

## **The nature of Reflective Practice as a soft-skill: enabling a conducive T&L environment**

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### **Abstract**

*A number of recent authors (for example those featured in Beyond Reflective Practice (Bradbury et al 2010) have argued for a repositioning of Reflective Practice (RP) away from “the worst excesses of technical or instrumental view” (Zukas et al 2010, p192). In this paper I propose that RP be considered a soft-skill; that is, as a skill concerned with human feelings and emotions. In particular, I suggest that consideration of the nature of reflection, as a non-rational consciousness, provides a valuable perspective in enabling a suitable T&L environment.*

*The focus of this paper is practical methods by which a T&L environment conducive to reflective states of mind can be obtained. Techniques and approaches drawn from relaxation and self-development classes in Lifelong Learning are shown to be directly applicable and effective in a Higher Education (HE) setting.*

### **Introduction: Repositioning Reflective Practice**

In *Beyond Reflective Practice: New Approaches to Professional Lifelong Learning*, Bradbury, Zukas et al. (2010) argue that Reflective Practice (RP) is not an objective, checklist, type of subject. They highlight the subjective nature of RP and of the type of knowledge with which it is concerned. Their description of RP clearly positions it, I would argue, in the category of a soft-skill.

The phrase soft-skills can be taken to cover a wide variety of skills that are often included under headings such as ‘social skills’ and ‘personal effectiveness’ skills. Such skills are essential transferable skills in the research environment of HE, as described in the Research Development Statement (RDS), which:

Support[s] the implementation of the Concordat to Support the Career Development of Researchers, the QAA Code of practice for research degree programmes and the ‘Roberts’ recommendations for postgraduate researchers and research staff. (Downloaded from [www.vitae.ac.uk/](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/) 2.12.12)

The RDS defines core skills requirements for UK researcher training. Whilst not using the term ‘soft-skills’ as such, the RDS requires that skills training be provided in the many abilities that readily fall under a soft-skills banner. These include, for example: “Willing to give and receive constructive criticism”, “Creativity” and “Takes a creative, imaginative and inquiring approach to research. Is open to new sources of ideas.” (RDS Domains A2 and A3).

From this, by no means comprehensive list, can be identified a range of skills that complement the technical skills required of academic research and professionals in many walks of life. Rather than further categorize or define sub-divisions, it is helpful to ask 'what do these have in common'? What is it about soft-skills that sets them apart from other subjects? Such problematisation will identify the issues that affect their effective pedagogy.

These features equate to what some scholars term the 'Threshold Concepts' of the subject. An explanation of the idea behind and the value of 'Threshold Concepts' is beyond the scope of this paper. The origins of, and the more recent developments in the use of, Threshold Concepts can be found in *Overcoming Barriers to Student Understanding: Threshold Concepts and Troublesome Knowledge* by Meyer and Land (2006).

Pursuing the approach of Meyer and Land, I will thus now examine the essence of soft-skills, taking RP as an example.

### **The nature and dynamic of soft-skills**

Soft-skills, almost by definition, contain a significant element of non-rational ways of knowing: empathy for others' feelings, being able to imagine alternative perspectives of reality, for example. By their nature, these are types of thought associated with empathically knowing how another person is feeling, or creatively 'thinking outside the box'. As such they do not come from logical or rational states of mind.

Underlying my argument is the suggestion that human consciousness and human relationships are not wholly objective. In recent decades many authors have argued that, at this critical juncture in human history, it is essential that subjectivity be embraced in all areas of academic endeavour. The work of B. Alan Wallace (2000), Jorge Ferrer (2002), Paul Feyerabend (1987) and Daniel Goleman (1995, 1998, 2003, 2006) provides clear rationale for engaging with the subjective nature of human beings and thus for training in soft-skills.

Further support for this need was evident at the recent *Beyond the Field* conference (Aberystwyth, November 2012) where many authors described the challenges of research in areas involving memories, performance and strong human emotions: see, for example, Feerick in *A Political Minefield: Remembering and Articulating the German Perspective on the Holocaust in Contemporary Literature* and De Vita's *Ask the Dust. Subjectivities, historical narratives and the presence of the self in international relations*. (For a description of the conference see: <http://beyondthefieldconference.wordpress.com/> - last accessed 9.1.13)

The current paper accepts the conclusions of the above authors and focuses on the practical implications: what can be gleaned from the nature and dynamic of soft-skills that can inform their pedagogy?

I will now examine, in more detail, what I mean by soft-skills and thus identify their key features.

