



Joseph A. Raelin

*The Wallace E. Carroll School of Management,
Boston College, USA*

Public Reflection as the Basis of Learning

Abstract *It is through public reflection that we may create a collective identity as a community of inquiry. But how does public reflection differ from introspection, and how does it contribute to self and organizational learning? In this article, the author uncovers the many traditions which constitute the process of critical reflective practice, as may be practiced as part of a project-based learning experience. After defining the concept, the article illustrates why reflection is fundamental to learning and how it can be brought out in the company of trusted others through dialogue. The article goes on to illuminate the relationships between public reflection and the common good, experience, and time, as well as to characterize the skills associated with reflective practice. **Key Words:** action learning; critical consciousness; dialogue; knowledge management; reflective practice; work-based learning*

Reflective Practice: What Is It?

Reflection is the practice of periodically stepping back to ponder the meaning to self and to others in one's immediate environment about what has recently transpired. It illuminates what has been experienced by both self and others, providing a basis for future action. It thus constitutes the ability to uncover and make explicit to oneself and to one's colleagues what one has planned, observed, or achieved in practice. In particular, it privileges the process of inquiry leading to an understanding of experiences that may have been overlooked in practice. Experiences can be composed of actions, beliefs, and feelings.

In this article, I propose to examine reflection particularly in its public form—when it is brought out in the company of others who are also committed to the experience in question, and as it may be applied in the project environment. There is ample evidence of the value of projects in contributing to both the performance and renewal of our enterprises (e.g. Ayas, 1997). Our concern in this special issue, however, is more to consider how projects may be used as a basis for learning. It is my view that it is public reflection that is the key to unlocking the learning from project-based learning. Further, it is this public form of reflection

that can enhance learning beyond the project (team) level to other levels of experience—individual, organization, and society. Reflection of this form is necessarily associated with learning dialogues. Rather than constituting an exchange of statements of points of view, dialogues surface in the safe presence of trusting peers the social, political, and emotional data that arise from direct experience with one another. Often these data are precisely those that might be blocking operating effectiveness. Learning dialogues also are concerned with creating mutual caring relationships.

This view of reflection incorporates traditions both from western and eastern thought. Western cultural tradition, especially the rational positivist model, puts the emphasis on standing back from the situation in order to analyze it and proposing solutions to be subsequently tested. In what is referred to as ‘reflexivity’ or ‘action research’, the western analyst may take it one step further by considering the effect of personality or the presence of the researcher on the investigation (Holland, 1999; Raelin, 1999). Eastern thought places more emphasis on the use of reflection for purposes of negotiation, contemplation, and enlightenment (Houston and Clift, 1990).

Mezirow (1991) distinguished three forms of reflection based on the object of the reflection itself. Content reflection entails a review of the way we have consciously applied ideas in strategizing and implementing each phase of solving a problem. Process reflection, on the other hand, is an examination of how we go about problem solving with a view toward the procedures and assumptions in use. Premise reflection goes to a final step of questioning the very presuppositions attending to the problem to begin with. In premise reflection, we question the very questions we have been asking in order to challenge our fundamental beliefs.

Consider an example of these three reflective forms in the project domain. The managers of a large project determine that they need to reduce head-count in order to keep the project on budget. Operating at the content level of reflection, they wonder how they should proceed with a rational restructuring of the project: should they lay off workers across the board; should they concentrate on weak segments; should they rely on natural attrition; or should they make specific cuts? Perhaps someone decides to probe to a deeper level of reflection, beginning to question the assumptions in use. ‘Do we really have a cost problem?’ ‘What evidence is there that resorting to layoffs is the correct solution to begin with?’ ‘Maybe there’s another way to attack the problem?’ ‘Maybe we don’t even have a problem to begin with but we are on the verge of creating one?’ Finally, someone might have the courage to question the basic premise of why it is that reductions in force or restructuring constitutes the set of usual alternatives proposed whenever there’s a concern about costs. Perhaps an even bolder question might be raised such as why the project permits disquiet at the top to lead to knee-jerk implementation efforts at the operating level.

According to developmental psychologists, such as Broughton (1977), premise reflection or ‘theoretical self-consciousness’ is only available to adults. It is only in adulthood that one becomes capable of recognizing paradigmatic assumptions in our thinking. However, adults need to engage, to evoke their reflective consciousness in order to learn at this level. Mezirow (1981) calls this learning ‘transformative’, that is, learning which takes us into new meanings. Transformative learning can help us review and alter any misconstrued meanings arising out of uncritical

half-truths found in conventional wisdom or in power relationships. Since premise reflection or advanced reflective judgment may not occur naturally, educational opportunities, such as project-based learning, need to be provided within the workplace to provoke critical reflection on current meaning perspectives. As Kegan (1982) has noted, however, such a practice can be threatening unless accompanied by an environment which intellectually and emotionally supports individuals in their learning and development.

Another way to view reflection is in terms of the epistemological purposes to which reflective practice is to be used (see Table 1). This approach highlights the assumptions that both researchers and practitioners make in informing their practice. There are three perspectives to consider. The first perspective sees reflection as the basis for *propositional knowing* and involves placing into practice thoughtful action based on theoretical formulations and research findings. The purpose of reflection in this view is instrumental because it is used to help practitioners replicate practice which empirical research has found to be effective (Grimmett et al., 1990).

