

National Implications: Training Reflective Educational Practitioners

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ABSTRACT

This article emphasizes that teaching reflection and the reflective process brings balance in the thinking of educational practitioners. Dominant rational thinking and fixing the problem mode of operation needs to be neutralized with reflective thinking. Professor Solomon asserts that by taking the time to look at a dilemma in the Zen sense of mindfulness may broaden the practitioner's scope of thinking first by becoming mindful of the details of the situation that posed a dilemma for them. The author states that educators who apply this kind of reflection as a professional development process will help improve their practice for the ultimate benefit of students.

Introduction

Importance of Reflective Educational Practitioners

Groups of graduate students in a course on Reflection were busy discussing a scenario that posed a dilemma. It was about Michael, an African American student at Union High, who had been sent out of Mrs. V's third hour freshmen English class repeatedly for three consecutive days. The principal and one of the counselors had been noticing this and were wondering what they could do to help. The task was to reflect on this dilemma and come up with a workable intervention to manage this situation. First they determined if this was a problem or a dilemma, and then followed a set of reflective steps to bring a resolution to the dilemma. This type of reflection was a regular activity in the course designed for developing reflective educational practitioners.

Purpose of the Article

The purpose of this article is to discuss reflection as a professional tool and show how graduate students in the field of education could be taught to become reflective practitioners.

Principals, Teachers and Counselors Need Repertoire of Strategies

The significance of K-12 educators becoming reflective practitioners has been underscored repeatedly in the literature in the context of educators facing numerous challenges in our schools. Moreover it has become a challenging responsibility to institutions of higher learning to prepare educational professionals who will have the capacity to respond to the difficulties schools are facing. One huge challenge comes from our nation's neighborhoods and schools becoming more diverse with a varied cultural tapestry. In this context just teaching students up to date knowledge, equipping them with skills and dispositions, and meeting state standards for the programs alone are not sufficient. The next generation of educators we prepare in our education schools and colleges need not only content knowledge and pedagogical skills but also professional learning tools to support their practice. Reflection is considered as one of those tools that principals, teachers and counselors should have in their repertoire of strategies. It has become essential in the academic arena to teach the significance of reflection and foster reflective skills in the professional practice of educators. This article discusses reflection as a professional tool and shows how graduate students in the field of education could be taught to become reflective practitioners.

The Importance of Reflective Practice for Teachers

Studies on reflection tend to underscore the importance of reflective practice for teachers (Rodgers, 2002, Schon, 1983). However, it is felt that other educational professionals such as school administrators and counselors also could benefit from learning to reflect in their work. Reflection as a professional tool is very fitting in the context of our schools facing enormous challenges because it helps one to become conscious of how he or she thinks and acts while confronting challenging situations in their work. Schon (1987) says that the rise of science in the Western civilization contributed to the prominence of problem-solving methods and linear, analytic forms of thought contributing to education professionals to think of the difficulties they face in schools as problems that have to be solved. This perspective does not provide sufficient base for dealing with issues and problems that are faced in our schools today.

Reflection: A Process to Stop, Think, and Understand Problematic Situations

Our technical, rational and logical positivist thinking has contributed to a “can-do” culture to an extent that we emphasize results over process and outcomes over seeing how problems get defined. Cuban (2001) brings more clarity to this. According to him much of the school time is spent on finding solutions to problems instead of investing more time and effort in figuring out what constitutes the real problems. Consequently, solutions to problems are many times mismatched. For example, a group of students in a high school were tardy every day and brought great concern for the principal, teachers and counselors. The administrative team got together and discussed about what should be done to stop tardiness of these students and decided after school detentions as an effective punishment. There was no discussion on what could be the real problem for the tardiness instead the focus was on how to stop it. There was very little thoughtfulness applied in handling this dilemma. The main interest was in fixing the problem rather than taking time to find out all the reasons that may have contributed to students’ tardiness and finding effective ways to eliminate the contributing factors. It is no doubt that it has become necessary for educational practitioners to free themselves from this type of linear thinking that limits their thought process to only analytical and rational thinking of fixing problems in schools. Reflection comes as a process to stop, think, and understand problematic situations as human predicaments that can be mostly managed unlike technical problems that get fixed hundred percent.

