

## **Making room for new traditions: Encouraging critical reflective professional practice for tertiary education management**

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### **Abstract**

We argue that a critical reflective professional practice is a necessary skill for tertiary education managers working in the knowledge-intensive enterprises of the tertiary education sector today. This is because a critical reflective professional practice is a useful sensemaking frame with which to address complexities and contestations of our everyday work. Indeed, Baker and Kolb (1993) regard such 'inside-out' perspectives as being highly "effective in valuing diversity and plurality in organisations" (p 26).

A critical reflective practice offers a way to surface pressures and a way to examine our assumptions, as well as those of others and our organisation, about the way we do our work. In examining our professional practice and the conditions of our work it is possible to uncover limitations and possibilities, become less prone to complacency or rigidity in our thoughts and actions, and develop a greater awareness of different perspectives and possibilities through engagement with this practice. This is all the more necessary when we add accelerating rates of change, uncertainty, ambiguity and as well as highly politicised and contested spaces to the mix.

### **Keywords**

critical reflective practice; tertiary education management; professional practice; critical thinking

### **Introduction**

We argue that a critical reflective professional practice is a valuable skill for tertiary education managers to develop so that our thinking becomes more visible. Such capabilities are sought after in knowledge-intensive enterprises because they are also useful as sense-making frames with which to deal with complexities, contestations and uncertainties of everyday work of tertiary education management. Many of the challenges facing the sector at this time have their roots in likely disruptive changes as we negotiate new challenges whilst still trying to hold on to old ways of thinking. Parker (2012) sums this up very well:

The organisational forms, cultures and practices which developed over the centuries to provide university education for society's elite have been stretched and panel-beaten as far as they will go for an era of mass participation in higher education (p. 2).

Such turbulent conditions provide challenges and opportunities for tertiary education management. They call for significant investment for the development of professional and academic staff so to improve the learning metabolism (Davis, 2012 p. 101) of our institutions in response to these challenges at the very time when funding models appear to be as ‘stretched and panel-beaten’ as the organisational forms Parker names. So what, we may ask, can we do as tertiary education management professionals? We might wait until someone ‘on high’ fixes problems that we see arising from such mismatched conditions; we could despair and retreat into forms of threat rigidity that we see in politics and leadership in times of turbulence and uncertainty; or we could find ways to make a difference for ourselves and our institutions by ‘taking leadership personally’ (Davis & Macauley, 2011).

Taking leadership personally is not easy and yet, as professionals we likely already take on this mantle, what we perhaps need to work on is making this practice more intentional and public. One way to strengthen our professional practice is to consider what Baker and Kolb (1993) regard as ‘inside-out’ perspectives which are crucial for the valuing of diversity and plurality, themselves hallmarks of contemporary work within tertiary education management. We name this as developing a critical reflective professional practice for tertiary education managers. In examining our professional practice and the conditions of our work it is possible to uncover limitations and possibilities, become less prone to complacency or rigidity in our thoughts and actions, and develop a greater awareness of different perspectives and possibilities. This is all the more necessary when we add accelerating rates of change, uncertainty, ambiguity as well as highly politicised and contested spaces to the mix. Integrating critical reflection into professional practice implies ongoing examination of our assumptions as well as the assumptions underpinning organisational mindsets. It does this by making conspicuous the way in which we approach our work and the conditions of that work. It keeps our thinking flexible and allows our comprehension and intrapersonal and interpersonal management to deepen as we work with contested perspectives.

Indeed this critical reflective professional practice lies at the heart of the Emerging Leaders and Managers Programme (eLAMP) launched by the LH Martin Institute the Association for Tertiary Education Management and ATEM) in September 2012. This is a strong foundation for the program and for professional development more generally in these times given Cunliffe’s (2004) argument that leadership and management is not just about helping managers to become more effective organizational citizens but it is also about helping them to become critical thinkers and moral practitioners (p. 408).

