

Reflective Practice and the Feminist Lens: The Other Side

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Abstract

This article aims to explore the recent promotion of reflective practice in teacher education and to draw on the thinking that has developed in adult education, particularly in feminist community education. It endeavours to unpack, briefly, the foundational theories that are promoted in teacher education and identify the failings inherent in these traditional constructions. Finally, it proposes a feminist reflective practice that draws on de Beauvoir's concept of the Other, as a key route to enabling educators to understand the multifaceted dimensions of inequality.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Critical Pedagogy, Epistemology, Feminisation of Education, Feminist Education, The Other

Introduction

The surge in interest in reflective practice in education is welcome on many fronts. It is now promoted as an essential element in the education of teachers in all aspects of the system. On the one hand, reflective practice as praxis, the cycle of reflection and action as proposed by Freire (1972) is a key element of conscientization and critical education. But on the other hand, it sets off a set of alarm bells when a process is embraced so wholeheartedly by professions and institutions which are basically conservative. Thus, I want to explore briefly the underpinnings of reflective practice to unpack those conservative leanings, in order to position feminist critical pedagogy as the key route to challenging those leanings.

In this article, I'll consider the ways which positions reflective practice in the context of feminist pedagogical practices. Through this lens, I'll look at the site of struggle between the wider social forces, particularly class, gender, ethnicity

on the one hand, and individualised, subjective practice on the other. In this, I'll endeavour to scrutinize the iterations of critical reflection, reflexivity and reflective practice and develop the core concepts that underpin my argument for a feminist critique in the discussion that is crucial to this scholarly project. That is, I propose to explore the Other side, (de Beauvoir, 1953) and propose that a feminist critique is essential in this discussion. I argue that the revelation of these Other sides is essential for those who experience oppression and subjugation, as well as the self-awareness of educators who live and work in this world. As such, the Other side enhances and extends the practice.

Foundations and New Ways of Knowing

When Dewey (1933) proposed reflection as a route to problem-solving in education, he was opening a new portal to the creation of knowledge with the potential to transform the experience of the educative process. In particular, the focus on experiential learning was ground breaking. Dewey argued that, however people arrived at new insights emanating from reflection, those insights lead to the newer position, more advanced than the starting point. And crucially, this advanced position is new knowledge. Reflection, in Dewey's terms, was both an intellectual process as well as an inductive logical process. That is, rational, logical argument, on one hand, leaving room for almost intuitive leaps, where suggestion and imagination play vital roles in arriving at that advanced state, (Dewey, 1933). Indeed, imagination is the great bulwark against narrow ways of knowing, (Finnegan, 2016). This proposal challenged the status of the scientific, positivist approach to creating new knowledge, which prevailed at the time and which prevails today in many disciplines, even in education (Connolly, 2016).

Dewey (1916) was the foundation for Schön's developments. His contribution placed reflection in the centre of practice, with his discussion on what practitioners can do, and, further, *ought* to do, allowing themselves to be surprised, puzzled or confused (Schön, 1983). Thus, the openness to uncertainty and vulnerability that Schön proposes is at odds with the ways in which many professions are framed. The status of professional development is gaining traction with Continuous Professional Development (CPD). But CPD is more likely to be undertaken to keep the professional up to date with new discoveries or new explorations, and the aim is to improve their practice, rather than to admit to uncertainty. Nonetheless, the promotion of reflective practice has the potential to interrogate this steadfastness. And, both Dewey and Schön have contributed to the understanding that reflective practice is a rich source of

new, self-created knowledge, challenging the view that knowledge is created in the vacuum outside of applied practice.

Interestingly, Freire's work in 1972, also promoted reflection as a prelude to action in his formulation of praxis. Freire contends that praxis is essential to create an alternative epistemological position, with the imperative to start with experience and continue with a critical inquiry into the social, cultural and political significance of the experience (Freire, 1972), notwithstanding the deficits that Freire acknowledged subsequently.

Thus, the foundations of reflective practice in education rest on the major contributions of Dewey and Schön. Reflective practice is viewed as intellectual and rational, rather than an emotional and consciousness raising process. In addition, it completely lacks gender and social analysis, thus promoting an individualistic model of teaching and learning.

