

Review Article on Developing the “Reflective Practitioner”

One of the most stimulating areas of learning theory, in my opinion, is the theory of Reflective Practice. In their popular book on this subject, Brockbank & McGill (1998) fundamentally rely on the work of Schön's (1987). Although intellectually challenging, Schön constantly reviews his ideas from different perspectives. As a result he produces a more thought-provoking text.

A summary of Schön's ideas

Schön begins his work by referring to Nathan Glazer's study of “schools of major professions”, such as business, law and medicine, and “schools of minor professions”, such as social work, teaching and town-planning. At the beginning of the twentieth century, as these professional schools sought the prestige of university departmental status, their normative curriculum was premised on technical rationality, that is, great importance was placed on the rigorous teaching and learning of basic science and facts. Far removed from this accretion of facts, Schön beautifully describes a type of ‘magical’ process inherent within seasoned professionals. Outstanding practitioners do not necessarily have more knowledge, but they have more “artistry”.

The “professionalisation” of education of the major and minor professions resulted in systematic, scientific knowledge replacing artistry. Schön underlines the increasing questioning of the competence of the professions (which has undoubtedly increased since his works were published in 1983 and 1987). He argues that we must teach and coach students not only basic facts but professional artistry. If we ask a great medical practitioner to explain how she makes a correct diagnosis from a hitherto unseen set of symptoms, it is unlikely that she will be able to accurately describe the mental process which characterises her ability to use an existing repertoire of diagnoses to make one on a fresh set of circumstances.

Schön refers to a professional's ability to practically draw-down on their repertoire as *knowing-in-action* and often for professionals this *knowing-in-action* is spontaneous. When a new set of circumstances demand thought to resolve a situation, Schön refers to this as *reflection-in-action*. Often *reflection-in-action* is also spontaneous and many professionals will satisfactorily operate at this level. Schön believes that the acquisition of artistry is dependent upon reflection upon our past reflection-in-action.

Traditionally professional education has not fostered reflection on reflection-in-action as there is no concept of indicating when primary reflection-in-action has taken place. Schön refers to the practicum and learning in practice, and indicates that reflection on reflection-in practice rarely occurs because of time and cost constraints. Schön looks at the ideal of the conservatoire as a model. Musicians and artists traditionally reflect on their practice as a necessary way to improve their work in a low-risk contusive environment.

Implications for legal education

I now consider the implications of Schön's ideas with reference to the Postgraduate Diploma in Legal Practice (LPC), on which I teach. The LPC emerged from the Law Society Finals (LSF) in 1994 following an appreciation that the LSF examinations were little more than a memory test of a vast quantity of facts. LSF practitioners concede that their course taught then little about client

care, drafting, advocacy or research. The LPC introduced these skills as pervasive and key areas. Coursework was also introduced and the examinations concentrated more on problem-solving abilities that regurgitation of facts, underlined by the fact that examinations became 'open-book'.

It could be said that the LPC sought to address increasing dismay from consumer groups about the poor customer service from solicitors. The reforms may have been influenced by the prevailing importance of Reflective Practice. Certainly it would seem that coursework and open-book examinations indicate a desire for students to apply facts. Application of facts would, on Schön's theory prompt knowledge-in-action and reflection-in-action.

As a teacher on the LPC I am aware that classes are required to have a clear pedagogical divide between lecturing in Large Group Sessions (LGSs) and problem-solving workshops in Small Group Sessions (SGSs). Ideally students should thoroughly prepare the professional practice based problems prior to SGSs so that I can facilitate a reflection on the students' reflection-in-practice which flows from their newly learned knowledge-in-practice. In reality this does not generally take place as, due to the sheer quantity of material in all subjects, students rarely prepare. I sat the LPC examinations in 1998 and recall that the best I could manage was to sketchily read the required chapters for the LGSs and make very brief answers to what I recall were quite inaccessible problems.

I believe that due to the current final examination regime (coursework has now been abandoned), students continue to learn in a 'traditional', reactionary manner. Very few students have the time or energy to thoroughly consider the workshop problems in anything more than a perfunctory manner. The factual 'building blocks' obtained in the LGS are barely learned or remembered. In very few instances do students manipulate this into knowledge-in-action or reflection-in-action prior to the SGS. If they did it may be possible to reflect on their reflection-in-action in the SGS and thus coach them in professional artistry.

The LPC has changed in one respect since I passed it in 1998. Graduates and employers alike complained that we had a comparatively poor grasp of basic law. If I compare my notes with those of my students it is clear that the amount of 'black letter' law students are expected to manipulate has increased substantially, thus making it ever harder for artistry to be taught. In one sense this is not entirely a bad thing: If students have a solid knowledge of the law, they will have one factor which Schön does not consider – confidence.

I believe I graduated from the LPC with a fairly unsatisfactory knowledge of the law but an excellent range of skills. I concede that Schön says that students needs facts and application before we can coach on reflection, but in the confines of the current 10 month postgraduate course I do not feel that it is practicable to reflect on reflection in practice following knowledge in practice. There is simply not enough time,

Following completion of the LPC, students must complete a 2-year contract in practicum. At the end of the two years, students pass seamlessly into a qualified profession. As Schön concedes, it is rare for reflection-in-practice to take place during an apprenticeship because, firstly, there are time/cost constraints and, secondly, for valuable reflection-in-action to occur, mistakes should be permitted - but in real life these could prove costly!

One answer would be for the LPC to 'sandwich' the practicum. Students could learn the law, apply in a limited theoretical setting as they do now, apply further in a practicum but then return to the university to reflect on their practice. More pragmatically, a smaller change that could be made within the existing framework, would be to set up voluntary reflective workshops so that some students could begin to reflect on their own workshop practice. These groups would also be

based exemplify the benefits of the “legitimate peripheral participation” theory of Lave and Wenger (1990). These communities of practice would begin the process of reflection on reflection-in-practice, hopefully commence the process of life-long reflective learning, and contribute to the development of students’ professional artistry.

Mark Blakely

Department of Law, Governance and International Relations

London Metropolitan University

References

Brockbank, A & McGill, I (1998) *Facilitating Reflective Learning in Higher Education*. SRHE & OU Press
Buckingham

Lave, J and Wenger, E (1990) *Situated learning: Legitimate peripheral participation*. Palo Alto, CA: IRL

Schön, DA. (1987) *Educating the Reflective Practitioner* (1st ed) Jossey-Bass