Andrews & Higson (2008), for example, consider it:

Possible to identify key 'transferable' soft skills and competencies integral to graduate employability. (Andrews & Higson, p413)

The skills they identify include reliability, the ability to cope with uncertainty, the capability to communicate and interact with others, either in teams or through networking and "Creativity and self-confidence" (ibid). Rather than predefined, prescribed tasks, such skills are, they argue about, being:

Able to apply theoretical and conceptual knowledge to their 'real life' business situation (Andrews & Higson 2008, p415)

Paradoxically, soft-skills are particularly desirable in the 'hard' business world, into which the graduates being taught in HE are destined: see Goleman references above. However, there is a misconception, which I highlight in this paper, that soft-skills can be treated in the same way as technical skills or factual-knowledge based subject. Central to soft-skills training is the often irrational nature and inconsistency between individuals of the human traits to which they relate.

Support for this stance can be found in Cecilia A Conrad's 1999 definition of soft-skills as:

Skills, abilities, and traits that pertain to personality, attitude, and behavior rather than to formal or technical knowledge. (Conrad 1999, p8)

This definition, whilst perhaps vague, clearly identifies human qualities as related to soft-skills rather than factual information. The few definitions that exist seem to associate soft-skills, almost by definition, with topics that are not learnt by formal instruction. In charting the early history of the use of the term, Conrad (1999) identifies another important factor:

In contrast, the application of a skill that is unequivocally soft, ... involves considerable uncertainty. (ibid)

Soft-skills are concerned with being able to respond to variability, between individuals, in human traits and emotions. Likewise human emotions vary widely from individual to individual and from circumstance to circumstance. Little, if anything, concerned with soft-skills is an exact science. The behaviour and attitudes that are at the heart of soft-skills are not readily codified. Likewise any codes proposed may be of little value in some particular circumstance since every situation is unique. A British 'stiff upper lip', for example, is by no means universal amongst British nationals. Thus, the best that training in soft-skills can provide is an awareness of the issues involved and the spread of possibilities.

That human nature is not readily amenable to codification is highlighted in the much cited *The Essential Piaget* (Piaget, J., Gruber. H.E. & Voneche. J.J. eds, 1937). In introducing Jean Piaget, often considered the originator of modern child development theory, the editors write:

In reality, however, every ego, so far from being a unity is in the highest degree a manifold world, a constellated heaven, a chaos of forms, of stages and stages, of inheritances and potentialities ... not yet a finished creation but rather a challenge of the spirit". (Piaget 1937, pxvii, quoting H. Hesse, *Steppenwolf*, 1927)

Since the aims of soft-skills is to assist in the navigation through the chaos of human potentialities, it would seem unrealistic to constrain such skills by way of rigid form, structure or definition. Yet many authors (for example Tracy M Kantrowitz's *Development and Construct Validation of a Measure of Soft Skills Performance*, 2005) attempt the codification of soft-skills. Whilst this may provide useful in distinguishing characteristics between different soft-skills, it does little to identify the underlying essence of soft-skills. On the contrary, it suggests to those learning soft-skills that they can be learnt by rote, as one would an objective academic subject. In practice, however, once the subjective, variable, non-technical nature is acknowledged then the limitation of such an approach becomes evident.

In the objectified epistemology of the late 20<sup>th</sup> and early 21<sup>st</sup> centuries, the meaning of a given thing is widely accepted as the set of words that literally describes that thing. However, one of the few statements that philosophers generally agreed upon and which William James reminds us of, is directly relevant here: "Knowledge about a thing is not the thing itself" (James 1902, p488).

Thus, to capture the essence of a situation, or of an experience, requires more than a purely rational description: it requires an engagement beyond conventional, conceptual, thought. The essence or meaning of a situation or experience, in a soft-skills context, is concerned with values such as belonging, a sense of fulfilment and worth. This includes professional experiences subject to RP where such meanings are personally felt, moment by moment. Soft-skills are related to thoughts which are beyond the purely rational. Since soft-skills knowledge needs to be felt, this means that it also needs to be experienced.

