

# Challenges of Critical Reflection: 'Nothing Ventured, Nothing Gained'

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*This paper arises from the experiences of the authors in providing critical reflection training to social workers and health professionals. It examines the cultural challenges involved in undertaking critical reflection, and how such challenges may contribute to learning. We examine the nature of some of these risks and what might be at stake, and how we as educators might manage these in the interests of better learning. First we discuss the concept of critical reflection and the particular approach we take. We then analyse the nature of some of the risks involved by examining the cultural challenges that are at stake. Lastly we posit some strategies to reduce risk and maximise learning.*

*We outline three major types of cultural assumptions which are challenged by critical reflection. These include assumptions regarding interpersonal communication and dialogue, professional helping and workplace cultures, and regarding knowledge, learning, research and the place of emotions. The implications of these challenges include: the appropriateness of critical reflection for all types of learners; the need for emotional preparation for the critical reflection process; the need to emphasise the professional learning purposes; the need to clarify the use of self-disclosure; and the need to set up an appropriate alternative cultural environment for the purpose of critical reflection.*

*Keywords: Critical Reflection; Critical Incident; Self Disclosure; Professional Growth; Social Change; Learning from Practice; Anti-Reflective Cultures; Interpersonal Cultures; Professional Helping Cultures; Knowledge and Learning Cultures*

## Introduction and Background

The concerns of this paper arise directly out of our experiences, separately and together, in teaching critical reflection, and in particular, what to make of, and how

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to deal with, the threats and challenges posed by the process for learners. Our approach to teaching critical reflection involves a small group of learners using a piece of professional practice experience as material to be reflected upon with assistance from peers. Participants are asked to describe a 'critical incident', defined as an incident significant to their professional practice (Fook *et al.*, 2000; Fook, 2004a). Despite the fact that 'significant' may be interpreted as either negative or positive, the overwhelming majority of participants often raise incidents which were traumatic, and become distressed in the discussion of these, or they may disclose later that the discussion raised related, but more personal, traumatic experiences. In some cases, participants may feel an unwanted pressure to disclose incompetence, rather than a more positive opportunity to learn from their experience. Sometimes participants express the desire to 'protect' others from strong feelings, and the risk of challenge, which might be evoked by the critical reflection process.

Yet despite these misgivings, participants often report transformative changes as a result of undertaking the critical reflection process (Fook, 2004b, 2004c; Fook & Askeland, 2006). Therefore we believe it is important to consider more deeply the nature of the threats or risks involved in critical reflection in order to preserve the opportunity for deep learning. In particular, we want to examine how our analysis and understanding of the nature of these risks might allow us to harness the power of critical reflection for more effective learning.

If we understand critical reflection as involving the unearthing of deeper assumptions (Mezirow, 2000), then we would argue that this unearthing also involves identifying previously unquestioned cultural norms. To make matters more complicated, these norms are often associated with several different cultures, or sub-cultures, which form part of the, often unquestioned, context in which it is practised.

The challenge of confronting more culturally embedded ideas constitutes one of the major challenges of critical reflection. We have termed it a challenge because we see it as a 'double-edged sword': it can be a very potent way of confronting 'sticking points' or previously unresolvable dilemmas; but its effectiveness may be limited because of the misunderstanding, resistance and anxiety which can result when deep-seated assumptions are questioned. To 'venture' involves risks, but with the potential for great gain. And it is a gain which may not be easily achieved in other ways.

In this paper therefore our main concern is to examine the nature of some of these risks and what might be at stake, and how we as educators might manage these in the interests of better learning. We have organised the paper in the following way: first we discuss the concept of critical reflection and the particular approach we take. We then analyse the nature of some of the risks involved by examining the cultural challenges that are at stake. Lastly we posit some strategies to reduce risk and maximise learning.

### **Our Model of Critical Reflection**

Our model is based on the idea that critical reflection involves the identification of deep-seated assumptions, but with the primary purpose of bringing about some improvements in professional practice (Fook & Askeland, 2006; Fook, *in press*).

