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Reflective Practice and a Process Called "Levelising"

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Abstract: The most widely accepted concept of reflective practice depicts a cyclic process of reflection in action and on action. Building on the tradition that begins with Schon's seminal work, this paper describes an approach to reflective practice that incorporates the perspectives and theories of others whose own views promise to increase the potential of individual reflection on and in practice. Called "Levelising," the process begins in our routine, unexamined ways of being; from various perspectives that are themselves subject to reflection, we come to know more about what we do as individuals in order to go on together with others. There are four different points of view that individuals or groups can take on their practice when they intend to understand and change some aspect of it, including their own role as practitioner(s). Level one is pre-reflective being; level two is reflective being; level three is framing; and level four is theorizing. It is in the last level that we identify what is new about this approach to reflective practice. Incorporating multiple ways of knowing, Levelising has particular relevancy to collaborative learning, reflective practice, and action research.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Learning, Theory, Framing, Being

Introduction

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE, WHAT Freire (1987) called a way of knowing, lies at the heart of Peters' (1999, 2002) approach to action research and to Peters' and Armstrong's (1998) model of collaborative learning. In common with other accounts of reflective practice (Imel, 1992), what is central to both modes of inquiry and learning is the assumption that practitioners learn from their own and others' experiences, in the moment of the experience as well as afterward (Schon, 1983; 1987). In this view, actions engender reflections that then engender different actions that bring about additional and new reflections in apparently unending iterations. However, we believe that this way of understanding reflective practice leaves a lot to be understood. Reflective practice cannot be reduced to a matter of an individual merely thinking about what she is doing at the time or has done in the past – as Schon's reflection *in* action and *on* action would imply - for there are other features of action and reflection that are not captured by this idea.

This paper describes an alternative way to understand reflective practice that builds on Schon's work. We also discuss briefly examples of how levelising relates to reflective practice and action research in diverse settings. First introduced by Peters (1999) but more fully developed here, the mainly recursive process of levelising helps us account for what individuals and groups do when they mindfully examine their own actions in a context that they continually and jointly create. The process begins in our routine and largely unexamined

ways of being; from various perspectives that are themselves subject to reflection, we come to know more about what we do in order to go on together.

Levelising

The four modes of levelising require that a practitioner step back in a series of removes in order to see herself engaging in action. In *Pre-Reflective Being in the World,* Level I, the practitioner is sensitive to or in tune with her surroundings, including her companions. This is a matter of having a look at what one is doing at the time, or has done. Her awareness is directed outward to others, rather than inward. In Level II, *Reflective Being*, often as a result of an unexpected or surprising occurrence, or in response to a prompt from others*,* she begins to consider her actions. This awareness usually develops first in retrospect; she becomes aware of already completed actions. While this level does incorporate the distancing necessary for examination and articulation of actions, it does not include the degree of separation inherent in the conventional objective or positivist worldview. Rather than split herself into subject and observer, in Level II the practitioner simultaneously occupies both points of view. When she steps back, she also remains in the situation she is reflecting upon. This is not a distant view from afar; rather it is a reflection on herself in the situation in which she finds herself. Of course, the position that she adopts in her reflective attitude is also subject to reflection, requiring yet another step back, as do subsequent perspective-taking steps. From each of these perspectives, she is able to reflect *on* her actions *in* the moment of acting *and* afterwards, as Schon (1983) acknowledged.

In Level III, *Framing the Experience*, the reflective practitioner begins to become aware of herself reflecting on her actions and perhaps to see that she is operating from within a conceptual framework. This is a matter of having a look at how one is looking at what they are doing. As the practitioner becomes more comfortable in this level, she may try out different frames. In *Theorizing*, Level IV, she begins to think about frames and to realize, for example, that language itself is a frame for her experience of the world. This entails looking around to see what others have to say about what she is thinking and doing. She can then think about thinking, critically examine what others think, consider how her own and others' theories shape her experience of the world, and perhaps construct her own new theories.

