

# Reflective writing

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## Definitions of reflection

Being a reflective practitioner is now a well-embedded notion within professional practice. However, we now need to consider what we mean by the term reflection.

### Thinking and Reflective go Hand-in-Hand

## Meanings of the term reflection

The term reflexive is often used interchangeably with that of 'reflection'. However, these terms do have different meanings, which we need to be aware of:

- “Reflexive” refers to a grammatical term, which means referring back to the subject of the sentence: for example, myself.

Reflection has a range of meanings the most common being that of a 'reflected image', for example, in a mirror. The term can also be used to connote something negative; for example, pupil misbehaviour is a reflection on the school's reputation. Where reflection refers to a cognitive process, the term means a reconsideration or an idea arising in the mind.

Here, we are concerned with the term reflection, rather than 'reflexive'. Where the term relates to cognition, there are the two interrelated ideas of a reconsideration and generation of an idea. However, the dictionary definition itself does not make it clear why there is an emphasis on reflection in professional education and practice. Indeed, it might be argued that reflection only impedes development: reflection as a reconsideration is retrospective and so could become self-obsessive. In order to explore reflection we should briefly focus on the layers of meaning which surround this term.

## Reflection as a metaphor for thinking

Reflection is an ocular metaphor for thinking which has a long history in Western thought. This history is still drawn upon today in our explanations of human development and thinking, thereby illustrating some of the tensions inherent in the term when we apply it to a professional context.

One example, which enables us to consider the genealogy of this term 'reflection', is the Greek myth of Narcissus. Narcissus, seeing his own reflection in water, fell in love with himself. Looking at reflection within this example does raise the question of whether all kinds of reflection are thoughtful, that is, related to thinking.

Reflection may be simply self-admiration, which lacks the detachment we ordinarily associate with thinking.

## Reflection and individuation

Nevertheless, we should be careful not to dismiss reflection as simply self-admiration. The instance of someone looking in the mirror may be an elementary example of self-reflection where the realisation of self is the essence of thinking. We must recognise that reflection and a sense of self are inextricably linked. Narcissism is a normal developmental state when the child separates from her mother, forms her own identity and comes to think of herself as a separate person. As Lacan has argued in his psychoanalytic theory of development, the process of individuation occurs when the child views a reflection of herself in the mirror and perceives herself to be different from her mother; Lacan coined this the mirror image stage. This mirror stage is where the reflection of self is crucial for human development, and, if not successfully achieved, will result in a pathological state in adulthood where the individual lacks any sense of self. Lacan notes that the process of a child seeing his or her own reflection in a mirror is the first conscious act of thinking as an individual.

We could interpret reflection, on the one hand, as a form of self-reflection, and if we accept this then we can loosely talk of reading and writing the self. Such an interpretation might then lead to questions about self-knowledge in the professional sense. Ultimately, how is it possible to separate us from the cultural practices of the self, that is, those practices that constitute us? What, then, is professional self-reflection?

## Different accounts of reflection

Moon (1999) points out that it is a difficult task to define the term reflection because ideas about reflection come from a range of academic disciplines such as psychology, philosophy, education and sociology, as well as from within professional contexts (p viii).

We might distinguish a number of different accounts of the idea of 'reflection', including:

- therapy accounts: reflection on previous experiences and feelings is a vital part of the therapeutic process
- spiritual accounts: reflection is related to contemplation and prayer
- philosophical accounts: reflection is related to thinking
- professional learning accounts: reflection is related to the review and development of practice.

## Examples of reflective writing

In this Section you will find an example of each of the three levels of reflective writing we have put forward. The same situation is the subject of each piece of writing. As you read these examples consider the similarities and differences between each piece.

## Levels of reflective writing

Here are three different levels of writing. Look for things like writing in the first and third person; objective and subjective stances and the interpretation of different peoples' perspectives.

