

Critical reflection. What do we really mean?

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Do we really know what critical reflection means in the context of work-integrated learning, more specifically cooperative education? Critical reflection, in some form, is located within many higher education programmes, including cooperative education and many educators would say this is important for in-depth student learning. It is a form of reflection that is complicated as well as challenging for the learner and the educator. It would appear that there is a lack of consensus regarding the definition of critical reflection, as it is difficult to define and your definition may depend on your context and ideology. Many learning environments including teaching, nursing, business and social work utilize various strategies to facilitate reflection, including learning contracts and journals. Models of reflection, based on a philosophical approach, may be considered to assist students develop an understanding of critical reflection. The framework chosen to guide students' reflections may be determined by the expectations of the learning outcomes. It would seem that critical reflection is generally understood to be difficult, contested terrain, that appears to be attractive on paper but is complex to put into action. Further studies are required to identify the true nature of critical reflection in cooperative education.

Keywords: Work integrated learning, cooperative education, critical reflection, models

Introduction

The area of critical reflection is generally understood to be a difficult and contested terrain, that appears to be attractive on paper but is complex to put into action. Educators say this is an important capability for students to develop as it contributes to greater depth of understanding and learning (Boud, Cohen, & Walker, 1993; Lay & McGuire, 2010; Moon, 2006; Wolf, 2010). The wide range of approaches to critical reflection suggests the focus of learning is placed on technique rather than the broader purpose and outcomes of critical reflection. Critical reflection should not be a prescriptive activity (Moon, 2006) but guidelines should enable the student to develop their own style. This paper begins a conversation on the challenging topic of critical reflection in cooperative education.

Defining Critical Reflection

There appears to be lack of a clear understanding of critical reflection, as it is a contested term reflecting the ideology of the user. Depending on one's perspective critical reflection can be understood to mean very different things (Boyd & Fales, 1983; Brookfield, 2009; Gardner, 2009; Harvey, Coulson, Mackaway, & Winchester-Seeto, 2010; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Smith, 2011; van Woerkom, 2010) and varies within individuals and contexts. Critical reflection is widely recognised as a key component in the learning processes of individuals and is advocated in many areas of professional practice (Brookfield, 2009; Jarvis, 2010; Leijen, Valtna, Leijen, & Pedaste, 2011), especially within programmes where there is rich learning possible through specific experiences (Harvey et al., 2010).

The terms reflection, critical reflection, reflective practice, reflective thinking and reflexivity have similar meanings and application in educational literature, as well as, used interchangeably (Black & Plowright, 2010; Rogers, 2001). Authors consider that not all reflection is critical reflection and critical reflection maybe at higher, more complicated level that challenges the learner and the educator (Harvey et al., 2010; Hatton & Smith, 1994). Further unpacking is required to clearly identify the true nature of 'critical' reflection. Fook (2006) suggests work needs to be done from a "common basis of understanding" so the practice of critical reflection maybe refined and improved.

Mezirow (1990) considers critical reflection as a precursor to transformative learning, which may lead to changes in personal understandings and potentially behaviour. Students can use critical reflection practices for engaging in metacognition (Eames & Coll, 2010). It is associated with a number of learning outcomes including improved thinking, learning and assessment of self and social systems (Smith, 2011). Dewey (1938) states that while we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well and especially to acquire the practice of reflection. To use knowledge critically we do not accept the situation at 'face value'. This requires the ability to look beneath the surface to see what may influence the situation, resulting in critical depth to understanding. In addition, the ability to examine the bigger picture and view the situation more holistically

develops critical breadth. These enable us to develop a fuller understanding of experiences so we are better equipped to manage similar future situations (S. Thompson & Thompson, 2008). This ability to think critically is developed over time (Crowe & O'Malley, 2006) through guidance and support.

Critical reflection is advocated in many areas of professional development and practice, including the all areas of health care education, teaching, management, and research, as it encourages practitioners to gain insight into their own professionalism through their experiences. These programmes generally require some form of fieldwork to be closely integrated with academic study. Consequently there is wide variation in the techniques and approaches used in the practice of critical reflection. Approaches may range from informal discussions to highly structured formats. Guidelines in the literature on how to determine, facilitate and assess critical reflection in practice appear to be limited (Leijen et al., 2011; Smith, 2011).

