



## Big Ideas

### Did Schön really say that? A response to Comer



## Introduction

In a recent paper published in this journal, I argued that the concept of reflective practice in nursing has been 'misunderstood, misinterpreted and misapplied' (Rolfe, 2014), and suggested that nurses might benefit from a close and attentive reading of John Dewey and other pioneers of the reflective practice movement. I was therefore pleased to see that Moya Comer has undertaken this task with respect to Schön's seminal work *The Reflective Practitioner*, (Schön, 1983) where she 'examines in quite close detail extracts that describe reflection-in-action and on-the-spot experimenting' (Comer, 2016). Her conclusion, however, is that rather than clarifying Schön's meaning, a close reading of his book 'reveals how the text itself makes different understandings and interpretations possible'. In other words, Comer appears to be suggesting that the source of the misunderstandings originates to some extent in confusions and contradictions in the text itself. Employing Derrida's deconstructive strategy of reading a text against itself, Comer provides two examples of how Schön contradicts himself and undermines his own argument, thereby opening a space for 'different understandings'. I will argue in this paper that the apparent discrepancies highlighted in these examples originate not in Schön's text, but in Comer's misreading of it, and in particular, in her apparent confusion around some of his key terminology. In doing so, I will hopefully clarify what Schön really said and make his book more accessible to the casual reader.

Schön's challenge in *The Reflective Practitioner* is nothing less than to outline a new epistemology for practice, which he refers to as 'reflection-in-action'. His problem, which is faced by anyone who wishes to write outside and in opposition to the dominant paradigm (in this case, the paradigm of technical rationality) is to find the words to describe the new concepts and practices that he wishes to discuss. As Schön recognises, 'one must use words to describe a kind of knowing, and a change of knowing, which are probably not originally represented in words at all' (p.59). Schön has two strategies for expressing these new concepts in words. Firstly, he uses compound words such as reflection-in-action, knowing-in-action, on-the-spot experimenting and reflecting-in-practice. These compounds, which are usually joined by hyphens, have precise meanings which cannot always be inferred from their component words. For example, we shall see later that knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action are quite different and distinct concepts which are sometimes mistaken to mean more or less the same thing. Secondly, he sometimes uses the same word for two or more different concepts. Often these different meanings are discussed when the words are first introduced, but thereafter it is assumed that the reader will spot the particular usage by the context in which the word is employed. For example, Schön uses the word 'rigour' (or 'rigor' in the American edition) in two very distinct and

contrasting ways, which he initially distinguishes as 'technical rigor' and 'experimental rigor', but thereafter he refers to each simply as 'rigor'. Other words to which he ascribes several meanings include 'practice', which he describes as ambiguous, and 'experiment', to which he gives least four meanings.

## Reflection-in-Action

The first concept to which Comer applies her close reading is reflection-in-action. Her strategy is to select two extracts from different parts of Schön's text, one describing practice based on technical rationality and the other based on Schön's concept of knowing-in-action. In the first, Schön describes how technical rational practitioners become '*selectively inattentive to data [from formal models and theories] that fall outside their categories*' and, in a second, strikingly similar passage, how knowing-in-action leads the practitioner to become '*selectively inattentive to phenomena that do not fit the categories of his knowing-in-action*'. Comer's conclusion is that 'when both descriptions are laid side by side, it becomes difficult to distinguish a reflective practitioner from a practitioner who espouses the model of technical rationality'. If she is right, it is hardly surprising that Schön has been misinterpreted and misapplied, given that he appears to contradict himself in this way.

However, the attentive reader will notice that the second extract cited by Comer refers not to reflective practice but to knowing-in-action. Comer makes the link between the two concepts based on her observation that 'Schön describes reflective practice as originating in knowing-in-action'. Thus, she appears to assume that when Schön refers to knowing-in-action he is describing a reflective practitioner. Unfortunately, this is a misunderstanding of Schön's position. For Schön, knowing-in-action is the tacit intuitive knowing that underpins all skilful performance, whereas reflection-in-action is the attempt to articulate this tacit knowledge and bring it into conscious awareness. In fact, Schön regards *all* skilful practice (reflective or otherwise) as having its roots in knowing-in-action, which he claims is 'the characteristic mode of ordinary practical knowledge' (p.54). Whilst it might be tempting to think, as Comer appears to do, that the terms 'knowing-in-action' and 'reflective practice' can be used interchangeably, in this particular context Schön sets them more or less in opposition: unreflective knowing-in-action can be a *cause* of burnout, reflection-in-action is a *remedy*.