While it may appear that there is a hierarchy in these stages, it would be an unwarranted assumption that the Theorizing level is privileged over any other level and that the Framing level is somehow more advanced than the two levels that are prior to it. Such an assumption would be, according to Bourdieu (2000), a reflection of the scholastic bias toward knowledge as something removed from the ordinary world of being. It is, however, true that there is a progression in these stages; it is a progression of stepping back, which Shotter (1994) might refer to as increasing degrees of "aboutness" (describing or explaining what one is doing) rather than "withness" (being in the act of doing with others). Nor should it be assumed that the progression from one level to another is linear or irreversible. The processes of reflection are often cyclical, recurring and folding back onto themselves in the course of time.

The stages of levelising have as their general principle that the knowing which comes with each level is only accessible from the next remove, the stepping back that allows the researcher to see herself acting in the previous level. What the researcher can see depends on where she stands and how she views the landscape before her. We discuss each stage below.

Level I: Pre-reflective Being

Pre-Reflective Being in the World, the primary or naïve experience in the phenomenologist's terms, is "a *pre-objective view* which is what we call being in the world" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962, p. 79). The subject is, according to Shotter (2002, p. 4), "embedded and embodied" in a self-evident world, the reality of which is simply "what we perceive" (Merleau-Ponty, xvi). Or as Berger and Luckmann would have it, "The reality of everyday life is organized around the 'here' of my body and the 'now' of my present" (1966, p. 22). This is the world of everyday conversation.

The knowledge privileged in the subjective experience of the world is that of Shotter's (1993) "knowing from within," or Wittgenstein's "knowing how to go on" (1953), a practical sense of what is called for and acceptable in the situation. In discussing this "kind of knowledge one has only from within relationships with others" (1994, p. 1), Shotter contrasts it with theoretical knowledge (knowing that) and practical knowledge (knowing how). He further equates knowing from within with Bernstein's (1983) "practical-moral knowledge" (p. 2) and claims a relationship with Aristotle's *phronesis*, thus emphasizing what he has elsewhere (Shotter, 1994) called the "rhetorical-responsive" nature of such engagement. He treats knowing from within as a kind of sensitivity to others and the context in which one comes to know what is called for in the form of verbal or gestural response to an involved other.

This knowing is not a result of conscious decision-making; rather it is what goes without saying (Wittgenstein, 1953). It is the ground against which what we notice becomes figural. A practitioner engaged in her practice acts into situations based on considerations that she would be hard pressed to articulate if required to do so. The actions of our everyday lives do have bases, but those bases are not, for the most part, the result of conscious deliberation.

What is required in order to examine the pre-reflective experience of the world is a stepping back, or removal from the primary experience. As Merleau-Ponty (1986) so eloquently puts it, "Reflection…steps back to watch the forms of transcendence fly up like sparks from a fire; it slackens the intentional threads which attach us to the world and thus brings them to our notice" (p. xiii).

Level II: Reflective Being

Reflective Being requires a conscious placement of the viewer in relationship to what is viewed. In contrast to the conventional objectivist paradigm in which the world becomes an object or a spectacle about which observations may be made and theories can be constructed, in Reflective Being the researcher not only retains her relationship to the practice, she seeks to examine that relationship.

Shotter's (1994) reference to "withness" knowing in contrast to "aboutness" knowing is understood in the context of Ryle's (1949) distinction between two kinds of knowing - *knowing that* and *knowing how*. Shotter calls withness knowing a *third kind* of knowing. This is a knowing that occurs only among people in the act of being together, in the moment of their being. A knowing from within is always present in a relationship but it is ever changing and sensed only from within the interaction that creates it. As such, once withness knowing is examined (however incompletely), it is never the same again. Instead, the examined knowing can only be understood as "about" what was examined. This suggests that

the third kind of knowing can only be subjected to reflective action at another level. Even though Shotter cautions against trying to capture withness knowing in aboutness terms, we maintain that an individual or group of people can gain from reflecting on what it is doing with the intent to understand itself and that it can capture its own history in descriptive terms if not in its full essence. Much will escape but much will be evident as well. For example, we can identify and discuss the frames we use, our speech acts, and other overt ways in which we relate to one another. We may not be able to capture the nuances of our sensitivity to each other's actions and the context of our relationship, but such matters are difficult to speak about in the first place.

