

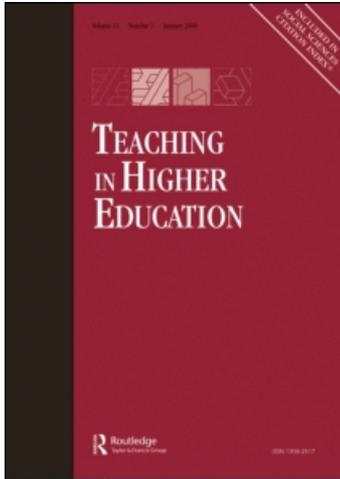
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### Teaching critical reflection

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## Teaching critical reflection

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Despite long-standing commitment to the notion of critical reflection across the healthcare professions it is unusual for critical theory and practice to be taught as explicit subjects in healthcare higher education. There is evidence to show that reflective techniques such as critical portfolios and reflective diaries can help students to consolidate and assess their learning of a discipline and its practices. Yet, there are also known drawbacks of critical reflection, including over self-critical inspection and the infinite regress of reflection on action. This paper offers a theoretically informed model of critical reflection which encompasses different purposes (thinking, learning and assessment of self and social systems), together with different forms of reflection (personal, interpersonal, contextual and critical). Explicitly teaching critical reflection is a logical step towards students being able to recognise and negotiate complex ethical and professional issues. However, teaching critical reflection creates challenges for curricula design, assessment and professional development.

**Keywords:** critical reflection; reflexivity; professional development; self-assessment

### Introduction

This article examines the theoretical underpinnings of critical reflection in order to develop a more defined language and theory base. It draws purposely and selectively from research evidence and theory across the broad fields of education, research methods and professional development to draw attention to some of the many purposes, techniques, and criticisms of critical reflection and argue that more structured and theoretically informed teachings of critical reflection in higher education (HE) could benefit student learning. Although this article highlights issues relevant to the health professional context, where it is felt to be an important aspect of professionalism, the article has much to offer academics in other subject disciplines.

The ability to be a critical reflector is held as being particularly important across the health and social care professions including medicine, social work, nursing, occupational health, physiotherapy and pharmacy (Boud, Keogh, and Walker 1985; Brookfield 1987; Johns 2004). Critical reflection can support professional development through assessment of decisions and actions and it can lead to improvements in service delivery and patient experiences of care (Brookfield 1987; Mezirow 1994).

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The teaching of critical reflective skills in HE offers a way for practitioners to gain insight into their own professionalism (Larivee 2000; Schön 1991) and the knowledge and power of the disciplines they align themselves with (Foucault 1982; Giddens 1976; Habermas 1978). For these reasons, critical reflection is, in general terms, an ethically and professionally good thing to do and it is advocated in many areas of professional development and practice.

Despite widespread and long-standing commitment to the notion of critical reflection across the health and social care professions, it can be difficult to assimilate into teaching because the language is complex and the same terminology is used in different ways in different contexts or carries different nuances. The theory and evidence is dispersed amongst literatures on critical thinking (Kemmis 1985), critical analysis (Boud, Keogh, and Walker 1985), reflective practice (Johns 2004; Schön 1996) and reflexivity in research (Holland 1999; Mauthner and Doucet 2003), making it difficult to access information for teaching. A particular problem is appreciating the subtle differences and overlaps of these concepts. For example, critical thinking is generally approached as being an outcome of learning which may be evidenced by a student's work – such as a reflective commentary on personal practice and skills – while critical analysis is more likely to be perceived as an academic process – such as scrutinising research papers or the quality of evidence generated by a research study. The notion of reflexivity is discussed below.

What is also striking is relatively little is known about the difficulties, practicalities and methods of critical reflection (Finlay and Gough 2003; Hsiung 2008) or the issues of teaching the theory and practice of critical reflection in academic contexts (Brockbank and McGill 1998; Larivee 2008). Critical reflection has been described as an extended and abstract outcome of learning (Biggs 2003), which implies that students will absorb such knowledge and skills during their HE experiences. While this could be true, it could also mean that students could learn quicker and more if teachers explained different theories and techniques that are available to them. Otherwise, students in HE could perceive critical reflection as elusive or idealistic rather than an essential set of learning tools.

### **Purposes of critical reflection**

What it means to critically reflect has been extensively debated by a number of philosophers, social theorists, researchers, educators and therapists. It is a notion that has been associated with a range of outcomes including improved thinking, learning and assessment of self and social systems, discussed here.

