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Through a glass darkly: shedding light on reflective practice and autonomous learning

By Susan M Taylor and
Mary A Dyer

What is Reflection?

Reflection is the process of critically examining one's own practice, specifically asking:

- does our practice achieve our aims
- who has defined these aims
- do they fit with our own vision of good practice

Reflection offers the practitioner the means of using their practice to learn from constantly – **“Because I pay attention to my practice I am open to what is unfolding. Being open I am ...curious and ready to consider new possibilities. Every situation becomes an opportunity for learning.”** (Johns, 2004, p.6)

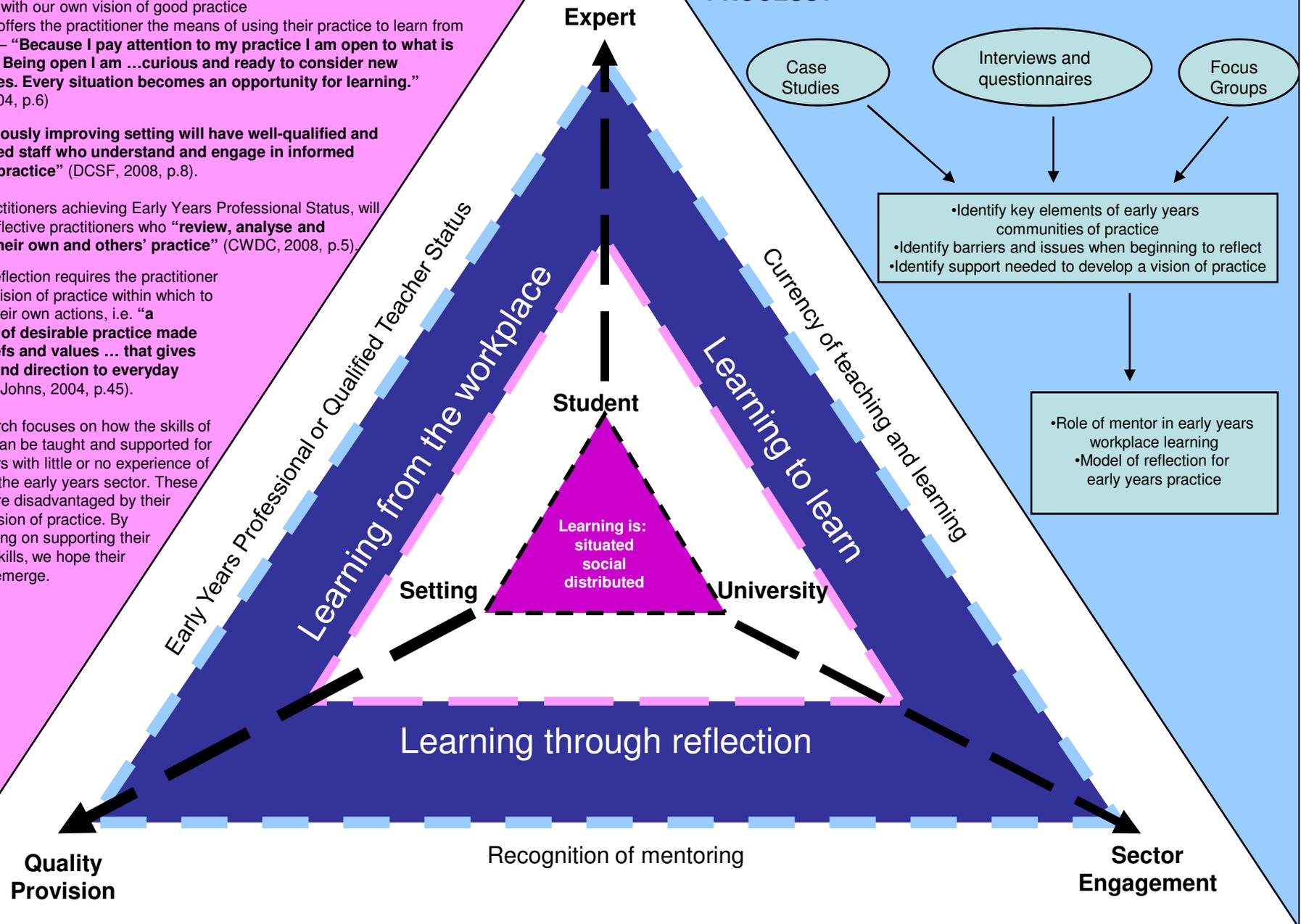
“A continuously improving setting will have well-qualified and experienced staff who understand and engage in informed reflective practice” (DCSF, 2008, p.8).

Senior practitioners achieving Early Years Professional Status, will become reflective practitioners who **“review, analyse and evaluate their own and others’ practice”** (CWDC, 2008, p.5).

Effective reflection requires the practitioner to have a vision of practice within which to evaluate their own actions, i.e. **“a statement of desirable practice made up of beliefs and values ... that gives meaning and direction to everyday practice”** (Johns, 2004, p.45).

This research focuses on how the skills of reflection can be taught and supported for practitioners with little or no experience of working in the early years sector. These ‘novices’ are disadvantaged by their lack of a vision of practice. By concentrating on supporting their reflective skills, we hope their vision will emerge.

BUILDING A VISION OF EARLY YEARS PRACTICE: HOW CAN REFLECTION SUPPORT THIS PROCESS?



