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THE VALUE OF REFLECTION

By three methods we may learn wisdom:
first, by reflection, which is noblest;
second, by imitation, which is easiest;
and third by experience, which is the bitterest.

Confucius (551 BC–479 BC) Chinese Philosopher

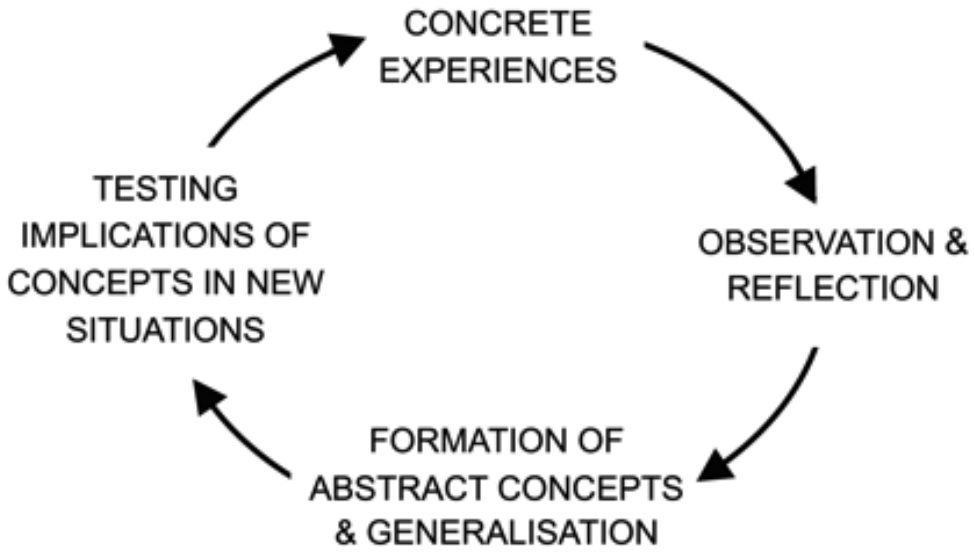
There has been much talk of the value of reflection in arts education practice in recent years. Yet simply declaring that we are undertaking "reflective practice", much like us saying that we are supporting "active learning", does not always guarantee that positive and productive reflection (or active learning) is actually taking place. Terms such as these require careful analysis and definition, not least so that we can understand what they require from us in order to be effective. Likewise reflection itself requires time and commitment and can often get squeezed out of our daily routines, despite our best efforts. In this short text I will set out a specific understanding of reflection and outline why it is of value. I will consider the connections between reflection, learning and art practice, note the challenges in trying to embed reflective practice within busy working schedules and then suggest some approaches to address these challenges. In doing so I hope to provide some insights and support to those who wish to develop good reflective practice so as to reap the many rewards of doing so.

Reflection, understood in the simplest terms as time spent considering and evaluating past experiences, is a basic human activity. However researchers and thinkers working in the fields of art and education have attempted to

deepen our conception of the reflective process and identify key aspects. John Dewey (1933), for example, identified that reflection can be understood as a process of making meaning that allows the learner to *connect* their experiences so as to develop a deeper understanding. He saw it as "the thread that makes the continuity of learning possible" (Dewey quoted in Rogers, 2002). Dewey also identified that reflection should not be a haphazard process, but rather be a systematic and disciplined, yet flexible, way of thinking, that ideally is undertaken in interaction with others. However, he recognised that not everyone will naturally take on more structured reflection, since in his view it requires the individual to prioritise their and others" personal and intellectual growth and be open to constant self appraisal and development.

From Dewey we get a sense of what is required of us if we are to genuinely reflect, whilst from another philosopher and educator, Donald Schön (who built on many of Dewey"s ideas) we can gain an idea of how different forms of reflection takes place. Schön (1983) describes two types of reflection: *reflection-in-action*, which is the ongoing intuitive and creative cognitive process that allows us to adapt and amend our activities whilst we are doing them and *reflection-on-action*, which is the moment when "we reflect *on* action, thinking back on what we have done in order to discover how our knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected outcome" (Schön, 1983, p. 26). In this way Schön draws attention to the relationship between doing and thinking; we reflect in order to make sense of our experiences.

But what is the purpose of this reflection, both "in" and "on" action? What do we gain by dwelling on our experience? For the educational theorist David Kolb (1984), we reflect in order to learn, or put another way, it is through reflecting on and analysing our experiences that we are able to construct new abstract concepts which we then apply in future situations. Kolb represents this through a four stage "Experiential Learning Cycle":



Kolb Experiential Learning Cycle, 1975

Reflection, as part of a process of "do – review – develop new knowledge – apply" is therefore a vital element of the learning process, without which we can neither move forward in our thinking, nor change our behaviour.

