

Reflective Practice Reconsidered: Creative approaches and challenges in academic development.

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Research Domains

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Abstract

Reflective practice is widely promoted in higher education yet remains under-theorised, particularly within creative disciplines. This study aimed to explore educators' understanding of reflective practice in a UK Design department. Drawing on document analysis and interviews with academic staff, five overarching themes emerged using inductive coding and cross-comparison of narrative and visual data: Creative Practice, Academic Practice, Practising Practice, Demonstrating Practice, and Expanded Practice, highlighting diverse, embedded, and discipline-specific approaches to reflection. A key insight is the use of visualisation supports conversational, iterative, and collaborative reflective processes, challenging dominant, text-based models of reflective practice. Importantly, the findings reveal this methodology can facilitate collegiality and professional community, which is particularly valuable in navigating tensions between institutional expectations and educators' pedagogic values. The study calls for broader recognition of reflective practice as situated, multimodal, and integral to criticality and disciplinary engagement, with implications for academic development, curriculum design, and interdisciplinary practice.

Full paper

Reflective practice is key to professionalism in higher education (HE), yet the meaning and enactment, particularly within design disciplines, remains under-theorised and inconsistent (Marshall, 2019). This paper draws on findings from a qualitative study investigating educators' understanding of reflective practice within a UK university Design department. The study aimed to examine how reflective practice is interpreted. Using a priori and a posteriori methods, institutional discourses and lived experiences were investigated through document analysis and interviews with 23 academic staff. Findings reveal multiple interpretations aligned to disciplinary ways of knowing, particularly within creative, iterative approaches to education (Budge, 2016; Orr and Shreeve, 2018).

The a priori phase analysed university documents, including learning outcomes and assignment tasks, to map reflective practice across an institutional framework. Four key themes emerged: Integration and Emphasis, Theoretical Underpinnings, Critical Reflection, and Praxis. While reflective practice occurred across these contexts, application varied. For example, an extra-curricular programme encouraged individualised models and multimodal reflection, recognising the importance of practice-based outputs (James, 2007; Rogers, 2008). Oppositely, university-wide materials promoted reflection as textual and focused on end-point evaluation (Moon, 2004). Furthermore, Design curricula showed fragmented terminology and limited theoretical grounding, raising concerns about the consistency and depth of pedagogic integration (Doloughan, 2002). These findings suggest that while reflective learning is institutionally valued, it is seldom framed to resonate with creative disciplines (Orr and Shreeve, 2018).

The a posteriori phase, utilising thematic analysis of interviews and visualisation tasks, offered insight into educators' personal and collective experiences. Thematic categories were developed using Braun and Clarke's (2022) inductive coding approach, and comparative analysis across narrative and visual data. Five themes emerged: Creative Practice, Academic Practice, Practising Practice, Demonstrating Practice, and Expanded Practice, centring 'practice' as a conceptual and methodological anchor (Barrett and Bolt, 2014). Participants described visual mapping and conversation as integral to teaching reflective practice, supporting discipline-specific signature pedagogies (Sims and Shreeve, 2012), iterative sense-making, tacit knowledge, and material exploration (Polanyi, 1966; Budge, 2016). Visualisation reinforced understanding, revealing non-verbal, spatial, and affective modes of reflection act as representational tools and generative thinking processes (Clarke, 2007; ManMet, 2020; Raven and Textbook Studio, 2019; Rogers, 2008).

This research confirms reflective practice in design education is relational, embodied, and multimodal, not solely an independent endeavour (Bleakley, 1999). Visual and dialogic approaches facilitated reflection in-action (Schön, 1983), confirming tacit epistemologies identified by Polanyi (1966) and Kinsella (2009). These practices challenge dominant institutional models that favour written reflection, particularly those linked to performance review frameworks (Ball, 2003). Several participants expressed discomfort with the bureaucratisation of reflection, transforming an organic process into an administrative burden. Others voiced that imposed formats discouraged authenticity, narrowing professional self-inquiry (Brookfield, 1995).

Participants also distinguished between 'reflection' and 'reflective practice': the former as surface-level; the latter structured to inform professionalism (Brookfield, 1995; Finlay, 2008). These differences illuminate reflective engagement in design spans personal, pedagogic, and institutional levels, and that terminology informs expectations (Clegg et al, 2002). Visual data revealed recurring metaphors (spirals, cycles, layered motifs), reinforcing the non-linear and dynamic nature of reflective practice in design (James 2007; Schön, 1975). Sharing educators' understanding of reflective practice fostered collegiality and greater criticality in approaches to teaching and professional development.

These findings are pertinent given the university's evolving emphasis on practice-led education. While many participants aligned with this focus and pedagogic value (Orr and Shreeve, 2018), concerns were noted for institutional policy potentially instrumentalising reflection and neglecting disciplinary nuances. This tension between university imperatives and pedagogic authenticity was central to apprehensions about curriculum design and academic development frameworks.

This paper argues for greater institutional recognition of reflective practice as situated, multimodal, and discipline-sensitive practice. Key implications include:

Academic Development: Professional enhancement frameworks should include visual, conversational, and practice-based approaches to reflection, recognising this legitimacy within creative disciplines (Clarke, 2007; Collin and Karsenti, 2011).

Curriculum Design: Reflective activities should be embedded in curricula and aligned with disciplinary inquiry over generic written tasks (Boud, Keogh and Walker, 2013; Bowers et al., 2022).

Policy and Language: Institutions must adopt flexible, inclusive reflective models that support diverse academic identities (Finlay, 2008; Brookfield, 1995) and calls for compassion, collegiality and equality (Hashemi Toroghi, 2024).

This research offers empirical evidence of design educators engagement in reflective practice, challenging text-centric models and affirming embodied, situated approaches. It highlights how discipline-rooted reflective methods can support critical engagement, pedagogic authenticity, and professional community. While grounded in design, creative reflection has relevance for other disciplinary fields. As HE confronts ongoing challenges, reflective practice must be reclaimed as a meaningful, contextually grounded part of academic life.