Promoting Reflection in Professional Courses: the challenge of context

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ABSTRACT   *Reflection and the promotion of reflective practice have become popular features of the design of educational programmes. This has often led to learning being more effectively facilitated. However, alongside these positive initiatives have grown more disturbing developments under the general heading of reflection. They have involved both misconceptions of the nature of reflection which have led to instrumental or rule-following approaches to reflective activities, and the application of reflective strategies in ways which have sought inappropriate levels of disclosure from participants or involved otherwise unethical practices. The article examines the question: what constitutes the effective use of reflective activities? It argues that reflection needs to be flexibly deployed, that it is highly context-specific and that the social and cultural context in which reflection takes place has a powerful influence over what kinds of reflection it is possible to foster and the ways in which this might be done. The article concludes by exploring conditions in which reflective activities might appropriately be used in professional education.*

Introduction

One of the key ideas and features of all aspects of learning from experience is that of reflection. Dewey (1933) expressed an early view that 'while we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, especially acquire the general habit of reflecting'. Since Dewey's time many writers in the field have emphasised the importance of reflection: Kolb (1984) has drawn attention to the role of reflection in Lewin's experiential learning cycle, Schön (1983, 1987) has introduced the concept of the reflective practitioner into current discourse, and many others have taken the idea of reflection and explored it in the context of theory and practice in experiential learning. Reflection has also been a central feature of our own work for many years (e.g. Boud *et al.*, 1985; Boud & Walker, 1990). Different aspects of reflection have been explored, in particular reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection has been used differently depending on the tradition from which the writer or practitioner has come. More recently the notion of critical reflection has become the centre of attention, driven partly by the interests of critical social scientists (Walker & Boud, 1992) and by practitioners who regard the idea of 'normal' practice as problematic (e.g. Brookfield, 1995).

Over the past 10 years or so we have seen the translation of ideas of reflection and

reflective practice into courses and programmes for the initial training and continuing education of a wide variety of practitioners, particularly in professions such as teaching (e.g. Zeichner & Liston, 1987; Clift *et al.*, 1990; Calderhead & Gates, 1993, Smith & Hatton, 1993; Loughran, 1996), nursing (e.g. Palmer *et al.*, 1994; Johns & Freshwater, 1998) and social work (e.g. Yelloly & Henkel, 1995; Gould & Taylor, 1996), where field experience and academic study need to be closely integrated. With this has come the challenge of incorporating ideas about reflection, which in some cases are only partially understood, into teaching contexts which are not conducive to the questioning of experience—that is, situations which do not allow learners to explore 'a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt' (Dewey, 1933), 'inner discomforts' (Brookfield, 1987), 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1990), uncertainties, discrepancies and dissatisfactions which precipitate, and are central to, any notion of reflection.

More recently, in parallel with increasing acceptance of reflective practice as an organising framework for professional preparation, there has been a questioning of Schön's views on reflective practice. Greenwood (1993) argues that he neglects the importance of reflection before action and Eraut (1995) suggests that there is little evidence of reflection-in-action in the crowded setting of classrooms. The unreflexive nature of Schön's accounts of his ideas is a concern of Usher *et al.* (1997), who also raise doubts about his methodology as it applies to practice, and draw attention to its insufficiently contextualised nature.

While we are sympathetic to the focus on learning through experience in reflective practice and are committed to the inclusion of reflective processes and theorising about reflection within professional courses, we believe that there are now many examples of poor educational practice being implemented under the guise and rhetoric of reflection. Unfortunately, it is impossible to assess readily the extent of this. However, evidence from our own observations of staff development activities devoted to reflection and reflective practice, and reports from experienced teachers across many professional areas enrolled in higher degree study, suggest that reality falls very far short of the rhetoric.

In this article we identify a number of problems that have arisen from the application of ideas about reflection in higher education courses and suggest that there are a variety of reasons for them. Some have arisen from misinterpretations of the literature, some from equating reflection with thinking, and yet others arise from teachers pursuing their own personal agendas at the expense of learners. The ideas about experience and reflection in the literature on which teachers draw are particularly challenging in that they question the conventional role of teacher as authority. This has led some practitioners to translate reflection and reflective practice into such simplified and technicist prescriptions that their provocative features—such as the importance of respecting doubt and uncertainty and distrust of easy solutions—become domesticated in ways which enable teachers to avoid focusing on their own practice and on the learning needs of students. Some applications of reflective practice which we have identified also exceed the bounds of ethical practice and expose learners to activities which are not only personally insensitive, but are not likely to lead to any productive learning.

The aim of this article is to examine some of the issues which have arisen in the application of ideas about reflection into courses and workshops and to explore the important and much neglected influence of context on learning. We suggest criteria for good practice in the use of reflection in higher and professional education which draw attention to key contextual factors which might enable some of the grosser misapplications to be avoided. In the process we draw on a range of reports from colleagues and students. They come from undergraduate and postgraduate courses as well as from continuing education and workplace settings. Because of the nature of the problems and the need to protect the individuals

concerned they are presented in generalised form. Throughout, the perspective which will be considered is that of reflection promoted by teachers [1] and the effect of teachers' practices on learners.

