Rethinking reflection:
A study involving students
of nursing

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Summary: This paper reviews the theme of 'reflection' in an area of professional education. It draws upon a study involving twelve student nurses. The participants reported experiences of uncertainty, conflict and tension when asked to produce reflective written assignments related to their practice and university studies. These responses are examined and interpreted in relation to the purposes of reflection, and to issues of discourse and power.

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Introduction

Over the last decade, those with power and authority in the education and accreditation of professionals such as nurses have imposed aspects of assessment which rely upon 'reflective' written work (Palmer et al, 1994; UKCC, 1995). Most of the nurses consulted for this study see the value of reflecting on their practice, but find that writing reflectively for assessment purposes often sets up negative feelings which may serve to undermine the purpose and value of reflection. Conflicts arise between the commitment to, on the one hand, authentic personal interpretation and evaluation of practice; and the need to achieve success in education and employment on the other. My argument is that at the heart of such tensions is uncertainty over the role of reflection in relation to power.

Utilising the work of Foucault, some theorists (Fairclough, 1995; Jameson, 1991) claim that it is characteristic of power in postmodern contexts to adopt mechanisms for regulating people's behaviour which: a) do not rely on external coercion (since they encourage self-policing), and b) are discoursal in form. Where practitioners' professional roles are treated uncritically, or seen as unproblematic, reflection could be seen as neatly fulfilling the requirements of such a mechanism for imposing and maintaining power. The adoption of models of reflection and reflective practice as part of the assessment process for those in professional training may therefore be seen as exemplifying this trend.

The study: Background and approach

This small, preliminary study of nurses' attitudes to writing reflectively may be described as 'project research' (Denscombe, 2002), since it combines aspects of case study, evaluation and action research. It was based on interviews with 12 student nurses conducted at the University of Plymouth during 2003, and informed by more extensive evidence acquired informally and anecdotally over four years of conducting study skills tutorials with student nurses, and through working with their lecturers.

A broadly interpretive methodology has been used, focussing especially on language use and drawing upon some aspects of the framework for 'critical discourse analysis' outlined by Fairclough

(1995). The stress given to interpretation in the methodology reflects a humanistic approach to learning, which values eliciting and giving voice to the views and understandings of the subjects.

The project was to improve my own practice in supporting students who are required to write 'reflective' assignments; and was motivated by a desire to describe more accurately the associated tensions and conflicts that students told me they were experiencing.

The subjects were chosen adventitiously, either because they were volunteers from groups I had taught, or because they had come to see me in my capacity as Learning Development Advisor, and had given permission for me to record their views. This is clearly not a representative group, and there is no intention to imply that valid generalisations can be derived from this study alone. The conclusions, however, acquire weight from comparison with other studies (Ixer, 1999), and from the experiences of colleagues in related fields and over a period of time.

Reflection: A model for assessing learning or for promoting social change?

The term reflection has become commonplace, or even clichéd, within the discourse of education and training over the last twenty years. Since the publication of Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner* in 1983, many programmes of study have adopted reflection, or critical reflection, as a 'tool' or an 'approach' to learning. A stated aim of the reflective process is to enable practitioners to look systematically and rigorously at their own practice, and to make use of these reflections to learn, improve and develop professionally (Bolton, 2001).

The reflective approaches introduced to students by lecturers frequently refer to Kolb's model of experiential learning (1984), and cite philosophical underpinnings drawing upon the ideas of Dewey (1933), where connections were developed between experience, thought and learning. In the methodology of Action Learning, (Beatty and McGill, 1992) reflection is seen as a key component, intended to fulfil functions such as to encourage 'ownership' by the learner of the process of learning or of being trained. Reflection is also linked to the notion of 'self-awareness' (Boud et al, 1985) and this too is seen as an

essential part of developing as an autonomous learner – the contention being that awareness of the internal processes of learning can be gained in reflection. The values underlying these approaches are broadly in the Rogerian mould of liberal humanism where notions of self and freedom of choice are seen as largely unproblematic (Rogers, 1961).

In the same vein, 'active' and 'student-centred' approaches to learning in Higher Education are promoted by writers such as Gibbs (1981) and Biggs (1999). They argue that evidence of reflection indicates a high-order activity – and a 'deep' level of learning, signalling willingness to change, develop and improve. A kind of wisdom and maturity is implied. In professional training and development programmes such as nursing and social work, this evidence rests on the self-disclosure by the learner, in written accounts, of instances of their own practice where, for example, prescribed or intended outcomes were (or were not) achieved. Such accounts should include comment by the learner about why they think things went awry and how they might be ameliorated in future (Rolfe et al, 2001).

