AN INTRODUCTION TO REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

We do not ‘store’ experience as data, like a computer: we ‘story’ it.

Winter 1988, p. 235

You understand how to act from knowledge, but you have not yet seen how to act from not-knowing.

Chuang Tsu trans. 1974, p. 68

I’m no longer uncertain about being uncertain: uncertainty is now my mantra.

Reflective practice student

Reflective practice is positioned firmly as a dynamic developmental process in this interdisciplinary second edition. The term has lost some credence, becoming a catch-all name for a wide range of activities from deep life, work and organisation-changing critique to rote box-ticking practices seeking to make professionals accountable to and controllable by increasingly beaurocratic and market-led organisations. This second edition offers practical and theorised methods for understanding and grasping authority over actions, thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values and professional identity in professional, cultural and political contexts. It clearly delineates processes for critical reflection upon the forms, values and ethics of institutional organisations and structures in which professionals work. This critique can result in radical movements for change.

Most training and post-experience courses include elements of reflective practice; the danger lies in undertaking it because it is just the thing to do. Such an attitude cannot support reflection and reflexivity.

The paradox is that reflective practice is required by the masters, by the system. Yet its nature is essentially politically and socially disruptive: it lays open to question anything taken for granted. Enquiry-based education, ‘education for creativity, innovativeness, adaptability, ease with difference and comfortableness with change . . . [is] education for instabililty’ (Reid and O’Donohue 2004, p. 561).

Smooth running social, political and professional systems run on the well-oiled cogs of stories we construct, and connive at being constructed around us.
Welcoming of diversity can be mere window dressing. Effective reflective practice and reflexivity are transgressive of stable and controlling orders; they lead cogs to decide to change shape, change place, even reconfigure whole systems.

The structures in which our professional and personal roles, values and everyday lives are embedded are complex and volatile. Power is subtle and slippery; its location is often different from how it appears. Deep reflection and reflexivity for development involve:

- **authority** and **responsibility** for personal and professional identity, values, action, feelings;
- **contestation**;
- willingness to stay with **uncertainty, unpredictability, questioning**.

Paradoxically the route is not through angry uncomfortable confrontation: such revolution leads to destructive cycles of action and reaction. The route is through spirited enquiry leading to constructive developmental change and personal and professional integrity based on deep understandings. It is **creative, illuminative, dynamic, self-affirming**, but not a thornless rose bed. People only learn and develop when they enjoy the process, and benefit personally. Serious professionals have cavilled at such creative methods, and use of deeply accessible varied sources of wisdom.

Einstein (1929) was successful partly because he doggedly and constantly asked questions for which everyone thought they knew the answers. Childlike, he asked why?, how?, what?, rather than accepting givens or taken-for-granted s. He ‘love[d] the questions themselves like locked rooms’, and certainly ‘live[ed] the questions’ (Rilke [1934] 1993, p. 35).

Stories are the mode we use to make sense of ourselves and our world. This world and our lives within it are complex and chaotic: seemingly governed by forces not only beyond our control, but beyond our understanding. We tell and retell episodes both minor and major to our colleagues, to our loved ones, to therapists and priests, to strangers on the train, to a wedding guest (Coleridge 1834). This can merely be a process of tucking ourselves securely under a quilt patchworked out of safe and self-affirming accounts: our stories can only too easily be essentially uncritical. Or, even worse, they are censoring tools: ‘cover stories’ (Sharkey 2004). This self-protectiveness can ensure that our stories are not exploring sensitive issues, but are expressions of what we feel comfortable with, or would like to be.

It was still snowing as [Pooh Bear] stumped over the white forest track, and he expected to find Piglet warming his toes in front of the fire, but to his surprise he found that the door was open, and the more he looked inside the more Piglet wasn’t there.

Milne [1928] 1958, p. 163
Effective reflective practice can be like looking for Piglet: the more you look, the more it seems not to be there. It is only when you have the courage to stop looking and trust the reflective and reflexive processes that you will begin to perceive the areas you need to tackle. Discovering what you need to reflect upon and the route to altering things is an exhilarating journey. Afterwards the insights and inevitable changes seem obvious. Although reflective practice has become a standard in initial and continuing professional education and development, it is a state of mind, an attitude, an approach, and therefore elusive to curriculum planners. It is an educational approach which makes the difference between twenty years of experience or one year of experience twenty times.

