The dilemmas of evidencing reflective practice in writing and their possible resolution (0300)

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Schön's phrase "the reflective practitioner" (1984) still resonates strongly in discussions about professionalism.   Reflective practice is the hall-mark of the professional and the reflective practitioner paradigm, although no longer viewed uncritically (Clegg et al 2002, Eraut 1995), still finds acceptance in both professional practice and the preparation for that practice.   What has evolved around the paradigm is a cottage industry based upon *evidencing "reflective practice" in writing* – writing a reflection, producing a reflective commentary, reflecting (in writing) upon their experience, etc.   Both the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC) require candidates for their professional recognition schemes to develop whole portfolios of such evidence, largely comprising written "reflections".

This paper looks at the dilemmas and contradictions surrounding the *evidencing of reflective practice in writing*, to which the cottage industries of portfolio production and accreditation turn a blind eye, but which reflective practitioners involved in those industries have wrestled with and attempted to resolve.   They emerge from a small-scale qualitative investigation into lecturer perceptions of reflection (Dennison, 2010) and from some years' experience coaching students and assessing their (written) "reflections" on both an MBA and an initial teacher education programme.

Both the portfolio process and evidence-based accreditation can be valid and hugely developmental. This paper contends, however, that the components of these portfolios should not be characterised as "reflections" or "reflective pieces", and when they are, the following dilemmas and contradictions ensue.

Dilemmas – in the nature of evidence

- A true professional is reflective for themselves alone – so what does it mean to evidence it for someone else?   Is the latter valid evidence of the former?

- There is something odd about evidencing a live ephemeral phenomenon of the mind – a reflection – with a permanent record – a dead artefact (see Dennison 2009).

- Even more odd is the idea of authoring evidence, of creating or concocting it.   This seems to compromise evidential validity.

- Students are required to evidence reflection to show professionalism, but in many professions – teaching for instance, qualified practitioners, though expected to be reflective, rarely write those reflections down (Eraut, 2002 – See CLEGG).   We accredit their professionalism on a requirement for evidence that the accredited professionals do not require of themselves.

- It will by now be unsurprising that students need to be coached in the "skill" of writing a reflection, which they invariably do. The question arises "Why are we coaching them in the (non-professional) skill of evidence-production?"

In coaching the evidence

- Obviously we coach students to select and present evidence of reflection that will make them appear professional. The better we succeed, the more convincing the presentation of evidence is. We may be (unconsciously) encouraging students to concoct – or at least heighten – incidents, reactions, problems and solutions to the point of unreality (MacFarlane and Gourlay, 2009)

- The opposite deficiency is exhibited by students who "do it by numbers" by falling back on fail-safe schema, such as Gibbs' reflective cycle (1988). The resulting reflections are often banal and lacking in depth, demonstrating a plodding box-ticking approach.

- Should we coach students to adopt the style of total revelation and honesty or more tempered partial (and perhaps professional) approach?

In assessing the evidence

- Given all of the above, is it clear that the assessment of written reflections is fraught with contradiction. Do you reward honesty, which may result in bland, unsatisfactory "reflections", or industry and invention, with the risk of inauthenticity.

- Are the naïve attempts at writing a reflection a better account of the "reality" of reflection?

- At post-graduate level, reflections are expected to be informed by (which is to say reference) relevant literature, further complicating the notion of what and who the reflection is for and undermines its evidential nature.

Several authors have commented on the dilemmas in assessing reflective productions (Sumison & Fleet, 1996; Stewart & Richardson, 2000; Bourner, 2003; Rai, 2006). Underlying most of their worries is the contradiction that reflections should be immediate and authentic, when in reality, their written "evidencing" is considered, created and to some extent "simulated". There is no room for editing or for "authorly distance".

What is not in question is that it is developmentally good that students articulate professional values, methods, self-analysis, problem formulations, insights, action plans, things that are central to our view of "professionalism". It used to be called "learning the 'language of the priesthood'".

Bourner (2003) makes an interesting attempt to bring the rigour of critical thinking to reflective learning. He offers two tables for comparison – "Questions as tools for critical thinking" and "Questions as tools for reflective learning". What's interesting about the two tables is how different they feel. The questions on critical thinking are entirely those which could be debated, could form

themes for dialogic sense-making: those for reflective learning do not.   They are not debatable, comparable, or contestable: they are internal to an individual's experience.   They also feel like the stimulation questions used in creative writing classes, which naturally leads one to think of Bruner's work (1991) around narratives.

	Questions as tools for critical thinking	Questions as tools for reflective learning
1	What explicit assumptions are being made? Can they be challenged?	What happened that most surprised you?
6	What values underpin the reasoning?	What does the experience suggest to you about your strengths?
12	How generalisable are the conclusions?	What might you do differently as a result of that experience and your reflections on it? What actions do your reflections lead you to?

Table 1: Three selected from Bourner's twelve questions (2003).

Bruner, in his paper "the narrative construction of reality" (1991), develops the idea that the way we tell the story shapes the reality we describe. "Each particular way of using intelligence develops an integrity of its own—a kind of knowledge-plus-skill-plus-tool integrity—that fits it to a particular range of applicability. It is a little "reality" of its own that is constituted by the principles and procedures that we use within it." (Bruner, 1991;2)

An example of such a "reality" could be the domain of a professional. In which case, *narratives of professionalism* could form substitutes for the "reflections" we have been criticising.   Considered as deliberately constructed *narratives*, demonstrating a professional reality, the evidential convolutions and dilemmas associated with their production and assessment evaporate.   Students would still write down their self-analysis, sense-making, judgements, quest for improvement, but in a different way and in a different place.   It would still be evidential, but evidence of a constructed reality, rather than a perceived one – one "whose acceptability is governed by convention and 'narrative necessity' rather than by empirical verification and logical requiredness" (Bruner, 1991;4).

Students would still evidence what they think, and this could be assessed again the requirements of professionalism, but it would be by writing narratives, not reflections. As Charles Handy said, quoting the Irish, "How do I know what I think until I hear what I say?" (2008).

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