



Reflecting On The Reflective Practitioners

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Synopsis

In this article Richard Pring makes a case for the “reflective practitioner” as exemplified by the seven teacher educators in the book.

Much educational research which is initiated at university level, and often at some expense has little impact in the classroom in terms of teaching and learning — either because the issues researched on are too broad or they are too theoretical.

The solution is that teachers themselves, the practitioners, become the researchers. They can do this by reflecting systematically on what goes on in the classroom and, to raise these reflections to the level of objectivity, to subject them to the critical scrutiny of others

Out of such reflections, though unique to individual researchers, can come “insightful accounts of processes which go beyond the particular story itself”.

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The seven teacher educators' contributions to this book demonstrate in their respective ways how teachers might engage directly in research into their own practice. Most of the studies are detailed and represent an approach to research which, in terms of its popularity, is relatively recent but which has gained much support in university departments of education across the world — as is reflected in the range of countries from which these contributions come: Singapore, Hong Kong, Australia, New Zealand and United States. Whether or not it has yet gained support outside the universities — particularly amongst those who make decisions about education or who sponsor research — is a different and more controversial matter, which I shall touch upon later.

Furthermore, in illustrating a rather distinctive approach, the case studies frequently refer to certain well-known authorities with whom they share a common interest in the “reflective practitioner” — particularly Schon (1983, 1987) and Shulman (1986, 1987) whose work has done so much to transform educational research and the further professional development of teachers.

The significance of this is not hard to find. It is argued in many countries that, despite much money being spent on educational research, the impact upon practice is slight indeed. Educational research, and the university departments developing it, have so often been dominated either by broader policy matters (such as “why are girls doing less well at science?” or “what are the causes of failure amongst working class children?” or “how might one overcome racist attitudes in schools?”) or by a research

model which seeks to measure and quantify and generalise. Either way, the teacher often feels left out; the central concern, viz what happens in this or that classroom or between the teacher and the learner, seems to be of little importance. As Christine Lee and Maureen Ng point out, in their fascinating study of a teacher trying to introduce more co-operative learning in her classroom, the most important problem in changing education as in most social reforms is the neglect of how teachers “actually experience change as distinct from how it might have been intended” (what Fullan, 1991, refers to as “the neglect of the phenomenology of change”). Similarly the neglect of the students’ perceptions: Kirpal Singh, in his report on the study of King Lear in a cross-cultural setting, argues that

the globalisation of our world means, in part at least, giving each individual a valid voice in terms of intellectual understanding.

Politically that is beginning to matter. Those whose job it is both to improve the educational service and yet at the same time to make sure that limited funds are well spent, question the value and utility of so much educational research which pays scant attention to the details of the classroom and seems so irrelevant, therefore, to teacher improvement. It is not clear, for instance, how the 2800 lecturers in education, declared in the recent United Kingdom universities’ Research Assessment Exercise to be active educational researchers, have had much impact upon the daily practice of teachers. The link between so much research, on the one hand, and, on the other, school improvement or professional development, is questioned. Why pay people to do research which has so little effect? For that reason in the United Kingdom there is an emphasis by the Teacher Training Council to promote a more teacher-centred form of research, to some extent by-passing the universities which are perceived to have failed in this respect. University initiated research, either because of its main interest or because of the way it has been conducted, has failed to have an impact upon the teachers. There remains a gulf between theory and practice, between those who theorise or research and those who practise or teach.

On the other hand, there is the danger that, in attempting to bridge this gulf, the politicians sponsor the kind of research which will produce a

“technology of teaching” — the belief that if only we were to conduct the right kind of research rigorously enough, then we would have a science of teaching which could, through courses or books, be applied or taught to others. Research would demonstrate how reading should be taught, or groups organised, or fractions illustrated. Teacher development would lie in learning the results of that research and then applying them to practice.

