Reflections on the absence of formal reflection in public relations education and practice

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

This content analysis is a part of wider research into the value of reflective practice in public relations education and practice. Examination of this topic is important given that reflective practice is widely recognised as an essential element for claims of professionalism (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983, 1987), and professionalism remains an elusive goal for PR practitioners (L'Etang, 2009). This article examines the extent to which the terms and processes associated with reflective practice are formally included in the contents of a range of widely used and well regarded public relations textbooks. The aim is to provide insight into the significance (or lack of it) of reflective practice in contemporary public relations curricula. Given that textbooks are highly influential teaching media that both reflect and shape curricula, conclusions about the emphasis of reflective practice in public relations teaching can be drawn as a result of this analysis. The findings indicate that – based on the content of the textbooks analysed – reflective practice is not formally included in the public relations teaching curriculum. Further research is needed to determine whether this omission also reflects the situation in public relations practice. This research has relevance for public relations educators given that they play a significant role in influencing future generations of public relations professionals. It concludes with a call for a shift in public relations education that includes greater emphasis on reflective practice.

1. Introduction

Formally reflecting on practice is a widely recognised and researched strategy for learning from complex and challenging situations that arise in the workplace (Boud, Cressey & Docherty, 2006; Fook & Gardner, 2007, 2012; Moon, 1999; Osteman & Kottkamp, 1993). It is a systemised approach to helping practitioners in all fields develop higher levels of self-awareness, and to create opportunities for professional growth and quality improvement. Reflective practice addresses profound, often unasked, questions such as 'what am I doing, why did it happen that way, what hidden assumptions are operating here, and what do I need to do in order to do better next time?' Formal reflective practice can be carried out either alone or in group settings, depending on the context.

This research considers the extent to which reflective practice is formally included in public relations teaching programmes, in light of industry aspirations of professionalism. Reflective practice is recognised as an essential element of professionalism (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; Schön, 1987). The field of public relations is evolving rapidly from being primarily concerned with the achievement of specific campaign outputs for clients towards dialogic co-creation of meaning and a concern with questions of professionalism such as the ethics of engagement with clients and publics, and the moral and political implications of practice (Grunig, 2006; Grunig, Grunig, & Dozier, 2002; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; van Ruler, 2015).

The extent to which reflective practice is formally included in public relations curricula is examined through review of the contents of ten widely used public relations textbooks written by well-regarded authors, most of whom are both industry experts and public relations theorists. The textbooks were all published in Britain, America, Australia or New Zealand between 2009 and 2017. Implicit in this research approach is acknowledgment of the powerful mediating influence of textbooks in critical debates and contemporary pedagogical practice.

2. Reflection in public relations teaching and practice

As long ago as the 4th Century, Socrates recognised the value of reflection in personal life, when he claimed that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. Today there is scholarly recognition that ongoing engagement in formal reflective practice is an important element of professional life. This recognition can be traced to the writing of John Dewey (1933) who was an early advocate of reflective practice as a systemised form of enquiry in the workplace. More recently, Schön (1983), Schön (1987) advocated for formal reflective practice as a way of developing 'actionable schema' that provide ways of handling uncertainty in times of change and for navigating the 'messy swamps of practice' (1987, p.3). He described reflective practice as a process of "problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique" (1983, p. 21). Reflection provides practitioners with strategies for examining their own 'theories in use', particularly to resolve the tension between values-based professional practice, and economically and technically focused outcomes (Schön, 1983).

Reflective practice is similar to critical reflection but there is a key difference in focus. Both are formal approaches that are theorised as challenging personal assumptions that may have been made in the course of workplace experience, and both operate in a reflexive space of honesty, critique and embracing change. However, critical reflection is typically theorised as an emancipatory form of reflection concerned with transforming wider society (Cotter, 2014), whereas reflective practice is more concerned with transforming interpersonal and organisational practices (Fook & Gardner, 2007; Moon, 1999).

