



## Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

*Strategies that encourage reflective practice are writing in journals, coaching with peers, and conducting action research.*

By Debra C. Daniels

Gardner (1996) used the metaphor of engravings for personal theories of knowledge. He suggested that we all start school around the age of five with an engraving on our self-constructed theories of the world and these engravings are sprinkled with the powder of information throughout the school years including college. After interviewing Harvard students at their graduation ceremonies, Gardner (1996) concluded that all too often these powdered layers fall off as a student exits the educational institution. In other words, the engravings had not been changed, altered, or corrected through educational experiences. His research revealed that students often move through school learning curriculum that had to be "covered" rather than developing an understanding of important life concepts. Thus, Gardner recommended that educators reflect on their practices to focus more on depth than breadth in teaching and learning in order to penetrate the engravings of students.

This metaphor can be applied to educator's beliefs about teaching practices and learning. Teachers generally enter education with a belief about teaching and learning based on their personal experiences; seldom do they question their actions and beliefs. Too often it is assumed that, "If I learned this way then it must be right for everyone." In reality, teachers were generally successful in school and choose to stay there. Thus, education all too often looks the same as it did 50 years ago.

Teacher beliefs and perceptions develop from personal experiences and influences throughout life. Creswell (1998) noted that:

Knowledge is within the meanings people make of it; knowledge is gained through people talking about their meanings; knowledge is laced with personal biases and values; knowledge is written in a personal, up-close way; and knowledge evolves, emerges, and is inextricably tied to the context in which it is studied. (p. 19)

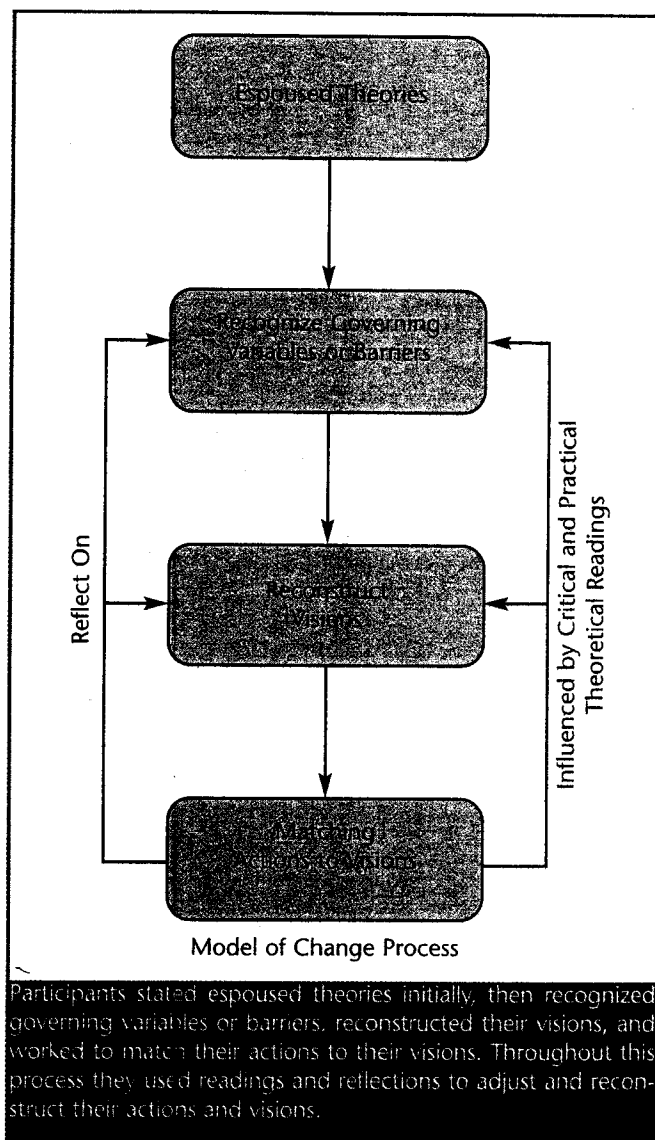
In a study of 165 top executives, Argyris (1966) concluded that these executives were generally unaware of their own behavioral patterns and the effect these patterns had on others. Argyris and Schon (1974) used the term *espoused theories* that are ones that a person states as true but has no proof or evidence of such. These theories are often developed as a result of participation within a culture, through experience, and/or observation. For example a teacher that works in a middle school that promotes cooperative learning would have likely attended some workshops or discussions about cooperative learning. This teacher may have noticed that students work in close proximity together. So, she pushes her students' desks together in groups of four and espouses that she does cooperative learning in her room. What this teacher is missing is that physical proximity does not guarantee cooperative learning. Cooperative learning requires communication and sharing of ideas, materials, responsibilities, and consensus on completing a project. If this teacher tells another teacher she "does" cooperative learning in her classroom she has an espoused theory of her teaching strategy. If, however, an authority on cooperative learning came in to observe and noticed students sitting together but working independently, they would not identify her strategy as cooperative learning. Argyris called this "single-loop learning."