What are the Problems?

The problems which we have encountered cover a broad range, from inexperience in how to conduct experience-based learning activities to basic misunderstandings of the nature of learning and reflection. Activities in which these problems arise include various different classroom tasks, the keeping of diaries and journals, the debriefing of workshops and placements and drawing on the life experience of students. None of these are problematic *per se*; it is the ways in which they are used which give rise to difficulties. The following are some examples which we have encountered.

Recipe following. In this form of practice, class activities typically take students through a sequence of steps of reflection and require them to reflect on demand. Elements of models of reflection are turned into checklists which students work through in a mechanical fashion without regard to their own uncertainties, questions or meanings. For example, nursing students might be asked to 'reflect' on a clinical experience in response to a predetermined set of questions to which 'answers' are expected. While there are many circumstances in which a list of reminders can be useful, in the case of reflection there is the great risk that acts of reflection become ritualised, without reference to context or outcomes. This leads to false expectations of what reflection is (it is linear, about external knowledge and unproblematic) and what learning outcomes can be expected of reflective activities (those which can be found in course statements and competency standards). When combined with a teacher- rather than a learner-centred approach to education, rule following turns 'reflection' into a process to be memorised and applied unthinkingly. The one characteristic of the references to reflection cited in this article is that they eschew the following of simple formulae to encourage reflection. Where stages or elements are given, authors are careful to point out that these are illustrative or conceptual elements, not an operational process. There is a challenge to teachers in turning ideas about reflection into tangible processes which can be commended to learners, but many are not meeting this challenge.

Reflection without learning. While reflection is important, not all planned reflective processes lead to learning [2]. Inadequate, inappropriate, or badly used reflective activities can become an obstacle. Just leaving time for reflection does not mean that the time will be used in a productive way. In many cases students may be able to use such time as an opportunity to take breath in a crowded curriculum, but they may not be able to use it to reflect or learn in ways which are meaningful to them. It is important to frame reflective activities within the learning context in which they are taking place. Without some direction reflection can become diffuse and disparate so that conclusions or outcomes may not emerge. Without a focus on conceptual frameworks, learning outcomes and implications, reflection for learners can become self-referential, inward looking and uncritical. There is inevitably a tension between guidance which leads to the problems of recipe-following (identified above) and a lack of structure which can lead to a loss of focus. There are no reflective activities which are guaranteed to lead to learning, and conversely there are no learning activities guaranteed to lead to reflection. It is often in the presentation of appropriate reflective activities that the skill of the teacher is manifest and that students are assisted in their learning. The common strategy of asking students to take time out to make reflective notes is only likely to prompt reflection if the course in which it is used is one which encourages

students to make their own meanings. In a different setting it could simply lead to 'spotting the examination question' or 'appearing to satisfy the teacher'.

Belief that reflection can be easily contained. There is often a pretence, or a naive assumption, that reflection can be restricted to matters outlined by the teacher within the teacher's comfort zone. In fact, the very nature of reflective activities is such that they may lead to serious questioning and critical thinking, involving the learners in challenging the assumptions of teachers or the learning context in which they are operating. For example, clinical placement for nursing students or teaching practice for education students can generate considerable distress, can provoke students to query their vocation and throw up ethical dilemmas related to the practice of experienced professionals which cannot be resolved by making notes and having a discussion. It is not surprising then that students may not accept the boundaries of reflection within a subject which teachers take for granted. Reflective activities may lead students to focus on personal distress, oppressive features of the learning environment, the programme of study, resources provided, assessment practices and so on. There is no way that these can be barred, and facilitators of reflection need to be aware that any activity can tap into such issues. If the learning context is not supportive of at least some wider exploration, intolerable tensions between staff and students can result, and some students may be left in situations detrimental to them.

Not designing for a formal learning context. Even when a recipe-following approach is avoided, there can still be a problem of a mismatch between the type of reflection proposed and where it is used. The context of learning is often taken to be non-problematic in educational institutions. For example, asking students to explore their misconceptions or to reveal their uncertainties (a reflective task), in a situation in which they will be assessed in terms of understanding of the subject-matter (a non-reflective requirement) on the basis of what they write, undermines the teacher's goal of encouraging reflection—students expect to write for assessment what they know, not reveal what they don't know. Assessment used in this way not only shows a poor understanding of the relationship between assessment and learning and the link between assessment tasks and learning outcomes, but also a limited appreciation of how to establish a climate conducive to reflection. Another example of a mismatch between reflection and assessment is in the use of reflective journals. The expectation that they will be read by an assessor leads some students to censor their reflections so much that they fail to engage with their felt experience and avoid learning. In circumstances where it is judged necessary to assess students' reflection skills (a goal which might itself be questioned—see, for example, Sumsion & Fleet [1996]), reflective writing should be judged in terms of criteria for the recognition of reflective writing (e.g. Hatton & Smith, 1994), not in terms of standard academic writing conventions.