## On-the-Spot Experimenting

Having seen how misunderstandings about some of Schön's compound words led Comer to draw the very opposite conclusions to which Schön was intending, her second example illustrates the problems caused when Schön uses the same word for different concepts if the context of its usage is not taken into account. This is an altogether more insidious problem for the reader of *The Reflective Practitioner* which highlights the pitfalls of dipping into the text without fully

understanding the specific meanings ascribed by the author to seemingly everyday words and concepts.

In this section of her close reading, Comer wishes to argue that many of the criticisms which Schön levels at technical rational, research based practice apply equally to reflective practice, and particularly to what he refers to as 'on-the-spot experimenting'. For example, she writes:

The rigour required for on-the-spot experimenting would seem to necessitate that the world of practice be divided into a real and a virtual one. [Quoting Schön] '*Virtual worlds are contexts for experiment within which practitioners can suspend or control some of the everyday impediments to rigorous reflection-in-action*'. Just as controlled experiments, which yield scientific knowledge, [quoting Schön] '*cannot be conducted rigorously in practice*', neither, it seems, can on-the-spot experimenting. Indeed, the desire that the experimenting characteristic of reflection-in-action be rigorous, a value closely associated with scientific investigation, would seem to necessitate the creation of a virtual world that appears more similar to the world of scientific research than to the world of professional practice (Comer, 2016; her emphasis).

The charges laid against Schön include (1) rejecting scientific rigour as being in opposition to clinical relevance whilst encouraging rigour in reflective practice; (2) criticising scientific research as being removed from practice whilst proposing the idea of a 'virtual world' as an equally remote space for rigorous reflection; (3) failing to recognise that scientific research and on-the-spot experimenting share many of the same values.

The validity of Comer's arguments depends largely on her assumption that words such as 'rigor', 'research', 'experimenting' and 'practice' are employed similarly when used in the context of technical rationality and reflective practice. Thus, if she can show that Schön holds double standards regarding these concepts, then she has successfully demonstrated that Schön is once again being inconsistent and difficult to understand. However, I am suggesting that Comer has largely failed to take account of the subtle and not so subtle differences in meaning that Schön ascribes to these words according to the context in which they are used.

Let's begin with Schön's use of the terms 'experiment' and 'experimental'. He takes great pains to distinguish between the 'on-the-spot experiments' of the reflective practitioner and the technical rational research experiment (pp.141–145). He then further describes three variations of on-the-spot experimenting, namely the exploratory, the move-testing and the hypothesis testing experiment. He adds, 'Because in practice these several kinds of experiment are mixed up together, experiment in practice is of a different order than experiment in the context of research' (p.145, my emphasis). If the reader is fully to understand the essence of reflection-in-action, it is vitally important that these differences be recognised and acknowledged. It is also important for the reader to recognise in which sense Schön is using the word 'experiment' in any particular instance.

As we might expect, these different concepts of experimenting are associated with differing concepts of rigour. As I have already pointed out, Schön makes the distinction early in his book between 'technical rigor' and 'experimental rigor' as being two quite different and to some extent opposing concepts. 'Technical rigor' equates to the rigour of scientific research, in which 'the experimenter is expected to adhere to norms of control, objectivity and distance' (p.144). As he points out, under conditions of everyday practice, the norms of technical rigour are achievable only in a very limited way. In contrast, 'experimental rigor' is not concerned with remaining neutral, nor with minimizing one's influence on the situation. Rather, the practitioner 'understands the situation by trying to change it, and considers the resulting changes not as a defect of experimental method but as the essence of its success' (p.151). Thus, 'he experiments rigorously when he strives to make the

situation conform to his view of it' (p.153, my emphasis). Experimental rigor is therefore the *very opposite* of technical rigor, and Comer's assertion that on-the-spot experimenting aspires to the values of scientific investigation is clearly unfounded. Similarly, her assertion that such rigour is only possible in a 'virtual world' such as the architect's design studio or the therapist's supervision session is based on a failure to recognise that Schön is using the words 'experimenting' and 'rigor' differently in different contexts. The action oriented rigour of on-the-spot experimenting is very different from the detached rigour of scientific investigation, and is perfectly suited to the 'real' world of practice, where the role of the practitioner is to bring about change.

