MA IN EDUCATION

Name: Kevin Roberts

Title of Module: Mastering Professional Learning

"Using a reflective model of practice critically evaluate your own performance within your professional setting. This should include a critical evaluation of your practice together with learning opportunities and assessment you have provided."

Reflective practice is a process which enables practitioners to learn from experience about themselves, using situations they have found themselves in to critically evaluate their actions (Bolton, 2010). Indeed, it is a concept which has gained increased credence in recent years, with interest having grown significantly in reflection and critical reflection (Gardner, 2014). In the education sector, it could be argued that this increased interest is due in part to the assertion that it is a highly complex field which is driven by decision making, thus creating the need for reflective practice to play a significant role (Thorburn and Collins, 2003). Conversely, despite the large number of works pointing to the need for practitioners to engage with reflective practice, there are arguments against it. One such argument is a lack of time (Copeland *et al.,* 1993; Davis, 2003), due to teaching staff being over-stretched, which can make reflection a luxury afforded to those with fewer temporal constraints. Indeed, Cropley and Hanton (2011) argue that practitioners are in danger of referring to reflective practice as something that needs to be done, rather than something which we are intrinsically motivated to engage with. In order to negate this potential problem, I am drawn back to the work of Bolton (2010), who stresses the need for practitioners to have time and facilitation invested into them, something which I am fortunate to receive from my educational establishment. This argument is further enhanced by O'Donovan (2006), who found that reflection is more likely to take place when there is mentor support available. Conversely, the presence of such a mentor does not always mean that the reflective practice that takes place will be effective. In the field of nursing, Scanlan and Chernomas (1997) suggest that nurse educators may be instilling reflective practice

in their students as a means of justifying their professional status, and without any thought of the basic concepts of philosophy behind it. Coward (2011) went as far as to suggest that the amount of assessment involving reflection is too high, and that the traditional roots of the concept have been lost.

The following work will be a critical evaluation of my practice to date, underpinned by this concept of critical reflection. It is important to note the distinction between reflection and critical reflection. The latter involves a much deeper questioning of our relationship with our own culture, and how that relationship is influenced by the social context which we find ourselves in (Bager-Charleson, 2010; Gardner, 2014). Interestingly, Kashiwagi *et al.* (2016) describe reflective practice as a tool to review an occurrence which is a deviation from normal practice, suggesting that we should only engage in the process when something does not go as planned. This is a view that suggests that learning only occurs when we experience something we consider to be negative, which other modern research disputes (Shephard, 2006; Ghaye *et al.*, 2008).

One of the most commonly cited models of reflection comes from the work of Schon (1983; 1987), which continues to have an impact on education and associated fields to this day (Erlandson, 2005; Kinsella, 2007). Since the initial publication of the work of Schon (1983), a number of reflective models have been devised by fellow researchers, including those by Kolb (1984), Boud *et al.* (1985) and Gibbs (1988). It is the reflective cycle proposed by Gibbs (1988) that will underpin this critical evaluation of my practice, as this is the one I feel most comfortable using. It is important to consider that there are arguments against this particular model, as noted by Bolton (2014), who suggests that practitioners may become too concerned with simply answering the questions, rather than fully immersing themselves in the process and developing their own narrative. In coming to this decision, I also considered the argument presented by Bolton (2014), that how a model is used is more important than individual elements, which helped to guide me towards using this model. Further justification in the decision to use the model of Gibbs (1988) lies in the fact that I do not consider myself to be a natural reflector. Looking to the work of Dewey (1933), he states that it is not enough to have an experience and go home to think about it, which is how the vast majority of my own reflection has happened in the past. In order to be

a more critical reflector, I feel that I need to follow a set cycle as proposed by Gibbs (1988), in order to be able to reach a level of reflection deemed necessary to be a quality educator (Kelsey and Hayes, 2012).

