Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

Teaching Development | Wāhanga Whakapakari Ako

How can I improve my practice?

The Thinker—Rodin

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February 2012
The learning outcomes for this workshop include the following:

*Students will be expected to be able to:*

- Provide a rationale for why reflection is encouraged in teacher education;
- Describe the main features of the history of reflective practitioner movement;
- Analyse and discuss own preferred ways of learning in a variety of contexts;
- Critically evaluate the claimed benefits and disadvantages of being a ‘teacher-as-researcher’;
- Determine own preferred ways of reflecting, based on past experience;
- Consider and critique exemplars of reflective practice presented at the workshop.
Reflective Practitioner

- “If you always do what you always did, then you’ll always get what you always got.”
- “One definition of insanity is to keep doing the same things, but expect a different result.”

These quotes illustrate the necessity for practitioners in any environment to consider how best to refresh their practice, to get better at what they do, to benefit from good practice that they may have seen in others, or to avoid aspects of their own practice that students or others have told them needs correction.

Activity:

Using the materials provided, spend ten minutes capturing your reflections on the kind of learning environment that you would most prefer, when you are learning a new skill. It can be in a university, community education or other context. Be prepared to share your reflections with your colleagues shortly.

Group Task

The History of the Movement

1. Over time, in education, various writers have suggested why and how teachers might work to improve their own practice. Back in the 1930s, John Dewey (1933) described the difference between impulsive action, routine action and reflective action. The first, Dewey believed, was based on trial and error. The second relied on
traditional ways of operating, sanctioned by authority. Both of these methods he felt were used by practitioners without engaging in much thought about how they were operating. However, Dewey claimed that reflective action arose from the work of educators who were active, who persistently and carefully considered how they practised and what they were teaching, and was often the result of a need to solve a particular problem. Reflective thought is a ‘chain of ideas’ (Dewey, 1933, p. 4).

Dewey believed that if teachers did not operate reflectively, they risked basing their practice on prejudice and outdated thinking. However, if they critically reflected on their practice, this should improve, provided that they used such skills as observation and reasoning, working within a framework of responsibility for their students, openness to better ways of operating, and passion for their work. Dewey believed that if teachers did not operate reflectively, they risked basing their practice on prejudice and outdated thinking. However, if they critically reflected on their practice, this should improve, provided that they used such skills as observation and reasoning, working within a framework of responsibility for their students, openness to better ways of operating, and passion for their work. Dewey believed that if teachers did not operate reflectively, they risked basing their practice on prejudice and outdated thinking. However, if they critically reflected on their practice, this should improve, provided that they used such skills as observation and reasoning, working within a framework of responsibility for their students, openness to better ways of operating, and passion for their work.

2. The notion of teachers as reflective practitioners was further developed in reaction to a tendency for research to be done on, rather than by, teachers. In the early 1970s Stenhouse, at the University of East Anglia, promoted the change from reliance on outside ‘expert’ research (Stenhouse, 1975; Stenhouse et al, 1970), a discourse in which teachers were the intended recipients of advice from university-based researchers who wrote papers on what constituted good practice. As Kencheloe (1991) pointed out, this advice was usually ignored by the teachers who perceived it as irrelevant if they were aware of it at all (see also Elliott, 1994; Smith & Lovat, 1991; Zeichner & Noffke, 1989).
Stenhouse was at the forefront of the ‘researching teacher’ movement in the U.K., claiming that all teaching ought to be based on research but that research and curriculum development should be the preserve of teachers who gain understanding of their work through studying their own problems and effects (McKernan, 1991). Stenhouse coined the term “teacher as researcher” (quoted in Zeichner & Noffke, 1998). Elliott and Adelman (1973) further promoted teacher-research work using action research in their Ford Teaching Project, which aimed to promote pupil independence, teacher identification of problems through utilising systematic reflection, and the ongoing development of teacher self-awareness.

