

## What Is Reflective Practice and Where Did It Come From?

*Reflective practice is as much a state of mind as it is a set of activities.*

(Vaughan, 1990, p. ix)

A review of the origins of reflective practice and its evolution to the present day indicates a substantial history and base of knowledge. The thinking about reflection and reflective practice has evolved over a period of many decades if not centuries, through carefully constructed theory, research, and application. Numerous theorists, researchers, and teacher educators have contributed to this body of knowledge. John Dewey is frequently recognized as the foundational 20th-century influence on reflection in education (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). His work, however, drew from much earlier Eastern and Western philosophers and educators including Buddha, Plato, and Lao Tzu. In more recent years, the work of Donald Schon (1983, 1987) has inspired a resurgence of interest in reflective practice in the field of education.

Some of the significant contributions to the thinking about reflective practice are highlighted in Table 1.1. Each of the authors' conceptions add to or extend a significant consideration in our understanding of reflection and reflective practice. Collectively, the literature on reflective practice reveals numerous common themes. Reflection is viewed as an active thought process aimed at understanding and subsequent improvement. Both personal and contextual variables influence the reflective process and outcomes. Reflection can occur in different ways and for different purposes. Reflection that considers social, moral, and ethical perspectives has the potential to affect community values and action.

What is reflective practice? Reflective practice is an inquiry approach to teaching that involves a personal commitment to continuous learning and improvement. A commitment to reflective practice indicates a willingness to accept responsibility for one's professional practice (Ross, 1990). Reflection is not "the mindless following of unexamined practices or principles" (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991, p. 37). It is not the "pointless reflection of one's navel as symbolized by Rodin's 'The Thinker'" (Bright, 1996, p. 166). It is not just getting together to talk about work or thinking self-reinforcing thoughts about how to teach.

There is no universally accepted definition of what reflective practice is, but numerous perspectives are offered in the literature, each of which has a slightly different emphasis. Listed here are perspectives that have been offered by different authors. Reflective practice can be considered

- "The practice or act of analyzing our actions, decisions, or products by focusing on our process of achieving them" (Killion & Todnem, 1991, p. 15)

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TABLE 1.1 Significant Contributions to the Thinking About Reflective Practice

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*Dewey, 1938*

- Considered the goal of education to be the development of reflective, creative, responsible thought (Hatton & Smith, 1995)
  - Was interested in how people think when faced with real and relevant problems
  - Viewed learning as an ongoing interaction between the individual and context
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*Van Manen, 1977*

- Suggested three levels of reflectivity to describe various aims of reflection: *technical reflection*, which focuses on examining the skills, strategies, and methods used to reach predetermined goals (e.g., Is this the most effective way to accomplish this goal?); *practical reflection*, which focuses on examining the methods used to reach goals and also reexamining the goals themselves (e.g., Is this a worthy goal to strive for?); and *critical reflection*, which focuses on inquiring about the moral, ethical, and social equity aspects of practice (e.g., Does this promote equity, and for whom?)
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*Zeichner, 1987, 1993*

- Argued the essential role of critical reflection in education, emphasizing that educators must critically examine how instructional and other school practices contribute to social equity and to the establishment of a just and human society
  - Challenged the assumption that education will necessarily be better if teachers reflect, because reflection can validate and justify current practices that are harmful to students
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*Schon, 1983, 1987*

- Described a “crisis in professional knowledge,” referring to the gap between professional knowledge and actual competencies required for practicing teachers
  - Used the terms *the swamp* to connote the ambiguity, uncertainty, complexity, and oftentimes conflicting values that define the daily teaching context, and *swamp knowledge* to describe the tacit knowledge teachers develop from construction and reconstruction of their swamp experiences
  - Differentiated between *reflection-in-action*, referring to the process of observing our thinking and action as they are occurring, in order to make adjustments in the moment, and *reflection-on-action*, referring to the process of looking back on, and learning from, experience or action in order to affect future action (Note: Killian and Todnem (1991) expanded Schon’s reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action typology to include reflection-for-action)
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TABLE 1.1 Continued

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*Smyth, 1989*

- Suggested four forms of action that can guide reflection on practice: *describe* (e.g., What do I do?), *inform* (e.g., What does this mean?), *confront* (e.g., How did I come to think or act like this?), and *reconstruct* (e.g., How might I do things differently?)
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*Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993*

- Emphasized the influence of underlying, personal-action theories on behavior
  - Brought attention to consideration of the theories or views that individuals talk about (i.e., espoused theories) versus the theories or views that are evident in watching individuals behave (i.e., theories in use), suggesting reflective practices as a way to examine and uncover underlying theories and views that affect action
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*Sparks-Langer and Colton, 1993; Langer and Colton, 1994*

- Identified multiple influences on the knowledge construction involved in reflective practice: experiential knowledge, professional knowledge, feelings, the surrounding collegial environment, and personal characteristics or attributes
  - Introduced a cyclical process, referred to as the Framework for Developing Teacher Reflection, that includes these steps: Gather information about an experience or event; conduct analysis by considering multiple influencing variables; form hypotheses; and then test hypotheses through implementation
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*Butler, 1996*

- Argued that professional development must be self-directed and that reflection is the central process for integrating knowledge and experience
  - Expressed concern that externally prescribed training disempowers the problem-solving process of educators, thereby creating dependence on "the system" instead of promoting the internal capacities of practicing professionals
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- "The capacity of a teacher to think creatively, imaginatively and in time, self-critically about classroom practice" (Lasley, 1992, p. 24)
- "Deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement" (Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 40)
- "A genuinely critical, questioning orientation and a deep commitment to the discovery and analysis of positive and negative information concerning

the quality and status of a professional's designed action" (Bright, 1996, p. 165)

