What Teachers Say about Reflection

Reflection can help teachers stop deferring to the "they" who "know better" to develop their own visions of education.

At the University of Northern Iowa (UNI), participants in our student teaching program—both students and teachers—are always enthusiastic about reflection after the fact, but they are almost always resistant at the beginning. There is always ambivalence and confusion at first about just what reflection means.

In the spring of 1989, our interest piqued by this confusion, selected teachers of the Waterloo UNI Professional Teaching Associates Cadre,[1] chose teacher reflection as a topic for collaborative research throughout the next year. To explore and describe how reflection felt from the perspectives of those who were doing it, we engaged in reflection; reflected on our own reflection experiences; and interviewed each other, our student teachers, and colleagues who were enrolled in graduate courses or workshops in Waterloo where reflection was taught, practiced, and studied. Before reporting how our teachers and student teachers experienced reflection, I will describe how I have come to teach the concept in our program.

Active Reflection

John Dewey, whose ideas are the basis for much of the current thought about reflection, described it as "behavior which involves active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or

> **My assumption is that when each person is ready, he or she has access to the questions as well as the "answers" needed for the challenges of his or her own life**

practice in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads" (Grant and Zeichner 1984, p. 4). We have anchored our curriculum in this concept of "reflective action" (Dewey 1933).

In their article "On Becoming a Reflective Teacher" (required initial reading for our students and teachers), Carl Grant and Kenneth Zeichner (1984) discuss reflection-enabling attitudes that Dewey identified years ago: open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. They also suggest an agenda or a line of questioning for anyone who would become a reflec-

tive teacher: beliefs and assumptions; consequences, intended and unintended, for self and children; consequences in the social order/global community; knowledge and skills needed to implement beliefs and values in teaching; how ideas generated by self and/or others filter through one's own set of priorities; and one's resulting reasoned choices.

From this agenda, I derive questions I can use to push students along through the initial phase of their journey. My assumption is that when each person is ready, he or she has access to the questions as well as the "answers" needed for the challenges of his or her own life, and in reflection these are internally uncovered and integrated into the subjective fabric that is that person's self-concept and worldview. Several other models influence how I go about teaching reflection:

- Taxonomy of Teacher Reflective Pedagogical Thinking (Simmons et al. 1989);
- Bloom's Taxonomy (Bloom 1956);
- Louis Raths' model of values development (Raths et al. 1966);
- a set of developmental affirmations developed by Jean Illsley Clarke and others (1986); and
- characteristics of helping relationships as discussed by Carl Rogers (1980).

Drawing on these sources, I give the

Fig. 1. Questions that Prompt Reflection

Can you talk more about that?
Why do you think that happens?
What evidence do you have about that?
What does this remind you of?
What if it happened this way?
Do you see a connection between this and ___?
How else could you approach that?
What do you want to happen?
How could you do that?

following directions for each week's one-hour written reflection assignment:

● Work to develop your own professional positions and your own voice through an active process of integrating the best advice from others (research reports, methods, materials, and various human resources), your own observations, past experience, what you believe is right or what you need to do, and your own goals related to what you want to happen and/or the person you want to become.

● Write about something that is important to you—some important issue or problem that needs critical thinking, expanded awareness, and or reasoned choice-making on your part. Or you might explore something that seems to be helping you get something you want.

● Look for connections or conflicts among pieces of knowledge about learners, learning, and curriculum; techniques used in instruction, management, and planning; and your own goals, values, beliefs, and biases.

● As you work in this process, affirm yourself for looking at what may be difficult for you—maybe your part in things that are not going well—for finding and building on things that are working for you, and for making progress on problems or in areas where you have decided to change and grow.

When each weekly assignment is complete, I pepper papers with detailed questions (see fig. 1), pushing the writers to be specific, to explain in terms of the professional literature, to anticipate various possible consequences, to identify underlying assumptions and all the variables that could be influencing the situation, and to take responsibility for the decisions they are making. I also write affirmations (see fig. 2) in the margins to reiterate the trust I have in each writer, my support for looking at things that may be uncomfortable to approach, and my intention that they develop and speak in their own voices, not as clones of mine.

That's how reflection is cast in our program. Given this orientation, what is reflection like from the points of view of those who have experienced it firsthand? Several themes surfaced in our reflective interviews with participants about their written reflections.

