

## **Course design for reflective practice**

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The importance of a reflective approach to practice has been emphasised in many professions in recent years. Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) drew attention to the fact that professional competence involves more than the application of technical expertise; not a new idea but one which had, up till then, little apparent influence on the design of university courses for the professions. Since the early eighties there has been a great deal of discussion about educating reflective practitioners particularly in professions such as teaching, nursing and social work where field experience and academic coursework need to be closely integrated (Schön 1987, Zeichner & Liston 1987, Korthagen 1988, Clift *et al* 1990, Palmer, Burns & Bulman 1994, Smith & Hatton 1993). Such discussion has emphasised the importance of focusing on the artistry of practice and, within courses, of creating opportunities for students to engage in activities which promote reflective practice.

Independently of the work influenced by Schön there has been an increasing interest in the role of reflection in learning from experience and how reflective activities can be incorporated into learning in a variety of ways (Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985, Mulligan & Griffin 1992). There have been two separate emphases in this. The first on reflection which takes place alongside action, which has close parallels with Schön, the second on reflection which takes place following action. The latter has emerged from a groupwork tradition and from an interest in debriefing complex events.

The argument of the present paper is that the encouragement of reflective practice requires more than the development of effective ways of debriefing periods of fieldwork or introducing a new topic into the curriculum; it requires finding appropriate ways to build notions of reflective practice into the processes of teaching and learning throughout courses.

## **Approaches**

There are now many strategies which have come to be identified as contributing to reflection, for example, the use of learning journals and learning partners, debriefing activities, critical incident analysis, autobiographical work, the creation of concept maps, action research and various forms of computer based dialogue (Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985, Holly 1989, Rosenthal 1991, Zeichner 1986). While these methods, if not common, are at least familiar in higher education, their use now is being more clearly conceptualised as having the purpose of "turning experience into learning" (Boud, Keogh & Walker 1985) or offering students the opportunity to process their experience to generate alternative ways of viewing a situation and achieving new appreciations or understandings. While each of these approaches has a particular focus, they share the feature that students are encouraged to return to their own experiences in class and outside and focus on what these events mean to them.

The following are examples of strategies used in our own teaching. The context here is one of courses for mature students who are already practitioners in the field of adult education.

### *Learning journals*

Students are required to keep a weekly journal in which they record and comment on their experience as learners in the course (what kinds of activities do they enjoy? what gets in the way of their learning? how does their experience relate to the theory they are hearing and reading about?). Five minutes at the end of the class time is devoted to journal writing. For some students this is all they need, others use this as a beginning and write more during the week, sometimes a great deal more. At the end of the semester students review their journal entries and submit an overview of their learning about themselves as adult learners and ways in which they think this

might influence their own practice as adult educators (Knights 1991). In other courses this idea is extended and students are encouraged to keep other forms of personal-professional journals (Holly 1989), dialogue journals (Reinertsen & Wells 1993) or learning portfolios (Bawden & McKinnon 1980, Walker 1985, Barnett & Lee 1994, MacIsaac & Jackson 1994).

### *Learning partners*

Students are introduced to the idea of using a learning partner at the beginning of a course. They are encouraged, though not required, to choose another member of the class to act as their partner. The aim of this relationship is for each student to have someone else with whom they discuss ideas that are raised, explore their own interests, exchange work for comment and generally to be a friendly person upon whom they can call (Robinson, Saberton & Griffin 1985). (The importance of a listener in supporting individual reflection is discussed in detail in Knights 1985). The formalisation of this arrangement is particularly important for busy part-time students who often do not have the same opportunities for peer interaction as those who are less pressured by family and work commitments. Students are encouraged to meet for coffee, for example, and then make their own arrangements which might involve telephone contact or meeting briefly before or after class. Support for learning partnerships as a reflective activity is indicated by Smith & Hatton's (1993) research on the measurement of reflection which suggest that more reflection may occur with 'critical friends' than through interaction with staff or through written assignments.

