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Reflecting on the Reflective Practitioner: muddled thinking and poor educational practices

Introduction

It is difficult to study a student textbook on teacher education these days that does not include a chapter on reflective practice and professional development. The chapters are usually reasonably short and decidedly thin on theoretical content. All will refer to Donald Schon's iconic text 'The Reflective Practitioner' (Schon, 1983) and include references to reflective practice techniques that will help the students to improve their teaching and performance. They will also, rather comfortingly, remind the student that there is no tangible link between theory and practice in teaching and that the 'knowing' is all in the action.

Rather more surprisingly this 'reflective practice' discourse has also become an integral feature of the professional standards that are set for the training of teachers in the UK. Government Departments, Inspectors of Education, professional bodies and teaching institutions all extol students to reflect on their practice. Indeed, a plethora of educational techniques have been invented in order to help them to be reflective, everything from keeping diaries to completing inventories and teaching logs (Redmond, 2006). Finally, these reflective narratives are routinely used as a basis for accrediting learning as part of continuing professional development programmes.

This is not to say that 'reflective practice' as a teaching methodology has not been open to criticism (Beverley and Worsley, 2007). It has and the criticism has been

persistent and unequivocal. The critique is normally based upon the overly individualistic nature of such an embodied practice, the lack of an emancipatory dimension to the concept and, more recently, its institutional role as a technology of surveillance (Erlandson, 2005).

However, I wish here to put forward a more fundamental critique of reflective practice and its use as a pedagogic model for teacher training in the UK. I will begin by discussing the original concept put forward by Donald Schon in his text ‘The Reflective Practitioner’. I will then show how the very notion of ‘reflective practice’ lacks conceptual clarity. This will then be followed by a discussion of the epistemology of ‘reflection’ within the history of philosophy, which will offer a critique of reflective theory. In the final section I will identify how reflective methodologies can result in poor educational practices and suggest alternative approaches for the development of teachers.

The theoretical and practical confusion that surrounds the concept of Reflective Practice can be found within the canonical text itself. There is no need to search any further. Within the book ‘The Reflective Practitioner’ there is no attempt to clarify what is meant be the key concept of *reflection*. Interestingly, the adjoining term *practice* is clearly defined and rests upon the assumption of the ‘uniqueness of an event’. However, how to be reflective remains unclear. Schon (1983) begins by claiming reflection is about ‘how professionals think about what they are doing’ (page 50), then goes on to associate reflection with a ‘feel for’ something (page 55) and an ‘intuitive knowing’ (page 56). Finally, reflection is then given a functional capability whereby it can ‘surface and criticise our tacit understandings’ and perform ‘frame

experiments' (page 61). There is no clarity here or explanation of how reflection encapsulates such a bewildering array of activities. Indeed, perhaps Schon had no intention of pinning down the idea of reflection, but rather preferred to use its metaphorical power to liberate it from technical-rationality.

There is little doubt that Schon was strongly influenced by Dewey and adopts a pragmatist view of the world through asserting the primacy of everyday practice over positivist rationality. Thus the knowing is *in* our action and is often tacit, yet able to be extracted through reflection and used as a basis for examining our 'theories-in-use'. Refection here can be both 'reflection-on-action' and reflection-in-action'. As Eraut (1994) points out this distinction between 'in and on' action presents us with a difficult and confusing time dimension problem. Schon does not help matters by claiming:

A practitioner's reflection-in-action may not be very rapid. It is bounded by the 'action-present', the zone of time in which action can still make a difference to the situation. The action-present may stretch over minutes, hours, days, or even weeks or months, depending on the pace of activity and the situational boundaries that are characteristic of the practice. (Schon, 1983, page 62)

This confusion is then further compounded by asserting that 'reflection-in-action hinges on the experience of surprise'. An experience characterised by 'uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict'. Reflection is therefore not required for dealing with the ordinary and mundane but rather with the divergent and the unexpected.

Most writers according to Kinsella (2007) now agree that there continues to be 'tremendous conceptual and practical confusion surrounding the interpretations of

'Reflective Practice'. Purcey (2006) confirms this by stating that 'in the concept of reflection different and even contradictory meanings are at stake'. This in turn leads to conceptual confusion and, more worryingly, poor educational practices.

