

Excerpts – What is Reflective/ Reflexive practice with examples of models

Critically reflective and reflexive practice

The need for reflective practice appears in many training courses in education, health and the social services. However the depth of reflection required will vary. This may mean reflecting on an individual client ‘case’ in order to solve a problem and improve practice; in a cycle of reflection employing the well known process outlined by Kolb. Kolb’s (1984) four step experiential learning cycle involves Concrete Experience (describing the experience in detail), Reflective Observation (thinking about what ‘I’ was trying to do, why, and the consequences of the action or behaviour), Abstract Conceptualisation (how does this experience relate to what I know already, what I can I learn from this, what else do I need to find out about) and Active Experimentation (what will I do next time in a similar situation, based on the analysis of this experience). A deeper process of reflection, reflexive practice, involves examining one’s own thoughts, feelings and actions and their impact on both the client and on the self as the practitioner. Critical reflection requires the resource of time, and time is often squeezed by the need to meet a range of competing demands whether in work or in training. Thus reflective practice may be espoused as important for professional practice in a range of helping professions, but evidence of how this is facilitated and supported can be difficult to find.

Engaging in purposeful and critical reflection can improve practice and can also be taken into direct work with clients – the reflexive practitioner can ‘practice what they preach’ and support clients by creating spaces for deeper thinking about career. A reflexive practitioner is less likely to be driven by behaviour that is centred on reaching targets that are not intrinsic to

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the client's values. Engaging in critical reflection involves a questioning of the political forces that shape practice, albeit that is not an easy position to adopt when practitioners themselves can feel powerless within services beset by resource issues and potential redundancies. There are constraints that as practitioners we may be conscious of, but there are other 'assumptions' that we may not be aware of that a critical approach can reveal. But, lack of time cannot be a reason to ignore the benefits of reflexive processes. In careers work an 'intervention' can be a reflective space to pause, opening up the possibility for questioning assumptions to enhance more creative thinking. Before continuing it will be useful to revisit the definition for reflectivity and reflexivity offered earlier in the book.

A reflective practitioner is someone who is able to reach potential solutions through analysing experience and prior knowledge, in order to inform current and future practice. The internal process of reflection that is active and conscious could be described as reflectivity. Reflexivity is the process by which we are aware of our own responses to what is happening in a particular context ... [i.e. a career counselling or coaching interaction] ... and our reactions to people, events and the dialogue taking place. A reflexive understanding will include an awareness of the personal, social and cultural context and its influence on both the speaker and the listener. Reflexive awareness in counselling practice, leads to a deeper understanding of how we co-construct knowledge about the world, and ways of operating within it, that are more meaningful for those involved.

(Reid, 2013, page 12)

Critical reflection is about an awareness of the social and political context within which career counselling and coaching take place. It is concerned with an acknowledgement of how

any interaction is influenced by a range of factors – as above, not all of them conscious. We need to acknowledge that a relationship like career counselling or coaching does not take place in a vacuum, separate from what is happening in the ‘outside’ world. As mentioned in chapter three, we all bring our life scripts and social, familial and cultural influences and defences with us into the interaction. Schön was also introduced in chapter three and his notion that theory and research occupy the ‘high, hard ground’, whilst practice resides in the ‘swampy lowlands’ (1983, page 54). Practitioners work within the complexities of practice and the ability to reach potential solutions in the moment, through analysing experience and prior knowledge, is not easy. Munby and Russell (1989) claim that Schön’s work is not sufficiently analytical as, ‘The reflection that Schön is calling attention to is *in the action*, not in associated thinking about action (page73). Eraut (1994) is also critical of Schön’s work, and questions the position of the reflective expert as enshrined by professional codes and the status they give. The space to engage in, what Eraut prefers to call, ‘metacognitive’ (that is, thinking about thinking) or ‘deliberative’ thought processes (page145) is not just for new practitioners or for ‘old’ practitioners in new roles, but should be continuous for all practitioners. Eraut suggests that Schön fails to give sufficient attention to the variable of time when considering the reflective process and this criticism is particularly acute for hard-pressed helping services with limited resources. Action in such contexts will often proceed on the basis of rapid interpretation of the situation rather than critical reflection. In a criticism of Schön and Eraut, Ixer (1999, page 513) goes further and states that in the context of ‘busy practice’ in the helping professions ‘there is no such thing as reflection’. These criticisms suggest a requirement for a more developed use of critical reflection that moves beyond a focus on ‘solving the client’s problems’, as if the practitioner is the objective expert operating outside of the process and not having an impact on what is taking place.

