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Reflective Teaching: Improving Library Instruction Through Self-Reflection

Mandi Goodsett

This paper was written by this year's recipient of the SELA's New Voices Award presented to professionally employed librarians with less than five years of experience. Mandi Goodsett is a Reference Librarian at the James Earl Carter Library of Georgia Southwestern State University and can be reached at Mandi.Goodsett@gsw.edu.

Introduction

Increasingly, the role of librarians in higher education is shifting from primarily librarian-as-expert to include librarian-as-educator (Holt, 2002). As a result, academic librarians with a wide variety of job titles are finding themselves contributing to the instructional services of their library (Hall, 2013). Even those librarians who have instruction as a principal responsibility may have little to no training or experience in instruction when they begin teaching students in one-shot or credit-bearing instruction situations. In a recent study of employer's expectations for library instruction training, nearly 90 percent of respondents found instruction to be important to their library (Hall, 2013). The study also found that employers expect new librarians with instruction duties to find training on the job or through observation, not necessarily through formal training programs (Hall, 2013). While informal training may be less than ideal, it is sometimes the only available option to instruction librarians. One way librarians can make concrete, positive changes to their instruction skills without a formal instruction training program is by engaging in reflective practices about their teaching decisions.

Why is Reflective Thinking Important to Instruction?

Professionals who engage in instruction, including librarians, often have a large workload of grading, planning, answering student questions, and facilitating class sessions, so adding more activities to the day may seem unreasonable. However, the value of reflection in improving instruction is well-documented and can involve activities that add minimal extra time and effort to the work of instructors.

In the classroom, instructors are doing more than presenting material to students; they are making many complex decisions throughout the class, decisions which have consequences on learning in that class and influence later teaching decisions by that instructor (Danielson, 2009). An ability and willingness to reflect can be an important factor in improving the complicated decision-making process teachers encounter in every instruction session.

While reflection is an important activity throughout the career of an instructor, new librarians face unique barriers

in their development as teachers. Very new teachers begin in what is sometimes called the "survival stage," in which they are primarily preoccupied in the classroom with their own actions and various coping strategies, not the learning needs of their students (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012). Over time these instructors leave the survival stage and begin to focus energy on ascertaining the learning needs of their students during instruction; however, reflective practice can greatly aid new teachers in improving their own self-directed development (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012).

Methods of Reflective Teaching

While scholars in the field of education consider reflection a core activity in the profession of teaching (McCullagh, 2012), it's important to understand how reflection differs from other types of thought. Good reflectors move beyond description of an experience and begin to identify problems or questions, gather information to address the questions, study the issues and the gathered information, and make sound decisions for further action based this act of studying (Dewey, 1933). Without this critical process of study, reflecting teachers run the risk of wasting valuable time engaging in reflective behaviors that fail to be meaningful or provide long-lasting consequences for an instructor's teaching.

The best reflective actions for instructors will be those that motivate the teacher to make positive, constructive changes (McCullagh, 2012). It is important to keep in mind that reflective thinking is a skill that is difficult for some and requires practice to master (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012). Below are presented several methods of reflective teaching followed by the author's own experiences as a new instruction librarian using these reflective activities to improve her teaching.

Journaling

One of the most common forms of reflection is regular writing in a journal or diary. An important foundation for reflective journaling is the identification of assumptions in one's own thinking, an activity that is surprisingly challenging (Brookfield, 1995). This kind of reflection can be done through several lenses, one of which is the instructor's own experiences being taught by others. It can be a valuable exercise for a new instructor to remember an effective teacher and an ineffective teacher, list the

qualities and characteristics of each, draw conclusions about good instruction from this comparison, and identify applications of those conclusions to his or her own teaching (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012).

Other common questions that can guide reflection journaling about teaching include:

- “What worked in this lesson? How do I know?”
- What would I do the same or differently if I could reteach this lesson? Why?
- What do I believe about how students learn? How does this belief influence my instruction? (Danielson, 2009)”

Asking these kinds of questions regularly after instruction and both re-reading reflections frequently and comparing the answers from different reflection journal entries can result in deeper thinking about instruction.