One way forward is to focus on NON-critical incidents, or perhaps non-‘critical’ aspects of such events. Insight is gained by respecting the reflective and reflexive processes to light upon and enlighten that which most needs examination. These areas might not sock us in the face as ‘critical’; they are probably ones which have been allowed to pass unnoticed because focusing upon them is more problematic, often for unexamined personal or professional reasons. ‘Critical’ incidents, such as giving the wrong vaccine because they had been stored higgledly-piggledly in the fridge, will inevitably be examined. The events we ‘forget’ most need reflection, and give rise to the deepest reflexivity: ‘we need to attend to the untold’ (Sharkey 2004). Joy-Matthews et al. (2004; see also Goldberg 1991) recommend a human resource development exercise: writing what you do not remember. Plato, who said ‘the life without examination is no life’ (Plato trans. 2000, p. 315), reckoned education is finding pathways to what we do not know we know.

Reflective practice and reflexivity are not subjects but a pedagogical approach which should ‘pervade the curriculum’ (Fanghanel 2004, p. 576): the pearl grit in the oyster of practice and education. To be effective they need dynamic methods. The method of travel affects what happens along the way and the destination. A medical student commented: ‘we spend so much time studying medicine that we never have time to study sick people’. Reid and O’Donohue (2004) argue that enquiry-based learning should become the organising logic of entire teacher education programmes, with students learning through enquiry rather than being prepared for enquiry. Curricula need shaking up, and more enquiry-based methods introduced. Curriculum is Latin for race course (Rome’s Piazza Navone was one): perhaps we need to lose an association with ancient Romans.

A story is an attempt to create order and security out of a chaotic world. But for our experiences to develop us – socially, psychologically, spiritually – our world must be made to appear strange. We, and our students, must be encouraged to examine our story making processes critically: to create and recreate fresh accounts of our lives from different perspectives, different points of view, and to elicit and listen to the responses of peers. Listening critically to the stories of those peers also enables learning from their experience. It is the exploration of experience, knowledge, values, identity that matters, rather than any attempt to arrive at a ‘true’ account (Doyle 2004).
important knowledge about reality always comes out of [writing] . . . through a . . . transformation of reality by imagination and the use of words . . . When you succeed in creating something different out of . . . experience, you also achieve the possibility of communicating something that was not evident before . . . But you cannot plan this transmission of knowledge.

Llosa 1991, p. 79

Postulating what other actors might have thought and felt, empathising with them and the situation, as well as imaginatively reconstructing the situation in fresh ways, offers understandings and insights as no other process can. For example, a practitioner can retell a story from the point of view of students or clients, reconstruct it with the genders of the actors reversed, or create a satisfactory ending in place of a horrible one.

Effective reflective practice and reflexivity meet the paradoxical need both to tell and retell our stories in order for us to feel secure enough, and yet critically examine our actions, and those of others, in order dynamically to increase our understanding of ourselves and our practice.

What do we call it?

The term *reflective practice* is not a terribly useful one. The metaphor it embodies is limited: a mirror reflection is merely the image of an object directly in front of it – faithfully reproduced back to front. What is the reflection of shit? Shit. *Reflective practice writing*, however, is a creative adventure right through the glass to the other side of the silvering. Such reflective practice can take us out of our own narrow range of experience and help us to perceive experiences from a range of viewpoints and potential scenarios. It can do this by harnessing a vital human drive – to create stories about our lives, and communicate them.

Perhaps this approach should be called *flexive*. Flexion means ‘alteration, change, modification’, and ‘a bend, curve, and a joint’, whereas reflection means ‘the action of turning [back] or fixing the thoughts on some subject’ (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary*), with the associated definition of the reversed reproduction of an image. This makes *reflection* sound as dynamic as *rumination*: a sheep chewing smelly cud. I have a cartoon of a sheep nose to nose with the reflection of herself and the surrounding meadow. She’s saying: ‘I’m sure the grass is greener in the mirror, but whenever I try to reach it, this ugly ewe bars the way and butts me on the nose.’

The mirror image model of reflection suggests there is a me *out there* practising in the big world, and a reflected me *in here* in my head thinking about it. If I think about it constructively enough I will be able to alter my practice and my relation to you out there. This model is located in modernist duality: *this* in dialogue with *that*, *in* and *out*, or *here* and *there*. Here is an ancient Zen text:
You must first forsake the dualities of: self and others, interior and exterior, small and large, good and bad, delusion and enlightenment, life and death, being and nothingness.

Tsai Chi Chung trans. 1994, p. 95

The through-the-looking-glass model involves far wider potential interactions, opens up more developmental reflexive and reflective space than is possible with a Cartesian-based one. ‘Reflection is the central dynamic in intentional learning, problem-solving and validity testing through rational discourse’ (Mezirow 1981, p. 4). Yes, true, but there is an awful lot more than just the ‘rational’ for us to explore. Professionals cannot fully crawl through the glass. They can still explore the wide and rather perplexing other side of reflection: turn their world inside out and back to front, not just think about it rationally.