In relation to thinking, Dewey (1933) describes critical reflection as problem solving or investigation brought about by a moment of doubt. Critical reflection could be thought of as a process of 'thinking about the conditions for what one is doing and the affects' (Steier 1991, 2). Critical reflection is perceived to be of value for surfacing the influences on, and effects of, thinking and behaviour (Birch and Miller 2000). In psychology, Mezirow (1981) suggests reflection can be a point of access and assessment to pre-conceptions. Critical reflection is also held as a way of examining our own subjective thoughts about who we are, our identities, beliefs and so on (Wilson 2002). Self-reflection is not only associated with understanding self, but it is also perceived as being central to the therapeutic action of psychoanalysis (Lewis 2000).

A corresponding social theory perspective of critical reflection is that it allows us to examine the uniqueness of our individual ‘positionality’ within social systems (Foucault 1982; Giddens 1976). This could mean looking at how we align ourselves with particular identities (mother, father, doctor, nurse, patient, etc.) or how these identities encourage us to act in certain ways.

The broader, yet related, sociological notion of ‘reflective knowing’ is a conception of critical reflection as the thinking that can occur beyond established and accepted social processes. For example, reflective knowing reflects on established professional stereotypes or practices to ask why professional groups have acquired particular ways of being. According to the social theorist Jürgen Habermas:

Critical reflective knowing is neither behavioural nor technical, not truth establishing nor captured by a discipline. It critiques all other forms of knowledge, and in so doing, it moves beyond merely reproducing what is. (Habermas 1978, 42)

In the context of education, critical thinking has been perceived as a way of improving professional practice rather than simply recreating professional knowledge (Barnett 1994). Kolb’s (1984) well-known model of the learning process posits reflection as a step-wise process within a cycle of learning which also includes planning, action and evaluation. In this particular model, reflection is perceived as being part of learning rather than outside or independent of it. Kolb’s conception serves to extend learning beyond reproducing received knowledge. However, because this conception positions reflection within learning, it could mean that student reflection is limited to personal actions, rather than a more holistic critique of reflection on learning, teaching or reflectivity itself (Bleakley 1999).

Other educational theorists have suggested that it is possible to learn to become more critically reflective; or to get better at reflecting. According to Taylor (1987), the transformation to self-direction progresses through four major stages: disorientation, exploration, reorientation and equilibrium. Larivee (2008) conceptualises reflective practice in teaching as including four hierarchical levels of reflection: pre-reflection, surface reflection, pedagogical reflection and critical reflection. The aim of this assessment tool is to provide a way to gauge how a prospective or practicing teacher is progressing as a reflective practitioner to serve as a vehicle for facilitating the development of structures to mediate higher order reflection. Key elements which distinguish levels are the ability to systematically consider how personal and situational factors come to bear on interactions with students, and how student’s personal and situational factors influence learning. A limitation of these conceptualisations is that they imply a sequential set of reflective acts can be followed to reach a perceived end-goal of reflective competence.

Critical reflection features strongly in professional development and adult education literature (for example, Brookfield 1987; Mezirow 1981) where the approach is to encourage individuals to take a critical attitude to their own work and to position themselves in relation to the ideas and practices they encounter (Leach, Neutze, and Zepke 2001). In healthcare education critical reflection has particularly taken hold as a way of students undertaking self-assessment of performance. Schön (1996) describes critical reflection as an ‘act of professional artistry’ (12) that can involve reflection-on-action (after the event) and reflection-in-action (at the time of the event). These perspectives correspond with the notions that

critical reflection can support professional competency and professional development. As such, a self-critical form of reflection could be applied to gain insights and assess one's own thoughts and behaviours.

In some health and social science research traditions, critical reflection has been approached as a way of assessing and overcoming biases in knowledge construction. A positivistic view would be that by becoming aware of our personal biases we can aspire to be objective (Denzin and Lincoln 2005; Gadamer 1989). Traditionally in phenomenology the notion of 'bracketing' aims to put one's pre-judgements or assumptions aside (Paley 2005; Wall et al. 2004). Similarly, in Grounded Theory critical reflection is put into practice through writing memos about the types of data collected or emergent themes of the analysis (Cutcliffe 2003).