Epistemology Aspects of Reflection

Reflection has become a familiar term in the educational circles and is used in multiple ways. For example, teachers ask students to reflect on a text they read or on a picture that portrays many ideas. A discussion leader asks his/her group to reflect on a scenario presented and find ways to manage it, and a counselor poses a thoughtful question asking his/her counselee to reflect. In these situations, reflection is used as a special way of thinking with implications for some deep thoughtfulness. Reflection is certainly a thinking process that influences the quality of ones attitude and action. According to Osterman (1991), reflection is a process for changing administrative behavior. “Reflection has been proposed as a means for changing administrative behavior through analysis of theories-in-use...reflective practice can facilitate organizational change by bringing about changes in the behaviors of individuals in those organizations” (Short & Rinehart, 1993, p. 502). Further, Carol Rodgers (2002) has done much work in training her teachers to reflect. She sees reflection “as the ability to ‘see’ the world, to be present to it and all its complexities” (p. 230). She explains her rationale for teaching them to reflect thus,

...I have found that a process of reflection that is rigorous and systematic and therefore distinct from ordinary thought (Dewey, 1933) slows down the teaching/learning process, revealing rich and complex details, allowing for appreciation, and paving the way for a considered response rather than a less thoughtful reaction (Johnson, 1998). As teachers gain skill in this kind of extended reflection, they become more able to respond thoughtfully in the moment. (p. 232)

Defining reflection in exact terms is not easy because it calls for a different type of thinking and mindfulness. The technical rational thinker who is very analytical wants to know if reflection is a procedural skill that can be learned and mastered to fix problems. As Clift and Houston (1990) say, "...definitions of reflection are strongly influenced by the Western cultural heritage, which emphasizes analysis and problem-solving as opposed to negotiation, contemplation, or enlightenment" (p. 211). Reflection certainly has elements of introspection, mindfulness and thoughtfulness and can be learned (Rodgers, 2002). Sometimes when we reflect on our sensory in-put against an ideal matter there is always a comparison of an actual to an ideal while reflecting. The reflective practice we are considering here goes much deeper into understanding, defining and resolving dilemmas and problems educators face in schools. It is also about changing professional behavior.

John Dewey introduced the concept of reflection with a problem solving orientation and with an ideal resolution in mind. According to him reflection is a special form of thinking that involves a thought process to resolve a problem or an issue (Adler, 1991). He saw reflection as an active and deliberate cognitive process involving sequences of inter connected ideas based on one's underlying beliefs and knowledge about an "action". Later, that concept was furthered by Donald Schon (1983) who framed reflection as a process of thinking that brings a different type of orientation to looking at dilemmas educators face. It is a thinking that allows for seeing the relationship between professional knowledge and practice. According to him reflection can be done before an action, during an action as well as after an action is completed. He calls it "reflection in action, reflection of action and reflection on action" (p.54).

Schon conceptualizes reflection as "artistry" asserting that just like an artist who does much reflection-in action, an educational practitioner must respond to what he/she is doing and gain insights on what it is that he/she does not know. He asserts that the mind that is set to find out solutions in an action oriented event, particularly in the case of a teacher in a classroom cannot practice reflection. Before finding the solutions to a problem the mind needs to understand the context that is raising the concerns. This can be applied to the work of school counselors and administrators as well. "Schon says that one of the primary qualities distinguishing reflective practice is its emphasis on the need for students, as well as teachers, to give themselves to the learning situation and to the action of the moment..." (Tremmel, 1993, p. 440).

In Schon's view of reflective practice, it is reflection-in action that is very important because it focuses on that action while it is being done. The important thing to understand what Schon (1983) describes as "reflecting-in-action" or "reflecting in practice" really is one's ability to feel, see and notice what it is he/she is doing or

experiencing, then learning from feeling, seeing and noticing and making adjustment in professional practice. That is purely knowing in action. Unlike an experiment in the traditional sense where external criteria is used to conduct an experiment off the scene, reflecting in action proceeds from direct experiences of the practitioner who acts as the researcher on the scene (Tremmel, 1993). Through reflection Schon (1983) proposes a kind of knowledge that is not gained from technical rational methods rather knowledge that comes from “knowing-in-action.” This reaches beyond what we can say we know and what we know. It is the reflection that is taking place while the action is going on. In other words “paying attention” to an action or showing “mindfulness” to an action goes beyond traditional ways of analysis and problem solving. It goes further than what one sees on the surface and calls for mindfulness which allows for looking at the details of the moments considered.

