

## CHAPTER 26

# REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

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### Introduction

It has been argued that there is an increasing need for reflective practice, given a growing 'crisis' in the professions (Gould 1996; Schon 1983). This crisis revolves around an increased questioning of professional authority and infallibility. Aligned with this there have been moves to manage professional practice through more objective, routinized and measurable systems of accountability (Fook, Ryan and Hawkins 2000, p.242). It might be argued that the essentially subjective processes of critical reflection are antithetical to the more technocratized systems of managerialism. However, I would argue that the move towards reflective practice can be seen as part of the same imperative – to make professional practice more accountable through ongoing scrutiny of the principles upon which it is based.

For this reason, the ability to reflect upon practice in an ongoing and systematic way is now regarded as essential to responsible professional practice. There has been some criticism that 'reflective practice' has simply become a new, and uncritical, orthodoxy (Ixer 1999), possibly because it can be enacted in many and varied ways, and is used so widely across many different professions and disciplines (Fook, White and Gardner 2006). In this chapter, therefore, I aim to provide enough basic detail about reflective practice and critical reflection for new social work students and practice teachers to begin to use the process in their own practice. I begin by outlining the basic theory and origins of critical reflection, illustrating this with a detailed example of how it can be used in practice learning and teaching, and indeed as an underpinning for ongoing professional practice. I finish by discussing some of the issues for learning that emerge.

### Reflective practice and critical reflection – definitions

The terms 'reflective practice' and 'critical reflection' are often used interchangeably. Both involve an ongoing scrutiny of practice based on identifying the assumptions

underlying it. 'Reflective practice' emerges principally from the work of Donald Schon (for example, 1983 and 1987), who was one of the first to alert us to the crisis in the professions often represented by the perceived gap between formal theory and actual practice. In Schon's thinking, reflective practice was a way of reducing the gap, by unearthing the actual theory that is embedded in what professionals do, rather than what they say they do. In this sense reflective practice is essentially a way of improving practice.

Reflection, on the other hand, is broader. It is a way of approaching an understanding of one's life and actions, as exemplified by Socrates' notion of reflection as 'the examined life' for ethical and compassionate engagement with the world and its moral dilemmas (Nussbaum, 1997). This is a striking reminder of why it is important to reflect. Reflective practice is more focused on professional practice, but reflection is relevant to all aspects of living. Many writers also make a distinction between reflection and critical reflection (Fook and Askeland 2006a). The idea of critical reflection seems to be more associated with writers in the education field, in particular adult education (for example, Brookfield 1995; Mezirow 1991). Part of the difficulty in pinning down exactly what reflective practice and critical reflection mean may be due to the fact that there has been a great deal of development of these concepts in widely varying fields, from the health and welfare professions to law, management, business and education, and from both research and practice traditions.

Critical reflection is defined in various ways. There are two main ways of being 'critical' with reflection. The first involves the ability to unearth, examine and change very deeply held or fundamental assumptions (Mezirow 1991). Brookfield (1995, p.8) however, emphasizes a second meaning which is that what makes reflection critical is the focus on power. 'Critical', however, in both these senses, is about the ability to be transformative, 'to involve and lead to some fundamental change in perspective' (Cranton 1996, pp.79–80). The former meaning relies on the examination of very fundamental assumptions, which leads to fundamental change. The latter involves changes wrought by an awareness of how power operates. We can further extend this to encompass an awareness of how assumptions about the connection between oneself and social context/structure can function in powerful ways, so that awareness of these assumptions can provide a platform for transformative action (for example, Fook 2012; Kondrat 1999). These latter understandings are associated with a critical social theory tradition (Agger 1998). This is the perspective that I adopt in this chapter and in my own work more generally, because I feel it is most compatible with the theoretical traditions of the social work profession and with the for social change aspirations of many current practising professionals.

Critical reflection and reflective practice are therefore not mutually exclusive, but can be based on similar assumptions and processes of thinking. I like to think of critical reflection as being a subset of reflective practice. Critical reflection, when used specifically to improve professional practice, is reflective practice that focuses on the power dimensions of assumptive thinking, and therefore on how practice might change in order to bring about change in the social situations in which

professionals work. In order to be able to critically reflect, obviously one must be able to reflect. However, not all reflective practice will lead to critical reflection – that is, to fundamental changes. In addition, effective critical reflection will apply to many important aspects of living, which may extend beyond the terrain of professional practice. In this sense, more fundamental and generalizable critical reflection should function to improve the way we live and relate as human beings, and in the process also improve our professional practice. While this chapter will outline general reflective processes and thinking, it will also discuss some of the issues involved with critical reflection specifically.