Developing a Voice

When we introduced reflection, students often said, "Yes, but what do you want us to *do*?" Almost everyone felt a need for structure, since none was specified in the assignment. In retrospect however, this latitude helped participants to figure things out for themselves. For example, Nancy George said, "The more I think about it, the more I feel the reflection assignment *should* be without a structure, even though I was adamant about wanting one in the beginning. When you try to fit into someone else's framework, you lose the flow of your ideas. You have to create the structure that fits your own reflection as you go." Those who wrote to please the instructor found their writing empty of themselves. Lee Stonewall, who tried to reflect in a two-voice dialogue format like one of the models given in class, said, "I got about halfway through and tossed it. It wasn't me. I wasn't reflecting. I had to find a way that was right for me."

This process of figuring it out for oneself was critical to developing one's own voice. For almost all participants, this meant giving up deference to some inner voice that "knew more." Student teachers trained to please, to defer to professors and supervisors for good grades and positive evaluations, said that they *had* a voice, but they had learned to withhold it.

The teachers in our study said they had lost touch with their voices or assumed their own voices were not important in professional reflection—they had developed internal patterns of focusing on what they felt they were *supposed* to say. Their early reflections were characterized by references to an unidentified "they" rather than "I." The taking on of an "I" voice was one of the achievements of the reflection process.

Another explanation for this suppressing of one's own voice may lie in

Student teachers trained to please, to defer to professors and supervisors for good grades and positive evaluations, said that they *had* a voice, but they had learned to withhold it.

the recent emphasis on effective teaching research, which in deemphasizing personal opinion may cause teachers to distrust their inner voices and experiences as a basis for decision-making. Some teachers thought their inner voices were also thwarted by current norms that support management of schools by administrative directives, which treat classrooms as places

where such directives are merely received and implemented. In reflection, however, the teachers began to develop a sense that they *had* individual voices—voices that are important and should be expressed. "I may not be able to change decisions made in the district," one teacher told us, "but now I know what I'm thinking, and I *can* make decisions in areas where I do have some control, like how I feel about the things I'm told to do and how I will actually implement them in my own classroom."

Rambling and Resolution

The student teachers always had trouble getting their writing started. Procrastination was common, and it was typical for them to "ramble." But we found that growth was often a product of the ramblings, questions, and explorations. One student offered this description: "I just ramble until all of a sudden two or three words will fit together and key something. Then I realize that's it! That's where I'm having the problem! And then I can go with that."

Teachers found they often made connections in their ramblings. Often new ideas would emerge, and other times they were able to focus on something after expressing seemingly unrelated ideas. One student told us, "I would get into what I wanted to accomplish as I wrote, even though I didn't know what that was when I'd started. I'd get more focused as I wrote. At first, everything would come out, but at the end it would be one thing I was thinking about and could expand upon. In the process, I resolved something, got focused, emptied my head onto the paper. It felt good at that point, and I ended up with a direction."

The teachers often started out writing on a topic that was comfortable to write about, such as some professional technique or strategy they were working on, and then made a connection to a second topic that turned out to be the "real" issue. While they often ended a given assignment with a resolve such as "This is what I need to do now," they seldom ended with a specific decision to implement a particu-

The teachers and student teachers felt vulnerable and uncertain as they approached unsettling questions about their teaching; happily, they found a payoff in clearer perceptions of themselves and others and in better plans for solving their own problems.

lar idea. "This is what I need to do now" more often referred to a question to pursue, a first step in a new direction, a new way of seeing a person or situation, or how they would approach a situation in the future. After reflecting on the concept of collaboration for several weeks, for example, Helen Melichar wrote, "I see things differently now. Because I see things differently, I guess I'll probably *act* differently. I know I'll be thinking differently from now on."

More often than not, reflection resulted in more questions. One teacher said, "Sometimes I think it's reflective when you *don't* reach a solution. You explore all the alternatives, and you have this feeling there is no answer. But maybe in three or four days or three or four weeks, there's an 'Aha!'"

Dialogue, Questions, and Prompts

Several teachers reported they learned to ask the questions for themselves, with reflection taking the form of an internal dialogue. Helen Melichar said, "It is the questioning that I find most significant to reflection. The questions force a deeper look and keep me from being superficial. If the questions are the right ones, I begin to grow. I feel a little tug, almost a painful little exposure, when the questions are what I need them to be."

