

Reflective Teaching – Exploring Classroom Practice

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Abstract

Reflective teaching means looking at what you do in the classroom, thinking about why you do it, and thinking about if it works – a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. By collecting information about what goes on in our classroom, and by analysing and evaluating this information, we identify and explore our own practices and underlying beliefs. This may then lead to changes and improvements in our teaching.

We constantly talk about the continuous development of a teacher and how he/she may grow in the profession. One way through which growth and improvement can happen is through reflection and introspection. Teaching English to the varied group of students that we have in our classrooms is truly a challenge. Some of our methods may have worked and some may have failed. Have we as teachers thought about where and why we have gone wrong and if so how may we go about rectifying or altering the practices.

My paper explores the various ways through which we can analyse our teaching practices so that we may find possible solutions to our problems in the classroom. Reflective teaching is a mode and method of developing professionally and improving upon our pedagogy as well as our competencies.

(Key words: Reflective teaching, CPD-Continuous Professional Development, Pedagogy)

Introduction

Reflective teaching involves recognizing, examining, ruminating over the way an individual teachers. Individuals possess their own background and experience; bring certain beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, attitudes and values to teach.

It is also seen that teaching takes place in a social setting that has its own unique characteristics, opportunities and constraints. The practice of Reflective teaching explores the implications of all these complex factors with the intention of understanding and improving teaching – learning practice. Schon (1993) suggested that reflective teaching practice is a continuous process and involves the learner thoughtfully considering his own experience in applying knowledge to practice while being taught by professionals. It helps the individuals to develop their own personality. Gibbs (1988) reflective practice suggests that individuals develop an analysis of feelings, evaluation of experience etc. Jasper (2003) associated reflective teaching practice with lifelong learning resulting in the development of autonomous, qualified and self-directed professionals. Engaging in reflective practice is associated with the improvement of the quality of care, stimulating personal and professional growth and closing the gap between theory and practice. Bartlett (1990) points out that becoming a reflective teacher involves moving beyond a primary concern with instructional techniques and “how to” questions and asking “what” and “why” questions that regard instructions and managerial techniques not as ends in themselves, but as part of broader educational purposes. Asking questions “what and why” gives certain power over individuals teaching resulting in the emergence of autonomy and responsibility in the work of teachers. In reflecting on the above kind of questions, teachers begin to exercise control and open up the possibility of transforming every day classroom life.

(Lieberman & Miller, 2000) pointed out that the practice of reflective teaching, reflective inquiry, and reflection-on practice, results in gaining of the personal and professional knowledge that is so important to being an effective teacher and in shaping students’ learning. Han (1995) stated that, the process element of reflection emphasizes how teachers make decisions, content stresses the substance that drives the thinking and reflective inquiry which may set the stage for learning how to be a good teacher. (Day, Galvez-Martin 2000) proposed reflective teaching as the act of creating a mental space in which to contemplate a question or idea, such as, "What do I know now about teaching young learners?" This repeated questioning leads to mental transformation to a time and a situation that leads to a deeper perspective helping Students.

Teaching – Our theory in use

Every teacher and every learner has a theory about learning. You are no exception and you will have a set of beliefs, ideas, and assumptions about the nature of learning, and teaching. You

will believe that certain practices bring about learning, and certain others don't. You will use this theory, both to plan your lessons, and to decide what to do while you teach. Schön called this your 'theory-in-use'. Never mind what you might write in an essay or tell your tutor, it is your 'theory-in-use' which guides what you do, and informs you as you plan and teach your lessons.

If you ask yourself 'how shall I teach this topic' you will consider your 'theory-in-use' to help you decide. If a student started playing up in one of your lessons, you would use your 'theory-in-use' to decide what to do about it. If a lesson did not go well, it would be your 'theory-in-use' that you would use to explain to yourself why it went badly, and to decide how to make that lesson, or the next one, go better.

As your 'theory-in-use' guides your every action it is clearly very important. If it faithfully describes the reality of how your students learn, then it will be an accurate guide for you, and you will be able to teach very well. If it doesn't describe that reality very well, then you will never teach effectively, except sometimes by accident! It is clearly crucial to get this 'theory-in-use' as right, and as comprehensive, as you can get it. So how can you go about that?

One way, of course, is to do what you are doing right now - to read about learning and teaching. Another is to attend an initial teacher training course. These can help, but in the end you must integrate this learning into your own 'theory-in-use' for it to affect what you do. This requires that you make your own sense, of these learning experiences, and work out how to teach as a consequence. For example, to learn about Maslow's theory of motivation, and even to write about it is one thing, to integrate it into your 'theory-in-use' is quite another. That would require you to work out what Maslow's theory means in practice for your students, and then to use this understanding to improve your student's motivation. That is very demanding, and will require much thought and practice.

Why Reflect on Your Teaching?

