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Reflection: an assessment and critique of a pervasive trend in higher education

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ABSTRACT

The idea of reflection has become more and more pervasive in higher education in recent decades, particularly – but not only – in teaching and learning and in the professional disciplines. But what does it mean, how has it been applied and what does it add? This article explores the history and development of the idea and assesses its place in contemporary higher education. The critiques of its increasingly prominent place are reviewed, and it is concluded that it may be time to re-assess the use of reflection in higher education.

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Introduction

The idea of reflection has become more and more pervasive in higher education in recent decades, particularly, but not only, in teaching and learning. As academics – especially those new to the profession – we are encouraged to reflect regularly on our varied teaching, research, administrative and other roles. We may write down these reflections, in a notebook or online, and share them with trusted mentors or colleagues, with the aim of 'continuously improving' our practice and its impact on those we work with.

These practices are also shared with our students, particularly those studying professional disciplines such as nursing, social work and teaching. They are encouraged to maintain reflective diaries or journals, as well as larger portfolios of their work and their reflections on it, and increasingly some of this reflective work will be assessed to check that they are both doing it properly and learning appropriate lessons from it.

Reflection has become widely accepted in higher education as a useful, even essential, tool. Yet, as this article argues, we need to maintain a critical stance towards the practice. We need to ask ourselves: where has reflection come from? What does it mean? And what does it add to higher education practice? This article explores the history and development of the idea, and assesses its place in contemporary higher education. The issues

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that have arisen, and critiques of its increasing prominence and practice, are reviewed, and appropriate conclusions are drawn.

Methodologically, the article is informed by the techniques of systematic review (Jesson, Matheson, and Lacey 2011; Torgerson 2003). Databases – Google Scholar, Scopus and Web of Science – were searched using keywords to identify potentially relevant articles and reports that had been published on the topic. Those identified were then downloaded and examined, and retained for further analysis if they proved to be relevant. The reference lists in these articles and reports were checked for other potentially relevant sources to follow up.

The focus of the article is primarily on reflection carried out at the individual level, which is the dominant form, though some recognition is also given to reflection at the group or organisational levels. In the latter cases, what may have originally been reflection can transform into something else, such as the development of a community of practice (Tight 2015). The article also, while recognising the importance of discipline, takes a deliberately pan-higher education perspective. Other researchers, in other articles, may trace the developments in particular disciplines.

Origins and meaning

The application of the idea of reflection in higher education, and education in general, is frequently traced to the work of educators such as Dewey (1933) or, more recently, adult educators such as Brookfield (1995, 2009), Kolb (1984) or Mezirow (1998; see also Mezirow et al. 1990). Kolb, for example, defined learning as 'the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience' (1984, 38). Kolb devised the four-stage learning cycle – one of the most widely reproduced diagrams in education and management (Vince 1998, 2022) – through which 'concrete experience' produces 'observations and reflections', leading to 'formation of abstract concepts and generalisations' and 'testing their implications in new settings'.

But the key author on this topic is widely agreed to be Schön (1983, 1987), another US-based academic. Schön (1983), based on a study of practices in the professions – in his case including architecture, engineering, management, psychotherapy and town planning – argued for moving the epistemology of practice from technical rationality to reflection-in-action:

> practitioners do frequently think about what they are doing while doing it. In professional practice, reflection-in-action is not a rare event. On the other hand, we have also seen how systems of knowing-in-practice may limit the scope and depth of reflection. (275)

The idea of reflection-in-action, thinking about what you are doing while you are doing it, was then complemented by reflection-on-action, a less hurried looking back on and reconsideration of the events of the day.

Schön (1987) later went on to propose that:

> university-based professional schools should learn from such deviant traditions of education for practice as studios for art and design, conservatoires of music and dance, athletics coaching, and apprenticeship in the crafts, all of which emphasize coaching and learning by doing. Professional education should be redesigned to combine the teaching of applied science with coaching in the artistry of reflection-in-action. (xii)

Taking the idea of 'deviant traditions of education' with a pinch of salt – with professional schools of business, engineering, law, management, medicine, nursing, teaching and so forth now accounting for the majority of higher education (Brint et al. 2005) – the related ideas of coaching, mentoring, shadowing and training are now mainstays of practice in many university and college departments.

