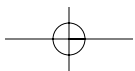
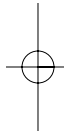
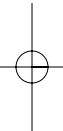


## **SECTION 1**

# **REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY**



## CHAPTER 1

# REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: AN INTRODUCTION

Chapter 1 introduces and describes reflective practice, outlining its political and social responsibility. Reflection and reflexivity are defined and explained. The particular nature of *through-the-mirror* writing is introduced, its relationship to mindfulness, and the way it can tell the truth while accepting the impossibility of objectivity.

We do not 'store' experience as data, like a computer: we 'story' it. (Winter 1988, p. 235)

You understand how to act from knowledge, but you have not yet seen how to act from not-knowing. (Chuang Tsu 1974, p. 68)

I'm no longer uncertain about being uncertain: uncertainty is now my mantra. (Reflective practice student)

**Reflection** is a state of mind, an ongoing constituent of practice, not a technique, or curriculum element. *Reflective Practice* can enable practitioners to learn from experience about themselves, their work, and the way they relate to home and work, significant others and wider society and culture. It gives strategies to bring things out into the open, and frame appropriate and searching questions never asked before. It can provide relatively safe and confidential ways to explore and express experiences otherwise difficult to communicate. It challenges assumptions, ideological illusions, damaging social and cultural biases, inequalities, and questions personal behaviours which perhaps silence the voices of others or otherwise marginalise them. *Reflective Practice* can enable enquiry into:

#### 4 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY

- what you know but do not know you know
- what you do not know and want to know
- what you think, feel, believe, value, understand about your role and boundaries
- how your actions match up with what you believe
- how to value and take into account personal feelings.

This form of reflection seems to enable practitioners to explore and experiment with areas of experience difficult otherwise to approach, such as:

- what you can change in your context; how to work with what you cannot
- how to value the perspective of others, however different they are to you
- how others perceive you, and their feelings and thoughts about events
- why you become stressed, and its impact on life and practice
- how to counteract seemingly *given* social, cultural and political structures.

*Through-the-mirror* writing is intuitive spontaneous, similar to initial drafting. Writings then inform discussion in trusted confidential forums. Reflective practitioners write for self-illumination and exploration, not to create a product.

We know a great deal more than we are aware, absorbing information unwittingly, and data we do not use and think we have forgotten, and challenging material shoved into boxes mentally labelled *do not open*. *Through-the-mirror* writing can give confidential and relatively safe access, using narrative and close and accurate observation. It enables the vital skill to use knowledge thus gained (for perceptive diagnosis for example). Constraining structures and metaphors can become clear, offering power to take more responsibility for actions.

All action is founded upon personal ethical values. We are what we do, rather than what we say we are. Yet it is hard to gain clarity about ethical values expressed in practice, far easier to *say* what we believe (espoused values). *Through-the-mirror* writing enables discovery of who and what we are in practice, and why we act as we do (for an exercise, see Bolton, 2009). This process can be unsettling (Pollner 1991) or even uneasy, leading to the uncertainty of genuine questioning, the foundation of all education. Education is about perceiving and developing our own searching questions, rather than being given answers. The search for solutions leads to yet more pertinent questions and more learning. In learning and understanding about human rights, for example, law students need to learn 'not only the practice of law. Rather it means the practice of people, their lives and the values, needs, beliefs that people hold and wish to protect, or promote, or advocate' (Hinett 2002; Williams 2002, p. 134).

*Through-the-mirror* writing can help practitioners towards perceiving and taking full responsibility. It is never good enough to say: 'I don't have time to do X', 'I did that because my senior instructed me to/it was in the protocol',

'I thought everyone did Y', 'Oh I've never thought about why I do that, or if I should!' There is much in life we are genuinely not in control of, such as birth, death, illness, accidents, and others' impingements upon ourselves (for example, a bureaucratic rule-bound manager with no interest in developing staff). We may not be in control of responsive feelings and thoughts, but we are surely responsible for our actions.

Reflection and reflexivity are essential for responsible and ethical practice, yet there have been arguments against it. One is lack of time (Copeland et al. 1993) and packed curricula taught by demotivated and over-stretched tutors (Davis 2003). Current expectations of constant activity and busyness make reflection a luxury; this, paradoxically makes it more important to point out the value of reflection (Hedberg 2009). Reflection and reflexivity can be seen as threats to position or status in organisations, where such practices are often impeded by prescriptive meetings with a low level of engagement, high role-based demarcated and political dimension, high degree of threat and task orientation (Heel et al. 2006).

Reflective practice leading to change and development only happens in learning organisations (Gould 2004), with supportive mechanisms of coach, mentor or facilitator (Gray 2007), and not when top-down, organisational visions are imposed leading to compliance (Senge 1992). Effectively facilitated reflective and reflexive professional development is amply repaid however, as practitioners take decisions more accurately and quickly by drawing upon effective trustworthy intuition (Cartwright 2004). And organisations gain from workplace reflection because critically reflective practitioners have increased morale, commitment to clients, openness to multiple perspectives and creative innovative non-dichotomous solutions, and clearer boundaries (Fook 2002). Reflection on the part of professional evaluators is also crucial, given the inherently politicised and value-based nature of evaluation, and the need for critical monitoring of bias (Clark/Keefe 2007).

Reflective practice which genuinely affects practitioners' lives, and those around them, needs confident experienced teaching and facilitating. Students or employees required to write journals and accounts of practice without being inducted and facilitated well are likely to experience feelings of helplessness, frustration and eventual burnout (Gray 2007), be resistant (Bulpitt and Martin 2005), negative (Hobbs 2007), or even 'angry, challenged, threatened, demoralized, shocked, and put off by the *leap into the unknown*' (Trelfa 2005, p. 206), and they might focus merely on technical skills (Truscott and Walker 1998), or write safely and hypothetically about themes rather than specific experiences (Clarke 1998). Leadership development students in business environments often block reflection due to negative 'mindsets' (Smith 2001) if appropriate educational environments are not created, and tuition offered. There are no half measures: if organisations want reflective reflexive practitioners they need to pay in time and facilitation.

