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What is reflective practice?

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Chapter Overview

In this chapter, I will discuss professionalism and the reasons why we are encouraged to reflect. I will look at some of the more traditional models of supporting reflective practice and explore the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches and their impact on practice.

- Why this book?
- Why do we need to reflect?
- What is reflection?
- What is the impact on practice?
- Focus reflection questions

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Why this Book?

For many years now, I have been working with teachers and student teachers in developing professionalism. One important element of this professionalism is reflection on practice. Over this time, I have investigated a number of approaches to reflection; and I have investigated the ways it is promoted, 'prescribed,' supported, documented and utilized in the context of teacher professionalism. I have looked at coaching models, structured models and traditional models. I have considered the benefits and drawbacks to reflection and the many challenges in having an approach that encourages personal

reflection which is relevant, meaningful, and, above all, useful to those doing the reflecting.

One significant conclusion I have come to is that it should be the person doing the reflecting who gets the most out of the experience. In order to manage this, they should have some ownership of the process, they should see and understand its purpose, and should not feel that it is something imposed upon them by others.

Why do we Need to Reflect?

One of the benefits of reflection is its impact on professionalism. Through reflecting on our practice, we become more aware, more in control, more able to see our strengths and development needs. Through reflection, we can begin to move from novice to expert. Berliner (2001: 5–13) states: 'To the novice the expert appears to have uncanny abilities to notice things, an "instinct" to make the right moves, an ineffable ability to get things done and to perform in an almost effortless manner' (in Banks and Mayes, 2001: 20).

He talks about the five stages: novice, advanced beginner, competent performer, proficient and then expert. He suggests that 'the experts have … an intuitive grasp of the situation and a non-analytic and non-deliberative sense of the appropriate response to be made'. Berliner goes on to say:

> The wealth of knowledge and routines that they employ, in fact, is so automatic that they often do not realize why they performed a certain plan or action over another. However, when questioned, they are able to reconstruct the reasons for their decisions and behaviour. (In Banks and Mayes, 2001: 27)

It is this process, the questioning or self-questioning to reconstruct what happened – or to construct what might happen – that enables the teacher to move from novice to expert. Indeed, it helps the expert to continue to grow and develop. It may even enable the expert to pass on this expertise to other professionals as they share their reflections.

It is well documented that to develop as professionals we need to be able to reflect on our practice and to learn from this reflection. Donald Schön (1983) suggested that the capacity to reflect on action is to engage in the process of *continuous learning* and that this is one of the defining characteristics of professional practice.

What is Reflection?

There are many definitions of professionalism, and probably just as many definitions of reflection. It is important to establish what definitions I am using to underpin the ideas in this book.

There is much written about notions of professionalism. Authors such as Carr (2000), Sachs (2001) and Story and Hutchison (2001) view a professional as someone with training, expertise, autonomy and values consistent with the society of the time. For the purposes of this book, I will assume a shared acceptance of the 'training and expertise' aspects, but the values and autonomy perhaps require some discussion.

Professional values

It is important to acknowledge that being professional is about much more than 'what you do'. It is also about *how you do it* and the values that go along with it. It is about how you behave, it is about who you are and how you see yourself. Our actions and attitudes are influenced by our values and what we believe is 'right', 'just' and 'fair'. Often, we can become entrenched in our own view of the world and do not see some of the other 'possibilities'. Given the enormous influence we have on the lives of young people, it is important to be aware of how the values transmitted, either consciously or unconsciously, are appropriate. This book suggests that through talking about our profession, through articulating some of these deep-seated beliefs and values in terms of professional practice, we might begin to better understand them. Often, we do not realize that we hold some of these values until we have cause to stop and reflect upon what we did/said, why this might be and what effect this might have upon others in our care.