I therefore argue that a key to soft-skills training is the need to use participatory methods. Experiential teaching methods are the most effective way to convey the 'beyond the literal' essence of human beingness with which soft-skills are concerned. This is as true in business as in research:

Management is a field closely bound to professional practice, and one where knowledge is acquired based on experience. In the business world, reality is the main source of individual learning for new managers (Cano et al, 2006, quoted by Lidón, Rebollar & Møller 2011, p301)

If the above is true of soft-skills generally, it is also true of RP, As Saltier (2010) argues:

Reflective practice engages with the messiness, the unpredictability, the uncertainty of practice, focusing not on abstract theory but on the real experiences of practitioners and the skills they develop as they try to make sense of those experiences. It emphasises the expertise – the skill and artistry. (Saltier 2010, p301)

Or, the nature of soft-skills is concerned with non-rational consciousness: with that non-rational thinking which might be equated to being 'in the zone'. This, I argue is thus an ideal place for both deep reflection and a flowing performance.

'In the zone', or 'in the flow' are phrases that certain commentators might equate to a spiritual state of being. For example, in *Beyond Reflective Practice*, Cheryl Hunts suggest that RP can be usefully considered, if not a practice of spirituality, at least a practice to be undertaken spiritually. She writes about her:

Recent work on researching spirituality as a dimension of lifelong learning ...[which] suggests that, especially for people who have a 'transpersonal orientation' to their life and profession, questions about spirituality are integral to reflective practice. (Hunt 2010, p155)

Pursuing this line of thought, it is reasonable to hypothesise that spiritual practices are beneficial to obtaining a deep, reflective state of mind. One such practice is the use of Mandalas, described thus:

Mandala (Sanskrit). Magic circle. In Jung, symbol of the centre goal, or of the self (q.v.) as psychic totality; self-representation of a psychic process of centring; production of a new centre of personality. (Jung 1963, pp415-416)

These 'drawings in a circle', were used extensively by Jung and are at the heart of many global cultural tradition, including Maori, Tibetan Buddhists and Celtic. For a more comprehensive description of Mandalas see Argüelles (1972). For many years, originally in a LL setting, I have been running workshops aimed at demonstrating to students the value of Mandalas.

**Figure 1**  
Reflective Mandala Triptych  
Keith Beasley 26.11.12



In Figure 1 (above) I illustrate mandala practice by including a series of three mandalas created whilst planning this paper. The creations that arose were unplanned and the only accompanying words that seemed to fit, were the three titles. The stark contrast between the three images, *Spontaneity*, *Developed* and *Contrived* illustrates, I would suggest, features of reflection that are difficult, if not impossible, to put into words.

In essence, the act of creating a mandala (or of meditating on a pre-drawn one) is found to enable meditative or reflective states of mind. In the mandala sessions that I facilitate, I endeavour to illustrate this by enabling a participatory workshop in which each student creates their own mandala. A short video taken during such a session is available here: [www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVy1cLzX5Xc&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rVy1cLzX5Xc&feature=youtu.be) (uploaded on 5.12.12)

The sessions are highly effective in achieving the above aim with participants observed as being deeply engrossed in the creative process and their feedback indicating a high degree of immersion into a non-rational mental state during and immediately after the mandalas drawing. When asked “What did you think of the session (compared to a lecture)” they answered (for example):

*Relaxed and conducive of gnosis. Paradigm shift (Student 9)*

*Enjoyable, creatively enriching (Student 10)*

*Fascinating, uplifting, expressive (Student 11)*

Peer observations of these session (as presented in Sections 14 & 15) confirmed that the session outcomes had been met: in particular that participants will “Have experienced the process and states of mind associated with the practice of mandalas”.

Such feedback from a HE classroom situation endorses my own experiences, both personally and professionally: deep reflection is about working with a depth and awareness of aspects to work and life beyond a check-box way of thinking. Bailey (2011) and Zhu (2011) are amongst the growing number of authors who argue similarly. Likewise Hunt concludes:

To speak of spirit and/or to advocate an appreciation of *mythopoesis* and intersubjective inquiry as an element of reflective practice may well seem a step too far. Nevertheless, I believe, as the opening quotations to this chapter suggest, that it is not really necessary to 'step' anywhere - but simply to look at the landscape, and the potential, of reflective practice with new eyes. (Hunt 2010 p168)

To see, I would suggest, as in the words of *Amazing Grace* (John Newton, 1725-1807)

*I was blind but now I see*

This seeing, or knowing, is to know deeply: not through reason but through connecting into the bigger picture and being human within it. If the words used to describe something are not the actual thing then, however precise one attempts to be with words, one will always miss some critical facet of the reality one is attempting to describe. One may, however, be able to ascertain and appreciate the missing element by 'knowing it' directly through first-hand experience. Such is the essence of Martin Heidegger's 'Being' (e.g. Heidegger 1949) and Martin Buber's 'I-Thou' relationships (Buber 1937). Such concepts offer, I would suggest, useful underpinning to the teaching of deep RP and other soft-skills training. Likewise the significant volume of work on non-rational or extraordinary ways of knowing, for example Polanyi (1969) and Mayer (2007).

