

Has Reflective Practice Done more Harm than Good in Teacher Education?

Tom Russell, Queen's University

Invited Presentation

Université de Sherbrooke

8 December 2011

Background

- I had a unique introduction to “reflection” and “reflective practice” by interacting with Donald Schön in 1984, 1987, and 1990. While “reflective practice” was becoming a common phrase in teacher education, I was looking for “reflection-in-action” in teacher candidates’ teaching and writing about their teaching.
- Today I find that REFLECT and REFLECTION are words that teacher educators use frequently but they rarely explain what they mean to each other or to those learning to teach.
- Many teacher candidates tell me that when someone gives them a reflective assignment, they have no idea what to do or where to begin.

Questions about REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

- Why did Reflective Practice become so important to teacher educators?
- What are we hoping that reflection will accomplish for new teachers?
- Is there a difference between **reflection** and **reflective practice**? (If so, what is it?!)

Here's what my program claims to offer to those learning to teach:

- Queen's Consecutive Education Program allows students to develop **the skills needed to become a critically reflective teacher – the kind of teacher who looks beyond the immediate activities of daily practice.** The program will foster a natural inclination to teach. You will learn how to guide and motivate the enquiring minds of children and young adults. Teacher candidates participate in a combination of course work and practicum experiences in each term. The program provides teacher candidates with both the theory and practice of teaching, using in-school experiences as the basis of discussions.

Stephen Brookfield

- Reflection as Hunting Assumptions
- What makes Reflection Critical?

Reflection becomes critical when it has two distinctive purposes:

- (1) "to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame, and distort educational processes and interactions"
- (2) "to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our own best long-term interests." (p. 8)

Stephen Brookfield

- **Why is Critical Reflection Important?**
(pp. 22-27)
 - It helps us take informed actions
 - It helps us develop a rationale for practice
 - It helps us avoid self-laceration
 - It grounds us emotionally
 - It enlivens our classrooms
 - It increases democratic trust

How is reflection-in-action different from learning?

- What has changed when we say someone (a student, a teacher, a pet, anyone) has learned something?
- What has changed when we say that a teacher is reflecting-in-action?

Donald Schön (1987)

- This capacity to respond to surprise through improvisation on the spot is what I mean by ***reflection-in-action***. When a teacher turns her attention to giving kids reason, to listening what they say, **then teaching itself becomes a form of reflection-in action**, and I think this formulation helps to describe what it is that constitutes teaching artistry. It involves getting in touch with what kids are actually saying and doing; it involves allowing yourself to be surprised by that, and allowing yourself to be surprised, I think, is appropriate, because you must *permit* yourself to be surprised, being puzzled by what you get and responding to the puzzle through an on-the-spot experiment that you make, that responds to what the kid says or does. It involves meeting the kid in the sense of meeting his or her understanding of what's going on, and helping the kid coordinate the everyday knowing-in-action that he brings to the school with the privileged knowledge that he finds in the school.
- <http://post.queensu.ca/~russellt/howteach/schon87.htm>

Donald Schön (1987)

- *Teaching in the form of reflection-in-action . . .* involves a surprise, a response to surprise by thought turning back on itself, thinking what we're doing as we do it, setting the problem of the situation anew, conducting an action experiment on the spot by which we seek to solve the new problems we've set, an experiment in which we test both our new way of seeing the situation and also try to change that situation for the better.

More Questions

- How is what Schön describes similar to and different from what we ask Teacher Candidates to do in a reflective paper or other assignment that is described as involving reflection?
- Why have teacher educators separated reflection from (reflective) practice?
- Why do we not teach people how to reflect?

More Harm than Good?

I believe that adding the terms “reflection” and “reflective” to the daily activities of teacher education does more harm than good for several reasons:

- Teacher educators rarely explain what they mean by reflection.
- Teacher educators rarely model reflective practice.
- Teacher educators have separated reflection from the world of action and experience.
- Teacher educators generally fail to link reflection to professional learning.
- Teacher candidates tend to complete a program with a muddled view of what reflection is and how it could contribute to their professional learning.

Further Reading

I first tried to raise questions about our general failure to teach reflection and reflective practice in a short article published in *Reflective Practice*:

Russell, T. (2005). Can reflective practice be taught? *Reflective Practice*, 6, 199-204.

I see important links between Reflective Practice, Action Research, and Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices.

Although the material is old, you may find it helpful to explore at the following URL:

<http://post.queensu.ca/~russellt/howteach>