

Discourse communities and the social construction of reflection in teacher education



Alan Ovens

Auckland College of Education, Auckland, New Zealand
a.ovens@ace.ac.nz

***Abstract:** A central theme in conversations about teacher education is the importance of encouraging student teachers to be reflective. Such conversations are often hampered by a confusion about the concept, not because of a lack of definitional clarity, but more because a lack of appreciation for the contexts in which reflection takes place. In recognising the importance of contextualising reflection, this paper suggests the concept of discourse community may be useful in recognising the social construction of reflection. In particular, three discourse communities are identified and described.*

***Key words:** discourse communities, reflection, reflective teaching, teacher education*

The concept of reflection provides fertile ground for quality conversations given its central location in teacher education and diversity of advocates. In many institutions there is a clear expectation that teacher educators will engage in discursive practices that enable reflection both as a process and outcome. Student teachers are expected to be reflective to enable them to develop as teachers while at the same time demonstrate such reflectivity as one of the standards or outcomes they are expected to achieve. However, like any common term that circulates within common discourse, extracting an exact operational definition is difficult. It is a term that seemingly dissolves under close scrutiny. Its politics, rationale and logic are alluring at one level, but its assimilation into the discursive practices of instruction exposes its pedagogical limitations in the next.

My intention in this paper is not to try yet again to define what reflection is. Many authors have done this in far more detail and with more clarity than I could. Rather, my intention is to explore the mechanisms by which reflection is rendered as a concept in the first place. This is not a task involving an historical or etymological analysis, but one requiring an examination of how the term becomes 'contextualised' in particular social networks that both produce it as a concept and give meaning to its particular practices.

The process of contextualising reflection makes it possible to recognise how different authors may draw on much the same literature to support quite different versions of the concept. As Gore (1993; p 49) notes, many scholars who advocate contemporary versions of reflective teaching ...

draw on Dewey's (1933) distinction between routine and reflective action to make their cases. In this instance the 'will to truth' functions in such a way that the same language is used to make vastly different claims about the 'truth' of reflective teaching

The meaning of language itself 'slides' according to the context in which it is used. Meaning cannot be cemented within language and definitions of reflection cannot denote a unitary understanding or agreement about what reflection is without a complementary understanding of the contexts that produce the concept of reflection in the first place. Therefore, there is a need to appreciate the dynamic and constitutive power of discourses and the communities that provide the context for such social interchange.

Discourse Communities

The point being offered in this paper is that traditional knowledge frames, such as models, perspectives or paradigms are too rigid and, by definition, exclusive in their categorisation. There is a need to find alternative ways to represent concepts like reflection that recognise a plurality of positions and their ambiguous connections. As Romero (1998) notes "The traditional war between paradigms is replaced with a global struggle between communities in interaction, so that knowledge seems to be more eclectic and is constructed from within multiple points of view" (p.51). As a consequence, concepts such as "discourse communities" emerge as an alternative means of representing the complexity of a field like reflection.

Discourse communities, as a concept, links two useful notions – discourse and community. The concept of discourse relates to the influential role communicative practices play in constituting the social world. As Kirk (1992; p42) states "Discourse is larger than language, because it embraces all forms of communicating rather than simply the verbal or written word. It refers to all meaning making activity, whether this be intentional, conscious, unconscious, explicit, tacit or reflexive". In recognising that social processes are involved in the creation of meaning, discourses create a specific perspective for interpreting the world. Each mediates what knowledge is privileged, how problems are identified and solutions sought. Romero (1998) states:

Each discourse perspective contains particular rules about what can be said, by whom, when, and with what authority one can speak. Consequently, discourses interpolate subjectivity within a field of power relations and are configured as both possibility and as limitation (p.51)

By implication, discourses don't just circulate within communities; they are essential constitutive elements that frame the practices, objective and meaning making of a community. Discourse interweaves language, action and identity in a way that engages and connects its participants, both immediately and over time and place, to give a sense of coherence and common purpose to a community.

Community, as a concept, is often applied to describe social groups whose identity is supported by the affiliations people have to the ideas, beliefs and purpose that create a binding force for the group. Romero (1998) defines community as "... an association of individuals sharing and creating ways of interpreting their experiences, that builds a particular identity connecting individuals and groups reinforcing their common issues without effacing their differences" (p.52). In this way community connects to discourse because it refers to a localised time, space and membership as the context for the expression and production of discourse. Community gives to discourse a human "face" and recognises that discourses are expressed through human interaction.