### *Use of learning contracts*

The widespread use of contract learning at all levels means that learning tasks which are meaningful to each student are negotiated with staff members and through this process students become committed to them (Knowles 1975). This form of tailoring courses and subjects to individual needs is a form of 'liberating structure' (Torbert 1978) that provides a framework in which students can operate, but which does not unilaterally define the specific features of learning tasks in which they engage. The use of contracts prompts reflection at three stages: prior to the preparation of an initial draft to be submitted to a staff member students need to focus on their experiences, their learning needs and how they might pursue them; in dialogue with staff their conceptions of these are challenged and a revised contract produced; and prior to final submission of the outcomes of their learning students are prompted by the contract to review their learning and how they can present it to another person. The use of contracts is ubiquitous in our School and is the predominant form of assessment in most courses. Strong support for them among both staff and students at all levels has been found (Anderson, Boud & Sampson 1994).

### *Self-assessment schedules*

One of the difficulties of conventional assignments in promoting reflection is that they tend to concentrate on relatively few aspects of a course. Self-assessment schedules are used as a means of enabling students to bring together a wide range of their learning in a course, to reflect on their achievements and to examine the implications for further learning. A completed schedule is a document in which students are required to identify the objectives they have been pursuing during a course (their own and others, predetermined and emergent), establish criteria for judging the achievement of these objectives, explain what evidence they have which will demonstrate their achievements (written work, contributions to class, notes on readings, feedback from others, etc.), make judgements about the extent and quality of their achievements and report on what further action they need to engage in (if any) with respect to any of the objectives which they have set (Boud 1992). Such a schedule fits well with the keeping of learning journals.

While these three approaches promote reflection, they also have features which address other desired objectives. Reflection is not something independent of what students are otherwise expected to learn and reflective practices are not separate from the normal teaching and learning practices of a course. It is often desirable to build reflective elements into activities which serve other teaching values and content objectives. Thus, in the examples given above, learning journals are a way of

students of students keeping a record of their learning, learning partners have a peer support function as well as encouraging reflection, learning contracts are a way of organising and keeping track of learning activities, and self-assessment schedules can be used as one element of formal assessment. In each case students are working with the substantive content of the course.

Most conceptualisations of reflection and reflective teaching are based on logical and analytical ways of information processing, but there are other ways of interpreting data and making decisions which make use of 'gestalts'. Korthagen (1993) proposes a broader form of reflection and reflective teaching than is often discussed which includes the mental 'mirroring' of these non-rational processes and argues for the importance of integrating the rational and non-rational in reflection. Strategies of this type include the use of metaphors, drawing or painting, making photographs, guided fantasies, and Kelly's repertory grid.

### **Models of reflection**

Reflection as a term is used in a number of different ways by different authors. We take our definition from Boud, Keogh & Walker (1985) as 'a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations' (p.19). They developed a three stage model of the reflection process focussing on: returning to the experience, attending to feelings connected with the experience and reevaluating the experience through recognising implications and outcomes.

This model has subsequently been extended into a model for facilitating learning from experience (Boud & Walker 1990, Boud, 1993). The essence of this model is that learning from experience can be enhanced through both reflection-in-action, that is reflection which occurs in the midst of experience, and through reflection after an event (reflection-on-action). Both forms of reflection can be introduced into courses, though in different ways.

The features of the model include the following: reflection is grounded in the *personal foundation of experience* of the learner, that is, those experiences which have shaped the person and have helped to create the person he or she is now, and their *intent* which gives a particular focus to their learning in any particular context. Learning occurs through the interaction of the person with his or her material and human environment—the *learning milieu*—and is assisted through the learner giving attention to *noticing* what is happening in themselves and in their external environment, *intervening* in various ways to influence themselves and the milieu in which they are operating and reflecting-in-action to continually modify their noticing and interventions. The model suggests that there are an endless number of reflective strategies which might be adopted, but those which are chosen must be related to the needs and intent of the learner and the nature of the milieu.