## 6 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY

Creating this environment can be complex and perplexing, and managerialism will always be a significant block to practitioner critical reflection (Heel et al. 2006; Redmond 2006). The most effective education has never been easy, as any reader of Socrates (Plato)'s dialogues knows. Good facilitation can lead to: '83% of the professionals with whom I had worked within the reflective teaching model considered that, over two years after the end of the course, they were significantly more confident of being able to introduce change within their organisation' (Redmond 2006, p. xii).

Change and development take time, energy and commitment. Instructional how-to and information-giving can seem to give instant 'results' making reflective practice seem 'soft and unquantifiable' (Regan 2008, p. 219), 'self-indulgent' (Bulman and Schutz 2008).

Instruction resulting in neatly ticked competencies is tidier, less demanding than challenging students and practitioners to question the very roots of their practice, themselves as practitioners, and significantly critique their organisations. According to Groom and Maunonen-Eskelinen, narrative exploration and reflective practice are more used and valued in teacher education in Finland than in the UK, where development of competencies is valued more highly. European teacher training is less inhibited in promoting reflective practice as liberating force than in the UK (Groom and Maunonen-Eskelinen 2006).

### Write to learn

---

This third edition not only clearly and thoroughly explains *what* reflective practice and reflexivity are and *why* they are essential, it also clearly and straightforwardly demonstrates *how* to start and develop, *with whom*, *when* and *where*. In this book you will discover how to *write to learn* as well as *learn to write*. *Reflective Practice* offers practical and theorised methods for understanding and grasping authority over actions, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and professional identity in professional, cultural and political contexts. It suggests processes for critical reflection upon the forms, values and ethics of institutional organisations and structures in which professionals work. This critique can result in radical movements for change. Most training and post-experience courses include elements of reflective practice and reflexivity. Danger lies in it being a separated curriculum element, however: it is a foundational attitude to life and work, not a set of exercises.

A paradox is that systems require reflective practice as curricula or professional development element. Since its nature is essentially personally, politically and socially unsettling, it lays open to question anything taken for granted. Enquiry-based education, 'education for creativity, innovativeness, adaptability, ease with difference and comfortableness with change ... [is] education for instability' (Reid and O'Donohue 2004, p. 561).

Smooth-running social, political and professional systems run on the well-oiled cogs of stories we construct, and connive at being constructed around us. Welcoming of diversity can be mere window dressing. Effective reflective practice and reflexivity are transgressive of stable and controlling orders; they lead cogs to decide to change shape, change place, even reconfigure whole systems.

The structures in which our professional and personal roles, values and everyday lives are embedded are complex and volatile. Power is subtle and slippery; its location is often different from how it appears. Reflection and reflexivity for development involve:

- recognizing *authority* over and *responsibility* for personal and professional identity, values, action, feelings
- *contestation* of lack of diversity, imbalance of power, the blocking capability of managerialism, and so on
- willingness to stay with *uncertainty*, unpredictability, doubt, questioning.

The route is through spirited enquiry leading to constructive developmental change and personal and professional integrity based on deep understandings. It is *creative, illuminative, dynamic, self-affirming*. Academic study has lost its suppressive attitude to artistry (Glaze 2002). ‘Any dinosaurian beliefs that “creative” and “analytical” are contradictory and incompatible modes are standing in the path of a meteor; they are doomed for extinction’ (Richardson and St Pierre 2005, p. 962). People only learn and develop when happy and benefiting personally. The route is not through angry confrontation: such revolution leads to destructive cycles of action and reaction. Yet it is not a thornless rose bed, as any dynamic process.

Einstein ([1929] 2002) was successful partly because he doggedly and constantly asked questions with seemingly obvious answers. Childlike, he asked why? how? what?, rather than accepting givens or taken for granted. He ‘love[d] the *questions themselves* like locked rooms’, and certainly ‘*live[ed]* the questions’ (Rilke [1934] 1993, p. 35). Stories make sense of ourselves and our world. This world and our lives within it are complex and chaotic: seemingly governed by forces not only beyond our control, but beyond our understanding. We tell and retell episodes both minor and major to colleagues, loved ones, therapists and priests, strangers on the train, a wedding guest (Coleridge [1834] 1978). A dynamic way of grasping understanding, it prevents us being pawns in events seemingly beyond our control. The danger is that story making can merely be tucking ourselves securely under a quilt patchworked out of safe and self-affirming accounts: our stories can only too easily be essentially uncritical. Or, even worse, they are censoring tools: ‘cover stories’ (Sharkey 2004). This self-protectiveness can ensure our stories do not explore sensitive issues, but are expressions of what we feel comfortable with, or would like to be.

## 8 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY

Knowing what to reflect upon out of the whole of one's professional experience is not a clear process. The more it is focused upon, the more the truly important issues become elusive. It can become like looking for Piglet: 'It was still snowing as [Pooh Bear] stumped over the white forest track, and he expected to find Piglet warming his toes in front of the fire, but to his surprise he found that the door was open, and the more he looked inside the more Piglet wasn't there' (Milne [1928] 1958, p. 163). Milne's Winnie-the-Pooh stories are celebrated because they express natural philosophy. Here Milne says in simple terms how the more we look for something important the more it is not there. Only with the courage to stop *looking* and trust the reflective and reflexive processes, will we begin to perceive the areas we need to tackle. Discovering what needs to be reflected upon, and how, can be an exhilarating journey. Insights gained and inevitable changes seem obvious afterwards. Although reflective practice has become a standard in initial and continuing professional education and development, it is often elusive to curriculum planners. *Through-the-mirror* writing is an educational approach which makes the difference between 20 years of experience and one year of experience repeated 20 times.