An important feature of Level II and subsequent levels is that each has features of Shotter's knowing of the third kind, particularly as we are reflecting in concert with other people. Each time that we engage in joint reflective action, we form a way of relating to each other that is unique at the time. If, say, we then move to Level III and consider the frames through which we are reflecting (Level II) on our pre-reflective being (Level I), we would also be able to describe and talk about some aspects of our knowing from within as we reflect. Just as in the above case, once we reflect on how we are together we change the way we are. We are nevertheless able to think together about aspects of our relationship and the ways in which we framed our earlier experience. More is said about this in the next section.

Level III: Framing

What practical implications are there when the same person occupies both the subjective being-in-the-world and the viewer of her own actions? It appears that one cannot know the boundaries of her own perspective from the inside and that she cannot know the interior of it any other way. How can she avail herself of the benefits of both points of view and avoid the limitations?

Pollio et. al. (1997) cite Gadamer's (1960; 1975) contention that "Understanding requires the interpreter to bring to bear a preunderstanding of the world" (p. 46). Gadamer's "horizon of understanding" constitutes a set of frames which in themselves do not preclude the observer attending to the specifics of the circumstances and individuals at hand. But as Ihde (1986) points out each observer sees what she already believes to be "out there." Frames establish what counts as data and the narrative structures we interpret as "reality."

Through reflection one begins to become aware of herself reflecting and to see that she is operating from within a conceptual framework, perhaps the western notion of the individual, self-contained self (Gergen, 1999), or perhaps a positivist tradition that tells her researchers are separate from their subjects. As Merleau-Ponty (1962) says, "All my knowledge of the world, even my scientific knowledge, is gained from my own particular point of view" (vii). Windows on the world constructed by the culture frame that point of view; just as windows in buildings, perceptual windows, focus one's gaze in a particular direction and eliminate other vistas entirely from view. The practitioner in the subjective position is happily ensconced in her practice; the observer looks at the practice through the window. At the next level, she steps back to see that there is a window which focuses and frames her view, and perhaps she then sees that there are other windows, with still other views. Goffman (1986) notes, "Since frame incorporates both the participant's response and the world he is responding to, a reflexive element must necessarily be present in any participant's clear-headed view of events; a correct view of a scene must include the viewing of it as part of it" (p. 85).

Level IV: Theorizing

Thus far, the practitioner's descriptions and reflections have focused on her own experiences and the context of her practice. Her move to theory is but a continuation of her focus on the practice, motivated by an interest in the way she has been examining the practice thus far. She may be concerned to recognize the frame(s) she is looking through as she reflects on what she is doing and why; i.e., to achieve a "clear-headed view" of her reflective actions. However, reflection is not entirely an individual activity; indeed, groups also reflect in the process of their learning (Peters and Armstrong, 1998). While the thrust of this paper has been to address the actions and reflections of an individual practitioner situated as she is in social, cultural, and intellectual fields, it must not be assumed that such a course is carried out in isolation.

Insofar as reflection is an intersubjective and interpersonal activity, to intentionally open oneself to the viewpoints of others is to increase the possibilities of knowing more than one can know on one's own. For example, others physically present to us may ask us to speak further about the assumptions we have made and the conclusions we have drawn in the separateness of our objective viewpoints, challenging us to reconsider whether we have mistaken regularity for rule. Otherness in written form (e.g., formal theory) or even in non-human form may cause us to consider how it is we frame our experiences and whether other frames may better serve. And stepping further back, we may come to believe that "Understanding comes to fruition only in the response. Understanding and response are dialectically merged and mutually condition each other; one is impossible without the other" (Bakhtin, 1981, p 282).

