

Reflective Practice in Learning Networks: A Critical Pragmatist Perspective

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Introduction

This paper offers a re-examination of the concept of reflective practice, as outlined by Schön (1983; 1987), as a lens through which to interpret structured learning in networks of small and medium sized enterprises in South East England (SMEs). This re-examination is informed by what might broadly be termed a critical Pragmatist perspective, which is intended to acknowledge both the key strengths of the Pragmatist tradition as an influence on the notion of reflective practice, as well as the need for a reworking and extension of the tradition to address a number of crucial blind-spots and limitations (Musolf 2001; Kadlec 2006). Pragmatist thinking, in particular the concept of inquiry developed by Dewey (1896; 1929), was a direct and enduring influence on the work of Schön from his earliest writing (cf. Schön 1992). There are clear parallels between Deweyan inquiry and reflective practice. Both are conceived in terms of an active interplay between people and the situations they encounter in which existing norms, routines, and patterns of thinking and practice play an important part as both a condition for, but also a potential barrier to, change and development. In Pragmatism, inquiry is presented as a dynamic, involved, and interested process where people are actively stimulated to inquire by some frustration or doubt that disrupts the flow of their experience (Peirce 1878; James 2000 [1907]). The aim of inquiry is to remove the source of doubt so that action can be resumed. Schön (1983: 68) similarly emphasised the way that disruptions to experience can set reflection in motion in an effort to resolve them and allow the continuation of practice:

The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behaviour. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation.

In some respects Schön arguably went further than Dewey in considering the conditions under which established habits and frames of thinking can be modified and revised. As

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Scheffler (1974) has argued, there are inconsistencies in the way that Dewey presented the theory of inquiry – as a psychological theory settled beliefs are only challenged when problematic situations are encountered, yet his characterisation of inquiry as a motor for social progress was based more on a constantly questioning attitude where difficulties need to be identified before they are actually felt. For Schön (1983), the distinction between reflecting-in-action and reflecting-on-action is a potentially useful way of sidestepping this inconsistency, although as we shall see is also subject to its own ambiguities. The former is closer to the psychological concept of inquiry, depicting reflection as a relatively immediate response to difficult situations where people are not necessarily fully aware of the beliefs and assumptions drawn upon and potentially modified in the process. The latter offers the potential for more temporal separation between thought and action, with practitioners providing an account of their practices through dialogue with themselves and/or others on situations either real or imagined. The importance of imagination as an element of inquiry was acknowledged by Pragmatist thinkers but not fully elaborated (e.g. James 2000 [1905]).

Nevertheless, for all its benefits, the concept of reflective practice also has some problematic omissions and blind-spots. Some of these have been inherited from Pragmatism, while others potentially reflect a failure to embrace fully the insights of the Pragmatist tradition. For example, as Reynolds and Vince (2004) have argued, there is a tendency in Schön's writing to focus on the individual practitioner without offering a fully social conception of reflective practice. This accusation is perhaps not entirely fair given the central role accorded to dialogue in Schön's work, but nevertheless there is room for a more elaborate understanding of the social nature of reflection, for which some strands of Pragmatism provide a useful starting point (e.g. Dewey 1922; Mead 1934). Clearly, any attempt to conceptualise the collective practices of learning networks would be hamstrung without taking seriously the social character of knowledge. Another serious shortcoming, shared by both Pragmatism and the theory of reflective practice, is the failure to offer a comprehensive account of the political and power-laden character of knowledge and practice. Both inquiry and reflective practice are depicted in rather idealised terms with inquirers calmly deliberating over solutions to problems that they face. This downplays the frequently contested nature of collective reflection, which may hold both positive and negative implications for learning, as well as the fact that the insights offered through reflective practice may ultimately come up against political constraints that act as a barrier to action. It is here that insights drawn from more recent Pragmatists, with their greater acknowledgement of divisions of power and interest, would be informative (e.g. Rorty 1988; 1990 [1979]; 1991; Joas 1993; Putnam 1995).

As a way of exploring the strengths and limitations of the concept of reflective practice, the second half of the paper draws on empirical material from a study of learning networks among SMEs. The study focuses on a series of learning networks that are being managed by the University of Brighton in South East England. These involve more than 450 firms across a range of sectors that participate in a number of small groups that meet on a regular basis. These meetings follow a structured action learning methodology that is intended to provide a supportive setting within which managers of SMEs can jointly reflect on their practices, share knowledge, generate ideas, and solve problems following a model of peer-based learning. These encounters follow a largely standardised pattern and are actively guided by independent facilitators. At the heart of these interventions is the assumption that reflective practice is something that can be actively encouraged and eventually institutionalised through structured activities that promote particular norms and values of group interaction. This paper aims to examine this assumption by considering what takes place in these groups, how

far this can be described as reflective practice, and what the implications of a more socially and politically orientated account of collective inquiry might be.

Reflective practice and the concept of inquiry

The legacy of Pragmatism can be clearly detected in the notion of reflective practice, although the precise connections are not always made explicit by Schön himself and the relationship between the two is quite ambiguous. Schön was particularly influenced by the work of Dewey. His doctoral thesis was concerned with Dewey's presentation of the concept of inquiry (Schön 1954) and the central features of this notion can be traced throughout his subsequent writing. However, while acknowledging his debt in considering the legacy of Dewey's ideas, Schön (1992) nevertheless attempted to place some distance between himself and Dewey. Some commentators have taken these differences even further to the extent that the two writers come across as almost antithetical (e.g. Furlong and Maynard 1995; Waks 2001), while others have argued that there is little to distinguish them (e.g. Clandinin and Connelly 1986). Given this ambivalence, it is useful to explore some of the points of contact, as well as differences, between reflective practice and the concept of inquiry. The departures between the two theories are especially informative – in some instances Schön extends the notion of inquiry to address weaknesses that Dewey failed to resolve, while in others, particularly concerning the social character of inquiry, he misses opportunities offered by the Pragmatist legacy. Consequently, in this section I will outline the main elements of the concept of inquiry and then attempt to indicate the points of overlap and divergence with Schön's depiction of reflective practice. This is by no means straightforward as there are some major ambiguities in both bodies of work and the commentaries surrounding them.

The concept of inquiry in Pragmatism

The Pragmatist notion of inquiry was first sketched out by Peirce (1878) where it was depicted as exploration set in motion in response to an interruption in the flow of experience leading to an 'irritation of doubt'. As Mounce (1997: 15) has explained, "[i]nquiry arises from doubt, which is a type of irritation, a frustration in what one believes or expects, inquiry being an attempt to remove the source of frustration and achieve a state of settled belief ... But inquiry presupposes that one already has some belief or expectation; otherwise there would have been no frustration, no impetus to inquiry". This image of disturbance or irritation also appears in James (James 2000 [1907]: 31), who wrote of a kind of 'inward trouble' or disruption of settled beliefs on encountering "a new experience that puts them to a strain". However, it is with the work of Dewey that the theory of inquiry is most fully elaborated. Borrowing James's example of a child reaching out towards a candle flame, Dewey (1896) illustrated the key features of the Pragmatist notion of inquiry. In doing so, he criticised mechanistic stimulus-response explanations for their incompleteness, and attempted to demonstrate the importance of situating inquiry relative to pre-existing beliefs, from which, he argued, any stimulus derives its significance. A straightforward stimulus-response model would see the child's hand reaching out towards the flame and recoiling on contact; the explanation being that the light of the flame stimulates the child to reach out towards it, whereupon the sensation of burning stimulates withdrawal of the hand. For Dewey, this account is incomplete because it takes the whole incident out of the stream of lived experience in which the child is already participating. The light of the candle flame disrupts the prior experience of the child, promoting a felt difficulty which she attempts to resolve through exploration, in turn resulting in a change to her experience on being burned. Thus, the incident has an important temporal dimension to it. On first encountering a flame, the

child reaches out towards it because it is perceived as a disruption of her prior experience. However, on subsequent encounters, contrary to what a mechanistic stimulus-response model would have us believe, the stimulus does not elicit the same response. Instead, the child is now wary of the flame; rather than a stimulus for exploration, the flame has come to represent a source of danger. Then, over time, as the immediacy of this experience recedes, the flame may cease to be of much interest at all as it is integrated into the child's expanding stock of settled beliefs.