*Through-the-mirror* writing uses an intuitive spontaneous form, the way a novelist or journalist writes their first draft. The writings then inform discussion in trusted confidential forums. Reflective practitioners write in order to learn: a self-illuminatory and exploratory process, rather than one focused upon creating a product.

Writings often focus on *non-critical* incidents, or perhaps *non-critical* aspects of such events. Insight is gained by allowing reflective and reflexive processes to light upon and enlighten that which most needs examination. These areas might be simple daily habitual actions, rather than 'critical'. Or actions hitherto unnoticed because focusing upon them is more problematic, often for unexamined reasons. 'Critical' incidents, described by Brookfield (1990, p. 84) as 'vividly remembered events', such as giving the wrong vaccine because they had been stored higgledy-piggledy in the fridge, will inevitably be examined. The events we 'forget' most need reflection, and give rise to the deepest reflexivity: 'we need to attend to the untold' (Sharkey 2004). Jonathan Miller said 'it is a passionate, almost religious belief of mine that it is in the negligible that the considerable is to be found ... The unconsidered is deeply considerable'. A human resource development exercise is writing what you *do not* remember (Goldberg 1991; Joy-Matthews et al. 2004). Plato, who said 'the life without examination is no life' (Plato 2000, p. 315), reckoned education is finding pathways to what we do not know we know.

This is probably a return to the original meaning of *critical incident*: critical processes are brought to bear upon what might have been a routine or typical event, rather than the event itself being critical. A problem has arisen with the term, leading many reflective practitioner students to think they must focus



upon the dramatic, disturbing or otherwise seemingly significant. We need to be critical *about* incidents.

Reflective practice and reflexivity are states of mind, an ongoing constituent of practice, not a technique, or curriculum element, but a pedagogical approach which should 'pervade the curriculum' (Fanghanel 2004, p. 576): the pearl grit in the oyster of practice and education. To be effective they need dynamic methods. The method of travel affects what happens along the way and the destination. A medical student commented: 'we spend so much time studying medicine we never have time to study sick people'. Reid and O'Donohue (2004) argue that enquiry-based learning (a form of reflective practice) should become the organising logic of entire teacher education programmes, with students learning *through* enquiry rather than being prepared *for* enquiry. Curricula need shaking up, and more enquiry-based methods introduced. *Curriculum* is Latin for race course (Rome's oval Piazza Navona was one): perhaps we need to progress from chasing each other and ourselves round a set track.

A story is an attempt to create order and security out of a chaotic world; strong stories have unique power to make sense of issues (Weick 1995). Stories penetrate human understanding more deeply than the intellect: they engage feelings. All learning involves emotion as well as cognitive engagement. 'Reflection without passion is meaningless' (Gully 2004, p. 314). But for our experiences to develop us – socially, psychologically, spiritually – our world must be made to appear strange. We, and our students, must be encouraged to examine our story-making processes critically: to create and re-create fresh accounts of our lives from different perspectives, different points of view.

We must rewrite our stories to question assumptions about our own actions, intentions and values, and every taken for granted about others, particularly those with less power (patients, students, less dominant colleagues), and every unthought-through acceptance of the status quo, even that seemingly written in stone. And we must elicit and listen to the responses of peers. Listening critically to the stories of those peers also enables developmental learning from their experience. It is the exploration of experience, knowledge, values, identity that matters, rather than any attempt to arrive at a 'true' account (Doyle 2004).

Important knowledge about reality always comes out of [writing] ... through a ... transformation of reality by imagination and the use of words ... When you succeed in creating something different out of ... experience, you also achieve the possibility of communicating something that was not evident before ... But you cannot plan this transmission of knowledge. (Llosa 1991, p. 79)

Postulating what other actors might have thought and felt, empathising with them and the situation, as well as imaginatively reconstructing the situation in

## 10 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY

fresh ways, offers understandings and insights as no other process can. For example, a practitioner can retell a story from the point of view of students or clients, reconstruct it with the genders of the actors reversed, or create a satisfactory ending in place of a horrible one.

Effective reflective practice and reflexivity meet the paradoxical need both to tell and retell our stories in order for us to feel secure enough, and yet critically examine our actions, and those of others, in order to increase our understanding of ourselves and our practice, and *develop dynamically*.

### What's in a name?

---

The term *reflective practice* is not a terribly useful one. The metaphor it embodies is limited: a mirror reflection is merely the image of an object directly in front of it, faithfully reproduced back to front. What is the reflection of shit? Shit.

*Through-the-mirror*, however, is a creative adventure right through the glass to the other side of the silvering. Such reflective practice can take us out of our own narrow range of experience and help us to perceive experiences from a range of viewpoints and potential scenarios. It can do this by harnessing a vital human drive – to create stories about our lives, and communicate them.

The mirror image model of reflection suggests a *me out there* practising in the big world, and a reflected *me in here* in my head thinking about it. This model is located in unhelpful modernist duality: *this* as opposed to *that*, *in* and *out*, *here* and *there*. An ancient Zen Buddhist text tells us:

You must first forsake the dualities of: self and others, interior and exterior, small and large, good and bad, delusion and enlightenment, life and death, being and nothingness. (Tsai Chi Chung 1994, p. 95)

The word *reflection* has static connotations, meaning ‘the action of turning [back] or fixing the thoughts on some subject’ (*Oxford English Dictionary*), with the associated definition of the reversed reproduction of an image. *Reflective practice* is purposeful, not the musing one slips into while driving home, which can be as dynamic as *rumination*, a sheep chewing smelly cud. I have a cartoon of a sheep nose to nose with the reflection of herself and the surrounding meadow. She’s saying: ‘I’m sure the grass is greener in the mirror, but whenever I try to reach it, this ugly ewe bars the way and butts me on the nose.’ The ‘ugly ewe’ is of course herself reflected. We need intensive explorative and expressive methods in order not just to be confronted by our own ‘ugly ewe’ reflection. We need to get beyond a notion that to reflect is self-indulgently (or painfully critically) thinking about ourselves. Isolating the

pawn of myself to reflect upon away from the chess game is not helpful. It *is* helpful to reflect in order to locate the white pawn which is me, clearly, boldly and *critically* within the four-dimensional chess game of my life and work.