Thinking about frames and stepping back again, one begins to consider that language itself is a frame for our experience of the world. For example, the widely shared view that words represent the world is an expression of a grand theory in which there are immanent truths that await discovery and the researcher becomes the archeologist who must unearth that truth. A practitioner may find herself attempting to satisfy the expectations of those operating, perhaps unknowingly, within frameworks congruent with this Platonic or Cartesian model. Or she may see it as her task to find pre-existing answers to problem situations.

What if, instead, "Words are deeds" (Wittgenstein, 1980, p46e) rather than pictures? What if the grand theory to which the practitioner subscribes, or, more accurately, which invokes her world, is something much closer to Gergen's (1999) view of social constructionism? If, for example, we operate from within the Platonic/Cartesian model of immanent reality, our task will be to find solutions to problems within practice, perhaps in relevant literature or in case studies of similar circumstances. If, however, we operate from within a grand theory in which solutions can be jointly created, then our actions will focus on fostering such creations with colleagues.

Theorizing in the above sense departs from the widely held view of the relationship between theory and practice. More often than not, we are wont to see the relationship as one that privileges theory as a guide to action, as if theory might be "applied" to practice. Whether formal theory can actually be applied to practice is a contested point among practitioners and members of the academy; however, in the levelising model no such assumption is made in the first place. Here theorizing is based in one's practice and experience in the form of a practical theory and intended to guide practice. In contrast, to come from formal theory to practice usually means to base decisions on someone else's experience. On the

other hand, to come from one's own experience in practice to formal theory with a willingness to be influenced by that theory is to anchor consideration of theory in one's own experience (Peters and Gray, 2007).

To begin with personal reflected-upon experience is to begin with some level of understanding. This provides a basis for considering the ideas of others, including their related practical theories or their formal theories. Beginning with an understanding of practice is to forgo the necessity of understanding another person's theory first and then searching for ways in which it might relate to one's own experience. In the latter case, the theory is likely decontextualized and the prospective user is faced with developing a new context in which she can understand the theory. By starting with a personal context, this part of her job is already done and the theory can more easily be examined and judged on its merits.

Key to finding the potential of any theory for contributing to one's own experience is to remain open and critically reflective of that experience. The process of levelising begins here and constantly cycles back and forth between experience and examination of one's own and others' actions, assumptions and frames. In the world of practice, this means knowing one's practice as well as one's role in it, especially when the practitioner desires to inquire into her practice with the aim of improving it in some way. This is why Peters (1991;1999) formulated an approach to action research that requires the practitioner-researcher to ground her research in a solid understanding of her practice and her role as practitioner. The logic of Levelising lies at the heart of the approach, examples of which are discussed in the next section.

In order to access her own actions within the practice and the practical mastery which informs them, she must rather step back one remove and reflect on her own actions as both subject and observer. In other words, her subjective experience can only be known from the perspective of Reflective Being, for as Merleau-Ponty remarks:

> True reflection presents me to myself not as idle and inaccessible subjectivity, but as identical with my presence in the world and to others, as I am now realizing it: I am all that I see, I am an intersubjective field, not despite my body and historical situation, but, on the contrary, by being this body and this situation, and through them, all the rest (1962, p. 452).

Examples and Further Inquiry

John (co-author) teaches courses in reflective practice and collaborative learning. Betty (co-author) is Principal of a school located inside a youth corrections center. Both engage in action research, John mainly in concert with his doctoral students who, like Betty, are practicing professionals. Betty did her doctoral dissertation research on an aspect of her practice, and levelising played a major role in the pre-data collection phase of her research. We discuss these and related new studies as examples of practice and research on levelising.

