

Reflection

What constitutes reflection - and what significance does it have for educators? The contributions of Dewey, Schön and Boud *et. al.* assessed.

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When considering reflection we cannot escape the figure of Dewey. *How We Think* (1910; 1933) has made a unique impact on education. He wrote this book for teachers and the first edition became the 'bible' of progressive educators in the USA (Rorty 1989: ix). His thinking still runs through the work of key writers such as Boud et al (1985) and Schön (1983; 1987). While there are a number of questions about the model he put forward, it does provide a good starting point for looking at some of the elements of the reflective process.

Dewey and *How We Think*

Dewey defined reflective thought as 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends' (Dewey 1933: 118). He set out five phases or aspects. These states of thinking are as follows:

1. Suggestions, in which the mind leaps forward to a possible solution.
2. An intellectualization of the difficulty or perplexity that has been felt (directly experienced) into a problem to be solved.
3. The use of one suggestion after another as a leading idea, or hypothesis, to initiate and guide observation and other operations in collection of factual material.
4. The mental elaboration of the idea, or supposition as an idea or supposition (reasoning, in the sense in which reasoning is a part, not the whole, of inference).
5. Testing the hypothesis by overt, or imaginative action. (See Dewey 1933: 199-209).

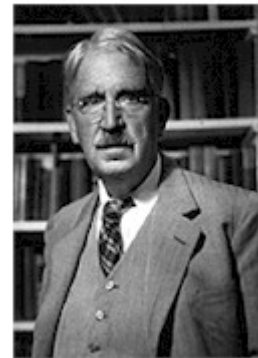
In this we get a feel of process. We can see links with Schön's view of reflective practice in the way in which educators focus on problems and experiment with situations.

In every case of reflective activity, a person finds himself confronted with a given, present situation from which he has to arrive at, or conclude to, something that is not present. This process of arriving at an idea of what is absent on the basis of what is at hand is inference. What is present carries or bears the mind over to the idea and ultimately the acceptance of something else. (Dewey 1933: 190).

Yet there are problems.

First, these five elements can be approached in a rather linear and mechanistic way. It can be used as a plan for action. In practice, two of the phases may telescope, some may be passed over (ibid: 207). No set rules may be laid down. This was a crucial insight. Yet Dewey still left a hostage to fortune by using terms like stage and phase. This leaves a sense of sequence. He still seems in half a mind to offer a set method.

Second, there is not a real grasp of reflection as an interactive or dialogical process. His work was grounded in the idea that 'the individual student teacher learns to reflect on a particular experience individually' (Cinnamond and Zimpher 1990: 58). To some extent this is mitigated by his stress on active experimentation. There is room for feedback. But doubts remain. There is in his work a lack of attention to the ways in which people's sense of self, their frames of reference are formed in dialogue with others. I suspect this is part of a larger problem. Dewey



often speaks, 'as if a correct account of the nature of thought would make possible the sort of improvement in thinking which had been promised in the past by others' (Rorty 1989: xvii). It may be that he was limited by the language of his time.

Last, while Dewey does attend to the place of emotions, for example with regard to the doubts that trigger reflection - it is limited. This is a odd given what he had to say elsewhere about the intellect and emotions (e.g. Dewey 1916: 335-6). Today, with the benefit of insights from psychoanalytical traditions, we can now trace out some key, emotional aspects (see Salzberger-Wittenberg et al 1983).

Returning to experience - attending to feelings

The great strength of the work of Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) is that they address emotions. For them reflection is an activity in which people 'recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it' (ibid: 19). They rework Dewey's five aspects into three.

- *Returning to experience* - that is to say recalling or detailing salient events.
- *Attending to (or connecting with) feelings* - this has two aspects: using helpful feelings and removing or containing obstructive ones.
- *Evaluating experience* - this involves re-examining experience in the light of one's intent and existing knowledge etc. It also involves integrating this new knowledge into one's conceptual framework. (ibid: 26-31)

This way of approaching reflection has the advantage of connecting with common modes of working e.g. we are often encouraged to attend to these domains in the process of supervision and journal writing. However, there is a tendency to focus on reflection-on-action (see below). Their focus on 'deliberate' learning does tend to act against an appreciation of reflection as a way of life. As Cinnamond and Zimpher (1990: 67) put it, 'they constrain reflection by turning it into a mental activity that excludes both the behavioural element and dialogue with others involved in the situation'.

Schön and reflection in and on action

Schön's great contribution has been to bring the notion into the centre of any understanding of what professionals do through the ideas of reflection in and on action. In the case of the former, The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (Schön 1983: 68)

To do this we do not closely follow established ideas and techniques - textbook schemes. We have to think things through, for every case is unique. However, we can draw on what has gone before.

We can link this with reflection-on-action. This is done later. Workers may write up recordings, talk things through with a supervisor and so on (more of this in the next chapter). The act of reflecting-on-action enables us to spend time exploring why we acted as we did, what was happening in a group and so on. In so doing we develop sets of questions and ideas about our activities and practice.

This distinction has been the subject of some debate (see Eraut 1994 and Usher et al 1997). Indeed he may well fail to clarify what is involved in the reflective process - and there is a problem, according to Eraut, around time - 'when time is extremely short, decisions have to be rapid and the scope for reflection is extremely limited' (1994: 145). There have been no psychological elaborations of the psychological realities of reflection in action (Russell and Munby 1989).

