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Reflective Practice in Teacher Education

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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN TEACHER EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

In this paper I want to raise four issues:

1. Why the interest in reflective approaches, now?
2. What is to be gained from this approach?
3. What are some of the advantages?
4. What are the drawbacks?

The basic argument of the paper is that the notion of "reflective practice" has generally had a positive history and connotation in schools, and that it is worth persisting with, but unless we develop some touchstone principles to guide us as to what it means to act reflectively, there is a distinct danger that a constructive and useful approach will be "at risk" as good ideas are appropriated by governments for other ends - ones that are not necessarily in the interests of students or teachers.

I want to conclude by canvassing some of the principles that might underlie a re-assertion of what it is that is fundamentally important about reflective approaches.

WHY THE INTEREST?

There are a number of major changes occurring across a range of professions and professional groups that are having a profound impact on the shape and nature of professional knowledge. Perhaps the major factor has been the breakdown of traditional forms of production (the so-called Fordist notions) and their replacement with much more flexible forms of specialisation, and ways of responding to customers and clients. With the dramatically increased speed of communication and the new micro-technology, it is now much easier for capital to move around so as to take advantage of global comparative advantage.

The effect of this has been that rigid, centralised forms of production are no longer the most appropriate. We have a dramatically changed sets of conditions. Donald Schon (1991) captured the essence of these changes for education when he indicated that disciplined-based forms of knowledge, which in the past had been used to try and construct grand theories of the way the

world works, are no longer relevant. What we have in their place, are much more locally-based theories that recognise the idiosyncrasies of site-specific circumstances, and that acknowledge the integrity and worth of knowledge won by people at the workplace. This represents a major shift in the centre of gravity of knowledge. The view that there are particular elite groups in our society whose responsibility it is to develop knowledge for and on behalf of others, has endured for a long time (and even now is only dying slowly in some quarters). What characterises these new locally-based approaches is the much more negotiated (even devolved) ways, in which the people who do the work are given a much more significant stake in it. As Schon (1991) put it in his most recent work, what we have is a "reflective turn", in which practitioners are allowed to give voice to the reasons that lie behind what they do. What this means, essentially, is that those of us in universities and other educational agencies have to grapple with a changed role for ourselves - namely, how to work with practitioners in assisting them to observe and describe what it is they do, and with what effect. Schon (1991) put it in terms of "exploring the understandings revealed by the patterns of spontaneous activity that make up practice" (p.5). Our role, therefore, becomes one of helping insiders to make sense of experience, often in quite strange and puzzlingly new sets of circumstances - rather than telling them what these experiences ought to look like.

This is quite a different emphasis to the past where "practice" was regarded mainly as a field of application, where ideas were developed by someone else (who usually wore the label of theorist or policy maker), then exported back to the field of practice to be implemented. The emphasis in the reflective approach is upon practitioners being assisted to theorise their own accounts of practice, and how they might use that as a springboard for action. What this change does is turn the world dramatically on its head. The issue is not "what is best for practitioners to do", but rather "what do practitioners need to know, and what do they already know or understand that might help them gain those insights?". Herein lies the really interesting (and daunting) aspect to the reflective turn - there is no uniform approach!!

WHAT IS TO BE GAINED?

Perhaps of most significance for me in this reflective turn, is the opportunity it provides for a genuine shift in power over who determines what counts as knowledge. The move is from a deterministic (one might even say, a patriarchal "father knows best" mentality), to one in which there is considerable scope for genuine dialogue about the nature of work. There can be little doubt that this is occurring in contexts (not always altruistic), but in which there is at least a modicum of understanding (albeit heavily tinged with self-interest), that knowledge about work-practices actually does inhere at low levels within organisations. This startlingly simple dictum comes as a major revelation to some groups and individuals.

In speaking of this I am reminded of an incident from David Halberstam's novel "The Reckoning" (the story of the economic battle between the titans of the car industry, Ford of Detroit and Nissan of Japan). Hal Sperlich, an executive of Ford, on one of his visits to Japan in the early 1970s, noticed that there were no repair bays in which to shunt cars that were defective and in need of fixing:

"Where do you repair your cars?" Sperlich asked the engineer with him.

"We don't have to repair our cars," the engineer answered.

"Well, then" Sperlich asked, "where are your inspectors?"