In constructivist research traditions, the issue of bias is perceived in a different way. In such traditions the view is that knowledge is always socially constructed and therefore contestable because it is linked to the people and social contexts within which it was created (Foucault 2006; Hsiung 2008; Merton 1942). In this context critical reflection is put into action through 'reflexivity'. The term reflexivity is generally used in relation to research processes to mean paying attention to the interrelationship between self and knowledge creation. Hence, this form of critical reflection is most likely to be taught as part of research methods courses (Finlay and Gough 2003). For example, the Economic and Social Research Council includes reflexivity as part of an optional research seminar programme for doctoral students (ESRC 2008). Through reflexivity, critical reflection is used to question processes of knowledge creation and to examine how personal and epistemological influences are interwoven with the research.

Within the specific method of Reflexive Interpretation (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000), critical reflection is applied as:

a critical and rigorous process which pays systematic attention to personal, interpersonal, and contextual factors influencing what is said and done, or not said and not done through the research. (Smith 2008)

Reflexivity in research draws attention to the issues of why knowledge is created and who can make claim of being knowledgeable (Burawoy 1998; Heron 1985; Powell 1985). From a critical theorist research approach, critical reflection is essential for examining how knowledge creation is directed towards political or ethical goals. While in feminist and emancipatory research traditions, reflection is approached as a way of learning about one's own life and gaining insight into how to improve one's own situation (Dowling 2006).

In summary, it is fairly easy to see that the purposes of critical reflection are diverse and potentially opposing. Thus, a more explicit teaching of the theory which underlies these different positions could help to placate some of the main criticisms of critical reflection, discussed below.

### **Criticisms of critical reflection**

There is huge variation in how critical reflection is put into practice in terms of the techniques and approaches that are used. For example, approaches used in HE range from informal discussions to highly structured forms such as Critical Incident

Technique (Flanagan 1954). They include personal approaches, such as reflective diaries and interactive forms such as Problem-based Learning (Fyrenius, Wirell, and Silén 2007) and service user involvement in teaching (Felton and Stickley 2004). This wide range of approaches may mean that the focus of learning is placed on the technique itself rather than on the broader intended purpose or outcomes of critical reflection. For example, a student could complete a reflective diary as a perfunctory account of their actions, rather than recognising its potential to improve their thinking or learning.

A related point, that there is no space here to discuss in detail, is the concern that critical reflection has not traditionally been seen as 'academic' and therefore should not be a part of an academic course. The argument for building critical reflection into academic courses may be even harder to make in relation to non-practice-based courses.

A further common drawback of using personal forms of critical reflection is that critical reflectors can slide into self-conscious cynicism, isolated thinking and self-absorption (Alvesson and Sköldbberg 2000; Boud and Walker 1998; Finlay 2002; Lewis 2000; Weick 1999). In educational contexts this could mean students who are reflecting on their own work become inward looking and allow self-inspection to dominate the work itself (Schön 1996). Baker (1990) argues that excessive rhetorical awareness can become 'a house of mirrors' which can isolate individuals from the rest of the world or lead to disengagement in a process which students are not interested in.

An important criticism of critical reflection is its potentially negative self-regulatory function. For example, in the case of critical portfolios students focus on the circumstances and impact of personal knowledge, skills and behaviours (Brockbank and McGill 1998), which could mean that their reflection is largely self-critical. Clegg (1999) suggests that at an extreme, self-reflection can become the internalisation of political project and adherence to a way of being without conscious scrutiny. Under such circumstances students could be overly critical of their own performance rather than adopting a balanced critical perspective of their judgements and actions within the social contexts they inhabit (Johnson and Cassell 2001). This can be problematic because negative feelings about one's performance can form major barriers towards learning, distort perceptions and undermine the will to persist (Boud, Keogh, and Walker 1985).

Furthermore, being a critical reflector is demanding of the individual as it involves 'de-centring' oneself (Bolam, Gleeson, and Murphy 2003), stepping back from one's own practices and 'visualising oneself over time and place' (Stronach et al. 2007, 180). Undertaking such activities requires a student to invest time in contemplation and exploration of alternative perspectives. This could potentially detract from their learning of technical skills or subject knowledge, which is likely to be the priority for students entering practice disciplines.

What is also not often recognised is that a person's view of their relationship to a subject or practice depends on their position, not only in a spatial sense, for example where they live, work, the communities they are part of, but also in more general terms including their cultural values and what is normal to them, and in a metaphoric sense according to their willingness to question their outlook on the issues at hand. There is also the issue that how a person chooses to critically reflect,

and what they critically reflect on, is likely to change over time and in response to the circumstances they are working and living within.

