

# ON BECOMING A CRITICALLY REFLEXIVE PRACTITIONER

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*Critically reflexive practice embraces subjective understandings of reality as a basis for thinking more critically about the impact of our assumptions, values, and actions on others. Such practice is important to management education, because it helps us understand how we constitute our realities and identities in relational ways and how we can develop more collaborative and responsive ways of managing organizations. This article offers three ways of stimulating critically reflexive practice: (a) an exercise to help students think about the socially constructed nature of reality, (b) a map to help situate reflective and reflexive practice, and (c) an outline and examples of critically reflexive journaling.*

**Keywords:** *reflexivity; social constructionism; journals; ethics*

## SETTING THE SCENE: DEFINITIONS AND REASONS

What is critically reflexive practice and why is it important to management education? Pollner (1991) defined reflexivity as “an ‘unsettling,’ i.e., an insecurity regarding the basic assumptions, discourse and practices used in describing reality” (p. 370). In practical terms, this means examining critically the assumptions underlying our actions, the impact of those actions, and from a broader perspective, what passes as good management practice. The concept of reflexivity has been debated across a variety of disciplines including sociology, the natural sciences, and psychology (e.g., Clifford, 1986; Gergen, 1994; Latour, 1988) and more recently in organization and management studies (e.g., Calás & Smircich, 1999; Chia, 1996b; Hardy & Clegg,

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1997; Weick, 1995). However, it is often difficult to translate the conceptual and theoretical aspects into practical implications for managing. In this article, I suggest that the practice of critical reflexivity is of particular importance to management education because by thinking more critically about our own assumptions and actions, we can develop more collaborative, responsive, and ethical ways of managing organizations.

If we accept that management education is not just about helping managers become more effective organizational citizens but also about helping them become critical thinkers and moral practitioners, then critical reflexivity is of particular relevance. Managers and administrators influence others—individuals, communities, societies, and the environment (Reynolds, 1999). They find themselves dealing with accelerating rates of change, uncertainty, and ambiguity and often work in politicized organizations where they have to deal with a wide variety of ethical issues. Recent scandals (e.g., Enron, WorldCom, the FBI's response to information on terrorist activity) have raised questions about the nature of ethical action and the pressures managers face when trying to act in morally responsible ways. Consequently, it is becoming more important to develop different ways of thinking, organizing, managing, and relating to people. Critically reflexive practice offers a way of surfacing these pressures by encouraging us to examine the assumptions that decisions are justified solely on the basis of efficiency and profit, that there is one rational way of managing, that maintaining current managerial practice is paramount, and that as professionals we know what is best for others. In examining these assumptions, we can uncover their limitations and possibilities, become less prone to becoming complacent or ritualistic in our thoughts and actions, and develop a greater awareness of different perspectives and possibilities and of the need to transform old ways of theorizing and managing. In this article, I explore three ways in which we can help our students become critically reflexive practitioners.

Critical reflexivity draws upon very different ways of thinking about the nature of reality as well as a different way of thinking about management learning. In particular, it means focusing on three issues:

Existential: Who am I and what kind of person do I want to be?

Relational: How do I relate to others and to the world around me?

Praxis: The need for self-conscious and ethical action based on a critical questioning of past actions and of future possibilities (Jun, 1994).

It is crucial for educators and students to recognize these issues, because otherwise critical reflexivity becomes just another technique rather than a philosophy-driven practice in which we take responsibility for creating our

social and organizational realities. In the following section, I outline the assumptions of reality underlying critical reflexivity and their impact on pedagogy and learning. In the remainder of the article, I draw on these assumptions to offer ways of helping students become critically reflexive practitioners.

#### ASSUMPTIONS UNDERLYING CRITICALLY REFLEXIVE PRACTICE: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING

The work of Paulo Freire (1972) was instrumental in drawing attention to the need for critically reflexive practice in education. He suggested that traditional pedagogies are often emphasized at the expense of critical pedagogies and that we need to redress the balance. Each draws upon different assumptions about the nature of reality and leads to a different way of teaching. Freire argued that traditional pedagogies encompass the *banking* approach to learning and assume that:

- Social reality is objective. There are things out there we act into, for example, organizational structures, norms, behaviors, and ideologies.
- Learning is a disembodied, structured, cognitive activity. In other words, learning takes place inside the head as an intellectual activity in which mind and body, intellect and emotion, thinking and acting are separate.
- We can apply knowledge to practice and use it to change situations, people, and events. We therefore teach techniques, principles, and models that can be used to align individual actions with the organizational goals of efficiency and effectiveness.

Teachers therefore deposit information with students who learn to see the world in objective ways and separate knowing and being. In practical terms, this often means teaching management and administration as a system and set of principles; as relationships involving authority, control, and accountability; as a process of making and implementing objective rational decisions; and as a concern with means rather than questioning ends. Critical thinking, as commonly defined, is also based on this idea that there is a reality out there that we can analyze in a systematic way, using established conceptual knowledge, and to which we can apply universal, rational standards (Caproni & Arias, 1997; Elder & Paul, 2001). This way of thinking still requires us to separate ourselves from reality and think about situations objectively, that is, *thinking about reality*. In essence, traditional approaches take the person and subjectivity out of management theory.

Freire (1972) suggested that a critical pedagogy is one that transforms reality and unites critical thinking and dialogue to develop a more humanistic approach to learning—one that puts a self-conscious being able to think criti-

cally about the impact of his or her actions firmly at the center of learning. I wish to develop the idea of critically reflexive practice by linking Freire's ideas with social constructionist conceptions of reality. This is particularly important because critically reflexive practitioners hold subjective understandings of reality and think about the impact of their own actions in creating reality and knowledge, that is, *thinking in realities*.

Social constructionism gained prominence with the work of Goffman (1959), Garfinkel (1967), and Berger and Luckmann (1967). Contemporary authors have assessed the implications of social constructionism for our organizational lives (e.g., Cunliffe, 2001; Gergen, 1994; Hatch 1997; McNamee & Gergen, 1999; Watson 1994; Weick, 1995). Essentially, it is based on the notion that our social realities and sense of self are created between us in our everyday interactions and conversations—through our oral and written language. This reality-constituting process is ongoing and never fully under our control, because it emerges in the spontaneous, taken-for-granted, nonverbal/verbal, subjective, un/conscious ways in which we respond, react, and negotiate meaning with others. Our knowledge of the world is also constructed through our interaction, and we make sense of what is happening around us as we interact with our surroundings (Prasad & Caproni, 1997). Knowledge is not just theory or information; it also incorporates knowing from within, a tacit practical consciousness of everyday sense making in which we implicitly know things about our surroundings (people, places, actions) and act from this (Giddens, as discussed in Pleasants, 1996; Shotter, 1993). Thus, a self-conscious person is at the center of understanding and learning; as Gouldner (1970) said, "There is no knowledge of the world that is not a knowledge of our own experience of it and in relationship to it" (p. 28).

From a social constructionist perspective, learning also becomes an embodied (whole body), responsive understanding in which we become more aware of, and skilled in, constituting and maintaining our realities and identities. In practical terms, we can equate learning with moments in which we are "struck" (Wittgenstein, 1980, p. 85) and moved to change our ways of talking and acting. Essentially, being struck involves our spontaneous response (emotional, physiological, and cognitive) to the events or relationships occurring around us. It may result from a comment, an event, a sense of unease or anxiety (Vince, 1998), or an *aha!* moment. This terminology can be very powerful in helping students recognize and work through learning opportunities. Both they, and we, use the language intuitively: "I was struck by the idea that . . ." and "What struck you about this reading?" Once students recognize that people are struck by different issues, they may become more tolerant of different perspectives, of the idea that we are each responsible for

our own learning, and of the importance of developing their own skills as critically reflexive practitioners.

To contrast these assumptions with the banking ones outlined previously:

- We construct our social realities and sense of self between us in our everyday interactions.
- We utilize taken-for-granted ways of sense making that draw on the flow of our everyday activity—a “knowing-from-within” (Shotter, 1993, p. 18) or tacit form of knowing (Polanyi, 1966). Learning is an embodied, responsive process that may arise from being struck.
- Thus, instead of applying theory to practice, critical reflexivity emphasizes praxis—questioning our own assumptions and taken-for-granted actions, thinking about where/who we are and where/who we would like to be, challenging our conceptions of reality, and exploring new possibilities.

From this perspective, teaching focuses on enabling students to think more critically about themselves, their assumptions, actions, and situations they encounter; to see multiple interpretations and constructions of reality; and to see praxis as a relational activity in which we question our actions and work with others to achieve collaborative and ethical goals (French & Grey, 1996; Giroux, 1988; Jun, 1994).

In the remainder of the article, I offer ways of teaching critical reflexivity: first by outlining a map that helps situate and define critically reflexive practice, second by helping learners grasp the underlying suppositions of intersubjective realities through a simple class activity, and third by offering excerpts from student journals to illustrate how writing can help students think in critically reflexive ways. These three practices offer ways of helping students recognize the role they play in constituting their everyday organizational realities for developing critically reflexive practice.

### **Developing Critically Reflexive Practice**

How can we help students understand the socially constructed nature of experience and the need to think and act in critically reflexive ways? We can develop critically reflexive practice by encouraging students to think about how they, with others, construct realities and identities. The suppositions and approaches to learning outlined above are complex and very different from the educational experiences of the majority of students. It is therefore important to build up to critical reflexivity and to situate it in practical circumstances. When doing so, I find it useful to introduce two ideas early in my courses (undergraduate and graduate Organizational Behavior and Organizational Change courses). I refer to Schön’s (1983) idea of “reflective practi-

tioners" before moving on to critically reflexive practice. Students also find Argyris's (1982, 1991) distinction between single- and double-loop learning useful and often refer back to his 1991 article throughout the course. They readily identify single-loop learning as reflective (problem solving, identifying, and correcting errors) and begin to think about double-loop learning (thinking more critically about behavior; questioning assumptions, values, and espoused theories; disconfirming, inventing, producing, and evaluating new theories in action) as the beginning of critical reflexivity.

Throughout the course, I try to be deliberately opportunistic and introduce critical reflexivity by asking the following questions (or different versions) at opportune moments:

- What is reality? Do we each see reality in the same way?
- What is knowledge?
- What is theory?

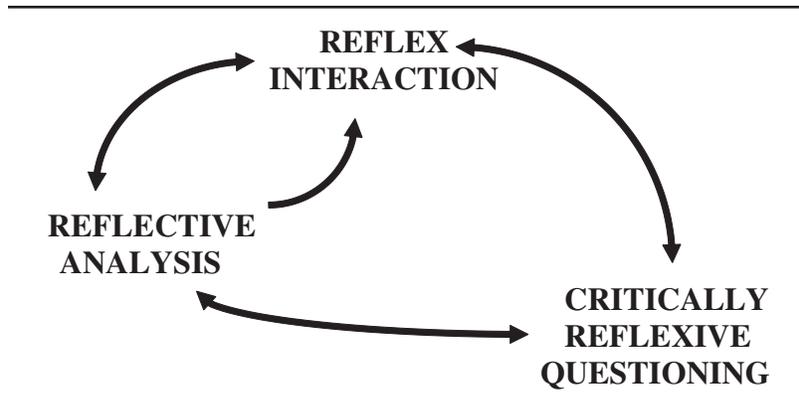
and by highlighting multiple perspectives. Three teaching practices I find particularly useful in helping students develop their skills as critically reflexive practitioners are (a) the idea of reflex interaction/reflective analysis/critically reflexive questioning, (b) a class activity to highlight a different way of thinking about how we constitute reality, and (c) the use of critically reflexive journals.

#### **A MAP: REFLEX INTERACTION, REFLECTIVE ANALYSIS, CRITICALLY REFLEXIVE QUESTIONING**

Figure 1 helps students grasp the different ways we make sense of experience.

Reflex interaction refers to the instantaneous, unselfconscious, reacting-in-the-moment dialogue and action that characterizes much of our experience. We respond to other people on the basis of instinct, habit, and/or memory (reflex), and in doing so, we draw intuitively on our tacit knowing (Polanyi, 1966) and on who we are. Much of our interaction is reflex—routine, habitual actions, and immediate responses to those around us. As we talk we respond to the verbal and nonverbal behaviors of others, often in an intuitive, subconscious way. Reflex interaction is therefore a primitive preordering or state of unawareness connected with an image, emotion, and moment of being struck. Our learning depends on our ability to take this reflex interaction further and reflect on or in the process.

Typically, when talking about reflective analysis, we are assuming that there is an object to reflect upon—something we can think about, categorize, and explain. Reflective analysis (single-loop learning) means creating order



**Figure 1:** Reflex Interaction, Reflective Analysis, and Critically Reflexive Questioning

and making connections, often using theory to help us see our practice in different ways (Bailey, Saparito, Kressel, Christensen, & Hooijberg, 1997). Schön (1983) best summarized this form of analysis when he talked about reflection in action as an objective, analytical process in which we make connections and construct an understanding of a situation by testing “intuitive understandings of experienced phenomena” (p. 241). Reflective analysis can be both retrospective—making sense of something that happened in the past and examining reasons why we made a decision or acted in a particular way—and anticipatory—planning our future actions. It draws on traditional assumptions of objective reality as a basis for a reasoned, impartial assessment of action or ideologies using universal principles or values (Mezirow, 1998). Much of what we do in the classroom incorporates reflective analysis: We ask students to use theory and principles to discuss and analyze case studies, reflect on questions or problems, and observe and analyze role plays. These reflective conversations can be important in processing learning, because they help us make sense and develop new understandings of situations. I offer an example of reflective analysis in a student journal (I discuss the format and use of journals later):

I feel our group is in the process of socialization among the members. Pascale (1985) describes socialization as the “process in which individuals become members of the group, learning the ropes, and being taught how one must communicate and interact to get things done.” All individuals within our group are experimenting with ways to create an effective and efficient team. . . . Following Pascale’s steps of socialization, it becomes apparent that the first exam served as a “humility inducing” experience for the group. . . . Creating a

multicultural group (Cox, 1991) will provide significant benefits to group interaction and eventually lead to a shared vision (Senge, 1990). (Journal Excerpt 1)

The writer is reflecting upon the group as an objective entity. He speaks seemingly as an outside observer and applies theory to make sense of his experience.

I use a simple activity to illustrate the difference between reflex interaction and reflective analysis. I ask students to fold their arms, and then I ask them to fold their arms the opposite way. The former is reflex interaction, something we do without having to think about how we do it; it is comfortable, habitual, and unselfconscious. Most of us have to think about folding our arms the opposite way—we must reflect on how we position and interweave our arms—and the outcome is not always comfortable.

The difference between reflective analysis and critically reflexive questioning is more complex. Whereas reflective analysis draws on traditional assumptions that there is an objective reality that we can analyze using logic and theory, critically reflexive questioning draws on social constructionist assumptions to highlight subjective, multiple, constructed realities. This means exploring how we might contribute to the construction of social and organizational realities, how we relate with others, and how we construct our ways of being in the world. Critically reflexive questioning also means exposing contradictions, doubts, dilemmas, and possibilities (see Hardy & Palmer, 1999, for further discussion). In doing so, we can expose unspoken assumptions that influence (unconsciously or otherwise) our actions and interactions: We can surface silences in conversations—what is not said or interpretations that may remain hidden or unspoken (Martin, 1990). Critically reflexive practitioners therefore question the ways in which they act and develop knowledge about their actions. This means highlighting ideologies and tacit assumptions—exploring how our own actions, conversational practices, and ways of making sense create our sense of reality. A critically reflexive stance can be seen in the student journal excerpt below:

My expectations (espoused theories) and my knowledge proved to be incorrect. Today I feel as though I have shared too openly and trusted too much. In turn, I feel that there is nothing left in disguise and I feel vulnerable—the reciprocal relationship [between the student and other course members] is lacking (Cohen & Bradford, 1989). The more I offer, the more taken for granted my source of information seems to become (at least in my mind), and therefore the lesser the value of my perceived influence. When I desire clarification or need assistance, I am often puzzled by the reaction [of course members] to my attempts at open discussion. . . . Through all of this, I have still not altered my

behavior. My desire to share and communicate openly overpowers my feeling of exclusion (Hall, 1973). Why? (Journal Excerpt 2)

In this example of critically reflexive questioning, the student discusses contradictions, doubts, dilemmas, and (later in the journal) possibilities (Chia, 1996a). Whereas reflective analysis is concerned with a systematic searching for patterns, logic, and order, critically reflexive questioning opens up our own practices and assumptions as a basis for working toward more critical, responsive, and ethical action.

#### **GRASPING THE NATURE OF INTERSUBJECTIVE REALITIES: A CLASS ACTIVITY<sup>1</sup>**

A short activity I find particularly useful in helping students think about how we construct our realities is one I first saw demonstrated in a session on the relationship between improvisation and organization theory at the Academy of Management in 1999. I ask for four volunteers to stand at the front of class. The rules are (a) no one can speak; (b) at any given time, one person has to stand, one sit, one lean (on a chair, desk, or other person), and one fold their arms; and (c) participants may stay in one position for no longer than 20 seconds. The activity lasts for 2 to 3 minutes. I initially ask the audience for their observations and then ask participants to comment, summarizing both on a flip chart. These comments form the basis for drawing out ideas about the constructed and responsive nature of reality, the tacit aspects of knowledge, and reflex interaction. This provides a basis for further discussion of the ideas in Figure 1 and leads in to the journals and how critically reflexive questioning means writing from within experience. Table 1 provides a list of questions and some typical responses.

The instructor can help students make connections between the activity, their comments, and the socially constructed nature of reality by discussing the following issues:

- We constitute our realities in spontaneous and taken-for-granted ways. Each movement is unique and creative, as are our daily conversations and interactions. We experience socially shared moments that we are not able to anticipate or plan. This means our actions and conversations are never wholly the same. There may be some repetition, but the unique peculiarities of each interaction call out different responses from people. This constitutes much of our social interaction.
- Interactions are responsive relationships (Bakhtin, 1986). We act in response to others and our surroundings. We react to eye contact, movement, and facial expressions. Some of this is reflex—spontaneous reactions—and some reflective. As we begin to pick up patterns in others' behavior, we can coordinate our

TABLE 1  
**Typical Questions and Responses to the Class Activity**

<i>Questions</i>	<i>Responses</i>
<p>Audience:</p> <p>What struck you when observing the activity?</p> <p>Who controlled the actions?</p> <p>How did the participants act?</p> <p>Participants:</p> <p>What struck you about this activity?</p> <p>Why did you do _____ at this point?</p> <p>To what extent can you anticipate your next move or the move of others?</p> <p>How simple is the activity?</p> <p>What kind of understanding does this activity involve?</p> <p>If we did the activity again, what might happen?</p> <p>Did the audience give a true interpretation of events?</p> <p>Can an observer say, "Let me tell you what is <i>really</i> happening here?"</p> <p>So what does this tell us about theorizing and/or making assumptions about what others are doing?</p>	<p>Audience:</p> <p>It wasn't planned, they improvised, they watched each other carefully, B did his own thing, they all remained very close to the chair, C tried to trick the others.</p> <p>No one person, it varied at different times, it looked as though A and B were collaborating, C was obviously trying to control others.</p> <p>Carefully, ignored others, they helped each other by moving slowly, watched each other.</p> <p>Participants:</p> <p>It was fun, we were interdependent, we had to watch each other.</p> <p>Because A did _____ so I ____, I thought B was . . .</p> <p>You can't, you can watch the beginning of the movement and react, I watched C—he kept doing the same two activities.</p> <p>It's not as easy as you might think, I had no idea who was going to do what, it does get easier.</p> <p>You have to pick up nonverbal clues, you can't plan, spontaneous responses.</p> <p>We couldn't do exactly the same, I'd have a better idea of what to do because I'd watch each person.</p> <p>Not really, because I wasn't doing that, I wasn't trying to control others, when they laughed I had no idea why.</p> <p>No, there are different interpretations, we do not see the activity in the same way as observers or each other.</p> <p>See below.</p>

own responses. We are sensitive to, yet not necessarily fully conscious of, movement; that is, we gain an implicit understanding of what others are doing, although we may not be able to articulate it. These ideas can be applied to our day-to-day interactions.

- There is intertwined complexity in what may seem like a simple activity. We are not wholly responsible for our own actions, because we act in response to others and they act in response to us. Shotter (1993) called this a “third realm of activity”—jointly and intricately structured yet under no one person’s control. How does this relate to what good managers do? They must be responsive listeners and responsive speakers and help organizational members make connections and relations given a chaotic welter of impressions (see Cunliffe, 2001, for further explanation).
- The activity draws on a practical, tacit understanding—one initially difficult to articulate but that has a powerful impact on our actions, for example, picking up and responding to nonverbal clues.
- In relation to Figure 1, the activity incorporates reflex interactions on the part of participants, and we (particularly the audience) can reflectively analyze those actions as observers. However, from our discussion, we can see the activity is subject to multiple and sometimes differing interpretations (participants, audience, instructor). Critically reflexive questioning can help surface differing interpretations, underlying assumptions, and taken-for-granted actions.

The activity therefore offers an example of the practical implications of social constructionism and how we can draw out practical understandings from within experience. It also highlights a crucial aspect of critically reflexive practice: the differences between developing theory about something/ someone else—that is, observing and reflecting (an outside-in approach, Journal Excerpt 1)—and creating theory in practice—surfacing and questioning tacit knowledge (an inside-out approach, Journal Excerpt 2). Baker and Kolb (1993) contrasted these two approaches to learning, the traditional one being the “outside-in approach which leaves human affairs to the experts” and focuses on the analysis and application of theory to practice, and the “inside-out perspective, which is rooted in our personal experience” (p. 26). They argued that the latter is more effective in valuing diversity and plurality in organizations, a view I extend to recognizing our ability to shape situations through our shared, responsive interactions. The second approach is crucial in developing skills as critically reflexive practitioners, because it draws attention to how we relate with each other ethically, which Deetz (1995) saw as resting “not in agreement to principles, *but in avoidance of the suppression of alternative conceptions and possibilities* [italics added]” (p. 223).

In other words, by emphasizing the nature of our being in relation to others and the creative and responsive manner in which our identities, experiences, and opportunities for action are shaped, then we recognize a moral

requirement to make available opportunities for others to communicate (Shotter, 1993, p. 163). This means recognizing our place in creating ethical discourse, respecting the rights of those around us to speak, and understanding how our use of words orients responses and ways of relating—a “knowing how, knowing how to live, knowing how to listen” (Lyotard, 1984, p. 18). A critically reflexive practitioner not only questions her basic assumptions but also whether she may be silencing the voices of others, and she is more aware of how she constitutes and maintains realities and identities through responsive interaction.

#### **BECOMING A CRITICALLY REFLEXIVE PRACTITIONER: USING JOURNALS**

Journals can be powerful in helping students develop their skills as critically reflexive practitioners, because they are a means by which students engage in their own learning (Bickford & Van Vleck, 1997) and surface tacit knowing. In explaining the purpose and nature of the journals, I often use the previous activity to highlight the difference between writing in reflective and critically reflexive ways. I use one of two approaches: Students complete three journals over the semester, moving from a reflective analysis of a situation they encountered to a critically reflexive questioning of their own learning (about 6 to 8 pages each), or they complete one journal (8 to 12 pages) to be handed in at the end of the semester (see appendix). The idea of using journals in the learning process is not new. Journals can be used to improve writing skills, improve analytic and creative thinking, and build self-awareness. Locke and Brazelton (1997) suggested that writing is itself a learning process, because it offers a way of surfacing, articulating, and rethinking our conceptualizations of the world. I include excerpts from graduate student journals to show the form critically reflexive journals take. From a critically reflexive perspective, journal writing is not just thinking about thinking but thinking about self from a subjective perspective. It requires us to be attentive to our assumptions, our ways of being and acting, and our ways of relating. As one student wrote:

So who am I, who am I becoming? I have been puzzled, frustrated, curious, and anxious throughout this semester. . . . I have experienced on a personal level both the “unfreeze” and “movement” stages (Lewin, 1951) yet seem to teeter-totter between the two. I have been very open to self-analysis and find learning about others and myself in a critical manner very intriguing. (Journal Excerpt 3)

This and the following excerpts illustrate a crucial aspect of the inside-out form of writing—“finding one’s voice” (Boys, 1999, p. 131) and beginning

with lived experience and writing about me, my feelings and frustrations, my assumptions and actions, that is, *talking from within*. We can begin the process by engaging in double-loop learning—being open and identifying assumptions and then moving to a critically reflexive questioning of those assumptions and actions and recognizing uncertainty and contradictions. In doing so, we may not only find our own voice but the voice of others and voices we may silence by our words and actions.

From a teaching perspective, this form of journaling means listening to those voices, needs, hopes, and concerns, often at an intellectual and visceral level, as students explore their experiences. It also means being critically reflexive about our own teaching practices and the voices we might silence, as Reynolds (1999) suggested when he called for coherence between teaching others how to take a critical stance and taking a critical stance ourselves. The journal excerpt below caused me to do some critically reflexive questioning of my own:

The process of questioning ones assumptions and values is disconcerting and tortuous. It is uncomfortable to truly look inwards and then reflect on all the assumptions and values that one has built over almost a lifetime. I have always assumed that my values and goals were just right for me and proceeded almost with single-minded purpose to achieve them. There was no reason for me to question them. Yet, I have been *forced to be conscious* [italics added] of this process over the past weeks especially as I become increasingly aware of the applicability of the course material to myself. (Journal Excerpt 4)

Although this student talked about the relative and nonabsolute nature of knowledge and voice, the language he used struck me: Have I “forced” others? Have I acted inconsistently by claiming students *must* consider multiple perspectives? I need to look at my own teaching practices to ensure I am enacting the values I espouse.

I discuss at least one draft of the journal with each student. This is important in helping each person grasp how to write from an inside-out, critically reflexive stance. Typically, many students begin from an outside-in stance because this is the term-paper approach they are familiar with, and most have not experienced this way of writing and questioning before. In our conversations, I highlight reflexive comments they may have written, ask them to think about their assumptions, surface any contradictions in language use that might affect their actions (e.g., “*we* need to work as a team, so what *I* want to do is . . .”), and suggest what to avoid. I also emphasize the importance of asking questions and raising issues and state that I am not looking for answers but possibilities.

Journal Excerpts 5 and 6 illustrate the process of critical reflexivity—writing as an involved insider, from a prospective stance, questioning assumptions and taken-for-granted ways of acting and thinking. Theory and readings are used in reference to experience, not as tools to analyze external events. Students find these excerpts helpful to their understanding of reflexive writing:

I willingly subscribed to the notion that management (and sometimes, life itself) is a “scientific, technically-rational, value-free” system of theories and practices and believed that “goal achievement carries with it no implicit moral commitments and consequences” (MacIntyre, 1981). I considered with interest those who swore that “conscience is but a word that cowards use, devised at first to keep the strong in awe” (Shakespeare’s Richard III). I believed in totally being motivated to achieve one’s goals. . . . This is perhaps the kind of mindset Peter Drucker (1999) had in mind when he advised all of us to discover whether our intellectual arrogance was causing disabling ignorance so that we may at least overcome it.

Having started with such a frame of mind, the tendency to reinforce long-held objectives and values to reinvent and perpetuate the old system was always present. Therefore, fuelled by what I can now see was an inherent fear of change and an instinctive desire to protect the system of values I’ve subscribed to over a lengthy period, I initially looked for loopholes and weaknesses in the theories and practices to disapprove them to myself. The fact that there existed a relationship that could best be described as murky between some of the theories we discussed and real-world management practices lent credibility to this process. My first impulse therefore, for quite some time, was to play the devil’s advocate as a part of me instinctively resisted the changes that I was undergoing. Though I based my initial reluctance to change my old assumptions and ways by trying to convince myself that a mere exchange of schemas (a new set of values for the ones I was contemplating to modify) would not be successful, I became aware that these were defensive mechanisms (Argyris, 1991) aimed at clouding the issue. Looking back, the extent to which these single-loop schemas formed a part of me is startling. I was starting with the premise that my goals were the preferred ones for all “right-thinking” individuals. (Journal Excerpt 5)

Basic human interaction is built on how we interact, or relate to each other. I am more likely to respond to those individuals who respond to me and will, in most cases, emulate their attitude towards me. The old adage (again from my grandmother), “Treat others the way you would like to be treated,” sounded good, but I rarely practiced it. For me, the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1995; Sherwood & Glidewell, 1972) of reciprocity has always been somewhat etched in stone, only now after a particularly difficult year in terms of relationships at work do I stop and consider why. . . . As this year has progressed I have learned that it is the efforts of many individuals (with different views) within the department that are needed for organizational effectiveness, not just myself directing individual efforts. I have also come to accept that we all have different

ways of achieving results and that each way has merit. It took a critical-reflexive analysis of myself to make me realize that I needed to step back and let other people contribute to the solution(s). Now, putting this realization into practice has been a different story! My need to direct the situation may be appropriate at times—what has been difficult for me is taking a different, more collaborative course of action when appropriate. (Journal Excerpt 6)

Both journals illustrate critical reflexivity and the concept of praxis—questioning our reflex actions, creating our own theories from experience, and using these as a basis for changing our own realities. Reflexive journals, therefore, offer a means of exploring new possibilities for being and acting.

#### ISSUES RELATING TO THE JOURNALS

##### *1. Comfort Zone*

Some students feel uncomfortable writing in this way. They see it as too personal or too ambiguous and unstructured. I try to accommodate these feelings by offering a second approach based on Drucker's (1999) article, "Managing Oneself" (see appendix). These students usually find the ideas in this article helpful in providing a framework for structuring their writing and see it as a less *touchy-feely* approach. In offering this option, I hope I am being responsive to individual differences while still encouraging students to question and reflect. I use these two approaches in both graduate and undergraduate courses. Many undergraduates prefer the Drucker approach, which helps them develop their skills of reflective analysis. Some do move on to a critically reflexive approach as they examine their assumptions and begin to think about ideologies and what constitutes ethical practice or moral responsibility. Graduate students usually have more work experience and a feeling that organizational practices could be improved. They often find it easier to recognize implicit power relations, contradictions, and dilemmas.

##### *2. Is This a Diary?*

Students often ask this question. No, it is not a description of daily activities but, rather, a critical questioning of experiences. Students often want to begin by describing their life history. I emphasize that this is important and excerpts can be woven into their journal as supporting information; however, summarizing life history can result in a book-length journal and be descriptive rather than analytical. A useful start point is for each student to list his or her *struck bys*, why they are important, assumptions made, and their impact on action and reactions (see appendix, Approach 1). Students taking

Approach 2 find it helpful to work through the ideas in the Drucker article (“Am I a reader/listener, what are my values?”)

### ***3. Are Critically Reflexive Journals Just Naval Gazing?***

The answer is no. I expect students to take their reflexive questioning and assess possibilities for change. I ask them to end their journals by answering the question, “So what am I/we going to do now?” As one student wrote:

We must first know and understand ourselves before we are at peace internally. We must be at peace internally to participate in our world in an effective manner. When we are at peace we naturally exhibit characteristics of integrity, honesty, openness, and trustworthiness. True success comes with truly knowing oneself and having an internal comfort zone so that we can openly express ourselves and openly accept the expression of others. . . . True success is powerful; mere power is not success. It takes me some time to reach my own “true success,” my ideal of “what might be.” The process of creating this paper, however, made me realize it is most definitely attainable. (Journal Excerpt 7)

The writer is drawing out her own practical theories (Shotter, 1993) from her experience—theories that are likely to be all the more powerful because they are her own and not imposed externally.

### ***4. And You Grade These . . . ?***

One issue that still remains problematic is how to grade this form of writing. It is difficult to create a grading structure, and I find it impossible to allocate percentages for individual elements. Rather, I ask myself whether I think this is an A, B, C, and so forth paper. When discussing the brief for the journal in class, I state that the nature of this form of writing requires a different way of grading; there are no right or wrong answers. I outline my grading criteria in the brief (see appendix). Students seem to see these criteria as acceptable and often say that they found the journal a difficult but enlightening experience.

My written comments in journals consist of questions and possibilities rather than judgments: “Have you thought about . . . ? Are there other possible interpretations? Might this be interpreted as a defensive statement? How might you do this? Is there an implicit power issue here? How might the language you use(d) in this instance influence/have influenced the response of . . . ? Might this behavior be self-sealing? How might this relate to the reading by \_\_\_?” In other words, my comments are aimed at helping students ask further questions, explore possibilities, or make connections (practical or theoretical).

### FINAL THOUGHTS

This type of journal is not necessarily appropriate for every student or every faculty member; it depends upon the comfort zone of each. It is a time-intensive process for a student and a faculty member, but it can be a rewarding experience for both. One benefit I have discovered is that many students come to class saying that they cannot change anything because they are not the boss. By understanding reality as relational and socially constructed and by developing their ability to question in a critically reflexive way, they realize they can influence situations.

Two journal writers have the last word:

I am confused. I am becoming more confused. And “they” say this is a good thing? . . . I recognize that change can be good, and I realize that from confusion there is *so* much more for me to learn. (Journal Excerpt 8)

Being reflexive is something new for me, a concrete experiencer, and a person of action, although I do like it. More than the chance to learn, it’s a chance to catch my breath and absorb. It’s kind of like the difference between yoga and high-impact aerobics. Mentally, I have come to a place in my life and career where both have merit, even with the doubts I have. It is this realization that makes me think I’m headed in the right direction after all. (Journal Excerpt 9)

## Appendix The Critically Reflexive Journal

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The reflexive journal is based on assumptions that learning is meaningful when embodied, when we interweave theory and experience, and when we focus on developing skills of lifelong learning. It challenges students to think about learning in relation to the topics covered in the course, explore their learning, and create a personal development plan. This means:

- Reviewing information learned about yourself during the course and finding integrative themes and interrelationships.
- Identifying and questioning your assumptions and behavior in a situation (double-loop learning) and how they might have influenced the other person’s response.
- Thinking about the unspoken assumptions that influence (unconsciously or otherwise) our actions and interactions, silent voices in a conversation, what is said and not said, and whether there are multiple interpretations. How might/do these relate to current/potential contributions (Drucker, 1999)?
- Identifying possibilities for self development—new roles, stretching abilities, risk-taking, and more complex and integrative thinking.

My grading criteria include the following:

- Linking personal experience to ideas, theories, and material from class and exploring how these may offer possibilities for practices.
- Ability to make connections between actions and responses.
- Drawing out insights.
- Evidence of critical reflexivity and double-loop learning.
- Challenging his or her thinking and ways of acting.
- Exploring possibilities.
- Asking questions.
- Following the basic standards of writing, grammar, and presentation.
- Expressing key points clearly and persuasively.
- Citing material correctly.

**Students choose one of the two approaches below.**

***Approach #1: A Critically Reflexive Approach—  
What Have You Been Struck By?***

1. Identify personal insights, issues, moments of critical questioning, and revelation/connection with ideas, moments, and comments (by you, other course members, me) that struck you and offered the potential for reflective insight or significant learning.
2. Describe why these are important to you. What impact did they have and/or what dilemmas, questions, or possibilities did they raise? Have these resulted in order or chaos for you?
3. So what are you going to do now? What issues, questions, and dilemmas are you going to explore further? Why and how? How will this influence who you are and how you relate to others? What relational nets can you construct/connect with to continue this process of reflective and critical learning?

***Approach #2: Feedback Analysis (Drucker, 1999)***

Reread the Drucker article. Think about the following:

1. How do I perform/what are my strengths?
2. What are my values?
3. What can I/do I want to contribute?
4. What areas do I need to work on?

Formulate your learning plan. What can I do in the short-, medium-, and long-term to manage myself?

- How you will construct learning opportunities, overcome your limitations, and practice your learning skills?
  - What is the social support system you plan to set up to maintain your continuing learning activities?
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## Note

1. I am indebted to John Shotter for the idea behind this activity.

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