In order to understand the idea of critical reflection and the processes involved, it is helpful to explore the main traditions of thinking from which it arises. I have identified four main ones that are involved: reflective practice, reflexivity, postmodernism/deconstruction and critical social theory. These traditions are not mutually exclusive and, of course, share many commonalities. It is helpful to understand some of the basic tenets of each of these traditions in order to build up a more complex understanding of the theoretical underpinnings of critical reflection. In addition, a better understanding of some of this thinking will enable us as learners to make more substantial connections between our own assumptions and our social and cultural contexts. In the following section I will detail each of these main traditions and their major contributions to the idea of critical reflection.

## The theoretical background of critical reflection

### REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

In the professions, the idea of reflective practice is often credited initially to Argyris and Schon (1976) and later to Donald Schon (1983, 1987). These works form much of the initial basis for subsequent writings in the professional learning traditions, such as nursing (for example, Rolfe 2000; Taylor 2000). In education literature, the work of Dewey (1933) tends to be cited as originating the idea of reflection (Cranton 1996, p.76; Mezirow 1991). Mezirow (1991, p.5) notes that for Dewey 'reflection referred to (Dewey 1933, p.9) "assessing the grounds (justification) of one's beliefs", the process of rationally examining the assumptions by which we have been justifying our convictions'.

Schon (1983, 1987) emphasized the importance of acknowledging that professional knowledge involves both 'technical rationality' (rules) and professional artistry (reflection in action). Part of the 'crisis' for professionals arises from the fact that very often the 'theory' or rules espoused by practitioners, is quite different from the 'theory' or assumptions embedded in the actual practices of professionals. Reflective practice therefore involves the ability to be aware of the 'theory' or assumptions involved in professional practice, with the purpose of closing the gap between what is espoused and what is enacted, in an effort to improve both. A process of reflective practice, in this sense, also serves to help improve practice, by helping

to articulate and develop practice theory. In this sense also, reflective practice can be seen as a process of researching practice theory, by developing it directly from concrete practice. From Schon's initial idea of reflective practice, a reflective approach has been developed (for example, Fook 1996), which encompasses the recognition of the intuitive, the artistic and the creative in professional practice. The role of the emotions is also often emphasized (Fook 1999a).

Put in terms of the reflective practice tradition, critical reflection involves a focus on assumptions about power. This includes the many ways power operates, and a person's own power and relationship to it. In addition, focusing on the intuitive and artistic aspects of one's practice also unearths the role of emotions in supporting particular assumptions. A simple reflective approach is useful in helping pinpoint important and indeed formative assumptions. What it can lack, however, is a detailed analysis of how power operates, and in particular the role of personal power in relation to social and structural contexts and constraints. This can be illustrated with a particular example, say the personal experience of loss or grief. Simple reflection might unearth assumptions about the personal meaning of the loss to a person. However, critical reflection, in addition to noting the meaning of the loss, might note how assumptions about social factors might also influence the experience. For instance, the person might feel social expectations to grieve in a certain way, or pressure to relate to other loved ones. The person may feel his or her own lack of power in the face of such pressures. In this example, reflection and critical reflection are complementary. Critical reflection simply also notes how a person's assumptions may carry power dimensions.

## REFLEXIVITY

The idea of reflexivity comes from different traditions again, and is often associated with social science research (Marcus 1994) in fields like anthropology (for example, Rosaldo 1993). It has been developed more recently in the health and human service professions (for example, Taylor and White 2000). Reflexivity, or a 'turning back on itself' (Steier 1991), has been defined in various ways. White's version of reflexivity (2002, p.10) emphasizes the ability to look both inwards and outwards to recognize the connections with social and cultural understandings. This is similar to my own version, which involves the ability to recognize that all aspects of ourselves and our contexts influence the way we research (or create knowledge) (Fook 1999b). I am using the idea of research here to refer to all the different ways in which we create knowledge – some occur on a more formal and systematic basis, yet others are used daily, and often in unarticulated ways to make sense of immediate surroundings. In this sense, research, or knowledge creation, is integral to the daily business of living.