Those more sympathetic to Schon's work (Kinsella, 2007a and 2007b) link his conceptual framework with the philosophical writings of Michael Polanyi (1967) and Gilbert Ryle (1949) and the constructivist psychology of Nelson Goodman. However, these links are at best tenuous and require a leap of faith by the reader based upon the significance that Schon attaches to a rather limited number of references by these authors. In fact, Polanyi's 'tacit knowing' is precisely that, tacit, incomprehensible and integral to action. Not something that can be made explicit and the object of rational thought. Similarly with Ryle, there is no 'ghost in the machine', no theories-in-use that explain the knowing that is *in* the action. There is always a remainder, a residue that is unknowable and inexplicable. This cannot be explicated by rational reflection or a 'turning backwards' by the self.

Reflective Theory

Interestingly, the most important critique of the concept of reflective practice has very rarely been discussed within the educational literature. Put simply 'what is missing in most approaches to reflection in education is an *epistemology* of reflection' (Procee, 2006). Re-flection in Latin literally means 'to bend back on itself - as we describe self-consciousness as consciousness in the act of reflection' Sandywell (1996). This differs from the related concepts of pre-reflective (antedates consciousness) and reflexive (problematising and emancipatory) experiences. Both ideas again have a coherent ontological basis for inquiry. The epistemology of reflection has a long and rather distinguished history encompassing Empiricism, German Idealism and

Pragmatism. Indeed, according to Heidegger ‘all modern philosophies from Descartes to Kant and Hegel have been notional variations of the philosophy of reflection’ (Sandywell, 1996, page 240).

It can be claimed that ‘Platonists, Aristotelians and Cartesians all assigned the *reflexive* awareness of thinking to intellect rather than to sense’ (Craig, 2005). Certainly, the ‘cogito’ represented a reflective ego, detached from any other mode of existence. Descartes ‘pure reflective subject’ is in essence a contemplative subject, one based upon the exercise of ‘internal freedom’. Indeed, one that St. Augustine would have recognised, a Self engaged directly with God through contemplation. However, with Empiricism, the self-referential subject takes centre stage and the idea of *reflection* comes to the fore. Indeed, for Locke the self becomes a ‘thinking intelligent being that has reason and reflection and can consider itself as itself’ (Seigel, 2005). This introspective and self-conscious activity ‘though it not be a sense, as having nothing to do with external objects, yet it is very like it, and might be properly enough call’d internal sense’. Here reflection becomes a ‘second order’ level of awareness and achievable only ‘in time’. All knowledge in effect is derived from sensation and reflection, with the subject becoming a knowing, rational, self-conscious individual in a Newtonian universe’ (Priest, 2007). An empirical Self, reflecting exclusively on data from the senses projected upon a ‘blank canvas’, a ‘tabula rasa’ of the mind.

Although the notion of reflection plays a role in Descartes ‘cogito’ and Kant’s ‘transcendental subject’, it is with Fichte and the post-Kantians that it finds its full expression. Here, according to Schelling, ‘absolute identity is irreducible to the

happening of reflection' (Bowie, 1993). This is the capacity of thinking to return into itself, the ability of the I to reflect on the I. This type of thinking having 'no other object than itself'. However, this idea of reflection, through which 'the form turns into the form of the form as its content' and returns into its self, is not entirely self-elucidating. Even 'Kant suffered from the fallacy that spoils all attempts to ground the self in pure reflection', namely 'the self first knows itself by reflecting on itself' (Seigel, 2005). However, as Fichte states this is not a feasible proposition:

For me to be aware of myself I must distance myself, make myself an object of my reflection; but in the sense that the same I is both doing the reflecting and is that which is reflected on presupposes a more direct acquaintance with the I that cannot itself be a matter of reflection (Pinkard, page 138)

Clearly what is able to know itself must be more than what it knows. This pre-reflective acquaintance with the self cannot be explained by cognition or thinking about thinking. Fichte, of course, offered a way out of this impasse by identifying an ego of pure activity that antedates the separation of subject and object. This intuitive intellect provides us with a pre-reflective knowledge of the world that subsists below the threshold of consciousness. An absolute self that then divides between an I of consciousness and a not-I, which then through 'positing' allows the representation of the object back into our consciousness. The resulting independent *and* limited form of the I is then continually 'striving for rest' through a process of thesis, antithesis and synthesis. This negated 'I' cannot be explained through cognition or simple reflection as it 'pre-supposes a prior site of disclosure'. Indeed, a prior site that 'cannot be articulated but only hinted at' and 'cannot be given to us but must be brought forth'. This, according to Schelling, 'led into a region where I do not find firm ground, but must produce it myself in order to stand firmly upon it'.