Where 'critical' reflection is advocated, the work of Freire (1972) or Habermas (1984) may be invoked, signalling a radical, emancipatory approach. The latter (a member of the 'Frankfurt School' of social theorists) suggests an interpretive approach to knowledge which is motivated to expose power imbalances and to encourage the development of practice to oppose and redress such disparities. Self-knowledge through reflection is seen as a part of this approach. Those advocating this more radical style may refer to models of reflection developed by Mezirow (1981) or Kim (1999), where issues of power are examined and a critical approach to knowledge is encouraged. This implies a problematising of notions of self and an attempt to explicate identity in terms of social subjecthood, where individuals are influenced by the powerful structuring effects of discourse in social and cultural practices.

The discourses of reflection in education therefore represent both individualistic interpretations of identity or, in critical form, a more socially-oriented notion of subjecthood. In the current study, however, the language of the former version was found to be prevalent in student-nurses' descriptions of reflection. The critical approach was either unfamiliar or incomprehensible to the nurses I interviewed.

Confusion over the language of reflection

Adopting a critical approach to the analysis of discourse (Fairclough, 1995), it can be argued that the language of reflection is associated with the registers of counselling, therapy and self-development, where self-disclosure, under 'safe' conditions, is assumed. The conventions of these fields differ from traditional academic language in, for example the use of terms such as the personal pronoun 'I', and the level of formality expected. Hull and Redfern (1996) quote Barnett's view that, in the context of learning, the reflective practitioner is:

> … conducting a conversation with herself. The conversation has a critical edge to it, for the professional is always asking the question: what if …? Being faced with fresh problems to which there is no single answer, and no one right answer, the professional has the responsibility to appraise the situation and formulate an effective strategy. The effective professional has, accordingly, to be continually self-critical (Hull and Redfern, 1996: 27)

The contrast between this register and the impersonal language of student essays is one potential source of tension for practice nurses in writing reflective work for assessment purposes. On the one hand, they associate 'reflection' with an examination of personal thoughts, feelings and attitudes, characterised by informal and personal forms of expression, whilst, on the other, assessed work is required to be public and is associated with characteristics such as formality of style and language. I recorded a variety of views which would support this interpretation, of which the following is typical:

> *It's hard to know what words to use when you write the … reflection, you feel, you know, well this is what I was thinking, but this is my essay - am I supposed to say that?*

Examining the dimension of power and its operation through discourse is a way to explore these tensions more fully.

Reflection and power

> Set against a contextual background of modernisation in the health service, reflection is recommended to ensure quality and safe practice (DoH, 2000), (DoH, 1999). The UKCC (1990) directed that nurses should keep an ongoing personal, professional profile, obliging them to engage in reflective activities. (Franklin, 2003)

The operation of power through discourse has been extensively discussed in the field of social theory, commonly drawing upon the work of Foucault and other poststructural or postmodern theorists (Sarup, 1993). In contrast with the predominantly uncritical or unproblematised use of the notion of reflection in higher education, attempting a critical analysis of discourse would aim to help learners in making sense of the contradictory or conflicted ideas and feelings they frequently experience when they are required to reflect.

A review of what student nurses said in the current study reveals their uncertainty about issues such as confidentiality and the assessment of their work:

> *You can find yourself writing personal experiences that you maybe don't want people to know about. I don't hand those in though - so I'm reflecting, yeah, but not all of what I think. I make it fit the essay.'*

A provisional conclusion I have drawn, therefore, is that, despite the best intentions of educators and academics, these trainee professionals are impeded and undermined in undertaking genuine or critical reflection whilst the dimensions of power and control remain unexplored and unchallenged in the way that reflective practice is taught or presented. An advantage of encouraging a critical approach to discourse within reflective work would be to shift the focus so that learners do not feel that it is always they who are under scrutiny, but would allow more reflection on the processes that they feel subject to in their practice:

> *'I think it (reflection) all has to be talked about more … and more openly… rather than be … just being a topic and a subject you write about on your own*

Student nurses are encouraged to use models such as those of

Gibbs (1988) and Johns (1993, 1998) to examine their practice and to comment on it in 'reflective pieces' or 'reflective accounts'. The models offer structured approaches to reflection. In Gibbs' case, this is in the form of headings in a cycle, commonly expressed as 'describing action, reflecting on thoughts and feelings, analysing or theorising, action planning'. In the case of Johns, a series of questions is posed by the practitioner to herself, such as: 'What was I trying to achieve? Why did I respond as I did? How could I have handled the situation better?'

