

## **Towards Reflective Teaching**

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Most teachers develop their classroom skills fairly early in their teaching careers. Teachers entering the profession may find their initial teaching efforts stressful, but with experience they acquire a repertoire of teaching strategies that they draw on throughout their teaching. The particular configuration of strategies a teacher uses constitutes his or her “teaching style”. While a teacher’s style of teaching provides a means of coping with many of the routine demands of teaching, there is also a danger that it can hinder a teacher’s professional growth. How can teachers move beyond the level of automatic or routinised responses to classroom situations and achieve a higher level of awareness of how they teach, of the kinds of decisions they make as they teach, and of the value and consequences of particular instructional decisions? One way of doing this is through observing and reflecting on one’s own teaching, and using observation and reflection as a way of bringing about change. This approach to teaching can be described as “Reflective Teaching”, and in this paper I want to explore how a reflective view of teaching can be developed.



### **What is reflection?**

Reflection or “critical reflection”, refers to an activity or process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making and as a source for planning and action. 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 “what and why” questions gives us a certain power over our teaching. We could claim that the degree of autonomy and responsibility we have in our work as teachers is determined by the level of control we can exercise over our actions. In reflecting on the above kind of questions, we begin to exercise control and open up the possibility of transforming our everyday classroom life.

### **How does reflection take place?**

Many different approaches can be employed if one wishes to become a critically reflective teacher, including observation of oneself and others, team teaching, and exploring one's view of teaching through writing. Central to any approach used however is a three part process which involves:

#### **Stage 1** The event itself

The starting point is an actual teaching episode, such as a lesson or other instructional event. While the focus of critical reflection is usually the teacher's own teaching, self-reflection can also be stimulated by observation of another person's teaching.

#### **Stage 2** Recollection of the event

The next stage in reflective examination of an experience is an account of what happened, without explanation or evaluation. Several different procedures are available during the recollection phase, including written descriptions of an event, a video or audio recording of an event, or the use of check lists or coding systems to capture details of the event.

#### **Stage 3** Review and response to the event

Following a focus on objective description of the event, the participant returns to the event and reviews it. The event is now processed at a deeper level, and questions are asked about the experience.

Let us examine approaches to critical reflection which reflect these processes.

### **Peer Observation**

Peer observation can provide opportunities for teachers to view each other's teaching in order to expose them to different teaching styles and to provide opportunities for critical reflection on their own teaching. In a peer observation project initiated in our own department, the following guidelines were developed.

1. Each participant would both observe and be observed  
Teachers would work in pairs and take turns observing each other's classes.
2. Pre-observation orientation session  
Prior to each observation, the two teachers would meet to discuss the nature of the class to be observed, the kind of material being taught, the teachers' approach to teaching, the kinds of students in the class, typical patterns of interaction and class participation, and any problems that might be expected. The teacher being observed would also assign the observer a goal for the observation and a task to accomplish.  
The task would involve collecting information about some aspect of the lesson, but would not include any evaluation of the lesson. Observation procedures or instruments to be used would be agreed upon during this session and a schedule for the observations arranged.
3. The observation  
The observer would then visit his or her partner's class and complete the observation using the procedures that both partners had agreed on.
4. Post-observation  
The two teachers would meet as soon as possible after the lesson. The observer would report on the information that had been collected and discuss it with the teacher (Richards and Lockhart, 1991).

The teachers identified a variety of different aspects of their lessons for their partners to observe and collect information on. These included organization of the lesson, teacher's time management, students' performance on tasks, time-on-task, teacher questions and student responses, student performance during pair work, classroom interaction, class performance during a new teaching activity, and students' use of the first language or English during group work.

The teachers who participated in the project reported that they gained a number of insights about their own teaching from their colleague's observations and that they would like to use peer observation on a regular basis. They obtained new insights into aspects of their teaching. For example:

- “It provided more detailed information on student performance during specific aspects of the lesson than I could have gathered on my own.”
- “It revealed unexpected information about interaction between students during a lesson.”
- “I was able to get useful information on the group dynamics that occur during group work”.

Some teachers identified aspects of their teaching that they would like to change as a result of the information their partner collected. For example:

- “It made me more aware of the limited range of teaching strategies that I have been using.”
- “I need to give students more time to complete some of the activities I use.”
- “I realized that I need to develop better time management strategies.”

Longer term benefits to the department were also cited:

- “It helped me develop a better working relationship with a colleague.”
- “Some useful broader issues about teaching and the programme came up during the post-observation discussions.”

### **Written accounts of experiences**

Another useful way of engaging in the reflective process is through the use of written accounts of experiences. Personal accounts of experiences through writing are common in other disciplines (Powell 1985) and their potential is increasingly being recognized in teacher education. A number of different approaches can be used.

### **Self-Reports**

Self-reporting involves completing an inventory or check list in which the teacher indicates which teaching practices were used within a lesson or within a specified time period and how often they were employed (Pak, 1985). The inventory may be completed individually or in group sessions. The accuracy of self-reports is found to increase when teachers focus on the teaching of specific skills in a particular classroom context and when the self-report instrument is carefully constructed to reflect a wide range of potential teaching practices and behaviours (Richards, 1990).

Self-reporting allows teachers to make a regular assessment of what they are doing in the classroom. They can check to see to what extent their assumptions about their own teaching are reflected in their actual teaching practices. For example a teacher could use self-reporting to find out the kinds of teaching activities being regularly used, whether all of the programme’s goals are being addressed, the degree to which personal goals for a class are being met, and the kinds of activities which seem to work well or not to work well.

