Reflective Practice

In: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research

By: Stewart Hase
Edited by: David Coghlan & Mary Brydon-Miller
Book Title: The SAGE Encyclopedia of Action Research
Chapter Title: "Reflective Practice"
Pub. Date: 2014
Access Date: May 5, 2018
Publishing Company: SAGE Publications Ltd
City: London
Print ISBN: 9781849200271
Online ISBN: 9781446294406
DOI: http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446294406
Print pages: 675-678

The most common general meaning given to reflective practice is that it involves thinking about what one has done after completing an activity or while one is still engaged in an activity. The usual purpose of this is to improve what one does, to develop and grow, or to find new ways of thinking or doing. Reflective practice is often thought of in concert with the idea of continuous learning. While not exclusively so, reflective practice is usually taken to be something that people engaged in professional practice might and should do. While reflective practice might occur at an unconscious level, outside of our awareness, most of the discussion about it concerns how to make it deliberate. In fact, identifying processes that might assist people to become effective reflective practitioners is a concern of a large body of literature. This entry initially examines the origins, definitions and various perspectives people have about reflective practice. It then goes on to look at what has been said about the relationship between action research and reflective practice.

Definitions

Desiderius Erasmus (1469–1536) once stated that 'reflection is a flower of the mind, giving out wholesome fragrance; but revelry is the same flower, when rank and running to seed'. The important message from Erasmus seems to be that reflection involves effort, design and purpose by being something more than idle thought. Indeed, dictionary definitions of reflection generally refer to the cognitive activity of reflection as careful thought or consideration. However, this definition does not quite capture the meaning applied to reflection by academics, educationalists and practitioners engaged in using reflection in practice. For example, Dewey defined reflective thinking as a number of phases involving a state of doubt, hesitation and mental difficulty. This results in action that will resolve the incongruity.

David Boud and his colleagues have described reflection as a process involving both emotion and cognition that results in a new understanding of a phenomenon. Don Schön, like John Dewey, saw reflective practice as thoughtful consideration of one's previous experience while connecting theory to practice. While reflection can be a quite unconscious process without purpose, most practitioners who use the term reflective practice take it to be a deliberate activity that has a method and can be taught. It is often thought as a continuous activity and, in some cases, a response to critical incidents that occur in one's life or work.

Some, however, take reflection to be somewhat more than changing what one does and include examining the deeper aspects of oneself, such as motivation, emotional response, values and beliefs. The reflective process involved in Buddhism is an obvious case in point, although this understanding of reflection is seen in more secular activities such as education,

psychology and sociology. In this conceptualization, reflection is sometimes perhaps confused with the notion of reflexivity, which involves the process of examining cause-and-effect relationships. In particular, reflexivity, as it applies to the social sciences, concerns self-referent behaviour arising out of action. Reflection is commonly and inappropriately taken to mean the same as reflexivity.

Reflective practice takes on a slightly different meaning from reflection alone. There are a number of interpretations of what reflective practice entails that will be explored in the next section. But a generic definition is that it involves practitioners using processes to examine their performance and increase personal awareness so that they create opportunities for growth and development.

Perspectives on Reflective Practice

The idea of reflection can be found in the work of the ancient philosophers. Reflection for Confucius (551–479 BC) was seen as the most noble of ways to learn wisdom. Socrates is well known for his quite famous reflection that ‘the unexamined life isn't worth living, behind every experience there is room for interpretation of the meaning of that experience’. Indeed, the Socratic method involving the use of artful questioning of another's viewpoint is a form of active reflection. Marcus Aurelius was probably engaged in reflective practice in his Meditations. The Buddhist literature is replete with references to reflection, particularly of the self, through meditation. Certainly, reflection needs to involve higher level cognitive activity. John Biggs muses that when one looks in the mirror one just gets back what one sees. Clearly, reflection needs to be more than that and should involve an improvement in what one does.

More recently than Confucius and Socrates, and with more direct reference to practice, John Dewey is perhaps the best known modern author to canvass the idea of reflection in his writings about education and the teacher. For Dewey, thinking could be either deep, and hence meaningful, leading to positive future action, or ‘idle’, where experience just passes through the mind. Dewey thought that reflection is the process that enables meaningful thought. He considered reflection to be critical to the ability to test one's beliefs and assumptions against data and other possible interpretations in a scientific and systematic way. Thus, reflection is more than an idle occupation or meditation and is deliberative in nature.

In a broader sense, Dewey thought that this process was essential in a democracy and, hence, critical in education. Thus, it is not sufficient to just be involved in an event, an intellectual bystander; it is important to be able to make sense of it. To this end, Dewey thought that either education could enhance this ability and lead to intelligent action and be positive or it could

retard growth and be negative. There are two principles to positive reflective thinking. The first of these is continuity. This is an assumption that one's experience will affect one's future, either positively or negatively. The second principle is interaction, which is the active comparison of present experience with past experience.