Intellectualising reflection. Because emotions and feelings are often downplayed in educational settings, it is common for reflection to be treated as if it were an intellectual exercise—a simple matter of thinking rigorously. However, reflection is not solely a cognitive process: emotions are central to all learning. Recognition of affective dimensions of learning means teachers taking responsibility to create a climate in which the expression of feelings is accepted and legitimate. Unless learners are able to express themselves in conditions of trust and security, and know that the expression of emotion is not likely to lead to negative consequences for them, then the use of many forms of reflection may be inappropriate. This is a particular dilemma in professional courses in, for example, teaching and nursing, where expressions of feelings may lead staff to believe that a student may not be able to cope in a practice context, and lead to doubts about whether the student should be permitted to enter the profession. One of the most common outcomes of intellectualising reflection is, ironically, that of leaving students in emotional disarray. Denying the power and influence of emotion

leaves staff with no strategies for dealing with it when it inevitably arises. Of course, allowing for emotional disclosure creates its own challenges.

Inappropriate disclosure. Because it is difficult and often inappropriate to focus reflection tightly, there is always the potential for learners to disclose matters which may be very confronting for staff: matters of great personal sensitivity, confidential information, unethical behaviour or even knowledge of crimes. In situations in which students do not feel constrained and are comfortable, they can include material which embarrasses staff and reveals information about others upon which their supervisors may feel professionally obliged to act. Dilemmas of breaking confidentiality, undermining colleagues, whistle blowing and privacy can arise. At other times, learners may be asked to disclose too much of their inner life, their relationships or work with others. The use of personal journals which are handed in and discussed with staff is a risky strategy. Unless they are carefully planned with these dilemmas in mind and students are guided in how to use them, they can become a forum in which students reveal more than they or their teachers can handle.

Uncritical acceptance of experience. While most teachers who use reflective activities would shrink from encouraging students to accept experience without question, there are some more radical practitioners who tend to reify felt experience as if it possessed a special truth which would be damaged by questioning. They see reflection as a bulwark against the conformity of the curriculum and a means of celebrating naive experience against other influences. Whilst sensations and feelings provide important data for learning, they do not provide unambiguous messages: they are always influenced by our presuppositions, framed by theory—be it formal or informal—and subject to multiple interpretations. As Bryant *et al.* (1996) argue, experience cannot be separated from knowledge, it needs to be interpreted as a social practice; it is neither coherent, complete nor masterable.

Going beyond the expertise of the teacher. While it impossible to predict the full range of possibilities in any given situation, it is necessary for teachers to be well prepared for the most common issues which are likely to emerge. Unfortunately this is rarely the case, and teachers have been deterred from using some forms of reflection in their courses because of unfortunate disclosures with which they could not cope. Some of these instances can be avoided through appropriate design of activities or staff development which extends facilitative expertise. There are reasonable expectations of learners that if they are encouraged to disclose information about themselves, then teachers will help them deal with the issues that are raised: teachers may not share the same assumption. However, a more unfortunate situation can arise if staff begin to work with issues which are beyond their expertise. Disturbed perhaps by what they have unwittingly elicited, or feeling that they cannot leave the student in the emotional state which they have inadvertently provoked, they may endeavour to work further with the issues raised to the detriment of the student. Teachers must be aware of what they can and cannot handle, work within their capacities and develop networks with other kinds of practitioners (e.g. counsellors) to whom they can refer when they do not have expertise.

Excessive use of teacher power. The use of reflective activities can lead to staff gaining far greater influence over the lives of students. Worryingly, for a minority of staff this may be part of their attraction. More is known about students' experience than previously and this can be enormously beneficial in facilitating learning; teaching can be better related to students' experience and misconceptions more readily addressed. However, in less benign environments this can be severely detrimental. When learners are required to provide personal information to staff, there is greater potential for the misuse of power. Problems of teacher power are compounded by the fact that many teachers are simply not conscious of what they are doing and would be offended if it were suggested to them that they were even exercising

power over students. A degree of mature awareness (Maslow, 1968) beyond that possessed by many teachers may be needed if reflective processes are to be used ethically.

The question which these examples pose is why have some of these ideas been interpreted in such educationally destructive, naive or negative ways? Is it because there are problems with the basic ideas upon which these practitioners are drawing, or with the ways in which they have been presented? Or is it because there is a problem in educational practice to which the use of such approaches draws attention? Our view is that these aspects require attention. However, in this article we focus on the last question. We explore the nature of context and how it influences the use of reflection in courses in higher and professional education.