Schon’ conceptualization of reflection is further explored and discussed by others. For example, Rodgers (2002) talks about reflection in terms of paying attention to details and its critical role in teaching and learning during in-action time or after the action. The ability to see a situation requires a “high level of consciousness about what one sees...a fine attention to detail and form; the perception of relations—tensions and harmonies; the perception of nuance—colors of meaning; and the perception of change—shifts and subtle motions” (Rodgers, 2002, p. 230). The ability to reflect and see the complexities involved in a human interaction as described above does not come easily, it has to be learned. This learning is different from learning other concepts and teacher education programs and graduate schools are exploring this process.

Teaching Reflection to Educational Practitioners

By nature all practitioners in education reflect about their professional experiences in some ways but developing educational practitioners who will have the knowledge and skills to do a structured reflection and become reflective in their work is not an easy task. First of all professional educators come with a traditional mind set that is technical rational in nature and are propelled to go into the schools to do whatever they were trained to do and to fix problems they encounter in their work. For example, teachers focus on teaching effectively to their students while handling routine and non-routine conflicts that occur and school administrators grapple with school issues and work on managing daily routine tasks and challenges they face in the best way they know. On the other hand school counselors with their knowledge and skills set out looking for challenging situations that need their assistance with students, teachers and parents. Thus problem solving in a deeper sense becomes the second nature of these practitioners.

Problems, Dilemmas, and Challenging Situations

Reflection begins with distinguishing between problems and dilemmas, and framing them accordingly because there is much confusion among educators in determining if a challenging situation in schools is a problem or a dilemma. Reflection can help to make that distinction and assist in managing problems and dilemmas. A situation which is problematic is when there is a gap between what is and what ought to be. For example, if there are 28 chairs in a class of 32 students, it is a specific problem that can be resolved with an additional 4 chairs. On the other hand dilemmas are different. “They are messy, complicated, and conflict-filled situations that require undesirable choices between competing highly prized values that cannot be simultaneously satisfied” (Cuban, 2006, p. 10).

Dilemmas are human situations that are more complex and conflict filled and “wicked.” Cuban (2006) defines them as follows, “Dilemmas are messy, complicated, and conflict-filled situations that require undesirable choices between competing, highly prized values that cannot be simultaneously or fully satisfied” (p. 10). Here is an example of a dilemma. Ms. Hunt is a Biology teacher and teaching her unit on “Evolution” presented many difficulties for her because two of her students came from conservative Christian homes that believed in the Biblical view of creation. They were very unhappy to hear what the teacher had to say about evolution and began to question the validity of the evolution theory. In addition they were unwilling to engage in class activities because of their strong beliefs in the Biblical creationism. There was certainly a value clash for the teacher and the students here so this is undoubtedly a dilemma because there is no one solution to it. Multiple steps have to be taken to bring a resolution to this complex classroom situation. The roles teachers and principals have to play in situations such as this differs due to value conflicts that surface. In these types of dilemmas which involve personal value conflicts one can only end up with good-enough compromises not real solutions.

The first step in teaching reflection to graduate students who are educational practitioners is to help them recognize that professional challenges they face in schools as either problems or dilemmas instead of categorizing them as problems that have to be solved or fixed. Educators have a strong tendency for fixing student problems like fixing kitchen appliances that break down. “If there is one task that practitioners pride themselves on, it is solving problems. Cuban says that problems come as two kinds—tame and wicked. Tame problems are “the familiar, routine, and frequent situations that practitioners face...these problems often involve procedures” (Cuban, 2001, p. 9). On the other hand wicked problems are “ill-defined, ambiguous, complicated, interconnected situations packed with potential conflict. In organizations wicked problems arise when people compete for limited resources, hold conflicting values...wicked problems are really dilemmas” (p. 10).