Elliott’s later work (1978) argued that teaching is inescapably a theoretical activity (quoted in McKernan, 1991:22). Teachers, according to Elliott, should interpret their everyday practice through the pursuit of reflective self-development. His thesis was that the two areas, split by the tendency for theory to be developed in universities and promoted to practitioners, should be reunified through being developed by teachers themselves. This kind of thinking has been continued and further developed in other countries around the world. It has been used at Deakin University in Australia by McTaggart et al, (1982); Carr and Kemmis, (1986, 2009); Kemmis and McTaggart (1988b); in South Africa by Dison & Murray (1998); Walker (1993, 1995, 2009), and in the U.S. by Cochran-Smith & Lytle, (1990, 2009), and Noffke & Zeichner, (1987), among other educators.
3. Teachers-as-researchers – a disputed concept

However, the notion is currently contested terrain. Despite the promotion of teachers as researchers who utilise the skills of reflective practice to improve their own situations, there is some debate about the extent to which the teacher-as-researcher movement is, or even should be, replacing a reliance on university based research. Zeichner (1995) discussed the way that many classroom teachers still see research as an activity conducted by those outside the classroom for the benefit of those outside the classroom.

McIntyre (1997), presenting his presidential address to the British Education Research Association, questioned the ‘relation between the practice of teachers on one hand and research done by professional researchers on the other’ (1997:131). In this statement McIntyre clearly polarised the two areas, which Elliott had worked to integrate. He quoted Elliott’s (1989) presidential address in which Elliott claimed that there could be no educational research in which teachers played no important role in the process of articulating, analysing and hypothesising solutions to complex educational problems, and that professional researchers should be subordinate to this. McIntyre, by contrast, argued that ‘It seems to me simply unreasonable to demand of teachers that they be researchers as well as teachers, when the expertise required for the two activities is so very different’ (ibid., 132).
Why did McIntyre think that teaching and research were incompatible activities? His argument was based on the notion that the split-second judgements which teachers need to make to practice effectively are at variance with the single-minded concern with clearly-formulated agendas, careful planning and analysis of what has happened, the skills which McIntyre argued are needed from researchers. Woodhouse, Director of the New Zealand Universities Academic Audit Unit, agreed, stating that there is ‘an assumption that all academics can be good at both teaching and research, which, given the quite different nature of the two activities, should not be expected to be universally true’ (Woodhouse, 1997:360; italics not in original).

4. The notion of reflection is debated (Adler, 1991; Bengtston, 1995; Cole, 1997; Grimmet et al, 1990; Hatton and Smith, 1995 - all quoted in Haigh, 1998), and McTaggart, 1995:32). The most frequently quoted proponent of reflectively practising teachers was Donald Schon, whose 1983 *The Reflective Practitioner* most concisely presented the developing discourse. The kinds of split-second judgements based on professional past experience which McIntyre considered both typical of good teachers and simultaneously incompatible with their adopting of a research function concurrently, are spelled out in Schon’s work, summarised by Gilbert. As Gilbert explained it, Schon described:
Knowing-in-action [which] is the professional knowledge that practitioners actually use, as distinct from the theoretical, scientifically derived knowledge that technical-rationalist approaches assume that they used. [There is also] Reflection-in-action [which] occurs when new situations arise in which a practitioner’s existing stock of knowledge - their ‘knowing-in-action’ is not appropriate for the situation. It involves reflecting on ‘knowing-in-action’. ‘Reflection-in-action’ is a process through which hitherto taken for granted ‘knowing-in-action’ is critically examined, reformulated and tested through further action. It is a process of research through which the development of professional knowledge and the improvement of practice occur together (in much the same way as in action research) (Gilbert, 1994:516, emphasis in original).
4. Some theory that underpins reflective practice

Much of our traditional learning experience has led us to believe that we learn best by listening to experts. It has been found, however, that learning that results in increased self-awareness, changed behavior, and the acquisition of new skills must actively engage the individual in the learning process. In particular, adults have been found to learn more effectively by doing or experiencing.

Adult learning specialist, David Kolb, has described this learning process as a four-phase cycle in which the learner:
1. does something concrete or has a specific experience which provides a basis for
2. the learner's observation and reflection on the experience and their own response to it. These observations are then
3. assimilated into a conceptual framework or related to other concepts in the learner's past experience and knowledge from which implications for action can be derived; and
4. tested and applied in different situations.

The adult learner assimilates useful information into their personal "experience bank" against which future learning events will be compared and to which new concepts will be related. Unless what is learned can be applied to actual work or life situations the learning will not be effective or long lasting.