Context and Reflection

Consideration of the context in which reflective action is engaged is a seriously underdeveloped aspect of discussion of reflection. The context to which we are referring is the total cultural, social and political environment in which reflection takes place. This broader context is so all-pervasive that it is difficult to recognise its influence. It is, however, mirrored in and is in turn modified by particular local settings within which learning occurs: the classroom, the course and the institution. Context influences teachers and learners in a variety of ways in their everyday interactions as well as in learning outcomes and processes. Included here are influences on teachers, in terms of what goals they pursue for what ends, their own competence in handling teaching–learning situations and the resources they deploy; on learners, in terms of what they aspire to and how their expectations are framed; on learning outcomes, in terms of what teachers and learners accept as legitimate goals and what outcomes are valued over others; and on learning activities, in terms of what processes are acceptable in any given situation. There is a need to acknowledge these influences if the boundaries which they set are to be utilised or challenged, as is the case when reflective activities are used.

Some exponents of reflection, particularly those Morrison (1996) identifies as adopting a politically oriented model, encourage students to focus on their own context and settings and change them (e.g. Smyth, 1996). However, it is far less common to extend such reflection to an analysis by learners of the context in which the reflective activity itself is taking place.

In an earlier model of reflection and learning from experience (Boud & Walker, 1990), we gave considerable emphasis to what we referred to as the learning milieu. The learning milieu, as we conceived of it then (following Parlett & Hamilton, 1977), represented the totality of the human and material influences which impinge on learners in any particular situation. These include co-learners, teachers, learning materials, the physical environment and everything which was to be found therein. Whilst these influences are undoubtedly important and provide some of the key resources for change, a conception of milieu which focuses on these alone is far too limited a notion to describe adequately the context of learning and its effects. Context is perhaps the single most important influence on reflection and learning. It can permit or inhibit working with learners' experience.

Varieties of Views on Context

Any view of context now must take account of the considerable theoretical contributions in recent years of, for example, critical social science, post-structuralism and postmodernism, which have drawn attention to the ways in which our constructions of what we accept as

reality are constituted. The context in which we operate has many features which are taken for granted and are normally invisible on a day-to-day basis. These features have a profound influence over who we are, what and how we think and what we regard as legitimate knowledge. These features include *inter alia* the language we use to name the world (we cannot hold concepts or draw meaning from experiences for which we do not have language); the assumptions we hold about ourselves and others (what we believe we can and cannot learn); what is acceptable and not acceptable for us to do and what outcomes it is reasonable for us to seek in any given situation; which social groups are dominant or oppressed (who is heard and who is acted upon); who has resources and what they are; and many other economic, political and cultural considerations. These wider features of the context of learning reach deeply into the ways in which we view ourselves and others. They impinge on our identity and influence the ways in which we relate to others.

This broader social, political and cultural context influences every aspect of learning. It is not possible to step aside from it, or view it 'objectively', as it permeates our very being. It is reflected in our personal foundation of experience which, although constructed from unique experiences, is also formed by the context in which we have developed. Context is subject to rereading and multiple readings: while it may be experienced as 'given', it is always available for reinterpretation. Institutions embody through their rules and modes of operation cultural assumptions which are or were dominant in particular aspects of society; they exemplify particular readings of context in their operation.

For our immediate purposes in this article, the ways in which context is represented in or challenged by institutions are of particular importance. As with individuals, institutions do not operate independently of their context, but there is some potential for administrators and teachers in key positions within them to counter, or at least draw attention to, particular features which may be antithetical to some kinds of learning. For example, leaders may initiate within the institution ground rules which emphasise inclusiveness and treat individuals according to their specific contributions and relevant differences rather than attributes (such as gender and race) unrelated to the work at hand. This can give staff within educational institutions more scope to create micro-contexts which operate as enclaves which have features separate from dominant cultural influences and which are conducive to particular kinds of reflective activity. Of course, many reflective activities—even the notion of reflection itself—are steeped in particular cultural practices and it may be necessary to draw attention to these in order to avoid establishing a new mystique and terminology which acts on some groups to exclude rather than include them.

Managing the Influence of Context

Despite the picture we have portrayed above, we believe that it is necessary to be optimistic about the extent to which the formation of such separate micro-contexts is possible. There are far more opportunities for challenging undesired aspects of the broader context than are often acknowledged, and there are many examples within higher education of radical questioning of dominant values and practices which could be cited. Whilst it is vital to take account of context and plan teaching and learning activities on the basis of how context frames and influences possibilities, it is especially important that the power of context should not be used as an excuse to do nothing or to reinforce the *status quo*. Aspects of context change and can be changed, some obviously more so than others.

