

**It's not what you do; it's the way that you question: that's what gets results**

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# **It's not what you do; it's the way that you question: that's what gets results.**

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## **Introduction**

We are both university lecturers based within the Autism Centre at Sheffield Hallam University. People who have a professional and/or a personal interest in the autism spectrum study with us on a range of part or full time courses at undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Over time we have come to realise that many of our students are attracted to the courses because they are looking for answers to professional dilemmas and expect us to have the answers. What we offer them instead are questions.

This paper explores the value of questions in the development of professional practice. Although the questions we work through with our students are designed to support them with their practice with pupils on the autism spectrum, within this paper we illustrate the value of the questions with examples from our own practice of working with students within the university. This is because the questions that we propose, to support reflective practice, apply whatever the nature of the learner.

The first section of the paper will evaluate the role of reflective thinking in the teaching and learning process. The second section will then propose questions that

we believe support educators with finding their own answers to the situations that challenge them.

The terms 'educator' and 'teacher' are used throughout this paper to refer to anyone involved with enabling the learning of others. As such they include, parents/carers, learning support assistants, teachers and health professionals. Child and pupil are also used but the processes discussed apply to learners of any age.

### **The role of reflection on practice**

The role of reflective thinking in developing teachers' understanding of their practice has long been appreciated by educational theorists (Schon, 1983; Cochran Smith and Lytle, 1999; Atkinson, 2000) and is based on John Dewey's original conceptualisation of how teachers work (Dewey, 1933 cited Pollard, 2005). Pollard (2005) considers reflective action to involve a willingness to engage in constant self-appraisal and development. It implies flexibility, rigorous analysis and social awareness

Moon (1999), writing about reflection, describes it as a form of mental processing - like a form of thinking - that we may use to fulfil a purpose or to achieve some anticipated outcome. Alternatively, we can simply be 'reflective', and then an outcome can be unexpected. Moon uses the term 'reflection' to refer to the process of considering relatively complex or ill-structured ideas for which there is not an obvious solution and which involves the further processing of knowledge and understanding that we already possess. Typically reflection or reflective learning is likely to involve a conscious and stated purpose for the reflection, in the sense that we have a question or issue that is puzzling us and we want to work out ways of

addressing it. In this way teachers may reflect on an aspect of their practice, using their past knowledge and experience to allow them to run ideas through their minds, to try to find an answer to the challenging question, to consider how their practice is developing, whether it might be changed or improved in some way, to identify elements of success and the reasons for that. Any teaching is a complex social process and it is naïve to consider that there can be easy 'one-size-fits-all' solutions to any teaching situation. The quest to find 'what works' in education can leave teachers feeling confused and disempowered when they apply a 'solution' to their classroom practice which then fails. Such solutions are often the focus of educational training activity and consist of a set of instructions on 'how to teach'. This search for the 'what works', for the 'answers', to how to teach is considered as simplistic by educational researchers such as Atkinson (2000) and Biesta (2007). Instead they advocate an approach to teacher education which involves teachers engaging in reflective practice, reflection on what they have done and what they are doing, or as Dewey describes it 'reflection in action' as well as 'reflection on action' (1933 cited Pollard, 2005).

Current research into teacher education indicates that the most effective teacher education opportunities come about when educators are enabled to engage in reflection on their practice as part of a community of practice (Wenger, 1999) in collaboration with lecturers who are able to facilitate that process of reflection and to provide access to current research which will inform that practice (Avramidis et al., 2000; Ainscow, et al., 2004). It is on this basis that we are developing our current practice as teacher educators working in the field of understanding how children with autism experience the world. There is no easy answer to how best to approach working with children with autism as each child and their learning style will be so very

individual. It is this very individuality which is the challenge and the beauty of this area of practice. Teachers need to be able to 'think outside the box' when approaching challenging situations, to be able to see things from very new perspectives and to apply what they know and understand about the child, what they know about the thinking and learning styles associated with autism and what they understand about the pedagogic process in order to come to a possible solution. This approach involves being creative and requires that teachers are willing to take 'calculated' risks. The basis of this risk taking is for educators to have a firm understanding of what autism might mean for the individual child, a clear perspective of their own professional practice and the ability to evaluate what they have done, and to be willing to change their plans. This approach to teaching is one that allows teachers to be creative and to extend the boundaries of their own practice. It is an approach which improves with age and use and one which allows teachers to grow professionally, with an ever deepening ability to approach new challenges. Pollard, (2005) describes the process of reflective practice as essentially cyclical or spiralling in process, with teachers monitoring, evaluating and revising their practice continuously and considers that teachers are further enabled to engage with the process of reflection whilst working together with their peers within a 'community of practice'. Through our autism courses at the university we are able to work together with educators in order to develop this reflective practice and through this to facilitate teachers with developing their understanding and knowledge of how to work most effectively with children with autism.