***Our definitions of reflection: ‘reflective learning’, ‘reflection’, ‘critical reflection’ and ‘reflexivity’***

The two authors came together through similar interests in critical reflection, educational and professional practice (see for example, Moon, 2004, 2006; Davis, 2009, 2010; Davis & Macauley, 2011). However we found that our ways of describing critical reflective practice differed, and given that such ambiguity is reflected in the wider literature too, it is worth exploring more fully. Moon, for example, refers to ‘reflective learning’ as synonymous with ‘reflection’. An important element of Moon’s work is her discussion and ongoing development of a model describing depths of reflection (2004, 2006). This model uses four levels of reflection to describe a continuum that represents the deepening criticality of reflection. Davis’s notion of ‘critical reflection’ relates to these deeper levels of criticality within Moon’s framework, whilst understanding the likely journey towards these levels of critical reflective practice often begin with more descriptive levels of reflection. In using the term ‘critical reflection’ therefore, we are talking of quite deep reflection as opposed to

superficial or descriptive writing and thinking. Scholars interested in this notion of a deeper and critical engagement for reflection may just as well describe this notion as ‘reflexivity’ (Brown & Dowling, 1998; Cotter & Cullen, 2012; Cunliffe, 2004; Maclean et al., 2012; Mockler & Sachs, 2011; Shacklock & Smyth, 1998). We should say too that we understand that reflection may be represented in writing, speech, dance, action, drawings and diagrams etc, and will focus on representations of reflective practice in writing in this paper.

Moon’s depths of reflection framework emerged from considerable experience in teaching reflection in higher education to students of all ages where she observed that when students were asked to write reflectively, some immediately ‘took to it’ like the proverbial duck to water whilst others struggled. The students more likely to engage with this practice were female with diary keeping habits already established, but even then first attempts were often still quite descriptive in nature. Those less likely to engage immediately with the practice may have reflected mentally but had made no attempt to write down their thoughts. Some even feel that reflection is self indulgent. Guidance was honed over many years to help students move from writing in vaguely reflective ways which did not support good learning towards the deepening of their reflections and their capacities for deeper more profound learning. Moon’s graduated scenario exercises use example and discussion to support the deepening of reflection on the basis of this model (2004) and one of these scenario exercises features in the Emerging Leaders and Managers Program (eLAMP), section encouraging a critical reflective professional practice for tertiary education managers. This program was conceived through a joint project between the LH Martin Institute of Tertiary Education Leadership and Management and the Association for Tertiary Education Management, and began in September 2012 (see, <http://www.lhmartininstitute.edu.au/executive-education-programs/leadership-programs/85-emerging-leaders-and-managers-program> for more details about eLAMP).

The task of this paper is to discuss how critical reflective professional practice aids identity construction when ‘becoming’ a tertiary education manager and to embed what may currently be seen by some as ‘trend’ into a tradition for the tertiary education management profession. We tackle this by: exploring linkages between critical reflection and professional thought and practice and looking at how to ensure depth of reflection within the realm of critical reflective professional practice.

### **Exploring the link between critical reflection and ‘becoming’ a professional tertiary education manager**

This section addresses what we mean by the role critical reflection plays in the ‘becoming’ of professional tertiary education managers. We approach this by first stepping back to consider epistemological (ways of knowing) and related ontological (ways of being) framing that impact the ways we learn and may see our places in the world of work in tertiary education management. In this way we can build up a picture of the manner in which sophisticated thinking develops in the experiences and learning afforded in the workplace and how these mature and develop as we become more confident in our professional identities. In this way we can demonstrate the kind of cognitive progression that lifelong learning affords professional practice as well as the ability to intentionally recognise these changes in ourselves and others.

Epistemological development has been the subject of a number of studies over the last half century. The studies explored by Moon (2004, 2008) broadly indicate that there is a

developmental sequence for understanding the nature of knowledge (epistemological beliefs) and that this influences:

- the manner in which we function intellectually
- our capacity for critical thinking and critical reflection,
- our ability to understand the nature of knowledge,
- our ability to manage situations of uncertainty or ambiguity,
- our understanding of scientific endeavour,
- our developing ideas of theory and its relationship evidence.

Epistemological development affects the manner in which we understand our relationships between our role as learners and the role of those who guide or teach us. As we mature these views as tertiary education management professionals, we are likely to cycle backwards and forwards through stages of understandings about knowledge. These usually begin with the notion that learning is a process of absorbing the knowledge passed on by experts (usually designated as teachers or leaders). In turn, as managers progress their thinking, they move towards understandings that it is not likely that everyone to see the world in the same what as they do.

In order to provide a picture of epistemological development we refer to four substantial studies that broadly coincide with this picture of a continuum for epistemological development in post compulsory and adult education. We do not suggest for a minute that this development always follows a linear pattern, but rather we suggest that as we master new concepts and ideas there are pathways to deepening understandings that look familiar. Indeed we suggest that this might play out as ‘zigging and zagging’ between levels of understanding as much as following the a set linear script.