The second perspective of reflection is based on *practical knowing* which entails deliberation among competing versions of effective practice. Although research knowledge is still used, it is mediated through peer deliberation and by the context of the actual situation at hand. Practitioners thus develop practical knowledge or ‘rules of thumb’ about how to act in particular situations and, when consulted, can bring to bear their contextual understanding (Sanders and McCutcheon, 1986).

The third perspective is based on *dialectical knowing* which views reflection as the reorganization or reconstruction of experience. In this view, knowledge is seen as emergent and is often depicted as being metaphorical in nature (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). Understanding is often a matter of recasting or reframing conventional ways of understanding so as to generate an appreciation of the novelty in the practice situation (Grimmett et al., 1990). Dialectical knowing can be used, therefore, to transform practice by asking practitioners to attend to features of the situation that were previously ignored. As in premise reflection, it might entail reconstructing taken-for-granted assumptions that might even lead the practitioner to identify and address the social, political, and cultural conditions that constrain self-insight (Habermas, 1971).

Table 1. Summary of three epistemological purposes of reflection

Perspectives on reflection	Source of knowledge	Purpose
Propositional knowing	External authority (mediated through action)	Informs through empirical research
Practical knowing	Peer deliberation (mediated through context)	Enlightens through ‘rules of thumb’
Dialectical knowing	Emergent experience (mediated through colleagues/self)	Transforms through reconstructing assumptions

Source Adapted from Grimmet et al. (1990)

When reflective practice engages our critical consciousness, it probes to a deeper level than trial-and-error experience. It is concerned with forms of learning known as double-loop and triple-loop learning, both of which seek to challenge the standard meanings underlying our habitual responses. In double-loop learning, we challenge our assumptions sufficiently to question the transfer of learning from one context to another. In triple-loop learning, we learn about the 'context of contexts' in order to challenge our premises and entire frame of reference. Within the project environment, we can generate learning that goes beyond the current context as we engage these deeper, more critical, forms of reflection. Our attention in this article turns, henceforth, to the value of learning through this more critical approach.

Reflection and Learning

There are a number of explanations why reflection of a critical nature can enhance learning through project management. Four are described here.

1. Managers not only need to be aware of their own actions but at times need to move from a position of unawareness to awareness. Often we are simply unaware of the consequences of our behavior. To complicate matters, our unawareness occasionally does not allow us to be open to new data or information to help us learn from our actions. We may even be unaware that the questions we ask might be producing defensiveness in others, closing off the possibility of generating new information, even new questions. It is often only through the support of and feedback from others that we can become receptive to alternative ways of reasoning and behaving. For example, some project managers may see themselves as having an open-door policy, but they may be unaware that they 'kill' nearly every idea brought to their attention by some of their associates.
2. There is an unfortunate gap between what many of us say we will do and what we actually do. The field of action science refers to this gap as an inconsistency between our 'espoused theories' and our 'theories-in-use' (Argyris and Schön, 1974; Raelin, 1993). We are simply all guilty of deceiving ourselves that we can practice what we preach, though what we preach may be very difficult to accomplish in particular organizational cultures. For example, managers are often pressured to produce reports without sufficient time to get all the facts. In these circumstances, though one might believe in and espouse the value of participative processes, one might be unaware that he or she has begun to order people to come up with subsidiary reports. Once the pressure has subsided, the same manager might still fail to notice that his or her behavior has persisted.
3. Most of us are biased in how we obtain information which, in turn, produces 'errors' in our perceptions of reality. According to Hogarth (1987) and Bright (1996), errors constitute such practices as collecting data superficially, ignoring certain pieces of information and thus underestimating uncertainty, making assumptions about data rather than investigating them, believing one can control random events, or using self-confirming reasoning. However, if we are

interested in improving our project managerial practices, we have to become aware of these judgment errors. Such an awareness is extremely difficult to awaken without the involvement of peers who can detect the use of untested assumptions and raw biases.

4. Although past practices can give us very cogent clues in deciphering future situations, often the new situation presents itself in a different context. Prior solutions may not fit, even if the situations appear alike. We tend to look, however, for the similarities between the situations rather than their differences. This type of normal cognitive processing can play tricks on us. Even when we consult a repertoire of available responses, we may not find one that fits the new situation. Consider a scenario in which an executive exudes great confidence in carrying out a consolidation among two closely allied projects, having successfully linked otherwise competing projects in a prior year. In a year's time, however, the environment may have changed, be it as a result of economic or political conditions. Furthermore, the projects under consideration may have little resemblance to those previously merged, perhaps due as much to elusive cultural and personal contingencies as to operating considerations. It is through reflective practice exercised in the presence of trusted yet discerning peers that such a manager can distinguish that part of his or her reasoning which is measured and critical from that which might be self-fulfilling and self-justificatory.

Reflection and Dialogue

It should be apparent that the reflection referred to in the aforementioned examples is not merely an introspective or private phenomenon that is kept private. Reflective practice occurs in the midst of practice and may be shared in the presence of others. Taylor (1997) even suggests that without the medium of relationships, reflection can be impotent and hollow, lacking the genuine discourse necessary for thoughtful and in-depth behavioral change.