If we take this concept of reflection as integral to learning and apply it to a professional art education context, its significance as an activity wherein people recapture their experience, think about it, evaluate it and plan their future activities becomes clear. Reflective practice becomes a means whereby teachers and artists can learn from their own experiences and engage in more or less formal professional development. Furthermore it can allow us to bring together theory and practice and provide a space where we can question and challenge our routine ideas and long-held assumptions. Genuine reflective practice encourages risk-taking and experimentation, coupled with deep and sustained analysis; it can help us to work out what is more or less successful in what we do and instigate new processes where needed.

These are some of the reasons why reflection is so important for artists and educators. In addition to these, evaluative thinking provides a deeper understanding of what we do. For example, reflecting on the simple question "why are we doing this activity" with colleagues can prompt a vigorous investigation of an event or process and yield some unexpected insights, whilst considering the question "how did we set about doing it" can illuminate differences in pedagogic approaches or unearth useful information that can be applied to future scenarios. And although this process may seem obvious, it is surprising how often it is overlooked. Yet the benefits in terms of promoting positive criticality, clearer thinking and shared values, whilst allowing for the introduction of fresh ideas cannot be overestimated. All of which contributes to higher quality practice and richer experiences for artists, teachers and learners.

A further benefit of reflective practice is that it draws attention to the connections between art practice and learning. As with art practice, the process of learning outlined above involves developing new understanding by considering the implications of our actions. As artists we "do" (we draw a line, we make an edit of a film, we frame a photographic image, for example) and then we review this action in light of what it is we are trying to convey. If the action, the "doing", successfully articulates our ideas then we may leave it, but if on reflection it does not work, we then change it. This ongoing creative process (of doing – reviewing – applying the knowledge) resembles the experiential cycle outlined by Kolb above and suggests that artists are continuously involved in reflection as part of their practice. This is the view held by the artist Ben Shahn (1957) who describes a painter operating as both a producer and critic; the "critic" within the artist performs the task of ensuring that the decisions and actions the "producer" undertakes result in the artist"s ideas being realised through the form of the image. The artist, for Shahn is not "a non-thinking "medium" through which ideas flow" (Ibid, 1957: 19) but an analytical and reflective creator, who constantly evaluates their creative decisions.

So if artists are naturally predisposed to reflection, why when they are working in arts education contexts can developing a reflective practice prove challenging? From my experience of working with colleagues to embed reflective practice over a number of years, the foremost challenges are as follows:

Time

More than anything else, finding the time to reflect deeply and usefully on experience is vital. Yet in busy education scenarios where the priority is most commonly on delivery, this time for reflection can often prove elusive.

Making explicit what is commonly tacit

In conversations with artist educators and teachers I have been struck by how often they will allude to their own creative and analytical process, or describe their practice as a form of research, but describe it as a personal or tacit process that they rarely share with others. Thus although they may regularly engage in critical reflection, they are less comfortable or familiar with making their thoughts explicit or undertaking a reflective process with others.

Acting on the reflection – making it useful

As noted above critical reflection can allow us to bring together theory and practice and provide a space where we can question our routine ideas. This is undoubtedly true and important, but it is not enough. As Kolb"s Experiential Cycle demonstrates, reflection can (and should) lead to changes in practice. For Kolb and others including the critical pedagogue Paulo Friere reflection is indistinguishable from praxis, which the latter defines as "reflection and action upon the world in order to transform it" (my emphasis) (Friere, 1973). Yet in my experience there is no guarantee that effective reflection automatically translates into changed practice; it can be hard to turn ideas into action.

In trying to address these challenges I have become aware that, above everything else, prioritising reflection and recognising it as an essential and valuable part of the learning process for all those involved in arts education is crucial. Without this acknowledgment it is unlikely that time will be found for it, or that intentions to implement changes in practice will become reality. In addition to this fundamental "first step", there are a number of other tactics which can support ongoing reflection:

Framing practice as a form of "enquiry"

From what I have seen, arts education practice is most commonly understood in terms of a "delivery" model. In other words it is constructed in terms of what happens – workshops, artists" residencies, for example – and what impacts are anticipated from these activities. This model can leave little room for experimentation, or indeed reflection, as the focus is on doing

what has been identified at the start and making sure that the desired impacts and outcomes are achieved. However a shift in terms of how programmes are conceived and executed toward a more open-ended "enquiry" model can allow for greater ongoing interrogation, reflection and change within programmes.

