

## Thinking or thinking well? An antidote to ‘sticking plaster solutions’

*Most of us inhabit the world of routines, daily activities filling pockets of time in surprisingly similar ways.... These events are woven into the fabric of our work so firmly we rarely question them....we do things this way or that and very often forget the reasons why.*  
(Thompson, 2022)

This passage sits in the introduction to my book *Reflective Practice for Professional Development*, a project I saw as an endeavour to encourage more reflective thought in professional contexts – and as I type this, I realise that might seem like a bold statement. Who am I to suggest that professionals don't spend enough time thinking? Of course, professional roles do require significant thought, but they also demand adherence to processes and protocols. Furthermore, most professions are governed by a set of standards encompassing accepted values, and approaches. For the most part, this is a good thing - until it isn't!

As a Teacher Educator I may be biased, but it does seem that practice guidelines have had a significant influence on the teaching role. Teacher's standards and Ofsted compliance have all played a part in this. More recently the Core Content and Early Career Frameworks (DfE, 2019) aim to ensure consistency in teacher education, complete with specific guidance on what research should inform practice. In addition, the huge raft of initiatives, seemingly developed as 'evidenced-based' have taken on such importance they seem to have become 'rules': '...hoisted on the unsuspecting profession, who have little leverage to say no.' (Bennett, 2013:2) These things haven't detracted from the need to think but they have influenced *how* we think and when juggling various demands, thinking takes up a lot of energy. Sometimes it is easier not to think but to simply Do.

In principle, teacher education should encourage critical thinking about practice in an endeavour to improve it. To support this, trainees are introduced to theoretical perspectives which may inform their ideas and the process is endorsed by the requirement to keep a reflective log in which specific challenges might be considered. But, we sometimes forget that all of this is framed by professional standards and the need to pass a course. As a result, reflection often takes the form of stating a concern and immediately seeking a solution, perhaps with a theory 'shoe-horned' into the narrative. Does this encourage reflective thinking ... or perhaps *not thinking*? It is akin to opening up a wound in order to cover it with a plaster. The plaster serves a purpose for a while, but the wound may remain.

It seems difficult to imagine now, but when I first started teaching (a few years ago!), there were very few 'rules'. There were of course some obvious 'no-go's' such as falsifying data and inappropriate relationships with students, but beyond those extremes teachers were pretty much left to get on with the job. There were no fears of low achievement data and no initiative fatigue. Teaching was about trying to do the best for your students. It seemed so simple. On reflection, the old days weren't always that good – it is fair to say there was some awful practice around, but one thing that did happen was honest and open reflection. People talked about their teaching a lot – not

in a 'let's log a peer discussion' kind of way, but a genuine dialogue, deliberating an issue or idea. This thinking was slow and considered, not driven by the need to find an immediate solution but by the desire to find the right solution.

It seems to me that this is what Dewey is talking about in his book 'How we think'. In this he states: 'No words are oftener on our lips than thinking and thought.' (Dewey, 1910: 1) everything that passes through our thought system could be considered thinking, but he does distinguish between *thinking* and *thinking well*. For Dewey, *thinking well* is a way of avoiding simplistic deductions by encouraging critical examination of beliefs, judgements, and actions, thereby providing the opportunity to unpick why we see and do things in particular ways. It is the antithesis to the 'sticking plaster' approach associated with solutions-focussed cultures, and yet it may well be the route to an actual solution. Thinking well provides the opportunity for thoughts to evolve: 'Each phase is a step from something to something... Each term leaves a deposit which is utilized in the next term.' (Dewey, 1910: 2) It is separated from the day-to-day thoughts that trample their way through our consciousness. Instead, it is more deliberate and as a result may be somewhat troublesome: '...it involves overcoming the inertia that inclines one to accept suggestions at their face value; it involves willingness to endure a condition of mental unrest and disturbance.' (Dewey 1910:10) This amount of uncertainty does not sit well in a world that wants a quick fix.

As suggested in the opening paragraph, we busy ourselves with routines often conducted without much thought at all. Some activities are based on decisions long-since forgotten and others enforced through protocols no longer questioned. It seems we are all so busy doing, we cannot endure the 'mental unrest and disturbance', required for thinking, let alone that needed for thinking well.

#### **References:**

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