

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND LEARNING

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In the current political climate, with its focus on standardized tests, mandated curriculum standards, increased teacher accountability, and legislative control of instructional choices, it seems futile, or possibly naïve, to write an issue of *Primary Voices* suggesting that teachers slow down, step back, and spend more time thinking, reflecting, and talking about their instructional practices and beliefs. In classrooms today, it is difficult to find the time to reflect, let alone meet with other teachers to talk about our teaching. While this certainly is a challenging endeavor, it is one we believe teachers will need to undertake if they are to remain a powerful voice in the decisions that affect their classrooms and curriculum directions.

Several years ago, I began to reframe my thinking about authentic assessment to include reflection as an integral part of the assessment process. As a classroom teacher, I used classroom-based assessments to gather information, reflected on this information, and then constructed learning experiences based on the information generated by these assessments. This was the "Assessment/Learning Cycle" I based my classroom instruction on, as well as the structure I presented in workshops and university courses (see Figure 1). In these educational settings, I focused on a variety of assessment techniques, including running records (Clay, 1993), miscue analysis (Goodman, Watson, & Burke, 1987), retellings (Brown & Cambourne, 1992), portfolios (Tierney, Carter, & Desai, 1991), observational records (Power, 1996) and reading interviews (Burke, 1980). Our goal

was to understand both how to conduct these assessments and how to use them to make instructional decisions.

Influenced by the work of John Dewey concerning reflective practice and the philosophical work of Charles Sanders Peirce, I began to think that assessment should be part of a "Reflective Cycle," as opposed to reflection being part of the Assessment Cycle (see Figure 2). Instead of beginning with the gathering of information, the Reflective Cycle begins with a reflective stance: the willingness to question our teaching and take a critical look at our beliefs, theories, and educational practices. The Reflective Cycle then continues on to include classroom-based assessment, planning, and teaching.

I was also influenced by the questions that preservice and inservice teachers frequently asked regarding the assessments we were learning to conduct. They understood how to administer the assessments, but questioned why they should collect student work in portfolios or go through the fuss of marking running records. The problem, I realized, was with having a purpose for using the assessments.

Since I now believe that a reflective stance drives the reflective cycle, I realize it was our unwillingness to critically examine our practice, not the inability to use classroom-based assessments, that deterred us from gathering information on our students and our teaching practices. Assessment is part of reflective practice, used by reflective teachers to gather information necessary to make curricular decisions. Because we had little or no doubts about

the learning experiences offered to students, there was no perceived reason for conducting these assessments. So it was a lack of purpose, not misunderstanding of assessments, that was the problem. This insight led us to believe that a reflective stance comes before the use of authentic assessments; otherwise the assessments are done simply to comply with school mandates.

Although classroom-based assessment does not always lead to reflective practice, we can say that reflective practice generally leads to the use of classroom-based assessment to gather information for

making curricular decisions. In short, it is our ability to suspend judgment, our willingness to question our practice that leads to the use of the classroom-based assessments and to becoming reflective teachers.

Reflective Practice Requires a Reflective Stance

Becoming a reflective teacher is a conscious, systematic, and deliberate process of framing and re-framing classroom practice in light of the consequences of our actions, democratic principles, and the beliefs, values, expectations, and experiences that we

