

Problems With *Evidencing* Reflective Practice (And Their Possible Resolution)

Paul Dennison
Educational Development Unit

A quarter of a century after Schön first published *The Reflective Practitioner* (1984), the phrase 'reflective practice' still resonates strongly in discussions about professionalism.

Reflective practice is the hallmark of a professional, and the reflective practitioner paradigm is still very much mainstream in both professional practice and in the preparation for that practice. In fact, it has become almost a rule on pre-professional courses that students are required to evidence their 'reflective practice' by *writing* a reflection upon an incident or encounter, or producing a written reflective commentary, or reflecting (*in writing*) upon their experience, etc.

The Higher Education Academy (HEA) and Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) require candidates for their professional recognition schemes to develop whole portfolios of such written 'evidence', characterised as 'reflections' or 'reflective pieces'. My contention is that this is a mistake, and that confusions and contradictions ensue when the words 'reflective', 'reflection', and 'evidence' are misapplied in this way.

There are contradictions with the nature of the evidence.

- True professionals are reflective for themselves alone; to produce a written account of that for public consumption is not to reproduce that reflection but to create something else entirely, something permanent, that can be interrogated at leisure. To call it 'evidence' is problematic since in reality, these reflections are authored, created and concocted by the students. It is quasi-evidence, which may achieve verisimilitude but never validity.
- Students are required to evidence reflection to show professionalism. In many professions, teaching for instance, practitioners rarely write those reflections down. So we recognise professionalism on a requirement for evidence that recognised professionals do not require of themselves.

There are problems with coaching the creation of the evidence.

- Not surprisingly, students do not intuitively know how to 'write' a reflection and need to be coached in that 'skill'. The questions arise: "Why are we coaching them?" If it is to produce evidence, isn't that evidence automatically 'artificial'? What is the value of that skill once their professionalism is recognised?

- As part of the coaching process, we show students how to select and present evidence of reflection that will make them *appear* professional. The better we succeed, the more convincingly 'professional' they appear, but it is an appearance; artificial and unreliable. It is even possible that students are encouraged to concoct – or at least heighten – incidents, reactions, problems and solutions.
- Should we coach students to adopt the style of total revelation and honesty or a more tempered partial (and perhaps professional) approach? How far should students disable their 'internal censor'?

There are also problems with assessing the evidence. For this reason many academics limit themselves to formative feedback only. Do you reward honesty, which may result in bland, boring or unsatisfactory 'reflections', or reward industry and invention, with the risk of inauthenticity?

All of these problems have at their heart the insistence on using the terms 'reflective', 'reflection' and 'evidence', with the implicit insistence on naturalness, immediacy, and authenticity. There is no room for authorly distance and revisionist editing.

Why not accept that the productions which students write to demonstrate their thinking and reflective processes are not 'reflections', nor are they direct 'evidence' of reflection? Instead, adapting Bruner's (1991) ideas on the narrative construction of reality, let us call them 'narratives of professionalism'. When we use this terminology the problems above largely evaporate. Students understand and achieve their task more naturally and with less coaching and anxiety.

Portfolios are valuable developmental as well as evidential tools, but let us not call the productions that fill them 'reflections' or 'reflective practice'. They are narratives – narratives of professionalism.

References

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