Reflective practice is widely recognised as an essential competency domain for claims of professionalism (Boud & Garrick, 1999; Fook & Gardner, 2007; Schön, 1983,1987). Fook and Gardner, writing particularly in the human services field, describe reflection as the process by which professionals, alone and with others, acquire and develop the knowledge, skills and emotional intelligence essential to high-quality professional thinking, planning and practice. Schön advocates formal workplace reflection as a way of resolving the division between technical rationality and ethical, artistic and intuitive thinking. He claims that this division is artificial and unacceptable in professional practice, given that professionals claim to contribute to social wellbeing and hold themselves accountable for standards of competence and morality (1983). Boud and Garrick claim that a key benefit of reflective practice is that it provides individuals with a way of finding their own meanings within a community of professional discourse. Fook and Gardner make the point that although many professional courses require students to be reflective, there is often no literature provided on the topic, or no specific part of the course that focuses on how reflective practice is carried out.

Reflective practice is regarded not only as an important element of professionalism, but also as an important element of deep learning (Boud, Cressey, & Docherty, 2006; Dewey, 1933; Driscoll, 1994; Ghaye, 2010; Kolb, 1984; Lave & Wenger, 2002). The reflective nature of learning is central to Lave and Wenger's (2002) research into the developmental transition from the knowledge of the novice to the knowledge of the expert in the workplace. Lave and Wenger saw learning as a process of socialisation within communities of practice where participants share ideas and experiences over extended timeframes. Central to this process of socialisation is the shift from experiencing the workplace as a sequence of chronological events towards learning through a process of purposeful reflection based on daily experience.

A review of the literature reveals hundreds of articles that discuss the significance of reflective practice in the fields of education and health, for example Brookfield (1999), Bruster and Peterson (2013), Fitzpatrick and Spiller (2010), Fook and Gardner (2012), Gibbs (1988), Glendenning and Cartwright (2011), Hinett and Weeden (2000), Joyce (2015), Maloney and Campbell-Evans (2002), Moon (1999), Osteman and Kottkamp (1993), and Zwozdiak-Myers (2012).

A similar literature review in the field of public relations reveals that the value of reflection is widely recognised at a theoretical or philosophical level as the discipline seeks to understand its role in an increasingly complex social and communicative environment (Burger, 2009; Holmström, 2004; Holmström, 2005; Holmström, 2009; L'Etang, 2013; L'Etang & Pieczka, 2006; Marsh, 2010; van Ruler, 2015; van Ruler & Vercic, 2005). Holmström (2009), considering the role of public relations within the systems framework of Niklas Luhmann, claims that reflection is essential to public relations practice in late modernity as organizations seek to earn and sustain social legitimacy. She says that reflection provides a way of anticipating and navigating potential conflicts and transforming the consequences of these conflicts into organisational learning (2004). Van Ruler and Vercic (2005) argue for a reflective approach to communication management that puts the counseling role at the centre of public relations activity.

While the value of reflection is widely recognised at a theoretical or philosophical level there is very little research into the role of formal reflection in the daily practice of public relations practitioners and public relations curricula. Sheehan (2008) and Fitch (2011) have researched public relations internships and advocate for reflective practice as way of integrating academic and workplace learning. L'Etang and Pieczka (2006) also discuss the need for increased reflection in public relations education. They call for teachers to encourage students to "be curious, to play 'devil's advocate', question received truths, and develop moral courage—all qualities they will need as public relations counselors" (p. 442). In other words, although they do not specifically use the term 'reflective practice', L'Etang and Pieczka are calling for students to be more reflective and challenge professional assumptions. Reflective practice is an element of what L'Etang (2013) calls for in a new epistemology of practice in which public relations practitioners can become more open learning systems capable of reflecting and adapting rather than solely focusing on outcomes.

A similar lack of formal recognition or inclusion of reflective practice in public relations education is evident in professional