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Reflect on this!

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Abstract

In this article we reflect on reflection. To do this, we share examples of pedagogic approaches used in undergraduate performance programmes at York St John University that re-situate reflective practice within creative practice. For example, we explore the creative, multimodal use of a catalogue document that two of the authors used to encourage students to reflect as part of the B.A. (Hons) Theatre level 2 modules entitled 'performing the self' & 'artist as witness'. These modules aim to encourage students to consider themselves in some sense auteurs of themselves and their art practice. The case study illustrates that we need to go beyond the familiar if we are to be reflexive about the role of reflection in creative practice education.

Keywords

reflection

reflexivity

theatre

art and design

practice

Introduction

It is a truth universally acknowledged that reflective practice is at the heart of creative education. Reflection enjoys a privileged position in Higher Education. It has become an orthodoxy, almost, in Foucauldian terms, a 'regime of truth' (1990). It is impossible to be against reflection. In this article we reflect on reflection to 'make the familiar strange'. We challenge the hegemonic position of reflection in creative practice, and we offer an example of reflective pedagogy that models the reflexivity suited to an arts practice context. For clarity there are points in this article where we differentiate and highlight the different contributions of the three authors. We hope that this signposting unpacks the different authorial voices and experiences.

In creative practice, educating students to become *reflective practitioners*, a term coined by Schon (1987), is viewed as essential to their development; indeed reflection is such a commonly used term that there can sometimes be the assumption that we all know exactly what we are talking about. For the purposes of this article we draw on Boud et al.'s (1985) definition of reflection as being 'a generic term for those intellectual and effective activities in which individuals engage in to explore their experiences in order to lead to a new understanding and appreciation'. In addition we note Reid's (1993: 3) definition that refers to reflection as 'a process of reviewing an experience or practice in order to describe, analyse, evaluate and also to inform learning about practice'.

Saltiel (2010: 140) writes that ‘the notion of the reflective practitioner is an enticing one’. We would go further; in our view, creative practice educators are enticed, entranced and enchanted by reflection, and we unite in telling our students to ‘go forth and reflect!’ because it is taken for granted that reflection promotes learning. Ambitious claims are made in relation to reflection within the literature. Much has been written on reflective practice as a means to promote deep learning by transforming and integrating new experiences and understanding with previous/existing knowledge. This has gained most currency as a key part of learning from experience (Kolb 1984). Moon (2010) writes that ‘reflection leads to deep approaches to learning’, while for Race (2003:61), reflection deepens [...] learning. For Osterman and Kottkamp (1993: 19) reflection is:

a means by which practitioners can develop greater self awareness about the nature and impact of their performance, an awareness that creates opportunities for professional growth and change.

Susan’s interest in reflection emerged as a result of her engagement with ‘Approaches to Learning’ literature about deep and surface approaches to learning (see for example, Marton et al. 1997). She became interested in identifying teaching approaches that heightened students’ meta-cognitive awareness about their approach to learning. Susan secured funding from the Higher Education Academy Art Design and Media Subject Centre to develop teaching materials that offer scaffolded exercises to develop students’ reflection as a means to enhance students’ learning literacy (see report at www.adm.heacademy.ac.uk/library/files/adm-hea.../devpedearn.pdf). This project led to an examination of the different genres of writing that

undergraduate art and design students encounter and produce while they are studying. For Susan, the reflective journals she was developing with students offered a writing genre that appeared to be particularly suited to the needs of art and design students, arguably much better suited than that of the essay. This is because reflective writing promotes the idea that writing is a practice that has much in common with arts practice (Orr et al. 2005). Reflection is about doing; it is an action. Reflective writing can be, to use Richardson's (2002) phrase, 'textwork'. For Richardson, the term textwork underlines that writing can be usefully understood as a method of enquiry. Thus, we find things out *through* the act of writing. This is in sharp contrast to the more dominant view that posits writing as the thing done at the end of learning. The traditional view is that a student does research and then she 'writes it up'. Reflective approaches challenge this assumption because the research occurs *in* the act of writing.

Jules' and David's interest in reflection arose out of a growing dissatisfaction with the written component requirements that sat alongside the practice requirements on a B.A. Theatre degree. The written requirements were an inadequate mode to capture the extraordinary learning that they were witnessing as pedagogues. For Jules this was further crystallized by engaging in a Postgraduate Certificate in Academic Practice course; in particular the keeping of a reflective journal, and with David she began to reflect on the very nature of learning and the relationship of learning to the higher education industry. Asking questions such as what are the ethics of teaching (offering learning opportunities) in higher education, why teach what they teach in the way that they teach, and what is the benefit to those students who encounter them on their university career?