What makes such reflection critical is the focus on power (Brookfield, 1995, p. 8) which allows the reflective process to be transformative, especially when linked with the basic ideas of critical theory (Fook, 2002, pp. 40–41). In this latter sense, critical reflection must incorporate an understanding of personal experiences within social, cultural and structural contexts. Ultimately, through critical reflection on deep assumptions, especially about the social world and the individual person's connection with it, a person should be able to become more empowered in acting within and upon her or his social world.

Our process of critical reflection involves small peer groups of participants, usually social work students or social work or health professionals. In the group the participants assist each other to reflect on an example of their professional practice experience. These examples are normally 'critical incidents': a specific and concrete example of some piece of practice which was significant for the participant (Fook *et al.*, 2000; Thomas, 2004). The participants' descriptions of these incidents are then used as material for reflection. Participants act as peer reflectors, assisting each other to critically reflect using a set of guidelines and questions designed to help unearth more deeply held assumptions. These questions are loosely based on the work of Schon (1983, 1987); the notion of reflexivity (Taylor & White, 2000); some postmodern and deconstructive thinking and critical social theory (see Fook, 2004a for further discussion).

### **The Cultural Challenge**

What do we mean by culture? In simple terms, we are referring to the embedded, and often implicit or tacit beliefs about what is normal or acceptable behaviour or ideas in our reference groups. Assumptions about these may of course vary in type and depth. More superficial assumptions might include, for example, beliefs about proper customs, whereas deeper assumptions might include, for example, those about what constitutes legitimate knowledge.

A culture may be shared by a group as large as a nation, a profession or as small as a family or group of friends. It refers to the thinking and behaviour which is taken-for-granted yet which often defines a group. It is perhaps becoming more commonly recognised that culture, as a description of the way people group and identify themselves, is becoming an accepted way of understanding workplace dynamics (Solomon, 1999; Aadland, 1994).

Our model of critical reflection aims to challenge cultures, that is, the preconceived ideas which are embedded in practices, in order to examine and change them if they do not fit with the stated ideals of individual professionals. We believe that professionals should be able to interpret and understand themselves and the implicit ideas in their reactions and actions. It therefore may become threatening when underlying assumptions which they have not been aware of, and which may have remained hidden for many different reasons, become highlighted through critical reflection. Because the influence of many different levels and types of cultural

groupings may be operating in any one practice situation, this means that there are many different ways in which critical reflection can be experienced as challenging.

In the next section of the paper, we will outline some of the cultures we believe are more likely to be operating in social work educational and supervision settings. We discuss three main types of cultures which are challenged by a critical reflection approach.

### **Cultural Norms Regarding Interpersonal Relating**

Critical reflection seems to challenge norms regarding acceptable forms of interpersonal relating, especially regarding personal privacy. For example, it may be a cultural norm in some countries to preserve a public face by pretending a situation is fine even when the person feels it might not be. We may assume that to admit mistakes and insufficiencies can make us vulnerable as it can be used against us. It therefore also makes us reluctant to interfere in other people's lives, even if we might suspect there is something wrong. This can apply to both our private lives and work related situations.

Brookfield (1995) notes the influence of some cultures regarding interpersonal relating, especially with regard to teaching settings. He discusses three types of these cultures which can mitigate against critical reflection: the cultures of silence, individualism and secrecy. We discuss more details of these cultures in relation to educational cultures further on, but at this point it is useful to note that these three 'anti-reflective' cultures may have implications for what people assume to be acceptable norms for communicating with other professionals in a group situation. Thus in our experience the critical reflection questioning process can often be experienced as too intrusive, too personal or too confronting, and the process is sometimes labelled as 'bombarding' or 'interrogation' because of its concreteness and directness. It appears to contravene unspoken cultures around what is regarded as polite public behaviour with regard to more personal topics.

