

Professional Reflection's Effects on  
Teaching Practice and Student Learning

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## Introduction

Reflection has most certainly always had some place in the world of education, and it could also be said to be a basic part of the human nature's capacity to learn and inquire. But recognition of its importance, and specifically the importance of formalizing both its understanding in the academic field and its implementation in educational institutions, has risen sharply over the past quarter century along with advocates for it in the scholarly world of education. Along with this have come attempts at defining the term, explanations as to how it crafts knowledge for both educators and students, as well as the offering of processes and procedures by which to conduct reflection in a constructive manner that improves learning for students and the execution of practice for teachers.

## Effects on Teaching Practice

The need to construct new knowledge out of reflection arises from the fact that educators must know what crafts actually achieve the results they are looking for from their work, and then be able to intentionally repeat those in the future. Conversely, they need to know "what gets in the way of [a] goal, and if that obstacle blocks only all students or just some" (Yancey, 1998).

Many scholars have written on the definition of reflection being one that helps improve teaching practice. For example, Yancey (1998) states that it is "to see our own teaching and learning *practices* as a source of knowledge, metaphorically as a text that can be systematically observed, questioned, understood, generalized about, and refuted" (p. 235). Costa and Gallick (2000) say that reflection "provides an opportunity for –

amplifying the meaning of one's work through the insights of others; applying meaning beyond the situation in which it was learned; making a commitment to modifications, plans, and experimentation; and documenting learning and providing a rich base of shared knowledge" (p. 60). We might take Yancey's definition and Costa and Gallick's observation into consideration and see that Schön elaborates further upon the expected results from reflection in his claiming that "when it [reflection] is successful, it yields not covering laws but prototypical models of causal patterns that may guide inquiry in other...situation-prototypes that depend, for their validity, on modification and testing in 'the next situation (p. 97)" (quoted by Yancey, 1998) (p. 235).

This last point has to do with appreciating the fact that the experiences and incidents which take place in any given classroom are always the subject and result of that class's and teacher's idiosyncrasies, but at the same time understanding and accepting that these experiences will also face and demonstrate similar themes, dilemmas, and character amongst each other that most educators would be able to relate to. Thus, the experiences can be categorized (or 'generalized about') and strategies for dealing with them or for producing the best outcome for the students can be shared with by faculty or reached through their own collaboration. This in turn can prevent mistakes from being made and better ready the teacher for dealing with potential problems and anticipating the best course of action before-hand, or within the split-second inside a classroom in which a decision needs to be made. Hole and McEntee (1999) sum this concept up with a quote from John Dewey in which he states that the "business of the educator [is] to see in what direction an experience is heading" (p. 35).

### Effects on Student Learning

Reflection for students, especially through writing, has been shown to improve learning in dynamic ways and across different learning levels and demographics. Consider two examples whose academic and demographical contrasts illustrate this fact. The first being the example of research showing that reflective journals written by English Language Learners (ELL) at a majority Mexican-American elementary school effectively showed the need for family connections to be made between educators of ELL students in content areas and ELL's families (Janzen, 2008). The second is in the use of class reflection blogs by medical students enabling them to identify patterns of behavior that would increase professional conduct in their practice (Chretlen, Goldman, Faselis, 2008). These show starkly different educational contexts that both benefited from formalized student reflection.

Learning can be improved through reflection in a variety of scenarios for students because reflective thought can result in a tangible product that allows for both them and their instructors to assess whether learning has taken place which is not only meaningful, but also reflective and self-regulated. Furthermore, reflective writing and sharing in classrooms by students reduces the tendency to be impulsive and improves general problem-solving skills, helps individuals analyze and deliberate issues, enhances communication of differing perspectives, and promotes self-awareness (Kish, Sheehan, 1997). In journaling or writing reflections on their own achievements and struggles as writers, students are both empowered by being given a level of authority in doing self assessments and are also pushed to take ownership and responsibility over their own

learning and development. These elements are essential for learning writing skills (Giles, 2010). Conversely, for the instructor of writing composition courses reading the student's self-assessments and reflections enables them to be more poignant with individualized feedback (Camp, 1998).

### Conclusion

There now exists a strong body of research and evidence that shows making reflection a part of the routine work, for both students and teachers, results in an increased chance they will achieve their objectives, as well as a decreased chance that mistakes will be repeated. For the student, partaking in reflection helps them understand themselves better as learners. Additionally, having the student produce a byproduct of reflection, be it a portfolio, journal, or blog, also helps their instructor become more effective in teaching them. For teachers, it accomplishes the important task of preventing mistakes from being repeated and assuring that practice is continually improved. These are prime objectives for any educator. As such, educational institutions would be well advised to implement reflection in a way that is formal, research-based, and integral to their mode of operation.

## References

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