

FIFTH EDITION

Reflective Practice

Writing and Professional Development

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Los Angeles | London | New Delhi
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SAGE Publications Ltd
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55 City Road
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd
B 1/1 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area
Mathura Road
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd
3 Church Street
#10-04 Samsung Hub
Singapore 049483

Editor: James Clark
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Production editor: Tom Bedford
Copyeditor: Elaine Leek
Proofreader: Bryan Campbell
Indexer: Martin Hargreaves
Marketing manager: Lorna Patkai
Cover design: Sheila Tong
Typeset by: C&M Digital (P) Ltd, Chennai, India
Printed in the UK

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First edition published 2000. Reprinted 2003 (twice),
2004

Second edition published 2005. Reprinted 2008,
2009 (twice)

Third edition published 2010. Reprinted 2010, 2012,
2013 (twice)

Fourth edition published 2014. Reprinted 2015, 2017 (twice)

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Library of Congress Control Number: 2017952666

British Library Cataloguing in Publication data

A catalogue record for this book is available from
the British Library

ISBN 978-1-5264-1169-3

ISBN 978-1-5264-1170-9 (pbk)

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Dedicated to all who heal, care and educate.

*Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world.
(Albert Einstein)*

*Try to love the questions themselves like locked rooms and like
books that are written in a very foreign tongue. Do not now seek the
answers, which cannot be given to you. Live the questions now.
(Rainer Maria Rilke)*



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1

Reflective Practice: an Introduction

Reflective practice is introduced and described, its social and political responsibility outlined. Donald Schön's theory that reflection-in-, and on-action are essential to inform us how to work in conditions of uncertainty is outlined. Reflection and reflexivity, common blocks to them, and how to discover just what each practitioner needs to reflect upon, are defined and explained.

By three methods we may learn wisdom: first, by reflection, which is noblest; second, by imitation, which is easiest; and third by experience, which is the bitterest. (Confucius, quoted in Hinett, 2002, p. v)

There are in our existence spots of time /... whence ... our minds
Are nourished and invisibly repaired; /... Such moments
Are scattered everywhere. (Wordsworth, [1880] 2004, p. 208)

How can we develop the practitioner from the practice? (GB)

How can we know the dancer from the dance? (Yeats, 1962, p. 128)

Reflective practice is a state of mind, an ongoing attitude to life and work, the pearl grit in the oyster of practice and education; danger lies in it being a separate curriculum element with a set of exercises. Brookfield calls it

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'a reflexive habit ... second nature' (2009). It enables us to make illuminative sense of where we are in our own practice, and our relation to our profession and our institution: we don't travel far with it. Yet it makes the difference between 20 years of experience and merely one year of experience repeated 20 times (Beaty, 1997, p. 8).

Reflective practice can enable (future) professionals to learn from experience about: themselves; their studies, their work; the way they relate to home and work, significant others and wider society and culture; the way social and cultural structures (e.g. institutions) are formed and control us. Indeed, having the ability to reflect is a key element of employability in today's professions (Wharton, 2017). Professionals face complex and unpredictable situations; they need complex and diverse reflective and reflexive processes. Engaging in these critically will be reflected in the quality of their work or studies (see Whelan and Gent, 2013). It brings greater unity and wholeness of experience to the practitioner and greater empathy between them and their client. Job satisfaction will increase, and work-related stress decrease (Alarcon and Lyons, 2011).

Perhaps the most accessible form of freedom, the most subjectively enjoyed, and the most useful to human society consists of being good at your job and therefore taking pleasure in doing it – I really believe that to live happily you have to have something to do, but it shouldn't be too easy, or else something to wish for, but not just any old wish; something there's a hope of achieving. (Levi, 1988, p. 139)

If it wasn't for reflective practice, [stuff] would undoubtedly go around and around in my mind.

It is much more helpful to get it out of my head and onto the paper and look back.

I feel I can genuinely ask my clients, 'unpick unpick unpick, cry, open up'... because I have done it, I know what I am asking you to do is really difficult, but I also know that it is a really helpful.

You relate the clinical work to the theory in reflective practice, and that gives you that 360° knowing, 'now I understand what the book is talking about'.

(Reflective practitioners quoted in Collins, 2013, pp. 54, 83, 84, 88)

Reflective practice can give strategies to bring things out into the open, and frame appropriate and searching questions never asked before. It can provide relatively safe and confidential ways to explore and express experiences otherwise difficult or impossible to communicate. It can challenge assumptions, ideological illusions, damaging social and cultural biases, inequalities; and it questions personal behaviours that perhaps silence the

voices of others or otherwise marginalise them. This book consistently enables enquiry into:

- what we know and wish or need to explore further
- what we know but do not know we know
- what we do not know and want to know
- what we think, feel, believe, value, understand about our role and boundaries
- how our actions match up with what we believe
- how to value and take into account personal feelings.

Practitioners explore and experiment with difficult areas of experience, such as:

- how to perceive from others' perspective
- how to value others' perspective, however different they are from us
- what we can change in our context; how to work with what we cannot change
- how others perceive us, and their feelings and thoughts about events, and our actions
- why we become stressed, and its impact on life and practice
- how to counteract seemingly *given* social, cultural and political structures.

We know a great deal more than we are aware, absorbing information unwittingly. We have challenging material shoved into boxes mentally labelled *do not open*. We have not celebrated and learned from positive experiences (Ghaye, 2011).

