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Keeping the cat alive: 'Getting' reflection as part of professional practice

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Introduction

Since Schön's work of the 1980's bringing reflection to bear *on* and *in* practice to prominence , sport and allied health professions have witnessed a rise in the use and scope of reflective practice to the extent that it has become embraced in what Horgan calls a 'wave of euphoria' (cited in McGarr & Moody, 2010, p. 580). We argue the rapid pace at which it has been embraced has meant critical issues have emerged at the heart of *doing* and *using* reflection. The principal challenge is to ensure individuals 'get' reflection.

Knowles, Borrie, and Telfer (2005) described what professionals *do* within sport as possessing *craft skills*. The ability to describe and make sense of practice when engaging with the range of decisions and actions that characterise this 'craft' (from the mundane to the more complex, including moral and ethical considerations), is problematic. Supporting and enabling individuals to engage with 'craft skills' requires practitioners to examine their personal, reflective accounts-on-action, based on the assumption this will be transposed into their actual practice. Within training and education emphasis is given to these accounts being written, on the assumption that trainees/students will 'write to learn', in contrast to 'learning to write' which characterises the majority of their education experience (Allen, Bowers, & Diekelmann, 1989).[1] At the same time, these reflective accounts are used to assess their competencies. The combined effect impinges on what individuals write, and sets up a

[1] Training and education is intended to include National Governing Body of Sport, Higher and Further Education as well as those learning opportunities provided by other provider organisations. Trainees and students are considered those within these structures and for simplicity will be referred to as 'students' throughout the chapter.

position-power dilemma of professional mentor intrusion into the personal and often emotional accounts which mitigates against honest, self-reflective testimony.

Against this backdrop, this chapter argues that reflective practice risks becoming a technical-rational activity, framed by a normative value system (Bleakley, 2000) and an ideology that controls students, rather than allowing freedom of expression in relation to their experiences. We draw on semi-structured interviews with students to examine their experiences and the impact of reflective practices (Trelfa, 2010a[2]) and use the analogy of *Schrödinger's cat* to determine whether reflective practice has been 'killed off' by the process of engagement despite being central to student experience and learning.

The Relevance of the Reflective Practice 'Box' in Relation to 'Vocational Practice'

Schrödinger's cat is a conundrum describing a cat in a sealed container. Whilst the box remains shut the cat is both alive *and* dead, both are possible simultaneously, and one can only discover which upon opening it. Using this analogy, whilst reflective practice is in a sealed box, it is both alive and dead and unless we open and critically examine the concept and practice we cannot know which, nor breathe life into the significant contribution it can make to supporting craft skills. The central question is whether individuals 'get' reflective practice or if they simply learn 'how to do it'.

Our understanding of reflective practice is that of a process through which practitioners, individually and in their communities of practice, consider, explore and develop their craft, skills, and knowledge alongside a deepening appreciation of intuition (Atkinson & Claxton 2000), improvisation (Harris 2009), and set within a context and purpose of professional

[2] Trelfa's (2010) research was carried out with students on two UK professional programmes in Youth and Community Work, and ex-students working in the field. The findings entirely parallel those of Telfer's experience of working with individuals on sports related programmes, reflected in this chapter.

agency, understanding, knowledge and change (Eraut 1994) that includes socio-political awareness and self-transformation (Cranton 2006).

Being able to 'do it' does not necessarily evidence the ability to critically reflect. This is at odds with claims for using reflection as a central, key skill with which to interrogate vocational and practice 'readiness'. Reflective practice is often also combined with benchmarking requirements of professional bodies. Whilst the drivers and political rhetoric behind this are complex and contested (cf. Usher, Bryant, & Johnston, 1997), it has always been of paramount importance to invest in ways of interrogating practice with a view to ensuring that future sports professionals audit, develop, understand and critique what they do, and how they do it. It helps ensure professionalism (and 'fitness for purpose') as much as it develops practice.