It is also relevant to note that silence and speaking might have different meanings in various countries, and therefore have to be interpreted in its cultural context. For example, for Japanese people silence may imply truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment or defiance as well as a way of gaining social acceptance or to avoid penalty. Even when asked a question, they may prefer to remain silent until they have heard others' opinions. For Chinese people silence may indicate politeness to the speaker or reflection and assessment of the situation (Askeland & Payne, 2002).

Of course, one of the more obvious norms operating here is the desire to protect oneself from criticism or negative judgment or disapproval. It is often assumed that airing doubts and vulnerabilities may leave a person open to misuse or exploitation.

### **Professional Helping Cultures and Workplace Culture**

We often become aware that a culture is being challenged when participants express extreme discomfort either when their practice, or that of others, is closely scrutinised.

On many occasions, they speak about wanting to 'support', 'take care of' or 'protect' the person who is critically reflecting on their work, and often continue to be concerned about this, even when the person who is reflecting says they are not uncomfortable, or chooses to continue.

Many of these challenges to professional helping cultures can be seen as stemming from the perhaps more traditional 'therapeutic' traditions of some professions, which is contrasted with the more 'educational' orientation of critical reflection. One common example of this is questioning the acceptability of asking 'why' questions. Many participants express reluctance to word questions in this way, stating that as social workers or therapists they were taught never to ask them (see i.e. Hepworth *et al.*, 2002; Compton *et al.*, 2005; Berg, 1994; Ivey, 1994). It may be that in more counselling-oriented cultures, 'why' questions are associated with the objectivity of positivism and are therefore disapproved of, and may be considered to provoke defence. Yet in the process of critical reflection, these very questions may be fundamental to bringing about some deep-seated changes. According to Brookfield & Preskill (1999, p. 90) 'Questions that provoke students to explore cause-and-effect linkages are fundamental to developing critical thought'.

In fact, the tensions experienced by the perceived differences between therapy and education/supervision, appear to be integral to the challenge of critical reflection for many participants; yet mutual interaction between the social professionals, the people they assist and their contexts are integral to professional practice. It is therefore inevitable that personal issues will be involved in the normal professional role, whether it is therapeutic, educational or supervisory in its primary function.

Following are five different types of professional cultures (or aspects of cultures), and one workplace culture, which, from our experience, appear to be challenged by the critical reflection process.

#### *i. Professional Relations Influenced by Cultural Norms in the Society*

Similar norms regarding interpersonal relating and dialogue may exist in both society at large and in particular professional cultures, albeit perhaps for different reasons. For example, in social work and some counselling professions, where interpersonal micro-skills have been learnt, there may be an implicit value placed on empathic listening styles as opposed to direct questioning which is seen as more confronting. This may be reinforced by micro-skills textbooks which tend to place the learning of listening skills before skills of questioning or confronting, which are hardly mentioned if at all (Johnson & Yanca, 2004; Shulman, 1999; Kokkinn, 2005; Aamodt, 1997; Berg, 1994; Ivey, 1994; Ohnstad, 1993). Hepworth *et al.* (2002) is a rare exception as they discuss in detail when confrontation of clients will be relevant. Shulman (1999) claims that social workers fear confronting colleagues about their practice. It is a paradox also that counsellors and social workers may ask clients for more sensitive information than would be acceptable to ask friends and colleagues.

### *ii. Assumptions Relating to the Construction of 'Client' Identity*

Practitioners in the helping professions often work with people who are disadvantaged or vulnerable in some way, usually for the purpose of assistance, support, treatment or therapy in various forms. In social work, this is usually associated, both in Australia and Norway, with a strong social justice orientation, and of course, in most Westernised countries as well, a strong therapeutic tradition. This may lead to workers constructing particular identities for 'clients' (Fook, 2002, p. 79) which may involve assuming that they will be victims (Moffat, 1999), relatively powerless, have rights to assistance, and perhaps have difficult or anti-social behaviour tolerated because of their disadvantaged position and yet, should be treated as equals and empowered. This thinking is supported by codes of ethics which reinforce the ideas of acceptance and non-judgmentality (IFSW/IASSW Ethical Document, 2004). Even though colleagues are obviously not clients, in our experience such assumptions often carry over into the culture of the way professional colleagues relate to each other.