However, if Schön's concept of a virtual world does not exist solely to provide a rigorous environment for on-the-spot experimenting, then what is it for? In order to answer this question, we must first examine Schön's concept of practice in greater detail. As we have seen, Schön envisages at least three different types of practice. Firstly, there is technical rational practice, where the role of the practitioner is largely to apply theoretical and research-based concepts. Secondly, there is the traditional view of skilful practice based on tacit knowing or knowing-in-action, where 'the know-how is in the action' (p.50). This mode of practice is similar to Benner's notion of expertise. However, neither of these can be described as reflective. In the former case, rigorous knowledge comes from theory and research, and knowledge from practice is situated firmly at the bottom of the hierarchy of evidence. In the latter case, the actions, recognitions and judgments that constitute practice happen intuitively and spontaneously, we are often unaware of them at the time, and we are usually unable to describe the knowing which underpins them (p.54). This 'knowing-in-action' often cannot be expressed in words and therefore cannot be subject to reflective scrutiny. Thirdly, there is reflection-in-action or reflective practice, which draws on the ambiguous meaning of practice as 'performance in a range of professional situations' and also 'preparation for performance' in the sense of practising the piano (p.60). In this latter sense, the reflective practitioner is always experimenting and rehearsing new ideas and actions. Reflective practice is therefore always tenuous and experimental.

Thus, Schön's 'virtual world' is not, as Comer has it, a detour from practice in which 'there is no guarantee that knowledge derived by experimenting in a virtual world will transfer successfully to the real world of practice'. The virtual world is not separate from the 'real' world in the way that the research setting is separate from the practice setting; there is no 'dilemma of rigor or relevance' in the virtual world because the real and the virtual worlds are both aspects of practice. So, for example, clinical supervision is not separate from reflective practice; it is part of the definition and requirement of what good reflective practice is. The practitioner rehearses, experiments and practices in the virtual world before (and, of course, after) doing the same in the real world, just as the pianist experiments and practices in the rehearsal room before and after practising (in the other sense of the word) in the concert hall. Furthermore, with increased practice the virtual and real worlds become a single space. As Schön describes in his example of the architect:

[He] has also learned to use graphic languages transparently. When he represents a contour of the site by a set of concentric lines, he sees *through* it to the actual shapes of the slope, just as practiced readers can see through the letters on a page to words and meanings. Hence *he is able to move in the drawing as though he were moving through buildings on the site*, exploring the felt paths as a user of the building would experience them (p.159, my emphasis).

Of course there is no guarantee that any practice, whether nursing, architecture or piano playing, will transfer successfully from rehearsal to performance, but the more the practitioner rehearses, the more likelihood there will be of a successful performance. Practice in the virtual world has both experimental rigour *and* practical relevance.

## Conclusion

*The Reflective Practitioner* is written in a lively, almost chatty, style which can easily lull the unsuspecting reader into a false impression that it is also a relatively simple book. However, it is not a book to be dipped into nor casually quoted from unless the reader has a deep contextual knowledge of Schön's terminology and the idiosyncratic ways in which he uses certain words. Comer's discussions of Schön's concepts of reflection-in-action and on-the-spot experimenting demonstrate some of the pitfalls awaiting the casual reader. In the first instance, she used Schön's description of the effects of knowing-in-action to draw conclusions about reflection-in-action without acknowledging the fundamental differences between the two concepts. In the second instance, she drew on passages from different sections of Schön's book to attempt to show how he used words such as rigour, experimenting and practice to contradict himself, without recognising that, for Schön, the meanings of each of those words varied according to the context in which they are used. For example, the concept of rigour is very different when used to describe reflection-in-action than when it is used to describe scientific research.

It is perhaps unfortunate that Schön could not have coined some new terms in order to distinguish between these multiple meanings, and Comer does at times recognise that she might not have fully grasped the subtleties of his distinctions, stating 'But, perhaps, Schön did not mean his writing to be interpreted in this way' and posing the rhetorical question 'But is that what Schön really meant?' At one point she explicitly acknowledges that 'It seems fair to say ... that Schön does not mean that the rigour of on-the-spot experimenting is the same as the rigour of scientific experiment'. However, she then ignores

her own caveat by concluding that 'the desire that the experimenting characteristic of reflection in action be rigorous, a value closely associated with scientific investigation, would seem to necessitate...'. Comer concludes her paper with the following observation:

The reading presented here may help to account for the diverse, and sometimes quite contradictory, understandings of Schön's work by nurse educators and nursing scholars, the so-called misunderstandings, misinterpretations and misapplications to which Rolfe refers (Comer, 2016).

My concern is that, rather the account for these misunderstandings and misinterpretations, Comer's paper has added to them.

## References

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Gary Rolfe

College of Human and Health Sciences, Swansea University, Singleton Park,  
Swansea SA2 8PP, United Kingdom  
E-mail address: Garyrolfe1@hotmail.co.uk