Plato had the idea of relationships in mind when in *Apology*, he quoted Socrates' now-famous phrase: '. . . the unexamined life isn't worth living'. Whenever I have heard this maxim used, it appears to be misinterpreted as a call for additional introspection by people. Although more introspection may be helpful, the actual meaning is that we need to discuss with others our life's experience and meaning. Plato's idea resonated with Aristotle who recognized that human beings are social animals whose good is bound up with the good of the polis. Underpinned by these Greek roots, the egalitarian tradition in western thought has long since recognized that the dignity of human persons is achieved only in community with others (Hollenbach, 1998). Jürgen Habermas (1984), referred to as a 'late' modernist, sees the reconciliation between individual and society through intersubjective recognition based on mutual understanding and free cognition about disputed claims. It is through communicative action that we are able to realize ourselves within a civic community. We must subject our entire experience to criticism, even our tacit understanding. For Habermas, then, the Enlightenment project of modernity can be saved through open, public dialogue.

The interactive, as opposed to the private, nature of reflective practice was also the lifelong concern of social psychologist, George H. Mead. Mead (1934) saw the relationship between the individual and society as a continual process of construction by the self as part of the social environment. Rediscovered by authors Cinnamond and Zimpher (1990), Mead described the self as formed as much from how others respond to one as from what one does. The self, then, is linked to the social communities that give it definition.

For Mead, reflection was natural to the process of role taking in any societal situation. As human beings, we learn about our self in relation to others through language. It is communication that allows us to validate our behavior. It is then through reflection that we examine the responses of others to determine if our participation in our social communities is legitimate. However, Mead also goes on to explain that one is not bound by static or absolute values in any community (Mead, 1934). Like Habermas, Mead believed that it was through discourse followed by reflection that we also make changes within our community. Hence, reflection contributes to the consciousness of change that is essential in maintaining the social order through adaptability. In an ideal community, each participant should be able to take the role of the other participants, develop shared values, and subject their actions and values to deep scrutiny. Even our language itself requires public reflection since our choice of words and concepts may predispose us to particular world views. As we develop skill in reflecting on our speech acts, we develop a capacity for dialogue that is generative, that is, which can generate new ways of thinking and imagining (Scharmer, 1999; Schipper, 1999).

Cinnamond and Zimpher (1990) see Mead's social theory as a democratic approach that encourages dialogue on the part of all participating social groups, not permitting the growth of authority in any one source. They further claim that 'the source of authority, instead, becomes the social groups that work together through dialogue to construct shared values and expectations' (p. 70).

Reflection and the Common Good

I have suggested that public reflection, especially of a critical nature, can increase learning at all levels of experience, even at the societal level. In this sense, reflection can assist in achieving a sense of the common good—a condition in which all parties in the human condition are treated as empowered entities or as human beings with dignity.

Most of us accept the view that, especially under stress, we human beings unfortunately do not behave that well. That is, we become defensive, mean, combative, or sullen. Jensen (1997) refers to our behaviors in this mode as our pain avoidance model. Compatible with a learning style that Chris Argyris has called Model I, under pain avoidance, we tend to avoid personal error, remain in control, maximize winning and avoid losing, act as 'rationally' as possible, cling to our theories of the world and our view of self, and suppress negative feelings. These reactions are more often than not nonproductive for us today, though as automatic responses programmed through our brain, they were helpful to us some 400,000 years ago. Now as we have become more populous, have created more of a global society, and have devised organizations as a basis for working and even

living in society, we need to adopt a different pattern of response, one characterized by learning. This pattern may be invoked through reflection. It is critical reflection, for example, that will allow us to search for truths even if they are unpleasant to us, to take personal causal responsibility for problems, and to allow us to accept some pain in order to learn how to become a better societal participant.

Recalling Mead and Habermas, our reflection can be social. We realize ourselves through civil discourse and intersubjective recognition. This suggests that the sure way to reach agreement about disputed claims in our society is through communicative action, that is, through public inquiry. Sigmund Freud understood the value of inquiry and dialogue even on his deathbed. There is a story that one of his students approached him and, seeing how much pain he was in due to an afflictive mouth cancer, sheepishly uttered: 'I presume your illness is so serious that you won't be interested in talking about the tenets of psychology'. Freud's immediate retort was: 'My illness is fatal but not serious'.

Reflective practice addresses two fundamental dilemmas posed by Giddens (1991) underlying the very process of critical reflection. Giddens referred to the 'unification versus fragmentation' of ourselves and our being in the world. In the unification dilemma, there is the danger of becoming so enmeshed in self-consciousness that questions of collective morality become lost from view. In fragmentation, one becomes so imbued in a social context that one's self becomes dependent and invisible.

The first dilemma is addressed in reflective practice as people show a willingness to confront themselves and create alternative interpretations of their own constructed reality in the company of trusting others. They become receptive to what Gouldner (1970) once referred to as 'hostile information', or data that run contrary to their comfortable stance. They submit to the critical gaze of others (Weil, Romm and Flood, 1997). But one can only accomplish a collective morality when, in Giddens (1991) terms, one 'does not just live for oneself, but develops meaning through relationship with others and through a feeling of wholeness with the earth's ecosystems' (p. 223).

As for the second dilemma, reflective practice encourages individuals to distinguish themselves from their social context. They are willing to be challenged on their interpretations but they also have the courage to posit constructions that might not be accepted in their community. They become willing to face the utter isolation that may come from ostracism from the group. Most of us have been in situations in which someone has asked for a second look at a proposal. In so doing, that person faces stern rebuke from nearly everyone in the room. Do we have to go over this one more time? Yet, how often does the second review lead to new critical insights? Are we not better off encouraging voice, or at least having a public debate about it, than suppressing it?