Teachers in particular can be very self-critical, and the demands of the profession are such that we often take even constructive criticism from others badly. We, nevertheless, blame ourselves for any seeming disaster that occurs in the course of our duties. Yet, on the other hand, we get little formal recognition for our victories and seldom stop to celebrate our expertise. It is often only when we stop and reflect that we realize how far we have come and how well we have done. This idea of reflection is not new. Many institutions have reflection embedded in the systems that operate in the professional environment. For many, it is this reflection and these values that help to define their professional identity.

Professional identity

Osgood (2006) suggests that 'a professional identity is performatively constituted, "being professional" is a performance, which is about what practitioners do at particular times, rather than a universal indication of who they are'.

This is echoed by Sachs (2003) who states that 'across society, professionalism increasingly refers to an individual's attitude and behaviour, rather than a group's formal status and collective identity'.

Without reflection, these elements may get locked away and development is hindered. Through reflecting on practice and on 'what it is to be professional' the door is opened to better understanding and potential development of the tools that will enable you to develop and grow professionally. These are tools that will support your practice in times of change, where attitudes and approaches must adapt and develop.

Reflective practice is specifically about reflecting on oneself and one's inner world, behaviours and impact. Therefore, we need to consider much more than performance. Many 'expert professionals' can operate well in difficult situations and not tell you how they did so. Through reflection and articulation, it is possible to learn how to express these things and to understand what made the difference in a certain situation. It is possible to look at your own beliefs and values and consider them in the light of your profession. The whole autonomy element of professionalism can only really be addressed if you are able to stop for a moment and reflect on your practice.

Donald Schön (1983) has written extensively on this relationship between reflection and professionalism. He states:

> A professional practitioner is a specialist who encounters certain types of situations again and again … He develops a repertoire of expectations. He learns what to look for … As long as his practice is stable, in the sense that it brings him the same types of cases he becomes less and less subject to surprise … As practice becomes more repetitive and routine … the practitioner may miss important opportunities to think about what he is doing. He may be drawn into patterns of error which he cannot correct … When this happens the practitioner has *over learned* what he knows.
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> A practitioner's reflection can serve as a corrective to *over learning*. Through reflection he *can* surface and criticize the tacit understandings that have grown up around the repetitive experiences of a specialized practice, and can make new sense of the situation of uncertainty or uniqueness which he may allow

himself to experience … Sometimes he arrives at a new theory of the phenom-enon by articulating a feeling he has about it … When someone reflects in action, he becomes a researcher in the practice context. He does not separate thinking from doing. (In Pollard, 2002: 6–7)

Professional expertise

Having trained and qualified to do your chosen profession, it is important to realize that this is not the end of the journey. Becoming a professional is not the end, merely a stop en route. The continuous development – constantly developing and updating knowledge and expertise – is what separates the professional from the technician.

Fullan (2007) suggests that every teacher has to learn, virtually every day. I would contest this and suggest that it is not 'virtually' every day, but indeed *every* single day! He goes on to state that 'to improve we need to do two things: to measure ourselves and be open about what we are doing'. The reflective process is one approach to this challenge, and one I will discuss in more detail in the following chapters of this book.

Professional autonomy

There is, of course, a well-documented, ongoing debate about auton-omy for professionals. There is always a fine balance between, on the one hand, the need for results and accountability, and on the other, the professional judgement and independent licence required to respond to day-to-day situations.

Quicke (1998) argues that teachers can be moral leaders only if they have sufficient autonomy to develop 'strategies and approaches in ways which, in their view, will benefit society' (cited in Banks and Mayes, 2001: 47). However, decades of government intervention have led to the erosion of professional autonomy. In particular, for teachers, 'the application of rigor, and of robust standards and pro-cedures by successive governments, has widely been viewed as an undermining of autonomy and creative potential in the classroom, with teachers as ciphers, simply technicians of the process' (Storey and Hutchison, 2001: 47).

Brown (1989) argues that 'teachers work spontaneously from their own situations and this does not tally well with a more systematic, define objectives – plan activities – evaluate achievement of objects, approach'.

It is this spontaneity and autonomy that should be nurtured in order to maintain a true sense of professionalism. The aim of this book is to examine some of the ways that the professional might be able to develop self-awareness regarding their own skills, aptitudes and values, through a process based upon reflective practice.