The Warzone and Critical Pedagogy

Education is in the frontline of the warzone within conflicting social forces (Connolly and Hussey, 2013). The battle is between critical educators who maintain that critical pedagogy has the capacity to work towards the common good, democracy, social justice, civil society and social and personal emancipation, on the one hand, and the neo-liberal economic discourse which has deepened the ways in which education performs as an instrument of the social, cultural and economic elites on the other hand.

Bourdieu argues powerfully that education maintains the status quo, with his framing of capitals, social and cultural. He considers that the reproduction of the norms and values in society, essentially an exercise of power (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, 1990), continues the entire social system using education as the conduit. That is, inequality, hierarchy, poverty and all other oppressions are maintained through the education system in the wider picture, regardless of the commitment of individual teachers at classroom levels. When we look at main trends in education in Ireland, we can see that these aspirations for the public good are overshadowed by reductionist neo-liberal, economic agendas. This is particularly pertinent in the ideas that underpin the framing of further education which has been conflated with training (Government of Ireland, 2014). This inherent link with occupational training and education is evident in all aspects of the field, not just the specific programmes on professional development, such as law, business, medicine and engineering. The status of

these disciplines drives the curriculum in Higher Education, rather than any aspirations towards the public good, through social justice, community and democracy. That is, human and social development capacities are channelled into constricted lifeworlds (Williamson, 1998), as Further Education and Training (FET) loses Freirean philosophies and critical practices that developed in adult and community education. Freire's pedagogical approaches were firmly on the side of educators and learners as activists and agents of change, pitted against the deeply embedded structures of inequality (Freire, 1972). This is probably the greatest divergence between critical pedagogy and reflective practice. That is, that educators are part of the learning community, and that both the learners and educators are agents, potentially if not actually, in their own lives. The nexus between structure and agency is exemplified in groupwork for learning.

Groupwork and Dialogue

Groupwork in adult learning is framed in many ways, from the individualist, psychological perspectives to the more communitarian, cooperative ways. That is, groupwork is a key process in enabling people to become more agentic in their own personal and social lives, equipped to challenge social structures (Connolly, 2008). Praxis is allied to the connections between structure and agency. Without this framing of agency, the fundamental elements of action and reflection are meaningless. The practice of working with groups in adult education is a model of participative democracy. The ways in which this practice can encompass a diversity of positions is the first principle in creating a more tolerant learning environment. That is, this model can embrace differences rather than perpetuate homogeneity and narrowness. In addition, adult learning groups are in the front line of countering the industrial model on which schooling is based, with the passive, individualist acceptance of rules and regulations, learning by rote, sitting in rows, and working so hard for a perceived reward that education promises to everyone, but which only rewards those who have power and privilege in society already.

This necessarily infers the continuous, reiterative dimensions of reflective practice in the moment and subsequent to the moment, through writing, discussion and groupwork. However, a central concern about reflective practice persists in the concerns about groupwork and reflection, that is, that it cannot, of and in itself, interrogate gender, social and multi-cultural inequality, because it doesn't have the breadth of vision to encompass these inequalities. A feminist lens is a vital way of addressing this blind spot. Moreover, feminist theory is not

unitary, as a basic introductory text book can readily show. It would be more accurate to say that *feminist theories*, as the scholarships are multidisciplinary, multi-layered and dynamic, with constant dialogue and discussion, arguments, tensions and new positions emerging in the vibrant field (Braithwaite and Orr, 2017). This has the impact of unsettling, upsetting and problematising knowledge as we understand it, not only in terms of what is considered knowledge in the first place but also in addressing ways of knowing and ways of being in the world. This opens up conversations about epistemology per se, but pertinently for this discussion, in adult and community education as well. Thus, for this article, I'm underpinning my use of the concepts *feminism* and *feminist* with this understanding: living, breathing, questioning, transforming, and these dynamics are congruent with the field of adult and community education itself.

Feminised but Not Feminist

Clegg maintains that reflective practice is promoted and valorised in feminised professions such as education, counselling, nursing and social work (Clegg, 2010, p. 167). Quite often, feminised occupations are seen as feminist. However, these areas are more likely to promote traditional perspectives about gender, for example, that women are better at caring than men, and men are better at logical, rational work. It is notable that reflective practice is almost absent in traditionally masculinist or patriarchal professions, such as management, business, engineering and construction, with a reliance on professional identity and autonomy. But, notwithstanding this debate, the feminised applications of reflective practice is open to the inherent risk of self-monitoring and self-censoring within a closed circuit, re-enforcing the gender stereotypes, when it could, potentially, be the enactment of radical practice.

