Reflective Practice at the Scottish Prison Service

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This paper discusses the role of reflective practice within the training for Scottish Prison Service (SPS) officers and managers, delivered by the Scottish Prison Service College. This paper does not claim to promote best practice in Work Based Learning (WBL) and reflective practice, but rather explores opportunities for this important practice to become more routine and imbedded in the Service as it seeks to support workforce development across the prison estate. This paper will begin by discussing the importance of reflection in work based learning before outlining current examples of reflective practice in SPS College training. The paper will conclude with some implications and recommendations for the future.

Reflective Practice and Work Based Learning

'It is the learning which counts, not the experience' (Helyer, 2016:5) is a truism often repeated to those who venture into work-based, experiential learning. 'Learning on the job' without adequate learning support becomes, simply, working, though superficially to an observing outsider, it may look very similar. Reflective practice is a key tool to ensuring that learning occurs in working experiences, enabling every opportunity for learning in professional experiences to be maximised.

Reflection is a natural and ongoing practice, people reflect on a daily basis and have done so for all their lives, that is why we do things differently from the way that we did things in the past and we choose to do one thing in that moment and not another; to reflect is to be human. However, reflective *practice* formalises that process, strengthens its critical aspect, links theory to action, clarifies understanding, and imbeds improved behaviours into daily working practices and routines. It is a key strand of meaningful work based learning and good professional practice (Hase, 2014).

Distinction is made between 'reflection on action' and 'reflection in action' (Schon, 1987). 'Reflection on action' means looking to the past, examining past experiences in order to make sense of them and to influence what we do in the future as a result of our assessment of how well they worked. 'Reflection in action' means reflecting in the moment to guide what we are doing (ibid). Beginning by reflecting *on* action enables us to become confident and self-aware

in this practice, so that we then become enabled to practice it 'in the moment' without interruption.

Reflective practice can be an enjoyable experience for some, but it can also be an uncomfortable and difficult experience for others, not least perhaps for those who are unused to 'looking inwards' and exploring their own behaviours, experiences, values and emotions. Reflective practice interrogates 'tacit knowledge', that implicit understanding which informs the 'taken for granted' world view generated from years of experience, and which is invisible to most of us unless we consciously explore it (Eraut, 2000). Reflective practice makes this knowledge more explicit to the learner through greater self-awareness, understanding and learning. In work based learning it is the individual and their professional practice which are the vehicles of successful outcomes, they embody, translate and perform the knowledge and understanding which they have accrued through formal and informal learning opportunities and life experiences. For these reasons, it is critical that people can understand and reflect on their tacit knowledge and their value base and how these effect professional behaviours and outcomes. The need for, and the value of, work based reflective practice is heightened in the context of a custodial professional culture because prison officers have enormous power to exercise discretion in their role; though officers have legal power, they tend to exercise more 'informal power, and personal, rather than legal, authority' (Arnold, 2016). Furthermore, any profession which gives employees the legal right to impose harm or sanctions, self-awareness and reflection is even more important (see Copley, 2011, for policing).

Reflective Practice at the Scottish Prison Service College

Given the key role that reflective practice has in supporting improved professional practice, current SPS practice regarding reflective practice will now be discussed. It should be noted that this paper discusses reflective practice which is part of formal training delivery at the Scottish Prison Service College, which is responsible for the design and delivery of the bulk of learning which officers and managers undertake within the Service.

The Scottish Prison Service College has the responsibility for promoting staff learning and development across the prison estate, and the College also acts as a service to the rest of the organisation who can sponsor training according to emerging priorities. Most SPS staff come to the College to undertake training, and then go back to their jobs throughout the estate

where it is hoped that their learning affects practice, however, little systematic and long-term evaluation measure whether or not this is the case. Reflective practice in various College training courses will now be discussed, and this paper will conclude with some implications for the future.

The largest and arguably most important course offered by the College is the initial six-week induction programme for new recruits to the service, the Officer Foundation Programme (OFP). This has recently been modified to include some small elements of learning in operational environments (real-time searching in custodial settings for example). Without losing sight of the need to ensure officers are fit to practice in an operational context when the course has concluded, in recent years the OFP has moved away from a sole focus on 'task and process' to also include learning about personal and professional values and theoretical approaches to understanding crime and how it ceases. On this course, officer recruits are taken through 'Gibb's reflective cycle' (Gibbs, 1998) in their first week and they are also required to undertake a weekly '3, 2, 1' exercise where they write down and then discuss with their tutor '3 things I have learned this week', '2 Things you found interesting, inspiring or that resonated with you', and '1 Action that you intent to take forward'. While this format does not follow a standard reflective structure (in that it does not focus on an event or action in the workplace, but rather learning predominantly in a classroom environment, and does not explicitly focus on how it made the individual feel), it does nonetheless seek reflections on learning and how they might connect it with future professional behaviours. One further reflective exercise they undertake is the 'Socratic circle', which facilitates discussion amongst the group and requires participants to reflect on the meaning of the topic to them, receiving feedback from their peers. Although officers at this stage have not had prison officer professional experience to draw on, it is good practice that they have had early exposure to reflective practice and regular reflective learning activities. Embedding these regularly at an early stage of professional learning will make it more likely that it become part of their continuous learning and professional life at a later stage (Workman and Helyer, 2016).