As these case studies illustrate, there is something very wrong with this simplistic understanding of the relation between theory and practice — between the research community and the teachers. The reality of the classroom is complex in the extreme; there are countless interactions between teacher and learner and between learner and learner such that it would be impossible to reduce the many interactions to a set of generalisations, or to generalise from one situation to another. Furthermore, the language and accounts of the researcher, seeking as they often do to provide a more theoretical understanding, might well go unrecognised by the teacher — a game being played at their expense by people who are more concerned with the obscurities of theory than they are with the articulation and improvement of practice.

The solution which some (exemplified by the contributions to this book) have found to this problem is that of seeing those who practise as the main theorists — the teachers as the ones who, from their privileged position, are able to make sense of the complicated practice of teaching in a way that no one else can. The teachers themselves have to be the researchers. In Britain, this was first most effectively argued by Lawrence Stenhouse (1972) whose book *Introduction to Curriculum Theory and Instruction* started a now well established tradition of teacher research, subsequently developed by those such as John Elliot (1993) who had worked closely with Stenhouse at the Centre for Applied Research in Education at the University of East Anglia.

There is now much written about the teacher as the researcher. He or she alone has full access to what happens in the classroom. Of course, the teacher will not normally be actively engaged in research — nigh impossible where there is a demanding and practical job to be done. But the teacher can be trained to reflect systematically upon practice, to subject such

reflections to critical scrutiny, to hypothesise and to test out the hypotheses against relevant experience. The teacher can be assisted in getting to a deeper understanding both of the situation in which he or she is teaching and of the particular episodes which occur in the classroom. Practice improves through the more systematic reflection upon practice — testing out the assumptions which so often go unquestioned, subjecting those assumptions to critical examination, considering alternative ways of understanding and approaching the practical problems which the teacher daily faces. And the question, therefore, is how can one make the thinking of the teacher more objective than it was before.

By “being more objective” is meant taking the steps which are more likely than otherwise to get at the truth. What is the evidence which is relevant to the judgement being made? How might these judgements be tested against experience? How far might the understandings and judgements be subjected to the critical scrutiny of others?

The contributions to this book illustrate in different ways what this might mean in practice. Across them all is a common philosophy reflected in the frequent reference to the *tacit knowledge* of the teacher which surpasses any explicit account, the *wisdom of practice* which is enshrined within this tacit knowledge, the *craft or pedagogic knowledge* which cannot be articulated in the propositional accounts of the theorists, the *reflective practice* which leads to *self-directed learning*, *deliberation* about the goals and values of practice already engaged in, *naturalistic enquiry*, *narrative* or *telling a story* as it is felt and seen by the practitioners themselves. The purpose is frequently seen as *making sense of* experience prior to further action.

In effect, these case studies are premised on two principles, one ethical, the other epistemological. In the first case, there is a profound respect for teachers and their perception of what is occurring in the classroom (a respect not often given by researchers who have tended to look *at* teachers and to fit them into the researchers’ categories, not those of the teachers themselves). The voices of the teachers must find a place in our exploration of how children learn and what will enable them to learn more effectively. In the second case, any science or claim to knowledge must

pay attention to the complexity of the subject matter being studied. In this case, the subject matter must be what happens in the classroom or wherever the complex interactions take place between teacher and learner. Essential to those interactions are the perceptions, the motives, the assumptions, the aspirations, the doubts, the values of the teacher. Ignore those and the researcher is not addressing the reality of the school or classroom.

But, one might ask, why should this be seen as research — this “telling a story”, this “gathering of teachers’ perceptions”, these worthy but necessarily limited “reflections” of the teacher? Interesting, perhaps, but why “research”? It is difficult to generalise from the individual case studies — indeed, the more intensive the case studies, the less generalisable they seem to become. Once one starts listening to the authentic voice of the teachers, then it seems less likely that one can reach any general conclusion.

The case studies provide two kinds of answer.

