

Reflexivity and educational professions

Professioni educative e riflessività

Maura Striano

Ordinaria di Pedagogia Generale e Sociale/Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II

abstract

The reflective paradigm in educational research has been mainly inspired by two parallel approaches: a pragmatist approach-developed on the basis of Dewey's idea or reflective thinking and Schön's notion of reflection in action-as well as on an approach inspired to Critical Theory, with particular attention to the work of Habermas and his analysis of the relationship between knowledge and interest. The two approaches have been often contrasted and not explored within a continuum which has determined an impasse in the exploration of educational agency. In order to overcome this impasse, it is useful to refer to a perspective internal to educational practices, aimed at highlighting their complex phenomenology. This leads us in identifying the different forms of intentionality as well as the structural dynamics that shape educational practices as specific forms of social agency inscribed within educational systems, and explored focusing on the forms of reflexivity imbedded within those systems.

Keywords: *reflection, reflectivity, reflexivity*

Il paradigma riflessivo nella ricerca educativa è stato ispirato sostanzialmente da due approcci paralleli: un approccio pragmatista, sviluppato sulla base della idea deweyana di pensiero riflessivo e della nozione di riflessione nel corso dell'azione elaborata da Schön ed un approccio ispirato alla Teoria Critica, con particolare attenzione al pensiero di Habermas ed alla sua analisi della relazione intercorrente tra conoscenza ed interesse. I due approcci sono stati frequentemente contrapposti e non esplorati all'interno di un continuum, il che ha determinato un'impasse nell'esplorazione dell'agire educativo. Per superare questo impasse, è utile fare riferimento ad una prospettiva interna alle pratiche educative finalizzata ad illuminare la loro complessa fenomenologia. Ciò ci conduce ad identificare le differenti forme di intenzionalità insieme alle dinamiche strutturali che danno forma alle pratiche educative, considerate come peculiari forme di azione sociale inscritte all'interno dei sistemi educativi ed esplorate focalizzandosi sulle forme di riflessività situate all'interno di questi sistemi.

Parole chiave: riflessione, pensiero riflessivo, riflessività

Reflexivity and educational professions

1. The reflective paradigm and its dicotomies in contemporary debate

In the last thirty years the reflective paradigm has been a strong reference in contemporary epistemological debate regarding educational practices and professionals.

Within this paradigm, the terms “reflection” and “reflectivity” have been understood in various different terms, according essentially to two approaches and perspectives.

According to an approach grounded in the pragmatist tradition, reflection is essentially a form of thinking which emerges from within human experience and helps in detecting problematic issues, formulating problems, identifying and testing hypothesis, defining outcomes and organizing funds of knowledge; moreover, this form of thinking leads us to connect previous and further experiences in a continuous chain, and to identify further and even long term consequences and outcomes of our actions and thoughts.

Reflection or “reflective thinking” as Dewey defines it, is the main tool that supports scientific inquiry and its structure models a method for the individual and collective exploration of human experiences; reflective thinking it is also a tool for ethical inquiry, as it grounds “reflective morality” which is a “habit of examination and judgment, of keeping the mind open, sensitive, to the defects and the excellences of the existing social order” and, at the same time, to “one’s own behavior in relation to the existing order” (J. Dewey, *Ethics*, MW.5, 1908, p. 169).

Rodgers has distilled four criteria that characterize Dewey’s notion of reflection and the purpose he felt it served identifying it as: “a meaning making process” that moves us from one experience into the next with deeper understanding of its relationships with and connections to other experiences and ideas”; “a means of essentially moral ends”; “a systematic rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry”; a process that “needs to happen in community, in interaction with others”

and that “requires attitudes that value the personal and intellectual growth of oneself and of others” (Rodgers, 2002, p. 845).

Within this framework, reflection is therefore a “transactional” thinking process emerging from contextual situations and engaging multiple actors in a process of joint inquiry which produces new understandings, and sustains individual and collective agency and practice.

Along this line, Schön (1993) has explored the implications of the use of reflective thinking within the context of professional practice in general and in educational practice in particular, and has highlighted how reflection is an essential element of professional agency, as it grounds the possibility of making meaning of professional actions while they occur and unfold.