Reflective practice: a political and social responsibility

Reflective practice can fall into the trap of becoming only confession. Confession can be a conforming mechanism, despite sounding liberating, freeing from a burden of doubt, guilt and anxiety (Bleakley 2000b). Confessing has a seductive quality because it passes responsibility to others. Practitioners need to take responsibility for their actions and values, and their share of responsibility for the political and social situations within which they live and work. The desire to hold an audience with a ‘glittering eye’ (Coleridge 1834) is strong. Jennifer Nias, a researcher into the experience of women teachers (Nias and Aspinwall 1992), noted with surprise that all her potential interviewees were keen to tell their autobiographies at length. People always are: but they do not want their stories questioned; this is the role of reflective practice.

Reflective practice is more than an examination of personal experience; it is located in the political and social structures which are increasingly hemming professionals in (Goodson 2004). Their right to make moral and professional judgements is being eroded; they are being reduced to technicians, their skills to mere technical competencies. In order to retain political and social awarenesses and activity, professional development work needs to be rooted in the public and the political as well as the private and the personal.

To this end, examinations of practice need to be undertaken alongside open discussions with peers on pertinent issues, an examination of texts from the larger field of work and politics, and discussions with colleagues from outside the practitioners’ own milieu. Reflective practice work can then become politically, socially as well as psychologically useful, rather than a mere quietist navel-gazing exercise. It supports, demands even, practitioners thinking about values:
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If we had asked people to talk about their values in abstract terms, we would have received generalised responses. By asking them to tell [write] stories about important experiences, we were able to see something of how values reveal themselves in a complex, varied and shifting way in practice.

Pattison et al. 1999b, p. 6

Values which underpin practice are rarely analysed or questioned. Through reflexive practice professionals realise dissonance, or dissatisfaction with their own values in practice, or those of their organisation, leading them to make dynamic change. This might not be easy, particularly if they realise an action has been against their own ethical code, or that they are in an untenable but unalterable situation (Rowland 2000). Examining such fundamental areas requires a supportive, confidential, carefully facilitated environment.

Goodson creates a distinction between life stories and life history. The latter is the former plus appropriate and challenging data from a wide range of sources, and evidence of vital discussion with colleagues. ‘The life history pushes the question of whether private issues are also public matters. The life story individualises and personalises; the life history contextualises and politicises’ (1998, p. 11). Noel Gough (1998) uses a similar method with postgraduate students in education. He says he plays with the method, which he calls currere – a term coined by Pinar (1975) and Grumet (1981).

Gomez et al. (2000, p. 744) found how education students’ reflection was unchallenging and non-risk-taking, because they only wrote personal narratives of their classroom teaching, from their own point of view. ‘The nature of personal stories as ones that people actually lived limited the ways in which they could be interrogated. Questioning the viewpoint resulting from an event in someone’s life was tantamount to challenging her overall integrity.’ Future student narratives will be written from multiple perspectives, enabling challenge and insight.

Cartoons in another study offered a ‘playfully ironic dimension for intensifying the process of critical reflexivity’ (Cavallaro-Johnson 2004, p. 423). Visual images, which allow subtexts to appear unwittingly, prevented the autobiographical stories from being uncritical and confessional. I would argue that a range of different forms of text, such as from different points of view, can similarly offer layers of unwitting subtext.

Re-view

A film or story is a dynamic fresh look through the eyes of more than one actor. Replaying back what ‘actually’ happened is impossible: any retelling will inevitably be affected by the view of the person doing the retelling. Effective reflective practice enables the exploration of a range of viewpoints and possibilities:
An introduction to reflective practice

Stories are a lens through which I view the world to make sense of my experiences and those of my colleagues and patients. In writing some of these stories I am able to focus on complex issues that have previously appeared distorted by time and emotions. Metaphors shed light on subjects that I had been unaware of before, patterns stand out in ways that I had not hitherto understood.

Mark Purvis

Reflective practice is learning and developing through examining what we think happened on any occasion, and how we think others perceived the event and us, opening our practice to scrutiny by others, and studying texts from the wider sphere. Reflexivity is finding strategies for looking at our own thought processes, values, prejudices and habitual actions, as if we were onlookers. It is a focusing closer and closer. In the film Blow-up the only evidence for a murder is a small, insignificant-seeming detail in a photograph. This tiny detail is blown up and up until the evidence is clear. No detail is potentially too trivial or insignificant to write, think and talk about. These vital details might have gone unnoticed at the time, as in Blow-up.