Donald Schön's Swampy Lowlands

Schön (1987) described professional practice as being in a flat place where we can't see very far. Everyone would love to work on a high place from which all the near valleys and far hills are in view. Everyday life, work and learning rarely have signposts, definitive maps, or friendly police to help with directions. The teacher in the classroom, clinician in the consulting room, healthcare professional with a patient, social worker in the client's home, lawyer with a tricky issue, member of the clergy, or the police officer themselves, relies on knowledge, skills and experience, and what they can glean quickly from immediate sources. Each one is rarely certain what is needed now. We cannot stand outside ourselves and our work (from the cliff), in order to be objective and clear. We work and learn in

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the 'swampy lowlands' (Schön, 1987) by trial and error, learning from our mistakes. Everyone gets it wrong sometimes and has to live and work with the consequences.

Reflective practice makes maps. Everyone needs thorough methods to sort through *and learn from* muddles, uncertainties, unclarities, mistakes and anxieties. All need to perceive hitherto unnoticed issues, which will otherwise cause greater and greater problems. How do we know which way to go, to avoid sinking into Schön's bog? How do we know which unclear path to take at a junction as they all seem to lead further into the swamp?

I remind us of Schön's powerful image because we cannot climb out of the lowland, but do the best we can down here. There often seems no clear reason for choosing this path through tussocks or that one over a muddy stream. What and who can we trust here? That bright green grass looks inviting, but I sink up to my knees in water. What is my compass?

We do have compasses and maps: Schön (in Argyris and Schön, 1974) called them our *theories-in-use*, which he said we develop within our practice as 'a conversation with the situation' (Schön, 1983, p. 76). But these maps are indistinct because they are tacitly rather than consciously used: our actions are governed by habitual patterns and ways of being. We use our *theories-in-use* unwittingly. If I were questioned about an action I would respond with *espoused theory* which I have thought out, but is possibly at variance with what I actually do.

So to develop my practice, gain greater effectiveness, I need to observe and understand my *theories-in-use*, what I actually do, alongside my *espoused theories*, what I believe I do. And as far as is practically possible I need to bring these into congruence (close to being the same thing). What equipment can I rely upon in this foggy swamp? Where, when and how do I begin?

I begin with reflective practice. We really are thrown onto our own resources in the everyday work and study environment, and have to trust what equipment we have: reflective practice can provide the very best. Schön said the process of trial and error and learning from mistakes is artistry. The reliable map and accurate compass are reflection and reflexivity.

Schön gave us the *swamp* image because he knew that all education requires entering a place of not-knowing, of having to ask significant questions to find out. The traveller on the educative journey through difficult terrain has to trust their few pieces of equipment. They might have helpers along the way, but no definitive guide. Being guided with certainty through the swamp would not be educative.

We learn by doing, through the very struggle to make our own judgements, not by being told where, when and how to turn, who to trust and

what is the correct path. The reflective educative process is one of each individual constantly asking *why* of everything, from the individual case to the running of the whole organisation. Albert Einstein ([1929] 2002) was successful partly because he doggedly and constantly asked questions with seemingly obvious answers. Childlike, he asked why?, how?, what?, rather than accepting givens or assumptions. He had the confidence to stay with and be open to: 'love[ing] the *questions themselves* like locked rooms', and certainly '*liv[ing]* the questions' (Rilke, [1934] 1993, p. 35).

There are no single answers to 'How could I have done better?' Yet more questions arise instead, such as 'If I had done this, which I think would have been better, what would the patient/doctor have felt?' Answers tend to put a stop to the enquiring process; more and more pertinent questions take us deeper (see David et al., 2013). As Master's student Ann commented: 'No wonder it all takes so much time!' Exploring issues in depth and width can take time. Though enlightenment can arrive after 15 minutes' writing, as you might discover here.

Now might be a good time to check out what reflective practice writing is. You can find a quick summary in the online resources.

Visit <https://study.sagepub.com/bolton5e>.

Write to Learn

You may have noticed this in the Preface of the book. Each chapter includes *Write to Learn*. These exercises can take very different lengths of time. Some are very affirming, some challenging; all result in positive writing. Each can be done individually or by a facilitated group: many are useful for initial group forming. See Chapter 8 for more advice on starting writing. For now:

- This is unplanned, off-the-top-of-the-head writing; try to allow yourself to write anything.
- Whatever you write will be right; there is no critic, red pen poised.
- All that matters here is the writing's content; if you need to adjust grammar and so on, you can - later.
- Ignore the *Inner Saboteur* who niggles about proper form and grammar, or says your writing is rubbish.
- This writing is private, belongs to the writer, who will be its first reader.

(Continued)

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- No one else need ever read it, unless the writer decides to share it with trusted confidential other(s).
- Before doing any of the exercises here, or in other chapters, do a *six-minute-write* about anything to limber up before starting (see Chapter 8).
- Reread all the writing with care and attention before reading it out to anyone.
- Writing can then be shared fruitfully with another or a group, if this seems appropriate.

Advice for facilitators

It helps the process if:

- each writer reads silently back to themselves before reading to a group or partner
- each person knows at the start they will be invited to read out
- everyone is offered the option of not reading if it feels inappropriate
- you know that many exercises occasion laughter, some tears: both are fine
- a facilitator gives instructions in numbered order
- participants finish writing each section before hearing the next
- minimal explanations are given: people usually 'play the game' if they trust the facilitator.

Visit <https://study.sagepub.com/bolton5e> for more tips and resources
Try this next exercise to get you started.

1.1 Names

1. Write anything about your name: memories, impressions, likes, hates, what people have said, your nicknames over the years: anything.
2. Write a selection of names you might have preferred to your own.
3. Write a letter to yourself from one of these chosen names.

Seeking a Route

Route-finding equipment or information can only help when the traveller knows their destination. One cannot find the solution without having identified the problem accurately and precisely. This is the conundrum of

reflective practice. We want to become good experienced practitioners. But to do this, we have to discover which specific areas of practice we need to improve, and why. We find out by exploring, experimenting and discovering, with uncertainty as the central paradox. Dewey (1933a) said doubt and uncertainty is an essential element of effective reflection.

