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Introduction

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INTERFACE

Reflection-in-action, still engaging the professional?

Introduction

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In his seminal book *The Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schön (1983) introduced “reflection-in-action” in answer to the apparent difficulty of professionals in dealing with the dilemmas of the contemporary world. According to Schön, when confronted with situations of complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict professionals cannot just rely on technical rationality or advocacy. In such situations, the assumptions of objectivity and neutrality of technical rationality do not hold. In choosing sides, advocacy exposes the limits of these assumptions. However, it also circumvents the issue of what the autonomous contribution of expert knowledge is. When faced with complex problems professionals must rather, according to Schön, engage in a “reflective conversation with the situation”, geared at identifying problems and exploring solutions, progressively and tentatively, and in close interaction with those involved. In this way they can not only develop effective professional knowledge, but also help the political debate become more reflective, and thus help society to learn to address complex problems. Schön found evidence for his claims in a variety of professional domains, including planning.

However, Schön also and crucially noted that professional institutions seemed not to recognize the centrality of reflection-in-action to the development of professional knowledge. Cultivating reflection-in-action required the worlds of professional research, education and practice to interact tightly, and they seemed rather to be drifting apart. In his view, it was instead essential for professional knowledge development that researchers engage with action, practice build-in space for systematic reflection, and for education to proceed along cycles of acting and reflecting. He contended that:

The extent of our capacity for reciprocal reflection-in-action can be discovered only through an action science which seeks to make what some of us do on rare occasions into a dominant pattern of science. (Schön 1983, p. 354)

Almost three decades have passed, but Schön’s message still resonates, or does it? How relevant is his message for contemporary planning practice, education, and research? Is reflection-in-action still a valid model for the development of professional knowledge? And if this is the case, do professional institutions and society at large still need to be reminded of it? Do planning academics still engage too little with practice? Do planning practitioners still not reflect systematically enough? Do students still not get enough opportunities of learning through cycles of acting and reflecting? Do societal debates still lack the reflexivity that professionals could contribute? And finally, if all of this is true, and not happening, why is that so, and what we can do about it?

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With these questions in mind I embarked on the inquiry that resulted in this *Interface*. Were these questions shared by others, and did they perhaps also have answers? The choice of travel companions was not random. They all were people that I felt to be engaged, in one way or another, explicitly or implicitly, with Schön's legacy. I did not limit myself, however, to the planning field, as I saw strong correspondences in neighbouring disciplines, here including political science, environmental science, management and organization, and urban design. In the following pages, this variety of disciplines (and, of course, of individual personalities) intersects with differences in the vantage point (education, research and/or practice). The outcome is a kaleidoscope of registers and perspectives, of different ways of looking at the same questions, and thus, I hope, a quintessential "reflective conversation" with Schön's own thought.

Political scientist and former colleague David Laws starts this quest by pinpointing the essence of Schön's message and its relevance for the challenges facing contemporary society. Next, planner and educator Marilyn Higgins discusses the relevance of Schön's ideas to the education of planners, but also the practical obstacles to their implementation. She is followed by environmental scientists Roland Stauffacher Scholz and Michael, who describe a teaching programme at ETH in Zürich that in many ways seems to have incorporated these ideas. The contribution of management and organization scientist Joan Ernst van Aken shifts the attention to research, addressing the question of which paradigm research should follow in disciplines such as planning directed at not just understanding but also changing the world. Finally, urban designer Thomas Sieverts documents a "reflective conversation with the situation" in his own professional practice, the transformation of the former steel works in Bochum, Germany into an urban park. In a short concluding note, I will try to summarize the findings.

Reference

Schön, D.A. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner. How Professionals Think in Action* (New York, Basic Books).

Practising "Beyond the Stable State"

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The giraffe, "the creature with whom he identified: long-necked, graceful, curious, aloof", is how David Warsh (1997) referred to Don Schön in a tribute written soon after Don's death. Warsh's account captures something of what it was like to encounter Don, something like, I suppose, it would be to encounter a giraffe: not easy to disregard and not so easy to approach either, especially for the first time. If you were curious enough to engage Don in conversation, however, you encountered a particular and instructive form of curiosity that provided valuable insights into his work. There would, of course, be new insights into the project you were working on and the way you were working on it, but you would also find yourself becoming curious about the conversation itself. Don was

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