For Dede Preston, the questions never changed. "I just need to hit those key questions," she said. *"What's going on here? Is that significant? What makes you say that? What do you want? Does that scare you? Have you ever thought about such and such,*

some model from the literature, for example? Why? What does that mean? Where does that come from? Do you want to talk about that? Anything else? Have you learned anything?"

"When I get into something that will sound good to someone else," she continued, "I ask myself, 'Who are you kidding?' Then there's always, 'So what's the plan?' If I have to ask what's still bothering me, I know I haven't reflected enough yet."

Not surprisingly, the questioning process was often prompted when participants became aware of a conflict between what they professed to value and what they were doing in actual practice. For example, one of our teachers believed it was her role to coach all students to success, yet noticed she was giving "failing" marks to many students. She took herself to task about this conflict, engaging in painful reflection as she worked to make her behavior congruent with her values.

An Intrapersonal Process
Teachers found that reflection was an intrapersonal experience leading to insight about themselves as actors in their worlds. It prompted changes in self-concept, changes in perception of an event or a person(s), or plans for a change in some behavior. As they approached unsettling questions, teachers felt a "squirmy feeling of vulnerability," as one of them expressed it.

"When reflection doesn't work for me," Dede Preston explained, "it's because I'm avoiding certain questions. I know what those certain questions are because they make me feel vulnerable. I

have to take a risk. It's an issue of identity. In this kind of reflection, I'm getting right to the core in understanding why I act the way I do. I think that's important if reflection is to do anything for you. Only a teacher can change a teacher. You can only change yourself."

Teachers agreed that whatever surfaces in such reflection is probably reiterated across other incidents and events in one's personal and/or professional life. For example, one of our student teachers reflected on the trouble she was having getting students engaged in instruction at the very beginning of the class hour. In a number of her reflective conversations and writings, other instances surfaced in which she was not assertive. Looking across her stories, she saw this theme and identified the need to please others as a critical issue for her. "Normally I don't try to think of what might be infiltrating my personal life and my work life," she told us later. "But the reflection I did really made me think, and I found something out that was really important, something I had to deal with to become a better teacher."

In her final reflection in our project, Sue Rowland said, "I came into this a good technician; and I now leave with a vision for myself, my school, and my district. I've changed, and I look forward to the challenge of the future."

Nurturing Reflection
Our research group finished our work together with two observations. The first came when we compared the climate in which we had worked over our year together to the climate back in the

schools. We decided if reflection is a practice we want to use in our schools, we may have to alter norms in our own workplaces and contribute to the cultivation of attitudes and behaviors that make fertile soil for reflection.

Second, we suspect that our action research activity, our meta-reflection, if you will, was critical to our current understanding of reflection and our commitment to its practice. It is this process that we would commend to others who may be confused about what reflection is. We've learned you can clear up the confusion yourself when you're ready.□

References

Bloom, B. (1956). *Taxonomy of Educational Objectives: The Classification of Educational Goals. Handbook 1. Cognitive Domain*. New York: McKay.

Clarke, J. I., et al. (1986). *HELP! for Parents*. New York: Harper and Row.

Dewey, J. (1933). *How We Think . . .* Chicago: Henry Regnery.

Grant, C. A., and K. M. Zeichner. (1984). "On Becoming a Reflective Teacher." In *Preparing for Reflective Teaching*, edited by C. A. Grant. Boston, Mass.: Allyn and Bacon.

Raths, L., M. Harmin, and S. Simon. (1966). *Values and Teaching*. Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill.

Rogers, C. (1980). *A Way of Being*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.

Simmons, J. M., G. M. Sparks, A. Starko, M. Pasch, A. Colton, and J. Grinberg. (1989). "Exploring the Structure of Reflective Pedagogical Thinking . . ." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

Christine Canning is Assistant Professor of Teaching, University of Northern Iowa, 511 Schindler Education Center, Cedar Falls, Iowa 50614.

Fig. 2. Affirmations That Support Reflection

You can find a way that works for you when you are ready.
You can change if you want to.
You can grow at your own pace.
You can know what you need and ask for help.
You can experiment and explore. I will help you.
You can learn from what doesn't work for you.
You can feel your feelings.
Your needs and reflections are important.
I like talking to you like this.

—Adapted from Clarke et al. (1986)