The studies we discuss may differ in the terminology they use, the populations that they researched, the research methods used, and in the number of stages they regard as fitting within this continuum, yet they all show theoretical congruence for the epistemological development we describe. These studies by Perry (1970), Belenky et al (1986), King and Kitchener (1994) and Baxter Magolda (1992, 1994, 1996) were conducted with American students, however others have confirmed resonance. Broadly all studies suggest that there are qualitative changes that occur in learners’ conceptions of knowledge. This is an important consideration for the processes of learning in the workplace as much as it is in class or professional development settings. To describe this, we chose Baxter Magolda’s (1992), terminology for description mainly because it is simpler to understand whilst at the same time acknowledging that any description of stages are at best only a linguistically convenient means of describing the processes captured in the continuum. Baxter Magolda describes the following stages as: absolute knowing; transitional knowing; independent knowing; and, contextual knowing.

In such continuum of development, learners and practitioners generally progress from ‘absolute knowing’ in which they tend to see knowledge as ‘right or wrong’, ‘black or white’ or as a series of facts that they will absorb from an expert who is the keeper of these ‘facts’. Knowledge in these terms tends to be viewed as a commodity and teaching and mentoring the process of ‘passing on this knowledge’. The ‘teacher’ in this regard is both expert and gatekeeper. As learners shift through towards the most sophisticated ‘contextual knowing’ domain they eventually come to recognise that there may be a range of perspectives on any matter, and that these might be called theories. At this stage they will also understand and assess, in a sophisticated manner, the relationships between different perspectives and relate

these to evidence, whilst at the same time recognising that the quality of this evidence also needs to be assessed. In this way managers can work with situations of uncertainty, taking appropriate measures to manage the situation in relation to their current purposes. They see their 'experts' much more as partners in the development of this knowledge. Below, we give you an outline of the four stages of epistemological development described by Baxter Magolda (1992) as well as examples of how managers may express how they come to know their world.

### ***The Stage of Absolute Knowing***

In this stage knowledge is seen as absolute, for example 'right or wrong'. This is the least developed stage in the continuum. Learners believe that absolute answers exist in all areas of knowledge. When there is uncertainty it is only because there is no access to the 'right' answers. Such learners may recognise that opinions can differ between experts but this is differences of detail, opinion or misinformation. Formal learning is seen as a matter of absorption of the knowledge of the experts. Learning methods are based on absorbing and remembering.

***Julia:** I like clear directions where my manager does not mess around giving us lots of different theories for everything, rather just tells us what we need to know and we can get on and learn it and do it.*

### ***The Transitional Stage***

There is partial certainty and partial uncertainty. Learners start to have some doubts about certainty and consider that authorities may differ in view only because the research has not yet been done. Learners see themselves as needing to understand rather than just acquire knowledge so that they may make judgements as to how best to apply it. Experts are seen as facilitating their understanding and the application of knowledge.

***Ivan:** I thought I came to eLAMP to stuff my head with what is known. Now I feel confused because there are lots of things that are not certain. I have to think about what I do with those ideas. This kind of professional development is different from what I thought.*

### ***The Independent knowing Stage***

Learners understand that there is uncertainty but they consider that to manage this, everyone should develop her/his own beliefs or opinions. This seems to be an embryonic form of the more sophisticated stage of contextual knowing. Learners now expect to have an opinion and can begin to think through issues and to express themselves. They also regard their peers as having useful contributions to make to the development of their opinions. They will look to experts to support the development of independent views, providing a context for exploration. However "In the excitement over independent thinking, the idea of judging some perspectives as better or worse is overlooked" (Baxter Magolda 1992:55).

***Ella:** I used to think that everything was so certain—like there was a right answer for everything and what was not right was wrong. Now I have become more aware contested spaces of work where people argue and debate over issues. I suppose it is a matter of coming to your own conclusions and sticking to those.*

### ***The Stage of Contextual knowing***

This stage is one in which knowledge is understood to be constructed, and the way in which knowledge is constructed is understood in relation to the consideration of the quality of knowledge claims and the context in which they are made are taken into account. Opinions are now be supported by evidence. The view of the expert is of a partner in the development of appropriate knowledge or ways of thinking.