Faculty members may change their teaching practices if such practices are made the objects of their thought and consideration; this is what reflection on teaching means. Reflecting on your teaching is a way to make you aware of how you teach. is a method for self-assessment. If we don't reflect, then we are teaching "in the dark" without knowing if we are effective and if we should modify our teaching. Reflecting requires us to answer a number of questions, including the following:

- How do I interact with students?
- How do I respond when they ask questions?
- What kind of classroom atmosphere do I create?
- What kinds of questions do I ask?
- Is my classroom spontaneous or is it predictable?

- Are my students involved?
- Why didn't a lecture go over well?
- Why did a lecture work?

The Role of Reflection in Teaching

Do You Need to Change Your Teaching Practices? How do you answer this question? How do you know if you need to change? One way to find out is to think about your own teaching; think about it regularly, thoroughly, and systematically; in other words, become a *reflective practitioner*.

All faculty members ask themselves questions like these from time to time. What Should You Look for in Your Teaching? One of the hardest things to do as you begin to examine and think about your teaching practices is to figure out what to look for. You may try to answer questions like the following:

- Am I determining what the students "know"?
- What kind of questions do I ask?
 - Genuine questions for which I do not know the answers?
 - Testing questions to find out what my students know?
 - Focusing questions that encourage students to think further about some Idea; to explain, justify, or hypothesize.
- Am I using wait time before and after I receive responses to questions?
- Am I exploring alternative strategies pursued by different students?
- Am I exploring unproductive thinking?
- Am I using various forms of communication; reading, writing, listening, and speaking?
- Am I modelling scientific thinking?
- What kind of questions are my students asking?
- Are my students talking to each other- disagreeing, challenging, and debating?
- Are my students willing to take risks?
- Are my students listening to each other?
- Are my students taking time to think about the problem, question, idea, or the like?
- Are my students able to explain their ideas clearly and precisely?
- Are my students able to reflect on the experience and identify that was hard or easy for them; what worked and what didn't; what they liked and what they didn't?

Reflective practitioners don't only ask questions routinely and deliberately, but they also use the answers to these questions to guide and change their instructional practices so they can be more effective.

How Do You Reflect on Your Teaching?

You might use several ways to reflect on your teaching practices.

Videotape yourself.

Some faculty members still say, "Oh, I could never do that!" We say, "Yes, you can!" After you get past the way you look and the way you sound, the videotape offers rich information about your teaching practices and how your students are thinking about the subject. Try to tape yourself once a month. Focus on some particular behaviours like those mentioned earlier and look for change over the academic year.

Written logs.

Keep a weekly reflection log or diary for each class. Let the students keep logs, too. Spend the last ten minutes of class at the end of the week filling them out. Ask yourself what went well that week. Did you make progress in your effort to listen more attentively to students' responses? To give better wait time? What would you do differently next year when you teach the same topics? What do you want to accomplish next week? Go back periodically and read your logs. You will learn a lot about yourself as a faculty member. Equally important is to read what your students say. You will learn a lot about their perceptions of the subject class.

Oral reflections.

Do you glance at your watch at the end of class and think, "Oh, good, time for one more task" or "Time for me to summarize?" Although these options are appropriate at certain times, occasionally try spending that time talking with the class about the lecture. Ask them what they learned today. What was hard about the lecture? What was easy? What would you tell a friend who was absent about what happened in class? You will be surprised at what you learn! Also tell students what you learned and what you will share with other subject faculty members.

Let another teacher observe you.

Teaching is a very isolated activity. Yet one of the very best resources that you have available to help you reflect on your teaching is right in your college building. Find another faculty who is interested in bettering instructional practices and ask him or her to observe you. Have a particular trait in mind on which you would like the colleague to concentrate. For example. Tell the peer that you are trying to improve your questioning strategies. Ask he or she to take note of how many questions have only one right answer and how many are more open ended. Or ask the teacher to observe your use of wait time. Are you giving students time to think? Critical to the observation is spending some time afterward in a debriefing session about you and your colleague's perceptions of the lecture.

Observe other faculty members.

Arrange to observe someone who is known to be an effective teacher and is willing to let you observe a class. What does this faculty member do that is working? What can you learn from this faculty member? Allow discussion time after each observation so that both faculty members grow professionally.

Conclusion

Remember that change takes time. Most of us won't change our teaching practices overnight. We have been trying to implement these ideas for several years and still have the old show-them-how-to-do-it tendencies. Also, you won't want or need to change everything about your teaching. Some of what you are doing is working. If you usually make effective use of wait time, keep that technique. If you usually ask students to justify their comments, both right and wrong, continue to ask. Look for the positive in what you do. Don't try to change everything at once. Take one piece at a time. Make it your own then try something else. If you think you need to work on questioning, start there. Make that the focus of your reflection. Maybe then you want to work on listening more carefully to your students. Work on that. This is not to suggest that you shouldn't notice other things. You should. And the more reflective you become, the more you will notice. Take it one day at a time.

Reflective teaching is linked to the inquiry and continuous professional growth. It can be a beneficial form of professional development and develops critical thinking and promotes experiential learning. The greatest reward of becoming a reflective practitioner is that you become aware of how insightful and capable your students are. Teaching becomes a positive and rewarding experience from which you learn every day.

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