**Forms and domains of critical reflection**

It is possible for critical reflectors to overcome some of these pitfalls and limitations of critical reflection by developing a broader understanding of the alternate forms and domains of critical reflection. In particular, an appreciation for the different theoretical underpinnings of critical reflection may help to moderate self-criticism and self-regulatory aspects of reflectivity (Bleakley 1999). By teaching that critical reflection can take different forms students may find it is easier to make use of reflective techniques and to explain how they have made use of reflectivity. Drawing from the literature it is possible to suggest four main forms and domains of critical reflection, summarised below and illustrated by Figure 1.

**Personal: thoughts and actions**

Personal reflection could involve recording one’s own perceptions, judgements, reactions and behaviours in relation to an issue or practice (Finlay 2002; Mezirow 1994). Personal reflection has been described as self-inspection (Colbourne and Sque 2004), personal reflexivity (Brookfield 1993), self-awareness (Giddens 1976) and the ability to represent oneself to oneself (Wolfe 2003). According to Larivee (2000),

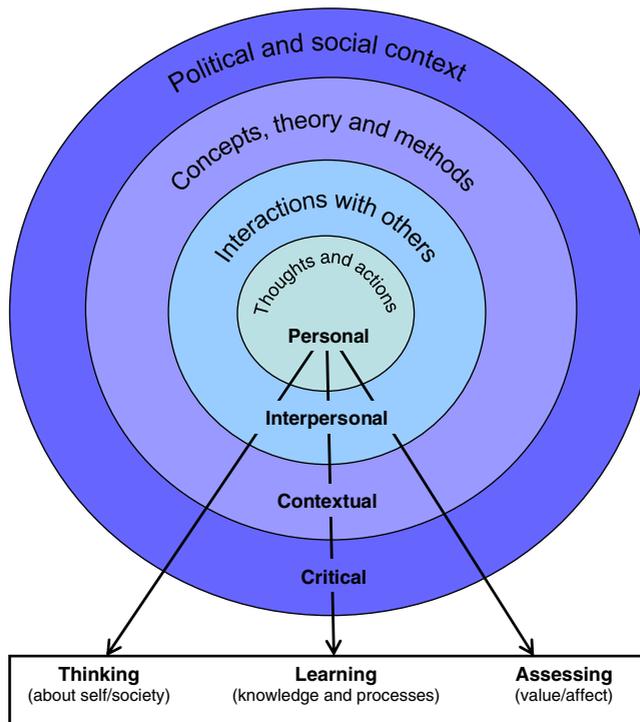


Figure 1. Forms and domains of critical reflection.

personal reflectivity can be thought of as a set of ‘filters’ such as past experience, feelings and mood, and agendas and aspirations, that are brought to bear on any situation and influence resultant responses. This type of reflection aims to address concerns about the influence of subjectivity by acknowledging and surfacing personal thoughts and actions.

***Interpersonal: interactions with others***

Interpersonal reflection means paying attention to the relationships that are central to the history and undertaking of a particular activity (Hardy, Phillips, and Clegg 2001). Examining interpersonal interactions, such as teacher–student or patient–doctor, can help to reveal the established norms surrounding a given practice. For example, the expectation or impact of duty of care or consent processes. A further dimension of interpersonal reflectivity is the group dynamics that influence decision making in any given context. This type of reflection aims to address concerns about the influence of professionalism and group interactions by acknowledging and surfacing disciplinary traditions and ways of working.

***Contextual: concepts, theory and methods***

Contextual reflection could include examining how established concepts, theories and methods inform and influence practice (Johns 2004; Schön 1996). Put another way, contextual reflection involves questioning the knowledge structures we operate within (Gadamer 1989). It leads to the question, how might things have been done differently if an alternative frame of reference (Weick 1999) or way of thinking had been used. This type of reflection aims to address concerns about the influence of established concepts and ideas by acknowledging and surfacing their limitations.

***Critical: political, ethical and social contexts***

Critical reflection examines the limitations placed around thinking or practice by bringing issues of power into focus (Riley, Schouten, and Cahill 2003). Critical reflection involves making explicit any ethical, political or social issues encountered and the impact this may have had on the people involved, or those not involved (Mauthner and Doucet 2003). Critical reflection involves asking what questions, issues or ways of thinking have been privileged by whom and for what reasons? This type of reflection aims to address concerns about the influence of powerful groups by acknowledging and surfacing different interests and agendas.