Because context is so embedded within situations, teachers and learners need to find ways of managing and working with it. It is never possible to set it aside. Context can be foregrounded though, and the ways in which it is manifest in any particular teaching and

learning setting made the subject for exploration. Awareness of how it is embedded in teaching and learning can be generated in many ways. For example, Derrida's notion of 'nothing outside the text' led Usher & Edwards (1994) to write about the importance of examining context, pretext (the legitimation for an activity) and subtext (values which are not normally articulated) in understanding the text of research. This idea could also be developed for reflection as a way of prompting learners to explore not only experiences which are apparently of significance, but also their context, pretext and subtext.

Teachers and learners also need to take personal responsibility for creating micro-contexts and alternative readings of contexts which permit a wider range of exploration and learning than might otherwise be possible, and avoid blaming contextual factors for their own reluctance to seize the opportunities which exist in any situation. They should, however, be mindful that some forms of context (for example, that of some forms of competency-based learning) may operate precisely to limit possibilities for alternative ways of operating.

Limitations of Individual Conceptions

Individualistic conceptions of reflection fail to take account of the subtle and powerful ways in which context legitimises and frames particular forms and approaches to reflection, and defines those outcomes from reflection which are accepted as valid. There are many circumstances in education and training in which it is inappropriate for teachers to be encouraging particular reflective activities as the local context is such that it is not likely that useful outcomes will result; for example, promoting the use of reflective journals when formal assessment is based on competitive, cognitively-oriented examinations, or encouraging the exploration of personal identity when anti-discriminatory practices are not well established within an institution. It is important to identify the conditions which may be required for productive reflection to occur.

Many discussions of reflection imply that it is a universal process which can be considered independently of context. However, if reflection is regarded as universal it more easily lends itself to abuse than if it is construed as a cultural practice located in a particular time and place. Reflection might therefore take on a variety of forms or processes, dependent on a wide range of factors. Factors to be considered might include class, race, gender, and so on as well as many local forms of difference. It may be necessary to contextualise not only the content of reflective activities, but also the process itself—as suggested earlier. It is tempting to locate reflection as part of the set of teaching innovations which emphasise autonomy and self-direction. However, to do this is to run the risk of limiting the idea and its applications and to position it as part of an individualist discourse. Michelson (1996) takes this argument further and suggests that a consequence of this kind of positioning is to give reflection an inappropriately masculinist character.

Creating the Local Context: conditions under which reflection might be promoted

An image may help to illustrate our use of context here. When people gather together in an organisation, certain dynamics take over so that the organisation itself begins to influence the attitudes and behaviour of those who constitute it. People are drawn into it, and often act in a way that is contrary to what they might do alone. They can be carried along with the organisational ethos, caught up in a bigger purpose, and taken over by its character and behaviour. Creating a local context is like making a space in the organisation for groups of members to operate apart from immediate pressures to perform. It can establish a different atmosphere within which people can resist the draw of organisational requirements, and can

act out of different attitudes and values. It can act as a kind of oasis, which provides an environment different from that which surrounds it. This is a space in which conditions are created deliberately rather than just accepted from the larger context; some of these conditions may be in contradiction to the larger context. The metaphor also suggests that while it may be possible to find a space for other activities within the wider setting, such a space is still within the organisation and ultimately subject to its influences.

While institutional contexts supportive of systematic reflection are not as common as is frequently assumed, the local context within which a particular group is situated must be one in which there are norms which counter negative features of the wider social context (e.g. one group norm might be that patterns of oppression are not accepted as legitimate and are questioned). It is this local context which is the focus of learning, and it needs to provide what is best to foster the learning process. One of the most important steps in the creation of the local context is to filter the negative influences of the larger context, for example, by developing ground rules for a class which make unacceptable remarks by students which might be taken as 'putting down' other members of the group. However, it is sometimes easier to counter negative influences than it is to create positive ones, especially when models for good practice are hard to find. For example, it is easier to filter expressions of racism through banning offensive statements than it is to establish a climate of safety in which members of minority groups feel valued and supported. For the latter to occur, trust is essential, but it can only be built progressively, never assumed.

There are a number of factors to be considered in establishing conditions for reflection in the light of an awareness of context. These include what teachers are and are not able to do, the need to build trust and the problematic nature of so doing, the need to create situations in which learners are able to make their own meaning rather than have it imposed on them, the ways in which disciplines and professions frame what is possible in the higher education setting, consideration of whose interests are being pursued in reflective activities and the importance of creating and respecting boundaries between the institutional imperatives of learning and the personal domain of the learner.

Limitations on Teachers

It is especially important to recognise that the influence of the socio-political, or even institutional, context on teachers can have serious consequences for the local context. Teachers may be too captive to the larger context to relate to the experience of participants and thus fail to engage them in meaningful reflection. They themselves may be unaware of the power of context and so operate in naive ways which ignore many of the important dynamics which affect learners: they may not be sensitive to some of the traps. They may collude with the dominant culture and guide reflection in order to avoid engagement with issues of power and control. Reflection on creating the local context may help teachers become more aware of previously unrecognised forces and the ways they are limited by them.

