

## CHAPTER FOUR

# Getting Started With Reflective Practice

As you now know, teachers have been practicing reflection for quite some time. This does not mean, however, that all educators are in agreement as to what exactly is involved in reflecting. Even though there is some overlap in what educators say reflection entails, there is no unity when it comes to agreeing on a definition of reflective practice. This is not necessarily a bad thing, for it allows teachers to define for themselves what reflection means. Educators Jay and Johnson (2002) have argued that educators must accept, in general, that “the concept [of reflection] is not clearly defined,” but if each person tries to “clarify [his or her own] understanding of reflection” (p. 73), it can be made personally meaningful. It is necessary that *each* teacher who engages in reflection attempts to define the concept from his or her unique point of view. In this chapter, I strive to define what the concept of reflective practice means to me by first outlining some common ideas evident in most of the existing definitions and then outlining my own definitions.

### Reflection Break 17 Understanding Reflective Practice

- What is your understanding of reflective practice?
- What does reflection mean to you as a teacher?
- What is your definition of reflection?

Compare your answers with what you read next in the text.

## UNDERSTANDING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Zeichner and Liston (1996) emphasized the reason for engaging in reflective practice:

For in order to understand and direct our educational practices, we need to understand our own beliefs and understandings. So much of teaching is rooted in who we are and how we perceive the world. (p. 23)

How can we access our own beliefs and then put those beliefs into practice in the classroom? One way is to look at reflection as systematic and structured. We cannot hope to bring our beliefs and values about teaching from a tacit level without systematically looking at our teaching. Taggart and Wilson (1998) suggested that definitions of reflective practice should also have change or self-improvement as a final goal. Putting these concepts together in one definition, reflective practice is a systematic and structured process in which we look at concrete aspects of teaching and learning with the overall goal of personal change and more effective practice. By change, I do not only mean behavioral adaptations toward teaching methods. Hopefully, we change as a result of the *awareness* brought about by engaging in reflection.

For the purposes of this book, reflective practice seeks answers to the following questions:

- What am I doing in the classroom (method)?
- Why am I doing this (reason)?
- What is the result?
- Will I change anything based on the information gathered from answering the first three questions (justification)?

These questions for self-analysis can be schematically represented as follows:

1. Method  $\Rightarrow$  Reason  $\Rightarrow$  Result  $\Rightarrow$  Justification

This approach to reflective practice begins with what the teacher actually does in a classroom (method). Understanding the reasons, results, and justification for these actions involves reflecting on “the wider

issues in education—its aims, its social and personal consequences, its ethics, the rationale of its methods and its curricula—and the intimate relationship between these and the immediate reality” of a teacher’s classroom practice (Parker 1997, pp. 30-31).

### Reflection Break 18 Reflection and Action

- What one word is common to all four types of reflective practice outlined in Table 4.1?
- What does that word tell you about reflective practice?
- Reiman (1999) has proposed that there should be a balance between action and reflection. How do you think you can manage to balance action and reflection inside and outside the classroom?

### Types of Reflective Practice

There are four major approaches to the study of reflective practice (Table 4.1 summarizes and compares them).

**Table 4.1** Summary of Different Approaches to Reflective Teaching

<i>Reflection Type</i>	<i>Content of Reflection</i>
<b>Reflection-in-action</b> Schon (1983, 1990)	Making decisions about events in the classroom as they happen
<b>Reflection-on-action</b> Hatton and Smith (1995) (Schon 1983, 1990)	Thinking about one’s teaching after the class; giving reasons for one’s actions and behaviors in class
<b>Reflection-for-action</b> Killon and Todnew (1991)	Proactive thinking in order to guide future action
<b>Action research</b> Dana and Yendol-Silva (2003) McFee (1993) Sagor (1993) Cochran-Smith and Lytle (1993) Carr and Kemmis (1986)	Investigating in detail one topic related to one’s classroom teaching

The first type of reflective practice is called *reflection-in-action* (Schon 1983, 1990). This practice requires that the teacher employ a kind of knowing-in-action (Schon, 1983, 1990). According to Schon, knowing-in-action occurs when we recognize a face in a crowd without “listing” and piecing together separate features. We don’t think, “Could that be . . . ?”—we just know. However, if you were asked to describe the features that prompted this recognition, it might be difficult because, as Schon has pointed out, that type of information usually remains at the tacit level.

