

Teacher development/ learner development: the role of reflective practice

About the author



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Despite formalised professional development programmes or informal teacher-led activities, the ongoing process of professional growth can be a lonely one. This can be especially true for teachers on international foundation programmes, who may be working on a part-time basis or situated in different departments across an institution. The act of teaching itself takes place in isolation, and it can be very difficult to view our own performance objectively. Critical reflection is one method of maintaining momentum in a demanding profession.

What?

Reflective practice is an established methodology, used by professionals across disciplines as both a training and development tool. Reflective practice is especially suited to working contexts which involve complex human interaction and strong emotions, such as medicine, social work and education. It is a goal, or a philosophy, and, as such, the practitioner can and should design their own pathway. In this way it fits well with the curriculum diversity which often characterises the IFP.

Schon (1987) identified three reflective processes, which interplay to different degrees depending, for example, on the experience of the teacher. Reflection-in-action represents the decisions we make during a class. Reflection-on-action is a more considered contemplation of an experience after the fact, the point at which we attempt to fit the new discoveries into our mental framework. In time, these processes may lead to knowing-in-action; the ability to make effective decisions automatically. These processes are not linear, and the expert, experienced teacher may often be confronted with a situation which prompts a reassessment of practice. Clearly, the teaching context presented by different IFP subject areas and teaching situations will also play a key role.

Why?

In his fascinating and ambitious study *The Lives of Teachers* (1993) Huberman concluded that career trajectory could take many directions, towards disenchantment or self-realization, through doubt or positive experimentation.

Although this can be influenced by external factors over which teachers have little control, such as institutional or national policies, Huberman emphasized the teacher's personal responsibility for those aspects of our work over which we do have some authority.

'Putting it unkindly, while the principle task of professional educators is to guide (students) in the course of their development, it seems that they, themselves, do not have the inclination to reflect on his or her own situation and their own professional future.' (1993, p.262)

In the twenty years since the project, increased interest in reflection has led to changes in initial and early teacher education, but it is worth reminding ourselves that experience is no guarantee of expertise, and that a continued commitment to teacher development is instrumental in maintaining interest and avoiding burnout (Woodward, 1991, p.147, Farrell, 2007, p.3). It would be interesting to find out how many international foundation programmes do already provide tailored professional development courses for their staff.

What is also interesting is the link that Huberman makes between the teachers own reflection, and that of his/her students. To employ an aphorism, we ought to 'practice what we preach'. Highlighting the need for critical reflection is especially important when it comes to foundation programme students, some of whom may come from pedagogical cultures which have different expectations. What we need to do is ensure our students understand what is expected of them. Little (1995) makes a case for the interdependence of teacher and learner autonomy thus;

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'... successful learners have always been autonomous ... Genuinely successful teachers have always been autonomous in the sense of having a strong sense of personal responsibility for their teaching, exercising via continuous reflection and analysis the highest possible degree of ... control of the teaching process.' (1995, p.179).

Teachers without a firm grounding and a belief in reflective practice, not just at a theoretical level but also at an experiential one, will find it very difficult to help their students towards learner responsibility.

How?

There are a number of techniques which can be adapted by both IFP teachers and learners to facilitate reflection. In order to be successful over time, however, I would like to stress two key points.

1. Routine is the enemy of reflection.

If reflection is questioning, what questions should we ask? Early in our teaching careers, we are often concerned with classroom management and other 'skills'. We are likely to analyse the superficial (What happened?) without attending to the beliefs or issues which cause situations (Why did that happen?). This can lead to a further problems.

- i the learning process becomes stale, and solutions to problems stagnate (Korthagen and Vasalos, 2005).
- ii the focus on critical incidents does not promote holistic learning, leading to reflection on each situation as a distinct occurrence rather than as a part of a pattern.
- iii reflection on problem solving is negative; it is more positive to picture an ideal and work towards it.

Both teacher and learner need to find ways of asking themselves new questions and somehow 'breaking the cycle'. Perhaps the best way of finding a new perspective is by having others pose the questions.

2. Reflection is not a solitary pursuit

Although at the outset of this article I stated that teaching takes place in isolation, learning need not. Vygotsky's (1978) 'Zone of Proximal Development' – a virtual space in which cooperative participants can achieve success in tasks beyond their individual ability – has experienced quite a renaissance in recent decades. If students commonly work together in pairs or groups, why does the teacher have to plough a lonely furrow? Perhaps there are opportunities for peer cooperation amongst IFP tutors which could be developed.

What? (Revisited)

With this in mind, what do you and your students need to do to really understand your own performance?

1. Journal Writing

Both teachers and students can benefit from keeping a journal; as a way of recording and processing new knowledge and ideas, to analyse values and experiences, to revisit and assess critical incidents, to reflect alone or

to interact with peers. Bolton (2005) is an excellent read for anyone considering writing as a tool for professional development, really emphasizing creative ways of finding new perspectives.

2. Time to reflect

As teachers, we plan carefully towards clear goals. However, we can sometimes forget that the students are not a part of this planning progress. It can be chastening to receive students feedback and realize that they don't know what they studied, let alone why they studied it. Incorporating reflection into each lesson not only consolidates learning, but also enables the teacher to see where they need to be more explicit, and offers the learner the chance to take ownership of new knowledge and feel a part of the process. It is important, however, to change the nature of this reflection throughout the course; I found that students lost their initial enthusiasm and stopped thinking as deeply after a few weeks. Recently, I have switched the reflection questions and tried combinations of written, oral, individual and pair work. When making time to reflect on teaching, the teacher should do the same.

3. Peer Assessment

Depending on how this is approached, students can be encouraged to make connections between what they are doing in class and abstract notions of 'learning'. The teacher can focus on certain areas, and (pragmatically) the process can assist us in grading, especially with larger classes. For teachers, this can take the form of teacher development groups or observation. Each requires sensitivity and diplomacy from participants, and it is best to set goals and ground rules in advance. I recommend Farrell (2007) for good practice guidelines.

Conclusion

Thinking about what we do, as teachers or as learners, is a vital component of development. I hope this article has given you some ideas of how and why you can bring this practice into your own classrooms

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