John's Practice

The first assignment in John's course on Reflective Practice asks students to write and share with others their learning biographies. Later, they are asked to write and share their choice of a critical incident in their lives. These brief stories serve as the beginning point of student involvement in each class. These stories also serve as part of the class narrative built between

and within class sessions over the term of the course. It is here that students speak to other participants in ordinary language about things of which they are most knowledgeable. They begin to co-author the overall way of being together. They learn to respect others' stories as theirs are respected, and they see connections in these stories. They also begin to see connections in the learning process and the theories that are introduced, reflected upon, and changed. It is through this overall, shared experience that they also learn to engage dialogically with one another within the joint context they create. This is the primary goal of the course: to understand one's self and others by focusing on individual actions and assumptions, as well as on jointly-constructed ways of going together in dialogically structured classroom interactions.

Noticing, attending to as many features of the relational landscape as possible, and being sensitive to what is going on at all times in the classroom are things that John as facilitator must do. And students also learn to facilitate one another's actions and reflections. One of the things John does is point to aspects of the classroom dynamic that aren't seen initially by students *(Level I: Pre-reflective Being)*. He sometimes puts the conversation on "pause" and points out moments of discourse that can be used to illustrate meaningful dialogue, blocks to meaning making, or other aspects of a reflective practice environment. The purpose of this approach is to help students attend to what is happening in the moment, from within their joint experience (*Level II: Reflective Being*), and to learn from this experience.

Over time, students gradually improve their ability to see more of what happens within their interactions. They soon evince this new awareness in more inviting discourse, in richer story telling, and in other forms that serve to construct a deeper, more meaningful learning experience for all participants. Pausing to point out such habits of expectation and actions is part of indicating, identifying, and making participants more aware of what is hidden in plain view (Wittgenstein, 1953) (*Level III: Framing*).

Admittedly, to pause the conversation in order to describe and reflect on a situation changes it; however, this is a teaching and learning process and its purpose is to help students awaken to their way of being in a classroom and elsewhere. Students learn to learn by noticing more aspects of their interactions. Over time, the pauses that John introduces into the conversations become less needed, as participants' awareness continues to grow with practice .

Both formal theory and practical theory enter about here (*Level IV: Theorizing)*. By being sensitive to the unfolding dialogue, including its relational dynamics and the new understandings being developed at any particular moment, John can find a space in which to introduce a concept, model, or ideas drawn from his own experience and knowledge of related literature. Students can also bring a formal theory to the table, something learned elsewhere or in assigned readings in the course. While accounting for actions taken in their critical incidents, students may talk about why they took certain actions and not others. Their practical reasoning may in turn resonate to another student and thus generate a new round of joint construction of new attempts at understanding one another.

During a semester and afterward, students report changes in their ways of being outside of the course experience. They cite such examples as slowing down their lives to listen to employees and colleagues with more intent to know them and to understand their sometimes differing viewpoints; talking to the middle of conversations with others; facilitating reflexive conversations with colleagues; awakening themselves to heretofore taken-for-granted aspects of their organizational life and noticing the difference this makes in their work routines; and hearing the resonance in others' voices so as to hear more and respond differently to them.

While not all students make major shifts in their way of being inside and outside the classroom, such experiences as these are traceable to students' reflections on different levels about otherwise taken-for-granted experiences.

Recent Action Research on Levelising

As a supervisor of teachers working inside a juvenile correctional facility, Betty was interested in engaging her colleagues in individual and joint examination of their experience in a supportive dialogical environment, and whether these interactions would bring about changes in their perceptions of their practice and in the practice itself. This aim became the focus of her action research project and eventually her dissertation research. However, as a precursor to designing the study, she decided to personally engage in levelising as a way to explore her experiences, beliefs, and assumptions so that she could ground her research in her way of being in the practice. However, she soon found that she could not engage in levelising as a solitary activity. Here is what Betty wrote in a report of her experiences with levelising (Ragland, 2006):

   As I reflect on my own process of positioning myself relative to research in my practice, this is what stands out for me: I have learned more about my being-in-the world than about my doing in the world. I could not have come to this knowing without the aid of others and otherness, both those present in the moment and those present in print. The research initiative that I undertook after this reflective process was deeply affected by the process. What I have previously tried to do in my practice is to make a difference in the workplace through my own actions. It seems clear to me now that no single person, no matter how that person is situated, can positively impact a workplace culture, except as she engages others at the level of the practice (p.177).