### Reflection Break 19 Listing Features to Aid Reflection-in-Action

This Reflection Break (adapted from Schon, 1983, 1990) highlights the difficulties that may be encountered trying to describe the things seen each day and usually take for granted.

- Try to list the features of your best friend’s face.
- Was it easy? Why or why not?

Again according to Schon (1983, 1990), there is a sequence of “moments” in a process of reflection-in-action:

- A situation or action occurs which triggers spontaneous, routine responses (such as in knowing-in-action):  
A student cannot answer a question about a topic he or she has explained in great detail during the previous class.
- Routine responses (i.e., what the teacher has always done) produce a surprise:  
The teacher starts to explain how the student had already explained this topic the previous class and that this silence was troubling. The student now begins to cry. This gets the teacher’s attention.
- This surprise leads to reflection within an action:  
The teacher reacts quickly to try to find out why the student is suddenly crying by questioning the student or

asking the student's classmates why they think the student is crying.

- Reflection gives rise to on-the-spot experimentation: The student may or may not explain why he or she is crying. The teacher will take some measures (depending on the reaction or nonreaction) to help solve the problem: ignore the situation, empathize with the student, help the student answer the question by modeling answers, and so forth.

### Reflection Break 20

#### Reflecting on Moments That Happen During Class

- Have you ever been teaching a class when something happened that you were not expecting? If so, explain the event to another teacher or write an account of what happened (or both).
- How did you respond?
- What was the result of your response?

The second type of reflection is called *reflection-on-action* and involves thinking back on what was done to discover how knowing-in-action may have contributed to an unexpected action (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Schon, 1990). Here, teachers reflect on their classes after they have finished.

### Reflection Break 21

#### Reflecting on Moments That Happen After Class

- What kind of reflecting do you do (if any) immediately after teaching a class?
- Do you ever talk to other teachers after class about teaching? What do you talk about?
- Do you ever talk to students about their perceptions of your class and teaching? What do you talk about?

- Do you ever ask students to tell you what they think they learned in your class?
- Do you ever write about your teaching in a diary?
- Have you ever gathered data on your class and discussed your findings with another colleague? If so, explain.

The third type of reflection is called *reflection-for-action*. Reflection-for-action is different from the previous types of reflection in that it is proactive in nature. Killon and Todnew (1991) argue that reflection-for-action is the desired outcome of both previous types of reflection; they say that "we undertake reflection, not so much to revisit the past or to become aware of the meta cognitive process one is experiencing (both noble reasons in themselves) but to guide future action (the more practical purpose)" (p. 15). Teachers can prepare for the future by using knowledge from what happened during class and what they reflected on after class. As such, reflective teaching is useful for detecting inconsistencies between belief and practice.

The fourth type of reflection is *action research*. Action research and reflective teaching practice are closely connected. Action research is the investigation of those craft knowledge values of teaching (what is actually done in the classroom) that hold teaching habits in place (McFee, 1993). It requires the transformation of research into action. Action research is one answer to the problematic reality that teachers' voices are absent from the research literature on teaching (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Teachers should be seen as thinking professionals who can "both pose and solve problems related to their educational practice" (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 4). Teachers can pose such problems related to their practice by entering into a reflective exploration cycle.

The general stages of the reflective cycle of the action research process are as follows:

- **Identify** (identify the problem)
- **Plan** (decide on the method you are going to use to investigate the problem you identified)
- **Research** (review the literature, consult colleagues)
- **Observe** (collect data—classroom observations, journal writing, discussions)

- **Reflect** ( analyze the data)
- **Act** (redefine the problem and take some action)
- **Repeat** (go through the cycle again to see what the new actions have yielded)

When the teacher recognizes a need to investigate a problem, he starts to plan how to investigate ways of solving this problem. The teacher begins by reading background literature on the problem to formulate ideas on how to solve it. This research cycle should include talking to colleagues about the concern, as they may have advice to offer. The teacher then plans a strategy to collect data. Once the data have been collected, the teacher analyzes and reflects on them, making a data-driven decision to take action; this step in the cycle involves redefining the problem.