Over the last two years I have been fortunate enough to work in various youth clubs across North Wales and have met some outstanding youth workers and young people as a result. Each setting presents different challenges, of which the challenging behaviour of young people is invariably one (Leaman, 2009). Indeed, Leaman (2009) continues, pointing out that managing challenging behaviour in the education setting is not a new problem, nor is it likely to disappear from our work. Harris (2011) delves a little deeper, exploring the notion that difficult behaviour exhibited by young people is usually an attempt to communicate something they find difficult to verbalise. The reason for this lack of this lack of ability to verbalise their issues could lie in their upbringing, as Leaman (2009) suggests. This work shares my own view that the ability of a young person to thrive through such adversity is dependent on a range of factors, including their intellectual development to date, and their personality. However, through reflection, I have begun to challenge this assumption, wondering instead whether we as youth workers have a bigger role to play in assisting a young person in reaching their full potential, as Zand *et al*. (2009) allude to. They argue that it is important youth workers understand the significance of developing positive, professional relationships between themselves and young people if positive outcomes are to be achieved.

There is one youth setting in particular where the young people are very difficult to manage due to their behaviour, and I am often left wondering if there is more I can do, or whether a different approach would yield what I consider to be a more positive result. The situation becomes slightly more complicated when I consider that I am not the lead youth worker at the session, which leads me to think if that person is happy, do I need to change my approach, or is this the behaviour to be expected from these young people. These questions I ask of myself lead me back to the work of Bager-Charleson (2010), considering whether the social context I find myself in on a weekly basis is having an impact on my relationship with my own culture. I should point out that my own culture and background is one of respect for those who I believe to be in a position of authority and being polite and honest at every available opportunity.

Deucher and Ellis (2013) describe how moral panics relating to anti-social behaviour in young people have accelerated in recent years, which aligns with my feelings when confronted with challenging behaviour as it does not conform to the way I personally behaved at that age, and would have expected to be punished for. Focus in recent years has shifted however from punishing the negative behaviour, to increased efforts in preventing it occurring in the first place and looking at the root cause of such behaviour (Leaman, 2009; Harris 2011; Deucher and Ellis, 2013). Thinking about my own morals and beliefs around behaviour of young people, I am drawn to the work of Smith and Jones-Devitt (2008) who refer to the notion of moral reasoning, which encourages the practitioner to consider a situation from all sides with an open mind, rather than being judgemental. I can certainly see where I have been judgemental in my past reactions to challenging behaviour, rather than engaging in moral reasoning, which may have yielded more positive results. The work of Richards-Schuster and Timmermans (2017) provides an interesting discussion on this, suggesting that our own experience creates bias in our perspective. However, a counter suggestion from Stake (2010) implies that by acknowledging our own experiences, we can bring a high level of understanding and nuancing to the role. Indeed, this latter notion has close ties to youth work practice, where I as a practitioner am expected to approach situations with an open mind, rather than be clouded by my own morals and ethics (Phillips, 2016).

Certainly, as I have gained more experience with young people who display challenging behaviour, I have become more accustomed to it, and my reactions have moved from those of surprise to acceptance, which I am not sure is wholly appropriate. My main reason for feeling this way is that one of the key roles of a youth worker is to act as a role model, and guide young people as best we can, preparing them for adulthood (Iwasaki, 2015). As such, if the perceived negative actions of young people are not challenged, but rather accepted, I am missing a golden opportunity to have a positive effect on the way that young person acts in society. Indeed, in my reflective efforts on this subject, I have spoken to other young work practitioners, including those who work at the session in question, in an attempt to understand their thoughts and feelings when the young people display such challenging behaviour. These discussions have guided me to make a conscious effort to look at my own culture, and how to get that across in my youth work practice.

Delving deeper into my thoughts and feelings when dealing with challenging behaviour, in addition to my surprised reaction, I would find myself wondering what the root cause of the behaviour is, and whether I can change my practice to avoid influencing it in any way. In addition to speaking to fellow youth workers, I had conversations directly with young people, some of whom were happy to admit that more often than not they are seeking attention when they behave in a challenging way. It is also a common theme that young people I work with suffer from learning difficulties and have problems with authority and paying attention for long periods of time, but it is seeking attention that interests me most, and prompted further reflection, both on my own, and with other youth workers.