Reflective practice, then, considers data beyond our personal, interpersonal, and organizational taken-for-granted assumptions. It is just as interested in exploring historical and social processes that go beyond even the individualistic notion of 'learning to learn'. We tend to assume that everyone has the psychological and even physical security of reflecting with others, but in fact this may not be the case for marginalized groups in particular settings. As suggested by dialectical knowing,

it is also likely that cultural background may play an important role in the encouragement or discouragement of reflective practices (Taylor, 1997).

Giroux (1981) believes that reflection can help us understand how knowledge has been constructed and managed and how what is deemed to be relevant or even common sense has been arrived at. Critical theorists, such as Freire (1970), are also concerned with how we consciously or unconsciously use power, privilege, and voice to exert influence and suppress dissent. We need to examine whose interests are served by the forms of knowing in popular use, be they instructional methods, curricula, or classroom technologies. Lectures and case studies provide the means for control to remain securely in the hands of the instructor. Dialogue, on the other hand, encourages learner voice because it attempts to develop critical consciousness by engaging learners in desocializing discovery and linking experience with text. Dialogue ensures that multiple points of view are heard, leading to new ways of thinking and ultimately of acting. Learners enter the conversation knowing that it will produce something totally new to each one of them. Dialogic practice, then, moves from an instructor-identified beginning point through numerous, subsequent rounds of interaction. Questions are raised by both learners and instructor as a given theme is explored (Shor, 1992; Boyce, 1996; McMaster, 1996).

A publicly reflective approach to project-based learning, then, takes up the challenge posed by critical theorists (see Garrick and Clegg in this issue) that work-based methods are not only openly or subtly performative but at best engage learners in a 'false consciousness' about their presumed participation in a social structure. Project-based learning under the auspices of premise reflection invites the critical commentary of trusted¹ other signifiers. Further, although team and organizational learning are encouraged, individual self-knowledge is also promoted. Individual members of project teams, for example, may include in their personal learning goals the elucidation of barriers preventing them from finding their voice or reaching their potential in the world independent of prescriptive forces, be they corporate or radical. In finding their voice, participants learn to 'speak up' in ways not merely sanctioned by privileged social authorities but because of their self-identified interests. They search not only for their own consciousness but for meaning in the collective set which arises from a true dialogue among competing interests, one that goes after the tough questions, not the easy answers (Heifetz, 1994).

Critical consciousness enhanced through public reflection recognizes the connection between individual problems and the social context within which they are embedded. Once this connection is made, learners can participate in educational projects that may transform their world by their very participation in it. Consider the case of Mark Twain's Huckleberry Finn, who believed he was committing a moral sin because he was harboring a slave, his friend Jim (Twain, 1948). Huck eventually gave up on his morality because of his feelings for his friend. Most of us can agree that acting on his feelings was correct since turning in a slave who also happens to be your friend is bad morality to begin with. However, Huck did make one error. He did not question the underlying values behind the morality of the day. In public reflection one learns to criticize even societal norms and values by surfacing one's own beliefs, and in Huck's case, one's own tacit wisdom. By engaging in civic dialogue, wherein we take others' points of view into considera-

tion but in which we also advocate and illustrate our own viewpoints as well as surfacing our underlying assumptions, we advance the common good. We mobilize to create a true community of practice and thus a better world.

Reflection and Time

Reflection can ensue before, during, or after the experience it examines. Adopting Loughran's labels (1996), we may refer to these reflective practices as: anticipatory, contemporaneous, and retrospective reflection. Anticipatory reflection occurs prior to the experience, often in the form of planning as learners suggest to themselves and to their peers how they might approach a given situation. They may even wish to rehearse some possible scenarios as a way of anticipating the reactions of others and the responses one might offer in response to these reactions. Anticipatory reflection tends to probe to a deeper level than basic planning by considering alternative goals and approaches, such as by positing a series of 'if-then' propositions based upon the possible outcomes of one's initial intervention. Subsequent interventions can then be tried out, perhaps on an off-line basis with peers or mentors, to discern their possible effectiveness.

Contemporaneous reflection occurs in the moment, akin to Schön's (1983) 'reflection-in-action', such that in the midst of performance one reframes unanticipated problem situations in order to see experience differently. While engaged in experience, planned responses often don't go according to plan, triggering a series of unexpected reactions. In this situation the learner often reframes the problem on the spot in order to release oneself as well as one's colleagues from fixed views, leading to the consideration of new approaches. Reflection of this nature can be described as taking one's experience outside oneself, temporarily, in order to examine it as an object. Although easier to do after the experience is over, talented reflective practitioners can look at experience in this way as the event unfolds.

Retrospective reflection looks back at recent experience. It can be initiated as the first instance of reflection, or it may be triggered by plans and hypotheses generated from anticipatory reflection or by insights evolving from contemporaneous reflection.