### *iii. A 'Task-focused' Orientation*

In our experience with critical reflection groups, participants often demonstrate a need or a desire to provide an immediate solution, or actions to 'fix' a situation. They will often try to suggest 'answers' to a problem situation, and seem uncomfortable with allowing a person to 'sit with' or simply experience a difficulty or tension. In a busy everyday work situation, many professionals say they are not used to having time to reflect—this may contribute to a culture which helps them avoid the discomfort of close scrutiny of their performance.

### *iv. A Culture of 'Objectivity'*

This influence of assumptions about objectivity in professional practice is often unearthed when people reflect on specific instances of their work. Perhaps this is related to a pervading underlying therapeutic tradition. We have found that from the practices discussed in our critical reflection groups, this often translates into avoiding what is considered personal. This is often characterised as value judgments, emotional reactions, or individual experiences and background. Indeed, such aspects of practice are often discounted as 'unprofessional' and many workers experience dilemmas in feeling that they are not able to integrate personal attributes into professional practice (Fook, 2004c). These kinds of assumptions obviously require questioning in order for people to learn from their personal, and often emotional, experience. This point is reinforced by Stuart (2001, p. 174) who says that in critical reflection it is difficult to distinguish between the 'self as me' and the 'self as a professional'.

### *v. Self-disclosure*

Self-disclosure, and some hidden assumptions about its use and validity, has also proved to be a difficult issue. Social workers', counsellors' and therapists'

self-disclosure has been frequently discussed in the professional literature (see i.e. Maram & Rice, 2002; Trotter, 1999; Wubbolding & Brickell, 1999; Kadushin, 1990; Johnson, 1990; Hepworth *et al.*, 2002). The idea of disclosure itself has been referred to as an ideology (Hepworth *et al.*, 2002). Wubbolding & Brickell point out that much counselling literature cautions against self-disclosure as contravening professional behaviour. Nevertheless, it is also accepted that self-disclosure may convey profound empathy and bring about significant change (Wubbolding & Brickell, 1999; Webb, 1996). Self-disclosure may have two different meanings; to share the therapist's, social worker's or facilitator's feelings and reactions in the shared situation or to reveal one's own experiences (Reid, 1997; Johnson, 1990). It is particularly the latter which is discouraged, emphasising the danger of the professional becoming the focus which can be distractive and confusing to the other party (Maram & Rice, 2002). The professional literature emphasises that the therapist, social worker or facilitator should never become the focus of the group. Yet this is exactly what the intention is when a facilitator models critical reflection by presenting his/her critical incident to the participants of a group. In this sense, the critical reflection process directly contradicts strongly held beliefs about the uses of self-disclosure.

#### *vi. The Procedural Culture of the Workplace*

Current workplace cultures work against critical reflection as they become more and more procedure and regulation based. The demand from the environment is that 'Students must be ready for, not critical of, practice' (Preston-Shoot, 2000, p. 88). Reflection about the work of social workers is not encouraged, as managers' main concerns are whether they follow procedures. Yet, it can be argued that social workers are faced with many uncertain and complex situations that are emotionally provoking and therefore cannot be handled by simply following procedures (Ruch, 2002; Fook *et al.*, 2000; Fook, 2007). Tension between bureaucratic routines and professional demands often causes anxiety. Therefore the more social work is conducted according to procedures, rules and risk assessments, the more it will reinforce the anxiety about not performing correctly. Ruch (2002, p. 202) claims that anxiety is the most common obstacle to reflection. In this sense then, current workplace cultures might not only directly discourage reflection, but they may also create conditions which make it more difficult. Thus workers who try to be critically reflective without a congruent workplace environment may feel that they are committing 'cultural suicide' (Brookfield, 1994, pp. 208–209) in being cut off, or marginalised from the mainstream culture in which they must operate and which has sustained them.