Conversations with other youth workers and young people have helped me to begin making sense of this aspect of youth work and have pointed me towards ways of dealing with it. One of these is the notion of how youth workers deal with what is described as secondary behaviour. As Leaman (2009) notes, this is a situation where a youth worker has challenged a young person about their behaviour, and the desire or need for that young person to get the last word or offer an insult as a method of preserving their pride in front of peers. It is at this point I have made concerted efforts in recent months to resist challenging the behaviour, and pull back from power seeking, instead attempting to deal with the situation with calm assertiveness, as Leaman (2009) suggests. Through conversations with other professionals, it is often thought best to completely ignore this secondary behaviour and allow the young person to have the last word. Indeed, as Harris (2011) contends, the feelings that I experience in situations like this are on an interpersonal level, and that youth workers in this situation become unable to think clearly about how to respond, instead requiring external assistance. However, Harris (2011) does not move toward any options for what form this assistance should take. Having come this far in the reflective process, I am of the belief that engaging in critical reflection with other professionals, as I have done in attempting to understand challenging behaviour, is a powerful method of doing so.

Looking at my professional practice more widely, it is often the case that I am called upon to deliver training to young people, which will often result in accredited qualifications being attained. Through reflecting on my work to date, it has become

clear that the issues around challenging behaviour mentioned earlier have usually been present in some form during learning opportunities I have provided. The way I dealt with this, particularly during assessment, was to punish the immediate behaviour, in an attempt to assert, or re-assert my legitimate form of power (Erchul and Raven, 1997; Batsleer, 2008) over the group. At the time, this emotional response to being challenged felt like it was the correct course of action for the sake of the whole group, trying to ensure that they would not be negatively impacted by the behaviour of another young person. Through reflection I have begun to challenge that assumption, taking an approach more aligned with youth work practice (Pope and Jones, 2011) and looking at both the root cause of the behaviour, and different ways of dealing with the situation that would have a better effect on the transgressor. A concept of youth work that has become more instilled in me through reflecting with other professionals is the voluntary nature of the field, in that unlike formal school education, a young person can freely withdraw their engagement at any time (Buckroth and Husband, 2015). Indeed, most youth work theorists and academics agree that voluntary participation is a precursor to effective youth work (Ord, 2009). It can therefore be argued that it is important for me to recognise this during my youth work practice, including delivering learning and assessment opportunities, and modify the way I deal with challenging behaviour. Biddulph (1984) provides an important point on this topic, arguing that young people are in a developmental stage in which they are beginning to separate both emotionally and psychologically from their parents. As such, they do not want to be spoken to or controlled like as if they were children. Looking to my own practice, when I have attempted to control a situation in a way perhaps more suited to younger children, this could lead to a breakdown in communication and increased challenging behaviour, due to the desire of young people to be spoken to as adults. There is further weight added to this argument from the work of Merton and Wiley (2004) who suggest the one of the reasons for the success of youth work is that youth workers treat young people like adults, rather than someone beneath them who can be controlled.

In attempting to form a conclusion about the journey I have been on, and my performance in managing challenging behaviour in my practice, I feel it is important to look back at my own social norms and values. In line with these, whilst my initial reactions of surprise to being met with challenging behaviour were perhaps warranted (Knoll, 2007), the move from surprise to acceptance should not have occurred. I feel

that confidence could have been one of the things holding me back, together with a lack of theoretical knowledge at the time. Thinking critically about what I could have done differently at the time, perhaps taking a step back emotionally when I was feeling surprised at the behaviour, and seeking advice from other staff members present, as well as my line manager, would have been beneficial. By approaching the situation in this way, I may have avoided moving to the stage of acceptance, and begun challenging the young people about their behaviour, and getting them to think about the effect it has on others. Consequently, this type of reflection may have made the youth setting a higher quality experience for all (Denissen, 2017). As I look at my youth work practice to date, I do feel proud of what I have achieved, the learning and assessment opportunities I have been able to provide to young people, together with having a positive influence on their lives. Being a relatively new youth worker with around three years' experience, my practice has improved significantly since I started, and through this reflective process I have been able to identify further areas for development. This is a challenge which excites me, for both professional and personal reasons, and the opportunity to have a greater impact on the lives of young people. To help me develop my practice further in line with my reflective progress, it is important that I look to external sources to help me achieve this, as Loughran (2002) suggests. I will look to have more in depth conversations with other staff members present at sessions, as well as observing their behaviour with young people, in an effort to replicate what I perceive as being good practice. Simultaneously, whilst Loughran (2002) asserts that reflecting with others can challenge assumptions which were previously taken for granted, I should keep in mind that a method that works for another practitioner may not work for me, and so to expect the same results could be somewhat naïve. In addition, I will seek support from my line manager, who is vastly experienced in youth work practice, to help me explore different methods of dealing with young people who exhibit challenging behaviour. I hope to achieve this through regular supervision sessions and conversations in which we will challenge each other to seek innovate solutions. Finally, I should not underestimate the power of speaking directly to the young people who attend my sessions and working directly with them in an attempt to understand the root cause of their behaviour. I am confident that this, together with regularly engaging in reflective practice, will enhance my youth work skills going forwards.