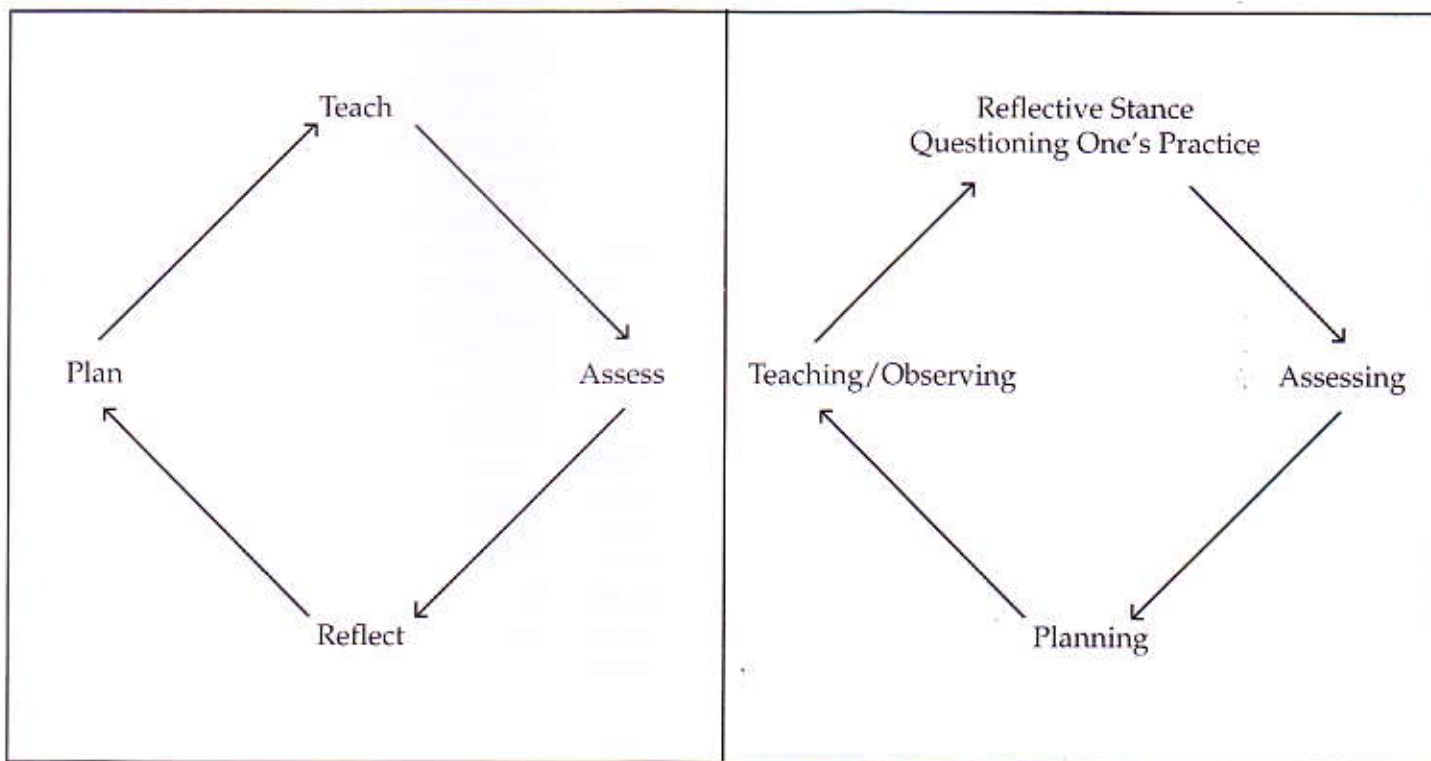


Figure 1. The assessment/learning cycle

Figure 2. The reflective cycle

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as teachers bring to the teaching–learning event. Reflective practice, then, is a stance, a willingness to question our teaching. It is a purposeful process used to inform our decisions and help us improve the learning experiences we provide to our students. Reflective teachers view the experiences in their classrooms as open to inquiry, are able to suspend judgments in order to question why they do what they do, and critically examine the learning experiences they create in their classrooms. Teachers who are willing to question their beliefs and are able to critically examine their teaching practices have adopted a reflective stance. That stance is developed within our classroom practice and with support from our colleagues.

John Dewey (1933) described reflective practice as an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends . . .” (p. 6). From this perspective, reflective practice begins with a perceived uncertainty, a nagging sense of doubt, and ends with a judgment or action. These “uncertainties” or doubts do not appear ready-made for teachers; rather they are created or “framed” from experiences encountered in the classroom. Teachers have to “construct” the problems or uncertainties they will act upon based in part on their knowledge base, their classroom environment, and the learning experiences taking place in the classroom.