Focusing upon personal beliefs, theories, values-in-use, and reflecting upon them, is tricky. So much we have always thought or believed is taken for granted – ‘everyone in my workplace thinks this way’. The very structure of language creates assumptions about things being immutable: this is how they are. Yet we have only to widen our perspective to perceive that other cultures do it differently, believe differently.

We all know colleagues who cannot say ‘I don’t know’, believing they act the ‘right way’. Their effectiveness is severely diminished by their inflexible need to be right. Schön called these people *Technical Rationalists*, who assume they work on the cliff-top where they see widely and can know what’s going on, what the outcomes will be and that everyone agrees with them (or should do). We neither respect them nor trust their judgement, knowing (even if they do not) that they are indeed in the lowlands with us.

Reflective practice helps us accept uncertainty which is the route to effective learning and professional artistry. It enables us to say ‘I don’t know what’s going on here, and I want to find out’. We find what kind of practitioner we are, and connect ourselves with our practitioner-selves (Brookfield, 2017). All this gives confidence and strength to:

- let go of certainty, in a safe enough environment
- look for direction without knowing where we need to go
- begin to act without knowing how.

This essential uncertainty is hard for many; practice and organisational contexts influence the effectiveness of reflection (Wilson, 2013). I found some senior practitioners heavily defended, using self-protective reasoning as proof against uncertainty and doubt. Their sense of themselves in their role was paradoxically too uncertain for them to lay it open to doubt and enquiry. This uncertainty is also difficult for students. ‘Pre-service teachers want answers and methods. They want to be certain, to know: but certainty does not generate the flexibly enquiring attitude required by learning. In [professional] education, working towards habits of uncertainty and puzzlement is need[ed] ... [In fact] certainty goes down as experiential knowledge goes up ...’ (Phillion and Connelly, 2004, p. 468).

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Our technologically and digitally based culture has not valued reflection and still less reflexivity, where market place, machine and computer metaphors are paramount. They have been ghettoised as *soft and fluffy* (feminine), a waste of valuable professional time, because they are unmalleable by masculine processes of commodification, nor can they be reduced to component mechanical parts, or tested by tick boxes. Reflection and reflexivity are sophisticated human processes, requiring sophisticated educative support:

The goal of education, if we are to survive, is the *facilitation of change and learning*. The only person who is educated is the person who has learned how to learn; the person who has learned how to adapt and change; the person who has realised that no knowledge is secure, that only the process of seeking knowledge gives a basis for security. Changingness, a reliance on process rather than on static knowledge, is the only thing that makes any sense as a goal for education. (Rogers, 1969, p. 152)

Reflective practice can increase:

- acceptance of, and confidence with, the essential complexity, uncertainty and perspectival nature of professional life
- reflexive critique of personal values, ethics, prejudices, boundaries, assumptions about roles and identity, decision-making processes, taken-for-granted structures
- reflexive critique of professional environments and workplaces
- awareness of diversity, and struggle against misuse of institutional power and managerialism
- willingness to explore the interrelatedness of the professional and the personal
- sensitive, fruitful review of 'forgotten' areas of practice
- analysis of hesitations, skill and knowledge gaps
- respect for, and trust in, others' and own feelings and emotions
- development of observation and communication abilities
- constructive awareness of collegial relationships
- relief of stress by facing problematic or painful episodes
- identification of learning needs
- communication of experience and expertise with a wide range of colleagues.

Reflection-In- and On-Practice: Our Map for the Swampy Lowlands

Schön divided reflective practice into *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action*.

Reflection-in-action is the hovering hawk in the mind, enabling us to bring remembered skills, experience and knowledge into play at the right time. We have to act immediately and cannot normally say to a student (patient/client/parishioner etc.) ‘sorry but I’ve got to stop and think how to do this’. The hawk enables us to draw on our *theory and knowledge in use* as we go along. With more experience, we have more to draw upon; reflection-in-action can work more swiftly to bring appropriate values, knowledge, skill or theory into use.

Experienced practice relies on reflection-in-action, rather than working from automatic assumptions. This latter can lead to actions at variance with our own espoused values, and even those of the profession. Copley (2011), a police trainer, highlights police value assumptions about race, in, for example, the Stephen Lawrence case. Actions based on skilful, experienced assessment, including awareness of appropriate values, might lead to completely different policing outcomes.

Reflection-on-action is reflection after the event, and increases the effectiveness of reflection-in-action. The artistry of practice is when our knowledge, skill and theory base becomes:

- large and diverse appropriate to our practice
- more and more available when needed.

Reflection and Reflexivity: Demystification

Reflection and reflexivity are the essential elements of reflective practice. Perceiving the difference makes it less of an ‘ill-defined process’. (Bleakley, 1999, p. 317)

Reflection is in-depth review of events, either alone – say, in a journal – or with critical support with a supervisor or group. The reflector attempts to work out what happened, what they thought or felt about it, who was involved, when and where, what these others might have experienced and thought and felt about it from their own perspective. Most significantly, the reflector considers WHY?, and studies significant theory and texts from the wider sphere. It is to bring experiences into focus from as many angles as possible: people, place, relationships, timing, chronology, causality, connections, the social and political context, and so on. Seemingly innocent details might prove to be key; seemingly vital details may be irrelevant. Reflection might prove something thought to be vital to be insignificant, or lead to insight about something unnoticed at the time, pinpointing perhaps when the seemingly innocent detail was missed.

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Reflexivity is finding strategies to question our own attitudes, theories-in-use, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions; to understand our complex roles in relation to others. It develops responsible and ethical action, such as becoming aware of how much our ways of being are culturally determined; other peoples have very different expectations and norms (Bager-Charleson, 2010). To be reflexive is to examine, for example, the limits of our knowledge, of how our own behaviour plays into organisational structures counter to our own personal and professional values, and why such practices might marginalise groups or exclude individuals. It is questioning how congruent our actions are with our espoused values and theories (e.g. about religion or gender).