The German Romantics would take the Fichtean notion of reflection further by distinguishing between the immediate and infinite aspects of reflection. Here the ‘endless regress’ of simple reflection that is prone to disintegration is arrested through intuition and the immediacy of a pre-reflective existence. A higher order of reflection, that Novalis would come to label as ‘romanticising’. These themes would of course be taken further with Hegel’s ‘Universal Self’ and Husserl’s ‘phenomenological reduction’.

It is with Pragmatism that the notion of reflection takes a decidedly instrumental turn. In particular the work of Dewey is seen as an attempt to uncouple knowledge from any ‘transcendental or a priori’ foundations and locate it within the everyday and indeterminate world of experience. Based upon Peirce’s ‘doubt-belief model’ and using a Darwinian conception of experience, Dewey establishes a ‘reflective thinking’ approach to inquiry:

Reflection appears as the dominant trait of a situation when there is something seriously the matter, some trouble, due to active discordance, dissentyency, conflict among the factors of a prior non-intellectual experience. (Cornelis De Waal, 2005, page 114.)

All reflection according to Dewey is therefore based upon an ‘indeterminate situation’ and only comes to resolution through an *experimental* act. As Procee (2006) points out the ‘specific problem with such models is their orientation towards improvement’. This then often requires the student to take a ‘negative attitude to past performances’. This sentiment is echoed by Clark (2001) who claims that ‘for Dewey, reflection is controlled, directed thinking towards some conclusion’ and thus remains within the realm of problem solving. However, Dewey did recognise that ‘consciousness is only a very small and shifting portion of experience’ and that reflection, or thought, mainly occupied an ‘intermediate and reconstructive position’. This thinking of thinking is

no substitute for action and it would be unsafe ‘to dissociate knowledge from experiment, nor experiment from experience’. In particular he warned against adopting a withered and diminished version of experience through the use of reflection:

This extraction of the kernel of past reflections makes possible a throwing to one side of all the consequences of prior false and futile steps; it enables one to dispense with the experiences themselves and to deal only with their net profit. ...it gives an object ‘as if there was no experience’ (Dewey, 1916, p.58.)

Nevertheless, with Dewey, reflection becomes an instrument of change that transforms an indeterminate situation to a determinate one through experimentation. This pragmatism is taken to ‘mean a behaviourist theory of thinking and knowing’. It is a knowing that is ‘literally something which we do’, and makes the ‘unknown and uncertain situation into a known and certain one’. Idealism, Dewey, would claim simply ignored the ‘temporally intermediate and instrumental place of reflection’ and its ability to take ‘control of the environment’ (Boydston, 1980). Here we have a reflective knowledge that has ‘a specific task which is set by a concrete and empirical situation’. Indeed, a knowledge which is ‘intellectual or logical in character’. This Pragmatist *move* takes reflection into a purely deterministic world far removed from that postulated by German Idealism. A world that is unable to accommodate the pre-reflective or the Hegelian concerns for the social, inter-subjective and historical. Indeed, a world that turns ‘experience into a future-orientated instrument in the name of a goal that could never fully be attained’ (Jay, 2006, page 298).

It is clear from this discussion that the notion of reflection does not in itself establish a unique or fundamental mode of self-consciousness. This is not a privileged form of knowledge that is self-legitimising. There is always a residue of the unknowable,

unexplainable and indeterminate. As Manfred Frank points out in his critique of reflective theory ‘some form of non-or pre reflective existence must be attributed to the self before reflective knowledge of it can be thought to be possible’ (Seigel, 2005, page 377). This pre-cognitive sense of Self cannot be ignored or dispensed with by adopting a purely mechanistic and deterministic view of reflection. The ‘thinking of thinking of the form’ that characterises reflection is inextricably bound up with a sense of Otherness. Be this an ‘intellectual intuition’, a restraining ‘Not-I’ or the dialectical and historical ‘transcendental self’. In defining reflective thought Dewey simply ‘dissolved the problems considered by his predecessors, rather than propose a new solution to them’ (Rorty, 1982). Indeed, post-phenomenological philosophers such as Nietzsche would come to distrust the notion of reflection as it ‘established a distance from the milieu’, while Heidegger would warn against the subjects ‘isolation’ and ‘rootlessness’ from the world.

