Reflective practice: Power, paradox and professionalism

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In Newton's terms the symbolism of 'reflection' seems obvious. Given our first apperceptive views of ourselves as objects in a mirror as neonates. To the empirically minded spirit, at least, reflective practice constituting grounds for professional activity in a wide range of professions, following the works of Schön and Argyris in America along with Boud and his colleagues in Australia in the 1980s, seems to remain almost beyond any space for questioning.

One measure of the powers involved comes from the fact that over the last thirty years, no one has been prepared to take a step into such space. Bucking the trend in a recent study for the 'helping professions' Flint and his colleagues have sought to do just that.

Let us for the moment remain with the metaphors. Such signs each purport to point towards something else. In physics, for example, three contrasting languages have emerged; Newtonian, Maxwellian and quantum theories of light means that reflection may now be understood in terms of the actions of light particles [quanta] and waves. Each of these discourses constitutes its own quite different understandings of the same phenomenon, reflection.

But, in Foucault's 'apparatus of education' only one possible understanding of reflection derived from the seventeenth century prevails. Herein with the aid of Foucault's [1977] perhaps over zealous narrative, *Discipline and Punish*, is manifest the production of the 'docile body'; the iteration and re-iteration each day of this compliant and submissive social body within disciplinary apparatuses found in all so-called developed economies and most developing economies around the globe. Despite his later obvious revisions of this genealogy in a series of lectures entitled *Security, Territory, Population*, a mark of the sovereign powers constituted by reflective practice is that its effects continue to be experienced daily across almost every professional practice in most leading economies around the globe. No professional activity worthy of this name is excluded: architecture, medicine, engineering, the helping professions, management, the media etc.

Reflective practice based on Newton's discourse remains the only show currently available on this small island in the solar system we call earth.

One is not suggesting by analogy with Maxwell and quantum physics that somehow reflective practice should adopt parallel languages. Rather the question is raised concerning the very constitution of possible languages of reflective practice and the understandings cultivated by such languages within all professional activity.

Moreover, *the* mark of the sovereign powers constituted in the language of reflective practice is that it has the capacity to produce few exceptions. Flint and his colleagues' on-going studies of reflective practice have so far revealed that while there is some questioning concerned variously with the efficacy of reflective practices in particular professional settings. Until now no one has yet asked the question about the delimiting effects upon our understandings iterated and re-iterated daily in such discursive practices.

The reason for this impasse is clear. In moving to this reason, despite Foucault's [1977] obvious later reservations concerning the capillary actions of the 'micro-physics' [ibid: 27] of modern power, gathering together, conditioning and shaping societies through in this case the disciplinary apparatuses of the professions, one needs to examine what is the basis for such powers. It is, of course, the very

naming force and gathering powers constituted by that tiniest of words in our lexicon, the *is*, being as presence. As the present participle of the verb, to be, the economies of what are given by being as presence purport to inscribe as objective facts matters concerned no less with every nominalisation and verb in the lexicon of the English language.

In all professional apparatuses two powerful 'meaning makers' are used, ensuring that in any projected understandings of entities arising from reflective practices the integrity of each and every projection is maintained. Moreover as principles, with two of our most powerful meaning makers, 'reason' and 'assessment', each constituting their own axes around which understandings are formed. As principles 'reason' privileges the connection of subject with object, and 'assessment' privileges what is valued in the pedagogic apparatuses of the professions.

It is here that we come to the paradox of professionalism and its aligned 'emotivist' and managerialist cultures where ends available to human beings in their various practices have become the very means of evaluating the performativity of any reflective practice. 'Performatives', of course, following Austin's [1975] deliberations, are those statements that carry with them the promise of simultaneous action. Herein lies the paradox. The principle of assessment concerns itself only with the 'object' formed in reflection in the mirror. In so doing, in purporting to create the basis for caring for other human beings, reflective practice creates a double division. There is a division between real human beings and their objects formed in the mirror. It also creates a divide between winners and losers in the 'language game' of performativity.

The real paradox arises from two inter-related matters. Despite the endless barrage of the measures of professionalism in different practices, such divisions at the heart of reflective practice always falls short of being a whole practice. The very possibilities open to human beings in their practices simply constitutes a reservoir of energy that is available for use in such systems. Secondly that very 'object' is never a unity. It has other identities at play within it. Consequently, as Derrida [2000] suggested, what is given in any economy of the 'object' constituted by reflective practice 'can only be possible *as impossible*, 'that is, unconditionally', 'as *the* impossible' [ibid: 300].

The danger, ironically, is that the prerogatives of professional practice remain locked within this seventeenth century model. Consequently failing to reflect on how to work not only with homogeneous economies of the conditional, calculable and possible aspects of practice, but also with their heterogeneous counterparts. The danger lies in not taking further action in researching this matter. But, not in the current fog of polysemic space constituted from objects of reflective practice, rather within the disseminative drift – that 'empire of signs' that grows everyday.

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