

Critical Reflection: My use of Reflective Practice

Before starting this Degree would I have actually known what is meant by the term 'Reflective Practice'? The answer to this would be probably not, but now it is not only a term I am familiar with, but a concept and idea that I am regularly aware of and putting into practice.

What is actually meant by the term 'Reflective Practice'? Breaking this down, reflection is the process of taking your experiences and turning them into learning and knowledge. Reflective practices offer alternate ways for us to look at our experiences and therefore we aim to learn something new from them. For the purpose of this course I have been focusing on the use of 'Personal Professional Reflection', after all we are studying our Professional Practice within the Arts sector and I have been analysing why this type of reflection is so important. David Schon (1983, 1987) argues that in order to be an effective practitioner, regardless of your field, you have to be able to reflect on your ongoing experiences and learn from them. In this ever changing and developing society we need to adapt and develop as practitioners in order to be as successful as we can be. The world won't wait for us therefore we need to reflect on the experience and adapt/change in order to improve next time we have that experience.

John Dewey was an educationist who was interested in linking 'experience' closely with reflection. Dewey (1933) describes Reflective Thought as 'active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and further conclusions to which it tends'. Basically he believes that in order for us to be able to reflect we have to be aware that we have had an experience and this process of 'Reflective Thought' enables us to do this. Personally I am finding Journal Writing a great tool for this; I have been using a 'description' method to work through my day to day events and then an 'evaluation' method to see what I can take from these experiences. Without the use of the Journal perhaps I would not be fully aware of all the events I had encountered that day and the amount of valuable experiences that I can reflect and learn from. Dewey (1934) believed that there were different levels of experience and that in order to be fully engaged with an event, you have to put your whole self into it in order for it to be a full experience. Only in this way can you truly reflect and gain knowledge from your experience. This links with David Boud's assumption that the process of learning from experience has to be an active one (2001) and this is the only way that good reflective practice can take place. I firmly believe in the statement 'you get out what you put in' and I always try to put my whole self into everything I do. I believe this comes with being a performer and the fact that perfection is always trying to be achieved. I find it very difficult when asked to 'mark' something and find myself giving more than I should be, often being told to give less not more.

Donald Schon (1987) introduced the idea of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, meaning reflection during an event and reflection after the event has taken place. As Artists we naturally reflect-in-action, having that instinctive reaction to adapt as we go along. This is a very hands on method of reflection, one that suits performers who are used to working in an ever changing environment. Schon's idea links with Robert Kottcamp's idea of online and offline

reflection; online being reflection-in-action and offline being reflection-on-action. Kottcamp (1990) believes this method of online/reflection-in-action is much harder to achieve but much more beneficial and rewarding once achieved. 'The latter type (reflection-in-action) is the more difficult to achieve, but the more powerful for improvement of practice because it results in 'online' experiments to adjust and improves one's professional actions.' (Kottcamp, 1990) In this type of reflection you are expected to perform, reflect and adapt simultaneously, whereas with offline reflection all your focus can be given to purely reflecting and analysing. It is true to say that your profession will impact on the way you reflect, so even though Kottcamp describes 'online' reflection as being difficult to achieve, as artists this is the most natural and probably successful method of reflection. I am constantly using reflection-in-action, when teaching but most commonly when performing. During one performance I realised that a cast member had left the stage, which meant that the spacing was now out. Instead of leaving a huge gap which would be noticeable to the audience, I adapted in the moment and adjusted my positioning so that it would be seamless to the audience. I can also recall one time when I had a quick change into tap shoes and I simply didn't have the time to fasten the shoes. I gripped with my toes and hoped for the best, however the final section of the number involved a huge kick line. There was no way that the shoes would stay on, so I had to think on my feet. Being placed at the end of the kick line I knew that if I exited it would not be noticeable to the audience, so on the change into the new formation I left the stage and the audience were none the wiser. These seem such simple things to me as a Dancer, but I assume that to someone with a completely different profession this would have created a huge dilemma! Reflection-on-action is also a huge part of my Personal Professional Reflection, whether it be working on notes from the Dance Captain or using my Journal to reflect on my day to day events. I find this method really promotes successful reflection and it is nice to have time to reflect and as Kottcamp states (1990) 'full attention can be given to analysis and planning for the future without the imperative for immediate action'.