Many professions facilitate others to understand their lives and themselves better, and hopefully improve things thereby. A practitioner cannot support another in this way if they are not aware and open themselves (Murray 1982). Bringing the personal into the professional can increase empathy between client and professional (Smyth 1996). Aesthetic experience (such as writing) can leap over the seeming gap between the personal and the professional self, and the seemingly impossible gap between the safe and rehearsed story and possibly dangerous new stories. This can only bring greater unity and wholeness of experience to the practitioner or educator, and greater empathy between them and their client. Job satisfaction will increase, and work-related stress decrease:

Perhaps the most accessible form of freedom, the most subjectively enjoyed, and the most useful to human society consists of being good at your job and therefore taking pleasure in doing it – I really believe that to live happily you have to have something to do, but it shouldn’t be too easy, or else something to wish for, but not just any old wish; something there’s a hope of achieving.

Levi 1988, p. 139

Writing stories and sharing them in a trusted, confidential, facilitated forum of peers, or within supervision, is a way of increasing job satisfaction and effectiveness, and is the process offered by this book. Explorative and expressive writing is pivotal: the writing of a story or poem is a first-order activity. The writing, the essential discussions and the writing of additional stories from different angles with the support of the group, is a creative explorative process in its own right –
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not a tool in professional reflection. Course participants do not think and then write, the writing is the vehicle for the reflection: reflection in writing. Not only does writing enable the most appropriate reflection, but also, as a participant commented, ‘one of the values of writing is that you can freeze the film: reflect upon one frame or a short series, then run the film backwards and review a previous scene in the light of reflections upon a later one. This would be difficult to do in talking: it wouldn’t make sense; impossible to do during action.’

I consider writing as a method of inquiry, a way of finding out about yourself and your topic. Although we usually think about writing as a mode of ‘telling’ about the social world, writing is not just a mopping-up activity... Writing is also a way of ‘knowing’ – a method of discovery and analysis. By writing in different ways, we discover new aspects of our topic and our relationship to it. Form and content are inseparable.

Richardson 2000, p. 345

The psychologist Oliver Sacks studied people who were missing, or effectively missing, part of their brain, and the bizarre things this led to. In his essay The Man who Mistook his Wife for a Hat, he studies ‘Dr P.’ who could see, but had lost ‘visual perception, visual imagination and memory, the fundamental powers of visual representation... insofar as they pertained to the personal, the familiar, the concrete’. Sacks concludes:

Our mental processes, which constitute our being and life, are not just abstract and mechanical, but personal as well – and as such involve not just classifying and categorising, but continual judging and feeling also. If this is missing, we become computer-like, as Dr P. was. And by the same token, if we delete feeling and judging, the personal, from the cognitive sciences, we reduce them to something as defective as Dr P. – and we reduce our apprehension of the concrete and real... Our cognitive sciences are themselves suffering from an agnosia essentially similar to Dr P.’s. Dr P. may therefore serve as a warning and parable – of what happens to a science which eschews the judgmental, the particular, the personal, and becomes entirely abstract and computational.

Sacks 1985, p. 19

Reflective practice can learn from Sacks’s ‘warning and parable’, and be open to as much of ourselves as is possible. A reflective practice suffering from agnosia will not get us terribly far.

Effective reflective practice encourages the seeking of understanding and interpretation of principles, justifications and meanings (Morrison 1996). It involves interrogating both our explicit knowledge, such as known and quantifiable evidence-based knowledge, and implicit knowledge – ‘a collection of information, intuitions and interpretation’ (Epstein 1999, p. 834) based on experience and
prior knowledge (for further analysis of types of knowledge, see Eraut 1994; Belenky et al. 1997). Implicit knowledge is tried and tested, gained initially from experience, observation, or study. Intimately known, its appropriate application is intuitive. This does not necessarily mean that it is right, any more than knowledge gained from randomised control trial research (explicit) is.

Such re-viewing of knowledge and experience can lead practitioners to perceive a need for change in their world, their relation and attitude to it, and the attitudes of others. One of my students stated: ‘this is not an academic module, but an assertiveness training course’. Asserting yourself inevitably involves challenging social structures.

One of the greatest benefits to a student in a learning situation, or a client with a practitioner, is the sense of their relatedness to the professional: that they are interested, involved, and care. In medicine this has been called the *placebo effect* of the physician as *healer*: ‘the attitude of the doctor can make an appreciable difference to the psychological response of the patient who feels the need to be understood and listened to empathically’ (Dixon et al. 1999, p. 310). To give the people we work with confidence in us as professionals, we have to be secure and happy enough ourselves in our roles, and not anxious or inhibited.

