

Reflective practice: some notes on the development of the notion of professional reflection

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Why have I written this for the Busy Guide?

I recently wrote a piece on reflective practice for 'Into Teaching' (2007) which is aimed at PGCE trainees and NQTs. In it I tried to outline why reflective practice is rather more than simply thinking about what you're doing (though that, of course, is a good idea) and to suggest that the notion of professional reflection has a strong and diverse academic pedigree. It struck me that tutors in numerous institutions may need access to a digest of some of the important 'messages' from the literature that I hope I identified in the 'Into Teaching' article, so what is presented here is an expanded version of that piece. It does not pretend to be comprehensive, nor indeed to present new findings - rather, it specifically aims to expand upon an established model of reflective practice proposed by Pollard (2005) so that we can help beginning teachers in particular to understand the theoretical bases of much of what is written about notions of professional reflection. So, here goes...

Reflective practice – just thinking about what we do?

Many teachers and intending teachers will ask why there is such a fuss about reflective practice. Don't all professionals think about what they do and modify their approach as a result of this thinking? Don't teachers, in particular, have a 'natural' propensity for considering what they're doing and for changing their approach on the basis of the response of their pupils?

It is the intention of this guide to attempt to explain how reflection - in which searching questions are asked about experience - might be conceptualised, why it can be viewed as rather more than 'thinking about teaching' and why a consideration of reflective practice itself might be helpful to both the beginning and the experienced teacher. In doing this it is not the purpose to provide a comprehensive overview of the traditions of reflective teaching (several authors present admirable digests, amongst them Zeichner and Liston, 1996), though some historical antecedents of contemporary ideas are considered. The primary intention here is to make evident the links between notions of reflective practice and the characteristics of such practice by professional educators. That said, it seems useful to start with a look at two fundamental 'schools of thought' on the nature of reflection, represented by the work of Dewey (1910, 1933, 1938) and Schön (1983, 1987).

Dewey – routine action and reflective action

If we consider Dewey first, we find that he provides a useful distinction between routine action – in which the grounds for action have not been *actively* considered and where tradition, external authority and circumstance are guiding factors – and reflective action. Reflective action derives, in Dewey's view, from the need to solve a problem and involves 'the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it' (1910, p6). Teachers who are unreflective about their teaching tend to accept the everyday reality in their schools and 'concentrate their efforts on finding the most effective and efficient means to solve problems that have largely been defined for them by (some) collective code' (Zeichner and Liston, 1996, p9). It's not that unreflective teachers aren't thinking – rather, their thinking does not allow the possibility of *framing problems* in more than one way.

Of course, some - and many would argue more than some - routine action based on on-going assumptions is necessary if we are to be able to act or react in the

classroom, and Dewey acknowledged the arrogance of an approach that questions everything all of the time. But equally he acknowledged the inadequacy of an approach where a professional acts without questioning received truths. Thus the separation of routine and reflective action has a strong appeal, as it provides a basis for an analysis of teaching that sees beyond a 'technicist', competency-based model (Calderhead and Gates, 1993), and suggests a strong basis upon which teaching itself might be viewed as a profession. Reflection, then, is a 'way of being as a teacher' (Zeichner and Liston, 1996, p9); in Dewey's view, reflection '...enables us to direct our actions with foresight...It enables us to know what we are about when we act' (1933, p17).

Extensions to Dewey's work

Dewey's arguments have been extended in various influential accounts of reflection. Whilst noting that 'the attitude of everyday work' is one that sees teachers carrying out tasks 'routinely and uncritically' (p264), van Manen (1977) identifies two levels of reflection. At the first level the focus is on 'an interpretive understanding both of the nature and quality of educational experience and of making practical choices' (p 226-7). At the second level ethical and moral questions are addressed as the 'worthwhileness' of actions is considered (p227). Zeichner and Liston (1987) and Carr and Kemmis (1986) also highlight a moral dimension to reflective action, the former linking to van Manen's notion of the two levels of reflection by characterising the action of teachers as sometimes that of the 'technician', sometimes that of the 'craftsperson' and sometimes that of the 'moral craftsperson' (Zeichner and Liston, 1987, p27). Carr and Kemmis (1986) make a strong case for this higher level of reflection as central to 'a critical educational science' that involves teachers as central actors in transforming education (p156). Fullan (1993) makes a crucial point here in stating that 'Teaching at its core is a moral profession. Scratch a good teacher and you will find a moral purpose... Moral purpose keeps teachers close to the needs of children and youth.' From this perspective, if it is the purpose of educators to make a positive