The distinction Cuban makes here helps to clarify the confusion between problems and dilemmas which is essential before a practitioner begins to reflect. “Teachers face classroom situations daily in which routine and non-routine conflicts occur, similarly, principals wrestle with school issues that call for negotiating differences

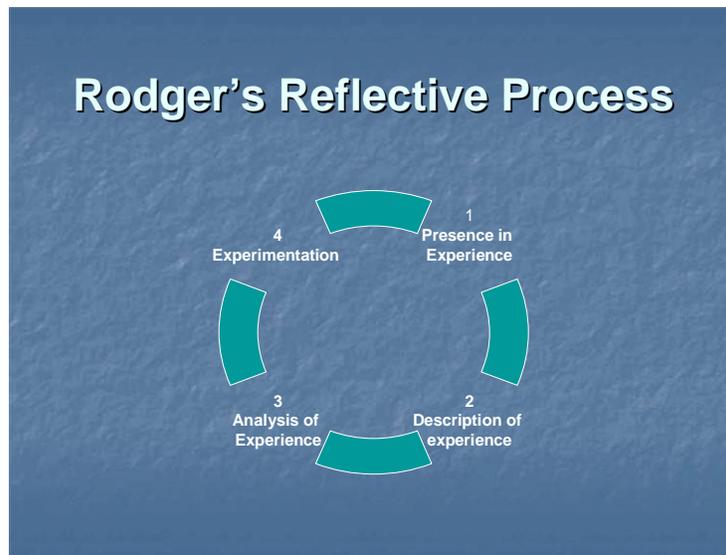
calmly...In mastering the craft of teaching and principaling practitioners become expert problem solvers” (Cuban, 2001, p. 3). In order to make a distinction between “tame” problems and “wicked” problems which are really dilemmas educators have to first stop and think to understand the details of the moment they are encountering which is the first step in learning to reflect. Their technical rational mind needs to be trained in a different epistemological tradition that follows Zen Buddhism which stresses the problem of knowing through mindfulness. This Eastern idea of mindfulness really means “to pay attention to right here, right now and to invest the present moment with full awareness and concentration” (Tremmel, 1993, p.443). Schon and Zen agree that “mindfulness” or becoming mindful of the present is a very powerful perspective to reflection. It is about becoming acutely aware of the present moment and that is reflection-in-action (Schon, 1983). Langer explains mindfulness as “an open mind that focuses on the processes of thought and action in the present” (1989, p. 75) and gains an “understanding of mind that is in-action and in-process” (p. 79). This is the initial step in reflection that Schon and Zen promote and it requires different ways of thinking.

The second step in training teachers, school administrators and school counselors in reflection is to get them follow a clearly defined structured process of thinking and doing to promote excellent professional behavior. Although structuring reflection puts it within the technical rational thinking realm, the reflective process with the Eastern thinking elements of mindfulness and deep thinking combined with the Western technical rational thinking could become a very powerful professional tool for educational practitioners. “Structured reflection is important in promoting sound professional behavior. It also supports the development of a growth competence: the ability to continue to develop professionally on the basis of internally directed learning” (Korthagan & Vasalos, 2005, p.47).

There are different reflective processes in the literature. Korthagan and Vasalos (2005) promote a reflective process called ALACT Model which names its five phases—Action, Looking back on the action, Awareness of essential aspects and Creating alternative methods of action and Trial action. Although this model begins with action, in its third step—awareness of essential aspects it emphasizes the importance of reflecting at a deeper level and contends that in order for the practitioner to see the discrepancy between an ideal situation and the limitations one is experiencing they have to assess their core beliefs and values. On the other hand, Carol Rodgers (2002) brings out a cyclical model which is also a structured process that combines the Eastern thought strand of mindfulness with the technical rational thought process of experimentation. In order for educational practitioners to integrate reflection as part of their practice there needs to be a process that is structured because they work in structured contexts and a “do-it” well culture.