The *through-the-mirror* reflective practice writing model involves wide potential interactions, opens up developmental reflexive and reflective space. 'Reflection is the central dynamic in intentional learning, problem-solving and validity testing through rational discourse' (Mezirow 1981, p. 4). Yes, true, but there is an awful lot more than just the 'rational' for us to explore.

Professionals can be enabled to think and discourse *way beyond the rational* using the methods outlined in the following chapters. They can explore the wide and rather perplexing other side of reflection, questioning everything, turning their world inside out, outside in and back to front.

### **Reflective practice: a political and social responsibility**

---

Practitioners need to take responsibility for all their own actions and values, and their share of responsibility for the political, social and cultural situations within which they live and work. Reflective practice can fall into the trap of becoming only confession. Confession can be a conforming mechanism, despite sounding liberating, freeing from a burden of doubt, guilt and anxiety (Bleakley 2000b). Confession has a seductive quality because it passes responsibility to others.

The desire to hold an audience with a 'glittering eye' (Coleridge [1834] 1978) is strong. Jennifer Nias, a researcher into the experience of women teachers (Nias and Aspinwall 1992), noted with surprise that all her potential interviewees were keen to tell their autobiographies at length. People always are, but they do not want their stories questioned: *this* is the role of reflective practice.

Reflective practice is more than an examination of personal experience; it is located in the political and social structures which are increasingly hemming professionals in (Goodson 2004). Their right to make moral and professional judgements is being eroded; they are being reduced to technicians, their skills to mere technical competencies. Practitioners are increasingly under pressure to perform, to have 'strong and stable personalities and to be able to tolerate complexity', are pushed destructively and distortingly by obsessive goals and targets in a masculine culture of assertiveness and competitiveness (Garvey et al. 2009, pp. 97, 153, 217). A supported process which allows, encourages even, doubt and uncertainty paradoxically gives them strength in the face of such attempts to control. In order to retain political and social awareness and activity, professional development work needs to be rooted in the public and the political as well as the private and the personal.

## 12 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY

To this end, examinations of practice need to be undertaken alongside open discussions with peers on pertinent issues, an examination of texts from the larger field of work and politics, and discussions with colleagues from outside practitioners' own milieu. Reflective practice work can then become politically, socially as well as psychologically useful, rather than a mere *quietist* navel-gazing exercise. It supports, demands even, practitioners thinking about values. Stephen Pattison et al.'s experience is similar: if we had asked people to talk about their values in abstract terms, we would have received generalised responses. By asking them to tell [write] stories about important experiences, we were able to see something of how values reveal themselves in a complex, varied and shifting way in practice (1999b, p. 6).

Values in practice are rarely analysed or questioned. Espoused values (those readily stated as being foundational to practice) are recognised and routinely stated both by organisations and individuals. Through reflexive practice professionals realise dissonance between their own values in practice and their espoused values, or those of their organisation, leading them to make dynamic change. This might not be easy, particularly if they realise an action, or an aspect of their organisation has been (or is) against their own ethical code, or that they are in an untenable but unalterable situation (Rowland 2000). Examining such fundamental areas requires a supportive, confidential, carefully facilitated environment.

Goodson creates a distinction between *life stories* and *life history*. The latter is the former plus appropriate and challenging data from a wide range of sources, and evidence of vital discussion with colleagues. 'The life history pushes the question of whether private issues are also public matters. The life story individualises and personalises; the life history contextualises and politicises' (1998, p. 11). In a similar process (*currere*, coined by Pinar 1975; Grumet 1981) education postgraduate students *play* with the method (Gough 1998).

Gomez et al. (2000, p. 744) found how education students' reflection was unchallenging and non-risk-taking, because they only wrote personal narratives of their classroom teaching, from their own point of view: 'The nature of personal stories as ones that people actually lived limited the ways in which they could be interrogated. Questioning the viewpoint resulting from an event in someone's life was tantamount to challenging her overall integrity.' Future student narratives will be written from multiple perspectives, enabling challenge and insight. Medical students write from the point of view of patients (Engel et al. 2008).

Cartoons in another study offered a 'playfully ironic dimension for intensifying the process of critical reflexivity' (Cavallaro-Johnson 2004, p. 423). Visual images, which allow subtexts to appear unwittingly, enabled the autobiographical stories to be critical, examining values in practice for

example, preventing them from being merely confessional. I would argue that a range of different forms of text, such as from different points of view, can similarly offer layers of unwitting subtext for critical review.

Trainee cognitive therapists reported a 'deeper sense of knowing' of cognitive therapy (CT) as a result of reflective practice writing (Bennett-Levy et al. 2003, p. 145). 'The written reflections are, in my view, crucial to the process, enabling trainees to look in depth at the implications for themselves, for their clients, and for cognitive theory' (ibid. p. 205).

School students are encouraged to write reflectively too. Science students 'write to learn ... to help acquire a personal ownership of ideas conveyed in lectures and textbooks ... [which] promotes the production of new knowledge by creating a unique reflective environment for learners engaged in scientific investigation' (Keys 1999, pp. 117, 119). Phye (1997) reports school students similarly writing reflective portfolios. Kim (1999) reports a highly supported model: nurses write and share descriptive narratives in interview with a researcher, developing depth of description and reflexive and reflective critique.

## Reflection and reflexivity: demystification

---

*Through-the-mirror* writing enables both reflection and reflexivity. There is a clear distinction between the two.

*Reflection* is learning and developing through examining what we think happened on any occasion, and how we think others perceived the event and us, opening our practice to scrutiny by others, and studying data and texts from the wider sphere.

