CRITICAL REFLEXIVITY AS A TOOL FOR ADDRESSING INEQUITIES IN EDUCATION AND BEYOND

Eden Rivera, Langan Courtney, & Heidi Bloom
International Education Policy, College of Education, University of Maryland (USA)

Abstract

Society, perhaps more than ever, is open to disrupting racist, colonial, and oppressive policies and systems. Engaging critical reflexivity (CR) in education spaces is one potential way to move this work forward. CR is "an 'unsettling' of the basic assumptions, discourse, and practices used in describing reality" (Pollner, 1991, p. 370). It involves examining assumptions underlying our actions and examining how these assumptions and related actions influence meaning and contribute to creating, sustaining, and/or transforming "realities" and ourselves (Cunliffe, 2020, p. 3). CR can expose contradictions, uncertainties, and possibilities within ourselves and in relation to the world around us (Cunliffe, 2020) while also enhancing our ability to explore positionality and power dynamics.
The purpose of this workshop is to engage with CR as an intervention to deconstruct the existing power hierarchies in one's work environment, education, and knowledge base. CR is a potential tool to help educators foster inclusive, equitable, and safe learning environments for their students. This session will provide a safe space to engage with CR and to work toward addressing the disconnect between "talk" and "application" in education, with an aim of bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Keywords: Critical reflexivity, education, positionality, social justice.

1. Introduction

Educators, like anyone, have inherent biases that shape their approach to life. These biases can have far-reaching implications, not only on the lives of their students but also for society as a whole. Critical reflexivity (CR) is a practice of examining assumptions, biases, and inequalities that underlie our thoughts and actions. CR is a powerful tool that requires a rigorous examination of one's identities and privileges and how social, cultural, and historical influences have shaped these. A key aim of CR is to challenge existing power relations and to contribute to dismantling systems and institutions that perpetuate inequities. Therefore, incorporating CR into educational spaces can enable educators to examine their biases and challenge existing educational inequities–as well as support students to do the same. Actively engaging in CR holds the potential to foster a more equitable and inclusive educational environment that supports positive societal transformation. The objectives of this workshop are twofold: firstly, to provide participants with an understanding of the key tenets of CR, and secondly, to provide participants with the opportunity to explore CR in relation to their individual contexts.

2. Literature review

From the humanities and social sciences - especially education - to business and STEM fields, this increased attention on reflexivity mirrors the ongoing social justice movements and critical awareness that has dominated these times (Cunliffe, 2020). The significance of reflexivity in academia and practice can be traced back to earlier discussions on reflection. Stemming from John Dewey's (1997) reflexive practice to Donald Schön's (1992) theory on reflection, then Melvin Pollner's (1991) radical reflexivity and Ann Cunliffe's (2004) critical reflexivity; the evolution of reflexivity, with roots in reflection, has progressed to incorporate more critical components.

Dewey defined reflection as "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" and recalls earlier philosophers and enlightened thinkers who began to focus on the individual and the self in relation to the world (Dewey 1997, p. 6). Taking inspiration from Dewey, Donald Schön's work theorized reflection in two parts: "in action [...] reflection that occurs whilst a problem is being addressed" with 'on action' which "takes place after an event" occurs and the way in which it is processed and understood

(Stîngu, 2012, p. 617). Both Dewey and Schön are credited as setting a foundation for reflection and reflexive practices.

Shifting from reflection to reflexivity, Pollner made a call to those in ethnomethodology to revive the practice of radical reflexivity to promote "'unsettling [...] an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality" (1991, p. 370). Pollner's work highlighted the need for critical reflexivity to further complicate the discourse around reflexivity. Expanding on Pollner's work, Cunliffe has continued to push for critical reflexivity as a practice in various sectors, including education. Cunliffe's (2020) article provides a concise guide for practitioners on how to utilize critical reflexivity, including approaches to developing critically reflexive activities for students. Influenced by Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy, which emphasizes the importance of critical reflexivity in education, Cunliffe (2004) attempts to tie Freire's ideas "with social constructionist conceptions of reality" to foster "critical thinkers" and "moral practitioners" (pp. 409-410). Like Pollner, Cunliffe highlights why CR is necessary to challenge our assumptions by exposing restrictions as well as probabilities; checking our biases to break out of traditional forms of thinking and doing; expanding our understanding and acceptance of various perspectives that disrupt the antiquated forms of knowledge production (2020, p. 408). Engaging in this work can promote students, practitioners, and educators alike to take ownership of their privilege and positionality as it relates to their work and society.

Over the years, concerns, and critiques about the limitations of self-reflection and reflexive practices in general have been discussed; opening the door for more critical application. Reflection, as a whole, has been seen as "too big, too vague, and too general for everyday application" (Korthagen & Wubbels, 1995, p. 53 as cited in Stîngu, 2012, p. 619). Stîngu and other scholars have cautioned against overusing reflection or reflective practices especially in teacher training, where there is a likelihood that individuals may not have the capacity to decenter themselves in the process to fully commit to critically analyze their assumptions and biases (Brockbank & McGill, 1998 as cited in Stîngu, 2012 p. 610). Lastly, Olmos-Vega et al. (2023) noted that reflexivity can be seen as narcissistic, as privilege, and as a never-ending process, which provides further evidence for a strong need for a more critical perspective (p. 248).