Together Jules and David convened a Centre of Excellence in Teaching and Learning (CETL) funded symposium on reflective practice in performance, entitled *Reflect on this!* at which Susan gave the keynote address (2008 York St John University). Jules and David gave a paper on the development of the catalogue document (see below for a discussion of this term) as a way for students to evidence their analysis, reflection and critique in a language that is more topographically equivalent to their performance practice (why learn two languages when one will do?). Their ideas echoed work developed by Susan and Margo Blythman that explored the parallels between the practice of writing and the practice of art making (Orr and Blythman 2002). This symposium identified Susan, Jules and David's common interest in reflection and the exploration of the relationship between feeling, thought and action. But rather than constructing a false and arbitrary dichotomy between knowing and doing, knowledge and action, theory and practice, they rather sought to find a braiding¹ and to further explore issues of reflective practice.

Case study

At this point in the article, Jules and David introduce a case study that unpacks the complex relationships between creative arts practice and reflection on that practice. To do this they discuss the pedagogic approaches used in undergraduate and postgraduate performance programmes at York St John University that re-situate reflective practice within creative practice.

¹ After Professor Dwight Conquergood of Northwestern University.

At York St John University there is a strand within the Theatre degree, performance practice, which is explicitly intended to articulate the creative demands of an auteur – someone who makes their own work. In year 2 these modules are *Performing the Self* and *Artist as Witness*, which have been designed to offer students the opportunity to negotiate the landscape from the self to the other – from the personal to the social, from the private to the public and from the individual to the collective – as a model of creation that has a wider personal/cultural/socio-political implication.

In *Performing the Self*, students are asked to ‘read’ their lived experience as ‘text’; interrogate the ‘self’ through performance, look at auto/biographical material through the lens of feminism, and engage with discourses considering identity and difference:

*Autobiographical practices become occasions for restaging
subjectivity and autobiographical strategies become occasions
for the staging of resistance. (Smith 1998: 434)*

The students then take these considerations to Auschwitz and the individual, collective and cultural trauma of the Shoah. What questions does this dilemma cause, how does this field trip bring to the forefront of consciousness the fragmentary nature of composition in contemporary theatre practice in light of ideas expressed by Young (2000) and Friedlander (1992)? How does the student artist make work in the midst of the maelstrom of this vertiginous discourse? The fact that they do make work is perhaps

nothing short of miraculous, braiding embodied experience (subjugated knowledge) with critical thinking (legitimized knowledge), and engaging in the theory into practice– practice into theory loop (praxis) (Conquergood 2007).

Every attempt to write – or claim to have written – a seamless narrative of a real life is doomed to failure. Conscious or unconscious gaps in memory demand to be bridged, and the result is an unending clash between the person who experienced and acted out the life of the past and the person now narrating and reflecting in the present. (Steiner and Yuang 2004:11)

Artist as Witness asks the student to consider the ethics of telling another's story; it asks the fundamental question: How will you bear testimony to an event you did not witness? With the coda when all the witnesses are gone. On their return the students create a series of fragments, not necessarily about Auschwitz, and then they begin the remarkable job of attempting to create whole, that which is essentially fragmented, thereby beginning to reflect upon the ever presence of failure, incomprehension and impossibility that is constantly being mitigated against by the politics of hope.

The assessment for these modules is in two parts, the performance and a written component, which notionally deals with context, criticality and reflection. Originally this took the form of a reflective journal, which through time Jules and David felt was inadequate to capture the extraordinary learning. So in discussion with the students on

these modules, Jules and David proposed a format that became (over time) a catalogue document. In the beginning it had no assignment brief and no criteria, but as reflection and thinking developed criteria and assignment briefs slowly revealed themselves.

As pedagogues we are offering the opportunity for students to engage in the world creatively and actively, to try and understand the world they, me, we, you live in through creative practice, which includes reflection. Creativity as with reflection is an iterative process going to and fro, and is an integral part of contemporary composition – a series of ‘is this how it works?’

Dewey (2009) the American philosopher, who was a significant influence on the work of Allan Kaprow (2007), considered experience and action as knowledge which could be summarized possibly in the axiom ‘doing is knowing’. Which begs the question: if the students create a performance work that has to have in it evidence of knowledge, context, analysis, critical intervention, and the work has to evidence self-awareness of itself as an artwork, why do we get the student to reflect in another form? Should the knowing not be inherent in the doing?