### Level one

There had been a number of incidents of pupils fighting during the interval period and so the usual sanctions were imposed upon those involved. These sanctions included a letter to parents/carers informing them of the incident and inviting them to discuss the matter with school staff. One of the pupils who had been involved in an outburst had previously never been involved in any similar incidents and was viewed as a well-behaved and diligent pupil. He had been deeply upset by the incident and the subsequent events. In the discussion with parents, their response was unexpected. The pupils' parents felt that he should be dealt with leniently not because of his previous excellent behaviour - but because he had "learned to handle himself at last" and now maybe "he would fight back more often". Obviously from the school's position this viewpoint had to be countered and this was done by indicating that any violence between pupils could not be tolerated no matter who was involved. However, what stunned me more was the parents' response to this. The pupil's mother, who by now was very upset, replied that we teachers, who left the district every day at 4 o'clock, did not know what it was to live there. If their son did not fight back he would be attacked on the streets. It was for his sake that they had been pushing him to retaliate.

I found this incident very difficult to deal with. On the one hand, I could see what the parents were saying, and indeed they were trying to protect their child. Further, I did not fully appreciate what it was to live in the district. On the other hand, the school obviously could not condone any form of fighting. It left us in a situation where we needed to maintain the policy of the school but this meant that pupils receiving mixed messages. This situation led us to review our policies on behaviour and make it clear to the pupils the expectations we have in terms of behaviour. However, we also decided that we would look more closely at individual situations and not always apply the sanctions as a matter of course.

### Level two

Following a spate of playground fights, interviews were held with the parents of the pupils involved. One of these interviews raised considerable questions about how we as a school deal with pupils involved in this type of behaviour. In this particular case the parents felt that the child should not be punished, not because of his previous record of good behaviour, but because he had at last begun to fight back. The parents had been actively encouraging the pupil to retaliate. It was the parents' view that the teachers, who left at 4 o'clock, did not know what it was to live there. If their son did not fight back he would be relentlessly bullied on the streets. He had to learn to survive.

This was not a position the school could condone but, at the same time, this pupil and potentially many others were receiving mixed messages. This incident raised questions about the school's policy and practices in dealing with pupil violence. Was the school's policy appropriate or effective? We had to review the extant procedures. These were outlined in the school policy- Any violent incident between pupils would result in:

- a. The withdrawal of good behaviour merits or in more extreme circumstances or where there were repeated incidents, withdrawal from the good behaviour merit scheme until re-admission was earned and;
- b. A letter being sent to the parents/carers asking them to come and discuss this matter and find ways of working with them to address the problem.

Pupils are told that if another pupil is aggressive towards them they must report this to the teacher or playground supervisor rather than retaliate. We had thought we needed to keep the procedures simple and that these should be applied consistently regardless of any other considerations including previous good behaviour.

This incident suggested that there were some circumstances where we need to be more sensitive to the situation and look at causes of the behaviour. We also needed to help pupils reflect on their behaviour and seek ways to address this other than simply and immediately applying the set sanctions. It further suggested that we needed to discuss the policies with parents including exploring the values and aims of the school.

### **Level three**

An interview with parents following an incident of fighting between pupils raised considerable questions for me as a teacher working in an inner city area. Among the questions raised for me was the role of the school in a specific community and the relationship between the personal and professional values of the practitioners and the communities they work in. Who has the right and responsibility to assert and demand the pursuance of specific values and behaviours?

A pupil who previously had a record of good behaviour was involved in a serious violent incident with another pupil. This is not a common occurrence in the school, which possibly is because there is a clear policy and set of procedures to deal with such incidents. Accordingly sanctions were imposed on the pupil and a discussion was held with his parents. It was the response of the parents that, on a personal level, stunned me and, on a professional level, made me consider some of my beliefs about the enterprise I am involved in a public education system.

The pupil's parents were of the view that the pupil should not be punished, not because of his previous good behaviour but because he had learned to fight back, something they had been urging him to do. My immediate response was that this was unacceptable, that there were some basic principles that must be abided by in a social context and especially in one

such as a school which has a role in the social and personal development of pupils. Further I also viewed this encouragement as gender stereotypical thinking in which this pupil was being encouraged to adopt the behaviours that are expected of boys. I was quite clear about my beliefs at this point. As Jackson (2002: 584) argues:

*Many writers have expressed concerns that the dominant ways of expressing masculinities run counter to the goals of the education system, and that some boys 'laddish' behaviours act as impediments to their progress at school.*

However, when the parents indicated their reasons for encouraging their child to fight back I had to question my beliefs. As the parents pointed out we teachers left at 4 o'clock and did not understand what it was like to live in the district nor did we understand what it was like to be a boy living on those streets. Fighting back was the only way to survive.