The reflective cycle is a process I use...seems to rest in its ability first to slow down teachers’ thinking so that they can attend to what is rather than what they wish were so, and then to shift the weight of their thinking from their own teaching to their students’ learning...I have two goals when using the reflective cycle in my work with teachers. The first is to develop their capacity to observe skillfully and to think critically about students

and their learning...The second goal is for them to begin to take intelligent action based on the understanding that emerges.(Rodgers, 2002, p. 231)



(Modified figure from Carol Rodgers, 2002)

In this model the core ideas of reflection by Schon such as paying attention and mindfulness are incorporated in practical ways. Here's where there is an opportunity for one to bring his or her core beliefs and even unexamined assumptions to understand the dilemma or problem one is concerned about. Any educational practitioner can slow down his or her thinking process while facing challenging situations, observing carefully and describing in detail before taking any steps to resolve the problem. That is why in this article Rodgers' reflective process is discussed as the basic model for teaching and practicing reflection with some elements of core reflection added to the first two steps.

Presence in Experience— Learning to See and to Understand is the Starting Point

In this first step of the reflection cycle the emphasis for the teacher, administrator or the school counselor is to have the ability to be present in the dilemmas they encounter in their professional work. "Being present is not the same as having a presence...It is a way of encountering the world of the classroom (or the school), but it also includes a way of acting within it whereby the action that one takes comes out of one's sensitivity to the flow of events" (Rodgers, 2002, p. 235). It is really developing a state of mindfulness which is similar to the "teacher being alive both to students' bodily expression of mental condition and to their words" (Rodgers, 2002, p. 235). A professional stops his or her action and learns to really see what is happening in the action of the moment he or she is encountering or doing. In the instance of a teacher, she/he is not stuck on the book or

lesson while teaching and looking for the right answers for questions asked; instead, she/he is listening to students' thinking and becomes one with their thinking while teaching. Then stops, listens connecting to his or her inner core beliefs to understand what is being watched and reflected as students' action unfolds. It is like a school counselor listening with his/heart to the details of a student's complaint. This initial step of stopping to see, listen and understand is the starting point of a true reflection. In many ways it is really reflection-in-action that Schon (1983) recommends.

Description: Learning to Describe and Differentiate

Once educational practitioners begin their reflective practice by feeling and understanding the intensity of the moment that is posing challenge to them, they immerse their thoughts with what is going on and then mentally take the steps to describe the situation mentally, orally or in writing. By doing this they learn to differentiate from what it is and what it is not and will be able to make a distinction between if what they encountered was a problem or a dilemma. Here they not only describe the actions of the event of their concern but also become conscious of how their mind was making meaning out of it. "...to understand what prior knowledge, experience, values, assumptions, needs, desires, fears, and so forth might be driving their... actions..." (Rodgers, 2002, p.240).

Learning to describe an incident without interpretations is difficult but it is very essential in the reflective process. Description here refers to telling the story of the event as it happened or as one sees it without any meaning or interpretations. It is also a deeper level of thinking and perceptions about how he/she perceives the event metacognitively. "The point of this phase of the cycle is, through collaboration, to dig up as many details as possible, from as many different angles as possible, so that one is not limited to the sum of one's own perceptions. Yet the urge to fix problems and to move on is powerful...the discipline of description...forces them to slow down, to look, to see the variety of nuance present in such moments before leaping into action" (Rodgers, 2002, p. 238). This step can be done as an individual metacognitive reflection or in collaborative groups while describing a professional challenge they encounter and providing feed back on each one's thinking.

Analysis of Experience: Learning to Think Creatively and Create Useful Theory

In the second phase of reflection efforts are put forth to generate a number of explanations for the dilemma that was encountered. The teachers, principals and counselors bring their individual perspectives to the situation of concern and analyze it critically. They look at the dilemma's causation from multiple perspectives then unearth

their personal assumptions that influenced their interpretations. At this juncture reflection becomes a deep thinking process. They discuss their interpretations of the situation and create meaning of the actions of the moment that they are concerned about. As a result a common language is generated to explain the dilemma and to deal with it by expanding ways to name and understand the experience. The thought process that goes through at this point of reflection becomes a little more retrospective as well. The description and analysis of experience take one to think clearly about personal unexamined assumptions that drove their description. Next, theoretical ideas from the field are applied to frame and understand the experience. “Theoretical concepts can be drawn from any piece of research that is relevant...If a group is focusing on a particular theme—school rules for example, readings within that area can lend depth to the discussion” (Rodgers, 2001, p. 249). After taking the dilemma through these steps, it gets reorganized and reconstructed for an inquiry or experimentation by framing it within a theory. That leads to the last phase of the reflective process which can be an action research of a practitioner using qualitative research tools as well as an experimental inquiry.