difference to the lives of the students that they find in their care, that purpose would seem to connect strongly with higher levels of reflective practice outlined by Carr and Kemmis, van Manen and others. It seems evident that this concern with 'moral purpose' can be strongly linked to the idea that 'reflective teaching implies an active concern with aims and consequences as well as means and technical competence' (Pollard, 2005, p15).

Dewey - the characteristics of reflective practice

Let us now return to Dewey and start to consider the *characteristics* of reflective practice. In illuminating the difference between routine and reflective action, Dewey (1910) outlines some of the skills and personal qualities of reflection. Certainly, keen observation, reasoning and analysis are seen as skills central to reflective practice. The linking of reflection to problem solving leads Dewey to the conclusion that 'search or enquiry to test the value of the suggestion before finally accepting it' is essential (p30), and that this involves thinking that is wide-ranging and based upon knowledge and experience, flexible and 'fertile', and well-structured and coherent. This must, according to Dewey, be accompanied by personal orientations such as 'open-mindedness', 'responsibility' and 'whole-heartedness' (1933). LaBoskey (1993) supports this through research showing that trainee teachers identified as 'Alert Novices', whilst no more intelligent than another group identified as 'Common Sense Thinkers', were better able to engage in reflective thinking primarily because they displayed modes of thinking that mirrored Dewey's open-mindedness, responsibility and whole-heartedness. They seemed driven by a will to know, were always on the look out for something better, and were questioning of *their* premise in situations not only where they were tentative, but where they were confident.

It seems that most of the writers in the Deweyan tradition argue that learning to reflect in the ways that *they* identify is a central part of learning to teach. However, McIntyre (1993) introduces a note of caution. If the higher levels of reflection where

the 'moral craftsman' operates (Zeichner and Liston, 1987, p27) are only possible where teachers have 'a certain fund or store of experiences or facts from which suggestions proceed' (Dewey, 1910, p30), then the comparatively scant experience that most teacher trainees have may limit their reflective practice. If this is accepted, the role of the mentor must be regarded as central to moving the trainee forward in their own practice.

Alternative conceptions of reflection – Schön

Furlong and Maynard (1995) go further. They see the distinction between routine and reflective action as actually unhelpful, failing to capture 'the multi-facetedness, unpredictability and sheer complexity of teaching' (p45). They also point to the difficulty of linking reflective practice firmly with solving specific problems and believe that whilst 'moral and ethical questions are important...they are not separable from questions about how children learn and the nature of pedagogy' (p44). They point to the work of Schön (1983, 1987) as providing an alternative conception of reflection. Schön emphasises that professionals find themselves constantly facing situations that are unique, and he posits that in these situations they tend to use their knowledge and past experiences as a 'frame' for action. This framing is an active, experimental and 'transactional' process that defines what Schön calls 'professional artistry'– 'the kinds of professional competence practitioners display in unique, uncertain and conflicted situations of practice'(1987, p22). The point here is that teachers rarely engage in bland routine action, but rather in 'knowing-in-action', revealed in the sorts of knowledge that emerge in their 'intelligent action' (1987, p25) and rather more than Dewey's conception of routine action.

Creating a reflective continuum, Schön develops the notions of 'reflection-in-action' and 'reflection-on-action'. Reflection-in-action is about 'questioning the assumptional structure of knowing-in-action', giving rise to an 'on the spot experiment' (1987, p25). Reflection-on-action involves trying to articulate tacit and

spontaneous intelligence through language (Furlong and Maynard, 1995) and Schön argues that moving teachers along the continuum from knowing-in-action to reflection-on-action is the way that they gain control of their developing artistry. The process is one of surfacing tacit understandings so that they can be examined, critiqued, developed and re-framed (Elliot, 1991). It is the way in which better and more general solutions are developed that can be applied in new circumstances – the ‘frame for action’ develops and a more confident teacher evolves. Certainly, for this author, it is this capacity to frame problems from different viewpoints – from a developed frame for action if you like - that is a central, defining characteristic of professional reflective practice. Importantly, part of re-framing involves setting as well as solving problems, ‘a process in which interactively we name the things to which we will attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them’ (Schön, 1983, p40).