The idea of “reflection in action” helps us in looking at educational agency as an experiential continuum sustained by a process of exploration aimed at clarifying and understanding events, occurrences and situations and at focusing on its own ethical implications, taking into account its reference to the contexts as well its consequences and outcomes.

This approach has been very influential in contemporary educational discourse, and has oriented the focus of educational research on the complex and undetermined dimension of educational practices, in order to identify and sustain the emergence of reflective processes within them, while not taking into account other kinds of related issues (such as for example issues of legitimacy, power, recognition...).

According to an approach referred to the Critical Theory (and in particular to Habermas’ analysis of the relationship between knowledge and interest in scientific inquiry as well to his theory of communicative agency) reflection is, instead intended as a process sustained by forms of critical judgement, that help us in identifying the cultural and social implicit and hidden constraints of any form of social agency, as well as the underlying practical interests that orient the processes of inquiry and knowledge construction within our practices.

Habermas’ articulation of the different interests and relative forms or rationality sustaining the processes of scientific inquiry and knowledge has guided Van Manen in outlining different levels of reflectivity of deliberative rationality, associated with corresponding interpretations of the practical within educational contexts.

Within this framework at a first level the practical is concerned mainly with means rather than ends; accordingly educators are forced into adopting an attitude that embraces these principles as the criteria for practical action but “when the nature of this constraint is recognized, the need for a higher level of deliberative rationality becomes apparent”; on this sec-

ond, higher level of reflectivity “it is assumed that every educational choice is based on a value commitment to some interpretive framework” and, accordingly, “the practical then refers to the process of analyzing and clarifying individual and cultural experiences, meanings, perceptions, assumptions, prejudices, and presuppositions, for the purpose of orienting practical actions” (Van Manen, 1977, p. 226).

At this level of the practical, the focus is on an interpretive understanding both of the nature and quality of educational experience, and of practical choices.

Nonetheless, in order to deliberate the worth of educational goals and experiences, a still higher level of reflective rationality is needed.

Therefore “It is on this highest level of deliberative rationality that the practical assumes its classical politico-ethical meaning of social wisdom” involving “a constant critique of domination, of institutions, and of repressive forms of authority” (ivi, p. 227).

Gu-Ze’ev, Masschelein & Blake have offered an analysis of the two approaches above described, contrasting them by using the term ‘reflectivity’ to identify the Deweyan approach which, according to the authors “represents the hegemonic realm of self-evidence and the productive violence of social and cultural order” and the term “reflection” to identify the critical theory approach, which “aims to challenge the supposedly self-evident and the present order of things” (Gu-Ze’ev, Masschelein, Blake, 2001).

The authors claim that within the framework of what they define “normalizing education” there is no room for reflection, but only for reflectivity; reflection can therefore occasionally emerge only in contexts and situations of “counter education”.

If reflectivity, intended according to the pragmatist tradition, as a process of inquiry (with deep ethical implications) aimed at making meaning of educational experiences is the reference for the definition of a reflective epistemology of educational practices, critical reflection is the matrix that shapes emancipatory and transformative processes.

Within this analysis reflectivity could not play any possible role in promoting change from the inside of the educational systems, understood as “normalizing” structures; moreover, the exercise of reflective thinking, in the form of “reflective morality” would not have any ethical and moral outcomes since it is not transcendently oriented according to a critical frame of reference.

On the other end, reflection aims at transcendence and represents a moral commitment in respect of the “otherness of the Other”, which “power relations in every realm of self-evidence oblige us to neglect, to destroy or consume” [...].

Indeed a radical opposition and separation of the two approaches in these terms is not useful in understanding the emergence of reflective processes and practices within the educational contexts according to different interests, motives and needs and to analyse their unfolding, taking into account the complexity and continuity of educational experiences.

In order to overcome the *empasse* determined by a dicotomic understanding of the two approaches (which should, instead be considered as referring to two different educational dimensions) an epistemic move is required, which would position us inside the complex phenomenology of educational agency and practice.

It is within this context that reflective processes may emerge and unfold according to different patterns and can, therefore, be explored and analysed through a contextual and situational frame of reference, which will allow us to identify the dimensions that ground and shape them in different forms and at different levels.