The influence of power and knowledge can never be avoided, though, and it would be simplistic to imply that a reflective space can be created by the good intentions of a teacher alone. Teachers need to be sensitive to whether particular reflective practices have been misused in this local context and have thus created a negative response from participants—for example, through the intrusive use of journals or demands for disclosures from students inappropriate to the course. Sometimes particular practices may have been employed by a dominant group to the disadvantage of others. Such practices need to be avoided. Also, it is important to check that participants respect reflective processes of the kind which may be introduced, or at least are neutral to them.

Building Trust

A good reflective space or micro-context requires a level of trust commensurate with the levels of disclosure which might reasonably be expected. Trust inevitably involves risk however; respect for participants and norms of confidentiality need to be actively worked towards and agreed to. Participants need to be able to express themselves intellectually and emotionally, and know that such expression, and discussion of it, is legitimate and accepted. Barriers that prevent open interaction and reciprocal communication need to be addressed. This may involve identifying differences of power or status among participants (i.e. when some hold public or implied positions of authority over others) and differences in levels of contribution by members of the group (i.e. ensuring that some members are not silenced). Oppressive behaviour (e.g. remarks directed to others because of visible or implied differences which are not related to the content of discussion) may need to be confronted and such behaviour worked through should it occur. The teacher should be aware that participants may have a history of seeing others in the group as barriers to their learning. Difference is always a challenge: in some cultures the expression of thoughts and feelings to relative strangers is problematic. Particular ways of promoting openness may in themselves act as barriers to disadvantage some learners.

Permitting the Making of Meaning

Suggestions for activities need to be sensitive to the unique characteristics of the group and acknowledge that the outcomes desired by members may differ from expectations of the institution with which the activity may be associated or the teacher involved. The intent of participants must be accepted to a significant extent in order that they can find their own meaning within the learning situation. Their intent may not at first be apparent to themselves or to others. Their articulated points of view are to be respected even if they are also to be challenged. It is important to introduce activities in ways which provide an understandable rationale for their use, allowing participants consciously to opt in or opt out without direct or implied coercion, and indicating that time will be available for debriefing. The processes selected need to take account of emotions and work with them as appropriate to the task and context. It is only when the need for learners to make their own meaning in ways which connect with their unique experience is accepted that learners can feel free to reflect within the limits of the activity proposed.

Framing by Disciplines and Professions

Everything we do is framed and situated. This framing rarely occurs through our own volition but is part of the world we experience as given. Framing imposes assumptions, it legitimises practices and it provides a language for describing and analysing what we do. The processes of framing are not ones of which we are usually conscious. Of particular significance in professional education is the framing imposed by particular disciplinary and professional contexts within which teachers and students operate. Disciplines and professions define what counts as legitimate knowledge and acceptable practice by their members. The invisibility of this framing offers a major challenge for teachers in working with students, as staff are normally enculturated into their discipline or profession and take it for granted. While this framing of context forms major barriers to the construction of micro-contexts for teaching and learning, it needs to be subject to critique and challenge by teachers working together concertedly over time. Examples of successful challenges can be found in the ways in which

gender assumptions about access to professional education have been successfully challenged in many professional areas, and how traditional notions of the route of initial training through low level non-academic work have been overturned in a number of the health professions.

Whose Interests are Being Pursued?

The broader context in which reflective activities take place must, then, always be considered. 'Who establishes the activity for whom?' is often the basic question to be considered. When there are differences of power between individuals or groups, as is inevitably the case in teaching and learning, there are many opportunities for one party unwittingly to oppress the other. For example, if reflection is initiated by a teacher who is a member of a particular dominant social group, for those who are not members of that group there is the risk that participation in reflection will merely add to oppressive activities which exist, rather than exposing or confronting them. The most likely outcome will be compliance, in which participants go through the motions of reflection without revealing (sometimes even to themselves) what are fundamental learning issues. For example, a student may attribute his or her inability to function well to a personal lack of confidence rather than a failure on the part of their teacher adequately to address and confront their own (low) expectations about what it is possible for that particular student to achieve.

Under other less oppressive circumstances resistance from participants may be evident. Indeed, resistance is often a positive feature, though sometimes inconvenient for teachers, as it can indicate that power dynamics are being subverted. However, unless the institution or organisation in which the activity is promoted is credibly committed to anti-oppressive practices for all social groups (for example, being known to be active in dealing with issues associated with sexism, racism and other dominant group practices), then a sufficient climate of trust and safety—to offset the inherently risky and disruptive nature of reflection itself— may not be possible to enable effective reflection to occur.