   Betty's newly developed sense of the importance of others' role in her practice came about after critically reflecting on not only her everyday practice (*Level II: Reflective Being*), as well as on how she framed her reflections on the practice (*Level III: Framing*). By seeking an understanding of how her colleagues saw the situation they shared with her, Betty was able to step back from her own way of seeing the situation and see it from different viewpoints (*Level IV: Theorizing*). In the end, Betty shifted her perspective from one of an individual agent of change to one that required forms of joint action. Thus, she joined her colleagues in a new way of going on together in their difficult environment, a change in practice that continued to introduce new ways of seeing their life inside and outside their facility.

   Torres (2008) and Gaskin (2007) took a different approach to studying levelising. Each introduced levelising to colleagues and examined how they and colleagues experienced the process. Gaskin worked with a team of behavioral health professionals in a regional organization engaged in continuous quality improvement practices. She was interested in whether she could facilitate team members' engagement in levelising and whether their levelising experience would make a difference in their practices. Based on data drawn from phenomenological interviews and on external raters of recorded team meetings in which levelising was discussed and practiced, Gaskin found that participants engaged primarily in levels one and two. She attributed the low levels of participation in levels three and four to her decision to "teach" the levelising process to her colleagues and thus devote too little time for colleagues to practice the process. In contrast, when participants were engaged the process, Gaskin observed more incidences of Level three and level four experiences. However, despite their

limited experience at levels three and four, team members reported improvements in consumer care, improvements in team functioning and relationships, a reduction in their initial resistance to changes in teamwork brought about by the levelising experience, and increased instances of reflection on practice.

Torres (2008) introduced levelising to Appreciative Inquiry practitioners and joined them in an effort to surface their assumptions and hidden frames of reference about post-modern organizational design and strength-based organization practices. She was interested in the impact of levelising on the participants' practices, including her own. Based on data gathered from phenomenological interviews with eight participants, email posts, and field notes during an eight-month period of engagement in levelising, results showed that participants engaged in all four levels in similar rates of participation on each level. In contrast to Gaskin's earlier approach, Torres didn't attempt to teach other participants how to engage in levelising; instead, she engaged them in reflective practice from the beginning of their interactions and went on to facilitate their reflections at different levels over the duration of their project. In the end, she reported that "…levelising may offer a practical means for double-loop learning, helping those who engage in this practice align theories in action with espoused theories" (p. vi).

Taken as a group, these practical and research experiences indicate that the levelising process as a form of reflective practice can be learned, if not directly taught. Although we are cautious about what we can conclude from these few studies, our own practical experience and the three studies indicate that levelising is best learned by experiencing the process. Another tentative conclusion is that the process is more effective if done in interaction with other people. Although it may be possible to think through one's actions, reflections, and frames, experiencing levelising appears to be "a solitary act one cannot do alone" (Peters and Gray, 2005). This is the way we approach levelising in our own reflective practices, whether this entails reflecting on our own actions, helping others to reflect on theirs, or both at the same time. What we have observed recently is that the process of reflecting on our practice can quickly become a double-loop learning experience (Argyris and Schon, 1978). Changes in how we conduct our practice feed back into our thinking about our practice, which results in a change in our practice, followed by a change in thinking about our practice changes, and so on.

Conclusion

Levelising is a socially-constructed, cyclical process of reflective practice that includes multiple ways of knowing and respects the logic and power of what Freire referred to as "learning what we already know" (Bell, Gaventa, and Peters, 1991). Grounded in experience, the process respects the role that both formal theory and practical theory play in the formulation of a way to go on with others in practice. It acknowledges the profound influence of context and the role of others in our actions. It is intended to be a comprehensive approach to guiding reflective practice, whether the practice is a part of a more formal inquiry such as action research or in such other areas of practice as collaborative learning. Whether we have been persuasive in our presentation of this model to the reader remains to be seen, and we invite whatever critique the reader wishes to offer.

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