*Single-loop learning* occurs because one prefers to remain in a situation that does not conflict with organizational or cultural rules. The individual (often subconsciously) tries to keep peace by acting in a way to please the administration. These learning habits are deeply embedded and are not consciously adapted. By going with the flow of the group, using the language, following the rules, seeming to please the general consensus, one rarely tests or reflects on his or her actions and espoused theories.

Based on his research of executives, Argyris (1966) suggested that when one learns to inquire and test personal espoused theories, a mismatch of behaviors and espoused theory is often found. When this discovery is made and revealed, one can work toward recognizing governing variables for disparities between theory and actions, reduce barriers, and work toward matching espoused theory and actions. One is operating in a "double-loop learning" cycle when this occurs (Argyris, 1997).

Argyris admitted that reaching the *double-loop learning* phase is not the easiest process. The

Figure 1  
Model of Change Process through the LMA experience



espoused theories are similar to the engraved child-developed theories of lifetime behaviors researched by Gardner (1996). Argyris found that it is often easier for one to recognize the discrepancies in another person's conflicts of espoused theory and actions before recognizing it in one's self.

A study of 17 teachers (kindergarten through ninth grade teachers) enrolled in the Lockheed Martin Academy for Mathematics and Science (LMA) at the University of Central Florida provides an example of the process of reaching double-loop learning (see Figure 1) (Daniels, 2001). Once the teachers confronted their espoused theories through dialogue journals with their professors, professional

readings, and interactive dialogue with their colleagues, they began to change their practices to align their actions with their visions for teaching.

### **Reflection: Moving Toward Double-Loop Learning**

What exactly is a reflective practitioner? To many, reflection means spitting back what they have read, but there is a distinct difference between retelling and reflection: A framework for reflection can pro-

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vide the structure for looking back with the goal of moving forward. Reflection requires one to look back and consider many dimensions of an event, such as, influencing factors, identifying controlling factors, and then deciding if any adjustments can be made for the next time. This is not easy and does not occur immediately. Reflections can take days or weeks. But most often they can occur over a relatively short time when time and effort are given for thoughtful consideration. Reflection can occur in different modes: Hillocks (1995) recommended that teachers engage in written reflections through journals, Costa & Garmston, (1994) found that coaching can guide reflection through communication with a peer, and McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead (1996) concluded that action research can provide a more formalized reflective process.

### **Written Reflections**

Learning to write reflectively is a process. Hillocks (1995) encouraged teachers of all disciplines to use reflective writing. He noted that "writing is a process of discovery" (p. 15) and "our inquiry results in a construction, an account of our observations and the transformations we impose upon them. When we write, that construction is very likely transformed again with the written product" (p. 15).

Writing reflective journals facilitates the writer in inquiring into his or her existing assumptions and beliefs by looking at them again, turning them

around, and viewing from a different perspective. The method of inquiry is to ask one to look deep inside his beliefs and understandings and develop a solid grounding for those beliefs.

Through this process of inquiry, one often finds disequilibrium in one's own thoughts. This feeling is the uneasiness one gets when his practices do not match beliefs or when one starts to question beliefs and practices. A teacher might start asking questions, such as: "Why am I designing my instruction this way?" "Why does our school promote this practice?" "Why does the curriculum guide present material this way?" The goal of reflective journals is to address questions such as these, to have a person start inquiring into her thought patterns and actions, to make connections from prior experiences to new knowledge and find where and how they fit. Maybe they do not fit; maybe one will make adjustments and change beliefs. But beliefs are not changed until old ways are confronted and new ways are considered.

Hillocks (1999) studied writing teacher's classroom practices to discern how teacher knowledge influenced classroom events. His results showed that a teacher's stance toward student learning influenced their reflective abilities. In other words, teachers that felt their students could succeed, most likely reflected on their teaching practices and made changes. But teachers that were not optimistic about student outcomes had little to reflect on since they felt it was the student's responsibility to "get it" based on the teacher's delivery system, usually lecture. Hillocks concluded that teacher practices will not change until they see a clear need and the way to get to that is through reflective practices. "One possibility lies in helping teachers to develop professional networks in which they can discuss their work with one another, become teacher researchers, and write about their thinking" (p. 135).