Reflective journaling can be stream of consciousness, answer questions like the ones above, or have a more guided structure. An important part of reflection is metacognition – “thinking about one’s thinking” - which can be developed through activities like before and after analysis (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012). For example, an instruction librarian teaching a semester-long course could do some reflecting and draw conclusions about good teaching at the beginning of the semester and then answer similar questions again at the end of the course. An important part of this activity is noticing changes in thinking and behaviors and working out *why* those changes might have occurred (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012).

Coordinating reflection activities for a group of instruction librarians or a whole library instruction department is another valuable approach to reflective teaching. For library instruction programs that are considering a guided reflection program for a group of instruction librarians, it can be helpful to give the instructors relevant literature to read before reflecting (Cornish & Jenkins, 2012). This can help teaching librarians identify assumptions and increase their knowledge of theory and practice in the field of education. A reflective teaching program could also include the creation of study groups that discuss issues in recent teaching experiences and even perform role-plays to prepare for addressing similar issues in future classes (Danielson, 2009). While a reflective program for an entire library instruction program benefits the program as a whole, even individual reflective practices can have an impact on an entire library instruction program and generate information that could be useful in reforming a program (Dinkelman, 2003).

Video-recording

While reflecting on the memory of teaching a class, making detailed observations, and setting concrete goals has been shown to improve teaching in significant ways, the memory is flawed and can present an incomplete or biased perspective to a new teacher. With this in mind, some educators advocate video-recording instruction sessions and viewing the sessions later while asking carefully constructed reflective questions (McCullagh, 2012).

Reflecting this way provides the added benefit of flexibility in reflection—reflection does not need to be done immediately after instruction or in a single reflection session. Recording instruction can help librarians experience the lesson as their students are experiencing it and return to their original learning outcomes for the instruction session (McCullagh, 2012).

The simple act of realizing that one’s memory of the instruction and how it actually happened differ can result in developmental reflective thinking. In a study of pre-service teachers at Michigan State University, reflection supported by video-recording as opposed to memory was found to help the teachers reflect on more specific aspects of their teaching, focus less on classroom management and more in pedagogical issues in their reflections, and notice how the students were responding to the lesson more than how they were behaving as teachers (Rosean et al., 2008). All of these differences in reflection practices led the participants in the study to find reflection based on video-recording to be more valuable and worthwhile than reflection based on recall. Overall, video made reflection more focused and detailed, allowing students to notice issues in the classroom that could not be fixed without the ability to notice them in the first place (Rosean et al., 2008).

Peer Feedback

One of the most successful forms of reflection comes in the form of peer assessment and feedback. While thinking about one’s own thinking and even seeing exactly what one’s teaching looks like through a recording can result in valuable reflection, these activities are all potentially affected by personal biases and assumptions. The input of an outside viewer who can contribute advice and a new perspective provides instructors with important reflective fodder to improve instruction.

While peer feedback can come in many forms, the critical friend relationship provides a simple, effective example of peer feedback that is relatively easy to arrange. A critical friend relationship involves a peer observing another peer’s teaching or teaching objects and providing constructive criticism (Costa & Kallick, 1993). An important foundation for the success of this relationship is a sense of trust between the peers; it can be intimidating to open one’s teaching up for criticism, so it is important to consider the relationship to be free of judgment (Costa & Kallick, 1993). This means that the critical friend should not be someone that already reviews the instructor’s teaching in a formal way (such as a supervisor); the assessment garnered from this relationship should be formative and informal, not summative (Özek, Edgren, & Jandér, 2012).

It is important to note the two parts of the relationship: this person is a *friend*, which means he or she provides more than just feedback, but also continued trust and support, and this person is *critical*, which means he or she provides honest advice for the instructor that bridges the gap between the goals of the instructor and the observations of the critical friend (Costa & Kallick, 1993). Opening up one’s teaching for feedback from a peer can be nerve-

wracking and lead to defensive reactions to advice from a critical friend. Even though feedback from a peer that points out areas for improvement can be valuable for a teacher, “supportive and encouraging comments are more easily received than ones that challenge our thinking and beliefs” (Schuck & Russell, 2005). Ensuring that the critical friends challenge one another gently and tactfully is an important step to establishing a strong critical friend relationship.

To initiate a critical friend meeting, the critical friend observes the instructor in a live or recorded teaching session or listens to a detailed description from the instructor of a particular class. The instructor then describes the goals he or she had for the instruction session and in what areas he or she would like feedback. The critical friend asks questions to better understand the thought process behind the instructor’s actions and provides feedback about what seems significant about the teaching practice. This process involves some critique of the teaching, presented as the result of a new perspective. After the discussion has concluded, both participants write about the meeting and reflect on its implications for their teaching (Costa & Kallick, 1993).