There are five main elements to Dewey's concept of reflective activity:

- 1.
  Suggestion making that involves coming to rapid initial solutions.
- 2.
  A conscious cognitive recognition of the complexity that the person has experienced with respect to the problem that is being solved.
- 3.
  The serial use of each suggestion as a hypothesis to guide further collection of facts.
- 4.
  The intellectual elaboration of the hypotheses or suppositions.
- 5.
  Testing the hypothesis by intentional action. These elements have been criticized because they seem to have a linear rather than dynamic quality, as if it is a method to be followed. In addition, there is no real concern with dialogue other than that which is internal to oneself. Others suggest that the role of emotion, such as doubt, needs to be included in any attempt to provide a model.

An interesting aspect of Dewey's notion of reflection is that people who are able to practise reflection have certain characteristics that these days would be seen as personality attributes. These characteristics are open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness. These are components of what are now known as the Big Five Personality Traits, which have been shown to predict behaviour.

Inspired by Dewey and Lewin, David Kolb incorporated the idea of reflection into his Experiential Learning Model. The model consists of four parts: (1) concrete experience, (2) reflection on the experience, (3) theorizing from the reflection and then (4) testing the theory. Perhaps the most well-known and greatest contributor to the notion of reflective practice, and the originator of the term, is Don Schön. Like Dewey, Schön thought that a key element of reflection is the capacity to draw on past experience that for the expert practitioner is intuitive.

This intuitive decision-making occurs at the moment one is doing something. Perhaps, the person is confronted with a problem, or something is not going well. There may be an instant

insight that there is a better way to do something, an improvement. Schön called this reflective process, ‘reflection-in-action’ that occurs spontaneously during an event.

Closely related to reflection-in-action is the concept of ‘knowing-in-action’, which was derived from Michael Polanyi's notion of tacit knowledge. Usually found in the repertoire of the expert practitioner, tacit knowledge becomes obvious only during the carrying out of a task or while solving a problem, and perhaps not even then. The problem or task is often complex and expertly done. However, articulating tacit knowledge is no easy task, requiring a high level of self-awareness.

Schön also identified a different reflective process, which he called ‘reflection-on-action’. As the name implies, this occurs after the event and is mostly a more conscious process of examining what happened. This reflection might be planned, a structured process and a part of what has more recently been called continuous improvement. In addition, Schön thought that it could occur in a quiet moment when the person starts thinking about the event. This might be stimulated by a sudden awareness that something isn't quite right or that in fact the whole experience went very well, and the mind starts to wonder why. Reflection-on-action can occur with another person, Socratic perhaps, or in a group, or it might involve writing things down. This latter process has proved to be very popular in recent times and, as we shall see later, is commonly used in action research as a reflective diary.

An extension of reflection-on-action is the notion of double-loop learning, which was described by Schön. Compared with single-loop learning, which is a reflection on what happened, double-loop learning involves examining underlying assumptions or what Schön called ‘theories-in-use’.

These processes were central to Schön's belief that practitioners can be taught how to reflect more effectively. This can occur during the Reflective Practicum, in which learners are coached by expert practitioners who demonstrate reflection-in-action. Then, a formal process is used to teach how to do reflection-on-action so that it becomes part of the practitioner's repertoire. For Schön, reflection is not just one-dimensional but a ‘ladder of reflection’. In a Socratic process, the learner and the teacher can reflect on the activity, they can experiment to test assumptions and, ultimately, they can reflect on the process of reflection.

Schön thought that in order to learn and to understand, one had to enter into an experience without any attempt to prejudge. Borrowing from Coleridge, he called this the ‘willing suspension of disbelief’. At the same time, there is a need to attend and absorb information and to participate in the experience rather than simply observe. Schön called this process ‘operative

attention’.

Applications

Reflective practice has been closely associated with the idea of lifelong learning and professional development. But it has mostly been embraced as fundamental to professional practice and professional identity. There is considerable reference to the application of reflective practice in the educational literature in particular, closely followed by nursing. Other professions, such as sport coaching, management coaching, medicine, management and consulting, for example, have also adopted reflective practice as a professional activity. Most of these applications of reflective practice have tended to take a retrospective approach rather than reflection-in-action.

In nursing, the model most often used for reflective practice is Graham Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, which was derived from Kolb's Experiential Learning Model, mentioned previously in this entry. Gibbs suggests reflection as providing an analysis of the situation and describing what happened, what thoughts and feelings were involved, what was good and bad about the experience, what could have been done differently and what would be done differently the next time. Many practitioners will recognize similarities between Gibbs' model and Reg Revans' description of Action Learning. This consists of asking questions after an event, as follows: What was planned? What actually happened? What worked? What didn't work? What would we do differently next time?