Furthermore, while much scholarship highlights the potential benefits of *critical reflexivity* specifically, there are concerns and critiques with this practice. Two areas of critique are particularly relevant to this conference workshop. The first is the difficulty of bridging theory and practice. Patricia Alexander (2017) underscores that despite the many benefits of reflexive practices, there is considerable confusion and ambiguity surrounding definitions, strategies for implementation, and criteria for evaluating effectiveness. The second critique, which has been shared by various scholars and thinkers, posits that CR as a concept and practice is a western construct that both reflects and promotes western cultural perspectives. This critique questions the relevance and applicability of CR in non-western contexts, the extent to which CR prioritizes individualism vs. collectivism, and the extent to which CR instills additional norms and values that are western-centric in nature.

3. Critical reflexivity as a tool for transformation

Critical reflexivity in educational settings has the capacity to encourage individual and societal change, as it promotes action-oriented critical thinking and introspection. It involves examining assumptions underlying our actions and examining how these assumptions and related actions influence meaning and contribute to creating, sustaining, and/or transforming "realities" and ourselves (Cunliffe, 2020). CR can expose contradictions, uncertainties, and possibilities within ourselves and the broader world (ibid, 2020) while also enhancing our ability to deeply explore positionality and related power dynamics (Alcott, 1988; Maher & Tetreault, 1993; Hooks, 1981). Specifically, CR can support: a) increased self-awareness and deeper understanding of one's positionality through rigorous examination of one's identities and related privileges and marginalizations in the context of the larger social, cultural, and historical forces that shape them; b) challenging of power structures through an intentional examination of power relations between individuals and within society at large, and c) a deep focus on systems aimed at examining, challenging, and potentially transforming–or dismantling–systems and institutions that perpetuate injustice and inequity in various ways.

CR alone cannot galvanize broad societal transformation, but it can be a vital aspect of this work in certain contexts. Through engaging in an intentional process to 'unsettle' our ways of thinking, question our assumptions and ways of knowing and being, and examine systems more deeply, we can contribute to individual and collective transformational efforts on multiple fronts.

4. Engaging with critical reflexivity and workshop format

CR involves actively questioning and challenging biases and inequitable practices. Below are a few examples of how to apply CR to educational contexts:

1. Examine course materials: Engaging CR to examine course materials and syllabi can ensure classes incorporate diverse perspectives and do not reinforce inequitable power structures or reproduce harmful stereotypes.
2. Reflect on teaching practices: Educators can use CR to: a) better understand potentially harmful language or facilitation styles; b) examine their approach to summative and formative student assessments, creating more equitable practices in measuring student learning; c) support students' capacities to develop their own CR practices through an explicit focus on the benefits of engaging CR as well as the inclusion of regular opportunities for students to actively engage in CR in their academic journey.
3. Challenge policies that uphold inequities: CR can be a tool to delve into a critical analysis of policies that allow inequities to persist and identify approaches to challenging these policies.
4. Engage in antiracist work: Through the ongoing engagement of critical reflexivity, educators can identify and counter inherent biases, working toward being anti-racist.

This workshop will begin with a brief presentation that outlines the key approaches to CR in education. The presenters will then provide case studies that highlight the practical application of CR in real-world situations. These examples will be used to stimulate discussion and encourage participants to identify ways they can adapt these approaches to their own contexts. The workshop's main focus is an interactive portion, during which participants will collaborate with their peers and explore how they can further apply CR in their own lives and professional contexts.

5. Conclusions

In Conclusion, critical reflexivity is a powerful tool that can support educators to examine their biases and challenge existing educational inequities. While not without limitations or shortcomings, it can provide opportunities to challenge assumptions, expose inequities, understand multiple perspectives, and ultimately work toward positive societal transformation. By effectively and consistently engaging with CR, educators can take responsibility for their privilege and positionality, better identify and critically examine inequitable educational policies and practices, and work toward dismantling them. CR focuses social justice work through an essential combination of inward and outward focus, with the goal of action.

References

Alcott, L. (1988). Cultural feminism versus post-structuralism: The identity crisis in feminist theory. *Signs, 13*(3), 405-436.

Alexander, P. (2017). Reflection and reflexivity in practice vs. in theory: Challenges of conceptualization, complexity, and competence. *Educational Psychologist, 52*(4), 307-314.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2004). On becoming a critically reflexive practitioner. *Journal of Management Education, 28*(4), 407-426.

Cunliffe, A. L. (2020). Reflexivity in teaching and researching organizational studies. *RAE - Revista de Administração de Empresas (Journal of Business Management), 28*(4), 64-69.

Dewey, J. (1997). *How We Think.* Mineola, N.Y. Dover Publications.

Hooks, B. (1981). *Ain't I a Woman: Black women and feminism* (12th print). Boston, MA: South End Press.

Maher, F. A., & Tetreault, M. K. (1993). Frames of Positionality: Constructing Meaningful Dialogues About Gender and Race. *Anthropological Quarterly, 66*(3), 118-126.

Misawa, M. (2010). Queer Race Pedagogy for Educators in Higher Education: Dealing with Power Dynamics and Positionality of LGBTQ Students of Color. *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy, 3*(1), 26-35.

Olmos-Vega, F. M., Stalmeijer, R. E., Varpio, L., & Kahlke, R. (2023). A practical guide to reflexivity in qualitative research: AMEE Guide No. 149. *Medical Teacher, 45*(3), 241-251.

Pollner, M. (1991). Left of Ethnomethodology: The Rise and Decline of Radical Reflexivity. *American Sociological Review*, *56*(3), 370-380.

Schön, D. A. (1992). *The Reflective Practitioner: How professionals think in action.* London. Routledge.

Stîngu, M. M. (2012). Reflexive practice in teacher education: facts and trends. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences, 33,* 617-621.