Book Review: Productive Reflection at Work
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Management Learning 2006 37: 410
DOI: 10.1177/1350507606067389

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>> Version of Record - Aug 21, 2006

What is This?
Productive Reflection at Work is required reading for all scholars and practitioners who are interested in integrating learning into everyday work. In fact, one of the hallmarks of this book is the idea that reflection is the nexus between learning and work.

Although the literature provides earlier studies on reflection, Boud, Cressey and Docherty redefine and recontextualize the concept and coin the term ‘productive reflection’, which thus assumes a new dimension. Productive reflection is thereby transformed from a mere method or instrument into the crux of a whole new approach to learning. Up to the 1990s, the focus was on training. In the 1990s, organizational learning provided an integrating framework. For Boud et al., the emphasis should now be placed on productive reflection.

Boud et al.’s contribution is innovative, and presents new insights into a concept previously covered by various authors.

Traditionally, earlier studies on reflection have focused on education, i.e. preparing individuals for professional practice (e.g. Bolton, 2001; Dewey, 1933), on how to link learning and experience (e.g. Boud et al., 1983; Boud and Walker, 1993; Kolb, 1984) and on the notion of the reflective practitioner (e.g. Johns, 1999; Schön, 1983). Despite their differences, a common strand to these contributions is that they focus on the individual as a reflective agent. This is precisely what sets the latest book apart. Productive Reflection at Work studies reflection both from an individual as well as from a collective standpoint. This approach is consistent with the current meaning of work and the setting within which it takes place, which is increasingly complex and ambiguous, and involves a host of participants and stakeholders.

Another differentiating feature of the work is the way in which the authors present productive reflection as an inherent part of work. Taking the idea of ‘organizing reflection’ (Vince, 2002), the concept is presented as an element that helps configure work and which thus needs to be ‘managed’ in the workplace. Taking reflection as something that fosters the individual’s ability to work, the book highlights the role reflection plays when working.

Productive Reflection at Work comprises 16 chapters, which fall under five clearly defined headings. The editors frame the book in the first two chapters, introducing the concept of productive reflection, justifying the need for the concept, and introducing forthcoming chapters.

Part II includes three chapters that attempt to clarify the importance of productive reflection. In Chapter 3, Høyrup and Elkjør provide a clear review of productive reflection from John Dewey to the present. In this historical review, the authors stress the need to shift from individual reflection to organizational reflection. Ellström, in Chapter 4, argues that reflection should be considered as part of work and daily practice, emphasizing the influence of workplace design on learning. In the last chapter in this section, Cressey helps us visualize the various forms reflection can assume in the workplace. In particular, he analyses the development of employee participation as a form of collective reflection.
The next five chapters (Part III) aim to contextualize the concept in various organizations and practical contexts. Shenkel (Chapter 6) stresses that reflection can be gravely hampered by poor design and business practices whose focus on formal procedures hinders collective reflection. Stebbins, Freed, ‘Rami’ Shani and Doerr (Chapter 7) study a case of lack of reflection in an organization in which the prevailing culture is one of secrecy. The case allows the authors to indicate how cultural aspects and the power structure within an organization help determine whether reflection is effective or not. In Chapter 8, Bjerløw and Docherty analyse three scenarios for organizational change, focusing particularly on the communicative learning process involved in productive reflection. In Chapter 9, Stebbins, ‘Rami’ Shani and Docherty analyse the concept of productive reflection in the context of crises during the implementation of a re-engineering process. They argue that these kinds of organizational change projects furnish opportunities for reflection as long as suitable discussion forums are set up to this end. They present cognitive, structural and procedural learning mechanisms that foster reflection and learning. The section ends with a magnificent contribution by Friedman and Berthoin Antal. They offer an empirical example of the absence of collective reflection in a multicultural setting, which shows evidence that organizational context, power structure and relations have a bearing on effective productive reflection. Besides these contributions, this chapter gives the reader a good example of the complexity involved in studying reflection at work. In fact, the empirical work shows the need for highly detailed analysis of conversations and dialogues in order to study the phenomenon.

Part IV comprises five chapters covering the challenges faced by productive reflection and its strengths and failings. Here, Boud (Chapter 13) warns of the risks of over-formalizing reflection. He also argues that companies should be capable of creating a ‘third space’ for reflection, which should be legitimized as part of the work. This would enable workers to see themselves not just as practitioners but also as learners. The remaining chapters reflect the section title and reshape popular managerial concepts and practices in accordance with this collective reflection perspective. Thus Nyhan (Chapter 11) comes up with innovative ideas on excellence that are linked to both ethics and reflection. Breidensjö and Huzzard (Chapter 12) assign trade unions a new role in which they would act as a forum encouraging reflection. In Chapter 14, Elmholdt and Brinkmann present the social dimension of reflection. However, they also warn of the risks of taking this approach to extremes. For example, they point out that reflection could easily become a method for exerting control over others (or oneself) that is much more insidious than the approaches traditionally resorted to by bureaucratic systems. Finally, Gherardi and Poggio conclude this section by offering a feminist perspective. In this chapter the authors defend the key role played by narratives in leading to productive reflection. A final chapter brings the book to a close.