Terms such as 'spirituality' or 'I-Thou' might scare some practitioners. I would suggest however, that this merely emphasises that the whole essence of soft-skills is, to some individuals at least, problematic. However, to deny these aspects of soft-skills would be, as West (2010) argues of RP, to become:

Superficial and formulaic, while more holistic forms of understanding, which combine self-knowledge with critical awareness, are needed in

becoming a more creative, effective and reflexive professional. (West 2010, p66)

“Self-knowledge with critical awareness” immediately associates RP with personal development and suggests that skills required for its mastery may be found within the self-development field, rather than within hard academic epistemology. Louise Hay’s *You Can Heal Your Life* (1984) has, since its publication, consistently been amongst the best selling ‘personal development’ titles, with reflection a consistent theme. See, for example, Hay 1984, p11, p114 and p238). If RP and soft-skills can be seen as part of the self-development process, then might methods used in the teaching of self-development be of value in teaching RP and soft-skills?

### **Lessons from Lifelong Learning for self-development**

If a HE environment can place an over-emphasis on hard skills and objectivity, this is not always the case in Lifelong Learning. Throughout LL in both public and private T&L scenarios can be found a vast array of experience in techniques and skills aimed at personal self-development. In this section I will share some examples, indicating how, by respecting the nature and dynamic of soft-skills some particularly positive results can be obtained.

Soft-skills might be summed up in a question such as “How can I be humble and yet at the same time also confident?” (Rennie 2012, p4). This quote comes from an article published in *Resonance*, the journal of the UK Reiki Federation (the professional associated for practitioners and teachers of Reiki Healing). Reiki or, more correctly, the Usui System of Reiki Healing (after its founder Mikao Usui), a soft-skill which I have been teaching since 1996. It is widely acknowledged in Complementary and Alternative Medicine (CAM) as a powerful tool for personal self-development (see Beasley 2007). A second article in the same journal, for example, describes work with young offenders:

Alongside these complementary therapies Jane [the therapist] uses approaches such as: therapy through art, song, poetry and rap, hypnosis, acupressure, meditation, visualisation, self esteem building, forgiveness and moral guidance. It is the combination of these styles along with the complementary therapy techniques coupled with a traditional take on counselling that has proven so successful with the young offenders.

During the sessions, I encouraged the young people through a variety of means to discuss their feelings and their lives. They were very open and talked in detail about their families, friendships and gang culture. This enabled them to reflect on their situation and see their errors clearly. This was sometimes a painful experience but it really did help them see what went wrong and how they can change and put their lives right. (Johnston 2012, pp8-9)

Highlighted in this article are a number of features related to the teaching of soft-skills which, in my view, are transferable to any T&L scenario. Firstly, no one soft-skill or means of teaching them works on its own or for everybody: a “combination of [these] styles” and techniques is required. Secondly how this combination of approaches “enabled them to reflect on their situation and see

their errors clearly". This is an important use of the word 'reflect' that clearly establishes the link between reflective practice and personal self-development. Whilst, one would hope, professionals using RP in HE do not share the degree of problems one might find in young offenders, the potential of soft-skills (incorporating RP) to "see their errors clearly" applies to errors of many sorts and of all degrees.

That CPD and RP within HE are closely linked to personal development is clear from the RDF which states:

The RDF is a professional development framework for planning, promoting and supporting the personal, professional and career development of researchers in higher education. (Downloaded from [www.vitae.ac.uk/](http://www.vitae.ac.uk/) 2.12.12).

Rather than learn, to acquire new information, the process required of soft-skills is a willingness to change oneself. Seen in this light, the gist of RP, is not to be found in strict definitions but in its praxis: in its daily use in one's on-going activities. Likewise RP (and its T&L) requires the enabling of a receptive mental state.

### **Providing a conducive environment**

I have illustrated that soft-skills and deep reflection requires a particular state of mind: one open to new perspectives, one free from rigid or restrictive thoughts or preconceived ideas. Thus, successful training in RP, and of soft-skills generally, requires a learning environment which enables such a state of mind.

