Chapter 8
From Reflective Practice to Critical Thinking: The Reflective Practitioner in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of reflection and the development of reflexivity in programs of professional studies in higher education. Serving as empirical basis is a qualitative explorative longitudinal study with students in different master’s programs at a University for Professional Studies, considering the students’ perspective and their changing understanding and practice of reflection both at the workplace and in their studies. The students’ perspective is complemented by an analysis of interviews with teachers in professional master’s programs about their teaching strategies supporting students’ learning. Linking these two perspectives leads to a developmental model of reflection over the course of studies that allows new ways of interpreting the reflective practitioner in higher education.

INTRODUCTION

In light of growing social demands and ongoing, disruptive changes faced by modern society, new skills and competencies are needed to navigate impending uncertainties and an unpredictable future. (OECD, 2019). Consequently, Europe has established a new skills agenda to help combat some of the anticipated challenges (European Commission, 2016): A primary focus of this new agenda includes increased pressure on universities with respect to the employability of graduates and their readiness for the job market, while at the same time placing emphasis on the strengthening of (higher) vocational education and training (VET). In addition, longer life expectancy plus an aging society means that greater importance is ascribed to the re- and upskilling of the existing workforce. Whichever way you look at it, all educational
sectors are currently tasked with the challenge of finding innovative ways to facilitate learning processes that allow individuals to involve themselves in, analyze and deal critically with changing societal and occupational patterns. With these challenges and circumstances in mind, the issue of bridging theory and practice in higher education gains greater relevance, as does the need to equip students with “twenty-first century skills of reflective practice” (Zuber-Skerritt & Cendon, 2014, p. 21).

In this chapter, the focus is on the importance of reflection in bridging the world of theory with the world of practice in a productive way, and hence, supporting lifelong learning at universities. The first section establishes a general framework of thought, drawing on literature from both the organizational and professional context and from higher education. Then, the chapter offers a more detailed understanding of reflection and its component features. The remaining sections focus on students who are professionals and on experienced teachers in higher education. Results from one explorative qualitative longitudinal research study on students’ development and one qualitative study on teachers and their understandings of their roles in professional studies are presented and critically discussed. Based on these results, the final part presents a developmental model of reflection in higher education.

BACKGROUND OR BRIDGING THEORY AND PRACTICE

When writing about bridging theory and practice and reflection, it is imperative that one establishes a framework of thoughts to help integrate different lines of thinking. When focusing on theory and practice, it is necessary to broaden one’s perspective to include both the academic world (which is more theory-driven) and the professional world (more practice-driven). The discussion often centers around the distinction between academic declarative, or propositional knowledge (knowing what), and action-oriented procedural knowledge (knowing how) (Billett, 2009, 2014), or the hierarchy of (scientific) knowledge above knowledge in action (Schön, 1983). The concept of bridging theory and practice within the academic context is by no means new – it actually has a long history dating back to the mid-nineteenth century as Barnett (1990, 1992) shows in his analyses.

The concept of reflection” becomes a central focus when looking at theory and practice in higher education. As Van Manen (1991, p. 98) points out, in educational theory reflection can be understood “as just another word for ‘thinking’”. If one reflects, he or she thinks. Two concepts of learning, closely interlinked with each other, become relevant: the concept of experiential and the concept of reflective learning. Both concepts take experience in its various forms as their central basis (for an overview Moon, 1999, 2004).

At the beginning of the 20th century, it was American philosopher and educational scientist John Dewey (1859-1952) who addressed the issue of theory and practice, focusing primarily on education. As the “founding father” of experiential and reflective learning, Dewey laid the foundations for an interconnection of theory and practice that put primary emphasis on critical thinking and reflection that always uses experience as its point of departure. As Dewey explains, experience and reflection are closely connected. Reflection denotes a certain quality of experience as reflective experience. A reflective experience consists of the following elements (Dewey, 1923, p. 176): the point of departure for reflection and hence for learning is always a perplexity, confusion, doubt. Based on this doubt, a first tentative interpretation of the situation and its elements takes place, to help understand the problem better. In a third step, the situation and its conditions are explored carefully. Finally, a tentative hypothesis is elaborated which is then validated through testing. Dewey specifies the difference between reflective