The example of the child and the candle flame represents a simple instance of inquiry, but it can equally be applied to any physical, social, or intellectual encounter in which the smooth course of established belief is disturbed. Indeed, it was this very element of exploration in response to a felt difficulty which Pragmatist philosophers regarded as missing in the rationalist philosophies against which they directed much of their critique. For James, rationalist philosophers who believe in an absolute theory of truth are too ready to foreclose the discussion on theoretical issues by invoking one-word solutions such as 'Matter', 'Reason', 'the Absolute', 'Energy', and so on, thus declaring the issue resolved. However, "if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest ... It appears less as a solution, then, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be *changed*. *Theories thus become instruments, not answers to enigmas, in which we can rest*" (James 2000 [1907]: 28, emphasis in original). For Dewey (1910), this attitude was better captured in what he called the happier title of 'the applied and experimental habit of mind' than in the term Pragmatism.

The theory of inquiry appears mainly to take the form of allowing a routine activity that has been disturbed by a blockage or difficulty thrown up by experience to be continued. By disrupting the partly unconscious and automatic conduct associated with repetitive habit and prompting reflection on practice to find a way forward, the conditions of inquiry are such that they hold the potential to forge intelligent habits. As we shall see in due course, this predominantly psychological theory of inquiry was extended by the Pragmatists into a model of social and political progress, resulting in a number of problems and ambiguities. Nevertheless, the notion of inquiry offers a powerful way of conceptualising the simultaneously routine and agential character of social action without falling into the trap of either cultural determinism or excessive voluntarism. As Dewey (Dewey 1917: 12) described it: "The obstacles which confront us are stimuli to variation, to novel response, and hence are occasions of progress ... Adjustment is no timeless state; it is a continuing process". Accordingly, there is an important projective element to inquiry which is about an orientation towards the future rather than simply reflection on past events.

Reflective practice and inquiry compared

On first inspection, the similarities between Schön's presentation of reflective practice and the Pragmatist notion of inquiry are hard to miss. Both concepts are developed in critical opposition to a model of technical rationality which is deeply dualistic, based on an objective view of a fixed reality out there waiting to be discovered, and narrowly instrumental in searching for specific means to achieve given ends. At the core of these respective critiques is an emergent, process-oriented view of reality that, while accepting the existence of phenomena regardless of our ideas about them, emphasises the crucially interpretative and experiential character of existence. As James (2000 [1907]: 108, emphasis in original) put it: "What we say about reality thus depends on the perspective into which we throw it. The *that* of it is its own; but the *what* depends on the *which*; and the *which* depends on *us*." Schön

(1983: 40) offers a similarly interpretative position in arguing that “we select what we will treat as the ‘things’ of the situation, we set the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed.”

One result of this is that both inquiry and reflective practice are necessarily situated relative to particular experiences and how these are interpreted or framed. This is a much more engaged, interested, and active image of how people make sense of situations compared with the more traditional ‘spectator view of knowledge’ that enforces a sharp dichotomy between thought and action, theory and practice. As Dewey (1917: 59) explained, “... if it be true that the self or subject of experience is part and parcel of the course of events, it follows that the self *becomes* a knower. It becomes a mind in virtue of a distinctive way of partaking in the course of events. The significant distinction is no longer between the knower *and* the world; it is between different ways of being in and of the movement of things.” The active interweaving of knower and the unfolding flow of experiences comes across strongly in the various illustrations offered by Schön (1983; 1987). He depicts practitioners engaged in an active commerce or dialogue with the situations they face as they perform their practices. This is captured in the term ‘agent/experient’ that Schön attributed to the systems theorist Vickers. Schön (1983: 163) described what is entailed in being an agent/experient in the following terms: “Through his transaction with the situation he shapes it and makes himself a part of it. Hence, the sense he makes of the situation must include his own contribution to it.”

Another similarity shared between reflective practice and the theory of inquiry is that both are presented as a response to some interruption or disturbance in the normal flow of experience. Just as in Pragmatism, Schön depicted reflective practice as being stimulated by some difficulty or surprise which disrupts the normal flow of conduct. As Schön (1983: 56) put it: “Much reflection-in-action hinges on the experience of surprise. When intuitive, spontaneous performance yields nothing more than the results expected for it, then we tend not to think about it. But when intuitive performance leads to surprises, pleasing and promising or unwanted, we may respond by reflecting-in-action.” There is an important question here about how necessary this element of surprise or puzzlement is for stimulating inquiry. By focusing on inquiry as a way of removing obstacles that get in the way of the taken-for-granted performance of activities, there is a tendency to see it as purely a response to things happening in the world of immediate experience. According to Scheffler (1974), this leads to a major inconsistency in Dewey’s theory of inquiry between its portrayal as a psychological theory and its potential to act as a method for guiding social progress. This is because the former emphasises the stimulating role of difficulties thrown up by experience in driving the search for solutions that permit the continuation of action, whereas the latter would be more effective if problems could be envisioned and solutions pursued *before* they are felt as difficulties or disruptions to the flow of experience.

The capacity to anticipate potential problems or issues without actually having to experience them is an advantage for any human endeavour and something that people routinely engage in when they imagine the consequences of possible future actions. This was something that James (2000 [1905]: 323) clearly recognised in suggesting that “by experimenting on our conceptual experiences, or ideas of reality, we may save ourselves the trouble of experimenting on the real experience which they may severally mean.” In fairness to Dewey, he also acknowledged the projective character of inquiry and the potential to imagine alternative possible futures. As Dewey (1917: 12) put it: “Since we live forward ... what should experience be but a future implicated in a present!” However, Schön arguably took

this further by according the notion of *design* a key position in his theory of reflective practice. This is brought out most vividly in his discussion of the architect Quist and the student Petra in which their inquiries take place in the virtual worlds of the sketchpad. As Schön (1983: 157) described it: “For Quist and Petra, the graphic world of the sketchpad is the medium of reflection-in-action. Here they can draw and talk their moves in spatial-action language, leaving traces which represent the forms of buildings on the site. Because the drawing reveals qualities and relations unimagined beforehand, moves can function as experiments. Petra can discover that her building shapes do not fit the slope and that her classrooms are too small in scale to do much with ... Constraints which would prevent or inhibit experiment in the built world are greatly reduced in the virtual world of the drawing.” This focus on design, not just as an architectural practice, but more broadly as any attempt to generate some kind of preferred outcome, offers much greater purchase on the generative and imaginative elements of inquiry than is arguably the case in the classical Pragmatist presentation.

A number of other differences between the work of Schön and Pragmatists such as Dewey have been suggested. Schön (1992) himself distinguished his approach from that of Dewey by arguing that the latter was ultimately unable to escape the influence of positivism. To the extent that Dewey reserved a special place for scientific method in his theory of inquiry, this accusation is perhaps understandable and has been voiced by several commentators (e.g. Rorty 1991; Lloyd 1997). Waks (2001: 40), for example, characterised the differences between Dewey and Schön in the following terms: “For Dewey [reflective practice] remains akin to scientific thinking, and it is learned by doing – by engaging in scientific inquiries at one remove from the practical problems generating them. For Schon it is the forms of thinking specific to e.g. professional practices, and it is learned in the thick of the professional activity, not at one remove. For Dewey the paradigm site of education is the scientific laboratory; for Schon it is the design studio.” Certainly, as we have seen, the metaphor of design is one that figures strongly in Schön’s work. Conceptualising design as a ‘reflective conversation with the situation’, which unfolds in a series of moves as different ideas are tried out, rejected, accepted, and refined, it becomes something of an archetype for all forms of reflective practice. However, the status of scientific method and the way it is understood is deeply ambiguous in Dewey’s writing and so the distinction between his and Schön’s thinking may not be as clear-cut as the above would suggest.

Some take the position that the charge of positivism levelled at Dewey is just plain mistaken. Boisvert (1998), for example, has argued that this view is based on writings that are not representative of Dewey’s overall thinking, such as *Logic: The Theory of Inquiry* (Dewey 1938). Johnston (2002) is even more adamant that it is wrong to paint Dewey as a positivist, arguing that this results from a tendency to conflate Dewey’s version of empiricism with positivism. Others take a more ambivalent view. Mounce (1997), for example, has suggested there is a schism in Pragmatism with a tension between elements that are sympathetic to scientific positivism and those that are strongly counter to it. This tension is played out most visibly in the work of Dewey without ever being satisfactorily resolved. According to this reading, Dewey’s later work is not an aberration but rather another attempt to accommodate the conflict in his thinking surrounding the relative status of scientific method and everyday experience. Certainly the sheer volume and breadth of Dewey’s writings, with their shifting and complex currents of ideas, mean that it is difficult to arrive at any definitive answer about the philosophical basis of his work. However, what is clear is that any simple split between Dewey and Schön along the lines of whether they were pro- or anti-positivist is not tenable and, in any case, not especially helpful.

