# Schon 1983 The Reflective Practitioner

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## Design as a Reflective Conversation with the Situation

### The Design Professions

The family of design professions, of which architecture is the best known, includes urban design (the design of urban places), regional planning (concerned with the structure and ecology of whole regions), and the type of town planning that produces plans for the physical structures of cities. For many years, these fields have been changing and in changing relationship to one another. Architecture, once the mother profession, now occupies a somewhat ambiguous position within the larger family.

In engineering there is also a family of design professions.

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Design as a Reflective Conversation with the Situation

Product designers concern themselves with the structure and appearance of industrial products. Industrial engineers design the mechanisms and layouts of production processes. And engineering specialists of various sorts design such large-scale products as ships, aircraft, dams, and roads.

In the last twenty years or so, the concept of design has broadened. We have begun to see cultural evolution as an informal, collective, generational process of design, as in Chris Alexander's story of the Slovakian peasant shawls. Herbert Simon and others have suggested that all occupations engaged in converting actual to preferred situations are concerned with design. Increasingly there has been a tendency to think of policies, institutions, and behavior itself, as objects of design.

It is questionable how far in this direction we ought to go. We risk ignoring or underestimating significant differences in media, contexts, goals, and bodies of knowledge specific to the professions. But we may also discover, at a deeper level, a generic design process which underlies these differences.

In this chapter I shall focus on design in the field of architecture, which I have had a particularly good opportunity to study. But architecture is worthy of study for other, less idiosyncratic reasons. It is perhaps the oldest recognized design profession and, as such, functions as prototype for design in other professions. If there is a fundamental process underlying the differences among design professions, it is in architecture that we are most likely to find it.

The search is complicated, however, by the fact that the boundaries of architecture are continually shifting, and even among practices clearly labelled "architecture" there are many variations. The field of architecture proper has been constricted by the emergence of newer professions such as planning, construction engineering, and landscape design. Within architecture itself, following the long reign of the Beaux Arts

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PROFESSIONAL CONTEXTS FOR REFLECTION-IN-ACTION

tradition in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, practitioners have tended to align themselves with a bewildering array of contending schools, each of which has laid claim to architecture.

Some of these schools have consciously returned to historical precedents, such as the Italian hill towns or the Gothic cathedrals. Others have formed around the stylistic innovations and methods of great men such as Le Corbusier, Wright, Kahn, Aalto, and Mies van der Rohe. Some deplore the intrusions of contemporary technologies and commercial forms, while others celebrate the artifacts of contemporary American culture. Some have aspired to simplicity and purity of design or to the craftsmanlike use of materials, while others exploit the technological possibilities of industrial building technology or the rich cultural store of American vernacular. Some have reacted against the formalism of the dominant styles, treating design as a social process which should respond to the needs and preferences of the people who live and work in buildings.

For a student of the field—and perhaps even more for a student in the field—the multiplicity of voices is confusing. How should we regard the controversies among the contending schools? Should we take them as competing definitions of the field, which entail very different concepts of professional knowledge and practice? Or as stylistic variations of a design process that is essentially the same for all schools?

In the following pages, I shall draw from a particular example a description of designing which underlies the differences

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Design as a Reflective Conversation with the Situation

works in particular situations, uses particular materials, and employs a distinctive medium and language. Typically, his making process is complex. There are more variables—kinds of possible moves, norms, and interrelationships of these—than can be represented in a finite model. Because of this complexity, the designer's moves tend, happily or unhappily, to produce consequences other than those intended. When this happens, the designer may take account of the unintended changes he has made in the situation by forming new appreciations and understandings and by making new moves. He shapes the situation, in accordance with his initial appreciation of it, the situation "talks back," and he responds to the situation's back-talk.

In a good process of design, this conversation with the situation is reflective. In answer to the situation's back-talk, the designer reflects-in-action on the construction of the problem, the strategies of action, or the model of the phenomena, which have been implicit in his moves.

### An Example of Reflective Designing

In the remainder of this chapter, I shall use a particular example of architectural designing to explore the reflective conversation which underlies the variety of schools of architecture.

I have drawn a case from a design studio, a type of professional education, traditional in schools of architecture, in which students undertake a design project under the supervi-

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**Schon 1983 the reflective practitioner** is a seminal concept introduced by Donald Schön in his influential work, "The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action." This concept has had a profound impact on various fields, including education, healthcare, and business management. Schön's ideas challenge traditional notions of professional practice and emphasize the importance of reflection in improving both individual and organizational performance. This article explores the key elements of Schön's theory, its implications for professional practice, and its relevance in contemporary contexts.

# Understanding Schön's Theory

Donald Schön's theory of the reflective practitioner stems from his observation that professionals often face complex, unpredictable situations that require more than just technical expertise. In his view, effective practitioners must engage in a continuous process of reflection to navigate these challenges successfully.

## The Concept of Reflection

Schön identifies two primary types of reflection:

1. Reflection-in-action: This occurs in the midst of action. Professionals think on their feet, adapting their strategies as they encounter unexpected challenges. For example, a teacher may adjust their lesson plan in response to students' reactions during class.

2. Reflection-on-action: This takes place after the event. Practitioners review their actions and decisions to learn from their experiences. For instance, a nurse might evaluate a patient care strategy after the fact to identify areas for improvement.

## The Reflective Cycle

Schön describes a cyclical process that underlies reflective practice:

1. Experience: Engaging in a professional activity.
2. Reflection-in-action: Reflecting on the experience as it unfolds.
3. Reflection-on-action: Analyzing the experience afterward.
4. Learning: Integrating insights gained into future practice.

This cycle highlights the dynamic nature of professional work and the importance of adapting to new information and circumstances.