The first lies in the approach — the methodology, if you like — adopted. Research would seem to entail at least this, the systematic gathering of information with a view to answering certain questions and the subjection of that information to objective or public scrutiny and questioning. Obviously, the gathering of that information must be appropriate to the problems being raised. The case studies reflect a certain unity in the gathering of information and the corroboration of this within a critical context. Even what might appear to be the most “subjective” of the studies, that by Clandinin and Connelly on *Storying and Restorying Ourselves: Narrative and Reflection* speaks of the importance of the telling of the story to an audience which can subject that story to a degree of questioning. It is a matter of “trying to understand” and of realising that understanding must be set against the attempts of the teachers themselves to make sense of even a small episode within the context of a human story of hopes and disappointments and aspirations. “Stories of professional practice are stories of relationship and they are stories of thinking again”.

Nonetheless, there is much more to the research than that. This is best captured in the account given by Marnie O’Neill in her account of a project aimed at promoting reflective teaching practice amongst lecturers in higher education. The programme was based on the following assumptions:

- (i) *realistic settings*: “demonstrations of pedagogical skills are more likely to be helpful if they are illustrated in holistic classroom settings enabling users to become involved in typical student-student and teacher-student interactions”.
- (ii) *participants’ explanations*: “understanding of teacher behaviour in classroom interactions will be enhanced if observers have access to the teachers’ explanation of his or her decision-making process”.
- (iii) *diversity of opinion*: “there is usually more than one effective way of dealing with a problem, so it is useful to access to a diversity of opinion in which to locate reflections on one’s own teaching practices”.
- (iv) *client opinions*: “students, being expert teacher-watchers and clientele can offer valuable advice on the ways in which they experience classroom interactions, and their expectation of teaching and learning situations”.
- (v) *context specific*: “research findings are sometimes contradictory, depending on the specific contexts in which the research was conducted, and cannot be regarded as absolute guidelines; instead they provide a context in which the users of the program can reflect on their own classroom practices, and pursue congruent research findings”.

This might be summed up in the statement of the academic registrar who was engaged in the process of self evaluation, identified by Mollie Neville in her report of the evaluation of a new Masters Course in Administration

The key to success will be reflection, consciously thinking over each activity and evaluating how and why I performed in the way I did and consider whether it could have been performed better or performed at all.

And then, drawing upon the work of Chen (1993), Neville shows how this reflection *on* action, following upon the reflection *in* and *for* action (to develop distinctions made by Schon), can be developed in a cyclical and interactive process.

In pursuing this kind of research — in developing systematic reflection, in subjecting that reflection to the critical scrutiny of others including the

“clients”, in welcoming a diversity of judgements, in contextualising the conclusions drawn as these arise from those reflections — so particular methods of data gathering and analysis are applied. The teachers’ regular and critical reflections are captured in diaries; an observer keeps notes of what is observed; perceptions of what has occurred are shared between teacher and observer with a view to understanding differences of perception and judgement; underlying assumptions are revealed through probing interrogation; semi-structured interviews are held; video or tape recordings of interactions or interviews are examined. This “trying to make sense of” with a view to more intelligent planning, decision-making and further practice is undertaken in the light of evidence which can be revisited and in the light of others’ critical scrutiny of that evidence. That is what raises it to the level of objectivity. Assumptions and implicit beliefs are made “objective” — open to public viewing and criticism, which can thus be pursued in the light of the evidence produced by those, the teachers, most able to gather that evidence.

The second kind of answer provided by the case studies to the question, “Why is this research?”, is as follows. In many of the cases, hypotheses are formed in the light of previous research and are put to the test, or a theoretical perspective, tentative maybe, helps to sift the data as it is revealed through observation or self-report. Of course, it is difficult to generalise with any degree of certainty or to conceptualise in too formal and definite a manner — the main lesson to be learnt from case studies is the uniqueness in many ways of each case and the constant need to reconceptualise if sense is to be made of experience. But there is never uniqueness in *every* respect. The experiences of academic staff concerned about the problems of teaching, described by Marnie O’Neill in her paper, “Reflecting on University Teaching Practices”, are unique to their own distinctive context in some respects, but they “ring a bell” to many others who have taught in other places and in other conditions. Hence, in promoting reflective teaching practices through multimedia packages, O’Neill proposes that,

if these are encouraged, the long-term effects of the instructional packages would be greater than that of a set of decontextualised exemplars of “best practice”.