Thus, we recognise we are active in shaping our surroundings, ways of relating to others and communicating. We begin asking critical questions, rather than merely accepting or reacting; we help review and revise ethical ways of being and relating (Cunliffe, 2009b). Reflexivity means we might point out inconsistencies (e.g. between espoused and values-in-action) in political, social or cultural structures (e.g. my employing organisation).

To be reflexive involves thinking from within experiences, or as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it, 'turned or reflected back upon the mind itself', and 'the effect of the personality on what is being investigated'. This is complex artistry, working out how our presence influences knowledge and actions. Reflexivity involves innovative dynamic methods, rather than coming from *reflex*, 'an action performed independently of the will, as an automatic response to a stimulus' (OED). A reflexive-minded practitioner might ask themselves:

- Why did this pass me by?
- What were my assumptions which made me not notice?
- What are the organisational etc. pressures or ideologies which obstructed my perception?
- How and in what way were my actions perceived by others?

Such deep questioning can enable development, much more than problem-solving questions such as 'what happened?', 'what did I think and feel about it?', 'how can I do it better next time?'

Reflexivity is the near-impossible adventure of making aspects of the self strange: attempting to stand back from belief and value systems and observe habitual ways of thinking and relating to others, structures of understanding ourselves, our relationship to the world, and the way we are experienced and perceived by others and their assumptions about the way that the world impinges upon them. Questioning assumptions is a struggle

against a sense of immutability – ‘it’s just how things are’, or ‘it’s common sense’ – so significant it’s ‘like laying down charges of psychological dynamite ... educators who foster transformative learning are rather like psychological and cultural demolition experts’ (Brookfield, 1990, p. 178).

Looking at ourselves thus can feel ‘embarrassing’ (Bager-Charleson, 2010, p. x); it requires bravery in staying with uncertainty, finding out others’ perceptions, flexibility to change deeply held ways of being, and willingness to be noticed (perhaps as ‘whistle-blowers’, Hargreaves and Page, 2013, p. 160) – all of which are highly responsible social and political activities.

Strategies are required, such as internal dialogue, and the support of trusted others such as supervisor or peer-reader of an account. Hibbert (2012) describes effective teaching methods for developing reflexivity from reflection, and Hanson (2013) explores deepening pedagogical practices around critical reflection and reflexivity.

Reflective practice enables us to wonder at our own world, work, course, and indeed ourselves, because ‘problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as givens ... he must make sense of an uncertain situation that initially makes no sense’ (Schön, 1983, p. 40). It is looking at everyday taken-for-granted, perceiving them as (possibly shockingly) unfamiliar and open to change. It ‘is designed to facilitate identification, examination, and modification of the theories-in-use that shape behaviour, [a process of professional development which] requires change in deeply held action theories’ (Osterman and Kottkamp, 2004, pp. 13–14). Such deep change can involve ‘loss ... of an element that made a part of what you were’ (Roffey-Barentsen and Malthouse, 2013, p. 20). Reflective practice helps us to meet this in the spirit of discovery rather than defensively (Schön, 1987) in and about our workplace (Matsuo, 2012).

Many writing suggestions begin with one of the querying words, or *tin-openers*. Between them they can set us off on a journey of asking more and more significant questions.

I keep six honest serving men
 (They taught me all I knew);
 Their names are What and Why and When
 And How and Where and Who. (Kipling, 1902, p. 83)

These servants have served me well for years, too. As well as starting reflective and reflexive questions, they also can create checklists for planning and writing, helping ensure we have covered everything. Eimear

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Allen (see example in Chapter 3) said 'I think it is a method which will help me explore future problems I might face in reflective writing by challenging them with these questions'.

Here is a seemingly simple, obvious reflection, yet its significance to Kirsten Jack's practice was profound: 'it was a very big and complex thing and I still feel that I was coming to terms with it only years later. It didn't have a "start" and "finish". Maybe the initial understanding of what was going on was there, but the actual thinking and feeling processes continued and might never end.'

The man in the green pyjamas

A first-year student nurse on my first hospital placement, I met 'Harry' who was confused and trying to get out of bed to go home. Unable to eat, he repeatedly tried to pull out his naso-gastric tube, making his nose bleed, so the registered nurses decided to bandage his hands.

I found the image of this agitated man extremely distressing. Tall and thin, in ill-fitting green pyjamas with frequently exposed genitalia, he had lost his dignity. I felt very sad and helpless to do anything to assist, apart from speaking to him quietly and soothingly.

I could not get Harry out of my mind and spent the night crying, feeling a grief I had not felt for a long time. I realised that Harry reminded me of my own father who had died when I was ten. The same build as Harry, my dad died in the same hospital in circumstances which remained a mystery to me. My sadness was for my dad; I was grieving as a daughter, not as Harry's nurse.

Through reflection I was able to make sense of my feelings of fear, anxiety and real heartbreak, and come to an understanding of how my grief as a daughter differed to that of student nurse. The reflective process led to emotional awareness and the beginning of my journey to manage my feelings, so that they did not overwhelm me when in practice. My emotions had been tangled; reflection helped me to unravel my grief, so that I could continue to nurse Harry without feeling overwhelmed.

Kirsten Jack

Many professionals never realise certain individuals distress them because they remind them of someone else in their life. Kirsten asked the critical question, why did this man so distress her? She wasn't satisfied with: it's a

very sad case, of course I'm distressed. I myself took years to learn that I responded defensively and weakly to bullying male senior colleagues because they reminded me of my brother. My career would have been immeasurably enhanced if I could have learned this as early as Kirsten's reflection began to help her. Like Kirsten, I bear burdens of past events which colour how I perceive the present. We all 'relive' (Bruce, 2013) past emotions in present events, processes called projection or transference in psychology (Humphrey, 2011). Reflective practice can significantly prevent these inhibiting or skewing our present abilities and empathy. Understanding these past experiences can enhance present practice. Reflection upon my past experience enables me to offer better support to those who are bullied, as well as help bullies tackle their essential weakness. And Dr Mark Purvis was able to treat extremely sick children once he had reflected upon his little brother's death (Chapter 2).

