

Reflect Upon Your Practice

GREG CONDERMAN AND JOE MORIN

So, you've been asked to reflect upon an assignment, a lesson, a classroom management system, or a decision you've made in your classroom. What is reflection, why is reflection important, and what are some ways you can approach this important professional challenge?

Reflection has been described in many ways. Koszalka, Song, and Grabrowski (2002), defined *reflection* as active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or practice. Risko, Roskos, and Vukelich (2002) believed that reflection creates the foundation for assessing situations and making rational decisions and provides educators the opportunity to generate connections between theory and practice, come to deeper understandings about their personal beliefs while adapting new perspectives, and to use inquiry to inform instructional decisions. Reflection is presumed to improve teaching and learning (Black, 2001), validate a teacher's ideals, and challenge tradition (Ferraro, 2000). Many teacher preparation programs claim it as a central goal (Loughran, 2002), and it is tied to teacher education standards. Here, then, are 20 ways to approach reflection.

1. Start with standards. Acquaint yourself with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC, 2003) standards (or those from other related professional societies) associated with your position. Are you aware of and practicing these standards? Can you operationally de-

fine how you meet these standards? Are you practicing the CEC code of ethics? Review the CEC standards and code of ethics from their Web site at (<http://www.cec.sped.org/>). Are you continually evaluating yourself and your program with these standards in mind? Allow these professional standards to guide your practice and your reflections.

2.

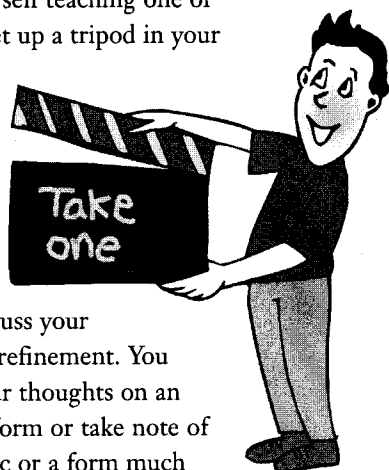
Analyze your audios. Audiotape yourself teaching during different lessons. Analyze the recordings for teacher-student interactions, focusing on the proportion of positive interactions over negative ones. According to *Solutions to Elementary Discipline Problems* (Teaching Strategies, 1985), teachers should aim for a 3-to-1 positive-to-negative ratio for lower-performing students. As you listen to your tape, ask yourself if your comments sound sincere. Are you using variety in your praise statements? Do students have to work hard to receive your positive reinforcement? Are the lower-performing students receiving more reinforcement than others in your classroom?

3. Make a movie. In addition to audiotaping yourself, videotape yourself teaching one or more of your classes. Set up a tripod in your classroom with the appropriate equipment, or ask a colleague to videotape your lesson. Either by yourself or with a trusted colleague or mentor, view your video clip and discuss your strengths and areas for refinement. You may want to record your thoughts on an open-ended reflection form or take note of your skills using a rubric or a form much like what was used during your student teaching experience. Based on the video, develop a few goals and revidetape yourself later in the year to note your improvement.

4. Conference with a colleague. Interview an admired colleague. Question the colleague on how he or she got into teaching. What were some pivotal influences? What has kept him or her in the profession for this length of time? Reflect on the nature of those pivotal influences as possible models for your own sustained development.



5. Chitchat. Establish or join a Web-based chat room, and use it as a forum for discussing current issues related to teaching and learning.



6. Join a journal. Establish or join a school district "journal" that is dedicated to sharing pedagogical opinion or action research. This may be an electronic site, an informal discussion group, or a regularly scheduled event for dialogue, discussion, or sharing. These informal types of professional development could include study teams and peer coaching experiences in which teachers continuously examine their assumptions and practices (Ferraro, 2000).

7. Switch shoes. Trade places with selected colleagues throughout the academic year. Perhaps you could act as a substitute teacher or take over a role that is usually assigned to your colleague, but one you could do comfortably. Reflect on how your role overlaps with theirs, and think about ways in which communication between the two of you could be augmented to benefit students.