Historically, pedagogues in Theatre and Performance have been asking students to evidence their learning in two different languages, first in performance and as performance, and second as written textual analysis in text and as text. On the BA Performance Theatre degree programme, this has taken the form of the following:

- Essay on the performance that the student has created
- Journal as a logbook of the process and performance that the student has created
- Reflective journal that charts the process to and of the performance
- Reflective journal with summative statement – reflection on the performance
- And now a catalogue document

What is a catalogue document?

Jules and David have not invented anything new; visual artists have been doing catalogues for some time, evidencing a body of work. For the generation of a catalogue document, the students studying Theatre actively select materials that will constitute it, and the students are expected to/required to engage in high production values. It is intended that the artefact produced will have currency for the students after graduation, especially for those who want to tour their work or progress to postgraduate study.

As in the creation of a performance work, the form of the catalogue document is important, it has to evidence an understanding of the form of the performance in the form as well as in the relationship to the content, which may also define the form, i.e. if the performance is deeply autobiographical and narrative based then the catalogue document should evidence that in its form as well as content. Therefore, when putting the catalogue document together, it does not have to be a chronological record of the process of one's learning; but it should deal with one's learning epistemologically. Allowing the students to evidence their understanding of their own learning through the lens of their learning

i.e., first level reflection and then second level reflection. This means that the catalogue document can be intervened in by the viewer and assessor, and witnessed holistically – reading the form, medium, methodology and content, which is of course topologically equivalent to reading a performance.

Using the elements in the same way as they constructed/composed the theatrework, the students employ compositional strategies such as juxtaposition, repetition, palindrome, accretion/accumulation, layering, scaling, stochastic, etc.

So what goes in the catalogue document?

Evidence of their learning in the form of:

- Photographic evidence of the process/product
- Selected journal entries, scanned in
- Diagrammatic formations – spatial arrangements, compositional devices
- Critical responses
- Quotes in text and visual (audio)

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It is essentially a *collage*

Will the collage/montage revolution in representation be admitted into the academic essay, into the discourse of knowledge, replacing the “realist” criticism based on notions of “truth” as correspondence to or correct reproduction of a referent object of study? (Foster 1983: 86)

The objective is that the catalogue document articulates the artistic process in a meaningful way both to the maker(s) of the work and to its recipients. It does so by allowing the integration and reading across different modes of doing (evidence of artefacts that have been made) and thinking (around the artefacts: contextual, theoretical and epistemological). Around different kinds of images and evidences there can also exist reflective commentary (i.e. the autobiographical I) and contextual readings that facilitated the making process and now facilitate the reading process.

Often with journals there is a temptation to list what ‘we have done’ in chronological order. The creative process, however, is much more messy and complex than a chronological narrative implies; and though it might be true that *this happened, then this happened and then I read about such and such and saw that exhibition and then by chance I forgot to do that and I remembered this dream and well, it just seemed to come together [...]* might approximate a process, it does not adequately articulate or reflect the whole process. And it could be argued that there is equally as much to be said/learnt about in all that has not been told/seen and reflected upon.

How we articulate the creative process is therefore problematic, as it often relies on an over-simplistic cause and effect narrative (of the process) being told. This frequently fails to articulate an intention to create work that is bigger than, or resonates beyond, the sum of its parts, and goes some way to highlight the complexity of thinking and doing involved in the creative act. What Jules and David seek to do with the catalogue

document, therefore, is to ask the student to juxtapose fragments of journals written at the time of making with commentary concerned with the resolution of an idea. The result is a reverberation between what is known now and what was not known at the time of writing, which inevitably leads to another layer of reflection/commentary, thereby deepening learning.

While we might learn and develop skills through practice (by trial and error), it is through active reflection on 'doing' that we become aware of, and empowered by, our own creative process. As familiar patterns emerge in the cycle of experience within the process, we recognize that we have 'been here before' and we become more knowledgeable, skilled and confident in practice. The result is that feelings of fear, as can be invoked by the state of 'not knowing', transform into a longing for, and even an embracing of, this state of 'not knowing' – as it indicates a movement/shift within and upon the self/process.

So in the catalogue document Jules and David ask the students to evidence their learning through the juxtaposition of differing and different evidence, and from that extrapolate reflections, and then to reflect on those reflections in order to begin to generate insight that will alter how the students operate as a creative theatre maker in the future, with their intuition becoming more informed, refined and defined.