Boundaries of Reflection

It is necessary to establish a common discourse for reflection within the domain of knowledge which is being considered. The range and class of activities which will be the object of reflection should be agreed. Without this there is potential to enter inadvertently areas which are beyond the normal contract between teacher and learner and thus to face tricky ethical dilemmas. There is a need for boundaries on what outcomes of reflection are to be shared with others and these boundaries should be clear from the start. The boundary between professional space and private space is not fixed, but needs to be clarified in any given setting in order to avoid a particular version of what Habermas (1987) has referred to as 'colonis- ation of the life-world'; that is the intrusion of institutions—work, profession, educational institution—into the domain that has been regarded as personal and in the hands of the individual to share.

If boundaries of reflection are defined by ideas and concepts in the discipline being studied, this should be explicit and attention given to developing a shared vocabulary and understanding of central concepts. For example, students may be expected in class to say what they know about the topic in the language of concepts which are publicly accepted, rather than explore uncertainties which may exist within their own frame of reference. If the boundaries are to include the professional practices of the learner (as in a work placement), then this should be agreed also. Moreover, if learning with an emancipatory focus which might involve exploring personal and social relationships is the *raison d'être* (e.g. Mezirow,

1990), then this too must be part of what is accepted by all parties as legitimate. Of course, it is also in the disruption of such boundaries that possibilities for different understandings occur.

When discourse crosses one or more of these boundaries without becoming questioned and contracts of acceptable behaviour renegotiated, then trouble will arise and ethical dilemmas will quickly emerge. The respecting of boundaries is of particular significance in educational institutions where the shift in discourse from public knowledge to personal reflection is problematic for both staff and students. For example, in religious education it needs to be clear whether the focus of attention in any particular situation is on understanding the particular theological tradition being studied or exploring personal crises of faith. The contracts of understanding between staff and student would differ in each case. Teachers may have to mediate between the expectations of the cultural or institutional context and that of learners to establish a clear contract which defines the boundaries for this local context. This does not mean that insights from personal experience or from understanding a particular tradition are not available to be drawn upon in either case. However, it does imply that self-disclosure of affective responses should not be required without prior agreement.

Perceptions of Context

It is sometimes comfortable to assume that it is possible to identify what the context might be in any given situation. Unfortunately, this is very rarely the case. Understanding context is always hard-won and there are always multiple readings of what it might be. Each participant will see it differently as each brings their own personal foundation of knowledge and set of life experiences with them. There will be competing views about how context is to be interpreted, and differences of perception. Context will be manifest in the behaviour and attitudes of each participant as each will have experienced, to a greater or lesser extent, forms of oppression from the wider context which bring that context into their own personal world. Context will be manifest in internal oppression of participants as they re-create the external world in their own. While context is a useful organising idea, it cannot be treated as unproblematic in conception or use.

Implications for those Facilitating Reflection

Although it is clear, when considering reflection, that the implications of taking context seriously are many and wide ranging, it is necessary to identify some practical aspects if problems such as those discussed earlier are to be addressed. While there are substantial implications for educational institutions, professional bodies and organisations in which students might be placed, we limit ourselves here to mentioning those for teachers at the course and subject level. At the risk of implying that there is a specific set of practices for teachers to follow, we suggest some fruitful directions.

Teachers need to consider themselves, the learners with whom they are working, the local context in which they operate, the processes they use, and the expected outcomes as defined by each party (including external ones, for example, the institution or accrediting body). They need to create a micro-context within which the kinds of reflection acceptable to learners and consistent with the values of learners and teachers can occur and which does not reproduce those aspects of the dominant context which impose barriers to learning.

The implications for teachers' practice are quite profound and a detailed discussion of these is beyond the scope of this article. Of the many factors which are important, the

following summarise earlier discussion and indicate some which *teachers* may need to take into account.

In Focusing on Context

- Their awareness of what elements of the cultural, institutional or disciplinary context may need to be filtered or confronted in this local context, or may be used to advantage in the learning event (i.e. a particular session in a course).
- How they can cope with the demands of the institution within which they operate.
- Their own power and the ways in which this might impact on learners singularly and collectively.

Reflection by teachers and learners before the learning event is as important as reflection during, or after, it. Understanding beforehand the factors that may be operating within the future learning event is necessary in order to work creatively within that event. Teachers and learners bring with them all the essential elements of the larger context: they are imbued with the assumptions and practices of their culture, the demands and expectations imposed by the educational institution, and the attitudes and ways of operating that dominate the particular discipline. Periodically, and in each new situation, teachers need to explore specifically how the subjects they are dealing with, and the learners they are working with, are affected, both positively and negatively, by this larger context. In particular, the larger context constructs the teacher as having specific power. The teacher needs to be aware of this and ensure that it is used productively within the learning event. Reflection on the larger context in relation-ship to the subject and the learners can help the teacher work on how to cope with these operating forces and develop strategies that will counter them, or use them creatively.

In Focusing on Learners

- Their assumptions about the particular learning event, their own intent and how this may relate to the intent and expectations of learners.
- How they can elicit from learners responses appropriate to the learning and reflective processes of the given activity.
- The prior experience of learners, both with regard to the substantive learning outcomes which are sought and the particular processes of reflection which are being contemplated.
- How they can respect learners and their agendas and take these as the focus rather than other agendas, either of the culture, institution or themselves.

