The Guidance Practitioner: Technician or Artist? Going Beyond Technical Competence

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The term ‘reflective practice’ is much used and little understood. It is not the ability to describe one’s feelings about one’s experience. Rather, it is the ability to reflect on one’s experiences, to analyse what happened, why it happened and the learning gained. But it can even mean more than this – according to Schön\(^1\), reflective practice is the ability to conduct such reflection, not only at the end of an experience, but mid-process. He calls this ‘Reflection-in-action’ - the ability to think on one’s feet, to understand what is happening and why, and to deal with the uncertainties of practice in situ. In terms of interviewing, this takes us beyond mere technical competence into the realm of what Schön calls the ‘artistry’ of practice. It is this I want to explore – how to create guidance practitioners who are artists, practitioners who are able to respond creatively to the uniqueness of each guidance interview, who are able to move through and beyond what they have been taught whilst preserving the principles and ethics of the profession in which they operate, not only in their evaluations but whilst they are face-to-face with clients.

Clients are unique. Their needs are unique. The way they engage in the guidance process is also unique. Yet how often do we say ‘this particular solution works best with this type of client’? How dangerous is it to teach students a predisposed set of responses and constructs of what clients are like and how best to deal with them? No wonder so many clients smile politely and say ‘thank you’ but upon leaving say to their friends that ‘she/ he didn’t listen’.

The artistry of Career Guidance

Schön explains what it means to be an artist of one’s profession. He argues that, within professional practice, the practitioner faces different types of problems, some predictable and others for which the mere application of theory and models will not suffice. The latter he calls ‘the swampy lowlands of practice’, the ‘indeterminate zones of practice’ where theory does not immediately apply. Schön believes that professional practitioners need to move beyond mere technical competence to develop the artistry which one observes in the most exceptional of practitioners, these being the practitioners who can respond creatively and effectively to situations of uncertainty. They understand and value their prior knowledge but can experiment and create new practice and theory without negating the fundamental discipline of their profession.

‘In the varied topography of professional practice, there is a high ground overlooking the swamp. On the high ground, manageable problems lend themselves to solution through the application of research-based theory and technique. In the swampy lowland, messy, confusing problems defy technical solution’\(^2\)(p3)

He believes that the problems that lie in the ‘swampy lowlands’ are often the most important, the most complex and the messiest.

‘The irony of the situation is that the problems of the high ground tend to be relatively unimportant to individuals or society at large … while in the swamp lie the problems of greatest human concern. The practitioner must choose. Shall he remain on the high ground where he can solve relatively unimportant problems according to prevailing standards of rigor, or shall he descend to the swamp of important problems and nonrigorous inquiry?’

A Guidance Practitioner who possesses knowledge of career and labour market intelligence may concentrate on clients’ careers information needs whilst missing deeper issues such as lack of confidence, the influence of others, inaccurate self-perception and ill-informed assumptions held about the world ‘out there’. Clients often start by presenting apparently simple information needs which require no more than a technical response, a direct application of what the Guidance Practitioner already knows. However, if we run with these presenting issues then we are likely to miss the more profound needs lurking beneath.

There is often a reluctance to go deeper for fear of moving beyond one’s competence, a position which is often framed in terms of ethical practice - to move beyond one’s competence is to endanger the client. But let’s return to the concept of artistry. An artist is one who pushes the boundaries, who takes risks, who dares to enter the zones of uncertainty. They do not merely reproduce the works of their teachers, the artists who have gone before them as that is reproduction, not art. As I write this I can already hear the protestation of ‘but we are dealing with people not paint or clay and therefore we should not experiment at the expense of our clients’. This is a fair point and one which Schön does address - the term ‘nonrigorous’, when used to describe this type of enquiry, means going beyond the systematic application of theory in order to be more creative. We often use the term lateral thinking\(^3\) to describe leaps in insight, non-linear/logical thinking. That fact that it is non-linear does not necessarily mean it is unethical. According to Schön, students should take risks, should experiment with moves and choices, but must do so within a framework of evaluation, that is, they should consider each move and choice in the light of its consequences. What we need are Guidance practitioners who are willing to experiment beyond what they know but who can do so in an informed way, keeping the ethics and strategic outcomes of the interview in mind. This balance between creativity and discipline is the artistry of guidance.

At this point it is probably useful to give a concrete example of what such an artist would look like. First of all, an artist of guidance would also be a technician – they would possess the basic discipline, the techniques and tools of the trade. They would be able to use the skills of effective questioning, summaries, signposting etc.; they would understand and be able to apply a model of interviewing; they would know the ethics and principles to which they must adhere; and they would understand the theory of guidance that enables them to justify and question their practice in terms of all of these domains. However, the possession of all of these would still only enable

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\(^3\) De Bono, E. (1970) Lateral Thinking. Ward Lock Educational
them to put into practice exactly what they have been taught, to reproduce and apply
the knowledge and skills of the ‘master’ who taught them. An artist has mastered the
discipline but can go further.