## **Questions that support the reflective process**

One of the disabling effects of giving learners a label, such as autism, is that it creates a mystique and moves the process of teaching and learning into the realm of the specialist professional (Gillman et al., 2000; Hodge, 2005). In a study carried out by Hodge (2006) a father recalled how distressed he became because the teacher had suddenly stopped engaging with his child. In response to the father's enquiry as to why this had occurred the teacher explained that she had been visited by the autism specialist team who had told her that the little boy had autism. What the teacher knew about autism was the 'urban myth' that 'children with autism like to be in their own world'. 'So', reasoned the teacher, 'I am leaving him alone'. The power of the label overrode all of the teacher's innate knowledge about human engagement; she forgot all the positive experiences that she had of teaching new skills and concepts to this child. The teacher stopped evaluating the learning process for herself and handed this responsibility over to other professionals. Unfortunately these only attended occasionally leaving the child with a now 'disabled' educator for the majority of his time.

Similarly, a mother in the same study (Hodge, 2006) reported how much she enjoyed being with her three year old son and how quick he was to learn all that she taught him. However, once professionals started to refer to her son as having autism and reframing his behaviour according to a deficit model, emphasising what he could not do rather than what he could, this mother suddenly lost her ability to teach her son; she felt that the diagnosis itself had replaced the son she knew so well with a stranger, 'I felt someone had taken my son away' (p.90).

In our own teaching sessions we find that encouraging educators to look for the answers within their own knowledge and understanding as 'teachers' and social beings, rather than expecting to find solutions in the laptops of visiting 'experts' or the textbooks of academics (Williams, 1996) enables educators to articulate what 'teaching' is and to recognise that the principles of effective practice apply to all learners with or without a label. Becoming aware of what it means to us to be a learner is an invaluable process for all educators as it reminds us how challenging the nature of learning can be. When we are asked to demonstrate our own emerging ideas and skills in front of our peers, this is often experienced as a daunting and anxiety producing activity. Yet it is something that we expect those we teach to do on a frequent basis throughout the day. Reflecting on the process of teaching reminds us what it means to learn. We illustrate below the questions that we encourage our students to engage with when developing their practice of educating people on the autism spectrum through using examples of how we, as lecturers, use them ourselves in reflecting on our own teaching. These questions have emerged out of our own experience of working with a wide range of learners in universities and schools; they have often been inspired by situations where the learning process seems to have broken down and we are left puzzled as to why. Our experience suggests to us that the problem usually lies within the teaching process rather than within the learner. At these times we need to think through why our teaching might not be enabling learning in the way that we intended. We need to evaluate the process to identify where the connection has been lost and questioning is one of the most effective ways of doing so. The questions identified below are some examples that might help with this process. We argue that the order in which the questions are

asked is not important and so have not numbered them here. Instead we have used bold type to make them distinct within the text.

### **Example questions**

Throughout our teaching sessions we ask, '**Is this lesson meaningful and motivating?**'

Students attend our classes on autism for a variety of internal and external factors. Internal factors might include being highly interested in the subject matter, for example. External influencers might centre on gaining a qualification as a route to career progression or, for a parent, as a means of acquiring equal status to the professionals who are making decisions about the future of their child. Often it is a combination of these that encourage students to study with us. Occasionally we encounter a student who has been compelled to attend a course by his employer. This student may have very little interest in autism and may resent having to study in his/her own time; these frustrations sometimes show themselves as resistance to learning. For these students we usually have to work harder and more creatively to make it worthwhile them attending the classes. To work out how we might do this we start by asking ourselves:

**'If I were *this student* what would make me want to engage with these classes?'**

To answer this we need to learn as much about the student as quickly as we can. This can be through asking questions to find out what their own goals and aspirations are or it might be by observing what engages these students with learning and what causes them to turn away. Rather than seeing this as an



annoyance we enjoy the challenge of engaging the recalcitrant learner and see this is as a significant part of what makes our work so stimulating; this is all part of our own learning and skill development. Once we know the student's frame of reference and way of being in the learning world then we can personalise the learning experience and make it more meaningful. For some, this might be through showing the student how the apparent focus on autism actually addresses generic principles of teaching and learning that will have relevance to the student as an educator. For others it might be informing them about all the resources that they can access through the University and how they might use these to further their own learning interests. Or we might need to introduce post session pub visits to capture students' interest. The principle for all learners is the same: if the subject matter of the lesson is not intrinsically interesting then what will *motivate* this learner to engage.