The two authors have also been portrayed as offering quite different views on the distinction between routine and reflective action, although again this is based on something of a misrepresentation of Dewey's ideas. According to Furlong and Maynard (1995: 39, emphasis in original): "Central to Dewey's view of reflection was the idea that there is a fundamental dichotomy between *routine action* – that is, action guided primarily by tradition, *external* authority and circumstance – and *reflective action*. Dewey presents a picture of people undertaking most of their lives in a routinised almost thought-*less* way." By contrast, Schön's concept of knowing-in-action, while also taken-for-granted and largely intuitive, is presented as an altogether more skilful and knowledgeable accomplishment, even if tacitly so. Waks (2001: 40) makes a similar argument in proposing that for Dewey "practice itself is not primarily a 'knowledge affair.' Knowledge comes into play only during periods of reflective delay." Again, the problem is not so much with how Schön's ideas are presented but with the account of Dewey's thinking, meaning that the distance between the two writers is made out to be greater than it is. Like Schön, Dewey clearly recognised that some routine performances driven by custom or habit are skilful and well-executed while others are not:

... the difference between the artist and the mere technician is unmistakable. The artist is a masterful technician. The technique or mechanism is fused with thought and feeling. The 'mechanical' performer permits the mechanism to dictate the performance. It is absurd to say that the latter exhibits habit and the former not. We are confronted with two kinds of habit, intelligent and routine. (Dewey 1922: 71)

For Dewey, all human activities have an habitual element to them and so inquiry is as much a habit as any other practice. The difference is that some habits condemn us to blind repetition while others have the capacity for transformation and growth.

Another point raised by those seeking to distance Schön's perspective from that of Dewey concerns the different temporality of reflection that is supposed to be revealed in each of their approaches. As indicated in the point made by Waks (2001) above, there are those who suggest that Dewey conceived of inquiry as a process one step removed from practice, whereas Schön, with his notion of reflection-in-action, portrayed the two as coexistent, taking place within what he termed the 'action-present' or "the zone of time in which action can still make a difference to the situation" (Schön 1983: 62). As we have seen, a similar argument was made by Furlong and Maynard (1995) in suggesting that Dewey introduced a dichotomy between reflection and routine action, making the former a separate and special activity distant from the world of everyday practice. While Dewey did distinguish between the relatively taken-for-granted and routine character of much day-to-day activity and the more reflective and self-conscious process of inquiry, it is misleading to suggest that the latter is thereby distanced from practice. Such dualisms were anathema to Dewey and his writings consistently emphasised the situated and interwoven character of thought and action. As he repeatedly insisted: "knowing is not the act of an outside spectator but of a participator inside the natural and social scene" (Dewey 1929: 157). According to Dewey, both inquiry and the more routine flow of unexamined experiences are equally embedded in social and physical contexts and can not "escape from the cultural matrix in which they live, move and have their being" (Dewey 1938: 20).

It is also worth noting that the distinction between routine and reflective practice is one that was central to Schön's thinking, formulated in a way that is not essentially dissimilar to Dewey (Clandinin and Connelly 1986). However, despite this similarity, one of Schön's major contributions was to introduce a more readily graspable vocabulary for exploring these

differences in the form of the threefold categories of knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action. Knowing-in-action refers to “the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life” (Schön 1983: 49), that proceeds in a largely taken-for-granted fashion and about which, were we encouraged to, we would struggle to provide adequate or appropriate descriptions. Reflection-in-action, as we have seen, tends to occur when there is some interruption to the normal course of knowing-in-action that prompts a more reflective process of inquiry that takes place in conversation with the action context. In this sense, the practitioner “does not separate thinking from doing, ratiocinating his way to a decision which he must later convert to action. Because his experimenting is a kind of action, implementation is built into his inquiry” (Schön 1983: 68). The third category, reflection-on-action, corresponds more closely to traditional ideas about reflection, occurring outside the action-present (Schön 1983: 276-278). As Van Manen (1991: 115) has described it: “reflection on action is recollective; it always occurs after the situation has passed.” (p. 115).

Unfortunately, there is some slippage between the latter two categories, partly due to ambiguities introduced by Schön himself, and partly because of the way that subsequent authors have interpreted his work. It is easy to think about reflection-in-action as caught up in the immediacy of action, occurring purely in the here-and-now of a particular practice. However, by using the concept of the action-present, Schön introduced the possibility that the temporal boundaries of action may be more or less extended according to the nature of different practices – “The action-present may stretch over minutes, hours, days, or even weeks or months, depending on the pace of activity and the situational boundaries that are characteristic of the practice” (Schön 1983: 62). Where the temporality of practices is more extended, where practices proceed at a slower pace, or where practices are punctuated by periods of activity and inactivity, the distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action becomes more difficult to discern. More problematic is the tendency in some interpretations of reflective practice by other authors to portray reflection-in-action as equivalent to reflection-on-action. According to Munby and Russell (1989: 73, emphasis in original), the phrase reflection-in-action which is “so central to Schön’s argument is easily misread if we focus on reflection rather than on action. ‘Reflection’ typically suggests thinking about action, but the crucial phrase, on our reading is ‘in-action’. The reflection that Schön is calling attention to is *in the action*, not in associated thinking about action.” It is precisely this misreading of reflection-in-action that appears to underlie many of the recent handbooks in teaching, social work, and health care with their calls for practitioners to become more reflective (e.g. Taylor 2000; Johns 2004; Redmond 2006). The role of reflection-on-action was not something that Schön was greatly interested in elaborating, perhaps because he was concerned with it being too close to the model of technical rationality against which he directed his criticism (Munby and Russell 1989). By reducing reflection-in-action to reflection-on-action, there is the danger of tying the former to a narrow positivist and instrumentalist agenda that betrays the spirit of what Schön was trying to do (Usher, Bryant et al. 1997; Kinsella 2007).

However, there are arguably elements of Schön’s attempt in *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* to define a ‘reflective practicum’ that themselves seem to conflate the two forms of reflection. This is particularly the case with those aspects that emphasise the discursive reconstruction of events by students as a way of helping them develop awareness of their practice and allowing for the modification of future actions. As Schön (1987: 253) described it: “... the student’s framing of the situation can become ‘visible’ to her as an object for private and public reflection. Her awareness of the way she has already framed a role or

problem prepares her for the task of entering into a new way of framing it.” Part of the problem is that Schön never fully untangled the relative role and status of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action and the relationships between them. There are times when knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action are located so deeply in the domain of tacit knowing that their translation into language is not only difficult but literally pointless, contributing nothing to our future ability to carry out the practice described. There are other instances where the dialogue and ‘back-talk’ associated with undertaking a particular practice are key elements in guiding how it unfolds. This is similar to the dilemma faced in the work by Argyris and Schön (1974; 1978; 1996) on single- and double-loop learning and how to overcome the defensive routines that support Model I types of behaviour. The problem with both, which is never fully resolved, is that it is not clear precisely how the unexamined and undiscussable domains of practice – the underlying values, norms, and assumptions associated with practice – can be surfaced and made explicit if they are so ineffable, nor, if it is indeed possible, whether there is any purpose in doing so.

This is an important question which will take on particular relevance when I consider the empirical example of an action learning network in the latter part of the paper. The effectiveness of the groups involved in this network is predicated on the ability of participants to reflect publicly on what they do. According to the categorisation outlined above, this is predominantly a case of reflection-on-action, taking place away from the immediacy of their day-to-day working practices. The key issue is whether such collective reflection away from the immediacy of practice is able to contribute to the practitioners’ performances when they return to the field of practice. Schön (1983) began to tackle this question by suggesting that despite there being a gap between intuitive knowing and any description of it this does not necessarily make the latter worthless. As he argued: “Incompleteness of description is no impediment to reflection ... Although some descriptions are more appropriate to reflection-in-action than others, descriptions that are not very good may be good enough to enable an inquirer to criticize and restructure his intuitive understandings so as to produce new actions that improve the situation or trigger a reframing of the problem” (Schön 1983: 277). However, as we shall see in the next section, there are fundamental limitations to the theory of reflective practice that mean that the relations of such descriptions to practice are not fully addressed. In particular, the treatment of the social and political elements of the interplay between knowing and discursive practices is seriously incomplete.