Professional accountability

However, it would be wrong to argue for a generation of maverick individuals, each working from individual ideals and purposes. Of course, we need boundaries and guidelines. In Scotland, the GTCS (2008) believes that the Code of Professionalism and Conduct has achieved this. 'It also has the benefit of making the profession more secure in its own professional standards yet, at the same time, making it more accountable to the public.' The GTCS advises teachers that they have 'tried to balance producing a book of rules or an exhaustive list of "do's and don'ts" with the broader, less prescriptive approach of a Code. This is to assist and support the individual teacher in relation to the professional judgments he or she has to make on a day-to-day basis'.

Models of professionalism

Eraut (1994: 2) suggests two models for teacher professionalism: the 'functionalist model emphasises expertise and relative autonomy; the traditional model concerns restrictions for entry and *continuing competence* with adherence to a code and self-regulation'.
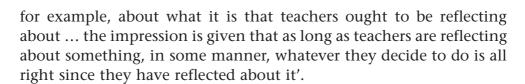
It is this continuing competence, the continuous professional development which drives the ideas in this book. 'Reflection is skilled practice that uses experience, knowledge and enquiry processes to increase our capability to intervene, interpret, and act positively on successes, problems, issues and significant questions' (Ghaye, 2011: 20).

Fullan (2008: 80) agrees: 'No part of the work of a consistent effective performance is static. In the midst of any action, there is a constant learning whether it consists of detecting and correcting common errors or discovering new ways to improve'.

Moon (2001: 365) argues that 'apparently, the most obvious reason for teachers to undergo work towards reflective practice is because teacher educators think it is a good thing'. This is echoed by Tabachnick and Zeicher (1991: 14, cited in Pollard, 2002: 14) where they suggest that 'neither Cruikshank nor Schön have much to say,

for example, about what it is that teachers ought to be reflecting about … the impression is given that as long as teachers are reflecting about something, in some manner, whatever they decide to do is all right since they have reflected about it'.

One of the aims of this book is to justify the development of reflective practice and open up the debate about what to do, how to do it and how to turn reflection into meaningful action and development for the professional. Above all, it is about meaningful self-initiated reflection where the reflector feels in control of the process and has ownership of the agendas. It needs to be so much more than a tick-box activity or a task completed to keep 'our masters' happy.

This process is described as:

> 'changing common sense thinkers', who are externally motivated to reflect, into 'pedagogical thinkers', who reflect habitually. (LaBoskey cited in Banks and Mayes, 2001: 366)

Professional reflection as action research

Richard Winter (2001) argues that 'practitioner action research is part of the general ideal of professionalism'. In addition to this, Elliot (1982) defines action research as: 'the study of a social situation with the view to improving the quality of action within it … (The) total process – review, diagnosis, planning, implementation, monitoring effects – provides the necessary link between self-evaluation and professional development' (cited in Banks and Mayes, 2001: 297).

Tony Ghaye (2011), speaks in favour of collaborative research, and suggests that:

> Improvement cannot take place unless we learn from experience. Failure to do this is resigning ourselves to being prisoners to our past. Reflection-on-practice is an intentional action; the intention is to improve the quality of educational experiences through a rigorous reflection of the learning that has accrued as a consequence of engaging reflective practices of one kind or another. (Ghaye, 2011: 134)

As Clark and Peterson (1986: 37) suggest, 'Teachers are revealed as responsible, reflective professionals, whose theories and belief systems influence, to a large degree, their perceptions of classroom experiences and who thus monitor their thoughts and actions involved in the teaching process'. Thiessen (2001: 320) puts it neatly: 'Teachers learn from each other. They cite fellow teachers as the most valuable

source of professional development.' The approach advocated in this book seeks to take advantage of this valuable resource as a means of facilitating professional development.

However, it cannot be assumed that because you are a good professional, you therefore reflect, nor that because you reflect you are therefore a good professional. Moon (2001) suggests that, perhaps the most important thing is the idea that the 'teacher as reflective practitioner will not happen simply because it is a good, or even compelling idea' (Moon, 1990: 69).