**Discussion**

***Critical reflection and the academy***

Teaching critical reflection adds a further dimension to the supercomplexity (Barnett 2000) of learning and teaching in HE. It can be at odds with traditional academic practices (Boud and Walker 1998) particularly so in the sciences, which focus on teaching operational and academic forms of knowledge (Barnett 1994). That said, teaching critical reflection supports the well-established argument that learning

should include both the assimilation of subject knowledge and the confidence to question and adapt that knowledge (Barnett 1994). Simply teaching subject knowledge falls short of ensuring new practitioners are empowered to question, and potentially improve upon, what they are doing or why they are doing it (Clegg 1999).

To be theoretically consistent with the broader perspective of critical reflection described here, pedagogy would aim to guide students to think and ‘find voice’ (Hertz 1997, 3), rather than aiming to reproduce a particular set of facts or techniques in a student’s mind. It would aim to provide space to explore thinking and the framing assumptions we employ to make judgements about the world (Woolgar 1988). An important emerging question is whether there is sufficient space for critical reflection within healthcare HE curricula and whether formalising critical reflection, for example, by defining learning outcomes for critical reflection, runs the risk of undermining what it aims to achieve (Hussey and Smith 2002).

### *Assessing and monitoring critical reflection in learning*

Explicitly teaching critical reflection could lead to the question of how to appraise an individual’s knowledge, understanding, abilities or skills of it (Higher Education Academy 2006). Whilst critical reflection is a well-established concept in professional development, particularly in nursing where reflection underpins a more client-centred and holistic view of practice (Schön 1991), assessment tends to be formative rather than summative. In the wider context of HE, focus on measured attainment means that the design and development of mechanisms to monitor and assess critical reflection have not been a priority (Hodkinson and Hodkinson 2004). Assessment of critical reflection generally is complicated because of defining what it is and whether it has been understood or applied (Larivee 2008). There is also a more fundamental tension associated with attempting to set standards for critical reflection:

To impose a unitary view of near-objectivity on the assessment process is to require the learner to conform to the reality of the assessor. (Leach, Neutze, and Zepke 2001)

Despite these problems, critical reflection offers useful development opportunities for assessment practice, including exploring student perceptions of the importance and meaning of intended learning outcomes and stimulating self-directed learning rather than a dependence on formal feedback from teachers. One solution may be to build in reflective tools into course structures which provide students with a framework to reflect on their autonomy, self-direction, critical reflection and transformation – including critiquing knowledge/power formations (Morley 2003), but acknowledging that learners will vary in their desire and confidence to make judgements about their own work (Leach, Neutze, and Zepke 2001).

A particular problem of critical reflection is that the range of available reflective techniques, domains and forms combined with a self-driven and self-specific form of assessment risks a relativistic position where what has been attempted or achieved is purely subjective (Morley 2004). If achievements towards being reflective are to be monitored and assessed there needs to be some basis for comparison or markers of quality (Ramsden 1992). This is not to say that students may benefit from being engaged in self-assessed reflective processes that are not part of their formal

assessment. With these issues in mind, drawing from the theory and research literature previously discussed, it is possible to extrapolate key indicators with which critical reflection could be observed and monitored (Figure 2). Unfortunately there is no space here to examine or explain these indicators in depth. As a starting point, using the questions identified in the first domain could encourage students to recognise the influence of their personal interests, what they believe to be important, and the factors that shape their opinions.

**Teacher critical reflection**

Given that theories and techniques of critical reflection can help to structure student learning, they could also help improve teaching practices. As Rogers argues:

The most socially useful learning in the modern world is the learning of the process of learning: a continuing openness to experience and incorporation into oneself of the process of change. (Rogers 1969)

Hence, teachers may also pass through phases of critical reflection (such as those identified by Larivee 2008; Taylor 1987) and may also encounter problems with degree of predictability. Schön (1991) identifies four main practical issues for teachers: finding time to reflect, fear of surfacing unmanageable complexity, infinite regress of reflection on action and the apparent incompatibility of reflection with action; as well as political issues such as the potential to be seen as a danger to the stable system of rules and procedures within which teachers are expected to deliver their technical expertise (Freire 1985).

