

Why Reflect? The Relevance of Reflective Practice to Teaching and Learning in Higher Education

An Essay by

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One of the three main premises of the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future states that what teachers know and can do is the most important influence on what students learn (Schultheiss, 1998). If we want student learning, we need good teachers. If we want good teachers, we must find out what makes them good. Until recently efforts to explain what teachers do focused primarily on knowledge and skills. This suggests a static view of teaching that implies once teachers acquire knowledge and skills they are automatically effective in the classroom. Because theories about teachers' knowledge and skills fail to explain effective teachers' talent for the changeability and unpredictability of the classroom, a new area of study has emerged--the study of reflection. This view implies that while knowledge and skills are essential for teachers, so are certain ways of thinking or reflecting on who they are and what they do. Reflection then, seems to be another piece of the puzzle, which in addition to knowledge and skills explains not just what teachers do, but how good they do it (Jay, 1999).

Reflective practice is an interesting and important evolving concept in the literature on teaching and learning in higher education. It involves thinking about the self who teaches, learning from your own practice of teaching as well as from the practices of others. Reflection enables the teacher to get in touch with the self who teaches and gain new perspectives on the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in educational situations, improve judgment and increase the probability of taking informed action when situations are

complex, unique, and uncertain (Florez, 2001).

In the 1930's John Dewey defined reflection as a proactive, ongoing examination of beliefs and practices, their origins and their impact (Stanley, 1998). This definition has undergone much interpretation in its application to teaching. In 1987, Schon introduced the concept of reflective practice as a critical process in refining one's artistry in a specific discipline. Since that time reflective practice has been influenced by various philosophical and pedagogical theories. One of these influences is constructivism. The constructivist approach views learning as an active process where learners reflect upon current as well as past knowledge and experiences to generate new ideas and concepts. A humanistic element of reflective practice is its concern with personal growth and its goal of liberation from values that may limit that growth (Kullman, 1998). In reflective practice, faculty engage in a continuous cycle of self observation and self evaluation in order to understand the actions and reactions that they elicit in themselves and in their students (Brookfield, 1995).

As an epistemology of practice, reflection is simultaneously both a way of knowing and doing. It addresses the familiar dichotomy between hard knowledge of science and scholarship and the soft knowledge of clinical artistry and unvarnished opinion. In a sense reflective practice is an oxymoron and a paradox. It is a proposition that seems self-contradictory but in reality expresses a possible truth (Longenecker, 1999).

Reflective practice on the self that teaches and on our own performance as

teachers is one form of professional assessment. If we are to become more *effective* teachers, we need to become more *reflective* teachers. To be reflective we need to articulate our theories of learning, critically examine them, and replace what needs replacing. Consciously engaging in reflective practice enables the teacher to learn from and potentially enhance teaching and learning about teaching. Reflective practice can include teaching, encouraging learning, and the scholarship of teaching.

The potential for reflection to increase the effectiveness of teaching has led to efforts to describe the processes of reflection so they can be learned and applied by faculty. Together with pedagogical skills and knowledge, reflection helps to round out the picture of what it is that effective teachers do (Schon, 1983).

There are numerous, unique and complex ways in which reflection can shed light on different educational issues for teachers. While it is essential to know that reflection is one composite concept, looking at it from different angles can help us to see it as a whole more clearly. Over the last decade Dr. Parker Palmer has developed the Courage to Teach program, which invites teachers to identify and reflect on the self who teaches. In addition reflection on teaching and learning can take the forms of a problem solving technique, a frame analysis, a bridge between theory and practice, and a Zen like mindfulness (Jay, 1999).

Palmer (1998), building on the concept of reflective practice of the self who teaches, suggests that teaching, like any truly human activity, emerges from one's inwardness, for better or worse. He contends that as we teach, we project the condition of our soul onto our students, our subject matter, and our way of being together. Reduce teaching to intellect and it becomes a cold abstraction; reduce it to emotions and it becomes narcissistic, reduce it to the spiritual and it loses its anchor to the world. Intellect, emotion, and spirit depend on each other for wholeness. They are interwoven in

the human self and in education at its best and we need to interweave them into our pedagogical discourse as well.

According to Palmer, the teacher within is not the voice of conscience but of identity and integrity. It speaks not of what ought to be, but of what is real for us, of what is true. It says things like, "This is what fits you and this is what doesn't." "This is what gives you life and this is what kills your spirit." The teacher within stands guard at the gate of selfhood, warding off whatever insults our integrity and welcoming whatever affirms it. The voice of the inward teacher reminds you of your potential and limits as you negotiate the force field of your life (Palmer, 1998)

Palmer (1993) recalls that many of the countless teachers he has worked with have confirmed his own experience that as important as methods may be, the most practical thing we can achieve in any kind of work is insight into what is happening inside us as we do it. The more familiar we are with our inner terrain, the more surefooted our teaching and living become. He suggests that technique is what teachers use until the real teacher shows up. Good methods can help a teacher find a way into the student's mind, but good teaching does not begin until the real-life teacher joins with the real life of the student (Palmer, 1993).