Therefore, in order to be reflexive, we need to be aware of the many and varied ways in which we might create, or at least influence, the type of knowledge we use. There are at least four ways this might happen. First, knowledge is embodied and social in nature – it is mediated by our physical and social lenses. So our physical

states and our social positions will influence how we interpret and select information, and indeed how we are socially interpreted and interacted with. Similarly, knowledge is also mediated by our own subjectivity – our particular being, experience and social position will influence what phenomena we see and how we see them. Third, there is a reactivity element – the knowledge we obtain is at least partly determined by the kinds of tools and process we use to create it. So our own beliefs about what constitutes legitimate knowledge and its legitimate creation, and the types of methods we should and do use, will influence what we find out. For example, information gathered from observation may be quite different from that gained through a conversation. And, last, knowledge is also interactional – it is shaped by historical and structural contexts.

Using the idea of reflexivity then, critical reflection is a way of researching personal practice or experience in order to develop our understandings of ourselves as knowers or makers of knowledge. This in turn helps us make specific connections between ourselves as individuals and our broader social, cultural and structural environment, by understanding how our ideas, beliefs and assumptions might be at least partially determined by our social contexts.

#### POSTMODERNISM AND DECONSTRUCTIONISM

The influence of postmodern thinking brings with it particular ways of thinking, which to some degree transcend yet complement those associated with reflexivity. For the purposes of this chapter I also include poststructural thinking, in that there are common threads that are useful to our understanding of critical reflection (Fook 1999a).

By postmodernism, I am referring simply to the questioning of ‘modernist’ (or linear and unified) thinking (Parton 1994). It represents a questioning of the idea that knowledge must be arrived at in a progressive way and that it is non-conflictual. Thus, postmodern thinking alerts us to the relationship between knowledge and power (a useful analysis in critical reflection). By pointing up the role of dominant discourses in creating what is perceived as legitimate knowledge (and therefore power), postmodernism sheds light on where power rests and how it is maintained by focusing on how certain thinking, and its association with certain groups, might function to strengthen the position of that group in relation to others. Poststructuralists also alert us in particular to the role of language in forming our knowledge. The way we speak about things, what we choose to label and what is not labelled, and the relationships we imply through the language we use, all have a role in marking what is legitimate and what is thus powerful.

In particular, the tendency to construct binary opposites, that is to create paired categories of phenomena that are total, mutually exclusive and oppositional (for example, ‘male’ and female’) is an important element in language-making (Berlin 1990). It often underlies how we make difference, and is therefore a crucial part of identity-making, and by implication, inclusion and exclusion. For instance, we often attribute inferiority to the second part of a binary category (for example, ‘female’

is inferior to 'male' by definition) and indeed the second part of the binary is often defined in terms of the first (for example, females are defined as 'not male'). Thereby, the first category in the binary opposite retains primacy.

In addition, language (and dominant discourse) also has a role in silencing multiple and marginal perspectives, since it is often only the major (unified) voice that is recognized or recorded historically.

In broad terms then, postmodern and poststructural thinking recognizes that knowledge can be socially constructed. By assuming that particular knowledge is linear and unified, we can unwittingly support a dominant power base, and unwittingly participate in preserving these power relations through the very language that we use to speak about our world. Thus, postmodern thinking opens up an awareness of the possibilities for contradiction, change and conflict in thinking, by recognizing that many different experiences can be legitimate, and by providing the basis from which to question accepted dominant ways of thinking.

From a postmodern and poststructural angle then, critical reflection can be aided by deconstructing our thinking in order to expose how we participate in constructing power. This opens the way for us to explore conflicts and contradictions that may have been previously silenced. In particular, it is useful in helping to explore difficulties in practice that are brought about because of perceived (binary) dilemmas or tensions, such as where we have reached an impasse in practice because we believe there is a fundamental dilemma or conflict involved. For example, social workers often conceptualize a basic dilemma in their work as being between 'care' and 'control' or about 'value-based practice' versus 'outcome-driven practice', as if the two categories are mutually exclusive. Postmodern thinking can lead us to question these divisions, to formulate perhaps more complex ways of working. However, what postmodern and poststructural thinking lacks in its contribution to critical reflection are details about the evaluative aspects – how we determine which forms of power actually preserve or challenge domination and how we might change this need further explication. For this we need to turn to critical social theory.

