Introduction

Over the course of the last fifteen years, professional educators have witnessed the unprecedented popularity of the theory known as reflective practice. Schön (1983) coined the term ‘reflective practice’ in his seminal and oft quoted book The reflective practitioner. Reflective practice has been adopted in the continuing education programs of a wide range of professional groups, and is a dimension of the quality assurance programs of numerous regulatory bodies. Although critiques of the theory of reflective practice have been articulated, they have rarely been examined with a consideration of how such critiques open up possibilities for further theoretical developments. In this paper, I raise four critiques of Schön's theory of reflective practice with a view to considering how such critiques open an avenue for productive dialogue. I conclude by suggesting directions for further theoretical work.

i) Lack of conceptual clarity

One problem frequently raised in the literature concerns the lack of conceptual clarity surrounding the term ‘reflective practice’, and indeed around the notion of reflection itself. Van Manen (1995) has pointed out that the notion of reflection is challenging and may refer to a complex array of cognitively and philosophically distinct methods and attitudes. Bleakley (1999) has suggested that reflective practice is in danger of becoming a catch all term for an ill-defined process. For instance, different authors frame reflective practice and its applications in distinctly different manners, emphasizing one dimension of the theory, while ignoring another. Likewise, in practice the theory is interpreted and applied in many ways, within different institutions, and by various professions. Confusion among practitioners and educators is rife (Bengtsson, 1995; Eraut, 1994; Mackintosh, 1998; McLaughlin, 1999, Newman, 1999; Zeichner, 1994). Thus, a major challenge with the theory of reflective practice is the lack of conceptual clarity. The concept remains elusive, is open to multiple interpretations, and is applied in a myriad of ways in educational and practice environments.

ii) Focus on Individual

A second critique has to do with the theory's focus on ‘individual’ reflection. Relevant to this discussion is the work of Barry Sandywell (1996) who has written an ambitious study examining the history of reflection and reflexivity. Central to his critique of the limits of reflection is his argument that the 'Other' is excluded in every project of reflection (p. 249). Sandywell notes that since Descartes, cognition appears as a type of ‘inner contemplation’ conducted by the solitary meditator and that it is distinct from older dialogical views of
existence. He suggests that such dialogical views have been displaced in favour of a proprietorial conception of ‘objects’ constituted through acts of introspective cognition (Sandywell, 1999). In his view, an emphasis on individual reflection fails to consider the accounts of ‘Others’ within the community within which reflection occurs. Along these lines, Taylor & White (2000) have noted that while reflective practice opens up the possibility of a more uncertain, ambiguous and complex world, it tends to close much of this down again by obscuring the client's perspectives and freezing practitioners' accounts as true representations of what happened. Such a privileging of the practitioner perspective can be as dangerous as an uncritical privileging of technical rationality.

iii) Discourses in practice

A third critique is that Schön’s theory fails to acknowledge the problematic nature of language and discourse within practice environments (Taylor & White, 2000). Practitioner accounts are non-problematically viewed as "true", and no effort is made to foster practitioner reflection on language use, or on the manner in which discursive systems construct what can be talked about. Rich (2001) highlights the power of language noting that language is the vehicle through which we name, describe, and depict, and that through its corruption, language can also be used to manage our perceptions. Lather (1991) draws attention to the power of language to “organize our thought and experience” and to “frame the issues” to which we address our attention. When such an understanding of language is applied to practice, the question of “who” frames the issues, and whose account is put forward is raised. While reflective practice brings practitioner accounts to the table as a counterbalance to a traditional emphasis on technical rationality, the question of whether those accounts can be taken as non-problematic reflections of reality is never posed. In this way reflective practice assumes what Alvesson & Skoldberg (2000) refer to as a so-called realistic view of language, which treats utterances as relatively unambiguous entry points to the understanding of actions, ideas or events. The potentiality of discursive systems to suppress certain accounts and to infuse others with power reveals an important dimension of practice that is not considered within Schön’s reflective practice.

iv) Where is the 'Other'?

A fourth and related critique is Schön’s failure to consider the intersubjective dimensions of practice. One potential implication of such, is the danger of treating the client or the coworker as an “object”, as a “thing”. Philosopher Richard Kearney (1988) has pointed out that in ethical relationship, the face of the other calls out to us for response before epistemological and ontological concerns, in what Levinas has termed the ethical relation of the “face to face”. Another in need makes the ethical demand on me - where are you? We are responsible for the suffering of the other in that face to face moment (Kearney, 1988, p. 362). Without an adequate consideration of human encounters, we are in danger of confronting “the other as a thing, as a raw material to be objectified and manipulated in accordance with an egocentric self-interest” (Gardiner, 1999, p. 64). This is contrasted with a Bakhtinian view of the other “as a unique and singular being, in which a dialogical relation is reciprocal and mutually enriching” (Gardiner, 1999, p.64). The question raised is whether reflective practice goes far enough in the consideration of intersubjectivity and the promotion of ethical relationships, and whether Schön’s reflective practice carries with it the danger of treating service users and colleagues as simply ‘objects’ of practitioner reflections.
Illuminating the way: Possibilities for further dialogue

While I concur with Schön as he points to the exclusion of phenomena that are central to practice, I suggest that he does not take his argument far enough in considering what those 'excluded phenomena' are. I wonder what would happen, if Schön's 'reflective practitioner' moved into a dialogic community that recognized power differentials, considered the problematic nature of a realist view of language, and considered the lived experience of users of service? In the interest of conceptual clarity, I suggest a hermeneutic examination of philosophical perspectives embedded in the theory (Dunne, 1997). Furthermore, given the above critiques, I suggest that work that illuminates notions of dialogue, discourse, and intersubjectivity provide fruitful locations for extending Schön’s theory of reflective practice.

References