### **Peer Coaching: A Guided Reflection**

Peer coaching is another tool offered for reflecting on one's practice. Costa and Garmston (1994) developed a model known as *Cognitive Coaching*. "Skillful cognitive coaches apply specific strategies to enhance another person's perceptions, decisions, and intellectual functions" (p. 2). Research on 12 high school teachers engaged in cognitive coaching revealed that they believed they improved in their

ability to instruct students in higher order thinking skills and that they talked with their colleagues more about teaching (Sommers, 1991). Costa and Garmston also concluded after several studies that the more a teacher is engaged in coaching, the higher the benefits for themselves and their students.

Cognitive coaching has three main elements: (a) a trusting relationship, (b) a desire to learn and grow, and (c) working autonomously but interdependently with others (Costa & Garmston, 1994). Prior to peers taking on the challenge of coaching each other, they must first establish a rapport that includes a trusting relationship. Trust must include sincerity along with the desire to facilitate autonomy in others. Both parties must be willing to grow and communicate openly.

A coaching session is usually preceded by a pre-planning session in which the teacher to be observed prepares the coach for the upcoming classroom events and identifies what specific strategies she wants observed. Examples of strategies a teacher might want observed are response patterns to students, movements about the room, or communication with students. In a session, they might agree on the observation strategy to be used. Then, the post conference is the coaching session where the coach presents the data collected with the "goal to engage the teacher's analytic abilities" (Costa & Garmston, 1994, p. 109). She asks probing questions to facilitate the teacher's reflection on desired goals and actual behaviors. The coach should follow through beyond reflecting on the actual lesson to prompt the teacher to make decisions about future actions. "The role of the coach becomes one who facilitates teachers' capacities to evaluate themselves" (p. 166).

Munson (1998) studied a group of high school and primary grade teachers engaged in peer observations. Results indicated that teachers were more comfortable being observed by their peers than by administrators. They thought the observations helped them improve their teaching skills, and they felt improved collegiality among the faculty.

### **Action Research: More Formalized Reflections**

The process of action research is "systematic and critical" (McNiff, Lomax, & Whitehead, 1996, p. 13). The researcher is the teacher or practitioner. The teacher starts by posing a question about his or her

practice. Then a plan of action is made along with a systematic plan for data collection from multiple sources. "Good researchers develop monitoring skills that enable them to triangulate their data—that is, get data from more than one source to use as evidence to support a particular explanation" (p. 42). Periodically the data is analyzed, modifications are made, and finally the research is reported in a public forum such as a written report. "The main purpose of action research is to bring about an improvement in practice" (p. 13).

Henry and Sutton (1999) reported the results of analysis of 65 action research projects that took place over a five-year period. They found that when teachers originally engaged in action research, they were seeking to improve student achievement or focus on their own professional development. After analysis of the projects, a follow-up study was conducted. After three years, over one-third of the teachers responding to the survey reported changed teaching and testing practices. These same teachers also reported "an increase in their own professional self-efficacy" (p. 6). Fourteen teachers reported that they continued to conduct action research. Henry and Sutton concluded that action research provided a systematic tool for teachers to find answers to questions they already ask about student achievement. The teachers also gained personal growth as an unexpected outcome of this process.

In 2000, Five Forks Middle School in Gwinnett County, Georgia, conducted two types of action research: collaborative action research to investigate schoolwide issues and action research based on

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teachers' personal teaching practices. A schoolwide project was to review the Success Through Educational Progression (STEP) program they had implemented for the past few years. The principal wanted to know the effect of this program on students' achievement, perceptions of learning, and general school experiences. As a result of the first year of data collection and analysis, the team made adjustments in student discipline and portfolio procedures. They continued their research for the sec-

ond year and found the data provided real evidence of the events in their school. After being immersed in action research over several years, the assistant principal felt they now made decisions based on solid evidence. They knew what programs and strategies were effective with their students and staff by conducting their own research and looking critically at the data.

## Conclusion

People are the catalyst of any change within a system. To support change in the educational system, Fullan (1991) contended that we must support teachers through their individual growth. Teacher change can occur through a variety of reflective processes. The data of Henry and Sutton's (1999) research showed that "teachers are concerned about their students' learning and are continuing to ask questions about how to facilitate that learning (p. 8). Strategies to encourage reflective practice are journals, cognitive coaching, and conducting action research.

Middle school educators working in teams might find the effort towards becoming active reflective practitioners rewarding and revealing. Collaborative efforts toward confronting issues that concern everyone is a good place to start. Addressing the data or evidence together will help address issues and seek new solutions.

Teaching is like a kaleidoscope in that it is ever changing. Twists of life happen daily. Some are more noticeable than others. Just like we must hold a kaleidoscope to the light to get a new dimension of a geometric pattern, Hole and McEntee (1999) suggested that we must hold our practice to the light for new understandings. Through the light we should see new colors of change, recognize patterns of our lives, and be prepared for the next turn.

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