"The workers are the inspectors," his guide answered.

(Halberstam, 1986, p.716)

This little example makes the point rather nicely that things are different. It is not that there has been a wholesale capitulation to workplace democracy, so much as a shift in the nature of social control over work. Workers as "reflective practitioners" has been a central part of that redefinition. What we are coming to experience is a *much less direct, overt surveillance* over work, and *much more indirect forms of control* through devices such as team work, partnerships, collaboration, quality circles, total quality management, and the like. What has come to characterise these approaches, at least in industry where they are receiving a lot of attention at the moment, is not that they are fundamentally committed to worker democracy (although they may sometimes give

the appearance that this is the case). Rather, they are about shifting the axis of control through ninety degrees - from vertical and bureaucratic forms, to more lateral, horizontal and, I might add, humane forms of work relations. In this regard, let's make no mistake, the new set of work relations are a shift decidedly for the better.

In schooling reflective approaches are but one manifestation of the more general post-Fordist shift in the nature of work that is occurring generally. It may be that schools over the past 10-15 years, through various collaborative approaches to curriculum development and reflective ways in which teachers have analysed their work, have been considerably ahead of the game elsewhere.

As a way of arriving at a considered position in which we are able to be clear about what is worth retaining in reflective approaches to teaching, there are certain matters we need to be mindful of it we are not to finish up in a situation in which reflection can mean anything anybody wants it to mean. Being aware of the advantages and drawbacks may be an important part of the process of deciding what is worth fighting for and persevering with.

SOME OF THE ADVANTAGES

1. The kind of knowledge-base that is being developed through reflective approaches, is much more comprehensive because it is directly tuned into what workers actually know about the work.
2. Because the knowledge-base emerges out of what workers know, it provides the opportunity for rapid and progressive re-focussing - a quality that is imperative in this new era of flexible specialisation;
3. Workers' ideas and beliefs are listened to much more attentively in the reflective approach than under the Fordist regimes, in which those higher up in the organisation were deemed to know best. Fortunately, this bureaucratic view of knowledge is on the wane, although it has by no means completely disappeared. The effect of this new approach has been to uplift worker's self-esteem and morale;
4. Strategic planning within the organisation is able to be much more grounded in a realistic sense of what is feasible, practicable and workable. The people who generate the

ideas are seen as having a concrete stake in their successful implementation;

5. What becomes important is not that knowledge is a product, so much that it is a process by which a workforce continually keeps itself up-to-date. When an organisation equips itself to become an "educative organisation" it is able to harness the very considerable reservoir of talent and energy invested in its workforce. Self-energising, self-renewing organisations, we know, are ones that are also more successful.

Taken together these are a package of features that have important and far-reaching consequences for the way neophytes are inducted into a range of professions, and for the kind of practical experiences they receive in their educational programs. I know this to be particularly the case in my own field of teacher education. These were ideas rehearsed in Minister Beazley's (1993) recent statement on teacher education entitled, appropriately, *Teaching Counts*. To that end it is worth briefly amplifying the relevance of reflective approaches to teaching and teacher education:

1. It is clear that the views of practising teachers and the theories that underpin their work, will play a much larger part than they have in the past, in the way teachers of the future are educated;
2. This presents those of us in teacher education with a significant new challenge - how to develop robust school-based and school-focussed ways of working that avoid the unfortunate aspects of the apprenticeship model we left behind several decades ago;
3. The thrust towards competency-based teacher education which has received a lot of publicity (although in this post-Mabo context of some States vigorously re-asserting their rights Federal initiatives are no longer a foregone conclusion), must be seen as an opportunity for us to engage with schools in the re-definition of what the notion of competency means *on teachers' terms*. We need to regard this as a means by which to capture and publicly assert the complexity of teaching, by working with teachers to better articulate how it is that reflective teachers make sense of their work.

In doing that we need to struggle hard against the entrenched and simplistic views that still abound as to what constitutes teaching. What we need is some sharply focussed public re-education of the rightful (but much more limited) role of teachers, based on evidence gleaned from carefully researched instances of competent practice;

4. By elevating the status of teachers as informed, articulate, and reflective theorists of their own work, we need to struggle to head off impositions by outsiders as to what they misguidedly think teaching is or ought to be. There are some ill-informed views about on what constitutes teaching, and we need to robustly confront those;
5. If we embrace, rather than reject outright, some of the policy initiatives being trumpeted by government, then perhaps we might have a chance of being able to shape what teacher education might look like in the 21st century. If we walk away from it, then it will be shaped for us, and what we see may not be a pretty sight.