Reflection-in-action
Schön describes the artist as one who has a conversation with the material and allows
what they experience, what they see to raise questions, challenge the rules and take
them in new directions, that is, they do not try to make the material conform to their
expectations. In the context of Guidance Interviewing Schön’s ‘material’ is our client.
The practitioner will possess theories on occupational choice, human nature, career
planning and preferred tactics for interviewing, all of which may work like a dream.
However, the practitioner should really see and experience the client, rather than
squeeze them into a set mould of theoretical constructs, ignoring through selective
listening the elements that refuse to fit. The Practitioner should be open to surprise
and able to reflect-in-action, to identify and respond creatively to the uniqueness of
the individual client and their needs. In short, they must be able to move beyond what
they have already experienced, beyond their preferred toolkit of diagnoses and
solutions.

‘It is no accident that professionals often refer to an ‘art’ of teaching or management
and use the word artist to refer to practitioners unusually adept at handing situations
of uncertainty, uniqueness, and conflict.”(p17)

Teaching Reflective Practice
The next question is how this artistry can be taught. According to Schön² (p40) there
are three ways of teaching:

a) Technical training where the instructor communicates the rules and facts of the
trade whilst students listen, read and observe. The tutor/ assessor observes student
performance, detects errors of application and points out correct responses
b) An advanced form of technical training where students learn the relevant facts and
operations but also the forms of inquiry by which competent practitioners reason
their way, in problematic instances, to clear connections between general
knowledge and particular cases

c) Reflection-in-action where students learn how to reflect-in-action, the ability to go
beyond stable rules, not only by devising new methods of reasoning as in b) but
also by constructing and testing new categories of understanding, strategies of
action and ways of framing problems. In such teaching the tutor/ assessor will
emphasise the indeterminate zones of practice reflective conversations with the
material (client)

There are times when practitioners need to be technicians, for example, when
following procedures relating to cases of discrimination, and there are times when the
thoughtful application of theory will be sufficient, but there are also times when
creativity is needed, and where better to look than the teaching of the fine arts to
explore whether there are any lessons which can be applied to the teaching of other
professions.
‘In education for the fine arts ... emphasis is placed on learning by doing ... the student cannot be taught what he needs to know, but he can be coached: “He has to see on his own behalf and in his own way the relations between means and methods employed and results achieved. Nobody else can see for him, and he can’t see just by being ‘told’, although the right kind of telling may guide his seeing and thus help him see what he needs to see;”’

(citing Dewey, 1974, p. 151)

It may be tempting at this point to think that Schön is arguing for learning-on-the-job. He is not. He is arguing for learning-by-doing in both a safe and real context, both in the studio and in the workplace. The fine artist learns in a studio, a ‘virtual world’ where they are free to experiment and to make mistakes. The safety of an unreal situation allows them to engage in taking risks, to push the boundaries in order to learn. The tutor, or coach as Schön calls them, encourages the student to develop the skill of reflection-in-action by interrupting their work within the studio, mid-process. The tutor/coach take the student’s work, their ideas and sketches, and draw over these in order to a) identify and reframe apparent problems, b) discuss options, and c) show the student how it could be done.

In doing so, the tutor/coach uses two levels of language:

1. The language of doing (the reality of what the student has done and the improvements that could be made)
2. The language about the practice (the theory and principles that underpin the critique and improvements made by the tutor)

In the ‘virtual world’ of learning Careers Guidance Interviewing, students first of all learn the basic discipline i.e. the theory, models and skills. They then engage in learning-by-doing through activities such as role-play interviews where they can interrupt the role-play with ‘time-out’ to discuss strategy, tactics and techniques. The tutor, acting as a coach, provides guidance by reframing the problem, clarifying why they are struggling. They also encourage the student to experiment, to go beyond what they have seen or experienced to date. The adept coach can discuss the concrete tactics and techniques with reference to the language of theory, ethics and principles.

In addition to role-play there are ‘Feedback Sessions’ where students bring recorded examples of their work for peer/tutor comment and assessment. This is another example where the student learns the skill of reflection-in-action. The recorded interview is often stopped at several points, the tutor facilitating discussion as to what is happening, why it is happening, and what could be done differently. In doing so the tutor and fellow students are ‘drawing’ over the student’s work, again reframing the problem and experimenting with what could be done differently.

Teaching students to be artists of guidance can, and arguably should, take place in both college and the workplace. Those who do the teaching need to appreciate and establish the opportunity for experimentation and learning in a ‘safe’ context in addition to standard practice with clients. Students should learn how to experiment, to think on-the-spot and try new tactics and techniques. However, this experimentation must be considered in the light of its consequences and therefore students need a framework for evaluation the choices and moves that they make. A clear
understanding of what outcomes we are trying to achieve for our clients and the ethical boundaries in which we operate provide such a framework. Therefore coaches, whether these are mentors, training officers or tutors, should possess both the language of practice and the language of theory. Moreover, they need to ensure that students also understand and use the two levels of language through repeated self-assessment. A coach who only talks the language of theory leaves the student bewildered as to how to practice, whilst the coach who draws their own tactics and techniques over students’ practice without reference to theory or ethics is training a career guidance technician.

Bibliography
De Bono, E. (1991) I am Right You are Wrong. Penguin