Dewey described three attitudes that a teacher must adopt in order to teach reflectively—open-mindedness, wholeheartedness, and responsibility. Open-mindedness refers to the ability to suspend judgment and be open to new possibilities. Wholeheartedness is the capacity to enter into the teaching event with all of one’s heart and attention. And responsibility refers to the moral and ethical implications inherent in the educational process. Dewey

also wrote about the concept of “suspended conclusion,” describing this as the ability to resist the temptation to “jump to premature judgments” and further, to carefully weigh both the evidence provided and the consequences of one’s actions before making instructional decisions. He contended that a teacher must never accept suggestions or solutions uncritically, and that one must always suspend judgment during the necessary period of inquiry and reflection.

Teaching from a reflective stance is not something teachers are “taught to do,” rather it is seen as something they are “helped to become.” Reflective practitioners are knowledgeable teachers that act according to their best judgments and suspend their conclusions, but also understand that knowledge is tentative and open to both change and falsification.

For Dewey, the purpose of reflective practice was to change teachers’ actions and their process of arriving at decisions. If reflection did not lead to action, it was simply a waste of time. The purpose of reflective practice, then, is to influence the actions taken by the teacher, the process of arriving at these decisions, and the various consequences and outcomes of those decisions. Unless reflection results in action, teachers are not using their new understandings to improve practice. The value of reflection lies in its potential to refine classroom practice and improve the quality of the teaching–learning process for both teachers and students.

Time, Distance, Dialogue, and a Preferred Vision

If we accept the notion that reflective practice is not something we can be taught to do, then we must explore how we go about becoming more reflective teachers who are able to create reflective learning communities. There are four important aspects to consider in promoting reflective practice—

Time, Distance, Dialogue, and a Preferred Vision. Each of these must be addressed when supporting teachers' efforts to adopt a reflective stance to their teaching.

Reflection on our practice demands time to think about what has happened and time to "mull over" what should be happening. Time is at a premium with the overloading of teachers' schedules and the increases in class size and curriculum mandates. It's hard to reflect when you are too busy. In the classroom portraits to follow, each teacher found ways to make time for reflection in their schedules. Whether this time was formally sanctioned, like Suzette's parent board meetings, or informally developed over lunch and prep times, each teacher knew the value of making time to think about practice.

Distance refers to a critical perspective or the sense of suspended judgment described earlier. It is the ability to render our practice problematic, to "objectively" analyze our teaching and suspend judgments until information is collected that defines a critical distance in reflective practice. There are many references to teachers as researchers that describe in detail techniques for achieving a critical distance from one's practice. It is, after all, very hard to analyze experiences while they are happening. Using a reflective notebook to record observations, many teachers, including those we will visit in this issue, are able to step back from their practice, see patterns over time, and come to better conclusions about how they might proceed. These teachers also record vignettes from their classroom on audio- and videotapes. They often use the recordings to achieve the distance needed for reflection.

The importance of dialogue with other educators cannot be underestimated in reflective practice. Teachers need support from colleagues. They need a group to bounce ideas off and a place to receive feedback on their ideas and instructional decisions. Although reflective practice has been

described as primarily an individual process, it is a social process as well. As teachers, we do not reflect in a vacuum. Rather we make decisions in a social context based on our social interactions. The opportunity to meet with other educators cannot be set aside if teachers are expected to make changes in their instructional practices.

When I first started working with these teachers, I was impressed by their willingness to invite me into their classrooms. They wanted another pair of eyes to come and watch what was happening and to offer ideas to consider. Because of the isolated nature of classroom teaching, sometimes teachers are apprehensive about colleagues in their rooms. As educators, we need to break down the metaphorical walls between rooms and be willing to share the successes and the problems that happen in our teaching lives. Unfortunately, the physical distance that now exists between the authors in this issue requires that we use e-mail to keep in touch, but we have resolved to keep the dialogue going.