# The Importance of the Reflective Practitioner

Schön's work emphasizes that reflection is not merely a supplementary skill but a core component of effective practice. Here are several reasons why the concept of the reflective practitioner is vital:

## 1. Enhancing Problem-Solving Skills

Professionals often face unique and ambiguous challenges that cannot be solved through routine procedures. Reflection allows practitioners to analyze problems critically and develop innovative solutions. For instance:

- A social worker might reflect on a challenging case, considering different strategies to better support their client.
- An engineer may reassess a project that is facing setbacks, encouraging creative problem-solving.

## 2. Fostering Lifelong Learning

The reflective practitioner model promotes a culture of continuous learning. By encouraging professionals to evaluate their experiences, Schön's theory supports personal and professional growth. This is particularly relevant in rapidly changing fields, such as technology and healthcare, where ongoing education is essential.

## 3. Improving Professional Practice

Regular reflection helps practitioners identify strengths and weaknesses in their practice. This self-awareness can lead to improvements in performance and quality of service. For example:

- Teachers who reflect on their teaching methods are better equipped to adapt their approaches and meet diverse student needs.
- Healthcare professionals who analyze their patient interactions can enhance their communication skills and patient care.

## 4. Building Collaborative Knowledge

Reflective practice encourages collaboration among professionals. By sharing reflections and experiences with colleagues, practitioners can learn from each other, leading to collective improvements in practice. This collaborative aspect is particularly beneficial in team-based environments, such as hospitals or educational institutions.

# Challenges in Implementing Reflective Practice

While Schön's concept of the reflective practitioner offers significant benefits, implementing reflective practice can be challenging. Some common obstacles include:

# 1. Time Constraints

Many professionals face heavy workloads, leaving little time for reflection. The pressure to meet deadlines or manage multiple responsibilities can hinder the ability to engage in thoughtful analysis.

# 2. Lack of Training

Not all professionals are trained in reflective practices. Without guidance on how to reflect effectively, individuals may struggle to integrate reflection into their routine.

# 3. Resistance to Change

Some professionals may resist the idea of reflective practice, viewing it as unnecessary or overly time-consuming. Overcoming this resistance requires a cultural shift within organizations that emphasizes the value of reflection.

# 4. Fear of Criticism

Engaging in reflection often involves examining one's mistakes and shortcomings. This can be uncomfortable, and some practitioners may fear judgment from peers or supervisors, deterring them from pursuing reflective practices.

# Strategies for Effective Reflective Practice

To overcome these challenges and foster a culture of reflection, organizations can implement several strategies:

# 1. Create Time for Reflection

Organizations should prioritize reflection by allocating specific times for practitioners to engage in reflective activities. This could be through scheduled meetings or dedicated professional development days.

# 2. Provide Training and Resources

Offering training workshops or resources on reflective practices can equip

professionals with the skills needed to reflect effectively. This can include teaching techniques for both reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action.

## 3. Foster a Supportive Environment

Creating a safe and supportive environment encourages practitioners to share their reflections without fear of criticism. This can be achieved through mentorship programs, peer review sessions, or collaborative reflection groups.

## 4. Incorporate Reflection into Performance Assessments

Integrating reflection into performance evaluations can reinforce its importance. By recognizing and rewarding reflective practices, organizations can encourage professionals to prioritize this aspect of their work.

# Conclusion

The concept of the reflective practitioner, as articulated by Donald Schön in 1983, remains highly relevant today. By advocating for reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, Schön has provided a framework that emphasizes the importance of continuous learning and adaptation in professional practice. While challenges exist in implementing reflective practices, organizations can take meaningful steps to create a culture that values reflection, ultimately leading to improved outcomes for professionals and the clients they serve. Embracing the principles of the reflective practitioner not only enhances individual practice but also contributes to the overall effectiveness of teams and organizations in an increasingly complex world.

# Frequently Asked Questions

## What is the main premise of Schön's 'The Reflective Practitioner'?

The main premise is that professionals can improve their practice by reflecting on their experiences and the processes involved, leading to continuous learning and adaptation.

## How does Schön define reflection in action?

Reflection in action refers to the process of thinking critically about one's

actions while they are happening, allowing practitioners to make adjustments and learn in real-time.

## What are the two types of reflection Schön identifies?

Schön identifies 'reflection in action' and 'reflection on action', with the former happening during the activity and the latter occurring after the event to analyze and learn from it.

## Why is 'The Reflective Practitioner' considered a seminal work in professional education?

It is considered seminal because it introduced the idea that practical knowledge should be valued and that professionals can learn from their experiences through reflective practices.

## What impact did Schön's work have on the field of education?

Schön's work influenced educational practices by promoting experiential learning and encouraging educators to incorporate reflective practices into their teaching methodologies.

## Can you explain the concept of 'technical rationality' as discussed by Schön?

Technical rationality is the idea that professional knowledge is based on scientific principles and technical skills, which Schön critiques as being insufficient for understanding complex real-world problems.

## How does Schön suggest that professionals deal with complex and uncertain situations?

Schön suggests that professionals should engage in reflective practice to navigate complexity and uncertainty, enabling them to adapt their approaches based on the unique context of each situation.

## What role does dialogue play in Schön's reflective practice framework?

Dialogue plays a crucial role as it allows practitioners to share their experiences, receive feedback, and refine their understanding and practices collaboratively.

## How has Schön's concept of reflective practice

## evolved in contemporary professional settings?

Contemporary professional settings have increasingly adopted Schön's reflective practice concept as a key component of professional development, encouraging ongoing learning and adaptation across various fields.

## What criticisms have been leveled against Schön's reflective practice model?

Critics argue that Schön's model may oversimplify the complexities of practice and that reflection can sometimes lead to over-analysis or paralysis by analysis, hindering decision-making.

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