However, reflection – like many key ideas in higher education and elsewhere – does not have a single, widely accepted, definition. Indeed, arguably, it is not a single, homogeneous idea.

About two decades ago, Rogers (2001) helpfully carried out a concept analysis of the term. He examined seven major theoretical approaches to reflection, noting that 'no fewer than 15 different terms were used to describe the reflective process' (40). Further analysis:

> revealed several common definitional elements. These included reflection as a cognitive and affective process or activity that (1) requires active engagement on the part of the individual; (2) is triggered by an unusual or perplexing situation or experience; (3) involves examining one's responses, beliefs, and premises in light of the situation at hand; and (4) results in integration of the new understanding into one's experience. (41)

He considered the antecedents of reflection, its context, the processes involved, its value, the techniques that might foster reflection and its outcomes, before concluding very positively that 'Perhaps no other concept offers higher education as much potential for engendering lasting and effective change in the lives of students as that of reflection' (55).

Tellingly, reflection has been closely linked to a number of other trends or practices in higher education teaching and learning, including action research (Burchell and Dyson 2005), experiential learning (Veine et al. 2020) and transformative learning (Mezirow 1998). Different approaches to, or categories or dimensions of, reflection have also been recognised. Thus, Jay and Johnson (2002), in the context of teacher education, offer a threefold typology – descriptive, comparative and critical – before discussing how these can be brought together in a more holistic way.

Gur-Ze'ev, Masschelein, and Blake (2001) put forward a 'new' concept of reflection, which they contrast with reflectivity, with the latter seen as the only strategy possible in 'normalizing' education:

> within the framework of normalizing education there is no room for reflection, but only for reflectivity. In contrast to reflectivity, reflection manifests a struggle of the subject against the effects of power which govern the constitution of her conceptual apparatus, her knowledge, her consciousness and her limitations and possibilities for successful functioning. (93)

Here, reflection is seen as essentially challenging, both to those engaging in it and to the wider institution or system within which they are operating.

More recently, Harvey and Vlachopoulos (2020) examined the use of reflection retreats for academic staff in Australia and China, identifying an epistemological spectrum of approaches to reflection; including technical/analytical, critical, personalistic and creative strategies. Interestingly, they concluded that:

> Personalistic reflection, through meaningful action planning, was the most divisive activity for both cultural cohorts. In the Australian cohort, participants reported that they didn't trust their own ability or habits to carry through with the plan of incorporating more reflection into their professional lives. In the Chinese cohort, participants reported that the

> organisational context in which they operated does not offer a good fit for this type of reflective activity, as there is no allowance for conceiving and carrying out personal plans. (388)

Clearly, then, the scope for employing reflection may be limited by both the individual's abilities and their institutional or cultural context.

Bleakley (1999), like Jay and Johnson (2002), while recognising a variety of epistemological positions on reflection, also argues for a holistic reflexivity, drawing out:

> four major epistemological positions informing 'reflection' … technical rationality (the object of Schön's critique), humanistic emancipatory (Schön's position, and the object of the deconstructive critique), deconstructive (Usher's position), and radical phenomenological (post-Heidegger). This latter position is further informed particularly by the final work of Merleau-Ponty … [which] offers a critique of philosophy's traditional reliance upon reflection as a thinking about thinking … For Merleau-Ponty there is a state that he calls sur-reflexion, best translated as either a 'hyper-reflection' or a 'radical reflection'. Reflection is seen as necessary to philosophy, but not sufficient. (Bleakley 1999, 328)

This perspective, which may be seen as related to that of Gur-Ze'ev, Masschelein, and Blake (2001), significantly elevates reflection, so that it becomes almost a sacred duty rather than a simple thinking through of the day's work; perhaps a touch too far for many advocates.

Brookfield (2009) also recognises this distinction, but in his case it lies between the everyday and the critical:

> It is quite possible to practise reflectively while focusing solely on the nuts and bolts of process and leaving unquestioned the criteria, power dynamics and wider structures that frame a field of practice … But this is not critical reflection … For reflection to be considered critical it must have as its explicit focus uncovering, and challenging, the power dynamics that frame practice and uncovering and challenging hegemonic assumptions. (293)

Critical reflection, then, takes the practitioner beyond the everyday to see their actions in the context of the broader society, something that is arguably of importance for all professionals (Thompson and Pascal 2012).