Reflective Practice: a Political and Social Responsibility

There is much in life we are genuinely not in control of, such as birth, death, illness, accidents, and obeying the law of the land. We may not even fully control our feelings and thoughts; we are surely responsible for our actions. Reflective practitioners take their share of responsibility for the political, social and cultural situations within which they live, learn and work, as well as for their own actions and values. We can't say: 'I did that because my senior instructed me to', 'it was in the protocol', 'everyone does that!', or even 'oh, I've never thought about why, or if I should'.

Questioning and changing work or study assumptions and attitudes is demanding. Our professional and personal roles, values and everyday actions are embedded in complex and volatile structures. Power is subtle and slippery; its location is often different from how it appears. Reflective practice for genuine development involves each individual:

- recognising, taking *authority* over and *responsibility* for their own personal and professional actions, identity, values, feelings
- *contesting* lack of diversity, imbalance of power, the way managerialism can block development
- *asking questions* and being willing to stay with *uncertainty*, unpredictability, doubt. This is the only way to discover our assumptions and do something about them.

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Reflective practice can enable discovery of who and what we are, why we act as we do, and how we can be much more effective. The educative process is perceiving and developing our own searching questions, rather than responding to given questions. The search for solutions, leading to yet more pertinent questions and more learning, leads to unsettling uncertainty: the foundation of all education. In learning and understanding about human rights, for example, law students need to learn 'not only the practice of law. Rather ... the practice of people, their lives and the values, needs, beliefs that people hold and wish to protect, or promote, or advocate' (Williams, 2002, p. 134).

The route is through spirited enquiry leading to constructive developmental change and personal and professional integrity based on deep understandings. Despite questioning all assumptions and strongly held beliefs, the process is self-affirming and illuminative: people only learn and develop when happy and benefiting personally.

The reflective/reflexive attitude is similar to Winnicott's (1965) creative *transitional space* (or *play space* [1971]), the realm of the artist. The *transitional space* is part way between our inner psychological experience and culture outside the self: a place of exploration just beyond the boundaries. Because it is betwixt and between, that which is created comes from both the artist's private self (or psyche) as well as from culture. It fosters activities that are not tidy and safe (it wouldn't be artistic if it was). So it is likely to come up with dynamic possibilities, and startling solutions.

Being able to enter the *transitional (play) space* with the wisdom of the child, being able to venture outside the firmly boundaried inner self into a place of exploration and letting go of assumptions and certainties to develop new ways of being and understanding, can ultimately enable us to relate to others in non-judgemental, unprejudiced ways.

Reflective practice can sometimes fall into the trap of becoming only *confession*. 'Confession' can be a conforming mechanism, despite sounding liberating, freeing from a burden of doubt, guilt and anxiety (Bleakley, 2000b). Confession has a seductive quality because it passes responsibility to others.

The desire is strong to confess and tell, like the ancient mariner (Coleridge, [1834] 1978). Nias and Aspinwall (1992) noted with surprise that all their research interviewees were keen to tell their autobiographies. People always are, but *they do not want their confessions questioned: this is the role of reflective practice*.

Reflective practice is more than an examination of personal experience, it is located in the political and social structures which increasingly hedge professionals (Goodson, 2004). The right of professionals in the West to

moral and professional judgements is eroded; they are being reduced to technicians, their skills to mere technical competencies. Yet they are also increasingly under pressure to have 'strong and stable personalities and to be able to tolerate complexity', and they are 'pushed destructively and distortingly by obsessive goals and targets in a masculine culture of assertiveness and competitiveness' (Garvey et al., 2014, pp. 112, 249). They are also pushed to work according to a scientifically derived evidence base. 'Since the seventeenth century, Western science has excluded certain expressive modes from its legitimate repertoire: rhetoric (in the name of "plain" transparent signification), fiction (in the name of fact), and subjectivity (in the name of objectivity). The qualities eliminated from science were localised in the category of "literature"' (Clifford, 1986, p. 102).

The assumption that an objective view of the world is 'grown-up', that we should shed our subjective view along with sand and water play, is being questioned (see also Sacks, 1985, pp. 1–21). 'We are impoverished if out of touch with any part of ourselves. The dominant culture is scientific, but the scientist who concentrates on this side of themselves exclusively is as impoverished as the musician or writer who concentrates only on the artistic' (Paul Robertson, director, Medici String Quartet, 1999).

Goodson creates a distinction between *life stories* and *life history*. The latter is the former plus appropriate and challenging data from a wide range of sources, and evidence of vital discussion with colleagues. 'The life history pushes the question of whether private issues are also public matters. The life story individualises and personalises; the life history contextualises and politicises' (1998, p. 11).

An ethnographer can no longer stand on a mountain top to map authoritatively (Clifford, 1986). Clinicians cannot confidently diagnose and dictate from an objective professional or scientific standpoint; teachers do not know answers; lawyers do not necessarily know what is right and what wrong. The enmeshment of culture and environment is total: no one is objective. Ideal professionals, gathering data on which to base their pedagogy, diagnosis or care, are like social anthropologists. Successful ethnographers create a 'thick description': a web of 'sort of piled-up structures of inference and implication through which the ethnographer is continually trying to pick his way' (Geertz, [1973] 1993, p. 7).