Reflection is an in-depth consideration of events or situations outside of oneself: solitarily, or with critical support. The reflector attempts to work out what happened, what they thought or felt about it, why, who was involved and when, and what these others might have experienced and thought and felt about it. It is looking at whole scenarios from as many angles as possible: people, relationships, situation, place, timing, chronology, causality, connections, and so on, to make situations and people more comprehensible. This involves reviewing or reliving the experience to bring it into focus. Seemingly innocent details might prove to be key; seemingly vital details may be irrelevant.

Reflection involves reliving and re-rendering: who said and did what, how, when, where, and why. Reflection might lead to insight about something not noticed in time, pinpointing perhaps when the detail was missed.

*Reflexivity* is finding strategies to question our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and habitual actions, to strive to understand our complex roles in relation to others. To be reflexive is to

#### 14 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY

examine, for example, how we – seemingly unwittingly – are involved in creating social or professional structures counter to our own values (destructive of diversity, and institutionalising power imbalance for example). It is becoming aware of the limits of our knowledge, of how our own behaviour plays into organisational practices and why such practices might marginalise groups or exclude individuals. And it is understanding how we relate with others, and between us shape organisational realities’ shared practices and ways of talking. Thus, we recognise we are active in shaping our surroundings, and begin critically to take circumstances and relationships into consideration rather than merely reacting to them, and help review and revise ethical ways of being and relating (Cunliffe 2009b).

To be reflexive involves thinking from within experiences, or as the *Oxford English Dictionary* puts it ‘turned or reflected back upon the mind itself’. This feels like a pretty difficult contortion: hence the need for innovative illuminative methods, like the *through-the-mirror* model recommended in these pages. A reflexive-minded practitioner will ask themselves, why did this pass me by: where was my attention directed at that time? Reflexivity is: ‘What are the mental, emotional and value structures which allowed me to lose attention and make that error?’ This deep questioning is missed out if the practitioner merely undertakes reflection as practical problem-solving: what happened, why, what did I think and feel about it, how can I do it better next time?

Reflexivity is making aspects of the self strange: focusing close attention upon *one’s own* actions, thoughts, feelings, values, identity, and their effect upon others, situations, and professional and social structures. The reflexive thinker has to stand back from belief and value systems, habitual ways of thinking and relating to others, structures of understanding themselves and their relationship to the world, and their assumptions about the way that the world impinges upon them. This can only be done by somehow becoming separate in order to look at it as if from the outside: not part of habitual experience processing, and not easy. Strategies are required such as internal dialogue, and the support of others. This critical focus upon beliefs, values, professional identities, and how they affect and are affected by the surrounding cultural structures, is a highly responsible social and political activity.

Reflexivity involves coming as close as possible to an awareness of the way I am experienced and perceived by others. It is being able to stay with personal uncertainty, critically informed curiosity as to how others perceive things as well as how I do, and flexibility to consider changing deeply held ways of being. The role of a trusted other, such as a supervisor or peer-reader of an account, is vital.

Reflexivity is a *stance* of being able to locate oneself in the picture, to appreciate how one’s own self influences [actions]. Reflexivity is potentially more complex than being reflective, in that the potential for understanding the myriad

ways in which one's own presence and perspective influence the knowledge and actions which are created is potentially more problematic than the simple searching for implicit theory. (Fook 2002, p. 43)

A definition of reflective practice is that it 'is designed to facilitate identification, examination, and modification of the theories-in-use that shape behaviour'. It is a process of professional development which 'requires change in deeply held action theories' (Osterman and Kottkamp 2004, pp. 13–14). In order to create a clear and straightforward method, readily adapted to classrooms and individual portfolios, this book does not differentiate between reflection and reflexivity. The *through-the-mirror* method enables a reflexive and reflective journey without analysing which is taking place at any one time (though this could readily be done if required).

## Mindfulness

---

An invaluable approach, mindfulness, a conscious exclusion of other elements of life, apart from that which is being attended to (Johns 2004), is achieved when senses and awareness are tuned into present action: the opposite of multi-tasking (Epstein 1999). Being mindfully aware develops accurate observation, communication, ability to use implicit knowledge in association with explicit knowledge, and insight into others' perceptions. Frank speaks of *practical wisdom*, from Aristotle: '*Phronesis* is the opposite of acting on the basis of scripts and protocols; those are for beginners, and continuing reliance on them can doom actors to remain beginners' (2004, p. 221).

The observation skills and awareness required of a reflective writer develop mindfulness, and are developed by it. Both require an acute focus upon what is happening at any time. Being fully conscious of actions can also enable awareness of their likely or possible outcomes, and therefore the appropriateness of the intended action. Mindfulness resembles reflection-before-action, which Wilson (2008) considers has immense value: for example it might have prevented the abuse and death of Victoria Climbié (Knott and Scragg 2007). Doctor-writer Verghese exhorts: 'We should be ministers for healing [and educating], storytellers, storymakers, and players in the greatest drama of all: the story of our patients' [students' or clients'] lives as well as our own' (2001, p. 1016).

Ours is an age of anxiety, tension, hyperactivity (multi-tasking, hot-desking, hitting the ground running), an era of inflated public emotion (a sea of flowers for a dead princess, road rage, televised war-torn victims). There is little reflective, reflexive, or simply mentally absent space allowed: 'A poor life this if, full of care, / We have no time to stand and stare (William Henry Davies). We have lost even more than Davies's everyday consciousness of 'squirrels'

## 16 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY

and 'streams full of stars, like skies at night'. It is loss of professional agency and responsibility, because we are unaware of things of which we so need to be aware.

An example: Sam, a midwife, brought a furious account of an angry mother she had attended as a National Health Service (NHS) midwife: 'stupid, hostile upper-middle-class bitch who felt she had the right to boss me around, tell me what to do'. The birth had been exhausting and disastrous for both mother and midwife: Sam still felt bitter 25 years later. The reflective practice group offered insight and comparative cases, and suggested Sam wrote an account from the mother's perspective.