***Krishna:** The Manager I have now would have driven me mad last year. In meetings he just sits there and says ‘OK, what do you think about this dilemma or that?’ Then he goes quiet and we discuss it. Then he will make the odd remark, throw in a question and this usually sets us off again. I jot down some notes so that I take everything into consideration when I have to write it all up and when I write it up, I consider what everyone else has said.*

In later work, Baxter Magolda (1996) suggested that learners progress their understanding of knowledge when they are challenged and in situations where they need to exercise independent judgements. Whilst this admittedly hard work, given only four of the undergraduates in Baxter Magolda’s original study actually reached the stage identified as contextual knowing, this is the aspiration we have for tertiary education management professional practice. This level of knowing the world, we suggest, is the goal and critical reflective practice the means for managers wanting to mature their professional practice to match the conditions of our work today. This is because much of the thinking that underpinned 20<sup>th</sup> century epistemologies functioned with absolutist conceptions of knowledge. Whilst this might provide a degree of comfort, absolutist conceptions are ill-equipped for the complexities, ambiguities and turbulence that frame our contexts of work in tertiary education management today. To reiterate our earlier statement, we acknowledge that moving through any of the stages of epistemological development may be uncomfortable, especially at the threshold periods. Indeed as we move forwards, and sometimes back, we will likely encounter challenges that not only affect our learning progress but also impacts on our identities and our ontological perspectives, in other words our way of ‘being’ in the world.

### ***An ontology of becoming...***

Whilst epistemology considers our ‘ways of knowing the world’, the realm of ontology considers our ‘ways of being in the world’ and these perspectives are closely connected. Indeed, our ways of knowing the world are deeply entwined with our concepts of identity and how we ‘are’ in the world. We are encouraging managers to consider these understandings of self for their professional practice. This work is necessary for use to be able to embed a tradition of a critical reflective professional practice for tertiary education management. Within the field of tertiary education management, an emphasis on ‘becoming’ and the relentless effort it takes to ‘become’ is emphasised by Whitchurch’s notion of the ‘blended professional’ (Whitchurch, 2008, 2009). Indeed Whitchurch (2013) makes the following connections between ‘becoming a professional in higher education’ (p. 6) and the expectations of continuing professional development, including developing a critical reflective practice (named in her paper as reflexivity):

Upon qualification, and subject to ongoing checks by their peers, the professional has significant autonomy and judgement in the use of this knowledge in their professional practice, and would expect to update it via reflexivity and accredited development activity (p. 7).

Concerns about identity and critical reflective practice have wider support in literature in the disciplines of education and management (see for example, Gardner et al., 2001; Graham, 2009; Klein, 1998; Raelin & Coghlan, 2006; Scanlon, 2011; Schön, 1983; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002; Vu & Dall’Alba, 2011). Notably, Petriglieri (2011) considers such ‘identity workspaces’ as relevant for leadership development practices which aim to benefit individuals, organisations, and society in changed and changing times:

Alongside the acquisition of knowledge and skills, identity workspaces facilitate the revision and consolidation of individual and collective identities. They personalize and

contextualize participants' learning, inviting them to wrestle with the questions "What does leading mean to us?" and "Who am I as a leader?" Attention to both activity and identity deepens and accelerates the development of individual leaders and strengthens leadership communities within and across organizations (p.2).

A good example of a conflation of ways of knowing and ways of being happens in times of deep learning. This is often experienced at the forward edge of our capabilities as we transcend by way of 'learning leaps' and cross "transformative, integrative, bounded and troublesome conceptual thresholds" (Wisker et al., 2010, p. 5). These are the 'aha' moments where it becomes quite clear that we cannot now 'unknow' what we have just learnt about ourselves and/or our subject matter; thus we can never 'be' the same as before this event. Vu and Dall'Alba (2011) regard this often uncomfortable step as authentic learning on the way to becoming an authentic professional:

We do not become authentic only by chance, we can become authentic by choice; such as when we take responsibility for shaping our lives by challenging assumptions and renewing routinised ways of understanding or doing things (p. 100).

Next we link these theories of epistemological development and the ontology of becoming with critical reflective practice. Moon argues in her books on reflective learning (2004) and more strongly in a later book on critical thinking (2008), that the capacity for learners to progress to more sophisticated stages of thinking, requires the ability to reflect and to think critically at depth. Equally we suggest that it is unlikely that a learner could become adept at deep reflection and critical reflection unless she works from a contextual knowing view of the world. We explore in greater detail our concept of depth in reflection in the next section.