A critical reflective practitioner attempts to understand the heart of their practice. Understandings gained in this way, however, are always partial; the deeper the enquiry, the enquirer realises the less they know and understand: *the more you know, the more you know you do not know*.

A supported process, such as recommended in this book, which encourages doubt and uncertainty, paradoxically gives practitioners strength in the

face of such contradictory expectations and attempts to control. Where enquiry into practice is undertaken alongside open discussions with peers on pertinent issues, an examination of texts from the larger field of work and politics, and discussions with colleagues from outside practitioners' own milieu, reflective practice can then be critical: a life-changing enquiry into the assumptions that underpin our practice, rather than mere confession.

Training and education curricula need shaking up, and more enquiry-based reflective methods introduced. *Curriculum* is Latin for racecourse (Rome's oval Piazza Navona was one): perhaps we need to progress from chasing each other and ourselves round a set track. 'Unearthing and questioning assumptions is often risky' (Brookfield, 2013, p. 23): let's take the risk.

Valuing diversity

Reflection and reflexivity support appreciation of diversity, which 'should be engraved on every teacher's heart' (Brookfield, 1990). Theories, values and practices vary between cultures, affecting how clients and others respond to professionals and their practice. For example, the West has a strong ethic of individualism, deriving from ancient Greece, which is very different from Eastern (particularly Chinese and Japanese) understandings of the self. Eastern thinking discourages abstraction (unlike Western), and focuses upon social harmony and a sense of constant change (Sellars, 2017). Culture is an iceberg: we are aware of differences, but they are even greater and more significant than they appear (Sellars, 2017).

An awareness of how groups can be marginalised or individuals excluded (Cunliffe, 2009a), of inclusivity and empathetic supportiveness with regard to, for example, non-traditional students and widening access and participation, are essential elements. Wright's (2005) study found reflective journals written in English, despite this not being their writers' mother tongue; their learning from the process would have been negated: this should not happen. Collins et al. (2010) developed a strategy for enhancing multicultural elements in reflective practice in counselling.

Making Sense of Experience

A closely observed event (Wordsworth's 'spot of time'), written about, rigorously reflected upon, discussed critically and re-explored through further writings can stand metonymically for that professional's practice. Stories and poems are slices, metonymically revealing the rest of practice.

Knowing what incident to reflect upon is not straightforward. Significant issues become elusive, and can become like looking for Piglet: 'It was still snowing as [Pooh Bear] stumped over the white forest track, and he expected to find Piglet warming his toes in front of the fire, but to his surprise he found that the door was open, and the more he looked inside the more Piglet wasn't there' (Milne, [1928] 1958, p. 163). Only with the courage to stop *looking* and trust the reflective and reflexive processes, will we begin to perceive what needs tackling. Mark Purvis (*The Death of Simon*, see Chapter 2) did not seek consciously for his 'critical' incident: he put his hand on the page and started writing.

Writings often focus on seemingly unimportant incidents. The 'right' one might be a seemingly simple daily habitual action, or incidents ignored because they are problematic, often for unexamined reasons, or those which have been 'forgotten' or unconsidered (because they appear not to belong in the realm of practice but in personal life). 'Critical' incidents, described by Brookfield (1990, p. 84) as 'vividly remembered events', such as giving the wrong vaccine because they had been stored higgledy-piggledy in the fridge, will inevitably be examined. Events we 'forget' are often those needing reflection, and can give rise to the deepest reflexivity: 'we need to attend to the untold' (Sharkey, 2004). 'A passionate, almost religious belief ... is that it is in the negligible that the considerable is to be found ... The unconsidered is deeply considerable' (Miller, 2009, p. 12). A human resource development exercise is writing what you *do not* remember (Joy-Matthews et al., 2004). Plato, who said 'the life without examination is no life' (Plato, 2000, p. 315), reckoned education is finding pathways to what we do not know we know.

A critical incident is an incident we are critical about. We do need to be critical *about* incidents. Kevin Marsden wrote a special-school experience:

Malcolm was struggling to recognise sets of two in number work, and sat slumped on an elbow.

I had one of those 'bright ideas' teachers tend to get. Let's make it more practical. 'Malcolm, look at Darren. How many eyes has he got?'

Malcolm looked at Darren. Pointing with his finger he slowly counted in his deep voice, 'One ... two.'

'Good, well done,' I said. 'Now look at Debbie, how many eyes has she got?'

(Continued)

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Pointing carefully again Malcolm intoned slowly, 'One ... two.'

'That's great, Malcolm, now look at Tony, count his eyes.'

'One ... two.' Let's take this a step further, I said smugly to myself.

'Now Malcolm, look at Matthew. Without counting can you tell me how many eyes he has got?'

Malcolm looked at me as if I had gone mad. 'OK that's fine, Malcolm, count them like you did the others.'

Relieved, he slowly repeated: 'One ... two.'

There is a magical moment in teaching, when the penny drops, the light goes on, the doors open. Success is achieved. I was starting to worry. We weren't getting there!

'Malcolm, how many eyes has Naheeda got?' Malcolm counted slowly, as if it was the first pair of eyes he had ever seen.

'Good, you're doing really well.'

We carried on round the class. Eager faces looked up to have their eyes counted. I was growing desperate as we ran out of children. Was I leading Malcolm on an educational wild-goose chase? Were we pursuing an idea that was not yet ready to be caught?

The last pair of eyes was counted. 'One ... two.' There was only me left. 'Malcolm,' I said, trying to hide my desperation, 'How many eyes have I got?' Malcolm studied my face carefully. He looked long and hard at my eyes. I waited expectantly in the silence. His brow furrowed. Finally he spoke.

'Take your glasses off.'