The following week saw a very different Sam: 'I don't know exactly what was wrong, but I do know, having relived it from this mother's point of view, that she was upset and confused. Because I saw her as a stupid, middle-class bitch who thought she could have everything she wanted her way, I never listened to her properly. I think I'll see demanding mothers in a different way in future.'

### Telling the truth?

---

The narratives we tell and write are perspectival. Looking in through a window at experience objectively to reflect on it from outside is impossible. To be objective is to be 'not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering or representing facts; impartial, detached' (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Humans, however open about themselves and their practice, can only perceive and understand from their own viewpoint, broad and empathic and professional as that might be. 'We don't see things as they are, we see them as we are' (Nin, quoted in Epstein 1999, p. 834).

Individual perspectives, values and understanding can be widened and deepened. One can look on the glass and only see one's self reflected, or through it to whatever is the other side as in George Herbert's poem: 'A man that looks on glass, / on it may stay his eye; / or, if he pleaseth, through it pass, / and then the heav'n espy.' Lewis Carroll's Alice does even better: she crawls right through the looking-glass, leaving her stuffy Victorian rule-bound world, entering a world in which everything 'was as different as possible', things are 'all alive' (Carroll [1865] 1954, p. 122), where dynamic connections are made between divergent elements.

A creative leap is required to support widening and deepening of perspective, and the effective ability to mix tacit knowledge with evidence-based or explicit knowledge. The professional arena can be opened up to observation and reflection through the lens of artistic scrutiny. We are still anchored to our own perspective, but these perspectives will be artistically and critically widened. We cannot really pass through the mirror's silvering,



and can inevitably reflect only upon ourselves, our own thoughts and experiences. Artistic processes such as writing can, however, enable a harnessing of, for example, material such as memories which we do not know we remember, and greater access into the possible thoughts and experiences of others. The perspectival nature of such writing is acknowledged (that is, they do not purport to be objective or true), and many of the skills used are those of literature.

Professional writers are being heard clearly, both students (for example, Charon 2006; Gomez et al. 2000) and practitioners (Charon 2006; Clough 2002; Helman 2006; Loughran 2004). Samuel Shem says fiction writing has been an essential way of humanising medicine (2002; see further *Annals of Internal Medicine: Physician-Writers Reflection* series).

Writers acutely observe small details and subtle nuances of behaviour and situations. A teacher- or clinician-writer observes details missed by good observant teachers or clinicians (see Charon 2004, 2006). Try it. Observe a student or client walking into your practice place. Capture on paper how they hold themselves, breathe, move their limbs, their characteristic gestures and sayings. What do they remind you of – a cat? A soft deep armchair? A locked filing cabinet?

A writer has the unparalleled privilege also of entering into the life of another. That this person is a character on a page does not make it any less of a insight-creating privilege. Deep understandings can be gained by entering (virtually) another's feeling, thinking, perception and memories. This is writing beyond what you know, and has to be: if you know where writing is going to take you, start at that known point, and write on into the unknown. Try it. Take the person you have just described. Write the conversation they might have had on returning home that night. Remember this is an artistic exercise: do not think about it, let your hand do the writing, free of your normal controlling thought processes. If you add in something about how they got home, where they live or drink, you really are allowing your imagination to take you through the glass. You tap into latent understandings which have possibly not been so fully exercised before.

This is fiction; the writing has been invented imaginatively: it removes the straitjacket of *what really happened*. Writers are therefore free to draw deeply upon their imagination and aesthetic sense, and upon their intuitive knowledge of social and human areas such as relationships, motives, perspective, cause and effect, ethical issues and values.

You bring what you understand and think about this person into the forefront of your mind. It matters not a jot that you do not depict what actually happened, or what your student or client really thought. Medical students write patients' illness stories in the voice and vernacular of the patient, imaginatively and vicariously entering patients' contexts. They 'become the other' through creative writing (Engel et al. 2002, p. 32, 2008).

## 18 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY

It is not quiddity we seek – the real nature or essence of a thing – but our experience of it.

Sharing this writing with a colleague can offer effective reflection upon understandings. Rewrite with the fresh insight gained. And perhaps a colleague, also present at the encounter with the patient, might write an account. Reading each other's account will offer the different perspectives from which you unwittingly work.

This method of reflection does not jeopardise professional accuracy of perception (Mattingley 2000). Neither does it impose distorted interpretations about patients (Garro and Mattingley 2000) because its purpose is to explore and express what is already there in clinicians' and educators' understanding and perception. It brings this to the fore to be reflected upon critically and effectively. It also brings to the forefront of attention the perspectival nature of our perception. No one can know *what really happened* in any situation. Perhaps it might become clear that the doctor understood the patient very differently from the nurse, or the teacher might think and write one thing today, reflect upon it perhaps with peer(s), and write something different tomorrow, their perception enhanced by the writing and discussions. Such a collection of stories can build up a composite picture, and what was thought and felt – getting as close as possible to *what really happened*.

Kevin Marsden, a special-school teacher, and Master's in Education reflective practice student, tells a classroom story:



### Malcolm

One morning we were doing number work. Malcolm was struggling to recognise sets of two. He was troubled by the book in front of him and sat slumped on an elbow.

I had one of those 'bright ideas' teachers tend to get. Let's make it more practical. 'Malcolm,' I said. 'Look at Darren. How many eyes has he got?'

Malcolm looked at Darren. Pointing with his finger he slowly counted in his deep voice, 'One ... two'.

'Good, well done,' I said. 'Now look at Debbie, how many eyes has she got?'

Pointing carefully again Malcolm intoned slowly, 'One ... two'.

'That's great, Malcolm, now look at Tony, count his eyes.'

'One ... two.' Let's take this a step further, I said smugly to myself.

'Now Malcolm, look at Matthew. Without counting can you tell me how many eyes he has got?'