### **Autobiographies**

Abbs (1974, cited in Powell 1985) discusses the use of autobiographies in teacher preparation. These consist of small groups of around 12 student teachers who meet

for an hour each week for at least 10 weeks. During this period of time each student works at creating a written account of his or her educational experience and the weekly meetings are used to enable each person to read a passage from his or her autobiography so that it can be supported, commented upon by peers and the teacher (43).

Powell (1985) described the use of reaction-sheets – sheets student teachers complete after a learning activity has been completed – in which they are encouraged “to stand back from what they had been doing and think about what it meant for their own learning and what it entailed for their work as teachers of others” (p.46). I have used a similar technique in working with student teachers in a practicum. Students work in pairs with a co-operating teacher and take turns teaching. One serves as observer while the other teaches, and completes a reaction sheet during the lesson. The reaction sheet contains the following questions. “What aspects of the lesson were most effective? What

aspects of the lesson were least effective? Would you have taught any aspect of the lesson differently? Why?" The student who teaches also completes his or her own reaction sheet after the lesson. Then the two compare their reactions to the lesson.

### **Journal Writing**

A procedure which is becoming more widely acknowledged as a valuable tool for developing critical reflection is the journal or diary. The goal of journal writing is,

1. to provide a record of the significant learning experiences that have taken place
2. to help the participant come into touch and keep in touch with the self-development process that is taking place for them
3. to provide the participants with an opportunity to express, in a personal and dynamic way, their self-development
4. to foster a creative interaction
  - between the participant and the self-development process that is taking place
  - between the participant and other participants who are also in the process of self-development
  - between the participant and the facilitator whose role it is to foster such development

(Powell, 1985, Bailey, 1990)

While procedures for diary keeping vary, the participant usually keeps a regular account of learning or teaching experiences, recording reflections on what he or she did as well as straightforward descriptions of events, which may be used as a basis for later reflection. The diary serves as a means for interaction between the writer, the facilitator, and, sometimes, other participants.

### **Collaborative Diary Keeping**

A group of teachers may also collaborate in journal writing. A group of my colleagues recently explored the value of collaborative diary-keeping as a way of developing a critically reflective view of their teaching (Brock, Ju and Wong, 1991). Throughout a 10 week teaching term they kept diaries on their teaching, read each other's diaries, and discussed their teaching and diary keeping experiences on a weekly basis. They also recorded and later transcribed their group discussions and subsequently analyzed their diary entries, their written responses to each other's entries and the transcripts of their discussions, in order to determine how these three interacted and what issues occurred most frequently. They reported that:

Collaborative diary-keeping brought several benefits to our development as second language teachers. It raised our awareness of classroom processes and prompted us to consider those processes more deeply than we may otherwise have. Collaborative diary-keeping also provided encouragement and support; it served as a source of teaching ideas and suggestions; and in some sense it gave us a way to observe one another's teaching from a "safe distance".....

By reading one another's diary entries, we were able to share our teaching experiences, and we often felt that we were learning as much from one another's entries as we were from our own. Reading and responding to the entries led us back to our own teaching to consider how and why we taught as we did.

These teachers observed however that

1. collaborative diary-keeping is more effective if the scope of issues considered is focused more narrowly.

2. a large block of time is needed
3. participants must be comfortable in sharing both pleasant and unpleasant experiences and be committed to gaining a clearer picture of their teaching and their classrooms.

### **Recording Lessons**

For many aspects of teaching, audio or video recording of lessons can also provide a basis for reflection. While there are many useful insights to be gained from diaries and self-reports, they cannot capture the moment to moment processes of teaching. Many things happen simultaneously in a classroom, and some aspects of a lesson cannot be recalled. It would be of little value for example, to attempt to recall the proportion of Yes-No Questions to WH-Questions a teacher used during a lesson, or to estimate the degree to which teacher time was shared among higher and lower ability students. Many significant classroom events may not have been observed by the teacher, let alone remembered, hence the need to supplement diaries or self-reports with recordings of actual lessons.

At its simplest, a tape recorder is located in a place where it can capture the exchanges which take place during a lesson. With the microphone placed on the teacher's table, much of the teacher's language can be recorded as well as the exchanges of many of the students in the class. Pak (1985) recommends recording for a one or two week period and then randomly selecting a cassette for closer analysis. This recording could be used as the basis for an initial assessment. Where video facilities are available in a school, the teacher can request to have a lesson recorded, or with access to video equipment, students themselves can be assigned this responsibility. A 30 minute recording usually provides more than sufficient data for analysis. The goal is to capture as much of the interaction of the class as possible, both teacher to class and student to student. Once the initial novelty wears off, both students and teacher accept the presence of the technician with the camera, and the class proceeds with minimum disruption.

### **Conclusions**

A reflective approach to teaching involves changes in the way we usually perceive teaching and our role in the process of teaching. As the examples above illustrate, teachers who explore their own teaching through critical reflection develop changes in attitudes and awareness which they believe can benefit their professional growth as teachers, as well as improve the kind of support they provide their students. Like other forms of self-inquiry, reflective teaching is not without its risks, since journal writing, self-reporting or making recordings of lessons can be time-consuming. However teachers engaged in reflective analysis of their own teaching report that it is a valuable tool for self-evaluation and professional growth. Reflective teaching suggests that experience alone is insufficient for professional growth, but that experience coupled with reflection can be a powerful impetus for teacher development.

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