Uncertainty and risk are key characteristics of sport practice; practice is fluid and situationally dependent (Cassidy, Jones, & Potrac, 2009); and in such contexts there are no formulae for individuals to fall back on (Schön 1987). Thus, there is a need for those engaged to be able to decide how practice should be in any given situation relative to their own skills and competencies. Lyle (2010) develops this idea of practitioners[3] being able to make rapid decisions that are contextually relevant and technically correct. These processes become tacit and therefore notoriously difficult to articulate. In essence, the practitioner has to be capable of working with, and in, a "stream-of-consciousness flow" (Lyle, 2002, p. 212). In all practitioner interactions there are key moments that involve ethical, moral, technical and procedural decisions (Banks & Nøhr, 2003). These practice dilemmas are further complicated as sport and physical activity becomes increasingly required to address socio-political agendas through initiatives relating to social policy. These dilemmas are described

[3] We use the generic word 'practitioner' throughout to cover the variety of contexts that include coaching, teaching and instruction related to sport and physical activity. For further reading on this issue see Lyle & Cushion, (eds.), 2010.

by Schön (1987, p. 42) as "swampy lowlands" that individuals need to be able to navigate, and reflective practice supports the disentangling of practice milieu. Moreover, as Philippart (2003) observes, 'Practice becomes increasingly complicated as society itself becomes more complex. ... Many conflicting interests, interpretations of reality, moral and ethical standards, visions and hopes for the future exist next to each other' (p. 70). Development of a deeply engaged analytical capacity is therefore a necessary skill to embed in training and education programmes, undertaken through the facilitation of reflective practice (Cropley, Hanton, Miles, & Niven, 2010).

This complex environment is characterised by competing ideas from above or outside sport pertaining to what it is to be professional and what a professional act involves, risking excessive external or managerial and bureaucratic control (Evetts, 2003). With its focus on responsibility, autonomy and interpretation, reflective practice is an important 'from within' opposing force (Furlong, 2000). It offers an avenue through which to respond to and manage these drivers and should be valued as a legitimate autonomous view.

Reflective Practice: Both 'Alive-and-Dead'

Some consider the role of reflection in learning with regard to *how* people learn from their experiences and thus develop (e.g., Burnard, 1991; Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985); others view the process from the perspective of critical thinking and experience to achieve an overview (e.g., Mezirow, 1990; Moon, 1999). When applied to professional practice, reflection becomes a 'specialised tool' (Moon, 1999, p. 4). Schatzki, Knorr Cetina, and Von Svigny (2001) explained how 'practice' in relation to professions refers to performance in specific settings, as well as preparation and repetition to improve. Repertoires of 'skills and judgements' are emphasised as important as is the role of critical analysis in determining the

best action for any given moment (Moffat 1996, p.75). Thus it would appear the concept of reflective practice is very much alive.

However, we contend that reliance on reflective practice in professional sports and related education programmes masks an alternative reality, one that suggests a confused concept and questionable practice. Part of the potency of reflective practice is in the notion that individuals will question previously held assumptions and decisions regarding their practice, leading to change (Jarvis 1992). However, the grounds for this claim are confused. For instance, Mezirow (2000) contends learning can be newly acquired or an extension of established learning, gained with or without challenging personally held assumptions, whereas previously he argued the latter had to take place for learning to happen (Mezirow, 1985). Moon (1999) argues a change in perspective is only one of a range of possible outcomes, whilst Boyd and Fales (1983) and Jarvis (1992) discuss it as an inevitable consequence.

Stages of reflection that are end points in themselves representing different ways of thinking and acting could be a solution here. Van Manen's (1977) three levels of reflectivity could be valid according to the circumstances the practitioner is working in and with. *Technical rationality* focuses on efficient and effective means to achieve certain ends. *Practical action* is reflection that unpacks the means, so considering underpinning assumptions and outcomes, while *critical reflection* involves reflection that results in a change in perspective that incorporates moral and ethical considerations. These levels are important for practitioners to grasp when moving between outcome and process goals. However, stage models are typically considered hierarchically with individuals showing engagement in critical reflection being more highly rewarded through assessment as long as they are able to articulate it (Placek & Smyth, 1995). To add further confusion, writers disagree on the number of stages. In contrast to Van Manen's (1977) three stages, Zeichner

and Liston (1987) propose four, King and Kitchener (1994) seven, while Perry (1970) discusses nine. This confusion lies at the heart of discussion around 'non' and 'effective' reflective practitioners (e.g. Cowan, 1998), the former being those who do not engage in reflective practice, and 'effective' being sharply (and negatively) contrasted with more sophisticated practice in terms of action, outcome, values, ethical and moral considerations, and the capacity to question and disrupt or unsettle existing power relations (Fook, 2002). Clearly then, an examination of theory about reflective practice shows it to be both alive-and-dead.