Writing in the context of teacher education, Clarà (2015) brings the argument down to earth again, stressing the basis of reflection while noting its varied usages:

> although the great majority of approaches to reflection are grounded on the same main theoretical sources, the meaning of this notion is unanimously recognized in the field to be ambiguous … It is argued that reflection is a descriptive notion — not a prescriptive one — and that it refers to the thinking process engaged in giving coherence to an initially unclear situation. (261)

This offers a very pragmatic and useable definition.

Procee (2006) makes some broader points in arguing for the close linkage of reflection to learning, and stressing its relationship to qualities of empowerment, tact and sensitivity:

> Reflection … is first and foremost aimed at personal and professional empowerment … practitioners such as medical doctors, teachers, and scientists need to develop the ability of reflection, not only to be critical about their practice, but also in order to act in a self-confident, professional way … in education, formal learning and reflection are complementary activities … it would be advisable to separate the activities of reflection and formal

> learning, because of the completely different ways of coaching and assessing each of them … Reflection aims at developing tact — in its many meanings. (251–252)

There are some potentially contradictory messages here, as Procee appears to see reflection as entwined with learning, but wishes to keep it separate from formal learning. The review of the research literature on reflection in higher education reveals a great deal more variation in its application and practice.

Application and practice

Bibliographic searches reveal an extensive research literature dealing with reflection in or on higher education. For example, searches carried out using Scopus on 27/1/23 identified 424 articles with the words 'reflection', 'higher' and 'education' in their titles, which might be taken to indicate a focus on the topic, and 7941 with those words in their titles, abstracts or keywords. Further searches identified 899 and 24,223 articles respectively with the words 'reflection' and 'university' in their titles or in their titles, abstracts or keywords. While a significant number of these articles were literally reflections (i.e. personal comments) on some aspect of the higher education or university experience, many others concern the use of reflection in higher education.

Articles, books and reports identified in this way were then downloaded and examined, and retained for further analysis if they proved to be relevant. The reference lists in these articles, books and reports were checked for other potentially relevant sources to follow up. Duplicate or highly repetitive sources were removed. A quality threshold was also applied, and, though this was inevitably a selective process, publications deemed borderline were discussed with a trusted colleague before a decision was taken on their inclusion or exclusion. In this way the literature to be examined was eventually reduced to 131 articles, each of which is indicated by an asterisk (*) in the references list.

Existing reviews

There are a number of existing literature and systematic reviews that have examined the use of reflection in higher education settings. Thus, Mann, Gordon, and MacLeod (2009) provide a systematic review of research on the use of reflection in health professions education, identifying 29 relevant articles. While these articles identified the varied usage of reflection across the field, 'None of the empirical studies that we reviewed addressed outcomes of reflective practice and their effect on professionals, and none addressed the effect upon professional practice beyond self-report' (610).

Kori et al. (2014) offer a literature review of studies carried out between 2007 and 2012 ($n = 33$) on the use of reflection in technology-enhanced learning. They identify three main types of support provided for reflection: 'technical tools, technical tools with predefined guidance, and technical tools with human interaction guidance' (45).

van Beveren et al. (2018) carried out a systematic review of the purposes of reflection in higher education in the social and behavioural sciences, identifying 42 relevant studies and three dimensions: personal, inter-personal and socio-structural. They concluded that:

> Our review clearly illustrates the complexity and openness of reflection as an educational concept both at a conceptual and an empirical level within the disciplines of teacher education, social work and psychology. Different practices and forms of thinking are considered reflective and the teaching of reflection is attributed a broad diversity of educational values and purposes … we argue for an explicit articulation of the value-bases and theoretical traditions underpinnings one's (research on) practices of teaching reflection … in educational contexts. (7)

Chan and Lee (2021, $n = 66$) provide a comprehensive literature review focusing on the challenges of using reflections in higher education. They stress the inter-relationship between macro-level and micro-level factors, noting 'The need for consolidated efforts from every stakeholder to achieve the goal of engaging students in deep reflective learning' (14).