Integrating a phenomenological and a structuralist approach, we will eventually come to an epistemological reframing of the notions of reflectivity and reflection the basis of an exploration of their generative ground, focusing on the intentional and structural dimensions of educational agency.

Within this framework, the notion of reflexivity intended as the basic condition that allows the emergence of reflective processes will finally help us in highlighting the different the different functions that they perform within educational contexts.

2. The complex phenomenology of educational agency and practice

Grounded in what Husserl defines “Lebenswelt” (a world made of intentional acts, objects and contents which always refer to a subjective consciousness), educational agency and practices are, indeed, characterized by a complex phenomenology, which calls for a pedagogical approach aimed at highlighting the constitutive referentiality and directedness imbedded within them, including the pre-cognitive and pre-logical elements characterizing their background.

In order to have a full understanding and control of their development and their outcomes we should, therefore, explore the different forms of intentionality that inspire, motivate and sustain them.

This requires to engage educational agents in forms of reflexivity that relate individual and collective consciousness to self consciousness and create the conditions to explore the intentional elements characterizing and defining educational agency within a specific context.

According to Husserl, intentionality should be analyzed in terms of three central ideas: intentional acts, intentional objects and intentional content.

While the intentional act is the particular kind of mental event (perceiving, believing, evaluating, remembering...) occurring within a specific situation, the intentional object is what the act is referred to.

As there are different ways to refer to an object, any correlation occurring among an intentional act and object is framed by an intentional content which defines the position of the agent, the approach and perspective used in the engagement with the object, the meaning emerging from the engagement itself.

If we analyze educational agency and practices focusing on their phenomenology, we should therefore primarily identify the intentional acts, objects and contents that form them as a complex whole by directly engaging the different agents implied, through different degrees of consciousness and self-consciousness.

Educational agents are therefore reflexively engaged in the exploration of their observations, perceptions, representations of educational events, facts, situations focusing on the ways they frame and understand them, but also on the cultural and pre-cognitive elements that somehow determine those intentional contents.

With reference to educational practices an intentional act could be, for example, defining an educational objective such as “developing self awareness” (which becomes, indeed an intentional object) and the relative intentional content is related to what “self awareness” stands within a specific educational framework (awareness of one’s own emotions and feelings; awareness of one’s own cognitive moves in a metacognitive perspective; awareness of one’s beliefs and representations, according to a critical and reflective perspective...) and within a specific cultural and social context.

In a normalizing context within which education is understood as a process of inculturation into shared customs, mores and traditions, self awareness could be understood in terms of self control and self regulation in order to conform to specific patterns, and this vision would have an impact on the planning and organization of educational actions and practices in a conformative fashion.

On the other side, in a context within which education is understood as a process sustaining individual and collective growth, self awareness could be understood in terms of self exploration, self-determination and self-understanding, and this vision would frame educational experiences and activities according to an inquiring and reflective pattern.

Understandings, representations, visions are the pre-cognitive elements that ground and frame the different forms of intentionality embedded within educational agency and practices, and should therefore be explored in depth in order to value their influence on educational processes through various forms of reflection and related forms of rationality.

Moreover, as it is always inscribed within a cultural and social texture, educational agency should be seen as inherently social, and therefore understood as a particular form of social agency.

Within this framework, the notion of reflection defined by Bourdieu could be useful in providing a deeper understanding of the nature and structure of educational agency.

Bourdieu focuses on the reflective relationship between the social agent, who acts according to the “logic of practice” performed in the context of habitus, situation, or embodiment and the observer, who is constantly engaged in a process based on the logic of reflection, useful to highlight the hidden patterns of routinary practices.

The repetition of experiences and behaviours enables social agents to progressively gain an inclination to act, to express, or to think in a specific way, which eventually becomes an habitus.

This is the primary source of thoughts, perceptions, expressions and actions, which are always conditioned by the historical and social bases of their production.

Habitus indeed is the matrix of schemes of perception, as well as the “generative grammar of practices”, which are therefore performed on the ground of possessed predispositions, unconsciously operationalized.

All these elements require to be explored in depth in order to gain a deep understanding of the underlying intentionalities in educational agency, and here is when reflection comes to the scene allowing the educational agents to identify the generative elements of their practices and therefore to modify and revise them.