The Confusion in 'Getting It'

It is therefore not altogether surprising that a key theme arising in interviews with post and present students regarding their experiences of engaging in reflective practice is that of 'getting it', questioning whether they had correctly understood the purpose of reflective practice and were 'doing it properly'(Trelfa, 2010a). The transition from merely acting on a requirement to engage in reflective practice, to individuals experiencing it as something of intrinsic worth, value and significance has been highlighted elsewhere (e.g., Johns, 2004). However, rather than reflective practice being the way they make meaning and create and draw on professional knowledge (Eraut, 1994), the respondents said sometimes nothing happened to reflect on, or certainly nothing they deemed as worthy enough; this indicates another dynamic at play. Mirroring the confusion in theory, they located their views and understanding of reflective practice as being reliant on big, worthy events leading to fundamental change. Emphasis given to journal writing as evidence of engaging in reflective practice compounded their confusion; they related engagement in journal writing as a key purpose of reflective practice. In isolation, these could be taken as an indication of poor

facilitation of reflective practice, however it is an experience more widely shared (Trelfa, 2010b; 2011).

Reflective Practice: 'Opening the Box'!

We contend that the way in which reflective practices are delivered, facilitated and used are the principle issues here. The interface between reflective practices as a learning tool and the various ways and purposes to which it used is damaging the potency of its original purpose and undermining learning. The distinction between reflection *as* learning, and, reflection *for* assessment, seems central to student understanding and engagement. Research respondents related how they lied, exaggerated, and censored accounts of practice in reflective journals forming evidence toward qualification, and a number now consciously avoided engagement in any reflective process in their professional life (Trelfa, 2010). Similarly, within sports settings, student practitioners detailed how they had fabricated reflective logs for qualification and accreditation (Telfer, 2002). As a result, it could be argued that reflective practice has become detached from professional craft, skills and technique. It is therefore important that we consider the three themes of evidence, assessment and the uses of reflective practice.

Reliance on reflective journals (diaries, logs) as evidence of engagement is problematic when pro-formas and guidance direct toward 'acceptable' format, content and writing style. This is both confusing and contradictory, a clash between what is deemed to be academic style with a focus on 'learning to write' sitting alongside cognitive reflections where the focus is on 'writing to learn' (Allen et al., 1989), a genre that in contrast looks more like free associative thoughts than anything that satisfies course learning outcomes. Individuals speak about having profound learning experiences, but the task of writing them down to fit what is required is an *"ordeal"* that effectively *"puts a break on"* the reflective

process[4]. Since practitioner reflective recordings are emotionally significant to them, it is often difficult for others to see or feel the relevance; yet rambling over a period of time can allow things to evolve. The 'learning to write' genre within reflective practice also involves individuals linking practice to theory, articulated as *"right, now I've got to find someone else who says something that relates to something I did."* The inference is that their learning is insufficient in its own right.

How can student 'writing to learn' be given comparable consideration to 'learning to write'? Furthermore, as soon as this personalised account is shown to someone else, it creates an audience for which their writing is now wittingly or unwittingly addressing thus making it different. This 'audience' also examines accounts for evidence of student competence to assess ability to qualify in their profession. Individuals speak of writing in ways and about things that will allow them to pass. This experience finds support in other accounts in the literature (see Trelfa 2010b). Hargreaves (2004) identified only three key narratives which are viewed as plausible by assessors and reflectors thus real reflectors are not likely to emerge from such a system.

Contexts for reflection are integral to the process, but individuals involved mostly referred to being required to engage in personal therapy that is unwanted (Trelfa, 2010a). The genre of self-confession in reflective spaces such as coaching, supervision and personal journals are underpinned by assumptions and discourses that have largely gone unquestioned; the ethical implications of scrutinising them has gained little attention (Pollard, 2008). In such circumstances, it is arguably a wise student that delivers what s/he thinks is required of them, performing according to the explicit and implicit surveillance. Reflective practice becomes *"a task to be done rather than to be embedded in practice"* and *"a hoop"* to jump through within a wider *"culture of hoop jumping"*.