Rounding up reflection

This case study serves as a useful tool to explore contemporary debates about reflection. There are four key elements in this case study that directly address concerns that exist about the ideology of reflection.

Reflection can be political, radical and empowering

Clegg (1999) argues that the discourse that surrounds reflection in higher education constructs a very particular individualized view of the student that mis-recognizes the co-constructed nature of learning in communities of practice. Clegg argues that the origins of reflective practice can be traced back to the feminist idea that the personal is political. In the 1970s, feminists argued that self-awareness can lead to self-emancipation through consciousness raising. In Clegg's view, the political roots of reflection were lost or maybe even denied in Schon's (1987) articulation of reflective practice. For Kilminster et al. (2010), this is a key omission because it means that the radical potential of reflection has been dissipated. Clegg (1999) offers an illustration of this when she explores the role of reflection in nursing education. She argues that nursing students' reflective commentaries can be viewed, in part, as a form of surveillance and micro-management. Arguably, nurses have limited autonomy and there may be few opportunities for nurses to use their reflective texts as a means to effect change. In this case reflection may not feel empowering.

In our York St John case study, students are engaging directly with the politics and trauma of the Holocaust. As part of their module assignment the students are asked to position themselves in relation to this pivotal world event. This engagement directly

challenges Barnett (1997) and Harvey and Knight's (1996) view that reflection has become an overly 'navel-gazing' activity detached from action. The students' encounter with Auschwitz is a social and collective experience where students actively make work in response to their witness. The students collide with the force of history in a way that compels them to consider the role of power relations, agency and structure.

Reflection is a site to explore identity

In Higher Education it is very common to ask students to reflect on their learning in learning journals that are popularly conceived of as a way to document process. These learning journals are then graded as a means to give assessment weight to the process of art making. In this context reflective texts are viewed as a proxy for process. In Orr (2010), Susan explores the relationship between identity and reflective practice. The article puts forward the argument that when students are reflecting about process, they are constructing themselves and their practices. This is best understood as a process that works iteratively across different modes of doing and thinking. In Shreeve's term, the students are doing important identity work (Shreeve 2009). In David and Jules' case study the lecturers recognize the complex co-constructions of identity/ies and practice. This model of reflection allows for a complex and nuanced understanding of self/selves as fragmented and plural. As Stanley reminds us, the story of self is a social story (Stanley 1992 cited in Burke 2002). This approach to reflection dispels modernist assumptions of self as fixed and stable.

Reflection is about representation

When students are writing reflective texts, they are making difficult decisions about what is presented and what is hidden from view. Students are offering a representation. As Saltiel puts it ‘reflective accounts are as artfully constructed, as storied as any other uses of language’ (Saltiel 2010:141). In spite of this we believe that reflective texts are often assumed to be more truthful or authentic than traditional essays genres. An anecdote will serve to underline this point. A researcher known to one of the authors once set reflective journals as a key assessment strategy for a Masters degree he taught on. At graduation he bumped into one of his star students and he congratulated the student on his reflective writing. The student responded with ‘What! You believed that!? I just gave you what I knew you wanted, it wasn’t true’. This was a shock to the lecturer who realized that he had unwittingly bought into the idea of the authenticity of reflective writing. The student’s words felt like a betrayal. The York St John case study addresses this issue because the focus of the module is on identity, and issues of representation are explored as part of the learning process.

Reflection is value laden

When we are asked to reflect there is often an assumption that full self-awareness is possible. This is problematic given that research into other areas of creative practice, for example assessment, suggests that there are tacit practices that may be beyond verbal explication – how we can reflect on things we know only at a tacit level? A consideration of tacit practice leads to a consideration of the role of values in reflective practice. There is a need to be more ‘honest’ (!) about the role of values in reflection. As Burke (2002)

observes, all practices are inscribed with certain value positions. Thus we tell our students to write about 'anything' in a 'truthful' account of practice. But if they write about practices we find distasteful, offensive or banal, we will point out the inappropriateness of these views. In other words we can recognize 'the wrong' kind of reflection. When we offer students a blank page/canvas upon which to reflect we imply that we are open to all reflection, that there is no right and no wrong way to reflect. However, as Clegg (1999) reminds us, our expectations, albeit tacitly, are value-laden and particular.