Reflective practice and the social and political character of knowing

Schön’s presentation of reflective practice is often criticised for offering an ultimately individualised account of knowing and learning, as well as for ignoring issues of power and politics. Reynolds and Vince (2004: 6), for example, have argued that Schön tended to focus on the individual practitioner without really acknowledging that “reflection is best understood as a socially situated, relational, political and collective process”. As we shall see in due course, it is by no means coincidental that the lack of an adequate theorisation of the social nature of reflective practice is accompanied by a failure to develop a thoroughgoing understanding of its political and power-laden character. However, the absence of the social in Schön’s work is by no means as clear-cut as has often been suggested. Certainly the case studies offered in his two major works on reflective practice place individuals centre stage, with the emphasis on the interaction between the different practitioners and the materials of the respective situations that they face. However, there are two senses in which the social makes an appearance in Schön’s writing.

The first, which ultimately does little to redress the individualistic slant of his thinking, involves the portrayal of reflective practice as involving not only a conversation with the situation but also with others involved in that situation. Thus, several of the examples involve dialogues between two or more actors (Quist and Petra; the Supervisor and the Resident; the Planner, the Developer, and the Architect). Nevertheless, these conversations still come across more or less as a series of atomised interactions between individual characters. As Usher *et al.* (1997: 147) have argued: “Mutual reflection-in-action is scripted as an inherent problem for self and other, dramatically constructed through characters and their lines ... This is engaging stuff, but it is limited. The problematic of reflection-in-action is individualised.” Indicative of this is the way that in most of the examples one of the characters comes to the fore and the others are treated essentially as another component of the situation.

The second way that the social enters Schön’s theory of reflective practice is more promising, but stops short of a fully elaborated account. This is through his discussion of professional roles and the role frames associated with them.

A professional role places skeletal demands on a practitioner’s behavior, but within these constraints, each individual develops his own way of framing his role ... The problems he sets, the strategies he employs, the facts he treats as relevant, and his interpersonal theories of action are bound up with his way of framing his role. (Schön 1983: 210)

Practitioners are depicted as being embedded in particular institutional fields which incorporate systems of norms, rules, and stocks of knowledge from which repertoires of practice can be generated. As indicated by the quotation above, professional roles do not determine behaviour in any straightforward sense; they establish boundaries, but practitioners are relatively free to select alternative ways of framing or reframing their role within these limits. While acknowledging the partly role guided character of professional practice is a good start, once again the individual is accorded primacy by being given the capacity either to go along with the demands of socially sanctioned rules and norms, or to choose a different direction.

The individualistic tendency in Schön’s writing is one that he shared with some of the earlier attempts to conceptualise inquiry within Pragmatism. In these inquiry was depicted mainly as a psychological process operating primarily at an individual level involving people’s attempts to reconcile tensions between their ideas and experiences. In this sense, as with Schön, experience is very much a first-person affair. This is not to say, however, that Pragmatism remained wedded to subjectivism, as is clear from Dewey’s later work, and especially from the writing of Mead. While Schön, in common with earlier Pragmatist writings, typically started with the individual and worked out to society, Dewey and Mead turned this on its head. According to Dewey (1922: 63) “[t]he problem of social psychology is not how either individual or collective mind forms social groups and customs, but how different customs, established interacting arrangements, form and nurture different minds.” Likewise, for Mead (1934: 162): “A person is a personality because he belongs to a community, because he takes over the institutions of that community into his own conduct.” This is not to say that individual thoughts and behaviours are blindly and unvaryingly determined by the standards, customs, norms, and habits of particular communities. Instead, if we recall the distinction made by Dewey between intelligent and routine habits, it is

possible to see that socially shared rules and norms can be both a source of inertia and transformation.

As with Schön, however, this still leaves the issue about the conditions under which intelligent habits, or the capacity for reflection-in-action, can be developed. In the end, both Dewey and Schön presented a fairly optimistic picture of how this is possible which was more or less silent on questions of power and politics. Although Schön (1983: 287-290) claimed that his vision was less utopian than either the model of technical rationality, with its faith in the role of professional expertise, or indeed the radical critique of this model, he nonetheless grounded his notion of social progress in a quite idealistic faith in the transformative capacity of reasonable and open dialogue. Certainly he was not blind to the obstacles in the way of such dialogue. This is precisely what his argument about the self-sealing character of Model I type behaviour is about. Nevertheless, the story is ultimately one of triumph over such barriers by opening up the deepest assumptions of our theories-in-use to scrutiny (Argyris and Schön 1974; Argyris and Schön 1978). Although Dewey's blueprint for how such a reflective conversation could be undertaken placed more emphasis on the methods of science, he also displayed a huge optimism in the potential for inculcating the attitudes and skills of critical inquiry. In this case, however, his conception was more obviously social in orientation, being concerned with the development of collective habits of reflective intelligence throughout society, primarily through a recasting of the nature and purpose of education (Dewey 1916; 1939).

Despite their differences, both Dewey and Schön "take for granted the possibility of reflectively questioning received beliefs and values, of gaining critical distance from established norms and roles, and of challenging ascribed individual and group identities" (McCarthy 1999: 174). The potential for transforming any human endeavour thus occurs through an open-ended and continuous process of justification and debate in which participants reflexively examine their own views as well as taking account of the views of others. This is what Rorty (1990 [1979]: 377) called the edifying purpose of philosophy, the point of which "is to keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth." Accepting that there is a discursive element to the development of moral norms of conduct, the pressing question becomes one of the conditions under which such conversations take place. Dewey took an optimistic stance on this issue, seeing the potential for the development of a responsible society whose members are actively engaged in the rational search for solutions to social problems. MacGilvray (1999: 544) has outlined this optimistic vision in the following terms:

Having discredited traditional philosophical attempts to root moral and political norms in transcendental categories of reason, schedules of natural rights, or universally approved human goods, pragmatism demonstrates, it is said, that there is no authority to which we can appeal outside of our own experience and thus liberates the participatory and deliberative energies of the common citizen. In the absence of an uncontroversial higher ideal, we are faced with the necessity of constructing our own norms and institutions, and given that we have an interest in constructing them fairly and rationally, we are compelled to open the political process to as many perspectives and experiences as possible.

This may well be a virtuous ideal towards which we can aspire, but I would suspect there are few who would genuinely accept that this is the actuality presented by most democratic societies. Indeed, Dewey himself was at times doubtful of being able to overcome the

barriers to developing a reflective and responsible society, as is evident from the following passage:

Those who wish a monopoly of social power find desirable the separation of habit and thought, action and soul, so characteristic of history. For the dualism enables them to do the thinking and the planning, while others remain the docile, even if awkward, instruments of execution. Until this scheme is changed, democracy is bound to be perverted in realization. With our present system of education – by which something much more extensive than schooling is meant – democracy multiplies occasions for imitation not occasions for thoughts in action. (Dewey 1922: 72)

Generally, however, Pragmatism has been less concerned with thinking through the implications of power and competing interests in formulating its vision of social progress. Mills (1964: 382, emphasis in original), a vociferous critic of Pragmatism, accused Dewey of being an apologist for the status quo because his model of action “serves to minimize the cleavage of power divisions *within* society, or put differently, it serves as a pervasive mode of posing the problem which locates all problems between *man and nature* instead of between men and men”. This is perhaps somewhat harsh and does little justice to the frequently radical character of Dewey’s social commentary (Kadlec 2006). However, the Pragmatists’ faith in the capacity to drive equitable social change through a form of collective intelligence based on deliberation and experimentation is overly credulous in the absence of any real consideration of how this is able to overcome established social divisions and inequalities of power and status. In consequence, while the Pragmatism of Dewey and Mead represents an advance on Schön’s individualistic understanding of reflective practice by locating the capacity for growth in a thoroughly social conception of collective intelligence, the implications of this remain under-explored because of the lack of acknowledgement of the deeply political character of much social interaction.

