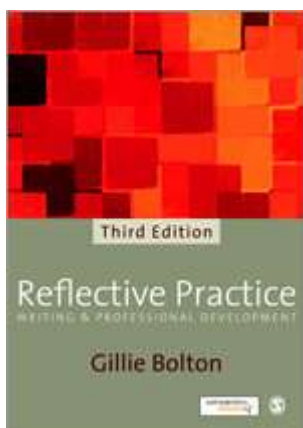


## Book Review



### **Reflective Practice: Writing and Professional Development (Third Edition)**

by Gillie Bolton

London: Sage Publications (2010).

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Reviewed by **Susan Kahn**

Bolton clearly enjoys reflective practice. Demanding but rewarding, expressive, deep and heartfelt – she writes persuasively about the positive and holistic powers of reflective practice. She presents reflective practice as more than a one dimensional reflection of our lives but as a ‘creative adventure’, allowing us to analyse our experiences and learn from them through our writing. Bolton is convinced that reflective practice can be politically, socially and psychologically useful.

This third edition of *Reflective Practice* invites the reader to engage dynamically in the process. Its intended audience is broad – from social workers and healthcare professionals to therapists and counsellors, professional services and consultancy. The author’s passion is evident and the language will not appeal to those who like to keep a distance from their work. This is indeed the point – she encourages a deep immersion and thorough self-questioning – an exploration of the gaps between the known and the unknown, the habitual and the possible. In reflective practice she argues there is a space to consider alternative answers and a space to admit we do not know all the answers. Her writing is aimed at those who are interested in engaging in reflective practice via ‘through-the-mirror writing’; founded on the principles that uncertainty, combined with playful creativity and a commitment to constant questioning will lead us to a better understanding of ourselves. The reader is taken gently through the process with lots of examples and guidance along the way.

The text is liberally sprinkled with quotations and references from practitioners, scholars, philosophers and key thinkers. Prepare to read prose that contains references to A. A. Milne alongside Einstein, Coleridge alongside ancient Zen Buddhist texts, Confucius alongside Wordsworth and Lewis Carroll alongside Simone de Beauvoir. Her premise is simple; our thoughts and actions are worthy of detailed examination and the unconsidered is well worth considering.

The book is divided into three sections. Section one focuses on the pedagogical principles and theoretical background; for example the difference between reflection and reflexivity. Each of the five chapters in this section ends with a series of exercises that invite the reader to ‘write to learn’. Section two gives a detailed practitioner’s guide for students - and for those facilitating learning - in how to enthuse and energise learning in this way. This section includes guidance on writing and learning journals, assessment and evaluation and using reflective writing for team development. Finally the book unravels ‘through-the-mirror’ writing by focussing on the foundations of reflective writing and explores other forms such as narrative, metaphor and poetry. There is an accompanying website with additional exercises, reference to further reading, web links and power point presentations.

Chapter one makes the case for reflective practice and introduces 'through-the-mirror' writing. Reflective practice is not presented as an agenda item but more a state of mind that allows exploration and experimentation in a state of mindfulness. Intuitive and spontaneous, this writing is introduced for the purpose of self-illumination. It acknowledges that it can be unsettling, cause writers to explore their ethical foundations and takes time yet Bolton claims that this practice can genuinely affect practitioners' lives and those around them. She is up front about the commitment required to adopt critical reflection of this kind and the unsettling nature of questioning assumptions and practice. She writes of 'spirited enquiry' leading to constructive developmental change. She helps the reader unpick the difference between reflection and reflexivity – the former allows us to learn and develop by examining what we think happened on a given occasion and how that might have been perceived – the latter is more complex and involves strategies to question our attitudes, assumptions, values and habits and our complex role in relation to others. Reflexivity demands that we ask of ourselves what part we play in creating structures and practices. No aspect of practice is seen as too big or too small for this treatment. Chapter 2 continues to explain reflection and reflexivity – making sense of experiences and also drawing on ethical values and using the trope of film to explore these two concepts more deeply. This chapter brings in examples of practitioners story writing. Chapter 3 offers educational models based on ethical principles. It tackles some messy issues, such as emotional responses, faulty practice, forgiveness and confidentiality. She draws on Carl Rogers, among others, to explore issues such as liberation and unconditional regard. This chapter brings in the notion of reflective practice as an educative process.

Should you at this point be thinking that reflective practice facilitators need to be therapists this might be understandable. A therapeutic understanding would certainly help, but the author suggests clear ground rules of operation, confidentiality and a system of supervisors/mentors or co-peer mentoring can help manage distress. Chapter 4 reveals the three foundations of the through-the-mirror approach: certain uncertainty; serious playfulness and unquestioning questioning. A grieving health professional explains the benefits of reflective practice in addressing the challenges of her professional life at a time of vulnerability. After adopting reflective practise she says "I have found that I can be more myself professionally..." Chapter 5 closes this section with the theory that through-the-mirror writing is itself a reflective and reflexive process with many benefits such as helping the writer to face up to difficulties and to act as a stress reducer.

Section 2 begins with Chapter 6 which outlines the five stages of through-the-mirror writing beginning with the 'Six Minutes' Write' then telling the story; reading and responding; sharing your writing and developing the writing. Chapter 7 guides the reader on the wherewithal of the learning journal and Chapter 8 tackles assessment. Assessment is potentially corrupting for reflective practice and Bolton acknowledges this but makes the case for appropriate assessment such as self or peer assessment. Chapter 9 brings us group work; how this can be powerfully facilitative and bonding, but also potentially painful. Bolton gives guidance on group life and explores the role of the facilitator. This chapter leads on to Chapter 10 that covers the potential of through-the-mirror reflective practice for teams. The section ends with Chapter 11 that pushes the boundaries of reflective practice with vehicles such as e-learning. The six chapters in this section also end with a series of exercises 'write to learn' but these are more directed and would be useful tools for those wishing to share reflective practice with students, colleagues or clients.

The last four chapters of the book offer a rich discussion of the concepts introduced in the book and again offer detailed 'write to learn' exercises that encourage the reader to write, reflect and if appropriate share with trusted circles. Chapter 12 makes the case for narrative writing as a fundamental sense making tool, the power of stories and our storied nature and how writing our own life stories allows the writer to take responsibility for those tales and the re-storying of ourselves. Chapter 13 stresses the importance of metaphor and the need to

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question the meaning of our habitual metaphors. If this is not enough for the reader Bolton closes her book with a chapter devoted to other ways to re-write the self – with parody, poetry, children's writing, folk tale or myth.

Bolton's overall argument is persuasive; anyone involved in the academic world or in a 'thinking' profession would find it hard to challenge the suggestion that the process of writing is developmental, helping to identify gaps in knowledge and adding to the journey of exploration of one's assumptions, ideas and knowledge. What she does is to take the reader on a step-by-step tour of the possible avenues of exploration, offering guidance along the way and tools for those who might need a helping hand on their journey. There is a paradox here however; this is no simple 'how to guide'. Instead, it requires serious engagement and suspension of our current, and sometimes well-established, custom to benefit from the power of reflective practice.

Bolton's style may not appeal to a normative reader, seeking a single truth. She recognises the messy, complex and rich nature of self discovery and the part we play in creating the narrative of our lives. Her writing reflects this with layer upon layer of possibilities.