3. The ecology of educational reflective practice between agency and structure

In the same line Giddens distinguishes “discursive consciousness” and “practical consciousness”.

“Practical consciousness” lies both in the unconscious as well as the non-conscious knowledge about social rules, which enables social actors to manage social relationships and engage social actions without reflecting on their motives and implications.

Both “discursive consciousness” and “practical consciousness” lead social actors to the use of “mechanisms of retrospection, which operate in the settings of action” and keep them “in contact with the fundamental reasons of their activities” but it’s the actors’ capacity not only to be aware of, but to reflect on the motives of their own actions and to share them with the others that paves the way for the emergence of “discursive consciousness”.

Giddens’s notion of “discursive consciousness” is grounded in a theory of structuration, which sees social life as an interplay of agency and structure and is extremely useful in understanding educational practices focusing on the structural elements that constrain them, and on the reflective role of educational agents, and highlights the situativeness of educational agency and practices.

This structural approach is extremely useful in identifying the degrees of structural distance in space and time between the educational practitioners and the professional situation in which they work, and helps us in framing educational practice focusing on its situatedness.

According to Giddens *structures* are “rules and resources” (Giddens, 1979:64) according to which we understand how things should be done drawing on “authoritative” and “allocative” resources.

Whereas “authoritative resources” are the roles and functions played by the different agent in a specific institution, organization or situation, “allocative resources” are those available in a specific contextual configuration and arranged in order to perform a specific practice.

Structures are organized in form of “mutual knowledge” which is taken for granted knowledge about how to act and which resources make use of, which persist among diverse groups of people and are lodged in agents’ heads in ‘memory traces’.

Our practices are organized around those understandings as well as the capabilities that support those understandings; accordingly, most of educational practices take place at the level of practical consciousness, where professionals just act referring to predetermined structures.

Educational institutions are structurally made of practices, which have become routinized, carried out across time and space by a number of different agents who keep on repeating those practices over and over again.

The structures imbedded in the educational institutions have a double function: they are the outcomes of the practices which have previously been performed, and are the ground of further practices to be performed; a structure only exists in practices and in the memory traces in agents’ practical consciousness, and has no existence external to these.

As structures do not reproduce themselves, it is always agents and their

practices that reproduce them, depending on specific circumstances and situations.

Educational agency and practices are therefore to be understood according to a situational ecology, through which making visible the complex interplay occurring between agency and structure.

This interplay can be reflectively explored through shared forms of “discursive consciousness” that offer to educational professionals the opportunity to clarify and explore their practices, focusing on the rules they refer to as well as the resources they have access to and make use of.

Reflection is, therefore, an emerging social function shared between multiple agents who are engaged in the complex task of organizing and reconstructing their practices.

Several authors have explored educational agency and practice referring to Giddens’ structural approach, but few contribute particularly interesting for a pedagogical reflection on the role of reflexivity in the acting of educational professionals focusing both on the individual as well as on the collective dimension.

Young suggests that teacher education policies should be based on reflexive not technocratic processes of modernization (Young, 1998) that view professional educational processes as opportunities to engage as active and reflective agents in a process of continuous revision and reconstruction of the rules and resources framing educational practices, and not as processes of engagement into pre-definite structures.

Educational professionals should therefore be engaged and encouraged as reflective agents whose role is not that of reproducing existing structures (in terms of rules, roles and resource arrangements) but rather of clarifying their function within educational practices, as well as deconstructing and reconstructing these practices according to specific situational conditions and needs.

Quicke highlights how the reflexive processes require to be carried on engaging not individual professionals, but professional communities within a “framework that guarantees individual agency as well as community ‘voice’” (Quicke, 1997).

In this perspective communities of educational professionals are reflectively engaged in discursive activities, which help them in exploring and sharing the motives and reasons of individual actions and practices, by inscribing them within a collective frame of reference aimed at defining and specifying their impact and relevance within educational systems.

4. Reflection and reflexivity within educational systems

Educational practices are always inscribed within educational systems which, according to Luhmann and Schorr, are characterized by a specific form of reflexivity.

Luhmann explains how reflexivity is a defining feature of all living, psychic and social systems, which include self-referential, self-organizational, autopoietic, autonomous and interdependent boundary-establishing processes.