Unlike many other collected works, this book is not a potpourri of unconnected contributions, nor is it a mere collection of chapters that share a central theme. Rather, the chapters are interwoven to some extent, and a splendid concluding chapter rounds off the book. It picks up the frame presented by the editors in the introductory chapters, summarizing and linking the main contributions in the
previous 15 chapters. This reveals rigorous work on the part of the editors and a certain collective reflection among the authors.

In general, the authors attempt to clarify and nuance the productive reflection concept. In defining the term, it is worth noting that the editors are mainly focused on stressing its key features. Other contributors point out the general impact of reflection instead of trying to give an exact definition. In fact, as one might expect, the authors do not share a common definition of the concept. Thus, while authors such as Stebbins, ‘Rami’ Shani and Doerr adopt a definition that stresses the fact of expliciting practice and the creation of collective meanings, others such as Breidenstro and Huzzard define reflection as ‘a means of contrasting and confronting experience with expectations through dialogue’.

It is precisely the definition of what productive reflection is and is not that raises the most questions. It is a blurred concept whose meaning is difficult to pin down. When productive reflection is spoken of, terms like ‘dialogue’, ‘conversation’ and ‘narratives’ crop up, but the way in which these are linked to the concept is still fairly imprecise. However this certain lack of definition can be seen as the product of a complex and evolving concept, opening up future opportunities for research.

The empirical work presented throughout the various chapters provides examples of productive reflection in various practical contexts. In fact, the authors present the implications of reflection in quality management systems, organizational re-engineering, implementation of new strategies and roles, multicultural contexts, and so on. This range of examples gives one the opportunity to analyse how collective reflection is present in well-established managerial practices and lends support to the idea that reflection forms part of professional practice. Perhaps one of the book’s shortcomings lies in the numerous examples that are given in which productive reflection or collective reflection are absent, whereas examples of their presence tend to be confined to general aspects and contexts. This is a pity because specific, detailed examples of productive reflection would have helped the reader pin down exactly what the term means or how it can be recognized in practice.

However, the empirical work clearly explains how contextual and design aspects can affect the achievement of productive reflection. Aspects with an important bearing on productive reflection that may foster or hinder it are presented throughout the book. Various chapters examine how organizational culture, ethics, aspects relating to management styles (e.g. level of surveillance or power), organizational structure, procedures, and resources may either facilitate or impede this goal.

Summing up, Productive Reflection at Work is a magnificent book that opens up new analytical avenues regarding the collective dimension of reflection at work. Productive reflection may well reconcile organizational aspects with personal satisfaction and thus help ensure the sustainable development of organizations that operate in increasingly complex and ambiguous settings. Readers of the book will be prompted to ask new questions and make new reflections. Far from being a limitation, this reflects the refreshing, stimulating nature of its contributions in what is a rich and rapidly evolving concept.

References

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Research Concepts for Management Studies
DOI: 10.1177/1350507606067390

Today, academic discourses in management studies are commonly restricted to well-defined disciplinary domains or merely centred on narrow research topics. This observation even holds true for those dialogues that actually ought to be multidisciplinary by nature. For instance, services management incorporates inter alia such different domains as marketing, psychology, logistics, human resource management or controlling. Nevertheless, only a brief glance at relevant service-related scientific papers reveals that ordinarily only a specific topic is dealt with in detail. The main reason for this shortcoming, which is by no means limited to services management, is that scientific debates have become extraordinarily sophisticated. Hence, for researchers it is per se becoming increasingly difficult to catch up on the latest developments within their respective communities. A second reason concerns the often intended incommensurability of the diverse notions that prevail within the different discourses. Bearing these notions in mind, it is not surprising that multifacultative research collaborations and potential publications resulting from such collaborations remain scarce.

Alan Berkeley Thomas takes this observation as his point of departure. In his stimulating and comprehensive book Research Concepts for Management Studies he tries to overcome these barriers. Thereby, his main objective is to lay the foundation for a fruitful exchange of ideas for those readers who are not familiar with the research concepts at stake. Moreover, the book is also aimed at researchers who are familiar with these concepts but still want to gain deeper and more rigorous insights. He attempts to achieve this goal in an informative and, not surprisingly, multidisciplinary way. The text is flanked by numerous illustrations and boxes that are provided throughout the book in order to elucidate the various research concepts. Throughout the entire volume he associates five fundamental research concepts with four major fields of management study, which are deemed to be central to management studies from his point of view. As for the research concepts, these are...