A 'discourse community' is created by the collective practices of its contributing members and provides "... the cognitive tools –ideas, theories, and concepts- that individuals appropriate as their own through their personal efforts to make sense of experiences" (Putnam

& Borko, 2000; p5). As a concept, discourse community reinforces the social nature of knowledge production.

Discourse communities can be difficult to identify. Membership, boundaries and limits are flexible issues and are not precisely fixed. Communities can be large or small, layered within other broader communities as well as overlapping. It is also typical for individuals to recognize themselves as participants in a variety of communities, simultaneously and with the possibly conflicting connections. For example, an individual may navigate a diversity of roles each day such as teacher, parent, political activist, musician, or sports coach. Each represents a different community where the nature of knowledge, learning and mastery is defined differently within each.

Discourse communities can also be defined as either local or global in nature. Killingsworth (1992) defines local discourse communities as the place where people work, a community bound by close physical association of common occupational practice, while global discourse communities are defined by an affiliation to particular political or intellectual ideas or by a commitment to particular kinds of discourse practices regardless of location. Global discourse communities can be widely dispersed and are made possible by modern communication methods. Individuals can simultaneously be influenced and positioned within both. For example, a science teacher is both a member of a school staff (local discourse community) and the broad group who identify themselves as science teachers (global discourse community).

For Killingsworth (1992) the aim of demarcating a local and global nature to the concept of discourse community is not to advance one at the expense of the other, but instead show how different types of social pressures can impinge on the practices of individuals. In this way it is possible to recognise that thought and social action are influenced by contexts that are both proximal and distant. Similarly, the pedagogical practice of reflection is shaped by its participants' simultaneous participation in the community and ethos of teacher education institutions (a local discourse community) and membership to a more generic collective of those concerned with the ideals of reflection (global discourse community).

Representing Reflection through Discourse Communities

The concept of discourse communities, therefore, offers a way to analyse the social construction of a concept like reflection. It allows an appreciation for any confusion over meaning to be linked to the various contexts within which it is embedded. From this perspective, reflection may not exist as some stable, psychological phenomena able to be learnt, applied and measured across a variety of settings. Instead, it raises the possibility that reflection may be a concept that is mobilised in particular contexts for particular political, pedagogical and phenomenological purposes.

Identifying discourse communities within the field of reflection is more difficult since it requires the careful mapping of the underlying ideas that sponsor affiliations to a particular community. I have tentatively mapped three discourse communities, each global in nature. Such choices are not intended to exclude or minimise the importance of other discourses or the local communities that also influence the shaping of the concept of reflection in particular contexts. Rather, the aim is to demonstrate how the concept of reflection takes on different meanings dependent on the ideas central to particular contexts. The identified communities do not have well defined borders, in fact, their overlapping quality is an important feature. However, for the purposes of the present discussion I will identify only three and treat them as separate entities in order to map their salient features.

The Phenomenological Discourse Community of Reflection

One of the most prevalent communities associated with reflection are those who cast the individual, as "...a central actor in a drama of personal meaning making" (Fenwick, 2001;p9). Within this community the individual reflects on lived experience, then interprets and generalizes this experience to develop deeper understanding and meaning. This understanding can then be represented, expressed and transferred to new situations. It is a phenomenological experience as the reflecting individual comes to understand themselves as historians of their own lived experience. Individuals are understood to construct their own knowledge through their interaction with their environments. In this sense, reflection "...stresses the complexity of the teaching act and the reason why it has, in the same time, rational and uncertain consequences" (Ricard-Fersing, 1999; p 251)

Themes within the phenomenological discourse community

In discursively producing reflection as a process of interpreting lived experience, this discourse community commits much energy to both clarifying and promoting the concept of reflection. Reflection is assumed to be a "good thing" and research attempts primarily orientate themselves around refining and naming the types of reflection individuals' engage in, as well as promoting particular strategies to facilitate reflection. Central to any attempts to define reflection within this community are the three key names of John Dewey, Max Van Manen and Donald Schon. Through these most writers draw the lineage for contemporary theorising about reflection. At the risk of oversimplification, the key contribution each has to the ideas central to this community is in their evolution in the clarification of the concept of reflection.