8. Flip through files. Conduct a once-a-week student file reflection. Select a student's cumulative file to review by the end of the week, and reflect on the child's school history and subsequent progress. What documented interventions were successful? What do the written comments in the student's file reveal about both the student and the author of those comments? How can you use information in the student's file to plan for the student's future without allowing yourself to be biased?

9. Notice the news. Select a current newspaper article that relates to an educational issue. Draft a letter in response to the article.



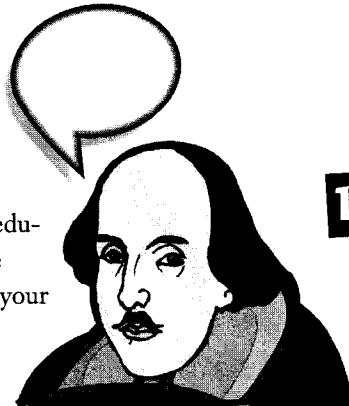
10. Relate the relevance. Take an element of your curriculum, and challenge yourself to

find 10 applications of that skill or knowledge component for your students. What are some specific ways students can use this skill or knowledge in their everyday life? Consider using some of these application ideas for homework, extending ideas, or learning centers. Even if you are unable to brainstorm 10 applications, continue to reflect on the relevance of the skill and aim to make your instruction more relevant.

11. Watch for worthy words.

Select quotations from a source like *Bartlett's Quotations*, *Chinese Proverbs*, or educational scholars like Dewey. Select 20 of your favorite sayings, and write these on index cards complete with the reference.

Write a different one on your classroom whiteboard at the beginning of each day for a month. Reflect on the significance of the selected quotation as you go about your day.



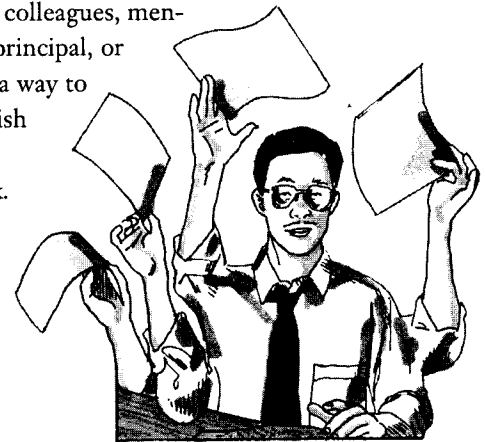
12. Reflect and ride. Purchase an inexpensive microcassette recorder. On the ride home after a day teaching, dictate your reflections of the day. Begin with the date, and let your thoughts flow onto the tape in random fashion. At the end of the week, schedule a period of time to listen to those taped recordings and privately reflect upon the week's outcome.

13. Make the most of your mentor. If you are a new teacher, participate in your district's mentoring program. With your mentor, discuss your reasons for entering the teaching profession, your passions and philosophies, ways to capitalize upon your strengths, and ways to improve in the areas that challenge you. If you are an experienced teacher, become a mentor for someone with less teaching experience. This will provide you with an opportunity to solidify your thoughts, share

your expertise, and perhaps even challenge the status quo.

14. Present a portfolio. Develop a portfolio that illustrates your teaching philosophy, approach to curriculum, classroom management, collaboration skills, use of assessment, and any other components related to personal or district goals or standards. Reflect upon each artifact by writing a short rationale for its inclusion in your portfolio, its connection to a standard, or what the artifact means to you. Periodically update your portfolio and share it with others.

15. Document with data. Implement action research in your classroom. Almost any instructional, curricular, or behavioral intervention can provide an opportunity to validate a theory, test a hypothesis, or inform practice. Remember to apply correct research design principles. Share your findings with your colleagues, mentor, principal, or find a way to publish your work.