Guo (2022, $n = 23$) offers a meta-analysis of reflection interventions, concluding that 'reflective interventions had a positive and significant medium-sized effect ($g = 0.56$, SE = 0.06) on learning outcomes. The moderator analyses revealed that the effect varied as a function of intervention duration, peer interaction and reflective activities' (118).

Lim, Hoe, and Zheng (2022) focus on the self-reflection formats used in public health higher education ($n = 34$), noting that most of the students covered by the studies reviewed were not engaging in self-reflection at a deep level.

In addition to these generally positive reviews, there is also a specialist journal, *Reflective Practice*, first published in 2000, since when it has published around 2500 articles, many of which focus on higher education contexts.

Overall findings

The bibliographic searches carried out for this article identified a total of 131 relevant studies published in the English language.

These studies were authored by researchers based in a varied range of countries, including Australia (Hill, Crowe, and Gonsalvez 2016; Morley 2008; Ono and Ichii 2019), Belgium (van Beveren et al. 2018), Brazil (Sobral 2005), Brunei (Sabtu et al. 2019), Canada (Whalen and Paez 2021; Wong 2016), Chile (Navarrete and Sandoval-Diaz 2020), Estonia (Kori et al. 2014), Finland (Korkko, Kyro-Ammala, and Turunen 2016; Niemi 1997), Germany (Lutz et al. 2017), Ghana (Oduro, Akuta, and Kuranchie 2022), Hong Kong (Chan and Lee 2021; Kember et al. 2000), Indonesia (Kuswandono 2014), Ireland (Farr and Riordan 2015), Israel (Gur-Ze'ev, Masschelein, and Blake 2001), Italy (Bruno and Dell'Aversana 2017), Jamaica (Roofe et al. 2022), Malaysia (Chong 2009), The Netherlands (Poldner et al. 2012), New Zealand (Teekman 2000), Norway (Furberg 2009; Veine et al. 2020), Pakistan (Rarieya 2005), South Africa (Baruthram 2018), Spain (Colomer et al. 2021; Fullana et al. 2016; García-Feijoo, Alcaniz, and Eizaguirre 2021), Sweden (Granberg 2010), Switzerland (von Klitzing 1999), Taiwan (Lee 2021), Thailand (Power 2012), Turkey (Kis and Kartal 2019), the United Arab Emirates (Alzouebi 2020; Richardson 2004), the United Kingdom (Clegg 2000; Jindal-Snape and Holmes 2009; Thomson, Bengtsson, and Mkwebu 2019) and the United States (Beecher et al. 1997; Brunstein and King 2018; Danielowich 2007).

While, quantitatively, most of the (English language) articles identified came from, and were about, the major English language-speaking nations of Australia, Canada,

the UK and the USA, this listing is impressively global. It includes contributions from all six continents and demonstrates a strong interest in reflection in higher education throughout Asia, Australasia, Europe and North America.

Not only is this interest global, it is also inter-disciplinary, though strongest in the professional disciplines. Teacher education (e.g. Danielowich 2007; Farr and Riordan 2015; Korkko, Kyro-Ammala, and Turunen 2016; Ovens and Tinning 2009) is a particular focal point, extending also to adult education (Roessger 2014), interprofessional education (Olson et al. 2016) and physical education (Jung 2012).

Another focal point is the health disciplines, including nursing (e.g. Chong 2009; Fernandez-Pena et al. 2016; Platzer, Blake, and Ashford 2000; Teekman 2000), medicine (e.g. Beecher et al. 1997; Lutz et al. 2017; Niemi 1997), health care/health professions generally (Mann, Gordon, and MacLeod 2009; Norrie et al. 2012; Pinsky, Monson, and Irby 1998), dentistry (Tsang and Walsh 2010), physiotherapy (Smith 2011), psychotherapy (Hill, Crowe, and Gonsalvez 2016) and therapy (Wigg, Cushway, and Neal 2011).

The use of reflection is also strong in psychology (Bruno and Dell'Aversana 2017), including the specialisms of clinical psychology (Woodward, Keville, and Conlan 2015), health psychology (Bolam and Chamberlain 2003) and sports psychology (Cropley et al. 2010). Social work is another disciplinary focus (e.g. Badwall 2016; D'Cruz, Gillingham, and Melendez 2005; Hatton and Smith 1995; Jay and Johnson 2002; Morley 2008).