Malcolm looked at me as if I had gone mad. 'OK that's fine Malcolm, you just count them like you did the others.'

Relieved he slowly repeated his methodical counting: 'One ... two'.

There is a magical moment in teaching, when the penny drops, the light goes on, the doors open. Success is achieved. I was starting to worry. We weren't getting there!

'Malcolm, how many eyes has Naheeda got?' Malcolm counted slowly, as if it was the first pair of eyes he had ever seen. 'One ... two'.

'Good, you're doing really well.'

We carried on round the class. Eager faces looked up to have their eyes counted. I was growing desperate as we ran out of children. Was I leading Malcolm on an educational wild-goose chase? Were we pursuing an idea that was not yet ready to be caught?

The last pair of eyes was counted. 'One ... two.' The finger carefully went from eye to eye. There was only me left. 'Malcolm,' I said, trying to hide my desperation, 'how many eyes have I got?' Malcolm studied my face carefully. He looked long and hard at my eyes. I waited expectantly in the silence. His brow furrowed. Finally he spoke.

'Take your glasses off.' (Kevin Marsden)

Kevin read this to his established sub-group of five teachers. They trusted and felt confidence and respect for each other's professional abilities and views. Kevin was able to share his frustrations and sense of failure; the group learned about the methods, joys and problems of special-school teaching. They were able to explore the probability that Malcolm had had a different understanding of his task than did Kevin. Possibly Malcolm thought he was to count the eyes, rather than 'guess' how many each had. To do this he would have had to ask for spectacles to be removed so he could see clearly. The situation of a mismatch between a teacher's intentions and a child's understanding must happen so often.

### **Why reflective practice now?**

The grand stories of patriarchy/patriotism, religion, family and community no longer bind society. We look to counsellors, psychologists, teachers, clerics, police, life partners, general practitioners (GPs) or social workers for essential support. Marriages founder and professionals increasingly experience stress as they now bear the burden previously carried by a nexus of local and family community.

Faith in that great god science has also been shaken: 'Science, in my view, is now at the end of certainty' (Prigogine 1999, p. 26). There has been a powerful frontier (boundary) between science (and scientific professions like medicine) and the arts since the Enlightenment. A blinkered view of what constitutes knowledge and experience cannot be held for much longer.

## 20 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY

The assumption that an objective view of the world (Kantian) is ‘grown-up’, that we should shed our subjective view along with sand and water play, is being questioned (see also Sacks 1985, pp. 1–21). Paul Robertson (Director of the Medici String Quartet) supports this argument from the artistic perspective: ‘If any of us are out of touch with any part of ourselves we are in an impoverished state. The dominant culture is scientific, but the scientist who concentrates on this side of themselves exclusively is as impoverished as is the musician or writer who concentrates only on the artistic’ (Robertson 1999).

An ethnographer can no longer stand on a mountain top from which authoritatively to map human ways of life (Clifford 1986). Clinicians cannot confidently diagnose and dictate from an objective professional or scientific standpoint; teachers do not know answers; lawyers do not necessarily know what is right and what wrong. The enmeshment of culture and environment is total: no one is objective.

‘Since the seventeenth century, Western science has excluded certain expressive modes from its legitimate repertoire: rhetoric (in the name of “plain” transparent signification), fiction (in the name of fact), and subjectivity (in the name of objectivity). The qualities eliminated from science were localised in the category of “literature”’ (Clifford 1986, p. 102). These categories have returned from that 300 year marginal position, to be embedded alongside the scientific approach.

Holistic coherent understandings which might support us out of our alienated mess are increasingly entertained. ‘We now see the world as *our* world, rather than *the* world’ (Reason 1988, p. 28). Complementary healing considers our wholeness, not just within ourselves, but also within our environment and community. ‘We seek a knowing-in-action (and thinking-in-action) which encompasses as much of our experience as possible’ (Reason 1988, p. 30).

Ideal professionals, gathering data on which to base their pedagogy diagnosis or care, are like social anthropologists. Geertz suggested that successful ethnographers create a ‘thick description’: a web of ‘sort of piled-up structures of inference and implication through which the ethnographer is continually trying to pick his way’ ([1973] 1993, p. 7). The reflective practice writer who explores and experiments with different writing approaches, using whatever seems appropriate at the time, is like Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur* (1966). This knotted nexus has then to be understood and interpreted to some degree: ‘a good interpretation of anything – a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society – takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation’ (Geertz [1973] 1993, p. 7). An effective reflective practitioner attempts to understand the heart of their practice. Understandings gained in this way, however, are always partial; the deeper the enquiry, the enquirer realises the less they know and understand: *the more you know, the more you know you do not know*. Geertz also stresses that it is vital not to generalise across cases but

within them. Having got somewhere near the heart of clients' or students' stories and poetry, practitioners can begin to act upon this understanding.

Professionals writing about their work, sharing it with colleagues in order to offer insight, and relating this to a wider field professionally and politically, are together engaged in an activity rather like Reason's *co-operative enquiry method*, in which researcher and subject collaborate in all the stages of research, including reflecting on the experience and making sense of it (Reason 1988). The practitioner takes a full share of responsibility. There is a similarity with heuristic research (Etherington 2004; Moustakas 1990). All too often professionals act in the mould of traditional researcher; acting *on* people: collecting data, and coming to conclusions in camera.

'In this way, it may be possible to avoid providing care which is dry, barren and – perhaps the greatest sin of all – unimaginative' (Smyth 1996, p. 937). *Through-the-mirror* writing can enable care or education which is alert and alive to the client's or student's needs and wants, whether professed or not. It can enable the practitioner to use their skill, knowledge and experience creatively and lovingly, and look forward with a greater confidence.