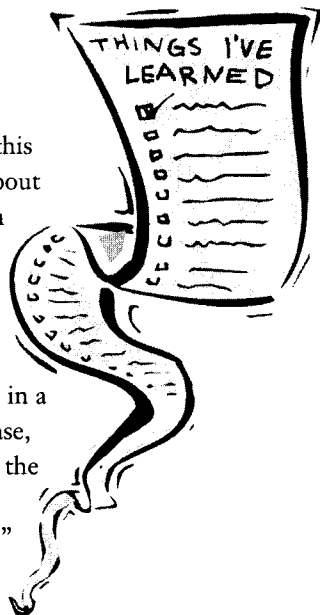


16. Participate in a professional development institute. Wilhelm, Coward, and Hume (1996) have noted that some professional development institutes focus on teacher attitudes that affect practice. These institutes may help teachers to develop management skills and to reflect upon unique ethical and cultural issues. By their very nature, these institutes cause teachers to step back and critically reflect on not only how they teach but also on why they teach in a particular way.

17. Pause, and pause some more. Reflection often requires a thoughtful pause so we can consider all variables or view matters in a different light. Black (2001) reminded us that real-world events seldom respond with the nice and tidy answers that appear in textbooks. Take time to gather information, brainstorm any alternatives or reasons for the situation, complete some research, and seek wise counsel. The human experience is very complex, and many variables working simultaneously may be involved. Henke (2001) proposed an eight-part reflective sequence with these steps:

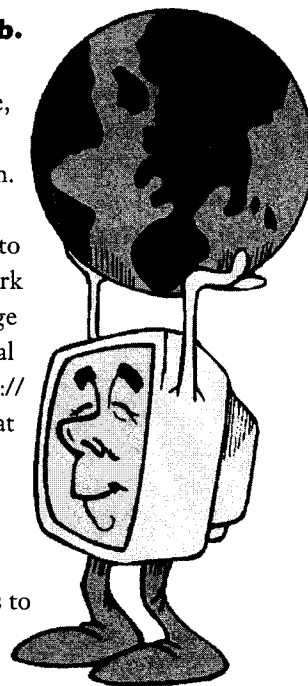
1. teach,
2. think back,
3. describe,
4. investigate reasons,
5. retrace events according to educational theory,
6. discover new understandings,
7. decide what to do next, and
8. start the process over again.

18. List what you learned. Just as we might ask our own children to share one detail they learned in school on a particular day, we could ask ourselves the same question. What one thing did I learn today? Perhaps this one thing was about your preparation or lack thereof, the students, the curriculum, or yourself. In a consistent place, in a sentence or phrase, respond daily to the probe, "Today I learned that" Consider sharing these with others via your journal, an illustrated book, or a Web-based discussion group.

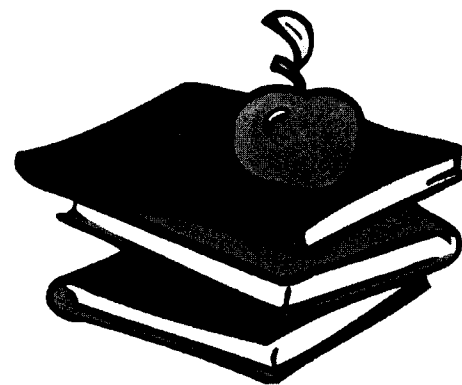


19. Welcome the Web.

Search the Web for sites that teach, guide, or encourage your professional reflection. Teachers have many opportunities online to reflect upon their work in forums and message boards at the National Board Web site (<http://www.nbpts.org>) and at other sites such as teachernet.com (Black, 2001). These sites often provide prompts or questions to guide your reflective practice.



20. Go for growth. Make the best use of professional growth activities by selecting those that meet your professional goals. Discuss your professional activities with a colleague, implement only proven research-based methodologies, and ask someone to hold you accountable for implementing at least one new proven technique each quarter or semester.



Persons interested in submitting material for 20 Ways To . . . should contact Robin H. Lock, College of Education, Box 41071, Texas Tech University, Lubbock, TX 76409-1701.

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