How can that happen in overworked, overstressed professions, which are getting less appreciated daily? One of the ways of being an empathetic, effective practitioner is to be reflexive as well as reflective.

Reflection is an in-depth consideration of events or situations outside of oneself: solitarily, or with critical support. The reflector attempts to work out what happened, what they thought or felt about it, why, who was involved and when, and what these others might have experienced and thought and felt about it. It is looking at whole scenarios from as many angles as possible: people, relationships, situation, place, timing, chronology, causality, connections, and so on, to make situations and people more comprehensible. This involves reviewing or reliving the experience to bring it into focus. Seemingly innocent details might prove to be key; seemingly vital details may be irrelevant.

Reflection involves reliving and rerendering: who said and did what, how, when, where, and why. Reflection might lead to insight about something not noticed in time, pinpointing perhaps when the detail was missed.

**Reflexivity**

A reflexive-minded practitioner will then ask themselves, why did this pass me by: where was my attention directed at that time? Reflexivity is: ‘what are the mental, emotional and value structures which allowed me to lose attention and make that error?’ This deep questioning is missed out if the practitioner merely undertakes reflection as practical problem-solving: what happened, why, what did I think and feel about it, how can I do it better next time?
Reflexivity is making aspects of the self strange: focusing close attention upon one’s own actions, thoughts, feelings, values, identity, and their effect upon others, situations, and professional and social structures. The reflexive thinker has to stand back from belief and value systems, habitual ways of thinking and relating to others, structures of understanding themselves and their relationship to the world, and their assumptions about the way that the world impinges upon them. This can only be done by somehow becoming separate in order to look at it as if from the outside: not part of habitual experience processing, and not easy. Strategies are required, and the support of others. This critical focus upon beliefs, values, professional identities, and how they affect and are affected by the surrounding cultural structures, is a highly responsible social and political activity.

Reflexivity involves coming as close as possible to an awareness of the way I am experienced and perceived by others. It is being able to stay with personal uncertainty, critically informed curiosity as to how others perceive things as well as how I do, and flexibility to consider changing deeply held ways of being. The role of a trusted other, such as a supervisor or peer-reader of an account, is vital.

Mindfulness is an invaluable approach. A conscious exclusion of other elements of life, apart from that which is being attended to (Johns 2004), is achieved when senses and awarenesses are tuned into present action: the opposite of multitasking (Epstein 1999). Being mindfully aware develops communication, ability to use implicit knowledge in association with explicit knowledge, and insight into others’ perceptions. Frank speaks of practical wisdom, from Aristotle: ‘Phronesis is the opposite of acting on the basis of scripts and protocols; those are for beginners, and continuing reliance on them can doom actors to remain beginners’ (2004, p. 221).

The observation skills and awarenesses required of a reflective writer develop mindfulness, and are developed by it. Both require an acute and aware focusing upon what is happening at any time. Doctor-writer Verghese exhorts: ‘We should be ministers for healing [and educating], storytellers, storymakers, and players in the greatest drama of all: the story of our patients’ [and students’] lives as well as our own’ (2001, p. 1016).

An example: Sam, a midwife, brought a furious account of an angry mother she had attended as an NHS midwife: ‘stupid, hostile upper-middle class bitch who felt she had the right to boss me around, tell me what to do’. The birth had been exhausting and disastrous for both mother and midwife: Sam still felt bitter twenty-five years later. The reflective practice group offered insight and comparative cases, and suggested Sam wrote an account from the mother’s perspective.

The following week saw a very different Sam: ‘I don’t know exactly what was wrong, but I do know, having relived it from this mother’s point of view, that she was upset and confused. Because I saw her as a stupid, middle-class bitch who thought she could have everything she wanted her way, I never listened to her properly. I think I’ll see demanding mothers in a different way in future.’
Telling the truth?

The narratives we tell and write are perspectival. Looking in through a window at experience to reflect on it from outside is impossible. Professionals, however open about themselves and their practice, can only perceive and understand from their own viewpoint, broad and empathic as that might be. To be objective is to be ‘not influenced by personal feelings or opinions in considering or representing facts; impartial, detached’ (OED). Yet, ‘We don’t see things as they are, we see them as we are’ (Nin, quoted in Epstein 1999, p. 834).