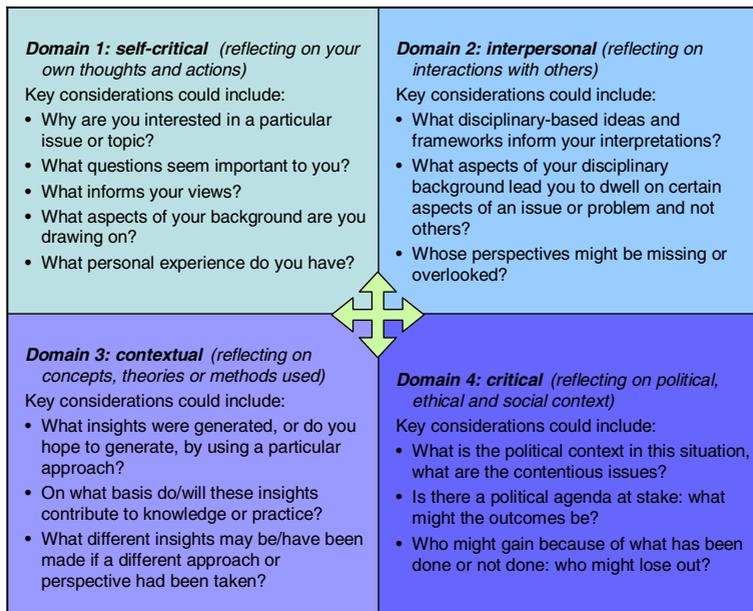


Figure 2. Indicators of critical reflection.

Table 1. Reflective techniques (Morrow 2010).

Reflective writing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Learning journals/diaries (Wall et al. 2004)</li> <li>● Memos (Dowling 2006)</li> <li>● Reflective notes (Smith 2008)</li> <li>● Critical Incident Technique (Flanagan 1954)</li> <li>● Critical Portfolio (Brockbank and McGill 1998)</li> </ul>
Reflective summaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Tabulation or lists of reflective themes (Alvesson and Sköldberg 2000)</li> <li>● Feedback/self-evaluation forms (Boud, Keogh, and Walker 1985)</li> </ul>
Diagrammatic representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Concept maps, mind maps and conceptual diagrams (Eppler 2006)</li> </ul>
Creative representation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Pictures/images (Stronach et al. 2007)</li> <li>● Story writing (Plummer 2001) and polyvocality (Riley, Schouten, and Cahill 2003)</li> <li>● Videoing/film-making (Pauwels 2006)</li> </ul>
Perspective taking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Stakeholder/service user views (Roth and Tobin 2002)</li> <li>● Reflective interview (Bolam, Gleeson, and Murphy 2003)</li> </ul>
Interaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Peer- or group-discussion (Brookfield 1987)</li> <li>● Problem-based Learning (Fyrenius, Wirell, and Silén 2007)</li> <li>● Service user involvement in teaching (Felton and Stickley 2004)</li> </ul>

Creating opportunities for co-reflective learning to take place generates new practical and professional issues. Using co-reflection within courses might raise issues for students from different cultural or educational backgrounds because of different expectations about teaching style and interaction with peers. Critical reflection ‘permits’ students to question the role of teacher and the ideas they present – which can be felt as criticism and be demoralising for teachers. On the other hand, reflective techniques may help to improve student learning by circumventing established dichotomies of teacher/student (see Table 1). Accordingly, Schön (1991) suggests a reflective stance that teachers may adopt to support critical reflection: including being explicit about presumed expert knowledge and a desire to connect with student thoughts and feelings about the topic at hand. However, perhaps the most difficult challenge for teachers is the intellectual demands of simultaneously teaching and reflecting on their subject knowledge.

## Conclusion

Teaching critical reflection marks a new chapter in HE. It opens a revolving door between the belief that objective knowledge exists or can be taught; and to the uncertainties of knowledge and the need to address personal and social influences on professional practices. Drawing attention to the different purposes of critical reflection may help to achieve more collaborative and constructive approaches to thinking, learning and assessment. A wide range of reflective techniques are already available and have been used in a range of professional development and educational contexts.

Learning about theories and techniques of critical reflection is a logical step towards students being able to recognise and negotiate complex ethical and

professional issues for themselves. The domains and indicators of critical reflection identified in this article can help students to be constructive in their criticism and pay attention to personal and social influences on their practice that might otherwise be overlooked. Approaches and techniques of critical reflection can be taught but students should also be made aware that the distinctly personal component of self-critical reflection is crafted at one's own pace and to one's own taste.

Essentially, teaching critical reflection in HE requires creating conditions for intellectual challenge – which is a challenge. Although a broad and balanced framework for critical reflection has been presented here, teaching critical reflection creates new challenges for curricula design, assessment and professional development. Teaching new generations of critical reflectors will help to assure that the revolving door between knowledge and uncertainty always remains open.

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