Schön suggests that teachers engaged in reflection-in- and reflection-on-action interpret and frame their experiences through ‘repertoires of values, knowledge, theories and practice’ called appreciative systems (Zeichner and Liston, 1996, p16). Others have named these systems differently – practical theories (Handal and Lauvas, 1987) or teacher’s strategic knowledge (Schulman, 1986) for example – but it is clear that one of the ideas fundamental to reflection is that in coming to see a problem differently these appreciative systems are themselves challenged, modified or strengthened – in other words, re-framed. It seems that this can be a career-long process – as Zeichner and Liston have noted, ‘it is our sense that teachers are capable of continually developing their practical theories, their images and their conceptions of teaching as long as they continue to teach’ (1996, p37). Griffiths and Tann (1992) present an interesting framework that builds on the work of Schön to describe how reflection by teachers occurs in five temporal dimensions. These are:

1. Rapid reflection (immediate and automatic reflection-in-action)
2. Repair (thoughtful reflection-in-action)

3. Review (less formal reflection-on-action at a particular time)
4. Research (more systematic reflection-on-action over a period of time)
5. Re-theorizing and Research (Long-term reflection-on-action informed by public academic theories.

Griffiths and Tann argue that teachers need to reflect in all of these dimensions at one time or another, and that neglect of one dimension at the expense of another can be problematic.

Schön – some critiques

Critics of Schön, as distinct from re-interpreters, highlight his lack of attention to the discursive or dialogic dimension of teacher learning (Day, 1993). Solomon (1987) in particular makes a powerful case for reflection as a social practice, in which the articulation of ideas *to others* is central to the development of a critical perspective and so to the development of appreciative systems. In short, we all need a mentor, and social constructivists would point to the crucial role of language and interaction in developing shared understandings (Vygotsky, 1978; Wertsch, 1991, Mercer, 2004). Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles & Lopez-Torres (2003) refer to the 'situated learning discourse community', where situated activity, reflection as a social endeavour, and reflection as a distributed process - in which dialogue is central - are core features. Mirroring Solomon's (1987) critique of Schön, they see teachers in such a community interacting with colleagues 'in goal-directed activities that require communication and the exchange of ideas where reflection itself is not contained wholly in the mind of the individual but is 'distributed''. It seems that the development of such a community should be seen as one responsibility of professional educators.

Central here, of course, is the idea that trust between teachers and between teachers and other practitioners must be embedded – without trust the sharing of ideas, concerns and challenges can be highly threatening. Interestingly, Kettle and

Sellars (1996), in looking at the developing reflective practice of trainee teachers, found that the use of peer reflective groups encouraged them to challenge their existing theories and pre-conceived views of teaching whilst modelling a collaborative style of professional development.

A further criticism of Schön is that his focus is too narrowly on the individual, without necessarily considering the interaction between the wider social setting, including the purposes of schooling and the professional. We have already seen that educationalists such as Carr and Kemmis (1986) regard reflection that considers such interaction as 'higher level' and central to 'a critical educational science' that involves teachers in transforming education (p156). Here, it seems appropriate to argue that the Deweyan notion of reflection that includes a concern for aims and consequences is part of this 'higher level' reflection that is likely to lead to small-scale, and sometimes large-scale, transformations.

Drawing ideas together – Pollard's 'seven characteristics'

In attempting to draw together some of the strands and traditions that inform our understanding of reflective practice, Pollard (2005) provides a framework comprised of seven characteristics. Though it leans heavily on Dewey, it presents one attempt to synthesise elements of understanding of the process of reflection that have developed through the work of both Dewey and Schön, together with studies that have extended and developed their work and those who have contributed new understandings. In attempting such a synthesis, Pollard's framework undoubtedly falls short of providing the level of detail that proponents of various schools of reflection would hope to include. Nevertheless, presenting the framework diagrammatically (Figure 1) allows a clear connection to be made between theoretical traditions and the characteristics of reflective practice in action.