Reflexivity, then, involves inner reflection, to be aware of the impact of our behaviour on the process and entails a conscious awareness of our thoughts, feelings and imaginings. A consciousness about what is happening in our minds and bodies, what Etherington (2004) describes as the need ‘to know the inner story that we tell ourselves as we listen to our clients’ stories’ (page 29). This is a deeper, metacognitive process that can lead to changes in the way we communicate with our clients. It can enhance the working alliance, the relationship with the client; acknowledging and fostering the client’s agency to effect change in their lives. ‘For the practitioner, it assists them to be fully conscious of and act upon the subjective influences which have an impact on their practice – it can cultivate strengths and aid the development of more informed and satisfying practice’ (Reid and Bassot, 201, page 105).

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In advocating for critical reflection, the observation has been made that this requires a separation from the immediate experience and this critical reflection can be enhanced within a conversation with others. Early writing on reflective practice can suggest practices which are somewhat sealed within a cycle which may become self absorbed and uncritical. Critical reflection is a learning process that adults can engage in if they are able, or enabled, to look back at the social norms and behaviours that were internalized uncritically as part of their socialisation in childhood. There is a contemporary trend to avoid looking back and yet engaging with our past can, as Freud taught us, lead to a deeper understanding of the present, in turn, reflexively, to reconfigure a sense of the possibility for the future - in all its constraints and uncertainties. To delve deeper into the concept of critical reflection to enhance reflexivity, I am going to make use of the influential work of Stephen Brookfield.

Critical reflection to enhance reflexivity

Brookfield (2005) draws extensively on the work of the critical theorists (writers such as Adorno; Gramsci; Horkheimer; Althusser; Marcuse; Habermas - see Brookfield, 2005) in order to challenge practitioners to rethink their assumptions about how adults learn about self and others. Although the work is focused on the sector for adult learning and teaching, it is highly relevant for those teaching and practicing in careers work, with both young and 'older' adults. Brookfield has moved away from earlier conceptions of reflective practice that were concerned mainly in explaining general approaches rooted in humanistic psychology, which, he highlights, paid inadequate attention to social class and the underlying inequalities in Western society. In the 2005 text he also turns a critical eye on the Eurocentric approach to learning and teaching and the related reflective practices, drawing on literature that offers analyses from race and gender theorists, and from writers who challenge both (e.g. hooks; Davis – see Brookfield, 2005). Brookfield explains that thinking critically is necessary to understand and then challenge the inequalities evident in the dominant ideology in any given society: the discourses that are seen as normal and democratic, and yet disadvantage large sections of the population. There is a conscious raising endeavour here redolent of the work of Freire (1970, 1994), which also informs his work. The point of this discussion is that ideology and discourses lead to normative behaviours and assumptions that are often not questioned. Mezirow (1991), theorising adult learning, refers to this critical questioning as a 'systematic' critical reflection that centres on probing sociocultural distortions. Brookfield explains that critical theory derives from questioning ideological (often masquerading as 'common sense') understandings of how the world works, by stating:

1. That apparently open, Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism, and class discrimination are empirical realities

2. That the way this state of affairs is reproduced and made to seem normal, natural and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology
3. That critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a necessary prelude to changing it.

(Brookfield, 2005, page vii)

According to the view above, within organised social systems, which include the judiciary, policing, health, social care and education, individual 'subjects' are socialised and 'disciplined' within discourses (accepted ways of thinking and speaking) that establish which social roles are possible and impossible; that is, they set and constrain the norms in a society. In this way, discourses are based on what counts in terms of 'truth', knowledge, cultural values and socially defined norms of behaviour. A social and critical analysis challenges humanistic psychology that assumes that the individual is able to act from a politically neutral stance, outside of the operations of knowledge/power within a society (Foucault, 1980). From this perspective, social systems can become viewed as a form of surveillance. Career counselling and coaching, incorporating processes of reflection, may also be a way of disciplining individuals as 'subjects' into the prevailing capitalist economy, with its focus on neo-liberal effectiveness and the demands of the market. Reflective processes and supervision, discussed later, can be seen as confessionary practices, disciplining subjects into society's norms. Power is not just top down and all embracing however, we resist through developing the necessary criticality around whose purposes such practices serve. The argument that it is important to acknowledge that careers work is a not a politically neutral activity has already been made in the book, alongside the need for a theoretical understanding of the models that are applied-in-practice. Thus, this must also include a critical questioning