This is perpetuated through the internalised constraints that gender stereotyping imposes. These include the internalised norms and values of traditional gender dichotomies which bring lower terms and conditions in work, paid and unpaid. The National Women's Council of Ireland (NWC) clearly identifies the gender pay gap, which is narrower at the basic skills levels, but widest at the highest pay levels, which the Council attributes to the glass ceiling and indirect discrimination (NWC, 2017). A further implication of the *feminised* but not *feminist* practice is the deepening of essentialist positioning. Feminised professions and occupations perpetuate the essentialist assumption of the way women ought to work together in the workplace, but which reverts to individualised private sphere work. In the workplace, women workers are

expected to be flexible and have the capacity to multitask, in work that centres on caring (Clegg, 2010) while in the private domain women do take most of the responsibility for housework and caring work, whether of children, spouses or elders (OECD, 2014).

Epistemology and the Wider World

Another issue that is raised by the feminist critique is the absence of content. When Schön proposed reflective practice, his intention was to challenge fundamentally the approach that prevailed - and still does - in education, the technical-rational perspective, that is, the positivist approach to the epistemology of learning and education, which renders it measurable, logical and neutral. This framing of knowledge limits it immeasurably, and promotes canonical knowledge to the detriment of lived experience and all of the arts, as well as innate and intuitive knowledge, what Thompson called 'really useful knowledge' (Thompson, 1996, 2006). Knowledge for political consciousness is missing from reflective practice, even as Schön proposed it, as reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (Schön, 1983). Thus, for feminist practitioners, the promotion of reflective practice is problematic on two fronts, that of self-censorship and fragile identity on the one hand, but on the other, the absence of consciousness raising knowledge.

Thus, I argue that reflective practice has to address this fundamental inequality through the interrogation of the creation of knowledge. However, the danger is that in a field of practice that is predominately feminised, but not necessarily feminist, the new knowledge is framed as a kind of *women's ways of knowing* (Belenky *et al.*, 1986) which was ground-breaking in its way and day, particularly with regards to the social aspect of the construction, deconstruction and reconstruction of knowledge. However, I want to examine this difference between women's ways of knowing and feminist ways of knowing.

Feminist Ways of Knowing

Anne B. Ryan's significant and influential work reframes these assumptions about the essentialist nature of epistemology (Ryan, 2001). Her interrogation of the liberal humanist perspectives that are influential in adult and community education is vitally important, particularly when it comes to the theory of the person in adult education and how adult education can hope to bring about social change if it relies on these liberal humanistic philosophies.

This tenet is central in the argument that education can envision and work towards profound social change. On the face of it, starting where people are at, that is, the Freirean and Women's Studies approach, looks like the person-centred approach developed from Rogers' ideas, from counselling and therapy and which he applied to education and community (Rogers and Freiberg, 1993). Rogers' stance, though compassionate and caring, is underpinned by an inescapable individualism. This means that he adheres to the liberalism that is inherent in the quests for freedom, based on the ideas of freedoms that emerged during the Enlightenment, and include freedom of speech, freedom of religion, and freedom of the press. It also, incidentally, embraces the free market, and the rights to property (Encyclopaedia of Philosophy, 2012). Rogers joins Maslow in humanistic psychology with Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1968) which again, promoted the individualism that inevitability followed from a narrow world-view of liberalism.

The Other

This belief and trust in individualism completely ignores the structural dimensions to inequality. De Beauvoir develops the concept of the Other to demonstrate the dominance of an androcentric social outlook, in which women are perceived not in their own right but only in relation to this androcentric perspective (1953). The importance of this concept is hard to overestimate in terms of enabling the understanding of persistent *second sex* status of women in social life. The Othering of women is not based on biological differences. Rather it is created out of the socialisation of one half of humanity, not only by the dominant other half, but by the whole of society, through the internalisation. *One is not born but rather becomes woman* challenges essentialism fundamentally, that is, the assumption that there are essential qualities of femininities, and by implication, essential qualities of masculinities, inextricably linked to biology. The internalisation of the social construction of gender means that it is monitored and controlled by heteronormativity, that is, androcentric social norms and values based on the idea of complementary - albeit primary and secondary - gender and sexual roles, which rewards compliance and punishes deviance. But further, de Beauvoir asserts that the quest for freedom and liberation is not to become more like the Subject, the masculine norm which is the opposite of the Other, but rather to fight for equality through discovering an alternative to heteronormativity in the public as well as the private domains. This has profound implications for feminist ways of knowing. By acknowledging that these assumptions are ubiquitous and so-called *common sense*, feminist ways of knowing avoids the risk that Belenky