Conclusion

The catalogue document now stands boldly in the new Theatre degree, and is itself the progenitor of further briefs designed to enhance student reflection and support the interaction of creativity, criticality and reflection – or feeling thought action. These artefacts can operate as a daily activity such as, an identity book and a commonplace book or a cumulative edited artefact such as a chapter book and a 'zine'. These catalogue documents have much in common with the textual sketchbooks explored by Orr and Blythman (2002). Textual sketchbooks and catalogue documents share elements with an art student's sketchbook because they are typically non linear, messy and unresolved. These are text forms 'which interrupt themselves and foreground their own constructedness' (Lather 1991: 83).

This study explores the binary between the means used to produce an artistic outcome and the means used to reflect on that outcome. Dr Marcalo, a choreographer at York St

John University has studied ways to reflect on her dance practice through the medium of dance rather than through text, and her work underlines that reflection can be a non-text-based practice (Marcalo 2009). This work refutes the text/artefact binary. Our case study demonstrates that we continue to look for imaginative and multimodal approaches to encourage students to become reflective practitioners.

Looking to the future the Faculty of Arts has a series of initiatives that have been supported by our CETL. For example a CETL Team Fellowship project entitled *Developing Best Practice in Student Reflection on Performance* by Dr Matthew Reason and Jules Dorey Richmond was designed specifically to survey, research, investigate and intervene in student reflection across the entire undergraduate and postgraduate Theatre programmes. This multimodal project utilizes drawing, video, writing, photography and dance as tools for reflection.

Drawing on this theatre-based case study we are able to identify new ways to approach reflexivity in art and design education. Arguably this case study espouses the key features of *critical* reflection. Fook defines this as:

The ability to recognise the social dimensions and political functions of experience and meaning making, and the ability to apply this understanding in working contexts. (Fook 2010: 50)

To take this idea further we recognize the need to go beyond critical reflection; to remove the C in reflection and replace it with the X in reflexivity (Burke 2002). X marks the spot! The use of the term reflexivity underlines that we recognize the importance of power relations, our own positions within these power relations and the socially situated, culturally imbued nature of learning in communities of practice (Karban and Smith 2010: 174). All these elements are central to the case study outlined above.

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Susan Orr is Deputy Dean of the Faculty of Arts at York St John University. In 2009, she was awarded a chair in Pedagogy in Creative Practice. Susan’s research focuses on assessment practices in art and design. She has developed a theorized account of art and design assessment practice that has been used as a means to bring greater reflexivity to

the assessment practices adopted in art and design. Working from a social constructivist perspective, her research identifies that assessment discourses are interlocked with narratives of identity and power relations. Susan also researches the role of writing in arts based curricula. Her research in this area subverts the visual/textual binary by recasting writing as a practice that has much in common with studio practice. Susan is on the editorial advisory board for this journal and she has presented papers at a number of conferences in the United Kingdom, Europe and the United States. She has authored a range of articles, papers and chapters on pedagogies in creative practice.

Jules Dorey Richmond was awarded a B.A. (Hons) in Art and Social Context from Dartington College of Arts and a Master of Fine Art (MFA) from University of Leeds. Currently she is a Senior Lecturer in Live Art and Performance at York St John University. Jules is a sculptor who makes books, video installations and performances. She is fiercely committed to making work drawn from the autobiographical – framing and connecting what impels her fine art practice to a larger field of feminist thinking and wondering. Over the past twenty years Jules has made a diverse range of performance and artworks with, for and by various communities throughout Britain and northern Europe. These range from large-scale outdoor spectacles, to happenings and interventionist works for nightclubs, parks, the streets, museums and cafes through to small-scale touring shows, performance installations, film works and gallery pieces. She was co-artistic director of Clanjamfrie from 1989 to 1997, a Glasgow-based performance group, and has worked extensively with her long-term collaborator David Richmond,

most notably on the Artist as Witness series of works with veterans, witnesses and survivors of World War II.

David Richmond is Head of Programme of Performance: Theatre and Senior Lecturer in Theatre and Performance at York St John University. For the past twenty years, David has been collaborating with Jules Dorey Richmond creating experimental and innovative works, pulling together their respective disciplines of visual art and theatre. Since 1996 they have been engaged in a Theatre of Witness series of collaborative works with World War Two Veterans, Survivors and Witnesses in various communities throughout Britain. This process is ongoing, and the year 1998 led them on a secular pilgrimage to Auschwitz. David and Jules have been funded by the Scottish Arts Council and Glasgow City Council and have obtained commissions from Mayfest and Centre for Contemporary Arts (Glasgow), as well as receiving support in kind from the British Council. David is touring his solo work *slipping away* performed at the National Review of Live Art (Glasgow 2010).

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