Over 14 years of developing my teaching practice in personal self-development I have studied and experienced a range of relaxation techniques and spiritual practices. Each have been found to be beneficial to some individuals and groups. The meditative state of mind enabled by these practices are now taught extensively in LL centres. Discussions on their value in personal, self and spiritual development is beyond the scope of this paper, but are well established in their respective traditions: the effectiveness of Yoga, for example, has been demonstrated by Ned Hartfiel (see Hartfiel 2010). In this paper I am exploring how these practices can migrate into a HE setting as an enabler of conducive mental states, in particular meditative or creative types of consciousness. Collier (2010), for example, suggests that RP could be:

Usefully connected to aesthetic understanding and the arts. Aesthetic consciousness requires a person, through focused contemplation to be acutely present in the moment, a quality that is also relevant to reflective thought. (Collier 2010, p154)

Obtaining such "aesthetic consciousness" is a primary aim of Reiki Healing, as discussed above. As with Mandalas, it is a technique that I have successfully migrated from LL to HE:



Introductory Reiki sessions were offered at Bangor University's *Beyond Boundaries* postgraduate conference in January 2010 and January 2011. Participants were so engaged with the experience that, at the end of the session, they were sufficiently relaxed and contented to chose to sit in silence, rather than leave the room. Figure 2 (used with consent) shows a participant deep in reflective thought. When asked to describe how they felt immediately afterwards, participants responded with phrases such as:

*Connected, unity, flow of energy,  
transported to a different place*

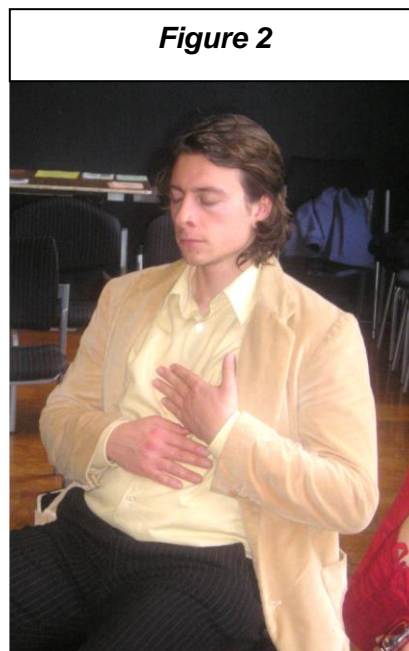
*Peaceful, empty mind.*  
(see Sections 14 &15)

Likewise during the two Mandalas session already reported in Section 3, the following are typical of the feedback provided:

*I should colour more. It helps me to  
think outside the box. The music makes  
the session (ref 8, student in  
observation Section 14))*

*Relaxed and conducive of gnosis.  
Paradigm shift. (ref 9)*

*Enjoyable, creatively enriching (ref 10)*



Yet another one says “Uncovering hidden balances” (ref 5). No less than ten of the seventeen students expressed similar sentiments indicating a significant change in the mental state to one ‘connected’ to an inner, non-rational thought process. There are clear examples, I would argue, of a deeply reflective state, and one in stark contrast to the superficiality of which RP is often accused. Likewise it is engaged participation in established relaxation techniques that enable the open-mind required for deep reflection.

### **Further work**

It is accepted that the results included in this paper demonstrate that certain participatory, meditative workshop sessions have been found to enable a relaxed, open consciousness in the participants, consistent with deep reflection. That such a state of mind can be achieved in a HE class-room setting represents, I would suggest, a significant breakthrough in the quest for meaningful ways of teaching deep RP. Clearly significant work remains to be undertaken, but working with those in LL (and elsewhere), who are already proficient in teaching, innovation, relaxation and other techniques reliant on non-rational thinking, offers significant opportunities for development of soft-skills in general and RP in particular.

## Conclusions

By considering RP as a soft-skill I have identified the essence of deep reflection as a non-rational state of mind. Methods to obtain such types of consciousness are already widely taught in LL as valuable aids to personal self-development. Given the close connection between personal development and CPD, it is concluded that such technique have an important role to play in the T&L of soft-skills, including RP.

Two particular techniques, Mandalas and Reiki healing, have been successfully introduced into a HE environment. Adopting an experiential approach to the T&L of these techniques was found to enable a state of mind conducive to deep reflection. Feedback from these sessions confirms that both Mandalas and Reiki have significant potential for aiding RP.

## Notes on contributor

As an Electronic Engineering graduate Keith Beasley worked for 17 years in micro-electronic Research & Development, becoming an acknowledged European expert on microelectronic reliability. He then retrained to become an holistic health practitioner, eventually running retreats in the Algarve (Portugal). He is now nearing completion of his PhD on 'Transcendent Thought' (see Beasley, 2013, forthcoming), at Bangor University in Wales.

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