Although the students use the models as prompts to assist in writing assignments or contributions to portfolios, the extent to which reflection really enters practice is unclear as a number of associated problems arise (Ghaye, 2000). Findings from the interviews in the current study suggest that the potential for an internal experience of discomfort and conflict over self-disclosure by learners in their reflective accounts has not been given enough explicit attention in the teaching of this approach:

> Actually when ... when my personal tutor read the reflections that I'd done I actually felt that they were quite private and I'd ... written about a situation that I'd been in with my mentor, and my personal tutor was reading my reflection while my mentor was there and she actually spoke to her about it and I hadn't actually given it to my mentor to read - and I almost didn't want her to say anything about it because to me it was quite private ... ummm because it was my own thoughts and feelings about the situation ...

Such experiences arise from the apparent dual role of reflective written work in learning, assessment and in professional life. Matters relating to the monitoring of practice and professional competence, managerial functions and supervision are referred to by several interviewees, in ways suggesting that their perceptions of the role of reflective work are unclear or that they suspect it would be unwise to express their views honestly in their writing. Some interviewees also indicate that they partially fabricate personalised accounts to fit their perceptions of what is desired by those assessing them.

> ... you have to sit down and think, well ... well what are you trying to get from me, you know ...

> You end up ... saying what they want you to so you can get a pass grade.

This study suggests, therefore, that despite the extensive scholarship and research in the field of reflection, including the development of models designed to be used by professionals to make conscious and critical reflection (Rolfe et al, 2001) a part of practice, the reality of their use does not live up to these intentions. These interviews also imply that the critical or emancipatory elements of reflection seen as so important by writers such as Mezirow (1981), Boyd and Fayles (1983) and Kim (1999), are either unfamiliar to practitioners, or not felt by them, even at more advanced levels, to be really encouraged in their studies and their work. Many reported feeling that reflection was just an additional pressure, or a management tool, rather than seeing it a way to address professional problems or issues:

> *… we're used to running, on a thirty-bedded ward, with four staff - and I mean just one trained … we're such a busy profession … you're always thinking about the next job … you don't have the chance to really reflect on what's happened – well, you're not going to sit and write it – that's a joke… you've got … you might have maybe ten other patients you've got to look after…*

It will not be surprising, therefore, that I did not find much evidence of 'holistic reflection' or the 're-integration of the artistry of professional life' (Bolton, 2001; Winter et al, 1999; Bleakley 1999) through reflective work on the part of the nurses and midwives I spoke to. These results would seem to confirm that the model of knowledge in healthcare education remains dominated by a medical paradigm, characterised by a view of science grounded in technical rationality. Power, authority and status are seen to reside with consultants, managers and doctors rather than with nurses. Their lack of time to reflect – and the view that it would be seen as 'a joke' to expect such time - seems universal. From this point of view alone, it is predictable that the use of reflective techniques by nurses and midwives in training has ambivalent status and causes some confusion among practitioners about both its rationale and techniques.

The critical analysis of discourse referred to above proposes that we examine how we are, at least in part, constructed as social subjects by the forms of language used to describe and prescribe our practices – including the language used to describe us and the language we are encouraged to use. An unproblematised or uncritical version of reflective practice does nothing to help student nurses challenge or overcome some of the tensions they feel as compliant and confessional subjects.

Conflating a reflective with an assessment function in student work leads to feelings both of being constrained in what can be said and of being observed, even in the ostensibly private world of thoughts and reflections – as one nurse commented '… *you sometimes feel it's a bit like Big Brother is watching*'.

Rethinking reflection

The purpose of raising such matters is not to oppose reflective practice, but to call for a critical examination of its role and application in an attempt to enable learners to make greater and more effective use of reflection for both individual and collective goals. Indeed, despite their anxieties, many of my subjects also say positive things about reflective practice:

We all sort of thought … ooo what a load of rubbish, ha! Umm, but actually … actually doing the reflections that I've done, it did actually bring things out that I probably wouldn't have thought of had I not sat down and deliberately reflected on that incident.

I think it does help you to understand your own feelings about something that's happened as well.

… in fact, talking to you about it I've probably reinforced to myself how useful it is to reflect - it really has been an eye-opener and I think if we weren't encouraged to reflect I would not think the way I do now - it really has changed my way of thinking and made me look at things more deeply and from different perspectives.

My own view is that reflection is an existential enterprise which must remain within the control of the practitioner in order to be genuine. I am also interested in the role of language in reflection-in and reflection-on action, and in reflective writing; specifically, how the forms of discourse practitioners feel impelled to use in their reflections may be influencing the construction of their subject positions, and how an uncritical or non-conscious reproduction of discourse forms can mask the operation, exercise and the effects of power.

Indeed, the examination and deconstruction of the discourse we each produce in our reflective activities can have an emancipatory purpose where it leads to the unmasking of values and interpretations previously unconscious for the subject, or part of some 'common-sense assumption' (Fairclough, 1989) about the world.