## CRITICAL SOCIAL THEORY

There are aspects of the work of many different theorists that share some commonalities with this category (for example, Marx, Marcuse, Habermas (Agger 1998)). For our purposes here, I focus on the common themes of critical social theory. I have paraphrased and summarized these (Fook 2012a) from Agger (1998) as follows. Critical social theory recognizes that domination is both personally experienced and structurally created. Therefore, individuals can participate in their own domination, by holding self-defeating beliefs about their place in the social structure, their own power and possibilities for change. Social change must therefore be both personal and collective. This involves a recognition that knowledge often has an empirical reality, but the way that knowledge is used and interpreted may be constructed (socially and

personally). Therefore, in bringing about social and personal change, communication and dialogue are important to enable new shared understandings to be created.

Critical social theory provides a broader framework for understanding what critical reflection can and should help achieve. By making connections between the personal and structural, and emphasizing the importance of communication, critical social theory points to how a critical reflection process might help us forge bridges between our own experience and that of others to bring about desired social changes. As Mezirow points out: 'precipitating and fostering critically self-reflective learning means a deliberate effort to foster resistance to...technicist assumptions, to thoughtlessness, to conformity, to impermeable meaning perspectives, to fear of change, to ethnocentric and class bias, and to egocentric values' (1991, p.360).

In practical terms, a critical perspective on critical reflection simply involves the idea that when dominant social understandings or assumptions are exposed (through a reflective process) for the political (or ideological) functions that they perform (i.e. that they exist for political reasons in supporting the status quo, apart from whatever inherent truth they might have), the individual who holds those assumptions is given a choice. Once these hidden ideas are exposed, people who hold them are thus given the power to change them (Fook and Askeland 2006a).

## An example of the critical reflection process

The theoretical traditions outlined above can be used to devise a process and model of critical reflection. In this section I will describe just such a process, which I have been developing over a period of some years, and which I currently use in the continuing education of practising health and welfare professionals.

### THE AIM OF THE CRITICAL REFLECTION PROCESS

As we said earlier, the aim of critical reflection is to assist the learner to unearth and unsettle assumptions (particularly about power) and thus to help identify a new theoretical basis from which to improve and change a practice situation. In essence, this is the critical reflection process: a reflective analysis, particularly of power relations, which leads to change effected on the basis of new awareness derived from that analysis. It is important to emphasize these two aspects of the critical reflection process – analysis and change. In the process the learner is effectively researching their own practice and developing their own practice theory directly from their own experience. Not only does this function to evaluate and scrutinize practice, it also teaches the learner the process of learning directly from their own concrete practice. In other words, they are learning to create theory that is applicable to practice.

Elsewhere I have likened the overall critical reflection process to a first stage of deconstruction and a second stage of reconstruction (Fook 2012a). It is also similar to a conscientization process (Alfrero 1972), in which a person shifts from a more

fatalistic stage in which the 'facts' dominate to a final stage of understanding the causal links between 'facts' and social circumstances. With this model of critical reflection there is a further stage that links this new critical awareness with possibilities for action.

#### CRITICAL REFLECTION QUESTIONS

Questions are derived from the above four theoretical traditions (reflective practice, reflexivity, postmodernism and critical social theory) to assist in critically reflecting on a specific piece of practice. Below are some examples.

From a reflective practice tradition, questions might include: What was I assuming? What beliefs did I have about power (for example, mine, other people's)? What are my most important values coming across and how do these relate to power?

From a reflexivity standpoint, we might ask: How did I influence the situation? What preconceptions did I have and how might these have influenced what I did or interpreted? How did my presence make a difference? What sort of power did I think I have, and how did I establish myself in the situation? What were my beliefs about power and how did these affect what I did or chose to see?

Using a postmodern/deconstructive perspective, we might ask: What language/words/patterns have I used? Have I used any binary opposites, and what is the basis for these? What perspectives are missing? What are my constructions of power? What is the relationship between my beliefs about power and the mainstream or dominant view? How have I constructed myself in relation to other people, or power?