The interest in reflection in higher education is, however, by no means confined to the professional disciplines, but extends to a diverse range of disciplines and fields, including business (Martikainen, Hujala, and Laulainen 2022; Ono and Ichii 2019), coaching (Dixon, Lee, and Corrigan 2021), dance (Hsia and Hwang 2021; Leijen et al. 2008), geography (Whalen and Paez 2021), languages (Ducasse 2022; Power 2012), law (Thomson, Bengtsson, and Mkwebu 2019), mathematics (Navarrete and Sandoval-Diaz 2020), music (Georgii-Hemming, Johansson, and Moberg 2020), statistics (Stark and Krause 2009) and theology (Wong 2016). These include examples from the sciences, social sciences, humanities and performing arts, the latter an area which Schön (1987) directed attention to.

The interest in the use of reflection has focused fairly equally on both students (e.g. Austen, Pickering, and Judge 2020; Baruthram 2018; Veine et al. 2020; Wong 2016) and their lecturers (e.g. Ashwin et al. 2020; Brookfield 1995; Clegg 2000; Ecclestone 1996; Harvey and Vlachopoulos 2020; Light, Cox, and Calkins 2001; Mezirow and Associates 1990). In the latter context, Mälkki and Lindblom-Ylänne (2012) stress the importance of the link from reflection to action if reflection is to lead to improvements in teaching and learning but note the obstacles along the way. Martin and Double (1998) advocate a three-phase process model utilising peer observation and collaborative reflection for the development of teaching skills. Thorpe and Garside (2017) advocate the use of co-meta-reflection to support mid-level leaders in higher education.

Key issues

Three of the key issues that have engaged researchers on the use of reflection in higher education are 'can it be taught?' (Edwards and Thomas 2010; Masui and De Corte 2005; Smith 2011), 'can and should it be measured or assessed?' (Alsina, Ayllon, and Colomer 2019; Crème 2005; Guo 2022; Janssen et al. 2019; Kember et al. 2000; Leijen et al. 2012;

Poldner et al. 2012; Rogers et al. 2019) and 'how can it be extended beyond the individual (student or academic)'?

While the answer to the first of these questions might seem to be self-evident, given the widespread use of reflection in higher education, there still remains the issue of how it should be taught. Edwards and Thomas (2010) argue for critical reflection and against seeing reflective practice as one of a number of basic skills or attributes:

> what is commonly understood as technicist practice is a consequence of a mistaken account of teachers' thinking which leads many to believe that their practice will be more effective if only they are taught to be more critically reflective … the question to be addressed by teacher educators is not the technical one: how do we teach reflective practice?, but rather the value-laden one: which practices do we consider worthy of our teachers' (and thus our pupils') engagement? (411)

Smith (2011) is also positive but stresses the individual nature of the reflective process: 'Approaches and techniques of critical reflection can be taught but students should also be made aware that the distinctly personal component of self-critical reflection is crafted at one's own pace and to one's own taste' (221).

Views on the second issue, of whether reflection can be measured and assessed, and whether it should be, are more varied. On the first part of this question, there is clear evidence, as instruments or rubrics to measure levels of and attitudes toward reflection have been devised and used (Janssen et al. 2019; Kember et al. 2000; Rogers et al. 2019). On the second part, however, there are concerns around the privacy of reflections, which, if it is known they are going to be assessed, are likely to be written down in rather formulaic fashion. Ryan and Ryan (2013) support both the inclusion and assessment of reflection in higher education, recognising that this needs to be done on a programme-wide basis, and offer a model to help its planning.

Crème (2005) argues for a compromise approach:

> on the one hand, to assess learning journals formally would demonstrate that the academy recognizes and values this different way of constructing and writing knowledge in its students; on the other hand, assessment may undermine the very qualities that we value in the journal. I have suggested as a compromise that we use a range of formative kinds of assessment for the journals themselves, and then assess summatively a new, final product. (295)

As Crème indicates, reflections may be recorded in a number of ways, using diaries (Baker 2021; Gleaves, Walker, and Grey 2008), portfolios (Beecher et al. 1997; Ghaye 2007), journals (Bruno and Dell'Aversana 2017; Dyment and O'Connell 2010; O'Connell and Dyment 2011) or rubrics (Cheng and Chan 2019). They are also now commonly completed online, for example in the form of blogs (Granberg 2010; Xie, Ke, and Sharma 2008), rather than in print.