Dewey's (1910) key contribution was in enabling a qualitative distinction to be made between different teaching practices: "routine action" is guided by impulse, tradition and authority while "reflective action" aims at "the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (1910, p6). Van Manen's (1977) contribution, some sixty years later, was to further clarify the concept by stressing that the focus of the reflection was important. He suggested a hierarchy of three reflective levels: technical, practical and critical. Van Manen argued that critical reflection was the most desirable, noting that "universal consensus, free from delusions or distortions, is the ideal of a deliberative rationality that pursues worthwhile educational ends in self determination, community and on the basis of justice, equality and freedom" (1977, p 227).

Schon's (1983, 1987, 1990) work is prominent in contemporary definitions of reflection. His work in this community is used to introduce the temporal components of "reflection-in-action" and "reflection-on-action". Reflection-in-action refers to the process of interpreting, analysing and providing solutions to complex and situational problems at the time they are happening. Reflection on action takes place when the practitioner has left the arena or endeavour and mentally reconstructs that arena to analyse actions and events.

Based on the work of these three key theorists, scholars working within this discourse community have worked to identify and clarify more precisely the type of reflection individuals engage in as they make sense of their experiences.

The Critical Discourse Community

The members of this discourse community are bound to a common commitment to critique the social and political contexts of schooling. Within this community 'critical' reflection

emphasises the consequences of action and the need for emancipatory action leading to social reconstruction. When applied in this manner, reflection is discursively produced as a different concept from that of the phenomenological discourse community. As Martinez (1990) states "Such a specific meaning of 'critical', when applied to reflection takes the concept of 'critical reflection' a long way from its commonsense usage signifying thinking back on events so as to pass judgement on their merits" (p22). Drawing on its critical theory roots, many practitioners within this discourse community view reflection as a valuable resource to the development of a critical pedagogy. For example, as Kirk (1986) suggests that a critical pedagogy is "...one in which teachers act as intelligent practitioners capable of reflective thought and reconstructive action, who are able to take responsibility for their own professional development, and who can contribute significantly to the creation of an emancipatory educational process through schooling" (p. 156).

Themes within the critical discourse community

Central to the work of scholars within this community is Dewey's contrasting of reflective action with routine action. The simple dichotomy provided a mechanism to critique the Performance and Competency movements that emerged in the 1960's and 1970's and mount an effective resistance. Reflection gained acceptance because it sat in opposition to an "impoverished" notion of teaching based on positivism. Essentially, reflection is concept mobilised within this community to oppose reductionist approaches to studying teaching and embrace humanistic approaches that acknowledge the complexity and holistic nature of any teaching encounter.

Parker (1996) provides a good description of the struggles between forms of rationality recognised as reflection and those associated with positivism. Those forms of rationality associated with positivism assume that the explanation and description of anything must employ the procedural and justificatory standards of the natural sciences. Teaching, like any natural or social phenomena, is believed to be governed by a set of laws or natural rules and it is the function of science to discover these so teachers can employ them to improve their teaching. In contrast, reflection draws on a different set of values, specifically those running through the enlightenment project and developments in critical theory so that "the central concern here is with emancipation through the development of rational, autonomous persons in a democratic, dialogical society which protects the individual from oppression of technical, bureaucratic means-ends conceptions of social organisation" (Parker, 1996; p 32). In addition to opposing technical rationalism, there is a favoured position within this community with respect to the philosophical or political positions of the individual who is reflecting. While most contemporary teacher educators would value critical reflection and urge that teachers subject their personal beliefs and theories to social, moral and political interrogation, only particular social, moral and political positions are considered as acceptable or legitimate. For example, Tsangaridou and Siedentop (1995) ask whether a teacher who valued political conservatism and was a devout Christian would be considered to be engaged in critical reflection if they came from such a value base. While this teacher may contemplate the social, moral and political aspects of their work, their philosophical position is different from those contemporary scholars advocating the use of critical reflection. Within this community reflection serves the particular purposes of those connected to the critical project embedded in emancipatory politics.

The Situated Learning Discourse Community

Although appearing as a fairly new community within the academic discourse of teacher education, theorising about the situated nature of reflection and learning has a long lineage

through the work of people like George Herbert Mead and Lev Vygotsky. Mead, in particular, was a proponent of reflective action as a fundamental process in attaining a sense of self and a sense of community. Importantly, he discusses the notion that social situations, like schools, are made up of communities of people, and individuals are situated as members of communities. A student teacher entering such a community takes on the values that belong to other members of the community. Cinnamond & Zimpher (1990) outline how the process of reflection emerges from such a notion of community, stating...