### **Knowledge and Learning Culture**

In this section we discuss the culture of assumptions which underpins what we deem to be appropriate or legitimate knowledge and the processes by which this is derived.

Our model of critical reflection is based upon assumptions in two key areas: regarding the nature of knowledge, learning and research; and the place of the personal and the emotional in learning.

In a traditional hierarchy of knowledge, technical knowledge, and knowledge gained through formal education, is most highly regarded. We are socialised to believe that intellectual knowledge has the highest value. Schon (1987) might term this knowledge 'technical-rationality'. The skills which are gained through action, such as manual and perceptual skills, or through socialisation, such as cultural skills, are less highly regarded (Collins, 1990). This means, of course, that it is the knowledge gained through everyday experience which is placed at the bottom of the hierarchy. The culture of critical reflection constitutes a direct challenge to this hierarchy as it in fact privileges concrete experience, and the innate ability of the person, as sources of knowledge.

In our model of critical reflection we assume that knowledge is at least partly created by people, through interaction and dialogue in a social and political context. Individual people are in this sense also researchers of their professional practice, in that they must collect and process knowledge in order to act in a meaningful way within their contexts. The role of personal and emotional experience is therefore as important in framing knowledge, as are cognitive abilities and behaviours, since the whole person is the research instrument. This means that personal and emotional experiences are crucial as food for learning and change in critical reflection. Yet to draw on personal experiences in order to gain general knowledge is not traditionally acknowledged as scientifically acceptable. Further, it is not recognised that what new knowledge we are able to take into possession depends on our personal experiences, opinions, values, and emotions.

Much of the literature on learning and critical reflection, and transformational learning (Brookfield, 2001, p. 142) notes that the emotional element is crucial and regarded as a necessary adjunct for critical reflection. This may take the form of first empathically recognising that the emotional experience is a necessary condition for developing a more connected knowing (Mezirow, 2000, p. 14). Alternatively it may simply involve using the emotions as an impetus to drive change (Wong *et al.*, 2002; Taylor, 2001, p. 305).

In an academic setting, these assumptions about knowledge seriously challenge more traditional ideas about learning. The educational experience is often implicitly constructed as objective, theoretical, rational, competitive, adversarial, and individualistic. The learning processes therefore, are often opposingly constructed as less valued, or not legitimate. This is indeed the case for the learning from critical reflection which often involves personal experience disclosure, in supportive group environments, incorporating the emotions and encouraging divergent and ambiguous thinking.

In the traditional classroom a rational and intellectual approach to teaching and learning often dominates. Very seldom are emotions revealed. Educational culture is often also competitive. Students are encouraged to demonstrate only their best



abilities and are indeed assessed on these, and it is therefore embarrassing or foolhardy to reveal incompetence or ignorance. This also applies to educators.

Critical reflection, however, relies on being open to consciously or unconsciously disclosing to others what is not understood in order to learn from it. To thrive, critical reflection therefore requires quite a different climate from the generally accepted educational culture.

Brookfield (1995) notes three types of related cultures, which we mentioned briefly earlier, which operate in educational settings and which can militate against critical reflection: the cultures of silence, individualism and secrecy. These three cultures are inter-related to some extent.

The culture of silence refers to the assumption that teaching is a private activity, and the resulting lack of open talk about the experience, the ups and downs and meaning of teaching. The culture of individualism is that which works against collaborative activities and assumes that all can be solved through the heroic efforts of individuals. The culture of secrecy is that which works against self-disclosure, and punishes mistakes or shortcomings. These three cultures seem to operate in social work education settings.