Poor Educational Practices

This philosophical discussion of reflection has significant implications for the practice of education, both within initial teacher education and subsequently for the continuing professional development of teachers. There are three broad areas where reflective practice may have a detrimental impact on student learning and development: the narrating of experience; objectification of otherness; instrumental determinism.

Narration of experience

One of the most intriguing definitions of the word ‘experience’ can be found in the German language. The terms *Erlebnis* and *Erfahrung* both denote experience, but have totally different interpretations of the word. *Erlebnis* ‘contains within it the root of life and is sometimes translated as lived experience’. This is often recognised as an immediate, pre-reflective and untheorised practice. In contrast, *Erfahrung* has been

associated with the senses and with reason. However, this is an ‘elongated notion of experience based on a learning process’ that suggests a journey or adventure. An experience that is both collective and cumulative and links to memory and a sense of what has gone before. Unfortunately, many reflective practice approaches to development encourage novice teachers to adopt an overly restricted and diminished notion of experience as a basis for action. Here ‘lived experience’ is taken to be a post-facto recounting or thinking about what is already known (Bullock and Jennings, 1996), where we often ‘conflate experience with knowledge of experience’. This important distinction between lived experience and reflection is summed up by Dilthey:

Lived experience is directly ‘there-for-me’ as its own reality. In its most basic mode, a lived experience involves a reflexive or self-given awareness which is an immediate, pre-reflective consciousness where there is not yet the distinction between act and content, subject and object that characterizes representational consciousness. The reflexive awareness (*Innewerden*) inherent in lived experience is thus not to be confused with reflection (*Besinnung*). (Dilthey, 1985, p. 16)

Lived experience cannot be arrived at by gaining an ‘understanding of experience by examining experience’. At best this will furnish us with ‘ideas of reflection’ or ‘knowledge of experience’. However, this is likely to be a sterile and fractured experience that relies solely upon the backward gaze of the subject. This *narration of experience* through self-reflection often becomes a substitute for experimentation and can result in a distancing of the subject from the world of practice. For new teachers this is exactly the opposite of what is required. It is through participation and engagement with the world of ‘lived experience’ that they find their own ‘firm ground’ and subsequent basis for practice.

Objectification of Otherness

All attempts to privilege reflective knowledge are grounded in a binary divide of subject and object. The object is seen as something to be viewed and represented as part of a subjective personal experience. A ‘spectatorial notion of knowledge’ that is isolated from an experience from which it is reached. Indeed, it is this ‘freedom from being determined as an object’ that the Hegelian dialectical turn sought so much to overcome. Emphasising instead the need to recognise the distinction between appearance (subject’s experience) and what is appearing (existing in itself). And thus avoiding a ‘sideways-on’ view that is taken to be absolute, and a world depicted by a ‘judging agent and a set of causal relationships’. Here it is important to think of the other as not merely an object but also as a subject, to presuppose a mutual dependency of inter-subjectivity. Above all to understand that the other is not just there ‘for-us’ but a ‘thing in itself’. It is this inter-dependency that features so strongly in both the new student’s learning and the experienced practitioner’s role as developer. This mutual relationship forms the heart of the developmental process where limits are set, support structures created and opportunities fashioned. Here the experienced teacher brings the ‘present of things past’ through the association of past events with the trial and errors of practice. A guidance matched with a sense of refrain that creates space for the novice teacher to find their own ground.

Instrumental Determinism

With the pragmatic notion of reflection comes a quest for the determinate. The material world is divided between the spontaneous and the mundane. The former providing the basis for a instrumental reflection that finds its expression in problem solving and experimental action. Here the ‘swampy lowlands’ of practice are transformed into the concrete and material world of determinate solutions. There is no

room for the inexplicable or indeterminate, no empty spaces or ‘things-in-themselves’. The environment can clearly be controlled through thought and action. However, this *instrumental determinism* can, rather paradoxically, result in very mundane consequences that are couched within a dynamic conservatism. A retreat, it can be argued, from political and social conditions. Indeed, experience that never arises above the ‘level of the particular, the contingent and the probable’ may prove to be unsatisfying as it simply leads to the next experience. There is no problematic residue here; no being that precedes thought or pre-reflective intellectual intuition. However, for many novice teachers, it is precisely this acquaintance with the indeterminate that becomes their first lesson from experience. A realisation that understanding at times cannot be articulated but ‘only hinted at’ and that it may be possible to ‘show it’ without being able to ‘say it’. In the early stages of teaching students often discover that the ‘ground they seek is also receding’. That by being less determinate and making space for things to unfold they can, rather paradoxically, feel more in control. Experienced practitioners also discover that ‘Reflective Judgement’ cannot be taught but must be ‘brought forth’ and that much of what transpires is already inscribed in an historical world. A realisation that the ‘indeterminate immediate’ may be what to expect and that often ‘being rather than thought is the underlying principle’.