of the theory and models that we apply when we ask students and/or clients to engage in reflective practice; if we are to be reflexive teachers and practitioners we are not immune to critical scrutiny. Earlier in the book it was suggested that we need to pay attention to the language we use and, in advocating for critically reflective practice, we need to recognise that words can become fashionable and concepts can have their meaning 'emptied out': words such as 'empowerment' and 'transformative' are particular examples. Critically reflective practice may be another: adding the word 'critical' without an examination of power and the politics of power, does not lead to a psychosocial understanding of the concept. The terms reflective and reflexive practice do have different meanings, as defined above, but are often used interchangeably, so for the rest of the chapter, and in keeping with the arguments made above, the embracing term critically reflective practice will be used.

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In order for career practitioners to challenge assumptions – their own and / or their clients - that are grounded in an unconscious and dominant ideology, it seems reasonable that we move on from theory and offer a few concrete tools. In doing so a cautionary note is required. In keeping with the tenets of critical theory, any such tools will work for some people and not others, and it is not the purpose here to suggest one way of working to engender critical reflection. The danger of moving on to tools for 'critically reflective practice' is that we put theory aside and stop thinking about the need for criticality, but move on we must.

Being critically reflective: models and practices

There are many books on reflective practice that do not take the critical approach described above. The focus is usually on what is happening within the interaction or on reflecting on the action to inform and improve further practice. Wider issues relating to power, its operation in any given society and the effects on the individual, are less likely to be

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considered. However, moving on from a social and political critique, which at times can feel like unrelieved pessimism, and keeping the need for criticality in mind; such models can offer useful starting points. As an introduction, I will draw on four approaches cited in Reid and Bassot (2011).

Gibbs' (1998) reflective cycle provides a structure for a practitioner that has a focus on the affective or emotional impact of an experience. Reflective questions are:

- What happened?
- What were you thinking and feeling?
- What was good and bad about the experience?
- What sense can you make of the situation?
- What else could you have done?
- If the situation arose again, what would you do?

Our emotions often precede rational thought and paying attention to our feelings can reveal our attitudes and values, our 'world view' or 'frame of reference'. This focus can help us to reflect on how our emotions, feelings derived from our past experience, may be having an impact on the interaction, either positively or negatively.

Boud, Keogh and Walker's (1985) model of reflection is more detailed and examines the attitudes and values that inform our frame of reference, with an acknowledgement that we live our lives in contexts that will reinforce these. Their seven levels of reflectivity suggest we should examine our relationships with others, reflecting on the habits that we have learned through experience:

1. *Reflectivity* – becoming aware of how we see things, and how we think and act

2. *Affective reflectivity* – becoming aware of our feelings about how we think and act
3. *Discriminant reflectivity* – questioning whether or not our perceptions about people are accurate
4. *Judgemental reflectivity* – becoming aware of our value judgements
5. *Conceptual reflectivity* – questioning the way we think about other people
6. *Psychic reflectivity* – recognising when we are quick to make judgements about people on the basis of limited information about them
7. *Theoretical reflectivity* – becoming aware that the reasons we are quick to make judgements about people are based on cultural and psychological assumptions.

If an interaction with a client is not problematic, the chances are that we will not reflect on it, but if unsatisfying in some way it would be my expectation that a professional career practitioner would question what happened and why. *Ostermann and Kottkamp's (2004) reflective cycle* recognises that problematic experiences play a vital role in learning. Their cycle includes four phases: a) Identification of the Problem: the discrepancy or gap between an ideal and a current reality, a dilemma (that by definition is not easy to solve) or a situation that resonates with our own personal experience, b) Observation and Analysis: the complex step of both describing and analysing the situation. Ostermann and Kottkamp (2004, page 28) use the metaphor of a theatre critic to describe a process of 'watching and analyzing our own actions on stage: we become both subject and object'. Within this phase they employ the seven steps on the *Argyris (1982) Ladder of Inference*, as follows, to identify how assumptions are made:

1. I experience a situation
2. I observe selectively. I see what I want to see

3. I add meaning (cultural and personal)
4. I make assumptions based on the meanings I add
5. I draw conclusions
6. I adopt beliefs about the world
7. I take action based on my beliefs.