Furthermore, this particular case study illustrates the interaction between the exploration of the present set of instances and episodes, with all their complexity, and previous research on similar issues. The literature illuminates the exploration rather than tells what should be the case. In fact, the exposure to other accounts, as revealed in the research literature, becomes in some of the case studies an integral part of the deliberations. As O'Neill explains, "The expectation is that users will relate them to their own teaching practices." Or again, as Alan Watson argues in the case study of an outstanding teacher examining the assumptions and reasons behind specific teaching episodes,

The teaching behaviour is always particular to that teacher, that class and even that specific moment. The subtle differences of teaching style and student needs and personality mean that even the best knowledge must undergo a transformation if it is to be used by another in another situation...Nevertheless, the teachers' actions provide a valuable starting point for ... teachers to discuss the issue and to think of other approaches which are likely to suit their teaching style and situation.

Moreover, Christine Bennett in her study of "teachers' perspectives as a tool for reflection, partnerships and professional growth", provides a clear set of categories through which teachers might be encouraged to perceive their own teaching and

to explore ways of helping teachers make explicit their assumptions about teaching, to identify multiple perspectives from which teaching might be viewed, to consider how their teaching might be enhanced....

Therefore, with few exceptions, such studies do not eschew a theoretical perspective normally associated with research.

These studies, therefore, illustrate an important and growing tradition of research in education — *important* because such research penetrates the complexity of the classroom relationship between teacher and learner which too often has been ignored, *research* because it endeavours to do so in as objective and systematic way as the subject-matter will allow. Indeed, since the *professional* knowledge of the teacher necessarily goes

beyond that which can be clearly articulated in theory or anticipated in generalisations about teaching, then, as Ora Kwo argues in her case studies of Hong Kong student teachers, there must be an integration of theoretical understanding with the practice within the teachers themselves, achieved through what she refers to as the “action research” of the teachers. *They* have to achieve the integration; no one can do it for them. And this is well illustrated in Kwo’s choice of “critical incidents”, which become the focal point of enabling her students how to learn how to teach. The “data-sets” of the fifteen students included written reviews of learning experiences, action research assignments, video tapes of critical incidents, the elaboration of the students’ perspectives — and then the “triangulation” of these different sorts of data. In this way, there emerged changing understandings of teaching, now based upon evidence and criticism rather than upon unchallenged preconceptions.

There are, however, reasons for concern. The uniqueness of the case can be stressed to the exclusion of relevance elsewhere. If the story is unique, the reader might understandably ask “so what?” Indeed, it is questionable that government or private sponsors should feel in any way motivated to fund research, the significance of which does not go beyond the individual case. Does any bit of one’s life story qualify for public exposure in the name of research? If not, how does one select? Why is one bit of the narrative significant to educational understanding and others not? The narrative is an area of research which is attracting much more interest — the understanding of the episode or issue against a richer background of the life story. But much more needs to be said about the ways in which such narrative are to be conducted if they are to be distinguished as research — if they are to be seen as insightful accounts of processes which go beyond the particular story itself. And, indeed, Kwo attempts precisely that — the “real life story of a teacher’s struggles” is partly elicited by a series of open ended questions guiding both journal writing and interviews.

This is an important book. Its main argument is that if there is to be school and teacher improvement, then there must be respect for the professional knowledge of the teacher. The question is therefore how might

one gain access to that knowledge — or, more importantly, how might the teachers themselves gain access to the insights which are implicit in their own practice but too often unrecognised, unquestioned and uncriticised. There is much theorising about the “reflective practitioner”. What are needed are more examples of the reflective practitioner in action. And these case studies provide those examples.

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