Conclusions

There is little doubt that Schon’s notion of reflective practice is conceptually muddled. Instead of ‘technical rationality’ we are presented with a naive form of Pragmatism that even Dewey would struggle to recognise. A world of determinate instrumentalism where all thought is ‘turned back to action’ and resolution is found in a crude form of problem solving. There is no room here for the immediate, pre-

reflective or untheorised lived experience so important to the German Idealists. Instead, what is offered is a withered and impoverished version of experience based upon a microcosm of reflective thought and action.

The recent renewed interest in German Idealism (Bowie, 2007) raises important questions about the role of reflective theory in educational practice. Most significantly the post-Kantians have, I believe, convincingly argued that pure reflection cannot provide a legitimate basis for the foundation of knowledge within a self-conscious subject. The process of reflection, the ‘thinking about thinking’, always ‘presupposes a prior site of disclosure’. Once this is acknowledged, then other dimensions of the self have to be considered alongside cognition, be this inter-subjectivity, intuition, embodied practice or an historical determinism. This is the rich legacy left by German philosophy.

However, it is within current educational practice that this impoverished notion of reflection unfolds so benignly and unsuspectingly into a form of modern day Pietism. A personal and group reflection on the significance and meaning of the mundane rather than the esoteric. An ordered written account of personal experiences within an already determined world where nothing can change except our own interpretations and prejudices. Indeed, an inordinate subjectivism based upon a precision of inward thought and personal meaning. This devotion to personal reflection often finds its expression in an effusive autobiography of professional practice. Endless fictional reflections on what might have been or may have transpired if only circumstances had been different. Or, even more inexplicably, the post hoc application of educational theories to explain practice or illuminate an underlying ‘theory-in-use’. If only the student had been theoretically nimble in the first place. The weight of argument, here,

if often found in the bulky expression of a poorly written reflective prose that ends up on an examiner's desk to be picked over for relevant literature and an apparent trajectory of self-improvement.

There is of course a seductive charm in the language of reflective practice. An appeal to self-determination, intelligent thought and personal autonomy. If professionals are not reflecting on their practice then what is it that they are doing? Well for most of the time anticipating and engaging in practice rather than reflecting upon it. As novice teachers this means initially being over-reliant on others for support and advice and discovering that preparation and planning only takes you so far in the classroom. Here the relational aspects to practice are paramount and having a pre-reflective non-cognitive awareness of teaching is so vitally important. For the expert teacher it is not particularly reflective thought that characterises good practice but a willingness to share experience and provide informal, or indeed formal, support to others. It is this *return to practice* of a shared and collective experience that distinguishes the good teacher. Also, and interestingly, this experienced teacher will have an ability to *refrain* from practice and thus create space and time for others to 'come forth'. This 'being-there' for others is often an indication of a shared moral code rather than a reflective 'backward gaze' at an historical self.

There is little doubt that Schon's 'Reflective Practitioner' was a publication of its time and historical context. It captured a sympathetic readership which had become disillusioned with the failures of the state after the Vietnam War, the assassination of Kennedy and the disastrous 'Bay of Pigs'. There was a genuine disenchantment with 'technical rationality' and a need for a return to a neo-liberalism based upon the self-determining individual. An individualism that would provide the basis for change and

offset the dangers from an increasingly intrusive state. This coupled with the growing intellectual stature of Pragmatism provided the appropriate context for the ‘Reflective Practitioner’ and its reception amongst the professional classes both in America and the UK. However, this overly subjective and instrumental approach to development has been severely compromised by change itself and become, rather paradoxically, everything that it claimed in effect to denounce. A horrible technical determinism, a discourse of performativity and a device used by the state to regulate the individual. A far cry indeed from the exuberance of the German Idealists and, ironically, largely unrecognisable to Dewey and his vibrant world of experimental learning.

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