Professional reflection in initial teacher education

It is important, therefore, to explore the various ways in which reflection has been introduced, encouraged and formalized in order to evaluate its impact on developing professional practice.

Government initiatives

Recent government initiatives have tried to raise the status of this kind of reflection by integrating 'reflection' into the requirements for registration. In the Standard for Initial Teacher Education in Scotland, it describes one element of professionalism as: 'taking responsibility for and being committed to your own professional development arising from professional enquiry and reflection on your own and other professional practices' (GTCS, 2008, section 3.1).

In England, there is a similar emphasis placed on reflection. The QTS standards guidance Q7 (a) states that teachers should:

> Reflect on and improve their practice, and take responsibility for identifying and meeting their developing professional needs.

> In the context of new professionalism, teachers find themselves increasingly both developing their skills as coaches and mentors, and benefiting from the coaching and mentoring that they receive. (GTC, 2008 Rationale:1)

It goes on to state: 'This standard requires trainees to develop an ability to make judgements about the effectiveness of their teaching, and to identify ways of bringing about improvement.'

Here we have a clear steer in the direction of reflection. The fact that the requirements for qualification include such an approach does

provide some justification for the ideas in this book. However, beyond that, there is the idea that we remember best the things we learn for ourselves; we learn best when we feel motivated, in control, with some sense of ownership and purpose to our learning. These elements suggest that despite any external pressures, reflection can be a very useful, powerful, supportive and motivational influence in our professional development.

What is reflection?

Bolton (2010: 13) said that: 'Reflective practice is learning through examining what we think happened on any occasion, and how we think others perceived the event and us, opening our practice to scrutiny by others.'

> Length of experience does not automatically confer insight and wisdom. Ten years of experience can be one year's worth of distracted experiences repeated ten times.

She then goes on to suggest that

> Reflection becomes critical when it has two distinct purposes. The first is to understand how considerations of power undergrid, frame and distort educational processes and interactions. The second is to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but academically work against our best interests. (Brookfield, 1995: 7–8)

It is this improvement that is essential to the reflection. It is not enough merely to reflect.

> A generalization that seems to apply to teaching, is the fact that there is relatively little concern for the effect of reflective practice on the subject of the professional's action ... Since the improvement in learning is deemed central to the purposes of these professions, this seems to be a surprising omission ... Copeland, Birmingham and Lewin (1993: 247–59) ask a critical question: 'Do students of highly reflective teachers learn more or better or even differently?' (Moon, 1999)

In 2000, the GTC in England stated: 'The focus for the early years of professional development should be on engaging the individual teacher in reflection and action on pedagogy, the quality of learning, setting targets and expectations, equal opportunities, planning, assessment and monitoring, curriculum and subject knowledge, and classroom knowledge' (GTC, 2000 rationale p1). There is a strong lead here to what we should be reflecting upon and what kind of action we might take as a result of this reflection.

However, reflecting on practice, after the event, is a luxury that most teachers say they cannot afford. Ask in any staffroom and the response will be, 'When?'. With all the pressures and requirements of the modern classroom, teachers do not need more 'distractions'. Talk to them about reflection and they will tell you that they do indeed reflect all the time. But the reflection of a seasoned professional takes place *in* practice, *on* the job. Indeed for some, this takes the form of 'firefighting', of reacting to the things that are not working. Adapting, adjusting, responding – all are already done in practice: professionals instinctively develop practice. Why then the need for a formal approach? Why more bureaucracy? If it is about reflection, whose reflection are we talking about? Is it imposed, contrived, something to deliver an agenda, owned by someone else, or has it some purpose and benefit for those taking part?
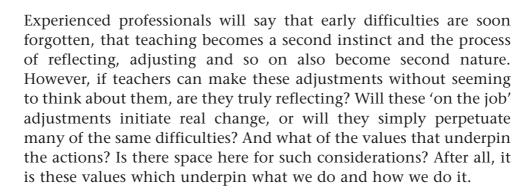
Wildman and Niles observed that systematic reflection on teaching required a sound ability to understand classroom events in an objective manner (in Banks and Mayes, 2001: 364). They suggest that teachers rarely have the time or opportunities to view their own teaching or the teaching of others in an objective manner. Further observation revealed the tendency of teachers to evaluate events rather than review the contributory factors in a considered manner – in effect, standing outside the situation or progressing to the higher levels of reflection in terms of Van Manen's model (Van Manen, 1991).