### **Ensuring depth of reflection within the realm of critical reflective practice**

There is a reciprocal relationship between critical thinking and epistemological development and work on one supports the development of the other. From the previous section, therefore, we can start by saying that situations that demand independent judgements enhance both. The capacity to make responsible independent judgements may likewise epitomise good professional practice. But there are earlier stages in professional education than this. How can we help managers to engage in helpful critical reflection so they may move towards effective judgement-making? We observed earlier that there is a difficult shift for many learners from superficial descriptive reflection to deep reflection. Many teachers resort to one or other of the multitude of models of reflection in order to try to teach students how to reflect effectively. This sort of method often seems to us like recipe book following. Learners are asked to answer one question then another then another and they end up with a somewhat dependent question and answer task rather than learning how to use reflection as a general habit of the workplace. We return now to look in greater detail at Moon's 'graduated scenario' exercises that were briefly mentioned earlier in the paper.

The design of the exercises is based on three principles. The first is that trying to 'tell' a learner how to write reflectively is unlikely to work. In what language do we describe this essentially constructed term 'critical reflection'? Indeed definitions given in the literature will not show a learner how to reflect. The second principle is that an important source for learning is learning from examples. And the third principle is that we learn from discussion, from hearing what others say and how we respond to their ideas. Therefore these 'graduated scenario' exercises consist of three or four accounts of an incident to be explored by the learners. Some of the examples of changes from superficial to deep reflection used in these exercise include:

- The text moves from description to reflective writing;
- There is a shift from no questions asked, to questions asked but with no attempt at response, to a responding to questions within the text (the questions are not necessarily overt);
- The emotional influences are recognised, and then handled increasingly effectively
- there is a ‘standing back from the event’ whilst at the same time a deepening realisation of the part we have played in the event
- there is a shift from acceptance of the narrative to a self questioning and challenge to personal ideas and assumptions
- There is a shift towards recognition of the relevance of prior experience
- Others’ views are taken into account for further reflection
- There is increasing metacognition (ie a review of own reflective thinking processes)

As our own reflective practices deepen they move into the realms of critical reflection, otherwise called reflexivity. Once these practices become intentional they become part of our professional practice, as much as our own personal development. We expect the critical reflective practice for the tertiary education management profession itself will naturally flow from the joining up of these maturing insights by tertiary education management professionals who individually commit to this practice. We will then see the benefits of this in the quality of our interactions with the self and with others and this will naturally mature our aspirations for what is possible for our profession.

## **Conclusion**

Our discussion in this paper has been based on an understanding of professionalism as a particular quality of thinking that arises through education and experience which can be then called upon to make independent judgements within professional contexts. We argued that developing a critical reflective professional practice is an intentional means of mitigating some of the complexities, uncertainties, turbulence and contestations that we encounter as part of our everyday work as tertiary education managers today. Within the Emerging Leaders and Managers Program (eLAMP), as in this paper, we have not only outlined a proposition as to why a critical reflective practice is important to individuals in the sector but as an aspiration for us all as the tertiary education management profession itself matures. More importantly, within eLAMP, contextual professional development opportunities, within a safe environment, have been provided to consider questions of identity and practice by integrating reflective questions throughout the program. This patterning is an important step for embedding an intentional critical reflection into practice—because all good practices take practice. In this way developing a critical reflective professional practice signals a commitment to ‘becoming’ and identifying as a professional which in turn connotes an understanding of ‘how we are’ in the world as much as how or what we know. It’s all connected and we are ever at the centre of it, as Scanlon (2011) suggests:

There is then no one response to the question of how one becomes a professional; so there is no conclusion to the discussion. It is important, however, to keep asking the question because it seems to us that knowing where we are going is partly dependent on where we have been. Knowing the origins of professional claims as expressed in the professional essence gives our professional journey a place to begin and a context for lifelong reflexive practice ( p. 246).



## Biographical note/s

Dr Heather Davis is an ATEM Fellow and responsible for the delivery of the Emerging Leaders and Managers Program as part of her role at the LH Martin Institute. She has a background in research management, lecturing, adult education, e-learning and librarianship and her research interests are in leadership development for changed and changing times.

Dr Jenny Moon works in the Centre for Excellence in Media Practice at Bournemouth University in the UK. She is the author of nine books on the topics of reflective learning, critical thinking, the use of learning journals, academic assertiveness and the role of story in higher education. She runs workshops in the UK and elsewhere mainly on the topics she has explored in the books.

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