[4] References in italics here and throughout the remainder of this chapter are the words of research participants taken from Trelfa 2010.

Finally, individuals recount experiences in the workplace of how reflective practice serves to *"cover"* them, a place where they *"get their story right"*; and, of how organisations use reflective practice as a way to *"put more of an onus on individuals"* within a wider blame culture, as a tool to police employees, and a way to *"institutionalise people into spaces and keep them there"*. In other words, reflective practices are being used as performance reviews or appraisals to guide and influence impressions which subsequently form opinions about others (thus pejoratively). This (unsurprisingly) encourages the individual toward a more conservative, less emotionally laden approach. Reflective accounts are written to reflect the requirements of the institution or organisation but not those of the individual. Rather than Schön's (1987) original notion of practice as engaging in 'hot streams of consciousness', reflective practice becomes ticking boxes, performing appropriately, and meeting targets. The thoughts of individuals become limited and isolated to private, 'secret' moments thus lacking equal intrinsic validity to organisational requirements.

Personal exploration and honesty in the discovery of knowledge (or lack of it) rather than justification of actions and decisions will lead to more robust lines of enquiry into self and practice. Practitioners need not only to know, but also to be able say honestly when they don't know. Individuals should be encouraged to be unique and relevant in the way they think about their own practice as well as thinking accessibly when their practice is about others. However, this sits uneasily with assessment and the managerialist processes.

Keeping the Cat Alive: What we want Practitioners to 'Be', rather than what we want them to 'Do'

How do we breathe life back into reflective practice? With student practitioners we need to remove the perception that it's all about assessment and 'getting through'. The idea that it can be a tool for professional growth often escapes them. We need therefore to

develop different ways of using and re-thinking the assessment of individuals through reflection in order to be able to use reflective practices more effectively and formatively. It also needs to be reviewed from an ethical position. Can and should reflective practices be used for assessment, since by their very nature they are highly personal and emotionally laden? Seldom is the relative maturity and emotional development of the reflector taken into account with some individuals finding the demands of reflective practices difficult to master, even in gaining the most rudimentary of skills.

The inherent contradiction between using reflective practice to improve practice, while at the same time emphasising the ethical underpinning that invariably frames practice based on the moral functioning of the practitioner, is a critical interface in determining how and why we use it. One person's values and sense of moral practice may be different from another's, while at the same time the profession will have organisational cultural values embedded (both implicit as well as explicit) to which all involved are expected to recognise and subscribe. Sports practitioners are also subject to professional and public scrutiny and audit. Therefore, we have the inherent contradiction between openness and honesty on the one hand and the possibility of our self-disclosure being wrong, at fault or contradicting others. The tendency therefore is to say what *needs* to be said, as opposed to what *should* or *could* be said. The assessment of someone else's moral or ethical dilemma is in itself an ethical issue.

Even after all this, there is little or no follow-up. Thus, assessment becomes the end point, not part of a continuous process. This also presents an ethical issue of how strong and revelatory reflection is dealt with, both in terms of support for those involved (the reflector) as well as the obligations of those in power positions dealing with it. The paradox of this should not be lost on those who know reflective practice processes and skills since they are

meant to edge practice ever higher. This does not sit easy with assessments which are too often 'end point'.

The consequences are of student practitioners carrying out reflective practice instrumentally, making up accounts of their performance, and seeing little reason to develop reflective practice once qualified. Reflective practice *is* complex; in trying to convey what it is and encourage a leap of faith to use it there are clearly a number of gaps that need to be filled (Trelfa, 2005). A range of ways of engaging in reflection may need to be offered to individuals and used in differing contexts (Trelfa, 2010a). Consequently, trainers, educators and coaches must be challenged to consider their roles. They must bring the practitioner to a point of saying 'who am I?' as well as 'these are my preferences' with the ability to identify or locate the ideologies, theories and understandings underpinning them. Ranges of methods from which individuals can evaluate their needs and approaches (how they work for them, how they use them) can be utilised, whilst not shaping content. Curricula should contain elements of simulated practice to which reflection can be applied (e.g., ethnodrama). As practice is fluid, dynamic, emotional as well as situationally specific, the search for strategies to sit alongside assessment of practice need to nudge nearer the nuances of practice (including emotional connections).