et al. (1996) take, that of the ascribing essential, rather than experiential and constructive qualities to women's ways of knowing. De Beauvoir is clear that the lens provided by the concept of the Other enables the analysis of experience, and is the key to uncovering those ubiquitous assumptions.

Othering also serves as a vital concept in the analysis of other inequalities and oppressions: class, race, ethnicity, ability, culture. By applying the Other lens, it's clear to see androcentrism, but it also makes the Eurocentric, Western, Northern, able, classist, mainstream, normative, and so on stand out in stark relief. Gender, class, race, sexuality and ethnicity are dimensions of personal, individual identity, while simultaneously being a part of macro social categories which carry various weights, depending on the social power of the normative. This power and influence is not simply about individual agency, but rather it is conferred by the status of the social. While agency can be enhanced through education, it still has to acknowledge and battle against those structural barriers. The Other lens is a crucial educational and reflective means for connecting the personal experience of oppression and the social structures which perpetuate it.

Starting where people are at is just that: the start. The whole idea of starting from that point is to move beyond it and in particular, to transform the personal, the 'I', to the political, the 'we' is fundamental. This is the basis of women's studies, it is implicit in Freire's work and it and the *raison d'être* of critical adult and community education and hopefully, optimistically, it will count substantially in Higher and Further Education, while it may lag behind in training contexts.

The point about feminist ways of knowing is to insert it into the knowledge created through reflective practice. And it points up a glaring deficit, in addition to the absence of social and gender analyses, that of standpoint.

Standpoint theory, as explored by Harding, refers to the value of the knowledge derived from the experience of belonging to a sub-ordinate or marginalised group, particularly women, in the production of knowledge and the practice of power (Harding, 2004). While Harding acknowledges the controversies within the debates, it remains a clear position to shed light on all occurrences of inequality and inequity. Thus, the feminist standpoint is immeasurably valuable in reflective practice, succeeding in linking, not only the action or practice to reflection, but also, more importantly, the personal to the political.

Further, this focus on the personal and standpoint brings in another element, that of the self-awareness that is absent from other frameworks. This necessarily infers a significant shift from *reflective* practice to reflexive practice. Reflexive practice focuses on our being in the world, how we, as agentic practitioners in a stratified world, see that world. Reflexive practice has to encompass a consciousness raising element, rather than simply improve practice. Reflexive practice brings the critical into the process and the knowledge that is created in that critical process is thus closer to knowledge for emancipation. And this has implications for the models of practice that are created.

Models and the Missing Lenses

The existing models of reflective practice are derived from the work of Dewey, Schön in mainstream education and other professions, and Freire in critical pedagogy, adult and community education and community development. Brookfield explores his own model, in which he promotes the idea of four lenses in the process, namely, the autobiographical, the students', the colleagues', and finally, the theoretical lenses (Brookfield, 1995). Brookfield inserts criticality into this process, with the reflexivity that I have discussed above. And as an extremely influential adult educator, his work shaped the practice in very significant ways.

In addition, Kolb's reflective learning cycle is freely used in reflective practice, following a similar process, moving from concrete experience, to reflection, to conceptualisation, to action, (Kolb, 1984). Both follow the pattern of the description of the experience, followed by an evaluation, followed by an analysis, and finally, the plan for future practice. While both these contributors have added substance to the field, they are not alone.

Bolton argues that writing is a key element in reflective practice and the process of writing shifts reflective practice into a formative, tangible, creation. The result of written engagement provides a more profound and multi-layered account of thinking (Bolton, 2010). That is, it makes thinking overt and explicit, rather than an abstract, cognitive process that becomes evident in practice only, at best.