Reflecting *in* practice is a skill that develops as we progress from novice to expert in our profession. Initially, there will be careful planning, supplemented by more than a little 'fire fighting', as things do not go as expected and adaptations need to be made. At such times reflection takes place. However, this reflection is not articulated, and is partly an unconscious 'survival' instinct, to get us through the experience.

Taken *in* practice, during the event, it is at least honest, useful, acted upon and 'vital'. *After* the event, if it happens at all, it is more about the past than the future. It might be a brief glance over the shoulder, a hope that tomorrow different mistakes will be made. Often, it's buried in the belief that there is no time for dwelling on the lessons of the past. Yet, when it is possible to stop and reflect, when perhaps there is someone to listen, then there is the opportunity to learn from an experience, to look towards the future with new insight. Surely, this is what reflection is meant to be about?

Experienced professionals will say that early difficulties are soon forgotten, that teaching becomes a second instinct and the process of reflecting, adjusting and so on also become second nature. However, if teachers can make these adjustments without seeming to think about them, are they truly reflecting? Will these 'on the job' adjustments initiate real change, or will they simply perpetuate many of the same difficulties? And what of the values that underpin the actions? Is there space here for such considerations? After all, it is these values which underpin what we do and how we do it.

Much better then to stop for a moment, to take stock, to articulate what is happening and to work out the reasons why. We move on then, from the particular incident to the more general policy and pedagogy, where consideration produces real change, where practice is transformed. This is where reflection, articulation and theory come together to provide 'institutional change'.

However, this skill does not come overnight. Professional reflection, being encouraged to stop and take stock of what happened, and why it happened, can help to develop this professional instinct in a much less haphazard way. It is well known that it is *experience*, and not *years in post* that gives professionals the best resource on which to draw. That experience is most valuable, and its benefit most palpable, when some kind of reflection takes place. Better still if such reflection is articulated and acted upon in some way. As Elizabeth Bird puts it, 'where a teacher makes a change to her practice as a result of this process, the next step is evaluation of the impact on her practice' (Bird, 2001: 290). There are a number of models which strive to encourage reflection and its impact on practice, and I will outline the traditional models before outlining the main approach advocated in this book.

Traditional models

Traditionally, reflection is very closely bound up with assessment, evaluation and accountability. The reflection is there to provide evidence to the person doing the assessing. The reflection itself is the manifestation of thinking and learning, and this is shared with the person who has the authority to make judgement and supply support. In the past, this has been bound to some form of written reflective paper, or, more recently, on observation and feedback.

Observation and feedback in ITE

In ITE, the tutor would go into a school and observe the trainee teacher in class. This would be followed by a discussion where the tutor would try to elicit reflective comments from the student which sum up, justify or expose their ideas, approaches and values. This opportunity to discuss practice and justify approaches has many benefits. However, it also puts a good deal of pressure on the participants, and a lot of significance on a one-off situation where the lesson and feedback take place.

In Scotland, it was found that the discussion was often tainted by the very act of assessment. The feedback comments, both oral and written, were lost under the weighty significance of the grade given. It was the grade and not the formative comments that were the focus. Students were most interested in the A grade, or the D. Tutors were often preoccupied to 'justify the grade' in their feedback.