Learners carry with them assumptions and practices of the larger context. However, their personal experience of their culture, their institution and the particular discipline may have affected them in different ways. It could have given them particular expectations and demands and affected how they approach the various processes of the learning event. It may be necessary, for example, to find an opportunity in any part of a course to introduce particular activities which elicit learners' assumptions about a learning event, and their intent or expectations of it. The planning for the event needs to respect these elicited assumptions and intents, give them priority, and relate them creatively to the assumptions and intent of the culture, institute or teacher. It is especially important to elicit and work in accord with emotional responses that learners bring to the event because these are often the most powerful influences affecting how learners engage in the event. While some of these insights may be known to the teacher from previous experience, they will probably need to be verified and filled out at an early stage.

In Focusing on Processes

- How they can construct a learning environment in awareness of the influence of dominant groups and intervene appropriately within it to counter oppressive behaviour on the part of learners towards each other.
- How they can create appropriate reflection processes for this context which will assist the learner to come to meaningful learning.
- How to avoid mechanistic processes which do not respond to unique circumstances and particular learners involved.
- How they can establish patterns of reciprocal communication and create a place of trust and respect in which reflection and exploration can flourish
- The need to establish agreements about what is and is not legitimate in the particular activity and about the appropriate roles of learners and teacher, and to respect and reinforce such agreements.

There is a uniqueness in each learning event that needs to be respected. To repeat the same approaches, processes and practices with every group of learners does not respect the variation in experience which necessarily exists. If teachers are sufficiently sensitive to the climate in the group, activities can be initiated to draw out some of the feeling of participants, and even reveal aspects of the dynamics of power. This can help teachers build appropriate ways of relating which respect the different approaches and further foster an atmosphere of trust and respect. It may be necessary to set ground rules. These are determined by the purpose and particular composition of the group rather than by the subject to be worked with. If the group is divided, distracted and discontented, it is unlikely that fruitful learning will be achieved. It is only when the teacher has begun to work with these issues of the group that it will be clear what reflective processes and modes of use are likely to engage members of the group in meaningful learning.

This list of factors is quite daunting, but it is hard to envisage a list which is substantially smaller yet which takes into account the issues which we portrayed earlier. It points to the need for increasing sophistication of teachers in professional education, and for opportunities for them to develop these skills over time.

If we return to the problems of use and abuse of reflection introduced earlier, we can illustrate this approach with a few examples. *Recipe following* is inappropriate because it does not take account of the uniqueness of the learners, their prior experience, the particular context in which they are operating nor the need to address any unhelpful dynamics of power or oppression which may intrude. *Reflection without learning* can indicate similar inappropriate approaches, and also the inability of the teacher to offer appropriate reflection processes for this context. *Belief that reflection can be easily contained* conflicts with all the evidence about learning that we have. It ignores the power of the larger context and the personal history of the learner. *Failure to design for context* is a particular outcome of the failure to recognise the importance of context as outlined in this article. *Intellectualising reflection* can be a lack of recognition that the emotional is important in learning, or a sign of teachers' inability to handle the emotional aspects of the learning process. *Going beyond the expertise of the teacher* may indicate the inability of the teacher to reflect on his or her own preparedness and ability to enter into this learning situation. Inappropriate disclosure may indicate the inability of the teacher to frame the reflective process or to contract appropriately with learners. *Excessive use of teacher power* arises from many aspects of the context and it may be related as much to teachers' own perceived powerlessness in an institution as from their failure to recognise the primacy of the learner.

Conclusion

Reflection can obviously occur even when circumstances are less than ideal—the capacity for humans to learn in the least auspicious conditions is quite remarkable. Some form of learning can occur in almost any situation. However, there is limited scope for critical reflection if the micro-context is not created to counter many of the factors which can readily inhibit it. If conditions of the kind discussed above are not generally found then misuse and abuse can flourish. It is necessary for teachers to be clear about whether they are really interested in fostering reflection and whether they are prepared to take a sufficiently contextualised view of it into account. If they are, they must confront themselves, their processes, and their outcomes. An honest self-appraisal conducted in conjunction with peers is one of the hallmarks of an effective promoter of reflection. Indeed, such an appraisal is needed when teachers are working with any processes which have the potential to blur the differences between the personal and professional lifeworlds. This article has contributed some ideas which need to be considered in such an appraisal.

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NOTES

[1] While one of us has argued elsewhere for reconceptualising teaching and facilitation as a process of animation (Miller & Boud, 1996), in this article we restrict consideration to professional education and use the more familiar term 'teacher' throughout.
[2] Learning in this article is interpreted broadly. It includes reconceptualisation and reframing of situations as well as more conventional outcomes which can be readily assessed.

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