

0054

## **Trapped in the hall of mirrors: the illusions and ironies of reflective professionalism in education**

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### **Background**

#### **Background to the topic**

This paper explores multiple interpretations of the metaphor of reflection in the context of professionalism in education. Post Dearing (1997), reflection became part of a standardised skill-set taught across disciplines in Higher Education. The model of the reflective practitioner developed by Schön (1987: 3) aimed at providing an alternative to technical rationality, where "practitioners are instrumental problem solvers who select technical means best suited to particular purposes". Reflection was subsequently incorporated into cyclical models of experiential learning by Kolb (1984) and Pedler et al. (1997). The discourse of reflection, interpreted as a language game (Bleakley, 1999), positions reflection as intrinsically worthwhile. However, a deeper exploration of the reflection metaphor reveals a number of illusions and ironies. For example, the circular representation of experiential learning can create an illusion of learning. This is because the completion of a cycle places the learner at the same point of entry on a continuous, one-dimensional circle. Ironically, these step-by-step models can also be used instrumentally as a technique, thus perpetuating the kind of technical rationality that Schön set out to transcend. Reflection relies on the cognitive processes of observation and reasoning, which can entrap us in cognitive space, where we live 'with the Others', rather than 'for the Others', the latter being the domain of moral space (Bauman, 1993).

### **Research Questions**

#### **Focus of the enquiry**

This paper arises out of my reflexive evaluation of an MA in Education module in which reflection was a central theme. My initial conceptualisation of the modular activities and assessment tasks was as an outcomes-driven review of the teaching and learning of reflection. However, in the process of analysing empirical data (student module evaluation questionnaires and their reflective narratives), deeper issues regarding the nature of reflection surfaced:

- What are the consequences of promoting the concept of the reflective practitioner?
- What ontological and epistemological positions underpin the metaphor of reflection?
- What is my ethical responsibility as a 'teacher of reflection'?

This paper seeks to explore possible answers to these questions.

### **Methods**

#### **Mapping of the literature**

Psychoanalytic theory positions the concept of professional reflective learning in the context of the transformation of the self. The archetypal image of the spiral is a symbol of transformation or transcendence as each revolution of a spiral ring takes the self to a higher plane of understanding (Jung, 1964). Learning is thus a process with no temporal or spatial end point. Education is also about interference, conflict and exposure of the 'bothered' self, which, ironically, are the sites of learning (Britzman, 1998). In Jungian terms, integrating the shadow, the 'darkness inside', is a prerequisite for transcendence.

## **Frame**

### **Analytical frame**

The analysis of the empirical data was conducted using Alvesson and Sköldberg's (2000) framework for reflexive interpretation. This consists of four levels of analysis. Grounded theory, the first level of interpretation, utilises an analysis of empirical data as a basis for developing a theory or as a stimulus for further investigations. The hermeneutic level emphasizes that both research and perception are merely acts of interpretation. The critical theory and postmodern levels "problematize the legitimacy of dominant interpretive patterns" (Alvesson and Sköldberg, 2000: 253). By transcending the confines of a single theoretical perspective, reflexive interpretation highlights the limited insight of the technical-rationalist approach to reflection above.

### **Research findings**

#### **Contribution to knowledge**

One of the outcomes of this analysis is a re-evaluation of my empirical data through the framework of reflexive interpretation. The dominant discourse locks professionalism into standardized rituals of reflection and self surveillance, which can lead to inauthentic accounts of reflective learning imposed by outcomes. Ontologically, the mirror metaphor constructs dualistic distinctions between the observer and external reality, between the realms of material objects and ideas. It promotes a narrow rationalist epistemology, which, according to Jung (1964) stunts the development of the psyche (Jung, 1964). Excessive rationalism can lead to a loss of the moral compass, for "moral phenomena are inherently irrational" (Bauman, 1993:10).

The "tarnished mirror" seen in moonlight, "one remove further from the actual" (Hawthorne, 1992: 52-54), offers an alternative mirror metaphor, symbolising the unconscious. Acknowledging the unconscious, 'haunted', 'bothered' aspects of self is an act of defiance against technical-rationalist professionalism that has banished doubt and ambivalence (Britzman, 1998). This can release the reflective practitioner from routines which, ironically, can be unreflective. Perhaps the greatest illusion of the mirror metaphor is its construction of a passive self reflecting reality. Far from being passive and determined by external circumstances, the self contributes to and promotes social influences (Giddens, 1991). It is therefore my moral responsibility as a teacher to introduce a more complex framework of analysis to the teaching of reflection than that offered by technical rationality.

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