Reflection and Experience

Experience alone does not predetermine practitioners' use of reflective practices; rather, it is how one uses experience that is critical to understanding why some individuals use reflection to grow in their professional learning. Reflective practitioners 'reinvest' in learning by participating in continuing education, by seeking out greater challenges in their work, and by tackling more complex representations of recurrent problems (Bereiter and Scardamalia, 1993). As a consequence of their learning reinvestment, reflective practitioners engage in problem posing as much as problem solving, continually expand their solution database rather than selecting the first solution that works, view inconsistencies as opportunities rather than inconveniences, and enjoy reflecting back on their

decision making rather than sealing off debate. Reflective practitioners also seek to involve others in their search for new solutions (Schön, 1983; Ferry and Ross-Gordon, 1998).

Reflection is thought by cognitive psychologists to contribute as much to learning as experience itself to the extent that learners are active observers. In fact, people often learn behavior from observing others before performing the behavior themselves (Bandura, 1986). According to social learning theory (SLT), individuals tend to anticipate actions and their associated consequences. Hence, before trying out new or altered behaviors, they first pay attention to others and develop mental models or cognitive maps to guide their trials (Bandura, 1977). Perhaps you may have noticed, even in yourself, that when introduced to a new game involving some dexterity—for instance, making a wrist shot in hockey—you tend to prefer seeing someone else demonstrate the activity first. That way, you can develop a mental picture of what the skill entails before trying it yourself.

Polanyi (1964) showed that the use of concepts in reflection facilitated our observations by the demonstration that medical students at the outset of their training could see practically nothing in X-ray pictures. Once trained, however, these same medical students could use their reflective powers to interpret and re-interpret these pictures. Hence, experience and reflection are not dualistic; they play off each other (Miettinen, 2000). John Dewey resolved the relationship between experience and reflection by explaining that the latter can be used to solve problems in the former. In his *How We Think* (1933: 277), he wrote: ‘experience also includes the reflection that sets us free from the limiting influence of sense, appetite, and tradition. Experience may welcome and assimilate all that the most exact and penetrating thought discovers’.

Consider that when people in interpersonal transactions sometimes pause for a moment to catch their breath and reflect, the process of reflection does not end once they resume the conversation. Reflection continues on into the engagement as one becomes absorbed in practice. So, reflection viewed in the sense of internal dialogue can be bounded by external dialogue which induces and then refines it (Wertsch, 1979). Hence it is mixed up with practice. Our experience with others informs us, pulls us, and even transforms us. As Wenger (1998) suggests, we create ways of learning in practice in the very process of contributing to making that practice what it is.

In our everyday work activity, although we may be learning, we may not be subjecting that ‘learning’ to conscious activity. Such concentration might indeed disturb our performance. Western positivists tend to think of learning as that time when we stop our performance, assess how we’re doing, and then determine how we can improve. We may choose at that point not to change anything. But when we stop and reflect retrospectively, we at best capture what we had already learned tacitly in the past. Our learning may be continuing beyond that point of capture.

The stopping, however, is important, if not to help us figure out what we had learned, then at least to help others learn what we have done well (or poorly). How might we observe and experiment with our own collective tacit processes in action? One way to think about the reflective process in action is through the metaphor of the self-guided tour bus, the kind that allows you to hop on and off to explore some areas of the city on foot. If you choose never to get off the bus, your experience is broad but perhaps superficial. Stopping gives you the chance to

see more deeply what is being experienced. It gives you, in the words of Isabel Rimanóczy (1998) of LIM Ltd, an opportunity to ‘lean over’ an event and even to melt inside the situation, becoming part of the scene. Note also that once you’ve completed the excursion on foot, you normally have the option of re-boarding the bus to continue the general tour.

Consider as a more practical example the instance of time-outs or adjournments in meetings used to give us time for private reflection on the transactions that have taken place, thus helping us prepare for the next meeting. In fact, this version of reality may be oversimplified and even misplaced. Private reflection does occur and may well help us prepare for the meeting, but any subsequent communication during the meeting extends that reflection because meaning derived from that interaction is as much social as it is an internal activity (Vygotsky, 1988; Holman, Pavlica and Thorpe, 1997). In other words, we may be just beginning our reflection when we do it in private. Our thoughts are constantly re-shaped when converted into language and brought out in the presence of others. Indeed, as we use language to persuade others about our points of view, we may notice that in our very process of argumentation, we begin to reframe our position. Furthermore, most of us find that we may change our viewpoints slightly or even a great deal as the conversation ensues.

Reflection also considers the affect experienced by the practitioner. Often overlooked, emotions can play a significant role in enhancing or in distorting the facts within a situation, and likewise in contributing to or detracting from learning experiences. Occasionally, we find ourselves outraged in the heat of the moment and we turn away from our fellow conversers. Private reflection affords us the chance to cool down and come back with a presumably more rational response. However, walking away to reflect might rob not just ourselves but those in our immediate—perhaps intimate—environment of a potentially productive, albeit highly charged, moment. In the *Drama of Leadership*, Pitcher (1997) cautions us that emotion can impair judgment but its absence can result in even worse judgment.

So we return to the need for learning dialogues that encourage reflection even after one of our temporary rages, in the presence of trusting others. That way we don’t have to walk away, but can work with others to help us make productive use of our emotional energy, and do so in a way that is sensitive to others, if not always perfectly pleasant. The reflection in this instance may not only be about our thoughts and actions, but about our feelings. The dialogue might also extend to what was not said or done. Hence, even under the grip of emotion and tension, we can develop the discipline of acknowledging our feelings and inquiring about the feelings of others, at least to the extent that we can understand the frames or meanings afforded by our statements and actions. Relying on the trust, friendship, and support of others, we can distill the learning resulting from interpersonal reflective processes.