After going through this process, teachers will take more responsibility for the decisions they make in their classes because they are informed decisions, not based on feeling or impulse.

### Reflection Break 22 Action Research for the Busy Teacher

- Try to think of a few action research projects you might like to attempt. Make a list.

For example:

1. **Investigate** the types of questions you ask.
2. **Note and analyze** the amount of time you wait ("wait-time") for student responses after asking a question.
3. **Test** which kinds of groups work best in your classroom (e.g., grouping by gender, by age, by size, etc.).

Now consider the following:

- Choose a problem or a focus for your action research project and examine the action research reflective cycle summarized below. See if you can complete one cycle of action research:

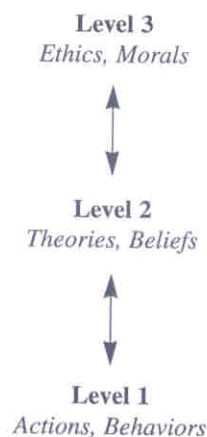
1. Identify a problem (or focus).
  2. Collect data (information) systematically about the problem.
  3. Examine, analyze and interpret the information gathered in order to reflect on what the information tells you.
  4. Act on the information by making some changes to improve your teaching.
- Reflect on the changes by going through one more cycle.

### Levels of Reflection

Once teachers have chosen a particular type of reflection, the next question presents itself: How deeply should they reflect? Reflective practice here is split into three hierarchical levels, as outlined in Figure 4.1: action, conceptual, and ethical. These three levels are similar to Jay and Johnson's (2002) typology of reflection, which profiles three dimensions of reflective thought: descriptive reflection, comparative reflection, and critical reflection.

Figure 4.1 shows that the basic level of reflection, Level 1, is action in the classroom. When teachers plan at the level of action, they are concerned only with what they do in the classroom. When teachers reflect at Level 1, often called *technical rationality*, they focus on their behavior and skills within the classroom. Level 2, the conceptual level, involves analyzing the reasons for the actions taken. When teachers reflect at Level 2, often called *reflection at a contextual level*, they focus on the theory behind their classroom practices. Teachers can then look into alternative practices they might prefer to use, depending on their students' needs. Level 3 encourages teachers to justify the work they do and reflect within the broader context of society. When teachers reflect at Level 3, often called *critical or dialectical reflection*, they focus on the moral, ethical, and sociopolitical issues associated with their practice, looking at outside forces in order to gain greater self-understanding.

It may be possible for teachers to reflect on different levels simultaneously, depending on the topic of reflection (hence the multidirectional arrows). New teachers may find themselves reflecting at the Level 1, the level of action, as they may not have enough time

**Figure 4.1** Hierarchical Levels of Reflection

SOURCE: Adapted from Day, 1993

or space to reflect at the conceptual level (Level 2) or moral level (Level 3). This is a normal level of reflection for new teachers, as they are just developing their schemata of teaching. In time, they will find themselves reflecting at each of the various levels.

### Reflection Break 23 Levels of Reflection

- Now is a good time for you to explore your level of reflective thinking. The hierarchical levels of reflection are as follows (see Taggart & Wilson, 1998, for a detailed questionnaire regarding the different levels of reflection):

Level 1: The level of a teacher's actions in the classroom—a teacher's observable behaviors

Level 2: The theoretical level—the theories behind the teacher's behaviors in Level 1

Level 3: The ethical, moral level—the role of the wider community in influencing a teacher's theories (Level 1) and practices (Level 2)

Now consider these questions:

- Give an example of how a teacher could operate at each of the three levels.
- Which level of reflection do you find yourself working at now?
- What does this mean to you as a reflective teacher?
- Do you think a teacher should always operate (reflect) at any particular level? Explain.

In this chapter, I have discussed definitions of reflection, shown how it is systematic, and gauged the levels of reflective practice for teachers. I have also suggested why reflective practice has value. However, teachers must define (or even redefine) what reflective practice means to them and how they can best practice reflection in order to improve their teaching.

### Reflection Break 24 What Does Reflection Mean to You?

Now that you have read some of the literature on reflection and reflective practice, write what reflection means to you as a teacher and how you would engage in reflective practice.