For Weaver (1997), the excessive optimism of Dewey and the fatalistic vision of the inescapably power-laden nature of society presented by Foucault offer two extremes that need to be combined. Whether this is the way forward is another matter, but the overall point is that Pragmatism, if it is to offer a more useful understanding of knowledge and action, needs to include a more developed theory of power. According to Musolf (2001), a more critical neo-Pragmatism makes a move in this direction by being readier to acknowledge structural differences in power and interests that a dialogical approach to addressing social issues is likely to reproduce or even amplify. Nevertheless, neo-Pragmatism remains a philosophy of hope that still believes that such divisions can be addressed by keeping the conversation going and gradually forging new, more inclusive social conventions (Kadlec 2006). This retains the centrality of practice of traditional Pragmatism because the emphasis is no the search for solutions to troubling problems rather than any rarefied quest for universal truth. As Rorty (2000: 7) suggested:

Foucault and Dewey can agree that, whether or not inquiry is always a matter of ‘power’, it never transcends social practice. Both would say that the only thing that can transcend a social practice is another social practice, just as the only thing that can transcend a present audience is a future audience. Similarly, the only thing that can transcend a discursive strategy is another discursive strategy – one aimed at other, better, goals. But because I do not know how to aim at it, I do not think that ‘truth’ names such a goal. I know how to aim at greater honesty, greater charity, greater

patience, greater inclusiveness, and so on. I see democratic politics as serving such concrete, describable goals.

Given the clear need for a more comprehensive understanding of power to extend the benefits of a Pragmatist perspective, there is an obvious question about what such an understanding might look like. One of the key issues in the literature on power concerns the distinction between prohibitive and productive conceptions of power, which has been summarised as the difference between power-over and power-to. The former, which can be largely traced to the formulation offered by Weber (1958), is mainly a question of the capacity of individuals or groups to draw on specific resources to achieve their objectives at the expense of others. Power is treated as a question of possession to the extent that people are able to access different bases of power (French and Raven 1959; Raven 1965). It is this approach to power, as a visible set of political relationships between those differently endowed with power resources, that has traditionally tended to dominate and can be found in various contributions to the so-called 'community power debate' (Dahl 1957; Bachrach and Baratz 1963; Hunter 1963) and in the power-dependency approach (Emerson 1962; Salancik and Pfeffer 1974; Pfeffer 1981). By contrast, the productive conception of power, primarily influenced by the writing of Foucault (1977; 1980a; 1980b), regards power in altogether "more anonymous terms, not as something to be possessed and wielded solely as a tool of coercion, but more as a shifting arrangement of materials, relations, dispositions and techniques that are simultaneously the medium and effects of power, and which enable and constrain particular patterns of action" (Marshall 2006: 208).

Power-over and power-to have tended to be treated as totally incompatible and mutually exclusive perspectives. However, as (Law 1991: 170) has argued, "so long as we understand that there is no necessity about these relations then there is no reason why we should not treat power as a condition, a capacity, something that may be stored, as well as an effect or a product". Indeed, I would suggest that an adequate theorisation of power that takes into account both its prohibitive and productive modalities is an effective way of linking together the different threads of the earlier discussion about the relationship between routine and reflective practices. The productive conception of power is consistent with the theorisation of the norm-based and patterned character of social action, interaction, and knowledge, while the prohibitive conception can be considered part of the performative or enactive dimension through which norms, rules, and schemata are reproduced and potentially transformed. This is equivalent to the distinction between ostensive and performative dimensions of power referred to by Latour (1986), and other similar formulations. For example, the circuits of power framework offered by (Clegg 1989) traces the interconnections between episodic, dispositional, and facilitative forms of power; while (Mouzelis 1995) has distinguished between the paradigmatic dimension of social action, consisting of position-role expectations and normative dispositions, and the syntagmatic dimension that relates to their expression in concrete situations through specific interactions. In terms of understanding reflective practice, this draws attention to the interplay between the routinisation of social action and the patterning of collective knowledge, on the one hand, and the active constitution and playing out of different configurations of power and knowledge as particular episodes of social relations unfold, on the other.

Learning networks as reflective practice?

Having examined some of the points of contact between Schön's notion of reflective practice and the Pragmatist theory of inquiry, as well as their relative strengths and weaknesses, the

remainder of the paper offers an empirical illustration as a way of exploring in more concrete terms the potential usefulness of a suitably modified and more critical theorisation of reflective practice. The context for this illustration is provided by a series of learning networks in South East England initiated and managed by the University of Brighton under a programme called ProfitNet. Based on the findings of an earlier action research project undertaken in Hastings in 2004, the ProfitNet programme was extended in October 2006 to cover the whole of East and West Sussex. The programme was designed to provide a structured platform for the managers of small- and medium-sized enterprises to learn from each other's experiences in what have been called 'industry peer networks' (Sgourev and Zuckerman 2006). So far more than 450 managers have been involved in the programme, participating in monthly meetings with groups of around 15 practitioners primarily organised along sectoral lines (e.g. manufacturing, creative industries, construction, hospitality and tourism, professional services, social enterprises) with a few groups established specifically for recently formed start-up businesses.

The following examples are based on a small sub-set of what has been a much larger research project looking at different aspects of the ProfitNet programme. This part of the research has focused on the dynamics of the groups in action and involved the direct observation of a selection of the groups over a six month period.² 11 groups (or around one third of the total) were chosen for observation using sector, region, and indicators of member engagement (e.g. attendance levels, reports from facilitators and the programme managers) as selection criteria (see Table 1). Observation of the selected groups was divided between two researchers, including the author, and involved attendance at their monthly meetings. The discussion at these meetings was subject to audio recording while the researchers took notes on the interactions between the group, paying particular attention to the structure of interactions, the use of artefacts or technologies to support group activities (such as data projectors, flip charts, notebooks, etc.), and any non-verbal or sidebar communication. Other sources of data relevant to this part of the study included semi-structured and informal interviews with programme managers, facilitators, and group members, and the various forms and records that are kept by the operational team, such as meeting minutes, facilitators' reports, and programme managers' reports.

Group no.	Region	Sector	Engagement
1	A	Creative Industries	High
2	A	Mixed/Start-Ups	Medium
3	B	Professional Services	High
4	C	Mixed/Start-Ups	High
5	C	Mixed	Low
6	C	Creative Industries	Low
7	B	Social Enterprises	Low
8	D	Social Enterprises	Medium
9	D	Engineering	Low
10	B	Construction	Low
11	D	Mixed/Start-Ups	High

Table 1: Selection characteristics of groups for observation

² The names of the groups and individual group members have been disguised to preserve anonymity.

Establishing norms of reflection

In devising the programme, the group meetings were accorded a key role in providing a suitably structured environment for group members to reflect on and share knowledge about their practices. While seeking not to stifle the creative potential of group interactions by over-specifying the content of activities to be undertaken, the idea was to provide an enabling framework which could promote a collective cycle of reflection in which problems are defined, potential solutions are generated, actions selected and implemented, and the outcomes of these actions reviewed and evaluated. The meetings for each of the groups were designed to follow the same general pattern. This is divided into five main activities: (1) Business planning – where each month one of the group members presents a summary of their business activities, describes the opportunities and challenges faced by the company, and outlines their business plan. This forms the basis for a discussion among the group through which problems are defined and possible solutions suggested. (2) Feedback on business planning – in this segment of the meeting managers who have previously presented their business plans are asked to report back on their progress with implementing actions identified from the discussion. (3) Action learning – this part of the meeting is open for any of the participants to raise issues that they would like help on and invite suggestions about possible courses of action. (4) Feedback on action learning – where group members recount any actions they have taken as a result of suggestions from previous meetings. (5) Business development workshops – each month there is a workshop run by a specialist from outside the group on specific topics, such as finance, marketing, human resource management, e-commerce, etc. Each of the groups is facilitated by an independent professional facilitator, sometimes with the help of an assistant. Their role was defined by the designers and managers of the programme to be one of ensuring that the general structure of activities described above was followed and of guiding the group members through the process of reflection without exerting unnecessary influence on the issues discussed.