A critical stance would place the emphasis on how the critical reflection process can bring about change. We might therefore ask questions like: How has my thinking changed, and what might I do differently now? How do I see my own power? Can I use my power differently? Do I need to change my ideas about myself or the situations in which I work?

Clearly each perspective provides different ways of asking critical reflective questions, but there is also a great deal of commonality. It is not important to differentiate the traditions each type of question is related to, but instead to use these theoretical underpinnings, and the analyses they provide, in an integrated and inclusive way. Using many different ways of questioning will, one hopes, maximize the potential meaningfulness of critical reflection to diverse types of learners. There is in fact no prescribed or formulaic way to undertake critical reflection, and indeed the field is characterized by many different processes, techniques and exercises that can be used to further critical reflection. It is as much about the enabling climate that is created as it is about techniques that are used. The highly diverse nature of critical reflection has been criticized (Ixer 1999) but I would argue that this is in fact one of its primary strengths. Since it is highly adaptable to situation, place, learner and educator, its flexibility potentially allows it maximum effectiveness.

### THE CLIMATE OF THE CRITICAL REFLECTION PROCESS

It is crucial to successful learning from critical reflection, that an appropriate learning climate is established. Since reflection is not necessarily a process that happens naturally in our often technocratic learning environments, it is vital to establish clear cultural ground rules for reflective learning (Fook, 2012b). Also, given the potentially flexible nature of critical reflection, it is important to structure the process to some degree in order to maximize opportunities to unearth and unsettle assumptions in order to bring about some change. And since there is potentially much personal and professional risk involved in scrutinizing deep-seated assumptions, the climate needs to be enabling and respectful of this.

I therefore think it is important to establish a culture in which it is safe and acceptable to be open and to expose professional vulnerabilities for the sake of learning. Elsewhere this has been termed a climate of 'critical acceptance' (Fook *et al.* 2000, p.230). When I engage in a critical reflection process with colleagues, I am explicit about a set of 'ground rules' to which I establish mutual agreement. There is not room to include the whole list here but some important rules include: confidentiality; respect and acceptance; non-judgementalism (the purpose of critical reflection is to help unearth assumptions, not to make evaluations of actions); focus on 'responsibility' (to influence and respond to the situation) rather than 'blame' (for controlling or causing the situation); openness to other, perhaps contradictory, perspectives does not mean having to give up one's own perspective; separating the reflective analysis from the need to make changes or take action.

### THE STRUCTURE OF THE CRITICAL REFLECTION PROCESS

In the model of critical reflection I have developed I ask participants to meet as a small group (usually up to ten people), and I ask each participant to present a piece of practice that was crucial to them in some way. This serves as the 'raw' material for reflection. I then structure the process in two stages. The first focuses on the analytical stage: exposing and examining the hidden assumptions. The second stage focuses on turning an awareness of these hidden assumptions into new ways of understanding practice, our power and how we might challenge and change our environments accordingly.

The process essentially involves a small group of participants who assist each other to critically reflect on their practice in a confidential setting facilitated by someone versed in the approach. The process normally begins with an introductory session (approximately one and a half hours in length) in which the facilitator lays the groundwork for the programme. This might consist of formal group introductions, some theoretical background and a discussion of ground rules, as well as an outline of the process. This is usually presented in an informal and interactive manner. This is followed by a modelling of the first stage of the critical reflection process by the facilitator, in which the facilitator presents her or his own practice material ('critical incident', as discussed below) and asks the group to assist her or him, to critically

reflect upon it, using the questions that have been outlined as a guide. This might last up to one hour. This modelling is vital in establishing a group climate of trust and ensuring that interaction is egalitarian. The facilitator may then spend a brief time discussing the process and clarifying the participants' understanding of it.

I ask people to present their piece of practice experience in the form of a concrete 'critical incident'. The critical incident technique is widely used and in varying ways (Brookfield 1995; Davies and Kinloch 2000). In the critical reflection process that I use, I ask that it be kept deliberately concrete – someone's 'story' or 'narrative' about an event in which they were involved that was significant to them in some way. 'Critical' in this sense simply refers to something that was crucial or significant to the person. I ask that they describe, in writing, why it was critical (or their reasons for choosing it), the background or context of the incident and the actual incident. It is vital to use a brief, concrete incident from the person's own practice because it allows them ultimately to keep the focus on further concrete possibilities for their own practice, without being distracted by overly abstracted ways of theorizing practice. Participants bring written versions of the incident for distribution to group members, so that the written version can be reflected upon as verbal interaction also takes place.

