A dialogical approach to educating critical reflexive practitioners

Relation to the conference theme
Critical reflexivity involves an attention to how we dialogically construct identities in relational ways including the ways in which in- and exclusion processes take place. The educational facilitation of practitioners’ critical reflexive awareness, therefore, has implications for their ethical work with transitions, social justice and agency in professional practice (Maksimovic & Nordentoft, 2019)

Keywords
Critical reflexivity, practitioners, education, ethical, social justice

Theoretical framework and research question
In their work, guidance practitioners must balance and navigate between individual and system demands. In this process, there is a risk that they reproduce both their own and neoliberal ideologies together with social inequalities by not reflecting critically on how they themselves may take part in the reproduction of these discourses. Critical reflexive practice means critically reflecting on the reflexive nature of actions and the way in which these actions are situated, relational and encapsulated in particular personal values and preferences – i.e. ideologies. It builds on a social constructionist premise and draws attention to the inconsistent nature of explanation and how we create our social realities every moment, every day as we speak, write and interact with one another (Cunliffe, 2004).

This theoretical position means reworking learning from a cognitive to a dialogical process (Cunliffe, 2002) and critical reflection can be viewed as a strategy for dealing with the consequences of the post-foundationalist premise that all knowledge is a situated and contextual product of contingent representations of the world rather than a neutral, context-independent foundation. In this regard, Davies draws attention to the importance of how we use language to construct identities and accounts. She suggests that critical reflexivity “involves turning one’s reflexive gaze on discourse—turning language back on itself to see the work it does in constituting the world” (Davies, 2004, p. 361). This critical outset is slippery and emotionally ambivalent because it marks “the end of the age of innocence” in the sense that it is possible to isolate ‘the right’ thing to do. Moreover, it is no longer possible to establish a power free zone in dialogical practices (Phillips, Kristiansen, Vehviläinen & Gunnarsson, 2013). Critical reflexive researchers assert that reflexive analysis of meaning-making processes have potential to expose processes of inclusion and exclusion and the operation of power in-learning processes resulting from tensions that arise in dialogue across different knowledge forms, knowledge interests and power hierarchies. (Pedersen and Olesen, 2008; Phillips et al., 2013; Nordentoft & Olesen, 2018). Because critical reflexivity implies an attention to how power and knowledge relations interact,
it has potential to enhance an ethical and socially just practice. This focus, however, implies investigating one’s own assumptions regarding the nature of what counts as ‘good practice’. In career counseling contexts, this could be assumptions regarding “what someone might or might not be able to achieve because of their age, ability, or gender” (Bassot, 2014, p. 455). To summarize, critical reflexive practice calls for a constant reworking and recognizing of how cultural norms are reproduced and the ways in which such norms constantly mould our relations, interpretations, sense-making and categorizations.

So far so good. Having established the theoretical and practical relevance of critical reflexivity, the question this paper addresses is how practitioners can be educated to be critical thinkers in their practice? In the paper, I outline a dialogical approach to education of practitioners based on three considerations:

Firstly, because reflexive questioning draws attention to the socially constructed and reflexive nature of discourses and practices it systematically and dialogically investigates the complexity of thinking or experience by exposing and exploring contradictions, dilemmas, an power relations rather than focusing on normative approaches to guidance practices (Cunliffe, 2002, Bassot, 2014; Nordentoft & Jensen, 2017).

Secondly, Pollner (1991) describes radical reflexivity as a form of “unsettling” of practices which can be instigated by drawing attention to moments in which you are ‘struck’ by an unusual course of events and ‘moved to make sense’ (Cunliffe, 2002, p. 36). Being struck essentially involves our spontaneous and unexpected (emotional, cognitive or physiological) response to a course of events (Cunliffe, 2004, p. 410). In this regard, the harnessing of difference can be seen as a generative force particularly well-suited as a way to unsettle practices and illuminate tacit assumptions in the creation of new knowledge (Tsoukas, 2009).

Thirdly, in the paper, I specifically work with Bakhtinian dialogic communication theory (Bakhtin, 1981) to explore how meaning and learning are produced dialogically in the tension between differences between multiple voices. In two examples from the Master Education in Guidance and Counseling, DPU, Aarhus University, I illustrate how differences between practitioners’ theoretical and epistemological assumptions can be scaffolded didactically in order to initiate a ‘struckness’ leading on to a critical reflexive awareness.

**Methods/methodology**

Exposing and challenging practitioners’ assumptions can be an emotionally loaded and slippery process for both students and educational facilitators (Olesen & Nordentoft, 2018). Therefore, it is important to set a clear frame both in writing and orally to create a trustful atmosphere before the reflexive work.

**Example 1: Defining critical reflexivity**

In the first example, I address the conceptual distinction between reflection and critical reflexivity. Educational researchers suggest that often students think they are critical reflexive when in fact they are not (Ryan, 2013).
In reality, they are often descriptive and perhaps non-reflective rather than critical reflexive. In other words, there seems to be a tension between practitioners’ normative assumptions about the nature of reflection/critical reflexivity and their practical actions. In groups students' are invited to negotiate the differences and tensions between their different understandings of reflection, critical reflection and the difference between them in this collaborative learning exercise. The dialogues are guided by the following questions: What is the significance of reflection/critical reflexivity – i.e. how can you define the concept? When do you/do you not reflect (reflect critically)? How can you learn to reflect/critically? Why/when must you reflect (critically)? In the dialogical negotiation of possible answers to these questions, students are confronted with their own assumptions about the nature of what critical reflexivity implies. In the last part of the exercise is a poster presentation where students present their written reflections regarding the differences between reflection and critical reflexivity visually. Following this exercise, they get a more formal lecture on differences and significance of reflection vs. critical reflexivity drawing on the posters they have made. This exercise can come before and be combined with the video reflexive work I present below.

**Example 2: Video-reflexive dialogues**

Video-stimulated collaborative dialogues is a driver for reflexive, context sensitive and often emotionally loaded considerations about practitioners’ tacit assumptions about what they do and what actually happens in practice. Assumptions which are embedded in the (asymmetrical) ways they often communicate in their practice (Mitra, Lewin-Jones, Barrett, & Williamson, 2010; Carroll, Iedema & Kerridge, 2008). At the Master Education in Guidance and Counselling (DPU/Denmark) students videotape and analyse one of their own guidance conversations and discuss them in groups (Nordentoft & Jensen, 2017). Following this process, several students choose to work with the stimulated recall method, which is similar to the Interpersonal Process Recall method in their master thesis. In both these methodologies practitioners and clients watch and/or listen to video-footages in which they interact (Lyle, 2003; Maree, 2016). Thus they give voice to the client and potential to provide reflexive insights into differences and similarities in the ways both clients and practitioners act and reflect on their actions (Lyle, 2003, p. 861).

**Outcomes/ expected results**

A critical and social constructionist approach suggests that by unsettling practices and initiating practitioners’ `struckness` it becomes possible to access and work with their normative assumptions in learning processes and enhance their critical reflexivity. This struckness can be scaffolded by working with tensions and differences between voices in a dialogical approach inspired by Bakhtin. Example number 1 shows how

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1 In the examples, I use the term students and not practitioner because they take place in an educational context.
differences and tensions between practitioners’ conceptual understandings of reflection and critical reflexivity can be framed didactically in a collaborative learning process. Example number 2 illustrates how practitioners’ collaborative dialogues on video footages of their own guidance conversations have potential to initiate critical reflexivity because they illuminate tensions between what they anticipated would happen and what actually takes place.

References