The partial structuring of group activities was intended to introduce a degree of predictability to the order of group interactions without overly constraining the issues that could be discussed. By following the same familiar cycle of reflection, the idea was that the capacity of group members to develop habits of reflection corresponding to this pattern would be encouraged over time through repeated participation. Equally, there was a clear recognition that the willingness of group members to participate in collective learning with other people who, in most cases, they have not previously met would require the gradual development of greater familiarity and trust, in line with classic theories of group development (e.g. Bennis and Shepard 1956; Tuckman 1965; Tuckman and Jensen 1977). However, there were also attempts to accelerate this process by explicitly raising issues about expectations and norms of conduct in the opening meetings of the group. Developed jointly by the members themselves, the resulting values and expected behaviours were underwritten by a signed agreement covering such issues as confidentiality, openness, support, respect for others' ideas, and so on. Needless to say, the formally prescribed framework for conducting the meetings and the written agreements covering expected norms could only ever provide an incomplete and abstract ideal which relied on being enacted to be given concrete form. In the language of Latour (1986) mentioned above, these are the ostensive dimensions of group norms, while their enactment through actual group interactions can be termed the performative dimension. The relationship between the two is not deterministic; to a greater or lesser extent there is always scope for variation, purposeful or otherwise, in how norms are performed in practice.

In terms of the prescribed structure of the meetings, for example, there was some variation in how the pattern of activities was interpreted and performed by participants. The group facilitators, not surprisingly, had a significant influence on how the meetings unfolded, reflecting their different styles, levels of experience, and expertise. In Group 11, for instance, the facilitator tended to get deeply involved in the discussions of the group and, as a result, would lose track of the progress of the meeting. Different parts of the meeting, particularly the business planning session, would overrun their allotted time and there would be less time for the other activities. In Group 10, the facilitator was relatively inexperienced and found it difficult to intervene in the activities of the group. This also resulted in mismatches in the time allocated to the specified activities, actions from the discussions would not be recorded, and, partly related to this, there was a rather haphazard approach to following up actions from the previous meetings. In other groups, by contrast, there was a much closer adherence to the meeting agenda, sometimes verging on the inflexible (e.g. Group 1 and Group 3).

Finding evidence for the development of group norms is notoriously difficult. However, both an analysis of patterns in the observational data and reports from the members themselves suggest a movement from more closed to more open interactions. A useful indication of this can be found in the evolving behaviour of members, particularly those who in earlier meetings were quite reticent to participate and would make few, if any, contributions to the discussion. In several cases, these quieter individuals started to become more involved in group discussions after several months of coming to the meetings. Another pattern in the level of participation was related to the making of business planning presentations. Many members were extremely anxious about presenting their business plans, being fearful about revealing problems with their business or coming across as not entirely competent or successful. As reported by other studies, group reflection involves an element of vulnerability as individuals are called upon to subject their individual ideas to public scrutiny, which can make the experience extremely uncomfortable (e.g. Platzer, Blake et al. 2000). Several of these individuals needed coaching and encouragement from the group facilitator before making their presentations. However, for most, having presented their business plans to the rest of the group and finding the response to be generally positive, there was a subsequent increase in their participation in the meetings that followed. For those who started off being wary about contributing, it seemed that overcoming the hurdle of making their business presentation was something of a milestone after which they felt more confident about taking part. For some, however, the collective pressure on publicly reflecting about their practice was too much, leading to avoidance behaviours, such as delaying the scheduled date of their presentation as far as possible, sending last minute apologies for not being able to make the meeting at which they were due to present, or, in a few instances, leaving the group altogether. One implication of this is that the development of group norms is double-edged – collective expectations about being open in sharing experiences that for some are experienced as positively beneficial, can for others be felt as the tyranny of the group. Even relatively confident members reported that the process of becoming comfortable in sharing information with the group did not happen instantly. As one of the members in Group 2 recounted:

I think everyone's been quite open ... And as we've got to know each other more I think more bits have come out ... Because I work alone from home it's just having that support; knowing there's a group of like-minded people who are going through the same challenges. And feeling that once a month you can come along and you've got that support. You've got people, even if they're quite silly basic things, it's ok to tell them. Whereas you know you probably wouldn't say a lot of the things we say

here to anyone else because you don't want to look weak or you don't ... you can't show that you don't know everything. You're the face of your company and you've always got to appear that you really know what you're doing. You don't always, you have to act sometimes. But coming here you can let your guard down a bit and be yourself. (Claire, Group 2, May 2008).

One interesting question concerns the extent to which such norms are localised and group-specific or capable of being shared more broadly across different practice settings. The following example offers some indication not only that most of the groups had developed a norm of open reflection internally, but also that it was beginning to influence their wider activities. In addition to the monthly group meetings, the ProfitNet programme also offered a number of opportunities for members from different groups to meet each other. One such opportunity was a series of workshops designed to help participants improve the absorptive capacity of their organisations (Cohen and Levinthal 1990). At one of these workshops, the facilitator was delayed in arriving. While they were waiting, the assembled members, who had come from different groups, rearranged the tables and chairs in the room, sat down in small groups, and began to talk about their businesses and the problems they faced. They did this with minimal discussion and without hesitation. By the time the facilitator arrived, the members were deep in conversation, offering each other advice and assistance, to the extent that he was initially loathe to interrupt. Although anecdotal, this example suggests that the workshop participants shared a common frame and experience of relating that guided their interactions within this different setting.

Group reflection as experimentation

The following is an extract from the transcriptions of one of the meetings of Group 9 that is fairly typical of the types of interaction that occur across all of the groups. It illustrates several of the characteristics of group reflection in these settings which are consistent with the notions of inquiry and reflective practice discussed earlier in paper. To set the scene, the discussion is about an issue raised by Rachel, the managing director of a family-owned business. Having worked for the business for many years, she was appointed as a director and given a small minority shareholding around five years ago. She is not a member of the family, but feels a strong loyalty to the founder of the business, who is now in his eighties and still involved, albeit in a less active capacity, in the running of the firm. The issue concerns the founder's daughter, who is also a director and draws a salary from the company, even though she does not actually do any work or turn up to any of the meetings of the board of directors. Rachel is seeking to grow the business and regards the founder's daughter as an unnecessary burden whose salary could be more productively used to employ another manager. She recognises that the founder is caught between his desire to do the best for the company he created and his obligation to his daughter. Rachel is seeking ways of resolving this issue. Although she does not have a controlling stake in the company, the founder has allocated her his voting rights for situations where he is unable to attend a board meeting. This gives her the formal power to take action in such an event, but she wants to avoid confrontation with the family and so would not go down such a route without the prior agreement of the founder. She is unsure how to proceed. At first the other members of the group probe her with questions that clarify the situation and encourage Rachel to make the components of the problem more explicit. Then they begin to suggest a number of potential courses of action as follows:

Kevin: There are all sorts of ways you can eat away at this without actually doing anything direct.

David: Taking out banking covenants and loans and things like that and making her sign as responsible for those should the company default. She might start to think hang on a minute this is too much risk.

[...]

Michael: Unfortunately, another view is there has to be confrontation somewhere. Somebody somewhere has to have confrontation, whether it be you or [the founder]. If he gives you the voting powers then you have to have the confrontation.

Rachel: Mmm ... yeah.

Kevin: But he's obviously got the most confidence in you otherwise he wouldn't have allocated you his voting rights and I think he's your best ally.

[...]

Kevin: One thing you could do is set up another company and gradually transfer the assets out of your company into the other company. With the agreement of obviously [the founder] transfer the property out and gradually make it so it's just a shell of a company. And then again that's a thing that you definitely need legal advice on.

Michael: Yes, because you have got yourself a slight conflict of interest there as a director, but there's no reason why you shouldn't do something like that. Split the company up because it works better that way and gradually your turnover increases in one side and decreases in the other.

Kevin: But she's got no shares in the other company at all and ...

David: You see the other thing is that may be a good solution ... take the premises, she gets an income from the rent that the business pays it and you take the company. That may be an amicable split because she's got no interest in the company – all she wants is money. That would be a salary from something else and that could be a way of carving it up.

The conversation continues with different members offering a whole series of different ideas about how Rachel could proceed. They consider various scenarios in terms of restructuring the shareholdings of the business, what would happen should the founder die, setting up a separate trading company, using the regulations surrounding the responsibilities of directors, and so forth. The facilitator then draws the discussion to a close in the following way:

Facilitator: So, there are lots of ways, but basically what people are saying is do something about it.

Rachel: Confront it, yes.

Facilitator: I think that's been a useful thing to just get everybody's kind of take on ...

Rachel: Definitely, yeah. No, it has.