In recent years, there has been a move away from this approach. Informed by the findings of Black and Williams (2002) and Shirley Clarke (2003), the grade approach has been replaced by a simple satisfactory/unsatisfactory mark: thus enabling the oral and written feedback to be formative and represent a positive look forward to what the student can do to improve in the future. However, there still exists the imbalance of power between the person reflecting on their practice and the supporter who is more knowledgeable and has more power and authority. Such a model of reflection gives the reflector little sense of autonomy or freedom to experiment and develop. Indeed, it may inhibit reflection if the reflector feels that honest reflection might be judged to be inadequate for a successful outcome to the interaction.

Part of teacher training is concerned with trying to develop reflexive practice and reflective practitioners. Within the ITE institutions, there are mechanisms to encourage students to reflect upon their teaching and learning experiences. These tend to take the form of conversations with an 'expert', be it a tutor or classroom practitioner. One of the difficulties with this is that the students themselves do not 'own' the agenda. They have some reflection, but this tends to be based on the requirements of the course for them to meet certain criteria. They also have the driving need to 'be successful', or at least to appear to be successful. This is not entirely conducive with someone being totally honest and prepared to admit what their heartfelt reflections might be.

What this book is about is something quite different. The best and most significant reflection is that which is self-motivated. The only agenda involved is that of the person trying to make sense of their own learning, and wanting to make things better. It has little to do with 'passing the course', or even with getting a 'high grade'. It is about learning and having a disposition to learn continuously.

What is the Impact on Practice?

This discussion about reflection is all very well, but it is important to remember that it should be taking us somewhere, otherwise it is going to be lost in all the other activities associated with the teaching profession. Reflection needs to have some impact. This impact should be such that it leads you to progress in your understanding, expertise or practice. It might lead you to then go out to search for informed views through your professional reading. It might prompt you to develop practice through experimenting with your own pedagogy. It might prompt you to seek support from a peer, a colleague or a 'more experienced' professional.

One way or another, the reflection needs to have some impact on the learning of the person reflecting, or on the learning of those in their care. Therefore, there needs to be some kind of action that follows this reflection. This is something that will be discussed further in Chapter 5.

> ### Summary
>
> In this chapter, we looked at professionalism and how it is defined. We explored the significance of professional reflection in the development of skills, attitudes and values. We also explored the link between reflection and professionalism and how the two elements support each other. We then looked at some of the benefits and challenges associated with regular professional reflection. Different ways of supporting and encouraging reflection were evaluated. Finally, we considered the importance of the link between reflection and the impact on practice.

Focus Reflection Questions

It is customary in books such as this to ask the reader to reflect on their learning. However, this is generally considered as a personal reflection, done in isolation, without a need to articulate in any way

the reaction to the focus questions. In order to be consistent with the philosophy espoused by the book, I suggest that this reflection is articulated, ideally with a peer who is also engaged in this study. Below are some focus questions to consider. If possible, get someone else to take on the role of enabler: asking the questions but not putting forward their own views, enabling you to think about, reflect on and articulate your own thoughts first. This should be your first experience of having a 'professional monologue', where you have the opportunity to articulate your thinking safe from judgement or interruption.

Questions for Reflection

- What experience have you had of being required to reflect on your own performance/understanding?
- Who did you feel was making the decisions about what to discuss?
- To what extent were you wary of expressing your true feelings?
- To what extent did you feel like the other person was really listening and was interested in your progress?
- What is your view of the idea that there could be reflection which is your own: your own agenda, your own opportunity to explore your own development and understanding – free from any sense of judgement or criticism?
- Discuss a recent occasion where you reflected in practice, where you reflected on practice after the event, and where you reflected in a manner that enabled you to have an impact on the next steps for you as a professional.
- Read through and look out for definitions of reflection and professionalism.
- Consider whether the approaches discussed suggest encouragement for the reflection to be open and honest, genuine reflection.
- Consider whether the scenarios discussed do in fact overcome the possible challenges of a power imbalance between participants.
- Consider whether there is, nevertheless, still a danger of imposed agendas or contrived reflection.
- Consider other arguments, not presented here, that the more traditional modes of reflection presented in the readings still have much to offer in supporting professional reflection.

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