Angela Mohtashemi, management consultant, shares reflective writing experience:



As I help organisations become more effective through better communication and engagement with their employees, I introduce reflective writing wherever I can as a tool for teamwork, learning and development and coaching. The workplace is a tough, manipulative environment where people are often expected to comply without challenge, to 'live the company's values', to 'display the right behaviours' and even to adopt the corporate language. One's sense of self can become fragile and this limits potential. Whenever I have used writing with groups or individuals they have commented on the sense of liberation and the feeling that they are getting to the heart of things.

Sometimes I have run workshops or team sessions specifically to explore reflective writing, sometimes incorporate it into other situations. A writing activity, such as writing about your name, can be a great icebreaker. I recently ran a session on writing for personal and organisational development as part of a leadership course my firm runs jointly with a university business school. The session incorporated learning theory, my own experience, principles of reflective writing and practical activities. These activities were typical of the techniques I use and included free writing and using unfamiliar imagery to look at the daily work experience.

Free writing, although very simple, fulfils many purposes and is often a revelation to people. A number of participants went to their action learning sets

*(Continued)*

## 22 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY

*(Continued)*

keen to use free writing to explore organisational issues before discussing them with the group. They were excited about the patterns that emerged and about the honesty of a conversation with one's self. I encourage people in action learning sets to reflect about the experience afterwards. One wrote to me later:

I spent almost 2 hrs writing up how I felt during our discussion and how I intended to change my behaviour as a result. It was tremendously therapeutic and enjoyable, which I found surprising, as I have, until now, been avoiding writing down anything about how I feel – so Thank You!

Sue Smith wrote:

Bringing the issue was like opening a door and seeing a crack of light – and seeing a very small slither [*sic*] of a room. Once the door was opened fully – which happened when I started to look at the amount of change I'd undergone – I could see the room in its entirety – and appreciate how full and intricate the things in there were.

Sue Smith has a tremendous opportunity to change people's lives. Writing helps her find a way to pause and reflect, to argue with herself until she believes what she says and can then find the voice to persuade others. In that way, writing can be a powerful force for change.

When I first began this work I feared the response would be cynicism and doubts about its relevance. After all, most workplaces are based on rational and 'scientific' management practices: plans, budgets, facts, timelines, blueprints etc. There is little place for emotion and individual expression. My fears were wrong. Every time the response has been very positive and unleashed the power people can have when they bring their whole selves to work. One team member said the writing was 'one of the most exciting, interesting and engaging things I've done since I've been with the firm'.  
(Angela Mohtashemi)

Reflective practice and reflexivity according to the principles and practice outlined here is a valuable developmental process for any professional or student. It can take its non-judgemental camera down to any aspect of practice, with patients, colleagues, administrative and other staff, the interface of home and work, and the impact of experiences in the past on present actions. No feeling, thought or action is too small or too big for this zoom or wide-angle lens.



### Read to learn

- Cunliffe, A.L. (2009a) Reflexivity, learning and reflexive practice, (Chap23) in S. Armstrong and C. Fukami (eds), *Handbook in Management Learning, Education and Development*. London: Sage.
- Davis, M. (2003) Barriers to reflective practice: the changing nature of higher education, *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 4(3), 243–55.
- Fook, J. (2002) *Social Work: Critical Theory and Practice*. London: Sage.



### Write to learn

Each chapter ends with *Write to learn*. These exercises can take very different lengths of time. Some are very affirming, some challenging, all result in positive writing. Each can be done individually or by a facilitated group: many are useful for initial group forming. *How to start writing* preliminaries is useful (see Chapter 6). For now all the advice you really need is:

- This is unplanned, off-the-top-of-the-head writing; try to allow yourself to write anything.
- Whatever you write will be right; there is no critic, red pen poised.
- All that matters here is the writing's content; if you need to adjust grammar and so on, you can – later.
- Ignore the *inner critic* who niggles about proper form and grammar, and even worse, says you cannot write.
- This writing is private, belongs to the writer who will be its first reader.
- No one else need ever read this, unless the writer decides to share it with trusted confidential other(s).
- Writing can be shared fruitfully with a group or confidential trusted other, if this seems appropriate once the writer has read and reflected on it first.

### Advice for facilitators

- Each writer reading silently back to themselves before reading to group or partner is vital.
- Participants need to know at the start they will be invited to read out; they can choose not to read if it feels inappropriate.

*(Continued)*

**24 REFLECTION AND REFLEXIVITY: WHAT AND WHY**

*(Continued)*

- Many exercises will occasion laughter, some tears: both are fine.
- These exercises are best done with facilitator giving instructions in numbered order, as participants finish each section.
- I suggest participants complete each section before being given the next.
- Participants do not need to know why they are doing each element: people are usually keen to 'play the game' unburdened with decisions, if they trust the facilitator.

**Exercise 1.1 Names**

1. Write anything about your name: memories, impressions, likes, hates, what people have said, your nicknames over the years – anything.
2. Write a selection of names you might have preferred to your own.
3. Write a letter to yourself from one of these chosen names.
4. Read back to yourself with care, adding or altering positively.

**Exercise 1.2 Milestones**

1. List the milestones of your life and/or career, do it quickly without thinking much.
2. Read back to self: delete or add, clarify or expand as you wish.
3. Add some divergent things (for example, when you first really squared up to your head of department).
4. Choose one. Write a short piece about it. If you wish, continue and write about others.
5. Read back to yourself with care, add or delete (without listening to your negative critic).

**Exercise 1.3 Insights**

1. Write a quick list of 20 words or phrases about your work.
2. Allow yourself to write anything; everything is relevant, even the seeming insignificant.
3. Reread; underline ones which seem to stick out.
4. Choose one. Write it at the top of a fresh page. Write anything which occurs to you.
5. NOBODY else needs read this ever, so allow yourself to write anything.
6. You might write a poem, or an account remembering a particular occasion, or muse ramblingly. Whatever you write will be right.
7. Choose another word from your list, if you wish, and continue writing.
8. Add to your list if more occurs to you.
9. Reread with care, adding or altering, using only a positive approach.