The ‘Practicality’ of Reflection

One wonders, nevertheless, whether reflective practice is possible or practical in this age of the busy corporate executive who is virtually socialized to be a person of

action, not of reflection. Nor are top managers, according to some fatalistic observers, prone to inspire reflection in others. They want an answer rather than a question; they are looking for solutions rather than problems. They want to take credit for successes rather than be part of the ‘team’ (Jackall, 1983).

In an exercise that I co-moderate with my colleague, Robert Leaver, we ask a series of questions in debriefing an exercise known as ‘Actors and Reflectors’:

- what is the quality of your work and personal experience?
- what are others at work saying about the intense pace of the workplace?
- what is your desire for personal reflection time?
- do you desire more genuine conversation in a group or with a colleague?
- what is the community saying it needs from business?
- will our Earth be able to sustain itself?

By examining questions such as these, we begin to see the shortsightedness of pure action as a world view. Bolman and Deal (1997) believe that action without reflection—or without ‘reframing’, as they call it—can be fatal to corporate success. The decline of Sears in the face of its stronger competitor, Wal-Mart, or the precipitous decline in market share of General Motors can be attributed, in their view, to an inability to use reframing. For example, Roger Smith, upon assuming the role as CEO of GM, killed a project design for a new small car to compete with the high-quality compact cars from Japan. It was thought that his commitment to rational thinking and financial logic got in the way of his mobilizing his company to undertake the necessary visionary strategy that would have been necessary to compete with the Japanese car manufacturers throughout the 1980s. As Bolman and Deal suggest, Smith’s inability to reframe comprehensively kept him from seeing in a new light the problems confronting his company. In other words, he was unable to question the fundamental assumptions of his business well enough to generate sufficiently creative responses to cope with the treacherous environment characterizing his industry.

In our turbulent global environment, it appears almost definitional that we need managers who can inspire reflection to the extent of generating new ways of coping with change. There is a natural inertia that seems to accompany size and structure in organizations. A reflective culture is one that makes it possible for people to constantly challenge things without fear of retaliation. Hammer and Stanton (1997) believe that of all the tasks involved in the reflective process, breaking assumptions is the most critical. In their view, businesses operate on fundamental assumptions, for example:

- ‘we are and always will be the low-cost producer’
- ‘every new product we develop must be unique’
- ‘our people are the best and brightest in the industry’
- ‘we are known for being the first to bring out new models’

Although these assumptions are necessary, they must be subject to review and revision as change occurs. Yet, this almost natural step is the most difficult to undertake since change requires having people in control lose their grip on the status quo.

An assumption-breaking culture is one that deliberately keeps itself off-center. Managers can contribute to this kind of culture by trying to make reflection and

learning contagious within their organization. They can engage their community in a persistent exercise of dialectical knowing. Perhaps one indicator of whether managers are prepared to accept this level of reflective practice is the extent to which they themselves are receptive to feedback—the extent to which they can allow others to have an effect on them.

In reality, inspiring reflective practice in an organization does not have to be an onerous task even for top managers. Although they are by definition people of action, they are also people who, when given a hospitable environment, like to share their experiences and, moreover, to help one another. Unfortunately, any formal reflective sharing that is made available to managers typically arises through discussion at training events or on strategic plans already formulated. However, managers are almost always confronting challenges and puzzles in their daily work which would benefit from public dialogue. Many come to realize that they do not have a monopoly on good ideas and solutions. They might even crave the opportunity to share their experiences, insights, questions, and even failures with others if given the right climate—a climate receptive to open discourse. Indeed, they might appreciate an opportunity to replay their plans and actions in front of like-minded colleagues who are not assembled to take advantage politically of their faults, but who want to help because they realize that they, too, need the understanding of others.

In this age of strategic planning, it is also important to note that reflective practice is not equivalent to planning. Planning, be it determining one's strategic advantage, gathering competitive intelligence, or exploiting one's strategic competencies, constitutes reflection at a somewhat superficial level. It takes for granted the goals we are working on in solving our problems. Higher levels of reflection, noted earlier as process and premise reflection, examine not only the assumptions and procedures in use but the very presuppositions attending to the problem to begin with. Reflection of this order requires an institutionalized capacity to rethink the nature of the business, including its strategic goals.

To truly shape organizational learning, reflective practices should also occur simultaneously with knowledge sharing so that new meaning and methods can be accessed by organizational members and partners. Shared meaning often gives way to new plans as well as to new or renewed action. Whether the action produced from reflection is new or renewed, it tends to be more coordinated than before, since it has presumably engaged everyone involved in a public reflective process. Action then precipitates more reflection and the process begins again.

Finally, is public reflection a practice that should be reserved only for those unpredictable times in corporate life when we have to reason our way out of turbulence? In fact, there isn't much routine in organizational practices these days, especially in the project environment, but if there were to be, it might be the perfect time to engage in reflective behavior in order to re-engineer taken-for-granted processes.