WHAT ARE THE DRAWBACKS?

I certainly don't want to give the impression that everything is "sweetness and light" with the reflective approach to knowledge generation - that is far from the case. Indeed, there are some quite substantial dangers that can, if we are not careful, turn reflective approaches into another "iron case". When I hear governments singing the virtues of what might be gained through becoming reflective (as is happening at the moment), I become suspicious. Governments never give up power, no matter what it might look like on the surface!! Indeed, when governments start talking about schools being more "autonomous", "self-managing" and "reflective" as they are at the moment, I have this overwhelming impulse to reach for my "crap detector" (to use Garth Boomer's phrase).

It is becoming clear that the shift to reflective practice is occurring in contexts in which there are moves away from direct, prescriptive forms of surveillance and control, towards more autonomous and indirect methods (see Smyth, 1993). For example, we are hearing a lot about teaching increasingly being defined in terms of "co-operation", "teamwork" and "partnerships" as teachers are urged to display "collegiality", and work as part of groups and teams in the policy making and decision making process in schools.

Martin Lawn and Jenny Ozga (1986, p. 226) in the UK use an interesting analogy in which they borrow the term "indirect rule" from British colonial administration, as a way of characterising what is happening at the moment. Drawing from that earlier historical period, they point to "the appearance of decentralisation and devolution, with a quasi-autonomous role for the 'natives' which ensured their co-option, while the major powers of government remained firmly in British hands".

Within education this has taken the form of what appears to be the gradual withering away of central control and the dismantling of educational bureaucracies, and in its place a process that is much more reliant on engineering broad forms of consensus. Lawn and Ozga (1988, p. 88) note that as with the colonial experience, emancipation is only for parts of the system - it does not mean endangering "real tactical control", but rather dispensing with some of the more burdensome aspects of unnecessary central power.

My point here is that we need to be careful about schemes that preach about reflective approaches, because they may in substance be little different from the traditional approaches they replace. Let me see if I can illustrate this through four of the difficulties I have with reflective approaches:

First, there is something commonsensical, natural, almost indisputable about the suggestion that teachers should be thoughtful and reflective about their work. Jean Rudduck (1984, pp. 5-6) argues that the debilitating effect of teaching itself, makes it imperative that teachers keep on their toes. In her words:

What teaching is vulnerable to is the flattening effect of habit. Habit is seductive: it is soothing, non-productive and anxiety free... Good teaching is essentially experimental and experiment entails rescuing at least part of one's work from the predictability of routine... Not to examine one's practice is irresponsible: to regard teaching as an experiment and to monitor one's performance is a responsible professional act.

Put in these sort of terms, what starts out as a process intended to liberate teachers from the drudgery of habit leaves open the possibility of being turned back on them and used as a way of ensuring conformity to narrow and instrumental ways of construing teaching. To not act according to some undefined canons of reflectivity can be tantamount to gross dereliction of duty. Who could possibly be against reflection; it's an

indisputable notion like "quality" and "excellence". Herein lies it's major problem.

My second problem is that reflection can mean all things to all people, and because it is used as a kind of umbrella or canopy term to signify something that is good or desirable to do in respect of teaching, it runs the real risk of being totally evacuated of all meaning. Everybody has their own (usually undisclosed) interpretation of what reflection means, and they use that as the basis for enunciating the virtues of it in a way that makes it sound as virtuous as motherhood.

What occurs is a kind of conceptual colonisation in which terms like reflection have become such an integral part of the educational jargon that to not be using it is to run the real risk of being out of educational fashion. Everybody climbs aboard under the flag of convenience and the term is used to describe anything at all that goes on in teaching. What is not revealed is the *theoretical, political, and epistemological* baggage people bring with them.