Reflexivity generates the conditions to generate meaningful (self-) identities and to frame the spaces of encounter, communication and discourse between self-identities as well as within and among the different systems.

Within educational systems, reflexivity works as an underlying anthropological structure which sustains learning, knowing and understanding and is articulated in different functions such as thinking, representing, acting.

Reflexivity is essential for the self control and self regulation of educational systems, in order to simplify the increasing levels of complexity that characterize educational processes.

According to this framework, reflection is to be understood as an active force that works out particular and situational cases of reflexivity, aimed at: exploring the problematic issues emerging from educational practices and processes; creating connections among different educational actions; inscribing specific educational situations and experiences within a systemic frame of reference.

In this perspective, reflection implies the positioning of an agent (playing a specific role) on a secondary level, in order to make her/him be able to look at the educational experiences identifying and specifying the elements that characterize them.

Educational agents play, therefore, an essential role within educational systems.

They can be engaged in intersubjective and intrasubjective self-referential, self-organizational processes aimed at clarifying, defining, specifying functions, roles, procedures and at identifying problematic issues related to the identity and function of the systems and of the agents operating within them.

Moreover, they are called to explore the sense and meaning of the practices they are engaged in, and to reframe them according to different meaning perspectives.

Educational systems that can continuously create and re-create them-

selves on the basis of the capacity of educational agents to think within and on educational practices and situations, to represent them and to act according to new patterns.

That's why reflection plays an important function for the "autopoiesis" of educational systems that can maintain themselves only through a continuous processes of renewal and transformation, which require a systematic and specific engagement of educational professionals.

Finally, reflection sustains the creation of multiple spaces of encounter, communication and discourse within which educational agents define their personal and professional identities in a meaningful way, through the double reference to themselves and to the others as well as to the systems they are part of.

References

- Beck U., Giddens A., Lash S. (1994). *Reflexive Modernization*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Bourdieu P. (1970). *La Reproduction. Éléments pour une théorie du système d'enseignement*, avec Jean-Claude Passeron. Paris: Minuit.
- Bourdieu P. (1992). *Réponses. Pour une anthropologie réflexive*, entretien avec Loïc J.D. Wacquant. Seuil: Libre examen.
- Dewey J. (1908). *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1991), "Ethics", MW 5.
- Dewey J. (1910). *The Collected Works of John Dewey, 1882-1953*, ed. by Jo Ann Boydston (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1967-1991), "How We Think", MW6.
- Giddens A. (1979). *Central problems in Social Theory: Action, Structure and Contradiction in Social Analysis*. Berkley: University of California Press.
- Giddens A. (1984). *The Constitution of Society Outline of the Theory of Structuration*. Cambridge: Blackwell/Polity Press.
- Giddens A. (1991). *Modernity and Self Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age*. Stanford CA: Stanford University Press.
- Gu-Ze'ev I., Masschelein J., Blake N. (2001). Reflectivity, Reflection and Counter Education. *Studies in Philosophy and Education*, 20, 2, pp. 93-106.
- Husserl E. (1928). Vorlesungen zur Phänomenologie des inneren Zeitbewusstseins. *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, 9, pp. 367-498.
- Husserl E. (1929). Formale und transzendente Logik. Versuch einer Kritik der logischen Vernunft. *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung*, 10, pp. 1-298.

- Luhman N., Schorr K.E. (1979). *Reflexions probleme im Erziehungssystem*. Stuttgart: Ernst Klett.
- Malthouse R., Roffey-Barentsen J., Watts M. (2014). Reflectivity, reflexivity and situated reflective practice. *Professional Development in Education*, 40, 4, pp. 597-609.
- Quicke J. (1997). Reflexivity, community and education for the learning society. *Curriculum Studies*, 5, 2, pp. 139-161.
- Rodgers C. (2002). Defining Reflection: Another Look at John Dewey and Reflective Thinking. *Teachers College Record*, 104, 4, pp. 842-866.
- Schön D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.
- Young M. (1998). Rethinking Teacher Education for a Global Future. Lessons from the English. *Journal of Education for Teaching*, 24, 1, pp. 51-62.
- Van Manen M. (1977). Linking Ways of Knowing with Ways of Being Practical. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 6, 3, pp. 205-228.