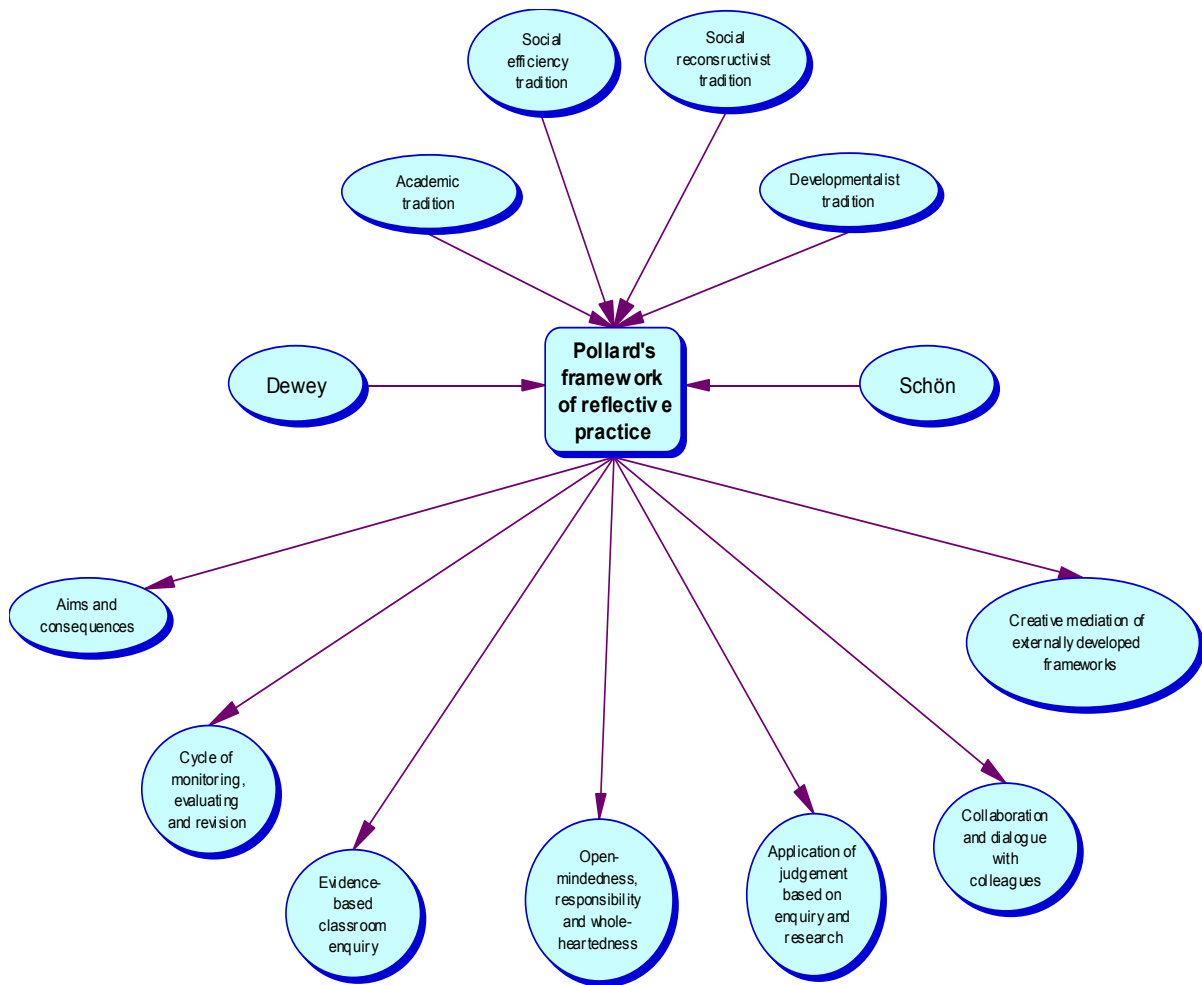


Figure 1: Pollard's framework of reflective practice.