Although the model was originally developed in the context of non-accredited (though deliberate) learning, it has also been applied elsewhere. In the context of university courses, the curriculum and the teacher are strong elements in the learning milieu. See Figure 1.

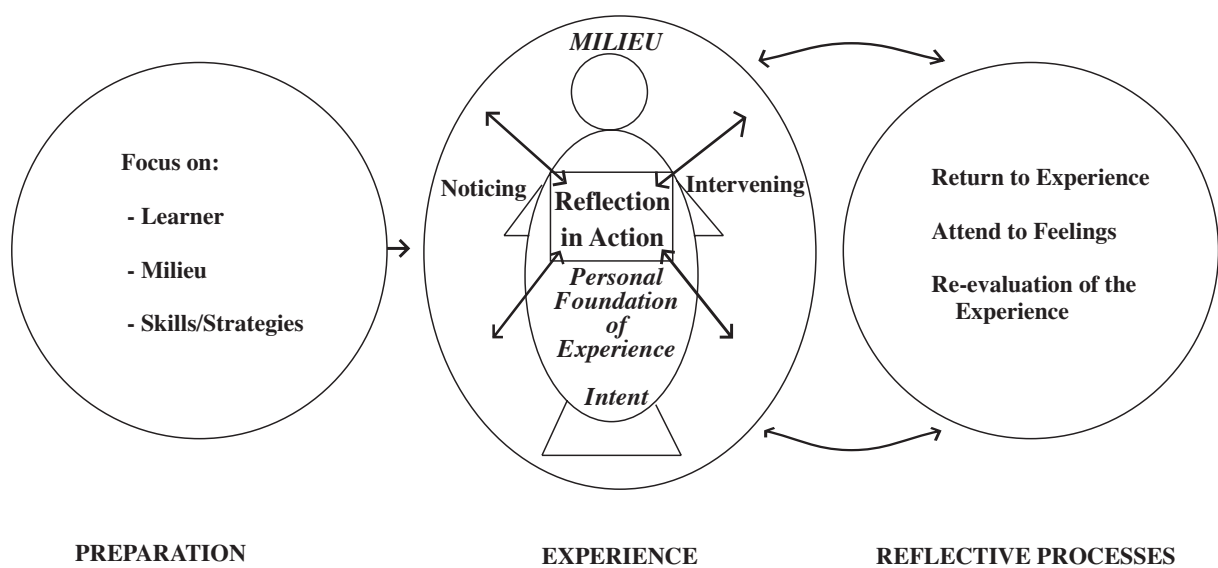


Figure 1. Model for promoting learning from experience

### Designing for reflection

The illustrations of reflective activities given earlier are just a few of many possibilities. Exercises and learning activities which are currently used as a normal part of a course can be designed or redesigned with a view to enhancing those features which contribute to promoting reflection. Reflection is about something and it occurs in a particular context; it must always be considered as an element of an overall design which links with the learning goals and curriculum content of a course. While some activities, such as, keeping a journal, have become identified as reflective, it is not useful to talk about reflective devices independent of the context in which they are to be used.

While there are some activities like those mentioned previously which have reflection as a dominant characteristic, it is important to identify those features of any learning activity which are likely to promote students' reflection. The following indicates some of these features which flow from the model of facilitating learning from experience discussed above:

- Learners are actively engaged with a task which they accept is for learning (they are not simply following a prescription or set of rules, but are contributing their own thinking to the task).

- The task is constructed to allow significant elements of choice by the learners so that they can begin to own it and make it meaningful and worthwhile for them—it thus becomes a task which is not undertaken simply to satisfy the needs of the teacher.
- The event is not totally predictable to the participants and learners are prompted to notice what they did not expect.
- Learners experience is challenged or confronted in some way which allows them to reassess their experience and the assumptions on which they are operating.
- Learners are obliged to intervene in some way in their own learning process; they have to make choices and follow the consequences of their choices.
- Learners are required to link what is new to them to their existing frameworks of understanding or confront the need to modify these frameworks.