Individual perspectives and values can be widened and deepened. One can look on the glass and only see one’s self reflected, or through it as in George Herbert’s hymn: ‘A man that looks on glass, / on it may stay his eye; / or, if he pleaseth, through it pass, / and then the heav’n espy.’ Lewis Carroll’s Alice does even better: she crawls right through the looking-glass, leaving her stuffy Victorian rule-bound world, entering a world in which everything ‘was as different as possible’, things are ‘all alive’, where dynamic connections are made between divergent elements.

A creative leap is required to support widening and deepening of perspective, and the ability to mix tacit knowledge with evidence-based or explicit knowledge effectively. The professional arena can be opened up to observations and reflections through the lens of artistic scrutiny. We are still anchored to our own perspective, but these perspectives will be artistically and critically enhanced. We cannot pass through the mirror’s silvering, and can inevitably reflect only upon ourselves, our own thoughts and experiences. Artistic processes such as writing can, however, enable a harnessing of, for example, material such as memories which we do not know we remember, and greater access into the possible thoughts and experiences of others. The perspectival nature of such writing is acknowledged (i.e. they do not purport to be objective or true), and the many skills used are those of literature.

Professional writers are being heard clearly, both students (DasGupta and Charon 2004; Hatem and Ferrara 2001; Gomez et al. 2000) and practitioners (Clough 2002; Loughran 2004; Bolton 1999b; 2003a; see also the Annals of Internal Medicine: Physician-Writers Reflection series, e.g. Shem 2002). Samuel Shem says fiction writing has been an essential way for him of humanising medicine (2002).

Writers acutely observe small details and subtle nuances of behaviour and situations. A teacher- or clinician-writer observes details missed by good observant teachers or clinicians (see Charon 2004). Try it. Observe a student or client walking into your practice place. Capture on paper how they hold themselves, breathe, move their limbs, their characteristic gestures and sayings. What do they remind you of – a cat?, a big soft armchair?, a locked filing cabinet?

A writer has the unparalleled privilege also of entering into the life of another. That this person is a character on a page does not make it any less of a privilege. Deep understandings can be gained by entering (virtually) another’s feeling,
thinking, perception and memories. This is writing beyond what you know, and has to be: if you know where writing is going to take you, start at that known point, and write on into the unknown. Try it. Take the person you have just described. Write the conversation they might have had on returning home that night. Remember this is an artistic exercise: don’t think about it, let your hand do the writing, free of the police officer of your mind. If you add in something about how they got home, where they live or drink, you really are allowing your imagination to take you through the glass. You tap into latent understandings which have possibly not been so fully exercised before.

This is fiction; the writing has been invented imaginatively: it removes the straitjacket of what really happened. Writers are therefore free to draw deeply upon their imagination and aesthetic sense, and their intuitive knowledge of social and human areas such as relationships, motives, perspective, cause and effect, ethical issues and values.

It matters not a jot that you do not depict what actually happened, or what your student or client really thought. What does matter is that you have brought what you understand and think about this person into the forefront of your mind. Medical students write patients’ illness stories in the voice and vernacular of the patient, imaginatively and vicariously entering patients’ contexts. They ‘become the other’ through creative writing (Engel et al. 2002, p. 32). It is not quiddity we seek – the real nature or essence of a thing – but our experience of it.

Sharing this writing with a colleague can offer effective reflection upon understandings. Rewrite with the fresh insight gained. And perhaps a colleague, also present at the encounter with the patient, might write an account. Reading each other’s account will offer the different perspectives from which you unwittingly work.

This method of reflection does not jeopardise professional accuracy of perception (Mattingley 2000). Neither does it impose distorted interpretations about patients (Garro and Mattingley 2000) because its purpose is to explore and express what is already there in clinicians’ and educators’ understanding and perception. It brings this to the fore to be reflected upon critically and effectively. It also brings to the forefront of attention the perspectival nature of our perception. No one can know what really happened in any situation. Perhaps it might become clear that the doctor understood the patient very differently from the nurse, or the teacher might think and write one thing today, reflect upon it perhaps with peer(s), and write something different tomorrow, their perception enhanced by the writing and discussions. Such a collection of stories can build up a composite picture, and what was thought and felt – getting as close as possible to what really happened.

Kevin Marsden, a special-school teacher, and Masters in Education reflective practice student tells a classroom story:
Malcolm

One morning we were doing number work. Malcolm was struggling to recognise sets of two. He was troubled by the book in front of him and sat slumped on an elbow.

I had one of those ‘bright ideas’ teachers tend to get. Let’s make it more practical. ‘Malcolm,’ I said. ‘Look at Darren. How many eyes has he got?’

Malcolm looked at Darren. Pointing with his finger he slowly counted in his deep voice, ‘one . . . two’.