The impact of Schön's work has been significant - with many training and education programmes for teachers and informal educators adopting his core notions both in organizing experiences and in the teaching content (and this has been reflected in the listing).

Further reading

In this section I have focused on those writers examining the reflective process. These texts need to be augmented with those in the section on **adult learning, learning and experiential learning**.

Argyris, M. and Schön, D. (1974) *Theory in Practice. Increasing professional effectiveness*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Landmark statement of 'double-loop' learning' and distinction between espoused theory and theory-in-action.

recommended Boud, D. et al (eds.) (1985) *Reflection. Turning experience into learning*, London: Kogan Page. 170 pages. Good collection of readings which examine the nature of reflection. The early chapters make particular use of Dewey and Kolb.

Clift, R. T., Houston, W. R. and Pugach, M. C. (eds.) *Encouraging Reflective Practice in Education. An analysis of issues and programs*, New York: Teachers College Press. By far the best of the crop of books that appeared around reflective practice programs in teaching. There are some real treats here including Yinger on 'the conversation of practice'; Cinnamond and Zimpher on 'Reflectivity as a function of community'; and Valli 'Moral approaches to reflective practice'.

Dewey, J. (1933) *How We Think*, New York: D. C. Heath. Classic and highly influential discussion of thinking.

recommended Lave, J. and Wenger, E. (1991) *Situated Learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*, Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press. 138 pages. Significant exploration of learning as participation in communities of practice. Participation moves from the periphery to the 'centre'. Learning is, thus, not seen as the acquisition of knowledge by individuals so much as a process of *social* participation. The nature of the *situation* impacts significantly on the process. Chapters on legitimate peripheral participation; practice, person, social world; specific communities of practice.

Lipman, M. (1991) *Thinking in Education*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 280 + ix pages. Rightly popular exploration of the thinking, dispositions and methods that have to be in place if students are to become 'more thoughtful, more reasonable, and more judicious. Looks to classrooms as communities of enquiry. Part one is concerned with education for thinking (the reflective model of educational practice; the craft of thinking; cognition); part two examines seeking standards for classroom thinking; part three, thinking: the forge of meaning; and part four, the nature and uses of the community of inquiry (includes thinking in community and the political significance of the inquiring community).

Newman, F. and Holzman, L. (1997) *The End of Knowing. A new developmental way of knowing*, London: Routledge. 185 + viii pages. The writers seek to offer an alternative to 'modernist' ways of knowing - performed activity: 'a practical, non-epistemological, non-academic way forward'. Thankfully, the writers are also critical of some of the pretensions of 'postmodernists' and look to a synthesis of Vygotsky and Wittgenstein. Chapters examine epistemological bias; radically reforming modern epistemology; some 'deliberately unsystematic thoughts on a new way of running a country'; a community of conversations. I have only dipped into this book - and it appears to adopt a rather academic form of looking for a non-academic way forward - but this may be unfair. More when I have read it!

Reflection in action

In each instance, the practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomena before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomena and a change in the situation.... He does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation. He does not separate thinking from doing... Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his inquiry.

(Schön 1983: 69)

- Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner. How professionals think in action*, London: Temple Smith. 374 + x. Influential book that examines professional knowledge, professional contexts and reflection-in-action. Examines the move from technical rationality to reflection-in-action and examines the process involved in various instances of professional judgement.
- Schön, D. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 355 + xvii pages. Development of the thinking in the 1983 book with sections on understanding the need for artistry in professional education; the architectural studio as educational model for reflection-in-action; how the reflective practicum works; and implications for improving professional education. (For a useful critique see M. Eraut [1994] *Developing Professional Knowledge and Competence*, London: Falmer; and R. Usher et al (1997) *Adult Education and the Postmodern Challenge*, London: Routledge). The idea of reflection-in-action is explored in M. K. Smith (1994) *Local Education*, Buckingham: Open University Press.
- Smith, F. (1992) *To Think: in language, learning and education*, London: Routledge. 177 + x pages. Examines different aspects of the thinking process in everyday, creative and critical thought.

Also mentioned

- Cinamond, J. H. and Zimpher, N. L. (1990) 'Reflectivity as a function of community' in R. T. Clift, W. R. Houston and M. C. Pugach (eds.) *Encouraging Reflective Practice in Education. An analysis of issues and programs*, New York: Teachers College Press.
- Dewey, J. (1916) *Democracy and Education. An introduction to the philosophy of education* (1966 edn.), New York: Free Press.
- Dewey, J. (1920) *Reconstruction in Philosophy* (1948 edn.), New York: Mentor.
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- Rorty, R. (1987) 'Introduction' to J. A. Bodson (ed.) *John Dewey The Later Works 1925-1953* Volume 8, Carbondale, Illinois: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Munby, H. and Russell, T. (1989) 'Educating the reflective teacher: An essay review of two books by Donald Schön', *Journal of Curriculum Studies* 21(7): 71-80.
- Salzberger-Wittenberg, I., Henry, G. & Osborne, E. (1983) *The Emotional Experience of Learning and Teaching*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Usher, R., Bryant, I. and Johnston, R. (1997) *Adult Education and the Postmodern Challenge*, London: Routledge.

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