For some, this process doesn't go deep enough. Real change is thought to come from the more introspective activity that questions values and beliefs, our schema about the world. It is here that the notions of reflexivity and reflective practice become blurred. David Boud and his colleagues, in the field of education, have come close to combining the two with their three-stage model. This involves reflecting on the experience by replaying it in their mind in a descriptive and non-judgemental way, examining feelings and discharging those that are negative and then re-evaluating the experience in a new way. This latter stage consists of association (comparing new information with current knowledge), integration (making new relationships among and between data), validation and appropriation (making the new understanding one's own).

Another model used in the health field, largely with nurses, is Johns' Structured Reflection. This, as the name implies, is a very structured approach to reflection (i.e. a virtual checklist) and has the advantage of providing a framework for teaching reflective practice.

The idea of reflective practice seems intuitively sensible, and to a large extent, its advantages

are selfevident. However, this has led some commentators to reflect that there is not much in the way of evidence to support it as an activity, outside of the anecdotal. More important, there have been warnings that reflection can be poorly executed, leading to erroneous conclusions. Others even suggest that reflective practice, particularly of the more introspective kind, can be harmful to how people see themselves and, ultimately, have an emotional impact.

This is a somewhat sobering thought and supports the conclusion that there is a need for more systematic research about the effectiveness of processes that purport to develop reflective practice, the impact on people and whether or not reflective practice in fact produces any real outcomes.

Reflective Practice and Action Research

There have been arguments put, mainly by the educational community, that reflective practice often occurs without any framework or structured methodology to guide it. Action research provides such a structured framework, in which reflection is an integral part. It provides a link between action and theorizing, and reflection. At the same time, action research uses methods such as journaling, memoing, recording, storytelling and autobiographies, for example, as vehicles for undertaking reflection. The often collaborative nature of action research enhances the potential for critical reflection, usually in relation to practice.

Kurt Lewin was one of the early pioneers to discuss the merits of reflection as a scientific endeavour within the context of action research, which he first mentions in 1944. Reflection is a component of the action research spiral that is discussed in great detail throughout this encyclopedia. Within Lewin's conceptualization of action research, reflection is a purposeful, conscious activity: part of a problem-solving activity. Thus, Lewin linked thinking with action. Lewin was also interested in bringing about social change, the betterment of society, through action research, of which reflection on data and action was a part rather than an end in itself.

It was later, through the work of educationalists such as Lawrence Stenhouse and John Elliott, that action research was applied to the improvement of the practice of teachers, which could be either an individual or a group activity. In these models, the teacher is seen as a researcher on her own practice, and reflection is tied to the research process. For Elliott, action is initiated by reflection but needs to end in action. Following contemplation of the identified problem, the teacher then might try out a variety of solutions and see what happens, modifying the approach on the way. In what has been coined as educational action research, reflection takes a central role and is seen as a professional quality that needs to be learned by teachers.

For Richard Winter, reflection is not given the precedence it deserves in conceptualizations of

action research. He argues that reflection is the core activity that enables us to make sense of the world, of the evidence that we have gathered. However, he goes further to invoke the notion of reflexivity, which is required to try and explain phenomena. Reflection then is informed by reflexivity on process and theory.

Reflective practice and action research are both cyclical and concerned with improvement and creating the opportunity for change. They are both emergent with action dependent on an evaluation of what has been learned from reflection. Schön saw action research and reflection-in-action as equivalent. However, there are times when action research legitimately involves reflection-on-action as either an individual or, more often, a group activity. Elliott also sees reflective practice and action research as the one and the same.

The exact nature of both action research and reflective practice are, according to some, still relatively vague and still needing more robust conceptualization. Whether they are the same activity is also open for discussion.

- reflective practice

StewartHase

http://dx.doi.org/10.4135/9781446294406.n299
See also

- cycles of action and reflection
- Dewey, John
- educational action research
- experiential learning
- Lewin, Kurt
- practical knowing
- practitioner inquiry
- praxis

Further Readings

Boud, D., **Keogh, R.**, & **Walker, D.** (**1985**). *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. London, England: Kogan Page.

Gibbs, G. (**1988**). *Learning by doing: A guide to teaching and learning methods*. Oxford, England: Further Education Unit, Oxford Polytechnic.

Leitch, R. (**2000**). Action research and reflective practice: Toward a holistic view. *Educational*

Action Research, 8(1), 179. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09650790000200108

Osterman, K. F., & **Kottkamp, R. B.** (**1993**). *Reflective practice for educators: Improving schooling through professional development*. London, England: Sage.

Schön, D. A. (**1987**). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the profession*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.