‘Good, well done,’ I said. ‘Now look at Debbie, how many eyes has she got?’

Pointing carefully again Malcolm intoned slowly, ‘one . . . two’.

“That’s great, Malcolm, now look at Tony, count his eyes.’

‘One . . . two.’ Let’s take this a step further, I said smugly to myself. ‘Now Malcolm, look at Matthew. Without counting can you tell me how many eyes he has got?’

Malcolm looked at me as if I had gone mad. ‘OK that’s fine Malcolm, you just count them like you did the others.’

Relieved he slowly repeated his methodical counting: ‘one . . . two’.

There is a magical moment in teaching, when the penny drops, the light goes on, the doors open. Success is achieved. I was starting to worry. We weren’t getting there!

‘Malcolm, how many eyes has Naheeda got?’ Malcolm counted slowly, as if it was the first pair of eyes he had ever seen. ‘One . . . two’.

‘Good, you’re doing really well.’

We carried on round the class. Eager faces looked up to have their eyes counted. I was growing desperate as we ran out of children. Was I leading Malcolm on an educational wild-goose chase? Were we pursuing an idea that was not yet ready to be caught?

The last pair of eyes was counted. ‘One . . . two.’ The finger carefully went from eye to eye. There was only me left. ‘Malcolm,’ I said, trying to hide my desperation, ‘how many eyes have I got?’ Malcolm studied my face carefully. He looked long and hard at my eyes. I waited expectantly in the silence. His brow furrowed. Finally he spoke.

‘Take your glasses off.’

Kevin Marsden

Kevin read this to his established sub-group of five teachers. They trusted and felt confidence and respect for each other’s professional abilities and views. Kevin was able to share his frustrations and sense of failure; the group learned about the methods, joys and problems of special-school teaching. They were able to explore the probability that Malcolm had had a different understanding of his task than did Kevin. Possibly Malcolm thought he was to count the eyes, rather than ‘guess’ how many each had. To do this he would have had to ask for specta-
cles to be removed so he could see clearly. The situation of a mismatch between a teacher’s intentions and a child’s understanding must happen so often.

**Why reflective practice now?**

The grand stories of patriarchy/patriotism, religion, family and community no longer bind society. We look to counsellors, psychologists, teachers, clerics, life partners, GPs or social workers for essential support. Marriages founder and professionals increasingly experience stress as they now have the burden previously carried by a nexus of local and family community.

Faith in that great god science has also been shaken: ‘Science, in my view, is now at the end of certainty’ (Prigogine 1999, p. 26). There has been a powerful frontier (boundary) between science (and scientific professions like medicine) and the arts since the Enlightenment. A blinkered view of what constitutes knowledge and experience cannot be held for much longer.

If any of us are out of touch with any part of ourselves we are in an impoverished state. The dominant culture is scientific, but the scientist who concentrates on this side of themselves exclusively is as impoverished as is the musician or writer who concentrates only on the artistic.

Paul Robertson (Director of Medici String Quartet), 1999

The age of post-Newtonian belief in our ability to order (‘master’ even) our world is going. It led to a mess: the rise of clinical depression and the spread of the deserts, for example. The assumptions that an objective view of the world (Kantian) is ‘grown-up’, that we should shed our subjective view along with sand and water play, are being questioned (see also Sacks 1985, pp. 1–21).

An ethnographer can no longer stand on a mountain top from which authoritatively to map human ways of life (Clifford 1986). Practitioners cannot confidently diagnose and dictate from an objective professional or scientific standpoint; teachers do not know answers. The enmeshment of culture and environment is total: no one is objective.

‘Since the seventeenth century, Western science has excluded certain expressive modes from its legitimate repertoire: rhetoric (in the name of “plain” transparent signification), fiction (in the name of fact), and subjectivity (in the name of objectivity). The qualities eliminated from science were localised in the category of “literature”’ (Clifford 1986, p. 102). These categories have returned from that 300-year marginal position, to be embedded alongside the scientific approach.

Holistic coherent understandings which might support us out of our alienated mess are increasingly entertained. ‘We now see the world as *our* world, rather than *the* world’ (Reason 1988). Complementary healing considers our wholeness, not just within ourselves, but also within our environment and community. ‘We seek a knowing-in-action (and thinking-in-action) which encompasses as much of our experience as possible’ (Reason, ibid.).
An introduction to reflective practice

Ideal professionals, gathering data on which to base their pedagogy, diagnosis or care, are like social anthropologists. Geertz suggested that successful ethnographers create a ‘thick description’: a web of ‘sort of piled-up structures of inference and implication through which the ethnographer is continually trying to pick his way’ (Geertz 1973, p. 7). The reflective practice writer who explores and experiments with different writing approaches, using whatever seems appropriate at the time, is like Lévi-Strauss’s *bricoleur* (1966). This knotted nexus has then to be understood and interpreted to some degree: ‘a good interpretation of anything – a poem, a person, a history, a ritual, an institution, a society – takes us into the heart of that of which it is the interpretation’ (Geertz [1973] 1993, p. 7).