Parker Palmer invites teachers to go beyond the outer surface of structural reform and summon the courage to explore the inner landscape of their lives as educators. Palmer focuses on the questions: "Who is the self that teaches?" "How does the quality of the teacher's selfhood form or deform the way in which he or she relates to students, the subject, and colleagues?" "How can educational institutions sustain and deepen the selfhood from which good teaching comes?" (Palmer, 1998).

How do we apply reflective practice to teaching? One way is to view reflection as a problem solving technique, a strategy for waiting out problems or interesting phenomenon (e.g., when teachers know the

curriculum is not working for students and they find a need to make change). Issues may be vague, as when the teacher senses a resistance tone from a class but doesn't know why. Once defined the teacher can think the problem out in a purposeful and deliberate way (Dewey, 1933).

The personal nature of reflection and the idiosyncrasies of classrooms indicate that reflection, as a problem solving technique, may not always be consistent. However, there are some common processes that generally seem to take place, including describing the situation, surfacing and criticizing initial understandings and assumptions, and persisting with an attitude of open-mindedness, responsibility, and whole heartedness (Jay, 1999).

Evans (1995) describes an interesting example of reflection applied to problem solving in trying a writer's workshop in her classroom that used the topic of family stories. In her words, "quite simply it was a disaster"(p. 267). In her process of reflecting to first understand and then redress this instructional problem, Evans continued to try new strategies to make the writer's workshop successful. At the same time she continued reflecting through journaling and dialoguing with colleagues. Ultimately an explanation for students' unwillingness to write emerged. Apparently many of the students' lives contained violence, poverty, abuse, hopelessness, and rejection. As a result they were not ready to reveal their home lives (Jay, 1999).

Evans' example indicates that reflection is more than looking over what she had done; it also helps to see where she should go next. The purpose of reflection, as a problem solving technique, is to make more sense of a puzzling situation; working toward a better understanding of the problem and finding ways of solving it (Loughran, 1995).

Another form of reflective practice is called frame analysis, which involves uncovering assumptions and beliefs. Using Evans' example, her frame, the writer's

workshop, determined her strategies for solving the problem. The frame set the direction in which she tried to address the situation. She focused on making the writer's workshop successful. Schon (1987) pointed out that when teachers are unaware of their frames for roles or problems they do not experience the need to choose among them and they do not attend to the ways in which they construct the reality in which they function. In Evans' example, her initial lack of attention to her construction of reality provides an example of how teachers who are not reflective practitioners can fall victim to their blind spots. When Evans' assumptions were challenged by her students' personal reality and past writing experiences, she then considered reflecting on her frame of reference. Becoming aware of the alternative perspective of herself made it possible for her to surface the assumptions inherent in her teaching approach. Frame analysis occurred when the reality of students' home lives helped break her out of her original frame. Frame analysis is similar to problem solving when a problem is explicitly evident but also offers potential for helping teachers attempting to surface hidden, implicit problems that they don't even realize exist (Jay, 1999)

Reflection on theory, a means by which teacher can use their judgment and experience to render abstract ideas more practical, personal, and meaningful, is another form of applying reflective practice in the classroom. Reflection can be viewed as a process by which a teacher can try on a theory, consider its meaning and consequences in a particular context, and experiment with the application in practice. For example, Evans might begin by exploring theories of teaching for diversity suggested by these and other writers by incorporating them into her teaching approach, then reflecting on the result--continuing to study, test, and reflect on the idea until perhaps her practice becomes transformed and more effective for students (Jay, 1999). Reflection as a bridge between

theory and practice, in addition to solving problems and examining assumptions, enables teachers to enhance the limitations of their own singular understanding of a situation by tapping other perspectives revealed by theories (Jay, 1999).

Reflection can also be viewed as a way of being that transcends strategy and practicality, approaching artistry in its execution. This view of reflection recognizes teaching as more than problem solving and the application of theory; it has an element of intuition and mindfulness. As Tremmel (1993) explains, “mindfulness means to pay attention to right here, right now and to invest the present moment with full awareness and concentration” (p. 434). Reflection as mindfulness, while esoteric to many, is no less direct and concrete than other forms of reflection. Teachers reflecting in the moment rely on classroom discussion itself to determine the plan to get students to reach a deeper level of understanding on the topic as opposed to following a scripted plan with discussion points carefully laid out. The spontaneity of this type of reflection suggests its reliance on intuition and emotion. Reflection has different forms which effective teachers apply and so teachers can see what is happening when it is happening (Jay, 1999).

In summary, it is important to remember that these forms of reflection are not mutually exclusive and they become intimately intertwined to compose a composite concept. The power of reflection lies in the way it thrives on the complexity of educational life. The primary benefit of reflective practice for teachers in higher education is a deeper understanding of the “who” that teaches as well as one’s own teaching style, a process that ultimately results in greater effectiveness as a teacher. Research on effective teaching over the past two decades has shown that it is linked to inquiry, reflection, and continuous professional growth. Other specific benefits noted in the current literature include the validation of a teacher’s ideals, beneficial

challenges to tradition, the recognition of teaching as artistry, and respect for diversity in applying theory to classroom practice. Reflective practice requires a commitment to continuous self-development and the time to achieve it.

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