The third question posed concerns how reflection can be extended beyond the individual. This has been a particular concern in the business/management area, where it has been linked to group activities designed to promote organisational learning (e.g. Cunliffe 2016; Parker, Racz, and Palmer 2020; Raelin 2001; Vince 2002), but similar strategies have been adopted in professional disciplines such as nursing (e.g. Platzer, Blake, and Ashford 2000).

A variety of strategies for encouraging and building on group reflection have been identified. For example, Warren-Gordon and Jackson-Brown (2022) advocate and

exemplify the use of critical co-constructed autoethnography. Burke and Gyamera (2022) make use of the more traditional approach of letter writing:

> the experiences of women in Ghanaian higher education as they navigate and make sense of the intersecting forces of neoliberalism and patriarchy through letter writing as feminist praxis. We engaged a process of re-searching our experiences of higher education through feminist analyses and by collectively examining the discourses at play in the different timescapes. (11)

To give a third and final example, Beauchamp et al. (2022), participants in an EU-funded research project, examine the potential of networking internationally through conversations: 'transnational, interdisciplinary projects like these have great potential in developing significant conversations and networks' (14).

Clearly, there are many ways in which reflection may be taken beyond the level of the individual, so long as there is trust and shared purpose.

The use of reflection in higher education has also been linked to other aspects of the teaching and learning process, most notably to the development of self-regulated learning (van den Boom, Paas, and van Merrienboer 2007; Dignath-van Ewijk, Fabriz, and Buttner 2015; Masui and De Corte 2005; Nuckles, Hubner, and Renkl 2009). As higher education is much less formalised than secondary education, with students given an increasing amount of autonomy, it is important for them to develop self-regulation, which should also help them in later life. Indeed, in online forms of higher education, self-regulation may be seen as essential (Lehmann, Hahnlein, and Ifenthaler 2014).

Chen, Hwang, and Chang (2019) link reflective thinking to flipped learning – the practice of getting students to read up on topics before class, with class time devoted to discussing identified problems in interaction with student peers and teachers – with reflective thinking promoted prior to class. Canning and Callan (2010) bring in the concept of heutagogy, 'an opportunity to take responsibility to direct personal learning, resulting in empowered learners, engaged in knowledge creation and sustainability' (74), viewing reflection as a continuing spiralling of activity.

Other researchers have linked reflection in higher education to a whole range of other issues and practices, including internationalisation (Estacio and Karic 2016), sustainability (Brunstein and King 2018), professional identity (Engelbertink et al. 2021) and workplace experience (Roberts 2009). It has been viewed as a situated practice (Ovens and Tinning 2009), playing a particular role in group work (Platzer, Blake, and Ashford 2000) and online (Nicholas, van Bergen, and Richards 2015; Rivers, Richardson, and Price 2014).

Criticisms

Not surprisingly, as a topic that has generated a great deal of interest in higher education practice and research – and even though the bulk of the literature produced is broadly positive in nature – reflection in higher education has also attracted critique.

At the most basic level, the lack of a common understanding and practice of reflection, amongst both staff and students, remains an issue:

> Reflective practices that are intellectually credible can promote resiliency and resourcefulness in the face of life's dynamic challenges and encourage habits of individual and collective attention and analysis that can sustain higher education as it works to address the problems of society. To achieve these ends, however, the teaching community needs to clarify the concept of reflection and implement additional techniques that will enable students to learn and apply habits of reflective thought both in the classroom and beyond. In addition, there is a need for faculty to more deeply understand and apply reflective processes in both their personal and professional lives so that they can more effectively model such practices for their students. (Rogers 2001, 55)

This, of course, necessitates that the whole higher education teaching community – or at least the majority of it in certain professional departments – agree on the importance of reflection, and are prepared to spend the time needed to develop a shared understanding of what it is and how to develop it in their students.