Hugh Munby and Tom Russell (1989, p. 76) for example, argue that Lee Shulman's work on reflection lies within an undeclared "technical rationality model of knowledge production and use" and that his language gives away his "cognitive process framework". To take an even more concrete example, the Holmes Group Report (Holmes Group, 1986), on teachers and teacher educators in the USA, also argues the importance of having reflective teachers if schooling is to improve and the economy undergo the supposed necessary revitalisation. But, apart from mouthing the words, it is clear from the report that the only kind of reflection that is to occur is that which conforms to an undisclosed preferred model of reflection that is inextricably connected to state and national guidelines on what constitutes acceptable qualities and standards of good teaching, and with teachers being subjected to increased forms of surveillance and appraisal.

The same can be said of our own NBEET Schools Council's (1990) *Australia's Teachers: An Agenda for the Next Decade*. It is replete with instances that exhort teachers to be "reflective", but in a particular constrained way - one that conforms to community values. In the words of Kevin Crowe (1993, p. 6) in the inaugural issue of *Teaching and Teachers' Work*, the report puts the view that teachers should be less inflexible, less intellectual, rely less on unscientific craft-type knowledge, be less wedded to outmoded work practices, mind their manners more, be polite, punctual and serve

well. The problem with our schools, so the report tells us, is that teachers are out of sync with community expectations and values, and that the solution is that teachers must be more reflective on how they can achieve a *new value consensus*. One of the proposed ways of doing this, we are told, is for each school to develop a "Charter for Teaching" in which teachers will justify to parents the value of what they teach. Because schooling costs so much, and because the gap between the views of teachers and the wider community is so large, teachers are the problem, and they need to be re-tooled (perhaps through being taught "key competencies"?). The difficulty, of course, with arguments of this kind is that they break down precisely because they are: (a) not founded on evidence - rather, persistent assertion; and (b) they are predicated on solutions to the fabricated problem which is seen as lying in the creation of a more docile, compliant teaching force - one that is reflective of (and upon) a perceived consensus of community values.

My third (and not unrelated) difficulty is that processes like reflection that give the outward appearances of modernity and teacher autonomy, can in fact be used as rhetorical flourishes and a very effective cover with which to acquire even greater control over teachers. As French post-structuralist Michel Foucault (1980) argues, the centres of power in contemporary society have become even more remote and the system of surveillance even more comprehensive. The surface appeal of appearing to be democratic and empowering belies the deeper manipulative intent. There is very real risk with reflective approaches of providing what Wayne Ross and Lynne Hannay (1986, p. 11) call a "detailed step-by-step" process that reifies a technical linear approach to problem solving, at the expense of failing to upset or at least uncover "the system and institutions that created the problem in the first place".

Proceduralising reflection in this kind of linear way, leaves the way open to appropriating the language of enlightenment, while perpetrating the practices of instrumentalism by constraining teachers to operate within a particular paradigmatic framework of teaching.

My claim is that all of this goes considerably beyond conceptual confusion. If we stop and look at the way in which the term reflection has evolved from largely individualistic/psychologistic origins, then perhaps we can come a little closer to understanding what is occurring. By *individualising the problem* of "quality" and "excellence" in education by leaving it to

individual teachers to reflect on their practice, what we are doing is handing them is an instrument which many will turn on themselves in the hopeless search for what's wrong with education. By labelling the problem in this way (i.e., the need for teachers to be more reflective about teaching) we have nicely quarantined the problem. Portraying the problems confronting educational institutions as if they were due in some measure to a lack of competence on the part of teachers and as if they were resolvable by individuals (or groups of teachers), is to effectively divert attention away from the real *structural problems* that are deeply embedded in social, economic and political inequalities. Rather than empowering teachers, what individual reflective processes actually do is to send teachers on guilt trips in the vain search for the alchemists' equivalent of the philosopher's stone. In effect, "the promise of research into teacher effectiveness which dominated the sixties and seventies appears now to have been exhausted" (Martinez, 1989, p.3) and has been replaced by reflective processes by teachers.

My fourth (and final) problem is that the kind of reflection likely to have most appeal to many teachers is one grounded in pragmatism, and we know that forms of reflection that place stress on 'relevance' can easily lack a wider social awareness of consequences and fail to face up to and reflect on the value issues involved. As Andrew Pollard (1987, p. 58-9) argues, we need "to link the personal experiences of individuals with social, economic and political structures and trends" within which those practices occur.

