

Critical reflection on professional practice | education



In this essay I will critically review the literature on the role of the modern educator. To this end I will consider the history of teaching and the impact of modern educational theory before defining “reflective teaching”. I will then go on to consider the ramifications of critical reflectivity at different granularities.

The concept of a “teacher” in the modern sense may have originated with the ancient Greeks. The Socratic Method set out by Plato and Xenophon encourages the learner to become an independent thinker through a process of elimination of working hypotheses. Throughout the European “dark ages” scholarly pursuits were largely the domain of the clergy, who developed the school system and the professional school educator came into being. By Victorian times, however, the role of the educator was that of an instructor who, in the spirit of John Locke, perceived children as “blank slates” onto which knowledge can be written.

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Educational theory in the 20th Century was influenced by, amongst others, Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey. It will be worth briefly reviewing their ideas.

Jean Piaget developed the notion of constructivism in which learners are considered to construct their own “ theories” of the world. Constructivism acknowledges the need to build upon and modify existing knowledge rather than simply to fill learners’ heads with knowledge.

Lev Vygotsky emphasised the importance of scaffolding for children’s cognitive development in which the sociocultural environment is internalised as knowledge is constructed. As such learning was no longer situated exclusively in the head but became an interaction between the child, peers and educators.

John Dewey endorsed Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach and highlighted the subjective nature of communal learning. He is credited with popularising socioconstructivist ideas into what became known as progressive education.

Another important influence came from cultural theory in the form of what is known as postmodernism. Postmodernism is not a theory but rather a rejection of the “ certain”. Instead, “ meaning is always in process”, and that which seems to be external reality is a cultural construct. Postmodernism

demands a shift in perspective. Derrida wrote:

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“ The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center.”

Perhaps the most important contribution of postmodernism to education, then, is the identification and questioning of underlying assumptions and a blurring of focus from naïve clarity to reflective holism.

As thinking human beings it is near-on impossible to not be reflective in an everyday sense of the word. However the term “ reflective teaching” refers to something more profound – something systematically undertaken by practitioners that “ implies flexibility, rigorous analysis and social awareness.” I will now consider how a teacher might be critically reflective at three granularities: (i) the fine-grain which occurs whilst teaching; (ii) the medium-grain which occurs retrospectively; (iii) the large-grain which considers teaching in the context of wider society.

Fine-grain reflection relates to what Schön calls “ reflection-in-action” . I interpret reflection-in-action to be a sociocultural process that is not located solely in the teacher’s head. Indeed it is a process of which the (experienced) teacher is not consciously aware. Rather, it relates to concepts such as routines, attention and making judgments. It is a subtle teaching skill that is often at odds with the fashionable notion of “ well-planned lessons”.

The long-term refinement of fine-grain reflection over time is perhaps what distinguishes the “ expert” from the “ novice” practitioner. Luntley investigated the nature of expertise which he defines as “ attention-based knowledge”. He reports on an experienced teacher in a mathematics lesson
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who drew shapes on the board and asked the class which ones were similar. She received answers that made no sense (to her) and reflected afterwards:

“ I was beginning to think: Oh God! There is something I am missing here. [Laughter] Something that is obvious to them but not obvious to me.”

The teacher then took action to resolve the issue because she:

“ recognised a mismatch between the pupils’ focus of attention and her own, and was able to interrogate this in order to respond in a way which changed the direction of the lesson, but enabled her to re-focus the pupils’ ideas.”

It is difficult to imagine how a trainee teacher might instantly improve their “ expertise” and reflect instinctively at the chalk face like this. Sheer experience seems necessary but it may be that this experience can be enhanced through systematic medium-grain reflection.

Medium-grain reflection has profound implications. Postmodernism suggests the need to be mercilessly self-critical. A consequence of this is the lack of a yardstick against which to measure progress. For example, one cannot simply reflect on how to improve test scores without reflecting that an environment engineered for passing tests may actually damage children’s learning by other standards. Similarly, one cannot simply reflect on how to reduce classroom noise levels as a way to “ improve” behaviour. Rather we must identify and reflect on the complex power relations at play in the classroom.

Given these shifting sands and the opaque nature of presuppositions, it is clear that reflective teaching at the medium grain size is no simple task.
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There is no formula or recipe to follow – rather it is therejection of such.

Practitioners’ retrospective reflection is in factan attitude that encompasses many areas. Here I will attempt to listjust a few of them.

The teacher must consider his or her own “ wholeness” in thesociocultural context of the classroom. Age, gender, ethnicity, class-background, culture, religion, political views are relevant. Similar holistic consideration must be given to the pupils. Furthermorethe classroom itself is a complex sociocultural environment demanding a holistic reflection.

The teacher must also consider the nature of the curriculum : how it isto be implemented and what is meant by learning and how we assess it. Policies and models and recipes and formulas abound, both voluntary andcompulsory (such as the 1988 Education Reform act which introduced aNational Curriculum). Reflective practice can be valuable in helpingteachers remain cool-headed amidst passing frenzies such as the currentunsubstantiated craze for “ Accelerated Learning”.

However it is no good the teacher merely being aware of thesociocultural nature of the environment, or the possible flaws in thecurriculum, as though this might vaccinate her from problems. Theentire purpose of reflective teaching is to inform practice through“ evidence-informed professional practice” such as reflective markingof pupils’ work, discussion with colleagues, classroom observations, journal keeping and so on.

Another aspect is how critical reflective practice might inform ateacher’s professional development, such as the acquisition offine-grained “

knowledge-based attention” mentioned above. Professionaldevelopment
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should be considered holistically in a wider sociocultural context as a “ process of enlightenment” that is “ a reflective and communal process”.

The next step up after school and career focused critical reflection is teachers reflecting on their role in wider society which I discuss in the following section.

Large-grain reflection refers to critically considering one’s role as a teacher within wider society. It can involve quite pragmatic issues such as joining a union, deciding how to vote and keeping an eye on political developments such as the current “ dominant managerialist ideology” in the work place.

It can also involve philosophical and ideological considerations about the future of education. During the ‘ cultural revolution’ of 1960s America many teachers (e. g. Herbert Kohl) came to reject the ideal of school altogether, imagining a future utopia in which society educates its young without institutionalisation. Other educationalists have visions of how the nature of learning might be revolutionised in an increasingly complex and technological society (e. g. Seymour Papert).

Considering that the teaching profession does not offer the greatest financial returns, working conditions or status the higher ideals are essential to me personally. Teaching must be seen as a holistic lifestyle – an attempt to “ save the world” even – to be enjoyable.

For me reflective teaching contains an inherent paradox -yet this is its strength. It is a ‘ formula for thinking’ that teaches us to reject formulae for thinking. It is an ongoing questioning and analysis at all granularities in which

our attitude should be holistic, dynamic process rather than a static set of commandments. Although critical reflection should be painful to a degree, the returns are enriching and invaluable.