It involves self-reflection upon the meanings and practices for the purposes of generating consensus to create new meanings or to take away obstructions to appropriate actions. An impediment to action or the dissonance occasioned by prior action can serve as a stimulus for reflection. Reflection may also be stimulated by the desire to understand the necessary conditions for maintaining the current social order. (p. 63)

In this sense, reflection is not an act of an individual coming to understand their lived experience in a solitary sense, but instead reflection is interactional and embedded in the social and community meanings that are held in common. Such interactions mediate the nature of reflection, not in a sense of limiting the “doing” of reflection, but determining the knowledge and histories used to construct the interpretation and reflection.

Themes within the Situated Learning community

The situated learning discourse community draws on situated cognition theory to suggest that the nature of reflection is dependent on the situation individuals find themselves in, the groups they are part of and the tools they have at their disposal (Borko & Putnam, 1998). Reflection within this discourse community is viewed as a sociocultural phenomenon where the meaning individuals construct is mediated through interacting with and interpreting their environments.

It is possible to highlight several key themes evident in this discourse community. Firstly, reflection is a situated activity. Both the physical and social contexts in which reflection takes place are integral to the nature of reflection and the meaning people make within these contexts. Schon (1983) concept of reflection as a professional activity is important here. He argues against the separation of theory and practice, where theory was the domain of universities and that practice only exists in schools. He recognizes that knowledge is embedded in teachers’ everyday activities in what he termed “knowledge in action”. The reflective practitioner is one who can think while acting and thus can respond to the uncertainty, uniqueness and conflict involved in the situations in which professionals practice (Schon, 1987).

Secondly, reflection is social. That is, reflection is situated in social contexts where the interactions individuals have with the people in their environment are major determinates of both the nature of reflection and the subject of reflection. Increasingly, various authors have begun to study the collaborative nature of reflection as well as the way the different discourse communities individuals participate in during their teacher education course impact on reflection. As Cinnamond & Zimpher (1990) outline:

The student teacher, while still a member of the community of college students, comes into contact with the communities of teachers, administrators, students, parents or students, university professors, and student-teaching supervisors. Not only must teaching candidates gain access to the communities of the school, they must learn to function well within these communities. Interaction connotes exchange, discourse, and change for both the social group and the individual. (p.58)

Thirdly, reflection is distributed. Situated theorists recognise that reflection often depends on resources beyond the individuals themselves (such as physical tools and notational systems) and suggest that cognition itself is distributed or “stretched over” the individual, other persons, and physical and symbolic tools. This leads to an understanding that systems or tools used to promote reflection each shape and constrain reflection in particular ways, mobilising the concept in within the frameworks and lenses provided by such systems.

Some brief concluding ruminations

As outlined at the start, the intention of this paper was to contextualise reflection in order to understand its social construction. Such a way of viewing reflection helps to highlight its complexity. Recognising it as a discursive practice allows consideration of how it articulates with other discourses, and how membership across various communities may position the differently in regard to benefiting from its potential. The paper introduces the idea of “discourse communities” a concept that could be usefully applied to highlight the discursive nature of reflective practices and the way these are connected to the underlying beliefs and values of its members. Three communities were identified: The phenomenological, the critical and the situated learning communities. Such discourse communities become the context where individuals are both situated within and situate themselves and is the generative location of the discursive practices students experience in their teacher education.

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The term classroom discourse refers to the language that teachers and students use to communicate with each other in the classroom. Talking, or conversation, is the medium through which most teaching takes place, so the study of classroom discourse is the study of the process of face-to-face classroom teaching. The earliest systematic study of classroom discourse was reported in 1910 and used stenographers to make a continuous record of teacher and student talk in high school classrooms. Essentially, a teacher asks a question, one or two students answer, the teacher comments on the students' answers (sometimes summarizing what has been said), and then asks a further question.

@inproceedings{Granberg2010EportfoliosIT, title={E-portfolios in teacher education 2002-2009: the social construction of discourse, design and dissemination}, author={Carina Granberg}, year={2010} }. Carina Granberg. This paper reports on a study of the experiences of teacher educators in the introduction and development of e-portfolios over an eight-year period from 2002 to 2009 at a Swedish university. The st View via Publisher. A discourse community is a group of people who share a set of discourses, understood as basic values and assumptions, and ways of communicating about those goals. Linguist John Swales defined discourse communities as "groups that have goals or purposes, and use communication to achieve these goals.". Some examples of a discourse community might be those who read and/or contribute to a particular academic journal, or members of an email list for Madonna fans. Each discourse community has its own