Participants present their critical incidents in two stages according to the process outlined above. They are normally allotted at least half an hour per presentation. Thus, overall the programme takes approximately the equivalent of two and a half days. Normally the first session, which includes the introduction and the facilitator's modelling, takes a half day, then the next two sessions take one day each, usually split by a period of at least a week to allow further intervening reflection.

The first stage focuses on analysing the story of the incident. The whole group asks critical reflective questions based on the four theoretical traditions outlined above. The facilitator tries to ensure that each participant reaches a point where they feel able to articulate some major assumptions that have been unearthed, and can identify some major piece of learning that they wish to take away and reflect further upon. During and at the end of the first session, the facilitator also draws out some of the commonalities of discussion, taking care to make connections between personal and social experiences. At the end of the first stage, the facilitator also ensures that the group as a whole understands the tasks for the second stage. Before the second stage, each participant reflects further on the thinking that has been unearthed in this first stage. In the second stage, participants present their revised 'theory of practice' again (allowing approximately at least half an hour each), with a view to devising specific practice strategies from it. The group assists this process by asking a series of questions focused on how practice and thinking may change or be different, compared with their original conception of the incident. Often they may focus on how they would handle it now, given their new set of reflections. The facilitator may encourage them to put a 'label' on this new set of actions and reflections, thus engaging in the process of creating their own personal 'theory of practice'.

## General outcomes and uses

What are some of the claimed benefits of critical reflection? In general, most studies of the effectiveness of critical reflection make a range of ambitious claims about how it can contribute to 'human flourishing' (Fook *et al.*, in press). The claims include an increased capacity for research and knowledge-building (Hess 1995, pp.65, 81), better knowledge application (i.e. the ability to use previous knowledge in new cases) (Hess 1995, p.75), the ability to create contextually appropriate responses (Fook and Napier 2000), improved practice, the creation of new practice possibilities (Hess 1995, p.80) and an increased capacity to practise in change and uncertainty (Fook and Napier 2000).

Analysis of evaluation results from my own critical reflection groups conducted over the last four years indicates the following broad trends:

- Increased collegiality, at a variety of levels including between managers and workers, between workers and supervisors, between colleagues within an organization and between colleagues in differing organizations – this was often brought about by gaining support from colleagues and therefore a better sense of connectedness with them. An openness to new or other perspectives also encouraged this. Former 'enemies' are more likely to be seen as possible allies, and individuals are more likely to look for cooperative, rather than oppositional, ways of working.
- A motivation and desire to find different ways of working with colleagues, especially where there had been previous conflict.
- A re-energizing of interest in and commitment to the job, through a reawakening of basic values and an ability to prioritize work on this basis. This was often experienced as better morale.
- Finding new strategies and options to deal with longstanding dilemmas.
- Finding the motivation to act on longstanding dilemmas that had previously 'frozen' action.
- Many participants speak of being 'liberated', usually from assumptions about what 'professional' practice should be. They often come to realize that they have constructed 'professional' practice in such a way that it limits how they can relate to service users (for example, Lowth and Bramwell 2000).

## Applications specific to practice teaching/learning

It is clear that the critical reflection can be adapted in many different ways to suit the particular purposes and contexts of practice teaching and learning. The model I have described in this chapter might be used as a component of a university-based teaching programme, or alternatively as a continuing education or peer supervision programme organized for practitioners. It might be adapted using different tools

in place of the critical incident (such as ‘stories’ or ‘narratives’ of practice, journal entries, case notes/studies, process recordings, observations or taped recordings of interactions). In short, any type of record of practice might be used as potential raw material for systematic critical reflection. Hypothetical stories might be used (Lehmann 2003) to avoid problems of confidentiality. Critical reflection may be done as ‘self-critical reflection’ (Mezirov 1998) – a process conducted by oneself on one’s own material. It can easily be adapted for use in one-to-one supervision sessions or as a model for peer supervision or learning groups. Alternatively, individuals might make arrangements with their own ‘critical friend’ – a friend or colleague whom they trust to assist them in more systematic reflection. Interactions may be face to face, but also conducted by phone, in writing or online.