The seven characteristics of reflective teaching detailed by Pollard are therefore:

1. 'Reflective teaching implies an active concern with aims and consequences, as well as means and technical efficiency.' This is not only a concern with the immediate aims and consequences of classroom practice, but also encompasses the responsibility for speaking out, on the basis of professional experience and often through professional organisations, on government aims and policies.
2. 'Reflective teaching is applied in a cyclical or spiralling process, in which teachers monitor, evaluate and revise their own practice continuously.' This highlights involvement in a dynamic, continuous reflexive process, an active

researching of one's own practice leading to self-monitoring, reflection and change.

3. 'Reflective teaching requires competence in methods of evidence-based classroom enquiry, to support the progressive development of higher standards of teaching.' This involves reviewing relevant existing research, gathering evidence, using objective and subjective data, analysis and evaluation, and judgement-making that leads to decision taking.
4. 'Reflective teaching requires attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness.' Open-mindedness 'is an active desire to listen to more ideas than one, to give full attention to alternative possibilities, and to recognise the possibility of error even in beliefs that are dearest to us' (Zeichner and Liston, 1996, p10). Pollard and Tann (1994) note that responsibility involves thinking about three central kinds of consequences of teaching – personal, academic, and social and political (primarily the effects of teaching on the life chances of pupils). In referring to wholeheartedness, Dewey meant that open-mindedness and responsibility should be central to the professional life of the reflective teacher.
5. 'Reflective teaching is based on teacher judgement, informed by evidence-based enquiry and insights from other research.' Here Pollard highlights the work of Schön in pointing to the use of judgement in reflection-in-action and its use in reflection-on-action, the latter of which may be seen as being more strongly linked to knowledge of research, systematic enquiry and an understanding of the political framework of action.
6. 'Reflective teaching, professional learning and personal fulfilment are enhanced by dialogue with colleagues.' This refers to dialogue with specific individuals in school, to collaboration across staff groupings – an integral aspect of the 'intelligent school' (MacGilchrist, Myers and Reed, 2004) – and to communication and cooperation with individuals, organisations and agencies beyond the school.
7. 'Reflective teaching enables teachers to creatively mediate externally developed frameworks for teaching and learning.' Here, Pollard refers to the

reflective teacher being able to justify protective mediation to defend existing practices; engage in innovative mediation by working within the spaces and boundaries provided by new requirements; contribute to collaborative mediation whereby externally developed ideas are scrutinized and adapted in a professional, mutually supportive environment; or even engage in conspirational mediation, where teachers' appreciative systems form the basis of a judgement or judgements that resistance to implementing external requirements through the use of subversive strategies is desirable.

These characteristics mesh strongly with Zeichner and Liston's (1996) five key features of reflective teaching - 'A reflective teacher:

- examines, frames, and attempts to solve the dilemmas of classroom practice;
- is aware of and questions the assumptions and values he or she brings to teaching
- is attentive to the institutional and cultural contexts in which he or she teaches;
- takes part in curriculum development and is involved in school change efforts; and
- takes responsibility for his or her own professional development.' (p6)

Related perspectives – Handal and Lauvas: the practice triangle

Another related perspective is provided by Handal and Lauvas (1987), who present a useful conceptualisation of reflective practice. In their 'practice triangle', teaching that integrates teacher's practical theories with their daily action involves three levels of practice – at the zenith is the notion that the reflective teacher must have a core concern with ethical and moral issues:

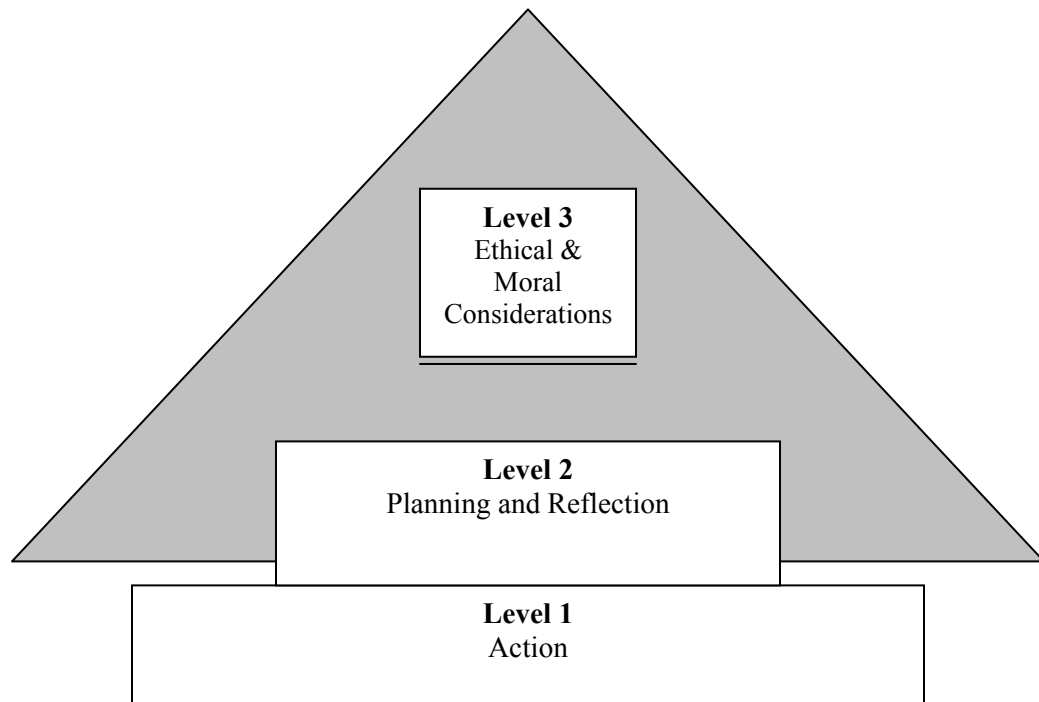


Figure 2: The practice triangle [adapted from Handal and Lauvas, 1987]

These attempts to provide characteristics or features of reflective practice or of a reflective practitioner will always fall short when viewed from any single theoretical perspective, but they do enable those new to understanding teaching to appreciate the possible elements contained within a reflective practice paradigm. However, the real question is surely related to where reflective practice leads.

Reflective practice and the process of change

If we return to Schön for a moment, it seems that at the level of reflection-in-action teachers are concerned with the *immediate* aims and consequences of classroom

practice, whilst at the level of reflection-on-action the importance of where a teacher 'places' themselves with respect to the societal issues and influences on education is fundamental to the way in which they may proceed, and to the ways in which they might view developments within the school. Fullan's (1993) notion of 'moral purpose' is most strongly linked to the second of these levels, as fundamental to both is an underlying and developing set of beliefs and values that inform action. As Bramell and White (2000) have stated, it is the value systems of teachers that provide a 'coherent, humane vision by which schools can be guided'. And this vision is informed by action – by day to day classroom experiences, by looking systematically for evidence and by calling into question established practices.

It might be argued that it would be perfectly possible for a teacher to engage in a 'monitoring-evaluating-revising' cycle of action, incorporating data collection and analysis procedures appropriate to action research, without recourse to wider aims and values. Yet is this ultimately sustainable? The role of the teacher seems imbued with moral purpose – why change anything, why engage in analysis, debate and painful trial and error if this is not the case? On what basis are judgements to be made, if not at least tangentially in relation to moral considerations founded on values? Yet a 'moral purpose' is something of an empty vessel without an understanding of the means by which change might be implemented. Here there seems to be a link with three inter-related elements of reflective practice - an understanding of the 'cyclical or spiralling process' of monitoring, evaluating and revising practice continuously, 'competence in methods of classroom-based enquiry' and the application of 'teacher judgement, informed by evidence-based enquiry' and research (Pollard, 2005, p16-21). There thus seem to be at least two broad and interrelated elements in the understanding of change – the first is to do with understanding specific school and classroom circumstances and the second is having a grasp on wider societal influences and intentions.

At a time when teachers and other professionals within schools are constantly struggling with new requirements, deciding on what to implement, what to put to one side and what to emphasise in their schools, an understanding of the importance of reflective activity has never been more important. The creative mediation of externally developed frameworks for teaching and learning (Pollard, 2005, p23) is really only possible from the position of professional understanding, evidence and reflection.

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