Models of critical reflection

This vast area in the literature, which explores models of critical reflection, lacks clarity. There seems to be similarities within and across the various applications from many fields or disciplines of education that may have little or no areas of overlap (Fook & Gardner 2007). Many models of reflection based on a philosophical approach, may be considered to assist students develop an understanding of critical reflection. These have been briefly outlined in table 1.0 to help visualize the relationship between the models and frameworks. The framework chosen to guide students' reflections may be determined by the expectations of the learning outcomes. Some models of reflection may not encourage critical reflection. Models may guide the process of reflection but should not impose a prescription of what reflection is. It is not essential to follow a model and some practitioners choose not to. There is some criticism of models that reduce reflection to levels but this approach maybe useful for teaching what the focus of reflection entails. The student may choose whether or not to adopt a model to frame their reflection as a temporary measure until confidence in the reflective activity is gained and understood.

Table 1.0: Three models of critical reflection identifying two frameworks that provides guidance for reflecting within each model.

Model of critical reflection	Framework	General comments
Dewey's model of reflective learning		Knowledge can be constructed through active reflection on past and present experiences. Pragmatic approach.
	Gibb's model	A cyclic generic framework. A general and nonspecific approach to reflection. Novices may find it too vague requiring further guidance.
	Stephenson's framework	A detailed set of cue questions. Focuses on consequences of actions and examines practice knowledge.
Habermas's model of critical reflection		Based on 3 areas of knowledge: technical, practical and emancipatory. Critical theory approach.
	Taylor's framework	Describes activities associated with 3 types of reflection: technical, practical and emancipatory. Highly structured.
	Kim's framework	Called critical reflective enquiry. Three phases of reflection: descriptive, reflective, critical/emancipatory. Processes and products applied to each phase.
Kolb's model of reflexive learning		Attempts to integrate thinking and practice. Experiential learning approach.
	Borton's framework	Simplified model using 3 questions: What? So what? Now what? Very easy to remember.
	Rolfe's framework	Expanded Borton's framework. Added questions to each step. Turned the last

		step back to form reflexive cycle. Generic, easily adapted to suit most situations.
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* Adapted from Rolfe et al (2011).

Critical reflection in cooperative education

According to Martin and Fleming (2010) cooperative education is more than work experience but a recognised pedagogical approach to learning. Critical reflection is an essential component of the pedagogy of cooperative education and other forms of work integrated learning. The process of critical reflection needs to be facilitated with structured strategies within the course that encourage engagement in reflection. It is important to create a culture where reflection is valued as a learning tool and it is safe to be honest. Practice and feedback on reflection throughout the program are important to enable the student to progress through their learning experience. Van Gyn (1996) suggests that reflective practice to enhance student-learning outcomes requires an organised partnership between the student, academic and industry supervisors.

There is a widespread assumption that reflection has positive outcomes for student learning. Cooperative education is student driven learning, which increases the need for the student to be self-motivated, proactive, organised and reflective. Critical reflection encourages students to be willing and able to question, explore and critique ways of behaving and thinking as they engage in workplace experiences (Higgins, 2011) and into the future. Consequently the student is better able to understand and gain insights into his/her skills, competencies and knowledge. The use of critical reflection in cooperative education increases the chances of the learning being relevant and meaningful to the student. Therefore the student's engagement in reflection can assist them in making sense of themselves, their learning experience and preparation for the future.

The importance of the social context (Fook, White & Gardner, 2006) of reflection should be considered, as personal reflection is part of the broader context of the organization culture and structure (Thompson & Pascal, 2012). The industry context is complex and may challenge other dimensions of reflection, such as emotional demands of the learning experience, power relationships and time constraints. The strategies that facilitate reflection should cater for the individual needs of the student, suit the learning environment and guide the development of students reflective skills (Martin & Fleming, 2010). Strategies may include learning contracts, reflective journals, progress reports, reports and oral presentations providing the student with many opportunities to practice critical reflection.

Conclusion

Critical reflection is used in education to encourage the integration of theory and practice while enhancing student learning and self-confidence. However, an extensive literature search on the role of reflection for learning through experience by Harvey et al (2010) concluded that the relationship between reflection and positive student learning outcomes was inconclusive. This suggests there is scope to explore the role of critical reflection in learning and the development of a theoretical basis in cooperative education. There is increasing interest in the concept of critical reflection (Boud & Walker, 1998) in work-integrated education and research (Brookfield, 2009).

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