoretical' content".

Despite this somewhat vitriolic approach, the core of the argument is that reflective practice has become an antidote to an overtly rational or technical approach to teaching, and in so doing has departed from some of its fundamental precursors. In particular, reflective practice is understood only in terms of the theories or models currently used to describe it, whereas it should be based on a realistic understanding of practice itself. Clegg *et al* (2002) take a more constructive view, and argue that if reflective practice is dominated by idealism, it may be appropriate to refocus on developing skills through teaching activity, and move away from the more abstract process of reflection *per se*, which has "*taken on the veneer of educational orthodoxy*".

These three references are representative of a great many more which appear to share the general consensus that the focus of reflective practice has moved away from skill development and activity to a more esoteric and theory-dominated approach.

Dye (1999) provides a balanced and comprehensive approach. She looks at using a better-defined balance between theory and practice in the curriculum planning for teacher educators, whereby teachers use reflection to become "*cognisant of a range of variables which influence attainment*".

This, along with the approaches of Jarvis and Merriam & Caffarella provide a framework for approaching reflective practice which I have found and continue to find extremely useful. I have now started introducing some of these approaches to my own students in order to help them develop their understanding of reflection, with what appear to be good results.

My approach might be summarised by a quote from a student cited by Dye (1999):

I refer to theories which reflect my world view, and reject those which do not.(p. 312)

and with regard to my overall objective for reflective practice:

Through this process.... Teachers will gain an effective repertoire of methods, ideas and principles, which are educationally sound, workable and, above all else, valued and believed in by the teachers themselves.(p. 317)

5. Conclusion.

The effect of reflective practice on me has been profound. It helps to develop a personal and evaluated framework which extends beyond my everyday teaching, into my personal, professional and spiritual development. It includes quantitative analysis of my performance, and has moved beyond straightforward pedagogy (and androgogy) into a broader tool for self-evaluation of management performance.

If it is legitimate to raise the question of conscious versus subconscious learning, then the same must hold for reflective practice: if reflection in its broadest sense leads to learning, it can therefore take place with or without the tacit knowledge of the learner. If this goes as

far as changing practices and behaviour it is 'habit', and takes place without conscious thought. This is where a formal, disciplined and above all conscious reflective practice is crucial to self development.

Reflection can be targeted and it can be learned, just like any other skill. However, it can be difficult to get students to accept this as it (tends) to be rooted in behaviour; it is less like other 'harder' skills with which students tend to be more familiar and is therefore harder to identify.

Reflective Practice has been widely described and defined, sometimes in confusing or contradictory terms, but by its very nature it must remain heavily subjective. If it forms an important part of the learning process, and different domains and environments affect its outcomes, then it is by its very nature nebulous. It may be useful to use it in an outline form, and focus on the desired outcome of the reflective process. Working back from this, the starting points are likely to vary significantly for each student, making it potentially difficult to teach but immensely rewarding for both student and teacher when the student identifies benefits.

Having discovered that I have unconsciously reflected, and also consciously worked at using and teaching Reflective Practice, my understanding is clear in my own mind: it is the single most useful skill any person can develop.

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