Kevin Marsden

Kevin read this to his established sub-group of five Master's in Education teachers. They trusted and felt confidence and respect for each other's professional abilities and views. Kevin was able to share his frustrations and sense of failure; the group learned about the methods, joys and problems of special-school teaching. They were able to explore the probability that Malcolm had had a different understanding of his task than did Kevin. Possibly Malcolm thought he was to count the eyes, rather than 'guess' how many each had. To do this he would have had to ask for spectacles to be removed so he could see clearly. The situation of a mismatch between a teacher's intentions and a child's understanding must happen so often. In order to gain a grasp of what might be going on, Kevin had to examine and question his assumptions.

Write to Learn

Part of professional development can be about studying in order to enter a chosen profession. Different courses that use reflective practice often ask you to reflect on an incident to show how it influenced your experience and professional understanding. Begin with some broad reflection using the following prompts.

1.2 Milestones A

- [1] List the milestones of your life; do it quickly without thinking much.
- [2] Delete or add, clarify or expand the list as you wish.
- [3] Add some divergent things (e.g. when you first really knew you had met someone that would change your life).
- [4] Choose one. Write a short piece about it and what it meant to you. If you wish, continue and write about others.

Now, let's apply this with a slightly narrower focus.

1.3 Milestones B

1. List the milestones of your job or training so far; again, do it quickly without thinking much.
2. Delete or add, clarify or expand the list as you wish.
3. Aim for further divergence – create some sub-items within the list (e.g. what impact receiving your assessments/appraisal result has had/will have).
4. Choose one milestone. Write a short piece about it. What observations can you make about your experience so far? What made you select this specific milestone to write about? What have you learnt from the milestone once it is given more attention?

Blocks and Limitations to Reflection

- Inexperience at imagining another's experience
- Not knowing how to create a dynamic reflective narrative (see Chapter 4)
- Fearing incompetence, fearing ridicule
- Tiredness/overwork/lack of time/too many other things to do
- Lack of motivation
- Seeing it just as a way of passing the exam
- Too painful and revealing.

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Reflection and reflexivity are essential for responsible and ethical practice, yet there are arguments against it. Some consider it challenges position or status in organisations where professionals are expected to do as they are told: managerialism is a significant block (Heel et al., 2006; Redmond, 2006); some that it is a luxury within packed curricula taught by demotivated, over-stretched tutors who use risk-averse and evidence-based approaches fostering disengagement and negativity (Munro, 2010).

Yet the busier we are, the more vital reflection and reflexivity are to prevent us missing significant issues and making mistakes (Hedberg, 2009), and losing authority by becoming uncritically conformist. Reflection is personally demanding, and needs to be undertaken at the individual's own pace and to their taste (Smith, 2011).

Without confident, experienced support (Chi, 2013; Standal and Moe, 2013) and advice, such as provided by this book, practitioners may experience feelings of helplessness, frustration and eventual burnout (Gray, 2007), anxiety and antagonism (Livtack et al., 2010), resistance (Bulpitt and Martin, 2005), blocking negativity (Hobbs, 2007; Smith, 2011), or feel 'angry, challenged, threatened, demoralized, shocked, and put off by the *leap into the unknown*' (Trelfa, 2005, p. 208; emphasis in the original), focus merely on technical skills merely to meet academic requirements (Collins, 2013), or write abstractly rather than about specific experiences. Inamdar and Roldan (2013) tell us that 'the ability to face, frame, and build solutions to ambiguous, highly uncertain situations is [essential] in rapidly evolving and globalizing business settings ... Yet our findings showed that reflection is the least taught skill in business schools ... and the most challenging for students' (p. 766). Tutors focus upon the least challenging and easiest to teach.

Dialogue with students to ascertain feelings and needs could lead to more informed tuition (Schmidt and Adkins, 2012). Creating an educative environment where practitioners and students challenge themselves as practitioners, the very roots of their practice, and, significantly, critique their organisations, can be complex and perplexing. Instruction resulting in neatly written competencies is less demanding and easier to mark, but is not reflective practice.

A paradox is that organisations or courses require reflective practice as curricula or professional development elements. Since the very nature of reflective practice is essentially personally, politically and socially unsettling, it does not allow anything to be taken for granted; everything has to be questioned. Enquiry-based education, education for creativity, innovativeness, adaptability, is education for instability.

Smooth-running social, political and professional systems run on the well-oiled cogs of stories we construct, and connive at being constructed around

us. Welcoming of diversity can be mere window-dressing. Effective reflective practice and reflexivity are transgressive of stable and controlling orders; they lead cogs to decide to change shape, change place, even reconfigure whole systems. Change and development take time, energy and commitment. Critical reflective practice leading to dynamic change is the result of tough practitioner (or student) exploration and self-examination.

Understanding the Name: *Reflective Practice*

A mirror reflection is merely the image of an object directly in front of it, faithfully reproduced back to front. What is the reflection of shit? Shit. The word reflection has static connotations, meaning ‘the action of turning [back] or fixing the thoughts on some subject’ (OED).

A mirror image suggests *me out there* practising in the big world, and reflected *me in my head*, an unhelpful opposing duality: *this* as opposed to *that*, *in* and *out*, *here* and *there*:

You must first forsake the dualities of: self and others, interior and exterior, small and large, good and bad, delusion and enlightenment, life and death, being and nothingness. (Tsai Chi Chung, 1994, p. 95)

Reflective practice is purposeful, not the musing one slips into while driving home, or rumination which can suppress emotions and create distressing yet absorbing negative thoughts (Fogel, 2009), leading to depression, anxiety, hostility and vulnerability. ‘*It’s easy to end up thinking and thinking and ruminating but not getting anywhere*’ (cited in Claire Collins, 2013, p. 72, emphasis in the original; see also Farber, 2005). Rumination is a sheep or goat chewing smelly cud. Lindsay Buckell (see Chapter 7) sent me a cartoon of a sheep, nose to nose with her mirrored reflection and meadow, saying: ‘I’m sure the grass is greener in the mirror, but whenever I try to reach it, this ugly ewe bars the way and butts me on the nose.’ The ‘ugly ewe’ is of course herself reflected. We need intensive explorative and expressive methods in order not just to be confronted by our own ‘ugly ewe’.