Following this analysis, where assumptions are questioned and actions are critiqued, Ostermann and Kottkamp suggest a third phase, c) Abstract Re-conceptualisation: where new thoughts and understanding emerge. Finally, d) Active Experimentation is the fourth and final phase, where new ideas are tested in practice.

Echoing Mezirow (1991), Lucas (1991) asserts that the development of reflective processes involves a systematic enquiry to improve and deepen one's understanding of practice. The word systematic suggests a methodical process that will require time, and the outcome can be enhanced if critical reflection can take place in a safe space, with one or more others. The need for change may emerge for the individual or the organisation and change is often challenging. As implied earlier, continuous improvement is a goal of professional practice and critical reflection has a crucial role to play in this demanding task.

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Capturing your reflections in some systematic way is useful, as this will enable you to think critically and analyse and evaluate your thoughts – maybe using the models mentioned above. That process may be through writing in a reflective journal (Bassot, 2013), through using a web-based tool, audio-recording your thoughts, a spider diagram or other creative means – the choice is yours. The time you spend on this will also depend on the value you place on the activity. You may be someone who prefers to discuss your thoughts with others, having spent

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time silently reflecting on the issue. These differences need to be reflected in teaching practices, as imposing one way of capturing reflections is not inclusive, particularly if such work is assessed.

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Supervision

Working in any helping service can be challenging and practitioners working as career counsellors will experience situations where they are troubled by the work with clients. There may also be occasions when a client presents for career coaching but other issues emerge. In such circumstances 'clinical' supervision (as found in therapeutic counselling) is helpful. Supervision is also a reflexive process. It can maintain ethical work, alongside supporting the practitioner and preventing 'burn out'. I have written about supervision for career and guidance practitioners elsewhere (Reid, 2007; Reid 2010) and for counsellors with Jane Westergaard (Reid and Westergaard, 2006; 2013). Briefly, the term can be divided into two words, 'super' and 'vision'. The experienced person looks from above (*super*) on the work of a colleague who may, or may not, be a less experienced person, and has a view (*vision*) of the work. The purpose and provision of supervision will differ according to the context in which practitioners are working and the individuals and/or groups they work with. For example, a career counsellor working with vulnerable young people will benefit from regular supervision, whereas a career coach working in an organisation with employees may not have access to supervision; albeit they may find themselves at times in challenging situations. These variations can reflect the role, the training for the role, the level of experience and whether working in private practice or within a public service. Within therapeutic counselling it is likely to be compulsory; in other roles it may be voluntary, or not available, or not viewed as a requirement.

Supervision is not therapy. To help identify what it is about, Weiner, Mizen and Duckham (2003) describe four primary tasks of supervision, these are:

...facilitating, encouraging and informing the work of the supervisee throughout the development of their professional life; attending to the dynamics of the supervisory relationship within an organisational context; ensuring competent and ethical practice is taking place within the developmental stage of the supervisee, and, maintaining the good reputation of the profession as a whole - through attention to professional standards and governance.

(Weiner et al, 2003, page 4)

A well known description of the functions of supervision within the context of counselling work, is offered by Inskipp and Proctor (1993). They describe supervision as having *formative, normative* (which can be viewed as a monitoring function) and also *restorative* qualities. These terms focus on the benefits of supervision for the supervisee. Kadushin (1976), within the context of social work, offers something similar, but with a focus on the role of the supervisor and uses the terms *educative, administrative* (which can be interpreted as managerial) and *supportive*. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) define the functions as *developmental, qualitative* and *resourcing*, and suggest that their definitions add new distinctions to a process that 'both supervisor and supervisee are engaged in' (page 57). They describe the *developmental* function as being concerned with 'developing the skills, understanding and capacity of the supervisees' (ibid), via reflection and discussion of client work. Hawkins and Shohet (2006) also stress the collaborative nature of the work and emphasise the importance of encouraging a learning culture in the practice of supervision.

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Harris and Brockbank (2011) pay particular attention to the place of learning theory, suggesting that supervisors need to examine the working context and their own experience of supervision. For this perspective there is a need for the supervisor to identify the learned philosophy and potential bias in their own supervisory practice. In other words, there is a need to question their assumptions about the work and the methods they use. As Harris and Brockbank state (2011, page 57) without this reflexivity, 'the implicit model is passed on to the supervisee, without the supervisor being aware of it.' What is emphasised here is that supervision takes place within a learning climate where participants are prepared to learn and work collaboratively.

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(Reid, 2016: 241-259)