Before we can make changes in our practice, we should have a vision we are working toward. A preferred vision is the result of thinking about what your room would look like if everything were going perfectly. It is a dynamic concept that changes and grows as one's knowledge base and classroom experiences expand, allowing teachers to articulate what they want their classrooms to be like. As Fullan (1993) points out, change without direction is chaos. Articulating our preferred vision allows us to know when we are making progress. At first, simply having children choose a book to read for a sustained period of time may be a primary goal. As the classroom evolves, our expectations for students and our preferred vision for our teaching expand. Keep in mind that our ability to articulate what we want our classrooms to look like directly affects our ability to reflect on our teaching. As reflective practitioners, we have to have some idea

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about where we are headed before we begin our journey.

Promoting Reflective Learning Communities

This issue is devoted to the notion of teachers promoting reflective learning communities. Thinking of teachers “promoting” suggests more than just acting as “facilitators.” Promoting suggests that teachers would take an active role in developing, establishing, and advocating for a type of learning community we describe as reflective. Teachers who promote a reflective learning community are concerned with the social relationships that develop among students; the rituals, ceremonies, celebrations, jobs, and routines that are established; and the way that students and teachers discuss and share their learning experiences (Peterson, 1992).

The teachers writing in this issue are trying to create a Reflective Learning Community in each of their classrooms. Rebecca and Tracy will describe how their workshop approach to writing and reading, respectively, lead to the development of their reflective learning communities. Suzette will describe how her classroom structure includes the voices of parents as reflective partners in supporting her learning community. The teachers in each of the classrooms described have adopted a reflective stance to their practice, and then have promoted this stance in their learning community, working alongside children as they gently guide them to question their work and their learning processes.

In a reflective learning community, the teacher is a reflective practitioner (Schon, 1983), constantly evaluating and learning from the experiences provided in the classroom, demonstrating his/her personal reflective processes, and providing the time and space for students to do the same.

Conclusion

Both reflective practice and inquiry begin with a sense of doubt. It is this sense of doubt, our ability to suspend judgment about our classroom practice coupled with our willingness to question our practice, that leads to reflective teaching. As our ability to reflect develops, so must our knowledge base expand to support our thinking. The more we know about teaching in general, the better we will be able to critically examine what happens in our own classrooms.

Reflection leads to more reflection. As we open this Pandora’s Box and allow ourselves to critically examine our teaching, the process gains momentum. I have been unable to look at my teaching practices without wondering if there isn’t a better way to do things. I carry my reflective notebook everywhere and continually reflect upon my teaching and other aspects of my life. It is reflection that has brought me to this point along the continuum toward the educator I hope to become. It is reflection that will keep me moving forward.

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Additional Teacher Research Suggestions

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Call for 2003 Hoey Award Nominations

The NCTE Edwin A. Hoey Award is given to an outstanding teacher, grades 5-8, in honor of Edwin A. Hoey, who brought limitless imagination and creativity to the pages of *Read* during his nearly forty-year career as writer, editor, and managing editor of the renowned educational magazine. The Edwin A. Hoey Award recognizes exceptional English language arts teachers who instill their own love of learning in their students. The winner of the award will receive \$2,500, plus up to \$1,000 for expenses to attend the NCTE Annual Conven-

tion in November; a one-year complimentary NCTE membership; a one-year subscription to *Voices from the Middle*; and the opportunity to present at the NCTE Annual Convention. You may obtain an application form by calling NCTE Headquarters at 1-800-369-6283, ext. 3612. Applications must be postmarked no later than **December 15, 2002**. Results will be announced in Spring 2003, and the award will be presented at the 2003 Annual Convention in San Francisco, California.