Looking at this initially I thought this a clash of values, and so there was the question of whose values were 'right'? Both the parents and the teachers had the best interests of the pupils at heart. However, in this case the pupil was receiving mixed messages and no matter what course of action he took he would be punished either by his parents disapproval or by the school's sanctions. I had interpreted this as a gender issue in which the pupil was being encouraged to behave in a stereotypical way displaying behaviour that might be tolerated or even encouraged in a boy. Partly it was. Certain expectations in the setting the pupil lived in demanded the display of aggression as part of being male. But to characterise this situation as a clash of values was too simplistic. There was an issue of the relationship between community and school values.

It seems to me now on reflection that it was not that the parents sanctioned violence but it was ultimately a way of protecting their child. The school's aim is "to ensure a safe and secure environment for all members of the school community" and so our position was to reject all forms of violent behaviour no matter what the cause. But did this reflect the middle class culture and expectations of the teaching staff who - as the parents pointed out - left each evening to return to the city suburbs where 'survival on the streets' was not something they witnessed nor had to confront? From this point of view any acts of violence have no defence and the policy of the school put in place procedures where any aggressive behaviour is immediately punished without any real exploration of the causes - as was the case here.

In some respects what we have done in school as a response to this situation is a compromise. We still see the rejection of violence as core. Now we have taken steps to ensure that such incidents are examined and discussed with the pupils. Becoming less mechanistic and more responsive to individual situations is one element. At the same time we have defined the sphere of influence in which the school operates by articulating that specifically within the school there are rules and expectations of behaviour that we must demand otherwise we would be failing in our task as a school.

## Reflective writing

This situation also raised for me questions about the role of a school in a specific locality. My own view had been to this point that education was a 'way out', that it is through success in the educational system that a pupil could achieve a better job, better life chances and consequently move out of a disadvantaged environment. Part of my role, I believed was to support these pupils to achieve. However, this could only ever be a response to a proportion of the pupils in the school. For other pupils who could not 'escape' through education, the school seemed to be operating at the level of social control. A set of values - whether about social behaviour, about the 'benefits of education' - are being imposed and those who do not abide by these are 'punished' both immediately and in the longer term. At one level these values seem indisputable but the role of the school and the professionals asserting these has raised questions about the purpose of school education. As Heaney (1995) writes:

*Even defenders of traditional schools have admitted that, if society is to hold together without the overt force of a police state, schooling must adapt learners to kinder, gentler controls: career choices (specialization), authority (dependency), and the good life (consumerism) (online source).*

The situation that we found ourselves in seemed to be counter to our intentions of facilitating learning. Our role in creating policies with no real involvement of pupils or parents was running counter to our attempts to create a genuine learning environment where there needs to be, as Rogers (1983) argues, a climate of trust and genuine participation in decision-making. In education currently pupils, parents and members of the community have little power or influence in shaping the values and purposes of public services like schools. While I still feel education is critical in improving life chances and all pupils should have such opportunities to flourish, I have to question this idea of 'escape'. We need to look more closely at a public education system that is not just located in a specific community but also acts as the means of empowering the pupils and the wider community to act. Dewey (1916) noted the intrinsic link between democracy and education and as Apple and Beane (1995:11) argue, we need to work towards empowering young people to bring about social change. In many ways, but their vision [in democratic schools] extends beyond purposes such as improving the school climate or enhancing students' self-esteem. Democratic educators seek not simply to lessen the harshness of social inequities in school, but to change the conditions that create them.

## Activity

Having read the example of reflective writing, think about a situation from your own professional practice and write a page or so of reflection about it. This can be your own subjective interpretation of an event.

Consider the event and reflect on your interpretation of it. Do you think others will see it from the same perspective as you? How might your subjective interpretation of the event differ from someone else who has experienced the same event?