What is most important to emphasize about the use of critical reflection for teaching and learning purposes, however, is not technique or technology – it is rather much more about approach. As an overall approach, critical reflection emphasizes the idea that we are all both teachers and learners, even though our formal roles or statuses might be more differentiated. This is an important point – effective critical reflection can only take place in a climate that is egalitarian and participatory. Knowledge creation, through ongoing reflection on experience, is something that never stops in a committed practising professional at any level. Furthermore, the critical reflective attitude is about always being prepared to question (and change) deep-seated assumptions and practices.

In terms of practice teaching and learning, this places the onus on all players to be aware of, and take responsibility for, the learning environment that is created. This means we all need to ask ourselves, as students, managers, university academics, supervisors, senior practitioners, colleagues or new workers, how we can best create a climate for critical reflection, in the various settings in which we work. This will of course involve implementing some new technologies and processes for learning, but it may also simply involve being prepared to question and change ourselves in far more fundamental ways.

## Conclusion and issues for learning

In conclusion, it is fitting to consider some of the criticisms of, and potential difficulties with, critical reflection as an approach and process.

The threat posed by exposing one’s professional practice to detailed scrutiny and questioning holds simultaneous potential for harm and good. Elsewhere (Fook and Askeland, 2006b) my colleague, Gurid Aga Askeland, and I argue that because critical reflection is also about unearthing deep-seated assumptions that are culturally held, the capacity for unsettling and threat may be too great and may work against learning potential. The trick is to get the balance right by minimizing the risk and maximizing the learning. Alternatively, it may be the case that many participants may not be ‘robust’ or resilient enough to expose their vulnerabilities in a public

way. It may be that critical reflection is not appropriate for everyone. Its culture and values may not be compatible with some people. For others (both teachers and learners), there may not be enough structure. In addition, some workplace cultures may actively work against a culture of critical reflection by exploiting individual workers' vulnerabilities.

Another perceived difficulty of the critical reflection process is its reliance on many theories. Therefore, in practice it can potentially unearth any assumptions about anything. And indeed some of these assumptions and related experiences may be outside the mandate of the group to deal with. For example, past painful personal experiences may be unearthed, which it would be highly inappropriate for a professional learning group to handle. For this reason, it is important to place boundaries on the group's discussion and to give participants the right to draw boundaries themselves. At the same time, the ability to be open ended in what is unearthed can be a potential advantage, in that, without too many preconceptions about what to focus on, some crucial but hitherto deeply hidden assumptions may be uncovered. This is another reason why a critical reflection process can take many different forms, and have many different outcomes, depending on the theoretical perspectives of participants and their ability to delve deeply for important assumptions.

It has also been argued that reflection is a highly individualized activity, its outcomes difficult to generalize to other people and situations. It is also a highly diversified activity, its processes lacking clarity of detail. It is therefore difficult to measure its outcomes, so it seems impossible to assess its success (Ixer 1999). In addition, the reflective approach and its practice seem to fly in the face of current managerial and cost-cutting trends. Some argue that reflection takes too much time in a climate of maximum efficiency. Its outcomes are often open ended and unpredictable in regimes that value concrete forward planning and budgeting. Furthermore, it encourages self-examination and the disclosure of vulnerabilities and limitations (Hess 1995), which can undermine the competitive edge of services. Last, it fosters holistic and contextual ways of knowing in economic contexts requiring scientific proofs of effectiveness and 'evidence'.

My response to these claims is not to disagree, but to point out that they constitute all the more reason to identify the benefits of critical reflection, both in 'hard' and 'soft' terms, and to persevere in developing the ways in which a critical reflective ability can be shown to improve practice responsiveness. Far from being an alternative in opposition to evidence-based practice, critical reflection may in fact be a very accessible process that can contribute to articulating the evidence base of practice.

## Note

Some of the ideas in this chapter have also been developed in: Fook, J. (2004) 'Transformative Possibilities of Critical Reflection.' In L. Davies and P. Leonard (eds) *Scepticism/Emancipation: Social Work in a Corporate Era*. Aldershot: Ashgate, pp.16–30.

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