Aims

- 2 strands of research:
 - Identifying difficulties students encounter when beginning reflective practice
 - Identifying difficulties students face in becoming autonomous learners
- Link these two together in order to provide coherent and effective teaching/support to early years workforce of the future

Identifying barriers

- Year 2 full-time students
- Minimum 1 year's experience of early years practice through placement
- Minimum 1 year's experience of reflection, assessed at foundation level
- All reported difficulties with processes of reflection

Methodology

- Survey of all Y2 f/t students
- Series of statements developed from comments made by students over course of year
- Student response measured in terms of agree strongly to disagree strongly
- Quasi Likert scale with aim of identifying common concerns from all students

Findings – the positives

- Reflection may not be enjoyable but it is regarded as a **non-threatening process**, which can include **a balance of positive and negative experiences**, and has **significant value** for the students, especially in **learning from their mistakes**.

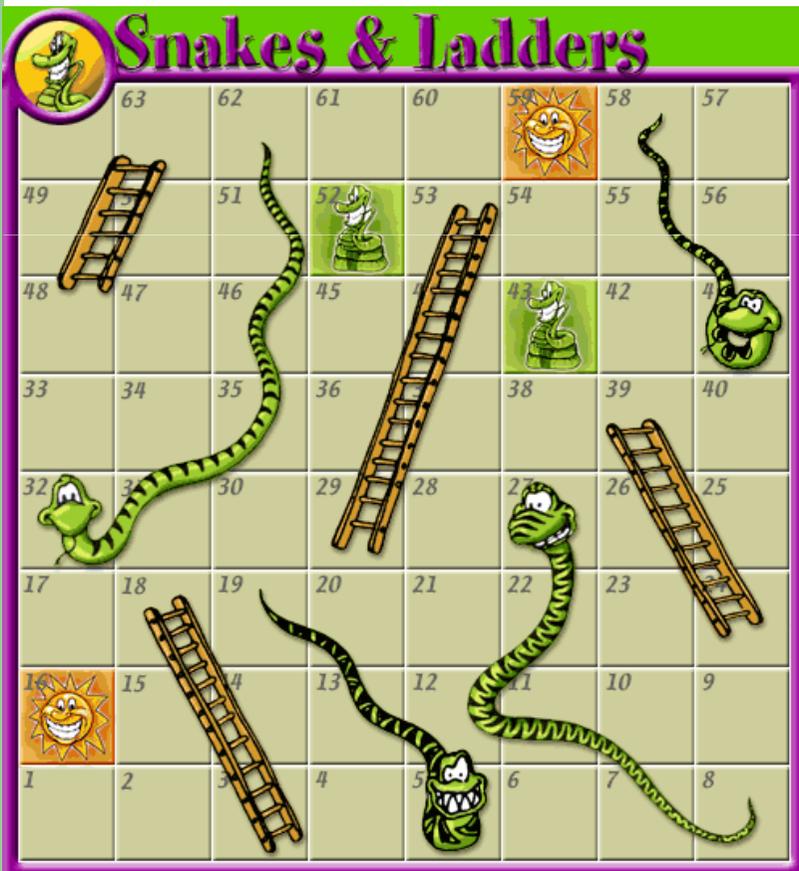
Findings – areas of concern

- What to include – balance of detail and being too descriptive
- Models can be helpful but students cannot always answer all the questions posed
- Sharing reflective accounts
- Issues around being able to judge own performance accurately

Moving on

- Tell the story (Russell, T (2005) *Can reflective practice be taught?* Reflective Practice 6:2, 199 - 204)
- Students now keeping detailed descriptive diaries of placement experience
- Reflection is separate process, by means of questions posed every 5 – 8 weeks, drawing on range of experiences in that time

Reflection: playing the game ?



Aims of the research:

- To foster students reflective skills
- To improve the delivery

of the module DFD 1620
Professional Practitioner

But what are the rules?

Snakes and ladders as a metaphor

Reflection

- Based on chance encounters.
- Learning from ups and downs
- Small experiences accumulate in a move forward.

Consequences

- Few rules- can the process be taught?
- The real life negatives can be a disincentive to reflection.
- Difficult to identify the moves from novice to expert, except in very general terms.

Methodologies

Placements Expectations of Students

- Focus group- part time students – several offer placements.
- Questionnaires-year 1 placement supervisors – start and end of first placement

Students Attitudes to Reflection

- Focus groups- previous students .
- Questionnaire present year one.

Analysis of results using revised Bloom's taxonomy is proving difficult.

Tentative results

Placements expectations of Students

- Affective aspects more important than cognitive or psycho- motor in expectation.
- Reviews make links between three domains of learning.

Students attitudes to Reflection

- Students do not know what to pay attention to, and do not understand 'reflection'.
- Students may not demonstrate use of the three domains of learning, and often do not seem to integrate them.

Further actions to date

- Development of a new model of reflection-
limited success
- ‘Genuine’ tutor reflection-limited success
- Imaginary ‘settling- in’ journey- too soon to
tell
- Snakes and ladders game- better than
expected.

Year 1 and 2 investigations.

Agreed conclusions

- Descriptive evidence should be a separate process from reflection
- Reflection does need to be practised rather than taught

Moving on

- Trial methods of supporting reflection.
- Develop students confidence to own their individual professional development.