Another learning culture which may be challenged by critical reflection is that of the 'argument culture' (Tannen, 1998). This is an adversarial culture which conditions us to believe that the 'truth' can be arrived at only through debate or 'fight' between opposing sides. This involves believing that there are only two sides, and one must be dominant in order to settle differences. This sort of culture tends to oversimplify complexities and to emphasise differences. It militates against understanding of differences and arriving at consensus positions. In this type of culture, a critical reflection approach, which values multiple perspectives, appreciating different viewpoints, and the holding of contradictions, may pose a serious threat to what may feel like the certainty involved in more adversarial ways of knowing.

Brookfield notes a similar phenomenon to the above, which he terms 'lost innocence' (1994, pp. 209–210). This is sometimes experienced by adult educators in critical reflection, when 'an intellectual appreciation of the importance of contextuality and ambiguity comes to exist alongside an emotional craving for revealed truth' (p. 210). He quotes More (1974, p. 69) referring to the experience of critical reflection as involving 'the agonizing grief of colluding in the death of someone who he knows was himself' (Brookfield, 1994, p. 210). This captures very neatly the experience of challenge and change involved in the critical reflection process.

### **Implications of These Challenges**

The approach to the critical reflection process that we use clearly poses a series of challenges to deeply held assumptions which are in turn embedded in a number of cultures in which we operate. We have outlined three major types of cultural assumptions which we have experienced as being challenged by critical reflection. These include, firstly, assumptions regarding interpersonal communication and dialogue, incorporating norms around personal privacy and confrontation by

non-direct questioning. Secondly, professional helping and workplace cultures, including a value on listening rather than confrontation, constructions of clients as 'victims', a 'task' or 'solution'-focused approach, objectivity, avoidance of professional self-disclosure, and a procedure-focused workplace. Lastly, assumptions regarding knowledge, learning, research and the place of emotions, including a value on rational and theoretically generalisable knowledge; a competitive educational culture; educational cultures of silence, individualism and secrecy; an argument culture; and the silencing of the emotions.

Whilst we would argue that the process of critical reflection can and must involve change, and therefore some degree of challenge to dearly held cultural norms, a major question remains as to how to maximise the learning whilst at the same time minimising the risk involved. As Brookfield so aptly points out, there is a 'dark side' to critical reflection (1994). How do we use our knowledge of the dark side, or the down side of the critical reflection experience to inform our better practice as critical reflectors and as educators?

In addressing these questions, let us examine some of the main issues which arise from the foregoing discussion.

Clearly there are many different questions raised by the potential cultural challenges inherent in the practice of critical reflection. In our own practice we have been led to question whether critical reflection is equally appropriate for all types of learners, or whether individual and cultural differences might in some cases preclude significant learning from critical reflection. Maybe there is more need to understand the role of difference in learning from critical reflection. Cranton (2000) provides some helpful discussion on the implications of different learning and cognitive styles for critical reflection. As well it may be that some cultural groups (for example men) are more comfortable with technical rationality, so more time may need to be taken in preparing the educational culture for such groups.

There may be a need to consider the different emotional experiences of individual participants: some may experience it as potentially damaging. Therefore there is a need to adequately prepare learners for the challenges of critical reflection. For example, much of the literature on critical reflection, which is primarily developed in Western English speaking countries, and transformational learning to which it is related (Mezirow, 2000, p.11), acknowledges the need for a type of personal or emotional maturity in order to engage in critical reflection.

Another important implication is the need to make clear the purposes of critical reflection—in our case it is specifically for professional learning rather than a more generalised emotional or personal therapy. In this sense, emotional or personal aspects would only be addressed in so far as they affected professional practice, and only then with as much informed consent of the participants as possible. Brookfield makes a similar point about ensuring the informed consent of participants when he discusses the 'dark side' of critical reflection—he suggests:

Full disclosure—the attempt by educators to make as clear as possible to learners the qualities, risks and likely consequences of the experience they are about to

undergo—is a condition of authenticity in any educational encounter, but it is particularly important in education for critical reflection. (Brookfield, 1994, p. 215)