Hillier argues very cogently for the critical consciousness that critical theory generated, that fundamentally challenged traditional ways of knowing. And she highlights the role of that the women's movement in that elemental questioning. Further, when ethics are included in the process, she goes deeper still in the

interrogation, to urge practitioners to search for the real issues that are part and parcel of critical practice, taking culture, tradition, our socially situated selves into the picture and problematising the ‘taken-for-granted’ common sense and assumptions that characterises our everyday lives (Hillier, 2005, pp. 13–15). That is, Hillier acknowledges implicitly and explicitly the centrality of critical theory and the debt to feminist thought and, by implication, the Other side of our socially situated selves. And further, how our socially situated selves necessarily demands reflexivity. This brings us to the centrality of the feminist lens.

The Feminist Lens

The feminist lens extends everything, from the analyses of the self and identity to high art; from interpersonal relationships to the power relationships in globalisation. And all spaces along these spectra. In this context of reflective practice, it is the crucial missing link. If we adopt Freirean praxis in our critical pedagogy, we have to include the feminist lens. Freire was clear that his blind-spot was gender. He had a clear grasp on class oppressions, north-south colonisation and urban-rural divides but not gender. The feminist lens enabled his work to become clearer about whose side he was on, and it adds a dimension that it would miss others. And feminist pedagogy acknowledges the inter-relationships with his vision for education.

A feminist lens creates a fundamental disturbance in scholarship and in the social world. In terms of education, feminism had disrupted epistemology, ontology, research, practice and engagement, to name but a few dimensions. It has also disrupted the disciplinary demarcation and curriculum studies. It has created space for new areas of interest, particularly intersectionality and subaltern studies, as well as disability studies, equality studies and LGBTQ studies. And it has even disrupted the ways in which education is offered, particularly adult and community education, with the diverse, non-traditional emphasis in participation, dialogue and facilitation of learning.

With reflective practice, the model that the feminist lens reveals is congruent with the social movements that feminisms are based on. That is, it is firmly rooted on real experiences and real analyses of real oppressions and real commitment to profound social change for emancipation. A feminist lens starts with the interrogation of where you stand with regards to socially situated lives, in particular lives that are lived in oppression and degradation. It questions how this influences your practice and asks what your commitment to emancipation is? And how do you turn this into knowledge? Finally, feminist reflexive practice

asks you to reflect on the implications for your practice and to start a new cycle of reflection.

This model recognises the missing lenses in the work of Brookfield, (1995) Schön, (1983) Boud *et al.*, (1993), Bolton, (2010) and many others who are committed to improving education through reflective practice. It also compensates for all the deficits in previous models, even within critical pedagogy. It starts where the educator is at, the educator's standpoint, which is the starting point for Freirean and feminist education. It also recognises that both practitioners and learners ought to be equally open to the creation of new knowledge. Above all, this model contains the possibility of creating an environment in which real transformation can happen. This takes education out of the hands of the powerful and into the hands of the population as a whole for the public good and social justice. And of course, it is the model to open the possibility of creating a better world, for everyone.

Conclusion

In this article I endeavoured to address the recent promotion of reflective practice in teacher education. I have reviewed the foundations of reflective practice and shown how these foundations have persisted throughout the roll-out to the present day. I identified the missing lenses, particularly those overlooked by those who do not connect the personal with the political, but also missing in those models drawing on critical theory, but afflicted by gender blindness. And when the gender blindness is acknowledged and redressed, it opens the floodgates for other analyses of inequality. If this is to become mainstream in teacher education, it has to embrace the full scope that has been developed in adult and community education and to guard against practices that maintain the individualist status quo.

In writing this article I recognised my own ignorance and all that I needed to learn. In particular, I saw the hope and commitment to creating a better world by so many adult and further educators, as well as allies in mainstream education. I also learned about the ways in which the potential, as proposed by Dewey and Freire, were drained of criticality, with a reductionism that simplified it into a series of steps that kept everything in the classroom, echoing Murray's contentions about the limits to transformative learning (Murray, 2013).

My vision for feminist reflective practice is to have an impact in people's lives, to bring about real change to real experiences and to real social constraints. If

we are going to promote reflective practice as critical educators, it cannot be unquestioned or reduced to a series of simple steps. It has to have a real impact on practitioners as well as learners, but also on education as a social institution. And a feminist lens enables us to see the Other side, to review our blind spots and to develop our agency against the might of structural inequality.

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