- "An active, proactive, reactive and action-based process" (Bright, 1996, p. 167)
- "A way of thinking about educational matters that involves the ability to make rational choices and to assume responsibility for these choices" (Ross, 1989, p. 22)
- "An active and deliberative cognitive process, involving sequences of interconnected ideas which take into account underlying beliefs and knowledge" (Dewey, as described in Hatton & Smith, 1995, p. 34)

Drawing on the perspectives offered above and on our own work, we identify the following as elements of a comprehensive definition: Reflective practice is a deliberate pause to assume an open perspective, to allow for higher-level thinking processes. Practitioners use these processes for examining beliefs, goals, and practices, to gain new or deeper understandings that lead to actions that improve learning for students (see Figure 1.1). Actions may involve changes in behavior, skills, attitudes, or perspectives within an individual, partner, small group, or school. Each of these elements is described briefly here.

Reflective practice requires a *deliberate pause*, a purposeful slowing down of life to find time for reflection. To deliberately pause creates the psychological space and attention in which an open perspective can be held. Kahn (1992) emphasizes the importance of psychological presence as a requisite for individual learning and high-quality performance. In between a stimulus and a response is a moment of choice (Covey, 1989)—a pause during which options for actions can be considered. Human beings have the capacity to choose their responses to life's experiences (Frankl, 1959). When reflecting, people choose deliberately to pause as a precursor to considering appropriate responses.

An *open perspective* or open-mindedness (Dewey, 1933; Ross, 1990; Zeichner & Liston, 1996) means being open to other points of view. It means recognizing that represented within a group are many ways to view particular circumstances or events. It means being open to changing viewpoints and letting go of needing to be right or wanting to win (Webb, 1995). Rather, the purpose is to understand. Openness to other perspectives requires a mindful and flexible orientation. Mindful people are awake (Nhat Hanh, 1993) and conscious of thought and actions. Being awake includes having an awareness of others and extending learning beyond the immediate sphere. In education, awareness extends from immediate instructional circumstances to caring about democratic foundations and encouraging socially responsible actions (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1993). Doubt, perplexity, and tentativeness are part of openness (Dewey, 1933; Langer & Colton, 1994). An open perspective creates the possibility for the emergence of new understandings and increasingly more effective responses.

Reflection involves active and conscious *processing of thoughts*. Thinking processes, such as inquiry, metacognition, analysis, integration, and synthesis, may all

Figure 1.1. A Comprehensive Definition of Reflective Practice



be used in a reflective process. Reflection, for example, may take the form of self-observation and analysis of one's own behaviors and the perceived consequences. It may involve group members' being aware of their thoughts during a decision-making process for determining differentiated instructional objectives and strategies (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Higher-level thinking processes provide the means to move beyond a focus on isolated facts, events, or data to perceive a broader context for understanding.

The focus of reflection involves *examination of beliefs, goals, and practices*. Beliefs include people's values, visions, biases, and paradigms. Beliefs stem largely from one's experiences and significantly influence ways of thinking and behaving. Beliefs create the lens through which we view our worlds. Goals encompass desired aims, outcomes, or intentions. They can be very general or specific in nature. General goals may address such desires as creating a learning community for students. Specific goals may address more concrete and immediate aims, such as teaching children how to learn effectively in groups during social studies. *Practice* refers to one's repertoire of dispositions, behaviors, and skills in specific areas of perfor-

mance, such as designing instruction and assessment strategies, interacting with students, developing relationships with families, collaborating with colleagues, and implementing schoolwide reforms.

A desirable outgrowth of reflection is new or *deeper understanding and insights*. Such understanding provides the basis for considering new forms of action. Awareness and understanding are critical elements for initiating and sustaining change in practice. New understandings without changes in behavior, however, will not make differences in the lives of students. Application of knowledge is essential (Dewey, 1933; Smyth, 1989). Reflective practice leads to improvement only when deepened *understandings lead to action*.

Reflective practice provides a way “to understand and make sense of the world” (Brubacher, Case, & Reagan, 1994, p. 36). It is an active process. “Rather than reflective practice being seen as impractical, passive, or irrelevant to action, it can be regarded as centrally important and relevant to the understanding of ongoing action” (Bright, 1996, p. 167). It serves as the foundation for continuous learning and improvement in educational practice so that children are successful in school and in life. It is a complex process that requires high levels of conscious thought as well as a commitment to making changes based on new understandings of how to practice. Reflective practice must not be viewed as yet another bandwagon—here today, gone tomorrow. It has the potential to significantly improve education if its foundations and assumptions are honored. Unless the integrity of reflective practice is upheld, efforts at implementation will be superficial and will result in few positive gains.

### *What Is the Potential of Reflective Practice to Improve Schools?*

Increasing evidence suggests what common sense has always told us: Student learning is linked with staff learning. This means that as staff members learn and improve their instructional practice, students benefit and show increases in learning (Richardson, 1997, 1998).

The main objective of reflective practice is to ensure a more accurate and relevant understanding of a situation such that professionally designed action in that situation is more likely to produce effective, relevant action which will facilitate the occurrence of more desired and effective outcomes. (Bright, 1996, p. 177)

In education, the desired outcomes are increases in student learning and capacity to learn, with learning broadly conceptualized as including academic, social, and emotional well-being. High levels of student learning require high levels of staff competence. Reflective practice increases the potential of schools to improve for at least the following reasons: