

A review of
Educating the Reflective Practitioner
by Donald Schön,
published by
Jossey-Bass (San Francisco, 1987)
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Rating: 9

(The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out. This produces a net five point scale from 6-10.)

This is not a new book – it was published in 1987, after all. It is nonetheless one of those ‘classics.’ My rule of thumb says that when you see a certain number of references to something, well, you ought to go back and read it. This is a ‘go back and read it’ book.

The book has a straightforward fundamental premise: Professionals who receive real-time coaching and encouragement to think carefully (about what they do while they do it) learn in a more profound way. Perhaps in 1987 people might have found this a revolutionary concept; I don’t know. If we knew this in 1987, however, it does not appear to have had a profound impact on our actions in the decade-and-a-half since then.

I found it interesting how Schön wrote about professionals. He quotes Everett Hughes, a sociologist: “In return for access to their extraordinary knowledge in matters of great human importance, society has granted them a mandate for social control in their fields of specialization, a high degree of autonomy in their practice, and a license to determine who shall assume the mantle of professional authority. But in the current climate of criticism, controversy, and dissatisfaction, the bargain is coming unstuck. When the professions’ claim to extraordinary knowledge is so much in question, why should we continue to grant them extraordinary rights and privileges?” We expect to them police themselves, based on their special potential for contribution. We expect them to contribute to the common good of society. This comment certainly appears timely in light of the recent corrupt behavior by some professionals – members of the clergy, auditors, stock analysts ... !

Schön examines how people learn. He uses examples from unusual (for most of us) situations: architecture, music performance, psychotherapy. I had never given much thought to how people in *those* professions learn. I *had* given substantial thought to how information systems designers learn and more recently to how educators learn. My exploration has involved side trips into what we mean by: *information* versus *knowledge*; *education* versus *training*; *learning* versus *teaching*. I found one sentence which represented a clean distillation of my own experience: “I have come to feel that [the] only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning.” We can provide the opportunity, the environment, the encouragement ... but the learning belongs ultimately to the learner.

Does that somehow let us – as people who want to help others learn – off the hook? Hardly. Schön suggests that we can learn much from, for example, how designers help others learn to design. “Designing,” he says, “in its broader sense involves complexity and synthesis. In contrast to analysts or critics, designers put things together

and bring new things into being, dealing in the process with many variables and constraints, some initially known and some discovered through designing. Almost always, designers' moves have consequences other than those intended for them. Designers juggle variables, reconcile conflicting values, and maneuver around constraints – a process in which, although some design products may be superior to others, there are no unique right answers.” You discover more about the problem even as you try to solve the problem. You choose a course of action, only to find yourself surprised at some consequence. You adjust, you maneuver ... but basically you synthesize in a world of complexity. If your world involves synthesis amidst complexity, perhaps Schön has something offer you. (If your world does *not* involve synthesis amidst complexity ... hmmm.)

More than that, however, you as the *master* must make your thinking transparent to the learner. He continues, “It is as though the studio master had said to him, ‘I can tell you that there is something you need to know, and with my help you may be able to learn it. But I cannot tell you what it is in a way you can now understand. I can only arrange for you to have the right sorts of experiences for yourself. You must be willing, therefore, to have these experiences. Then you will be able to make an informed choice about whether you wish to continue. If you are unwilling to step into this new experience without knowing ahead of time what it will be like, I cannot help you. You must trust me.’” The learner must trust that the more experienced person really wants to help even though the experienced person may lack the capability to make it all perfectly clear at the outset.

One reason that the master / teacher / coach cannot make it all clear is simply that there is no single-track agenda. The more sophisticated person possesses a repertoire of options, drawing from them as appropriate. The coach responds to the learner's actions by re-framing, listening, reflecting, engaging in dialogue, and trying again. In so doing, the coach exposes her own thinking. Having herself learned at some point in the past she is now called on to think aloud, making explicit her reasoning in order to clarify it as much for herself as for the learner.

The implications for educators seems clear: the recognition of effectiveness in the future will depend less and less on degrees earned or years of experience. “In a reflective practicum, the role and status of a coach take precedence over those of a teacher as teaching is usually understood. The coach's legitimacy does not depend on his scholarly attainments or proficiency as a lecturer but on the artistry of his coaching practice.” The question is not how much you know, but rather how effectively you can help others to learn.

To the extent that each of us knows something special, or each of us has some unique insights based on unique experiences, each of us can be a coach for others more junior to ourselves in that domain. I believe that the most effective organizations of the future will be led by ‘coaches’ committed to helping others learn; I think that forms the foundation of effective leadership.