Action Plan

Name: Kevin Roberts

What do I need to develop?	What will I do to achieve this?	What resources or support will I need?	How can I measure my success?	Target Dates for Review	Target dates for completion
The way in which I deal with challenging behaviour from young people.	Continue to attend and run youth work sessions where I know challenging behaviour is a reoccurring issue. I will also ensure that I engage in critical reflection following these sessions, even if I perceive them to have run smoothly.	I will utilize the support of other staff members present, in both observing their practice, and conversations with them about their methods. Furthermore, I will ensure I have access to regular supervision sessions with my line manager to discuss my progress with this, and whether he feels any adjustments could be made to my approach.	I believe a key indicator for measuring this success will be the behaviour of the young people after I have dealt with their behaviour. This may not happen immediately, and may be a more gradual change in behaviour, but if they are more receptive to my approach and their behaviour improves, this will be an important factor in determining success. I will also liaise with other staff members to discuss whether they feel behaviour has improved, which will be an additional factor in determining success or progress.	April 30th, 2018.	July 31st, 2018.

The quality and quantity of critical reflective practice I engage in.	I feel it would be beneficial for me to build into my working calendar a sufficient time slot for engaging in reflection following each session I run. By doing this, I am firmly committing myself to the process, just as I would be for a professional meeting or engagement.	I will certainly need support from my employer to achieve this, due to the extra time needed to be allocated in my calendar. I will also engage further with the latest literature and theory in an attempt to maximise the benefits I can yield from the process. Regular supervision sessions with my line manager should help me with this, by clearly explaining the need to do it, and the benefits it could bring to my practice, and, by extension, the organisation.	I feel success in this element will be quite an intrinsic event. Whilst I could show I have completed a certain number of reflective logs, and evidenced the time taken with my work calendar, this will not necessarily mean the quality of reflective practice has improved. Whilst I will be happy to share my reflections with my line manager, the way I feel approaching my practice, and the changes I make as a result of engaging in reflection will be a key indicator of success.	April 30th, 2018.	July 31st, 2018.
The use of external sources of assistance to improve my overall professional practice.	I think it is important for me to fully utilize the sources of assistance around me when I am involved in sessions. These could be other staff	As strange as it may sound, a key resource I feel I need for this is myself. The ability to be honest with myself and be prepared to hear comments that are not necessarily	To help me measure success for this development area, I will return to those people who have been part of the reflective process. They are the people who will know what I have been	April 30th, 2018.	July 31st, 2018.

	members involved in delivery, my colleagues at Boys' and Girls' Clubs of Wales, and the young people who are attending the sessions. To help me achieve this, I will ensure I allocate enough time at the end of sessions for me to be able to discuss my practice with these people, and the effect it has on them. I will also make a conscious effort to replicate this during the sessions, allowing me to gain valuable real time information about my practice.	positive, will be important for my development, and I should approach this area with an open mind as a result. As with my second development area, it is important that I have the full support of my line manager for this, due the extra time it will take. I am however confident that this process of critical reflective practice will yield positive outcomes for my practice.	discussing, and the details of the action plans that have been developed as a result. As such, they will be a key indicator of the progress I have made in using my reflections to improve my practice. Again, it is important that I approach this with an open mind, so that if I am told that my reflective practice is not having an effect on my practice, I am able to respond positively and make changes to my process.		

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