An additional clear implication of our foregoing discussion is the need to clarify the use of disclosure. In critical reflection the purpose of disclosure by the facilitator is to build a trusting learning atmosphere and test out and show the participants that it is safe to take a risk. The timing of the professional's self-disclosure is crucial here (Maram & Rice, 2002). The professional person's self-disclosure gives the participants an opportunity to practise and become comfortable with asking reflective questions. However, the presentation has to strike a balance between an involvement in working out the incident which genuinely concerns the facilitator, and not unduly raising the anxiety of participants by presenting an overwhelming story that might become too difficult for them to handle. The facilitator's presentation and critical reflection will be crucial and influence the climate for the participants' willingness or ability to self-disclose. It is expected that the participants' sharing will follow the facilitator's example (Kadushin, 1990). In this sense, the facilitator is modelling appropriate self-disclosure—one which balances risk taken with potential learning to be gained.

In connection with the idea of appropriate self-disclosure, it may be helpful to make a distinction between what is meant by 'personal' and 'private'. While 'personal' is related to the person's abilities, characteristics and qualities, 'private' is connected to situations and contexts (Leenderts, 1997). This helps us define the limits for what to share. Without this distinction exposing personal vulnerabilities may be experienced as going against professional and organisational culture. In these instances, even though participants might have a personal predilection to acknowledging vulnerabilities, they choose to be defensive because of their workplace culture. However, as critical incidents are linked to specific situations and contexts, they might touch private areas as a basis and condition for new learning about their own performance and the social and political context in which it took place.

Lastly, it appears crucial that since critical reflection involves challenging some fairly fundamental cultures, an appropriate alternative culture is set up for the process to occur. Establishing a culture for critical reflection is therefore one of the major requirements for a successful learning experience. Indeed we would argue that critical reflection is as much about establishing an enabling culture as it is about using effective techniques. When starting a critical reflection group, a new culture has to be established which takes into account that a common 'fear-of-group' (Shulman, 1999) might be reinforced by a fear of being judged by colleagues.

Mezirow has termed this type of climate 'reflective discourse' which includes access to accurate information, freedom from coercion, an ability to weigh evidence and assess arguments objectively as well as openness to other perspectives and new ideas. Elsewhere this has been termed 'critical acceptance' (Fook *et al.*, 2000) referring to a type of climate in which it is safe to challenge old ideas and try new ones. We should point out that we are in the main referring to the micro-climate which an educator can relatively easily establish within the confines of an educational programme or

group. There may, of course, be different issues involved in establishing such a culture in a broader workplace environment.

This climate would include principles of creating a trusting environment which minimises the risk involved in self-disclosure and maximises the encouragement to be open to new and different perspectives. This may comprise a commitment to confidentiality and to non-judgment of perspectives and practices. A climate for challenge in this sense does not imply criticism or judgment, but rather an opportunity to examine different perspectives in a non-threatening environment. Such a climate should enable responsibility or an increased sense of personal agency, as opposed to a feeling of blame. Critical reflection should thus provide an environment in which people can see increased opportunities for personal action, as opposed to feeling restricted by their past inadequacies.

## Conclusion

The approach to the critical reflection process that we use clearly poses a series of challenges to deeply held assumptions which are in turn embedded in a number of cultures in which we operate. We have outlined three major types of cultural assumptions which are challenged by critical reflection. These include assumptions regarding interpersonal communication and dialogue, professional helping and workplace cultures, and regarding knowledge, learning, research and the place of emotions. The implications of these challenges included: the appropriateness of critical reflection for all types of learners; the need for emotional preparation for the critical reflection process; the need to emphasise the professional learning purposes; the need to clarify the use of self-disclosure; and the need to set up an appropriate alternative cultural environment for the purpose of critical reflection.

In closing we would like to emphasise that in our model the purposes of critical reflection are professional growth and social change. Furthermore to enable this process it is helpful for the facilitator to familiarise the participants with the three cultures that we have discussed, and how they might inhibit critical reflection. This will lay the groundwork for establishing the appropriate cultural climate in the group.

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Accepted March 2005