CONCLUSION

As a way of drawing together some of the points I have made in this paper, there are six key principles that ought to underpin reflective practice, and that might be useful to dwell upon. While each of these might be extracted from the more positive aspects of our encounters with reflective approaches up to this point, we need to be especially mindful of them if we are to avoid the situation in which reflection can mean anything we want it to mean:

1. Reflection should not to be restricted to examining only *technical skills*; it should equally be concerned with the *ethical, social, and political* context within which teaching occurs;

2. Reflection should not be restricted to teachers *reflecting individually* upon their teaching; there needs to be a *collective* and *collaborative* dimension to it as well;
3. Reflection is a process that is centrally concerned with *challenging the dominant myths, assumptions and hidden message systems*, implicit in the way teaching and education are currently organised;
4. Reflection is also fundamentally about *creating improvements in educational practice*, and the *social relationships* that underlie those practices;
5. Reflection is founded on the belief that *knowledge about teaching is in a tentative and incomplete state*, and as such, is continually being modified as a consequence of practice;
6. Reflection occurs best when it *begins with the experiences of practitioners* as they are assisted in the process of *describing, informing, confronting* and *re-constructing* their theories of practice (Smyth, 1992).

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Note: Some of the ideas in this paper had their genesis in my "Teachers' work and the politics of reflection" *American Educational Research Journal*, 29(2), 1993, pp. 267-300 that received the Palmer O. Johnson Award for the most distinguished contribution to educational research published by the American Educational Research Association in 1992.

'I WASN'T AWARE, UNTIL I WAS AWARE': TEACHING GENDER EQUITY TO SECOND YEAR EDUCATION STUDENTS

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ABSTRACT

The study sought to ascertain the success of a pre-service unit in which one module focussed on developing 'gender fair' attitudes in education students. The subjects of the study were students in their second year of a Bachelor of Education degree studying the 'Social Justice and Equity in Schools' unit. Collaborative action research methods were used to collect data over a three month period. It was found that 85% of students attempted to use gender fair approaches and material when observed on teaching practice. While the outcome of pre-service teacher education was positive, it was acknowledged that there was always the problem of achieving effective change in their future role as practising teachers in a loosely coupled, conservative education system.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender and schooling has received intermittent attention over the past 16 years in Australian schools. Little is known of the success of pre-service courses focussed on the creation of 'gender fair' attitudes and predispositions. In the module 'Gender Equity', we sought to address the issues of girls in purportedly masculine subject areas, the problem of limited career paths and inequalities in the classroom.

The 1990 second year Education Studies unit for pre-service teachers was entitled 'Social Justice and Equity in Schools and Society'. Critical theory was taught alongside specific modules on equity. Issues related to the Aboriginal, multiculturalism and gender were addressed. The text was *Understanding Schooling* by Henry et al. (1988) and eminently suitable for the unit.

The unit was planned on a three modular sequence so that during the course of the semester we taught three distinct groups, each in a four week block of time. This was a fortuitous arrangement from the point of view of conducting collaborative action research. Our research proceeded through the action research spiral of planning the first module run, monitoring and discussing each session,

reflecting, rethinking, evaluating and modifying as appropriate for the two repeats of the module (Kemmis, quoted in Oja and Smulyan, 1989: 19). According to these writers, action research involves

the application of the tools and methods of social science to immediate practical problems with the goals of contributing to theory and knowledge in the field of education and improving practice in schools.

We had three general aims in the gender equity action research:

1. Our own professional development as lecturers in the area of gender equity.
2. Improved school practice as a result of educating our students in the module and subsequent practice in the schools.
3. Modifications to and elaboration of theories of teaching and learning in gender inclusive curriculum in university and schools.

Our paper begins with an explanation of the philosophy underlying the unit, and details the issues we address while engaged in action research. Finally we discuss the findings of our data collection.

The compulsory Education Studies unit enabled us to raise issues of sexism and gender inequity. The lectures focussed on cultural limitations faced by girls. The conditions were set for renegotiating knowledge in the classroom with the emphasis placed on 'democratisation' of the curriculum, classroom management, classroom interaction, preferred learning styles, resources and career education. The module was based on Social Feminism, a philosophy defined by Jagger and Struhl (1978: 225) as

Social Feminist theory of society is characterised by an emphasis on the inextricable interconnectedness of home and work, private and public, personal and political, family and economic system, women's oppression and class society. It attempts to synthesize the important