Understanding and making sense of this extensive landscape makes demands on those who are the gatekeepers of professional practice and those who teach reflective techniques and facilitate reflective practice. Not all will be able to offer such extensive and deeply focused skills. Concomitantly, the impulse to put reflective practice in professional and educational activity at every turn needs to be resisted despite it being a vogue activity. Reflective activities as well as assessments have grown, but the validity of many of the experiences is questionable. There are however, individuals who do 'get it'. They use methods such as voice recorders, mind maps, diaries, shared dialogue and group discussions.

They understood the exercise was to get them as individuals to think around, through and about their practice. They can also question what effective practice *is*, and for whom it is effective (client, practitioner or both). Even so, unstructured journals that are excellent accounts of exploring around, through and about practice that do not meet academic practice demands, and 'talking to camera' reflections-on-practice, run the risk of 'not fitting in'. Therefore, unless the means to achieve an assessment outcome looks like all other means to achieving assessment outcomes, it isn't satisfactory and ultimately nothing satisfactory is achieved. This is of course central to an understanding of the use and purpose of reflective practices as a means or an outcome. It has to look like a cat, and meow like a cat!

Control and Turning out in our own Image

Reflective diaries, portfolios, and discussions are *de facto* policing of practice. It is a fine line between developing the student according to their professional skills and in our own image as 'experts', and that of developing them as rational, free thinking, autonomous professionals, given the pressures to produce 'oven ready' practitioners. This takes learning, understanding and application out of the hands of the students precisely when we need to encourage them to develop autonomy of practice. It no longer becomes 'about them', but about control 'of them'.

Over the years evidence-based practice has determined that more concrete evidence from student practitioners is required rather than their mere perception of events. Anything rooted in how they felt (insight) about this becomes difficult to deal with, both in ethical and practical terms, despite many of the reflective methods and processes asking for exactly this kind of engagement. This reduces the role of training and educating practitioners to that of policing as indeed is the role of using reflection as part of appraisal and continuing professional development. This said, practitioners must be 'fit for purpose'. If reflective

practices are used in the process of professional accreditation, how is the veracity of the work established? Does the system encourage us all to lie by justifying practice in hindsight? This is, of course, at odds with a key practitioner ethic of building trust with 'the other'. Time is houred; less formal discussion with student practitioners and what we do in that time pressurises the student/mentor interface and therefore the process is often reductionist. The richness in engaging with the development of practice in the moment is lost on all parties who should be absolutely central to that process, creating a number of tensions not least between the need to obtain 'hard' evidence and that of individual growth.

The clash of constructivist philosophies around craft skill development versus assessing the nature and content of those constructions is evident. Systems have become mechanistic where there is a requirement to provide evidence for *everything* we do. This includes students and where they recount evidence of practice we have no way of knowing whether their experiences are real or imagined. The only decision we make is whether they are plausible.

Conclusion

Opening the box of reflective practice raises the important questions of have they 'got it?' A greater discussion is needed to establish what the use and nature of reflective practice should be for and about. The debate also needs to focus on the vexed question of the ethics of using reflective accounts, emotionally charged as they are, for assessment purposes especially within such a power relationship as that of assessed and assessor. In this chapter we have suggested that we want of our future practitioners are intellectually and professionally curious professionals. However, the practices we use would seemingly not support this.

Does or should reflective practice allow us to 'get at' practice? Who decides this and in what context? Is the content of our work in reflective practice too methodologically laden but author evacuated (Brown, Gilbourne, & Claydon, 2009)? Has reflective practice become, or has it always been, downright nonsense?

Are we in a better position now to supply an answer that can help Schrödinger discover whether his cat (called Reflective Practice) is indeed dead or alive? Perhaps it has escaped and is now something else entirely without anyone noticing. Or is it in fact now so traumatised by its experiences, that it ceases to exist in any meaningful way and is merely a shell of its original self?

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