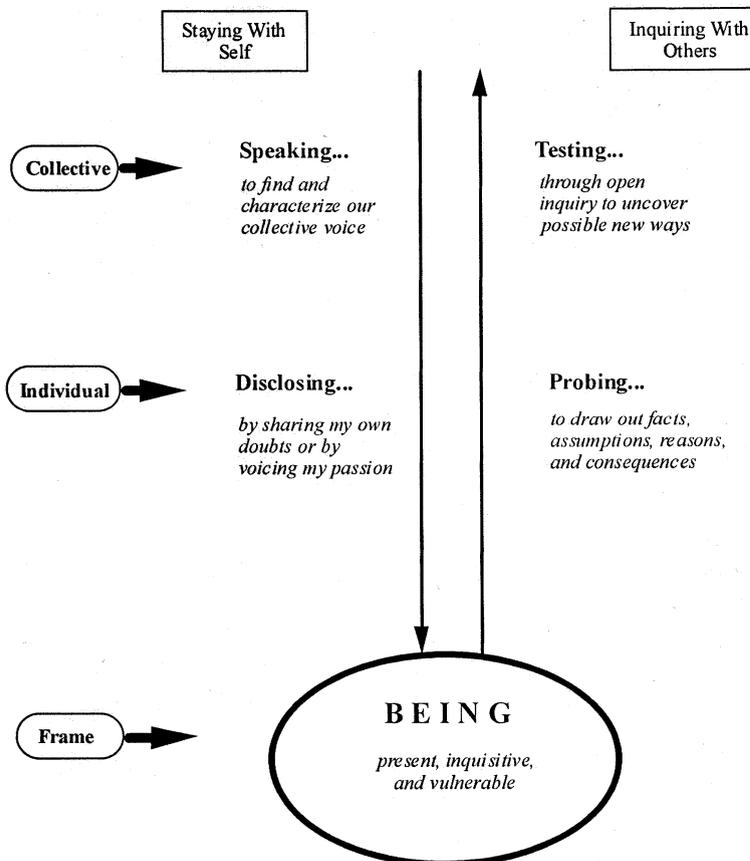
The Skills of Reflective Practice

Practically speaking, there are skills that can be associated with reflective practice beyond the basic skills of communication, listening in particular. Acknowledging

first the contribution of active listening competencies as well as the value of feedback, there are five advanced skills that, used together, can contribute to reflective discourse.

Although these skills are often introduced by trained facilitators, they can gradually be assumed by other facilitating members of any work or learning team. In the model presented in Figure 1, five principal skills are illustrated: Being, Speaking, Disclosing, Testing, and Probing. The skill of Being is central and pervasive, cutting across the other skills, for it represents one's presence and vulnerability in creating a reflective climate in the group. Recalling that reflection represents a stepping back to ponder meaning, the first reflective skill is to experience, or even more simply, to be. In accomplishing 'being', we try to experience and describe situations, even our own involvement in them, without imputing meaning to them or without evaluating them. If facilitators are successful in modeling or helping team members to learn to 'be', they can begin to explore differences and diverse experiences together and learn from one another without initial polarization. In this way they learn to explain together (Griffith, 1999).

Figure 1 The five skills of reflective practice



The skill of Being can place one in a vulnerable state in the sense that one does not rely on defending oneself against experience. The focus is rather on opening up to experience and to the interpersonal environment around oneself. Isaacs (1999) refers to this process as ‘suspending’, in which we make the contents of our consciousness available to others. We engage in such practices as suspending certainty, externalizing our thoughts, and exploring the tension of the opposites. This produces a reflective response which can be characterized by a number of attributes (from Bell, 1998) that are in direct contrast to the defensive posture; i.e.

- instead of maintaining unrealistic standards – one sets realistic expectations
- instead of expressing trepidation – one displays tolerance
- instead of concentrating on self-expression – one uses listening
- instead of being self-absorbed – one conveys humility
- instead of feeling out of depth – one feels open to learn
- instead of feeling out of context – one becomes open to experience.

Bell’s reflective response suggests that at times we may engage our empathy with others by viewing them and listening to them as we wish to be treated. At other times, we may wish to view others as ‘strange’ (Isaacs, 1999)—someone so unlike ourselves that they require even deeper respect and attention so that we may learn to know them. Using language from Buddhist insight meditation, Being can also be referred to as mindfulness, which represents knowing what is arising in the moment without losing track of the knower. Gregory Kramer (1998) through the practice of ‘insight dialogue’ has explored the potential of maintaining a meditative state of being while engaged in relationship with others. Developing the discipline of folding action and reflection into one requires a good deal of skill and patience but can be learned, according to Kramer, using a number of guidelines.

- Commit to the process. One brings one’s full presence to the group and commits not out of obligation but out of wisdom and compassion allowing us to connect with one another.
- Trust emergence—no goals. The universe of possibilities is not limited by a preconfigured agenda. There is no goal but to rest in the moment from which might ensue an emotional and spiritual release or an intellectual breakthrough. These are natural results, not goals.
- Balance affirmation and investigation. Participants practice deep listening and maintain an attitude of inquiry. They affirm, not from a separate, limited self, but from the circle emerging within the group. One feels at ease with oneself, confident of the group’s loving kindness.
- Pause—reflect—contemplate. One pauses after hearing a statement, reflects on what has been said, and contemplates one’s feelings, the motivation for speaking, and the richness of the moment. By providing space in our interactions, we can begin to understand their nature.
- Free up roles. In the group there is no hierarchy. Participants attempt to avoid the tendency to pigeon-hole people into roles. An open-hearted acceptance of ourselves and of others yields freedom and spontaneity to all.