Reflection in the sense used here is a conscious act of the learner. It is not meaningful to think of ‘going through the motions’ of reflection even though many students will respond instrumentally in this manner when confronted with a requirement to do so. Setting an assignment which the staff member believes will encourage reflection is not sufficient; the intent of the student is crucial as most activities can be turned into ones in which the semblance of reflection can be portrayed.

Learning activities may promote different types and degrees of reflection. While it may be difficult to distinguish reliably between what is and is not a reflective task, it is possible to introduce features into an activity which increase the likelihood of it becoming a reflective one. For example, when students engage in a self-assessment exercise on an assignment, they are more likely to approach it reflectively if they are expected to take each aspect in turn and make a judgement about their own work with respect to that aspect rather than making a global judgement about their overall work. They are also more likely to approach it reflectively when they are expected to write a phrase or sentence about each aspect, rather than give a numerical rating for each. A similar approach can be used in student evaluations of teaching. Asking students to complete open ended sentences (‘my major learning from this subject was ...’ , ‘my main difficulty in learning in this subject was ...’ and so on) or give other qualitative assessments of their learning in the subject is likely to promote reflection about their experience and learning in the course whereas the assignment of a number on a scale from one to five simply provides the lecturer with (dubious) quantitative data.

### **Creating a context for reflection**

These points underline the importance of introducing and establishing an effective climate for reflection, and this is inextricably linked with establishing an effective climate for learning more generally. All learning requires learners to actively engage with knowledge, but reflection makes such engagement an essential part of the process.

Our experience suggests that the following are important in introducing and establishing a productive climate for reflection:

- *articulating an educational rationale for the process.* Why is reflection important, why bother with it? How is it different from other aspects of learning, particularly memorising and problem-solving? It may be useful to introduce students to the idea of different levels of reflection. Van Manen (1977), for example, discusses three different levels: the first concerned with techniques needed to reach given objectives, the second concerned with clarifying assumptions and assessing the consequences of different actions and the third concerned with principles such as justice, equity, and human concerns.
- *introducing a simple exercise to illustrate reflection.* For example asking students in pairs to interview each other about an activity earlier in the class using the reflective questions: what happened? How do you feel? What does it mean?

- *providing an opportunity for students to clarify their understanding of the idea.*  
Making the distinction between reflection and evaluation or record keeping, or reflective and non-reflective thinking and encouraging students to bring forward examples and non-examples of reflection to be discussed.
- *introducing a framework or model to aid thinking about elements of reflection.* For example, by referring to that of Boud & Walker (1990) or some aspect thereof.
- *modelling a reflective approach in one's own presentation of the idea.*  
If the idea is presented as instructions to be followed, it will contradict the notion of reflection that is being promoted. The staff member must plan for, expect and allow for considerable questions and discussion and must treat the issues raised in a thoughtful way, engaging with them rather than offering an immediate technical response. Particular attention needs to be given to wait-time (Tobin 1987) so that the learners feel that the staff member has made some attempt to reflect upon their concerns and respond to them, rather than presenting the plan as a fait accompli.
- *identifying areas of the process that students can make their own.*  
Reflection cannot be determined exclusively by staff and students have to bring an agenda of their own which they pursue in the process.
- *providing time.*  
Reflection takes time and it will normally occupy students in much time outside the class. The importance of it can be emphasised if the staff member commits class time to reflective activities particularly at the early stages. This will demonstrate that the teacher takes the matter seriously and is willing to allocate precious meeting time to an important matter. Later in a semester, very small amounts of class-time can be very productively used for reflection, for example, in having students complete a one minute paper or reflection on the topic of the class at the end of the session.
- *treating reflection as a normal activity*  
While it might be necessary to build particular reflection activities into courses in a way which at first might seem a little self-conscious, the aim is for them to become commonplace over time and be regarded as part of the norm of teaching and learning. This is a positive development if it means that the ideas of reflection are being internalised by all parties involved, but it is not if reflection becomes a ritual which is conducted in a non-reflective manner!