An effective reflective practitioner attempts to understand the heart of their practice. Understandings gained in this way, however, are always partial; the deeper the enquiry, the enquirer realises the less they know and understand: *the more you know, the more you know you don’t know*. Geertz also stresses that it is vital not to generalise across cases but within them. Having got somewhere near the heart of clients’ or students’ stories and poetry, practitioners can begin to act upon this understanding.

Professionals writing about their work, sharing it with colleagues in order to offer insight, and relating this to a wider field professionally and politically, are together engaged in an activity rather like Reason’s *co-operative enquiry method*, in which researcher and subject collaborate in all the stages of research, including reflecting on the experience and making sense of it (Reason 1988). The practitioner takes a full share of responsibility. All too often professionals act in the mould of traditional researcher; acting *on* people: collecting data, and coming to conclusions in camera. There is a similarity with heuristic research (Moustakas 1990; Etherington 2004)

‘In this way, it may be possible to avoid providing care which is dry, barren and – perhaps the greatest sin of all – unimaginative’ (Smyth 1996, p. 937). Effective reflective practice can enable care or education which is alert and alive to the client’s or student’s needs and wants, whether professed or not. It can enable the practitioner to use their skill, knowledge and experience creatively and lovingly, and look forward with a greater confidence.

Angela Mohtashemi, a management consultant, shares her experience of reflective writing in organisations:

As I help organisations become more effective through better communication and engagement with their employees, I introduce reflective writing wherever I can as a tool for teamwork, learning and development and coaching. The workplace is a tough, manipulative environment where people are often expected to comply without challenge, to ‘live the company’s values’, to ‘display the right behaviours’ and even to adopt the corporate language. One’s sense of self can become fragile and this limits potential. Whenever I have used writing with groups or individuals they have commented on the sense of liberation and the feeling that they are getting to the heart of things.
Sometimes I have run workshops or team sessions specifically to explore reflective writing, sometimes incorporate it into other situations. A writing activity, such as writing about your name, can be a great icebreaker. I recently ran a session on writing for personal and organisational development as part of a leadership course my firm runs jointly with a university business school. The session incorporated learning theory, my own experience, principles of reflective writing and practical activities. These activities were typical of the techniques I use and included free writing and using unfamiliar imagery to look at the daily work experience.

Free writing, although very simple, fulfils many purposes and is often a revelation to people. A number of participants went to their action learning sets keen to use free writing to explore organisational issues before discussing them with the group. They were excited about the patterns that emerged and about the honesty of a conversation with one’s self. I encourage people in action learning sets to reflect about the experience afterwards. One wrote to me later:

I spent almost 2hrs writing up how I felt during our discussion and how I intended to change my behaviour as a result. It was tremendously therapeutic and enjoyable, which I found surprising, as I have, until now, been avoiding writing down anything about how I feel – so Thank You!

Sue Smith wrote:

Bringing the issue was like opening a door and seeing a crack of light – and seeing a very small slither [sic] of a room. Once the door was opened fully – which happened when I started to look at the amount of change I’d undergone – I could see the room in its entirety – and appreciate how full and intricate the things in there were.

Sue Smith has a tremendous opportunity to change people’s lives. Writing helps her find a way to pause and reflect, to argue with herself until she believes what she says and can then find the voice to persuade others. In that way, writing can be a powerful force for change.

When I first began this work I feared the response would be cynicism and doubts about its relevance. After all, most workplaces are based on rational and ‘scientific’ management practices: plans, budgets, facts, timelines, blueprints etc. There is little place for emotion and individual expression. My fears were wrong. Every time the response has been very positive and unleashed the power people can have when they bring their whole selves to work. One team member said the writing was ‘one of the most exciting, interesting and engaging things I’ve done since I’ve been with the firm’.

Angela Mohtashemi
Reflective practice and reflexivity according to the principles and practice outlined here is a valuable developmental process for any teacher, social worker, clinician or student. It can take its non-judgemental camera down to any aspect of practice, with patients, colleagues, administrative and other staff, the interface of home and work, and the impact of experiences in the past on present actions. No feeling, thought or action is too small or too big for this zoom or wide-angle lens.