Facilitator: Because people are speaking as in one voice here to you, aren't they to act about this.

The preceding exchange can be interpreted through the overlapping notions of inquiry and reflective practice in the following ways. Firstly, the process is set in motion by some question, doubt, or uncertainty that is getting in the way of action. Rachel has plans for the business, but they are being frustrated by her difficult position within the company as an outsider in a family-owned enterprise. The issue concerning the founder's daughter is the specific manifestation of this frustration and Rachel is unsure how to proceed. With the help of the other members of the group she is encouraged to be more specific about the particulars of the problem. The remainder of the discussion is then comprised of a series of attempts to try out different ways of approaching the issue. These start off by taking as given the current situation, as Rachel describes it, and then trying to find solutions that would fit in with the constraints of this situation. However, as these solutions are considered one-by-one, the members of the group become more adventurous in thinking about what might be done. Rather than accepting the constraints of the situation, they commence a series of 'what if' type experiments – what if the business is split into two separate companies; what if the founder's daughter is given an income from the rent of the premises; what if the structure of the shareholdings is changed; and so forth.

This is consistent with the account in Schön (1983) of using 'virtual worlds' as a way of experimenting without making the, often irreversible, changes that are a consequence of action in the actual situation to which the experiment refers. The group members are able to manipulate the situation faced by Rachel to see what the consequences might be. However, there is also another consequence of this experimentation. By considering a series of different scenarios, it becomes clearer and clearer to the group members that Rachel must act on the issue as a matter of urgency. As such, they are encouraging a reframing of the situation. Rachel begins her description of the problem by emphasising how, in most respects, the business is performing well, but that there is just this one area that needs addressing. This makes the question of how to deal with the founder's daughter into almost a side-issue – something that needs to be addressed, but over which there is no great urgency. By the end of the discussion, having uncovered the serious wider implications for the future of the firm that may arise should the situation be allowed to continue, the other group members are all urging Rachel to see this as a central problem against which she must take immediate action.

Power and the political character of reflective practice

While the previous example illustrates several of the key features of inquiry, it is crucially incomplete because it reveals nothing about the practical consequences of the group's reflection. The discussion remains within the virtual world of the possible where different courses of action can be tried out without real consequences. The group members empathise with Rachel's predicament – some have gone through similar experiences themselves – and come up with a number of ways that she might address the problem, but ultimately it is up to her to turn those ideas into actions. The notion of reflective practice places a great deal of

emphasis on the framing of problems, which can either enable or constrain what different course of action can be imagined. Frequently within Schön's writing it seems that the biggest constraint that practitioners need to overcome is limitations in their own capacity to examine the assumptions that undergird their practices. As discussed earlier, this is part of the individualistic and voluntaristic tendency that runs through the theory of reflective practice. However, for Rachel, as we shall see as we continue the story, it is not just her assumptions about the situation that are holding her back.

At another meeting of Group 9, two months later, the facilitator asks Rachel if she has any feedback on what actions she has taken as a result of the group's earlier discussion. This is how she replies:

Rachel: I haven't got a great deal because we've been absolutely choc-a-block at work [...] Other things unfortunately have ... well, not unfortunately because they are actually in my way of thinking business-wise more important to sort out at the moment so ... It's all there. It's all looked at and it's up to me to then make the decision to what I say and how I say it and how we're going to resolve it [...] It's just it's the family connection. That's the hardest one to tackle. Not wanting to put any extra complication there that needn't be there. That's really all I can tell you because I haven't taken things further.

Facilitator: But it sounds like it's still on the agenda.

Rachel: Oh, it's definitely, yeah ... And after the meeting it did bring a lot more things to the front of my mind that I hadn't even considered.

Two months have passed and Rachel has yet to broach the subject of the founder's daughter properly with the founder himself and the other directors. She confirms that her perception of the problem has changed, bringing it forward into a more prominent position in her thinking, but nevertheless she makes a series of excuses why she has not taken action. Although her assumptions about how the founder will react, about what confronting the founder's daughter will be like, about not wanting to create family problems for the founder, are all discouraging her from taking action, it is not simply her framing of the problem that is the blockage. If anything, the greater range of interpretations about the situation that emerged through the earlier group discussion have given her a deeper understanding of the position she is in and why it is imperative for her to act. Arguably what is making her hesitate in taking action is not her capacity to reflect on her dilemma and come up with possible courses of action, but her fears about what the consequences of those actions might be.

What the theory of reflective practice tends to downplay is the social reality of the consequences of action for participants. For Rachel what is at stake is not simply finding a solution to a problem through a creative conversation with the materials of the situation – she is, as Dewey consistently emphasised, part of that situation and has to live with the consequences of her actions. The founder may feel compelled take the side of his daughter; Rachel may lose her job; the daughter may be removed from the company but the resulting rift in the family causes so much bad feeling that working there is unbearable, and so on. Since reflection is necessarily embedded, to a greater or lesser degree, in such social webs of consequence, there is an inescapably political dimension to it. In this example we are seeing the situation through the lens of Rachel's interests and things would no doubt look quite different from the perspective of the founder, his daughter, or any of the other people

involved. As long as the status quo is left undisturbed, the reality of these different positions will remain untested. However, if Rachel takes the first step and forces the issue about the founder's daughter, it is likely that a series of events will unfold in which various political resources will be constituted and invoked by the different parties as the problem is negotiated – shareholdings, voting rights, family loyalties, emotional blackmail, the continued existence of the firm, contracts, norms of what is right and fair, and so forth. In the vocabulary of power introduced earlier, these are elements of the episodic or performative dimensions of power. However, although latent, this is not to say that the influence of power is therefore absent from the discussion of the group about Rachel's predicament. In terms of the interactions between the group members, these are conducted in a relatively egalitarian fashion with the participants coming together more or less as equals with a shared interest in learning from each other. Nevertheless, to the extent that their collective process of inquiry reaches out to connect with Rachel's day-to-day field of practice, their exchanges are imbued with traces of the power relations that she is caught up in. By imagining the consequences of the various solutions that they devise together, they are acting out potential ways that the situation is likely to be played out given their understanding of the different political resources and strategies that are going to be involved. Although this is a simulation of what might happen, the political implications are nonetheless real – Rachel delays action because of what she imagines will happen should she raise the issue of the founder's daughter.

The above illustration offers an interesting discrepancy between the relatively calm and symmetrical dynamics of the group and the intensely conflict-ridden nature of the situation being discussed. Most of the groups developed similar norms of openness and reasonableness in which overt conflict and explicit power differences were rare. Nevertheless, we have already seen some indications that the normalisation of group reflection could be experienced as uncomfortable or coercive by some members. In addition, there were a few groups in which more pronounced differences emerged between members

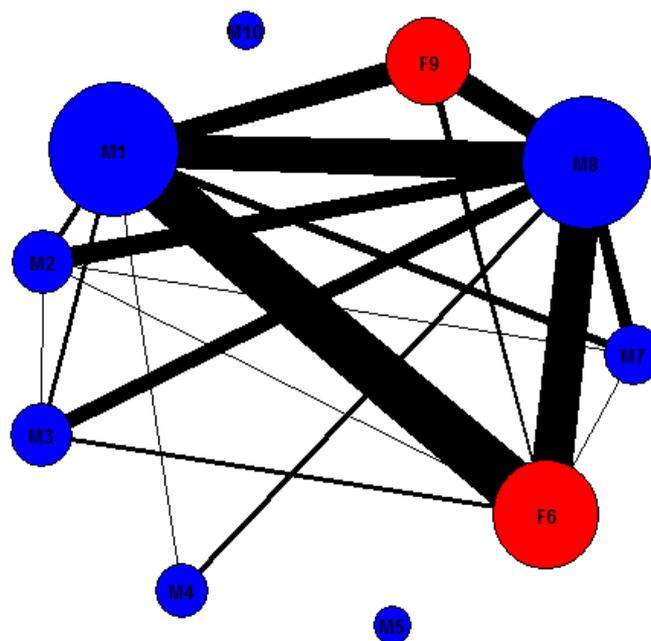


Figure 1: Sociogram of group interactions (Group 6, Action Learning, January 2008)

through the development of relations of dominance and subordination. In all of the groups it was not untypical to have a few individuals who were clearly more forthcoming in making contributions and some who rarely, if ever, entered into the conversation. However, in the majority of cases there was a progressive encouragement by the more vocal members to draw the quieter members into the discussion. Although this itself could be seen as a form of coercion, the general pattern appeared to be one of creating a friendly and unthreatening environment in which everybody could contribute; a process in which the facilitator played a crucial part. There were, nevertheless, examples of rather less inclusionary behaviour. Whether purposeful or otherwise, these have the effect of privileging the voices of some participants over others. Figure 1 shows a sociogram constructed from the action learning section of one of the meetings of Group 6. The circles represent the total number of contributions made by each of the participants and the lines represent the volume of communications between different group members.