## Promoting reflection

This list demonstrates that reflection is not easy, and so we should consider some tools to promote and enhance reflective practice.

### Reflection is a powerful process

## The Process of reflection

There is a considerable literature providing advice to teachers, nurses, doctors, engineers and other professionals on how to reflect more effectively. Much of this writing is concerned with the various strategies practitioners can adopt to reflect upon their practice. In this section we will explore critically some of these techniques that are frequently used in development programmes for professional practitioners to promote and enhance skills in reflective practice.

The notion of reflection as a facet of professional practice and as a means of enhancing practice is widely accepted. Here reflection is on and about action. Subsequent to the action or experience, the practitioner engages in a reflective process whether through discussion or writing as a means of making sense of that experience.

Reflection is seen as a means of probing experiences not only in terms of the actions and behaviours of the individual practitioner but also deals with their motivations and intentions at the outset as well as their emotions during the experience being examined. This emphasis on the 'full' experience has led to the usage of a wide variety of genres being used to reflect including fiction, poetry, as well as descriptive and analytical styles of writing.

There is an increasing choice of texts (Bolton, 2001, Moon 1999b) that seek to provide practical guidance on the development of reflective practice. These ideas draw implicitly from some of the theoretical models we have examined in previous sections. For example, Bolton suggests, perhaps whimsically, that reflective practice is fostered through 'the looking glass model' of education. This model has three foundational ideas that echo back to Dewey's ideas about reflective thinking and Schon's construction of 'reflection-in-action'. These ideas are:

- certain uncertainty;
- serious playfulness;
- unquestioning questioning.

(Bolton, 2001:32)

Reflection does refer to an internal cognitive process, but often it is important to make such processes external, either through discussion or through writing. Writing, in particular, has

been emphasised as an important process within reflective practice (Moon, 1999; Bolton, 2001).

There is then the question of what we mean by reflective writing. Hatton and Smith (1995), create an operational framework for writing that helps us to think about what we mean by reflective writing.

The operational framework put forward is a hierarchy whereby the focus on writing moves away from description of personal experiences to a more analytical stance that relates experiences to a socio-political context:

- **Descriptive writing** - In this type of writing there is no reflection, no analysis or justification, just a description of the circumstance or incident.
- **Descriptive reflection** - This type of writing focuses on contrasting your ideas with those of others: for example, Hatton and Smith think 'x'; in contrast I think 'y'.
- **Dialogic reflection** - Here the writer steps back and explores the events often in the form of a self-dialogue: for example, although I chose 'y', students had difficulty in responding to the approach. Perhaps this was due to factor A?
- **Critical reflection** - In this type of writing there is a realisation that cultural, historical, social factors affect the reflective process.

## A framework for reflective writing

Hatton and Smith make fine distinctions between descriptive and descriptive reflection and between dialogic reflection and critical reflection. In this section we have adapted Hatton and Smith's hierarchy and put forward three levels where the distinctions are more easily identified. There are three levels used, adapted from Hatton and Smith's original four levels are as follows.

### Level one: descriptive writing

At this level, the writer focuses on the description of events, of the context, of the feelings and views of the participants in a situation. For example, the writer might describe a successful lecture or a group discussion with a set of pupils that was not successful.

### Level two: reflective writing

At level two, the writer focuses on review events and situations faced by the participants and considers what the questions, issues and problems that had to be addressed. The writing also is evaluative in that judgements are made about the effective of the practice or decisions taken and some possible alternatives that might be explored. The focus though is very much on the specific situation or incident.

**Level three: critical reflection**

This is the level that you should be seeking to develop. Here the writer focuses on the placing incidents, situations, practices and experiences in a wider socio-political context. Again taking the examples above these pedagogic approaches would be placed in a wider debates about the nature of effective teaching and learning, discussions about the changing role and place of the learner in the educative approach - a transmission model and a participative model - the issue of democratic processes in education.

These examples could also be placed within areas of discussions that we have been exploring in this Module such as: the role of public education in society, the changing status of professionals, the socio-political debates about effectiveness and performance in education.

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