The existential view I am proposing sees reflection as holistic - inseparable from human consciousness and being – and therefore not usefully conceived of merely in terms of following a model or developing a set of skills. This is not to deny the usefulness of examining particular aspects of reflective processes and the associated skills, such as in the work of Moon (2002). In addition, however, it means taking account of the position occupied by learners in relation to power - in relation to their employers and to those who will assess their professional development. It implies the fostering of conditions for reflection under which learners feel confident to express their thoughts, views and feelings without fear of such expressions being submitted for formal assessment. These conditions would entail a much greater degree of self or peer-control of reflective activities and processes in the first instance, to acknowledge the legitimacy of tentative rehearsal and development of views and forms of expression, free from the anxieties that normally surround the construction of assessed work.

> You need your peers to help you. I do. The thing is, they've got the experience and the background there so ... you know ... they've been through these situations before and you can learn from their experience. But if you never have opportunities to properly talk then the trainees are isolated and OK the lecturers ask them to reflect but they aren't getting the benefit of their colleagues.

A reflective practitioner in the philosophical sense implied in, say, Schön or Dewey's work, is one who reflects not merely to meet assessment criteria but as a matter of course. For learners to feel confident to reflect in such a way, the impression that reflection is 'saying what they want you to so you can get a pass grade' or 'showing them you can use the jargon' must be countered. Such instrumental and mechanistic approaches devalue the notion of reflection and undermine its potential as both an individual and collective activity.

In the discourse of critical reflective practice there are numerous mentions of reflection in the context of peer work or in discussion – however, my experience of practice in HE is that this aspect of

reflection goes largely unexplored due to reasons such as shortage of time and the pressures of getting through a very full curriculum. Many learner-practitioners express the view that reflection is an individual process, undertaken largely for the purposes of completing required written assignment work and, in the words of one nurse I spoke to: *'being seen to say the right thing'*. Thus, despite intentions to the contrary on the part of theorists and lecturers, the reflective model seems to these learners to be rooted in an attempt to oversee and control their individual behaviour, rather than to encourage careful thought about practice, let alone group discussion and peer support.

> *I mean, they need to make time … I think … because … you learn more from talking to other people, and I think more time needs to be made available on the ward for you to be able to reflect on what you've done that day, or a specific thing that you've come across.*

A related implication is that learning itself is seen as an individual activity and that the development of knowledge is an individualistic process carried out by theorists or experts rather than in a community of practitioners.

'Critical' reflection – as distinguished by some writers (Hull and Redfern, 1996; Kim, 1999) from other forms of reflection, gives the image of being a somehow more radical or potent approach, and refers to the need for reflection to be conducted with peers or in group supervision. In practice I have been unable to find many genuine examples of such work. Comments made by student nurses in interview suggest that a collective dimension to critical reflection would be very useful, but would need to be characterised by consciousness of power relations to encourage mutuality and support through genuine voluntarism and group negotiation over matters such as confidentiality.

> *My husband is also a nurse … we used to go to the social club that was attached to the hospital … and he would … join his mates, and say: what a … crap shift we had, or whatever, and … get everything of his chest, and then that would be his type of reflecting.*

Conclusion

This paper calls for a re-visioning of reflection in social and existential terms; not merely a set of skills and not simply an individual approach to studying and learning; rather, a recognition that acting and learning in the world is mediated by the social phenomenon of discourse, through which power operates. This implies that reflection needs to involve more than simply thinking about and describing our own actions according to models such as that of Gibbs or Johns. It also requires some recognition of how our identity and subject position may be structured in the discourse forms we use. To this extent, where power relations are unequal, practitioners need opportunities to reflect that are as flexible as possible – to look at, think about, discuss, sing, shout, draw or celebrate practice! In other words, they need opportunities to determine the ways in which they will reflect - and to be empowered to protect the *'sensitive frontiers'* (Bolton, 2001) between personal and professional life.

Reflection cannot be seen or used simply as a way to assess particular kinds of learning. It has been argued in this paper that 'genuine' reflection is holistic; this implies that what students or trainees produce as reflective work may not reflect 'standard' approaches to knowledge or practice and may not conform to convention – but it needs to be respected, valued and explored outside of the formal assessment process. There is a strong case to be made for time in the curriculum to be given to the development of reflective methods under supportive conditions, and for an examination of theoretical and methodological issues arising from reflective approaches. At present it seems that the requirement to reflect is a given, whereas it could be a subject for study, discussion and experimentation, supported in the classroom.

It is not useful to prescribe too closely what reflection should or can be for those we hope will become reflective practitioners, nor to construe reflection simply in terms of skills; do so it to diminish what it is to reflect, and ourselves as reflective, social beings.

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