We need to throw out a sense that reflection is merely self-indulgent. Narcissus fell in love with his own reflection: this is self-indulgence. Reflective practice is not narcissistic because rather than falling in love with our own beauty, we bravely face the discomfort and uncertainty of attempting to perceive how things are. We seek to uncover dark corners by asking difficult questions. We reflect in order to try to perceive ourselves with others’ eyes (employers, clients, colleagues), to gain a clearer picture.

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Perhaps this approach should be called flexive. Flexion means ‘alteration, change, modification’, and ‘a bend, curve, and a joint’ (OED).

Let me explain with another picture. In London’s Covent Garden Opera House, we share the magic of world-class performance in the crimson and gold auditorium. We cannot part the red curtain, however, and go onto the stage and beyond. Yet there are acres and acres of stage, rehearsal space, offices, canteens, costume and set stores, etc. Fabulous opera and ballet could not take place without this invisible space and activity. We live our lives in the auditorium of our minds – excitingly and dramatically playing different characters (parent, colleague, lecturer, lover ...) – but without realising what’s beyond the curtain. Reflective practice writing enables exploration of areas we didn’t know we knew, had forgotten, never bothered to develop, never really noticed, etc. Beyond the curtain we remove our masks and props and become vulnerable and uncertain. This is education and learning.

Being reflectively aware is like Einstein’s ‘appreciation of the mysterious [which] is the fundamental emotion which stands at the cradle of true art and true science’ (1973, p. 80), and Socrates’ ‘wonder is the beginning of wisdom’, because wonder is an open, enquiring state of mind when anything might be possible, when startling inspiration appears as a result of no cognitive logical thought. The sculptor Juan Muñoz spoke of an aim of his art ‘to make [viewers] trust for a second that what he wishes to believe is true. And maybe you can spin that into another reality and make him wonder.’ This reality spinning can involve imaginatively entering others’ consciousness, empathetically and ethically:

There would seem to be a need for some special intuitive faculty which allows me to range beyond my own sense-data, transport myself into your emotional innards and empathise with what you are feeling. This is known as the imagination. It makes up for our natural state of isolation from one another [each in their own separate auditorium]. The moral and the aesthetic [imaginative] lie close together, since to be moral is to be able to feel what others are feeling. (Eagleton, 2008a, p. 19)

Reflective practice is here seen as complex, fascinating and unstraightforward as life and practice itself.

‘Reflection is the central dynamic in intentional learning, problem-solving and validity testing through rational discourse’ (Mezirow, 1981, p. 4); but there is more than just the ‘rational’. We can be enabled to reflect beyond Mezirow’s ‘rational’ using the methods outlined in the following chapters. First, to develop our understanding of reflective practice, we consider some of its vital foundations.

Read to Learn

Bruce, L. (2013) *Reflective Practice for Social Workers*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

The first four chapters are a thorough, wise study of what reflective practice is and should be, and analysis of such issues as emotional intelligence, and what it is to be a professional. I recommend them to all readers, not just social work practitioners and students.

Fook, J. (2016) *Social Work: A Critical Approach to Practice*. 3rd edn. London: Sage.

Jan Fook is a reliable, lucid guide to critical postmodern, poststructuralist practice. This book concerns social work, but I heartily recommend readers to turn to her for her wisdom, depth of research, and clarity.

Scaife, J. (2010) *Supervising the Reflective Practitioner*. Hove: Routledge.

Joyce Scaife is a reliable, intelligent and critically informed guide to reflective practice and supervision, both theory and practice. She clarifies and enlightens some of the dense issues with cartoons and light verse. I recommend this book to a wider readership than Scaife's field of psychology.

Timmins, F. (2015) *A-Z of Reflective Practice*. London: Palgrave.

As an introductory text, this book is invaluable in getting to grips with the language and concepts within reflective practice. Keep it to hand to look up items that might appear in lectures or professional training.

Write to Learn

Now that we've reached the end of the chapter, there's no need to wait until later to get writing reflectively. These activities aim to make you think and write - there's no pressure yet to apply reflection to particular 'problems'. Rather than tackling all of them, choose one and see what happens when you use writing to access thinking.

(Continued)

1.4 Insights

1. Quickly write a list of 20 words or phrases about your work or studies.
2. Allow yourself to write anything; everything is relevant, even the seemingly insignificant.
3. Reread: underline words or phrases that seem to stick out.
4. Choose one. Write it at the top of a fresh page. Write anything that occurs to you about it.
5. NOBODY else need read this ever, so allow yourself to write anything.
6. You might write a poem, or an account remembering a particular occasion, or muse ramblingly. Whatever you write will be right.
7. Choose another word from your list, if you wish, and continue writing.
8. Add to your list if more occur to you.

1.5 Significant clothes

1. Describe in detail favourite work clothes, including features such as mends.
2. Describe acquiring these clothes (was any part a gift?).
3. How do these clothes make you feel?
4. Describe your least favourite work clothes.
5. When do you wear these and why? Why do you dislike them?
6. Tell the detailed story of an occasion when you wore them.

1.6 A spot of time (Wordsworth: see beginning of this chapter)

1. Jot down a very quick list of occasions when you felt nourished, content, affirmed.
2. Choose one, write about it with as much detail as you can remember.
3. Give it a title as if it were a film; write the brief paragraph of film advertising blurb.
4. Read it back to yourself with care, adding or altering positively.
5. Write about another one if you have time.

Visit <https://study.sagepub.com/bolton5e> for additional useful resources, including writing examples, exercises and videos.