However motivated a student is the learning process can be either be enabled or impeded by the learning environment. So as educators we must always ask ourselves, '**how conducive is the learning environment for *this* student?**' We know of one pupil, for example, who changed from being an engaged learner to one who was anxious, highly distracted and apparently incapable of acquiring new knowledge. Because of his label of autism the school staff attributed this decline to some sort of 'autistic regression', a problem that stemmed from the child himself rather than the learning environment. Luckily, however, one member of staff who was less 'expert' in autism, and so had not made this assumption, asked the child what was wrong. 'It's this school', he cried out, 'it's this school. The roof leaks. Hasn't anyone noticed?' From this child's perspective he was being asked to pay attention to learning when his focus was on survival, making sure that he was ready to run when the roof collapsed; something that was just a matter of time in this young

man's mind. We are sure that were we trying to facilitate a session on autism with our students while reports circulated of two escaped lions being in the university building the students might be less 'on task' than usual.

Autism is often described as a problem with empathy (Hughes, 2007). We agree – the problem is that people without autism find it difficult to empathise with the way the world is experienced by those that do have the syndrome. Empathy, the ability to understand the perspective of another, is extremely difficult, especially if you have not had that life experience yourself. We often ask students to think about someone known to them who has autism in the school setting. We challenge the students to identify one aspect of the school environment that the person with autism might choose to change. Often the students suggest that the person with autism might ask for more friends. While that might be true for some, many people with autism would actually ask to be the only child in the school. Having friends is something that the student, if he or she is socially inclined, might desire but it is not necessarily what the person with autism might request, 'Parents should not assume their child is lonely – I like being on my own, and so do many people with my condition' (Waller, 2007: 60). So achieving empathy might be too challenging but we have to be able to have some understanding of how the learner is experiencing the learning environment if we are to maximise access to learning.

Many of our students travel long distances after work to attend sessions. We notice a difference in the quality of engagement when we can offer a warm drink on arrival and allow students to settle themselves. We would like to offer biscuits too but the budget does not allow that; some students provide them and that seems to improve the learning environment again. We would also like more mellow lighting but standard lamps are not a feature of our university's classrooms. There will always be

limitations to the environment and we only aim to do the best that we can with the available resources. What is important is that we recognise the impact of the environment on learning and we attempt to identify the barriers, and enablers, to learning contained within it.

We also need to ask of ourselves **‘is the lesson appropriate for the developmental level of the learner?’** Are the concepts that I am trying to teach within the current understanding of the learner? Some of our students have an extensive knowledge and understanding of autism and for others it is little more than a word. As educators we have to adapt concepts and materials in ways which make them accessible and stimulating to a range of learners. How we decide to do this depends on the learning styles and nature of each group. We need to ask, **‘what is the preferred learning style of this student?’** Some students are excited by sharing experiences within small group sessions while others prefer to research independently at their own pace and level. We cannot always make every session ideal for every student but we have to make enough of it accessible and achievable in order to keep learning meaningful and motivating for all.

## **Conclusion**

The value of questioning our own practice is that it reminds us that teaching and learning is a relational process. Within this, it is the job of the educator to find a way to make new ideas and information accessible for the learner. If the learner cannot understand the concept or he/she is not acquiring the skill then we need to rethink what or how we are teaching. For the most part as educators we are mindful of this; if our lessons are not relevant and stimulating then learners often protest or give us

'negative' feedback when evaluating the sessions. But when teaching people who have acquired a label, such as 'special educational needs' for example, the teacher - learner relationship becomes unbalanced: all the responsibility for learning becomes placed upon the learner. The labelling process positions a learner as 'other', makes him or her different, distinct from other learners and places her/him outside the responsibility of the teacher and within the realm of external 'experts'. Labels are usually attributed according to what someone is unable to do. In our experience this then frequently leads educators to ascribe any problems with learning only to the learner. In so doing educators forget the relational nature of learning and the need to evaluate the teaching process; instead they look only to the learner's label to explain why learning might not be taking place.

We argue that engagement with reflective practice and especially evaluating the learning experience from the perspective of the learner is an essential element of the teaching process whoever the learner might be. The questions that we propose here to help educators evaluate the teaching and learning process with pupils on the autism spectrum are the same as the ones that we use with our own students, the majority of whom are educators themselves. We do not claim that these are the only questions that might be asked and we hope that readers of this paper will suggest others to us. These are just the questions that we have found helpful to date.

Often a student will ask us a question such as, 'what can I do to make learning more meaningful for a lad in my class who...?' The answer is that we do not care what the student does but we care tremendously that the question has been asked. We know that this student will find her/his own solution to the issue because he/she recognises that the teaching and learning experience is relational, an interaction between learner and educator within an environment that can support or impede the learning

process. If the student works through the questions that we identify within the paper then we know that she/he will find a solution that works for that particular pupil within that particular learning environment. It's not what you do; it's the way that you question: that's what gets results.

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