- Seek out assumptions. One actively explores the moment, searching for assumptions in our own thinking and in what has been said by others.
- Observe judgments. Judgments are allowed to rise to consciousness in order to gain a window into our reactive nature and to open the possibility of a more even-handed way of being.
- Share parallel thinking. Parallel thoughts are those that arise in the background as other things are said. In the safety of the group, we bring these forth, be they judgments, feelings of inadequacy, or observations about the processes arising in the group.

Referring to the dimensions of the model, Being itself occupies the dimension we call the 'frame' mode. Framing refers to how we think about a situation, more specifically, how we select, name, and organize facts to make a story for ourselves about what is going on and what to do in a particular situation. In the collective mode, we extend our contributions and inquiry out to all the members of the community, whereas in the individual mode, we hear our own voice or address one individual at a time. The cross dimensions are 'staying with self' and 'taking action toward others'. At times, we make personal contributions to the group or focus attention on ourselves. At other times, we extend and dedicate attention to others.

Returning to the skill of Being, as a central skill it may entail staying with oneself or taking action toward others. It is most concerned with exploring differences and diverse experiences apart from members' preconceived notions. The Being skill models an inquisitive, nonjudgmental attitude towards group phenomena. Some of its components are: inviting questions and comments, considering one's own positions as hypotheses to be tested, acknowledging expressions of vulnerability by others. An example of Being might occur in an advertising project group about ready to launch a new campaign. Everything seems to be in place, but the group leader (who might also be a facilitator of reflective practices as outlined here), who has actually pushed a particular design, might ask the group to pause with him or her in a state of vulnerability. He or she then wonders out loud if something has been overlooked and whether the group might take one more look at the design.

The second reflective skill of Speaking is in the upper-left section of the Figure 1, signifying that it seeks to articulate a collective voice from within oneself. In Speaking, one attempts to characterize the state of the group or its meaning at a given time. It may entail summoning an image to articulate meaning, suggesting group norms, or bringing out uncertainties or unfounded assumptions. In Speaking it is not necessary to prepare one's words in advance. One crafts one's message in the moment as the meaning unfolds. One group never lost the image presented at an earlier time by their facilitator who said the team was operating like 'a cargo plane having to make its destination to Istanbul but with one engine knocked out'.

In the third skill of Disclosing, one stays within oneself and, at the same time, shares one's doubts or voices one's passion. By using Disclosing, one may unveil one's feelings at a given moment based on what has transpired, or one may present a story to reveal the depth of one's experience. The idea is to help the group learn more about its membership. Another cue to promote Disclosing is to ask oneself what you might say to help the group know you better.

Testing, the fourth reflective skill, is an open-ended query directed toward the group as a whole that attempts to uncover new ways of thinking and behaving. In using Testing, one may ask the group to consider its own process or may attempt to explore underlying assumptions previously taken for granted. In Testing, the member is trying to promote a process of collective inquiry. As a tester, one may occasionally ask for a process check or ask if someone might act out a scenario to explore an option. As an example, rather than offer another opinion to help a group resolve an impasse, a member might inquire about the available methods for approaching the problem at hand.

Finally, in Probing, one makes a direct inquiry, typically to one member at a time, to find out the facts, reasons, assumptions, inferences, and possible consequences of a given suggestion or action. For example, probing might attempt to point out inconsistencies in members' reasoning patterns, perhaps helping them to uncover the assumptions and beliefs behind particular actions. In using Probing, however, one needs to be careful not to interrogate or make any member feel on the spot or defensive. On the other hand, Probing may initially have to make some members uncomfortable if they are asked to consider assumptions that had been hidden even from their own consciousness. As an example, consider a frank inquiry posed to a member named Mark:

Mark, you've said several times that you believe the workers in your unit should take the ball and run with it. Yet, you say they are dependent and continue to check with you on every new initiative. Is there anything you might be doing or saying that might be blocking their independence. Might you be unwittingly giving them a sense that you'll be blameful if they screw up?

It should be noted that the project environment offers a promising opportunity to develop the skills and dispositions inherent in the public reflective process. There is little substitute for immersing oneself in continuously changing problem situations the solutions to which require reflection with others. What is called for is a work-based learning approach in which all participants are involved in the solution of real-time problems (Raelin, 1997). Formal structures, such as learning teams, journals, and developmental relationships (see Raelin, 2000) are also available to stimulate the reflective stance.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to disclose the emerging theory and the eminent practicality of engaging in public and critical reflective practice, especially arising from project-based learning. In an age when 'doing' is espoused as the necessary ingredient for success, there is a need for a counterpart to both (1) 'stop the presses' of action so as to learn from that action, and (2) bring the parties to the table, even those heretofore left behind, to generate a collective process of inquiry. This may be accomplished by critical reflective dialogues with all relevant stakeholders who, as suggested throughout this account, can take the role of the other, develop shared values, and subject their reasoning to public scrutiny.

Note

1. The requirement of 'trust' in the learning team is seen by some observers as problematic since it may discourage critical commentary. Trust need not be assumed as a condition for conformity of views. On the contrary, it provides license for attack against inadequate reasoning *without* a corresponding need to solidify one's defenses against personal counter-attack.

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Contact Address

Joseph A. Raelin, The Wallace E. Carroll School of Management, Boston College, Chestnut Hill, MA 02467, USA. [email: raelin@bc.edu]