A second example is the training which equips officers to respond effectively to critical incidents (e.g. riots, hostage taking etc.). Reflection is a natural response on these occasions, indeed, this is probably the time in which it is easiest to reflect on why adverse events have occurred and how they could be prevented in the future. Indeed, many professional contexts

will prioritise professional reflection after these, or 'near-miss' incidents (see e.g. Howatson-Jones, 2016). In the training for SPS staff to respond to critical incidents, they are encouraged write a reflection on their training in which they are asked to reflect on the good and bad of a particular incident, what they have learned as a result and what they would do differently next time, in relation to a number of headings including leadership, decision making, behaviour and communications. Importantly, they are all then required to take this back to their 'learning sets' which are teams which operate throughout the estate, and share this with each other. Incident Command Team 'learning sets' thus act as a form of 'action learning' in which collaboration around a mutual problem is central (Revens, 1998).

The third example is a training course which is structured to ensure that learning and reflection is embedded into professional practice, and this is the training for officers who work with women in custody. This takes place in three 'strands' and a final single day of review, with five weeks back in the workplace in between each 'strand' at the College. In this course officers are required to undertake reflective writing assessments in between every strand which are assessed and marked according to a rubric which provides marks for, amongst other things, 'relating theory to practice' and for the 'depth of reflection'. In this way, officer learning in the training course *must* be imbedded into future professional practice, and must also involve reflection of this process. This model has the core elements of being practiced, imbedded, incentivised, and of linking theory to practice. Together, these are the component parts which increase the likelihood for ongoing professional learning to become imbedded and sustained in the workplace (Jaspar, 2013).

The fourth and final area in which reflective practice promoted by the College is the activity of the leadership team who support and train managers throughout the Service. As Matsuo (2012) argued, professional reflection must be supported by management within the work place if it is to become routine and embedded. Though some individuals might be motivated enough to undertake this practice without support, it is likely that for the majority of practitioners this task will slip as the demands of the day to day work activities seep into time for professional learning activities. The Leadership team at the College follow the 70:20:10 philosophy (see Lombardo et al., 1993) and recognise that the majority of professional learning occurs in professional practice, not in formal learning contexts. Therefore, SPS managers who attend the training course at the College are taught the principles of reflection,

what it is, why it is important, and shown how to reflect on practice, along the principles of Gibb's reflective cycle. To what extent managers use this either in their own line management, or with their more senior managers, is unknown. However, staff who seek promotion will draw on their experiences in competency based promotional interviews and drawing on some form of reflective journal will support them in this process.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

The College recognises that learning occurs throughout the whole of the Scottish Prison Service and that it does not have a monopoly of promoting best practice or spearheading change; learning and development must occur in partnership between the College and the wider service. However, the College has a responsibility to be a motor for change in an organisation focused (rightly) on the care of people in custody. The College must 'practice what it preaches' in such an important area of work based learning and development before we can expect the rest of the service follow suit. This could occur in several ways: firstly, we should expect College staff themselves to engage more regularly in reflective practice, especially those who are responsible for the design and delivery of training, secondly, reflective practice should be more routinely embedded in College training, and finally, the College should have a stronger role in supporting reflective practice throughout the rest of the service. These will be discussed in turn.

Firstly, as Workman and Helyer (2016) argue, it is easier to support students in their reflective practice if the trainers also engage in regular reflection. To support reflection, particularly when it may not be routine, requires leadership and confidence in the practice itself (ibid), therefore regular reflective practice in trainers own work would enable this to occur.

Secondly, although, as detailed above, reflective practice does feature in the College training, there are many parts of training in which it does not. Reflective learning should thus become part of a far wider range of training at the College. There are a variety of activities which can support reflective learning including short narrative statements, journals, logs, portfolios, etc. These can be assessed, which will certainly incentivise this process, though some argue that 'forcing' this practice can illicit 'strategic responses' and 'hostility' rather than honest reflection (Hobbs, 2007). Given the often personal nature of reflection, thought should also be given to with whom reflection is shared. Sharing reflections has the benefit of

disseminating learning, of focusing self-understanding, of building and sustaining communities of practice which are so important in eventually sustaining professional learning. However, this practice can be deeply personal and reveal mistakes and vulnerabilities which the learner may be wary of sharing, particularly in vertical professional structures. Buddy or mentoring structures may better support the sharing of reflective learning (Helyer and Price, 2016).

Ultimately, the learning activities of all SPS staff should centre on supporting those in custody, so, thirdly and finally, the College must work in closer partnership with the rest of the Service to support reflective practice in operational environments. This practice should, whenever possible, include the effect of work on people in custody. In order for reflective practice to become habitual and routine throughout the estate, it is likely it will need to be incentivised or otherwise encouraged, certainly in initial stages. This could occur by rostering reflective practice sessions into shift patters, by including it in official line management responsibilities, and / or performance management appraisals, though this may encounter the same problems as discussed above, in relation to assessing.

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