Linked to this is the argument that many students are currently performing the wrong kinds of reflection, or are not extending themselves sufficiently to engage with higher or deeper levels of reflection:

> pedagogic strategies prioritising some elements of reflection at the expense of others, lead to limited or superficial reflections … if any of the levels of reflection are neglected or assumed, students' reflections do not demonstrate the ultimate goal of reconstructive reflection with evidence of learning through praxis … if a key issue/incident is not reported at the outset of the reflection, students lack focus and are unable to reconstruct their thinking/learning/professional strategies in any specific way … if students do not relate the issue/incident to their beliefs, experiences or world-view, they … cannot reconstruct their learning or practice to incorporate this new knowledge … if students neglect to use supported evidence to reason with rigour, they rely on personal opinion and homespun philosophy … if students are not provided with opportunities to apply reconstructive strategies with active experimentation, feedback and analysis, they are likely to pay lip service to potential future action or transformed ideas. (Ryan 2013, 154; see also Ryan 2012)

One point which isn't (perhaps unsurprisingly) made explicit by either Rogers or Ryan, but is implicit throughout their writing, is the sheer amount of time required to teach, learn, assess and reflect, and to do it properly as a continuing practice.

The belief that a common understanding and practice of reflection is possible across the disciplines of higher education is, of course, open to challenge. van Beveren et al. (2018) draw attention to this complexity, arguing for the meaning and practice of reflection to be made explicit, which would likely show how this varies from context to context.

In addition to encouraging superficial or formulaic responses, making reflection compulsory may also produce a hostile response in students. Hobbs (2007) draws attention to:

> the problematic nature of required reflective practice, namely, that requiring individuals to be open and honest in the context of assessment tends to provoke strategic response and often hostility. These reactions, documented in other research as well, point to an underlying problem with any required reflection that has serious implications for teacher education as well as any other field that employs forced reflection. (405)

There is a fundamental contradiction hiding here. Reflection is typically – though, as has been pointed out, not solely – a private, personal and individual activity. The individual may choose to share at least elements of their reflection with selected others, but, if it is left up to them, will likely keep most of their reflections to themselves. This is not simply

because they are private, with implications for themselves, but also because they may relate to others in unfavourable ways.

Making reflection compulsory and shared, at least with the teacher or supervisor, and possibly also assessed, potentially destroys this privacy, opening up the individual and their thoughts to close scrutiny and judgement. In such circumstances, it is little wonder if the reflections produced for assessment are partial and guarded.

Finally, reflection in higher education, as currently advocated for and practiced, may be seen as another example of white/western dominance, such that their norms are forced on others:

> Although critical reflexivity is an important intervention in social work, it is not without its critiques, worries, and hesitations. Practices constituting how one comes to know oneself as "good" and "moral" are squarely contingent upon colonial continuities designed to govern the parameters of what can be reflected upon in White organizations. (Badwall 2016, 17)

There is a need here for not only more research into reflection in higher education as practiced in non-western countries and settings, but for a more philosophical exploration into how other cultures and societies view reflection and related ideas.

Conclusions

The practice of reflection has become increasingly endemic in higher education, particularly in teaching and learning and in the professional disciplines. The underlying belief is that effective reflection on your practice and experience makes you a better higher education teacher, and makes your students better learners and, when they complete higher education, better professionals and practitioners in whatever line of work they enter.

There is, however, considerable diversity in how reflection is understood, taught and assessed, in the emphasis that is placed on it, and in how significant it is in the overall assessment of the student (or the teacher). There are also continuing concerns about the time needed to do reflection properly, the potential invasion of individual privacy when reflections are assessed, and the imposition of yet another western conception on higher education systems across the world.

Perhaps the most fundamental criticism of the growing role of reflection in higher education, however, is that – with the increasing pressures on academics, staff and students – it is usually much more convenient just to do something with little or no reflection (at the time of doing it or later). For the great majority of the time – given the training and experience of academics and other higher education staff, and the selection and experience of students – this should be perfectly satisfactory. When it demonstrably isn't at least satisfactory, the quality assurance procedures which higher education institutions have should, if they are working properly, pick up significant problems with teaching. Similarly, student problems should be picked up in day-to-day interactions or through assessment. Then would be the time to practice careful and thorough reflection.

This should not, of course, deny higher education staff and students the opportunity to engage in regular and continuing reflection on their work if they wish to do so, and if they find this helpful. But that is no reason to impose this expectation on everybody if their work is proceeding satisfactorily.

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N.B. – Items marked with an asterisk (*) form part of the data set used to produce this article.

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