Reflective activities in themselves cannot compensate for courses which are not related to the concerns of the student, nor ones in which students are so overloaded that they cannot take each task on its merits and engage fully with it. The reviewing of courses to ensure that they are generally realistic needs to proceed alongside considerations of enhancing the place of reflection in them.

### **Assessment and reflection**

Although the role of assessment and grading in relation to reflective activities is problematic, it seems to us that in an environment where other aspects of learning are assessed, relating reflection to assessment requirements in some way appears to be necessary. The question is what kind of evidence can students be expected to provide to indicate that they have been engaged in reflection, how can this evidence be collected without inhibiting the very processes which we are seeking to encourage and how should this be assessed?

In our courses assessment tasks have taken the form of the presentation of written reports of the outcomes of reflective activities such as self-assessment schedules, overviews of journals or reports of self-monitoring. Since reflection is a very individual activity, based, as described above, on the personal foundation of the experience of the learner, we believe it is inappropriate to grade reflection in a way which suggests that one student's reflection is of more value than another's. This does not imply that we believe there are no qualitative differences in different examples of reflection. There is also a danger that grading might lead to students trying to impress an assessor and gain higher marks for a 'correct' response which means that they are unlikely to focus on a central aspect of

reflection: exploring their uncertainties and considering alternative or creative ways of viewing the material with which they are working.

What is sought in considering reflective reports is evidence that the learner can give an account of a particular experience, be aware of any emotional response the activity engendered and describe the outcomes of reflecting on the experience such as new awareness, 'I realised that as a learner I felt very uncomfortable without a clearly defined structure to each session', decisions 'I decided that I would in future make sure to provide this for my own students', new questions 'I noticed that fellow students experienced this activity in a very different way and feel I need to test my conclusions again' or new understanding 'looking back on my journal entry for the first night of the course I realise how uncertain even adult students are at the beginning of any new learning activity'. Such reflective reports can only meaningfully be judged on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis where 'unsatisfactory' (or 'incomplete' if there is an opportunity to re-submit) would be applied to reports which simply tell the story or evaluate an activity with no evidence of the student working with or extracting learning from the experience.

### **Concluding thoughts**

In writing about reflection we are conscious that we are dealing with a topic which has attained the status of being 'a good thing' and something which some teachers regard as self-evidently worthwhile. We believe that it is important and that reflective activities should be incorporated more effectively into courses. However, we are also conscious that reflection is a more problematic concept than it generally considered and that there is a need for critical debate about the nature of reflection, its role in learning and its inclusion in university courses. Unless we can be clear about how we can recognise reflection, how we can judge the effectiveness of any given reflective activity and create a suitable language for discussing reflection in learning we will not be able to develop the full potential of what we regard as an important component in the development of reflective practice. The literature on the subject is growing rapidly, but a lot more systematic work is required before we can be really confident that the particular practices currently being adopted are having the influences which we desire.

Nevertheless, it is clear that course design must now take account of how students learn and the learning requirements of the professional practice for which they are being prepared. While such matters will be subject to deliberation by teaching staff, it is vital that these discussions be based upon good evidence. Although there is not a great deal of research on these matters in the specific area of social work education, the best we have to date from related areas indicates that it is prudent to structure courses around the idea that students are being prepared to become reflective practitioners and that opportunities for students to develop reflective skills and sensibilities should be embedded as a normal part of all professional courses.

### **Note**

This chapter is a revised and extended version of a paper originally presented at the 1993 Annual Conference of the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia at the University of New South Wales. It appeared in the conference proceedings as Boud, D. & Knights, S. (1994). Designing courses to promote reflective practice, *Research and Development in Higher Education*, 16, 229-234.

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