What is immediately noticeable from this sociogram is that there are three individuals who are dominating the discussion, while two participants make no contributions at all. Of course, looking at the volume of communication says nothing about the quality or influence of what is being said – it is quite possible, as happened on several occasions during the group observation, for individuals to contribute relatively little and then make a comment that goes to the core of what is being discussed and dramatically changes the direction of the conversation. Equally, it says nothing about the reasons why people are not contributing – they may be tired or distracted, they may feel they have nothing relevant to offer, they may be nervous, they may feel actively excluded by those talking, or they may be content just to listen. However, the volume of communication is still a fairly good proxy for detecting dominance and subordination in the structure of communication. Looking more closely at the content of interactions, those participants who regularly made the most comments during discussions also tended to be those driving the precise agenda of the meetings, although this could be moderated by the interventions of the more skilful facilitators. In Group 6 there was one member, Jack, who had a particularly strong influence on the group. As the facilitator explained after one of the group meetings, Jack makes a lot of good suggestions but she felt that sometimes he constrains other people who do not feel they can make a point after he has spoken. He also appeared to have a disproportionate impact on decision-making within the group. For example, it was on his suggestion that the venue of the meeting was changed to a conference room within the same building that he has his office, even though it made the journey more difficult for some of the other members (and one person actually stopped coming to the meetings as a result). On another occasion he proposed the following change to the established structure of the meeting:

Jack: Perhaps we should all bring ... I don't know, you need to tell me to stop talking ... but, you know, I think for me I like to hear successes. I like to hear ... I'd like say Stephen to come along and say this month I did this and it worked for me and it takes one minute. We just go round the room. And perhaps we should all make more effort to bring two successes in a month or two things we've learnt from in a month. We just whizz round the room talking about that and if there's anything we want to hone in on we can just hone in on it and ... I want to know about things that work, you know.

The rest of the group concurred and it was decided that they would all bring their 'success stories' to the next meeting. The point is not whether such ideas are good or bad, but rather that even in the relatively co-equal setting of a group established to share their experiences it

is not uncommon to find interactions that suggest more unequal dynamics of power and influence. This should come as no surprise since, once one embraces a more thoroughly social conception of reflective practice, then political considerations in terms of power and legitimacy quickly come into play.

Conclusion

The theory of reflective practice, to the extent that it draws on and, in some respects, extends the legacy of Pragmatism with its similar notion of inquiry, provides a useful lens through which to examine the ways that practitioners develop their practices by engaging in an active dialogue with the situations that they are embedded in. Rather than offering a vision of knowing and learning as being somehow detached and distant from practice, there is a strong emphasis on the involved and interested character of reflection where the knower is part and parcel of the object of their knowledge. Faced by a disruption to the normal flow of experience, they are stimulated to examine the sources of this disturbance and how it might be overcome. This entails adopting a forward-looking and experimental attitude to the situation in which the understanding of the problem and possible solutions jointly emerge in an unfolding interplay of ideas and actions, either real or imagined. As both Dewey and Schön in their own ways emphasised, the capacity to inquire or reflect is a universal human attribute, but one which is subject to different degrees of development. In other words, the routines or habits of reflection are themselves capable of being learned.

This assumption was one that underpinned the development of the learning networks outlined in the empirical illustration. The programme was explicitly conceived by its architects as a way of routinising and institutionalising a particular style of reflection. While the examples provided indications of the development of certain norms of reflection, as well as suggesting several features in common with reflective practice, there remains a question about where this fits with Schön's threefold characterisation of knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action. As previously suggested, there is some ambiguity about these terms, particularly the latter two. The monthly group meetings of the learning networks take place away from the immediate context of the practitioners' normal day-to-day work practices. In this respect there is an element of distance that makes them resemble more closely the characterisation of reflection-on-action. However, the discussions that take place in the meetings are also closely intertwined with the participants' practices through the partly structured and iterative cycle of reflection and experimentation. By considering various courses of action, going away to try them out, and coming back to consider what has happened, the ongoing procession of meetings takes place within the action present, to use Schön's terminology. This means that what takes place in the groups could equally be described as reflection-in-action. This is even more the case when one considers the role that imagination plays in the group discussions. Since they take place away from the immediate field of practice, there is the scope to consider alternative scenarios by experimenting with different understandings and courses of action in the virtual world of the meeting. Whether this is comparable to the examples used by Schön to illustrate the concept of reflection-in-action is debateable. However, one clear implication is that there needs to be much greater consideration of the temporality of reflective practice. Not all practices offer the immediacy of response that allow the skilful practitioner to feel their way forward in the here-and-now. The implications of the different pace and timing of practices for the style of reflection and the possibilities and constraints that these introduce need to be more thoroughly explored. Nevertheless, the distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action offers a potentially useful vocabulary for beginning to address these issues.

Having said that, the paper has also attempted to show that there are two serious blind-spots in the theory of reflective practice that need to be remedied. The first concerns the necessarily social character of reflection. The need for a more adequate conception of the social than that offered by Schön is, of course, brought into sharp relief by the subject matter of the empirical illustration, dealing as it is with collective processes of group reflection. However, the socially embedded character of even the most isolated case of individual reflection needs to be more clearly acknowledged through a more developed understanding of how individuals themselves are constituted through their connection with socially shared stocks of knowledge, norms, rules, expectations, language, and so forth. This is where Schön's ideas part company with the Pragmatist tradition, especially the attempts by Dewey and Mead to offer a fully social account of experience, by remaining ultimately wedded to an individualised conception of reflection. This is a major limitation to any notion of the critical or transformative capacity of reflection. As Cronk (1976: 236-237) has argued: "... to account for the reflexivity of consciousness ... it is necessary to begin, not with personal consciousness, but with the social world out of which individual selves arise; and the means by which selves arise is the incorporation of socially defined symbols into individual consciousness via 'symbolic interactions' ... in which the individual assumes the roles of others and views himself from the standpoint of these assumed roles. We become capable of self-reflection and self-criticism as a result of taking the attitudes of others towards ourselves." This process of taking the attitudes of others was clearly evident in the example the discussion surrounding Rachel's dilemma with the founder's daughter. The other members of the group placed themselves in Rachel's position to consider possible courses of action, and by taking on these other attitudes Rachel herself was able to gain new insights into her own situation.

The second blind-spot is one shared by both the theory of reflective practice and the Pragmatist concept of inquiry. This relates to the absence of any sustained consideration of the frequently power-laden and political character of reflection. The examples of group reflection in the learning networks offered illustrations of the operation of various modalities of power, seen in both productive and prohibitive terms. The establishment of different sets of rules and norms within the groups enabled them to develop the capacity to reflect on their practices, but at the same time such normalisation could also be experienced as tyrannical, creating expectations about how one is expected to behave that some found uncomfortable. Rachel's story revealed how the process of group reflection reached out into wider domains of practice characterised by contested social relations and thus itself became a simulated exercise in considering the different interests and power resources that might be mobilised and how they could be played out. The example of Group 6, in contrast, suggested how the group meetings themselves could become a contested terrain in which certain voices are privileged over others. To make sense of such examples, the paper briefly introduced a possible framework of power based on the interplay between its normative or ostensive dimensions and how these are performed within specific episodes of social interaction. While this needs further development to incorporate it more closely with the theories of reflective practice and inquiry, the argument is that there is sufficient value in the latter to make such an attempt worthwhile. In this I follow the view that Pragmatism is a suitable starting point from which to proceed to develop a critical social theory providing that it is reworked in key areas. As Bernstein (1992: 840) has suggested: "I do not think we can simply return to the pragmatists to solve our theoretical and practical problems. Nothing could be more unpragmatic than to engage in nostalgia for the 'good old days' (that never quite existed). But I do believe that we can continue to draw inspiration from the pragmatic legacy and develop it in creative ways."

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