In the "enquiry" model, rather than determining what activities should happen to achieve specific outcomes at the start of a programme, the initial exercise is to frame a particular, but open question (one example being; "what happens when children are brought together with artists and their processes of production?"). The resultant programme of events and activities is understood to be an investigation, undertaken with participants (which in this instance would include artists and children), of the question. So whilst actual activities can follow familiar formats (such as artist-led workshops), the expectation is those involved in the programme question, reflect, change, redefine and remake as these programmes progress. This methodology can be seen to resemble action research in some respects and in line with that methodological approach, there is an expectation that programme form and content are open to constant reappraisal and, potentially, significant change.

Finding relevant research questions

Finding the key "research" question around which to frame a process of enquiry is clearly important and it is worth spending time exploring and reflecting on what this might be before embarking on the programme of work. Some simple prompts can help pin things down:

- What are you setting out to do?
- Why are you doing it?
- What are you really interested in?

Equally with projects that already have clearly defined aims and objectives, it can be helpful to reframe these as a question. For example an artist-led project that aims to engage young people who have been excluded from school, might be explored through the lens of a research question that asks: "what are the creative contexts that afford young people"s engagement with education and learning?"

Building reflection into existing structures and systems wherever possible

It is important to recognise that serious and committed reflective practice of the type that we are advocating here does not happen without conscious effort. Yet the process can be made easier by building it into existing systems and structures whenever possible rather than inventing new activities. Regular team meetings for instance can provide a forum where the simple, yet vitally important questions identified above can be discussed. However where these forums do not exist it is essential that the necessary structures to facilitate reflection are put in place. The more regular the

reflective sessions are the more effective they will be, since as with most things, reflection needs practice.

Making the reflection explicit

Reflection in dialogue with others has multiple benefits; sharing ideas, testing out theories, hearing the views of others that may not necessarily correspond with our own all contribute to learning. Furthermore, drawing on the expertise of colleagues in order to frame how we translate our reflections on experience into action going forward supports praxis. At the same time, however, there is enormous value in individuals maintaining reflective journals to document thinking and ideas development. In both scenarios, committing to regular reflective conversations or to the writing of a journal results in time being created for this activity whilst also ensuring that the reflective process is made explicit.

Recognising the complexity of the reflective process

In a recent conversation with a colleague we reflected on the reflective practice that we have sought to put in place at Tate Gallery. We acknowledged that this process was both simpler and more complicated than we had envisaged; simpler as it was self-evidently valuable in terms of improving the quality of our pedagogic practice, supporting the professional development of the Learning team and enriching the learning experience of our visitors, yet more complicated as it has taken longer to embed than we first thought and has resisted efforts to circumscribe it. The latter concern is perhaps not surprising as reflective practice, whilst contributing to evaluation processes, differs from both evaluation and advocacy, since it is a process undertaken primarily by and for practitioners that must necessarily remain resolutely open-ended.

The reflective process invites individuals to hold potentially conflicting ideas simultaneously and experiment with possibilities. It sees value in change rather than permanence and involves practitioners looking back over what has been in order to construct a possible future, none of which lends itself to simplistic or comprehensive representation or a convenient end point. Yet rather than despair at this complexity, or attempt a reductive and/or one-dimensional representation of this process, my colleague and I agreed that it was more productive to embrace it and acknowledge the value of this creative learning process, for it is the unconstrained space that reflective practice allows that genuine learning happens. To this end it is helpful to develop creative and authentic approaches to capturing the process, but also to:

- Recognise how partial any documentation of this process will be
- See value in the process itself not only in what is documented or accounted for
- Acknowledge that the "outcomes" of this process are revealed in practice as well as in any documentation

The American artist and researcher, Graeme Sullivan, draws attention to the value of art practice as a form of communication and a means of constructing meaning. As he says:

… Arts processes are critically important kinds of human exchange that have the capacity to change the way we think about how we come to know what we do.

Sullivan identifies how art processes can help us to understand not only *what* we know but also *how* we come to know it. This suggests that art processes, and by extension artists who are expert in negotiating these processes, can illuminate and potentially change the ways in which we learn. What I have attempted to highlight in this paper is the vital role that reflection, as a key element of art practice and of developing new knowledge and understanding can play in learning. Although challenging to implement in some ways, systematic and rigorous reflection brings about profound and positive change; it is through reflection that we can understand what it is that we are doing and how we can change it for the better going forward.

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