People responsible for designing learning events should keep these phases in mind as they develop ways to help the learner understand and be able to use the new knowledge and/or skill.
How can you use Kolb’s model to help students learn to learn?

- “The whole point of education is that a person develop capacities in all four of the learning modes:
- Learning is the process by which development occurs…We want to accomplish an increase in students' cognitive complexity. We want to move them to a higher level of critical thinking.
- We used to think we were arming or empowering students when we gave them the facts. Now we realize we must give them the theory [of learning] - not just for a successful college life, but for a successful productive life.”


(this material drawn from http://arl.cni.org/training/ilsco/adultlearn.html)
Pip will talk about reflective practice and action research

There is also a large amount of theoretical work that connects reflective practice with action research. We will discuss this during the workshop, but writers such as Kemmis and McTaggart, Stenhouse and Elliott, McNiff, Somekh and Whitehead have all written extensively about how reflective practice underpins action research. Kolb’s cycle is the basis of the ‘standard’ action research spiral:

Benefits of being a ‘teacher-as-researcher’

The preceding section has described how the teacher-as-researcher concept developed over time, and also some of the arguments that have been advanced against the notion. Let’s take time to reflect on our own perceptions of the approach.
Task:
For five minutes, reflect on what you think might be the benefits of becoming a researching teacher who inquires into your own practice. These benefits might be theoretical, practical or both. Write them down, and be prepared to share them with others. You may also want to capture any ideas about the disadvantages of this approach also, for later discussion.
Following group discussion and feedback, list the benefits you have shared or heard below.

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List any reservations or disadvantages you have shared or heard below.

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Why is it important to capture reflections in some way as you practise?

There is a variety of ways of capturing reflections, and we’ll look at some of these shortly. Meanwhile, why is it important to record your thoughts as these happen? Teachers have said:

- “When I’ve been doing professional reading, I sometimes come across really great ideas that someone has tried out in their class, and written about. I’d like to try those out in my own work, but the pressures of work often mean that I don’t get around to it unless I actually write into my plan for a subsequent session that I’ll try one of them in that session.”

- “Sometimes, when I’m teaching a session, I’ll get to the end and think that something didn’t go quite right. At the time, I can remember why that happened. But if I don’t write it down, then the next time I come to teach that session I have a gnawing feeling that something didn’t go well, but I’m darned if I can remember what it was! It can make me feel quite anxious about how the session will proceed.”

- “When I’ve been out walking, I’ve often had flashes of insight into how to teach a class in a better way. If I don’t take the time to write down my insight when I get home, I often can’t remember it in the future.”
• “I’ve been observing someone else’s teaching, either in a formal sense when I’ve been asked to give peer feedback, or sometimes through something I’ve seen in a movie or on TV. I think there are some aspects of the way that person is teaching that I’d love to try out. But I don’t always remember how they set the situation up, or what they did, so I can find myself reluctant to try it.”

If we don’t take the time to write down or record ideas in some way as these occur to us, we’re in danger of losing them. So, as you develop as a reflective practitioner/teacher-as-researcher, we encourage you to find a way of capturing ideas that works for you.

A further benefit of capturing ideas and then formally reflecting on the effectiveness or otherwise of these, is that they are data for academic papers. We’ll be looking at examples of these later in the workshop.

Reflection time:

Take a couple of minutes and write down ways in which you keep a record of reflections on your practice as these occur, or subsequently. Be prepared to share these with the group.
Exemplars: how do people capture their reflections?

The way that people capture their reflections is largely dependent on (a) their own learning style; (b) their discipline – whether they’re in a predominantly written-oriented, performance-oriented or oral discipline; and (c) what resources they happen to have at hand at the time!

For practical reasons, most people capture their reflections via written forms such as diaries, post-it notes on lesson plans, journals, portfolio materials, poetry, sometimes short stories, novels or books (e.g. McWilliam, 1994).

However, some capture reflections in dance, some in drama, some in song. We will look at a couple of these ‘alternative’ forms of reflection during the workshop. You may even choose to present your own reflection in such a way. A student at the University of Waikato gained her Masters thesis through the combination of dance and reflective practice (Bright, 2007) and is now studying for her doctorate at this university. She has taken a number of academic papers to conferences reporting on this work.
References


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Whitehead, J. (various) http://www.actionresearch.net/writing.shtml