In their study of the use of the critical friend model for teaching academic librarians, Özek, Edgren, and Jandér found that the critical friend relationship provided librarians with opportunities for productive discussion about teaching, a new perspective on their own teaching, the ability to talk about other promotion and tenure issues in a safe environment, a strengthened self-identification of librarian as teacher, a sense of belonging to a professional community, and improved confidence (2012). While some participants in the program found the program time-consuming or wished they could have chosen their own critical friends, most felt the program affected their teaching positively (Özek, Edgren, & Jandér, 2012).

Using Reflective Teaching: A New Librarian’s Perspective

As a new librarian, although I had taken advantage of instruction opportunities where I could in graduate school, I still felt under-prepared for the amount of instruction required in my job duties. Reflection became a large part of my self-directed growth as a teacher, and I employed many of the strategies described above to improve my own instructional practices. After every instruction session I took (and continue to take) fifteen to twenty minutes to answer questions like:

- Were all teaching activities successful? Why or why not?
- How was my demeanor and attitude?
- Did the students learn what was intended? How do I know?
- What additional resources or activities would have been useful? What changes could I make for next time?

Using the assessment from class and my own conclusions, I then listed ways that I could improve my approach to

teaching for the future. Many of the reflective decisions I made during these journaling sessions resulted in immediate changes in my instruction including alterations in how I organized one-shot instruction sessions to what activities I included to even where I stood in the room. The improvements are obvious when I observe my reflections from the beginning of the fall semester as compared to my current reflections.

While I was only able to video-record a small number of my instruction sessions, the amount of information I gained from each recording was enormous. It can be painful to view oneself on camera, but it reveals mannerisms, obvious assumptions of the audience’s knowledge made by the teacher, and how the class flows. I noticed parts of class that lacked energy or involvement from the students very quickly and was able to change my instruction to improve the distribution of active learning exercises over the course of the class. I also became aware of moments when I spoke too quickly or failed to fully explain concepts from class. The act of noticing this behavior allowed me to be mindful of it in future classes and provide more effective instruction.

As a new teacher, I felt very fortunate to have the opportunity to form a critical friend relationship with a colleague early on in my teaching. The colleague who agreed to be my critical friend also participated in my library’s instruction program and was not my supervisor, so she was a perfect candidate to provide me with supportive, critical feedback. We began our sessions using a script of guiding questions for our critical friend meetings, but over time we found it easier to talk freely about what worked and didn’t work in an instruction session. Because my critical friend was a more experienced teacher, many of our meetings involved her imparting advice to me about the structure and pacing of my instruction sessions. However, my fresh perspective allowed me to give her valuable feedback about how the students were perceiving her instruction as well. After almost a year of exchanging feedback every two or three weeks about our instructional practices, the experience has been so valuable that I am looking for a second critical friend outside the library. It’s amazing how the simple act of reflecting on an instruction session with a trusted peer can result in significant positive changes in one’s instruction.

Conclusion

Reflecting on one’s own teaching is “inherently risky and potentially threatening” because it exposes one’s hard work to criticism and can lead to a need for significant, time-consuming changes to teaching practices (Schuck & Russell, 2005). However, the benefits of reflecting are well-documented and often immediately apparent in a teacher’s success in the classroom. Actions like keeping a reflective journal, recording teaching sessions, or having a critical friend relationship can lead to improved metacognition, better teaching practices, a sense of confidence as a teacher, and the ability to move beyond the “survival state” in the classroom to a state in which the

instruction librarian can begin to mold teaching to the students' needs.

It is important to keep in mind that reflection is not purely a negative activity; it is possible and, indeed, important to recognize positive aspects of instruction during reflection and measure progress. This is made more possible by continued reflection—instructors can observe in current reflections how past reflections resulted in positive changes in the classroom. Observing what contributed to successful

instruction can be just as valuable as noting things to improve for the future (McCullagh, 2012).

While teaching librarians may not always have the ability to gain formal instruction training, engaging in reflective practices is a free, yet extremely valuable way to improve teaching. As we embrace the role of librarian-as-educator, we can use reflection to make our instructional practices better and our library services even more valuable for those we serve.

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