Before starting this course I had never heard of 'The Learning Cycle' and had only briefly touched on what type of learner I could be. David Kolb created the Learning Cycle and it is a great tool for reflection on how you learn and a tool for approaching experience. It is made up of a cycle of four parts; Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation. We all go through this learning cycle however the difference is at which point we enter the cycle. The point at which you start to learn is your entry point into the learning cycle, also known as your learning style. Using a task set out in the reader I analysed an experience and tried to discover my entry point into the cycle. I felt I learnt by observing others but also by trying things out working my way through it as I went along. From this my entry point would be 'reflective observation' and also 'active experimentation'. Knowing this will help me approach future events, for example during a rehearsal I will make sure that I watch others closely and observe them, taking from this performance tips which will help with my own performance. I am already aware that I do this, but knowing that this is how I learn best, makes me more aware of the importance of it in order for me to develop and improve. Often I procrastinate, as many performers do, and find numerous ways of putting off that all important task. I know that I need to actively experiment in order to start the learning process, therefore I

need to just get on with the task set. Even if I am a little unsure on how to proceed, I need to focus on the task and muddle my way through.

The idea of Tacit Knowledge really interested me when I came across it in the reader, the idea that you can have lots of knowledge stored inside that you simply cannot express in words. Twilya Tharp (2006) describes muscle memory as a form of tacit knowledge and I can completely relate to this. When performing on stage it would sometimes dawn on me that I wasn't thinking about what I was doing and it is only when you start to think about the routine that the mistakes happen. Your body is on 'auto-pilot' and does not need instruction from the brain, when you try to interfere with this, confusion happens within the body and mistakes are made. In a previous show we had a really difficult hand clap that took at least a month to learn and during this number I would purposely think of anything other than the routine, because if not guaranteed I would make a mistake. Jennifer Moon (1999) stresses the importance of being able to articulate this tacit knowledge so that the ideas can be recalled and shared. Moon believes that Journal Writing can be a great tool for this and identifies many purposes for Journal Writing. 'To enhance professional practice or the professional self in practice and to enable learners to understand their own learning process' (Moon, 1999, pp 188-194). When this knowledge is put into words it has understanding and meaning that can be accessed and shared by other professionals. I find Journal Writing a great vehicle for reflection and have experimented with different types of Journal entries. For me a combination of description, evaluation and what if? methods promotes the most successful reflection. Journal Writing allows me to clear and organise my thoughts, creating head space to engage fully in future experiences. The 'what if?' method allows me to prepare for the day ahead and makes me realise what I want to achieve from the day, therefore getting the most of my experiences, hopefully resulting in the best possible reflection.

Howard Gardner (1983) introduced the idea of multiple intelligences; the fact that people have different ways to engage with understanding and learning. There are no right or wrongs with learning and reflection and this is something I have really come to realise in my journey so far on this course. Everyone is unique in the way they learn and therefore will be unique in the way that they reflect. You have to find the method of learning and reflection that is best for you and how you can therefore develop and grow as a professional.

The above mentioned practitioners have introduced me to new methods of reflection and ideas about reflection that I never even pondered on. However, they received their fair share of criticism and not everyone was so willing to accept and share their views. Philosophers such as Bertrand Russell and Evander Bradley McGilvery completely disagreed with John Dewey's ideas on reflection. They argued that the object of knowledge must be understood as existing apart from the knowing subject, setting the truth conditions for propositions. Whereas Dewey defended the view that things understood as isolated from any relationship with the human organism could not be objects of knowledge at all (Field, 2005). Dewey truly believed that in order to learn and reflect, you have to be fully engaged and completely aware of the experience you have had. Schon's idea of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action has also created

much debate and criticism. Eraut (1994) states that 'when time is extremely short, decisions have to be rapid and the scope for reflection is extremely limited'. Russell and Munby (1989) also believe that there have been no psychological elaborations of the psychological realities of reflection in action. They are saying that true reflection actually only takes place after the event, we may adapt and change midst action, but they don't agree with Schon that reflection in action can take place.

With key thinkers and in some cases great philosophers, criticism is always going to be found and there is no escaping this. Everyone is entitled to their opinion and if the methods can help you in any way then it doesn't really matter whether you fully agree with them or not. You can analyse the approaches and use the parts that relate best to you and your process of reflection. Going back to Gardner's idea of Multiple Intelligences and the fact that there is no right or wrong way to learn; it is about finding the best method for you and focusing purely on turning your experiences into learning and knowledge.

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