Experimentation: Learning to Take Effective Intelligent Action

This is an important phase because description and analysis cannot really bring a resolution to the dilemma. After theorizing the dilemma, an intelligent action is called to alleviate the difficulties experienced by those who are involved in the situation. It is possible to describe and interpret the dilemma and leave it at that. According to Rodgers (2002),

it is easy for teachers to abandon perfectly good ideas because they didn't work the first time, or to be satisfied with the ideas but reluctant to carry them out. By requiring experimentation and enjoining my graduate students to bring their stories back to the group, I am able to encourage them to take risks to describe and analyze their experiments, and to plan for second, third...tries... (p. 250)

Schon (1987) states,

When the practitioner reflects-in-action in a case he perceives as unique, paying attention to phenomena and surfacing his intuitive understanding of them, his experimenting is at once exploratory, move testing, and hypothesis testing. The three functions are fulfilled by the very same function. (p. 72)

Similarly, school administrators and school counselors need to think of resolving their dilemmas and problems with a focus on studying the results of their efforts. In general when they encounter a dilemma or problem they seldom think through the

situation to resolve it in a scientific manner but take immediate actions that are driven by their assumption to resolve it momentarily and leave the consequences unchecked. Reflective process would save practitioners from this pitfall and help them understand a dilemma by looking at the details that contribute to it and then analyze it by identifying possible causes. Since many unexamined assumptions contribute to determining what the causes may be for the dilemma, the experimentation phase of the process helps to nail down what might or might not work to resolve the dilemma. Reflection begins with looking at the details of the moments in a dilemma and then ends with an intervention to bring a resolution to the dilemma.

Teaching Reflection to Professional Educators

This version of reflection focuses on improvement of professional practice therefore opportunities are provided to practice Carol Rodger's (2002) four step reflection which facilitates two levels of thinking. In the first two steps they look at the given scenario holistically and practice "mindfulness" and become fully aware of the present moment with much concentration and mindfulness. The second set of steps is at a rational thinking level with a problem solving orientation. Students practice these reflective steps on given scenarios which are cases of varying types of dilemmas.

Here is a scenario that was used for practicing reflection. This was the case of a principal facing a challenge with a Chemistry teacher. The teacher was frustrated with a Hispanic student Javier in her 11th grade science and told him he did not have to bother writing the lab report on the experiment they had just finished because he was not going to college anyway. Students were asked to consider this scenario and apply the reflective steps. First they determined if it was a problem or a dilemma. This was determined as a dilemma after which they practiced "mindfulness" by playing out the scene orally in detail. They also tried to get the complete picture of the classroom and the teacher's interaction with Javier. They described the teacher's frustrations, unexamined assumptions and state of mind about Javier. They also described Javier's difficulties in the classroom. After that they analyzed the situation from multiple points of view by discussing all the possible reasons that could have contributed to this situation from the teacher's and Javier's points of view. Then they thought of ways to intervene and resolve the problems and dilemmas recognized in this situation. This type of class activity helped students to apply the process of reflection in a deliberate manner but with thoughtful ways.

Concluding Remarks

In conclusion, the purpose of teaching reflection and reflective process is to bring a balance in the thinking of educational practitioners. Their dominant rational thinking and fixing the problem mode of operation needs to be neutralized with reflective thinking. By learning the importance of taking the time to look at a dilemma in the Zen sense of mindfulness they broadened their scope of thinking first by becoming mindful of the details of the situation that posed a dilemma for them. In the end it also became a compassionate way of dealing with human problems and difficulties. In this process of reflection first students gained insights into the various levels of the dilemma or problem occurrence that caused concern, then they moved to a deeper level of critical thinking about the dilemma of their concern. Understanding the situation in its entirety meant looking at it holistically first with much deep reflection that brought to their consciousness the compelling beliefs and competencies that caused their actions. Reflection thus became a process for thinking through professional dilemmas with a critical eye first to understand then to take actions to manage the dilemma in the best possible manner. Educators who apply this kind of reflection indeed use it as a professional development process that would help improve their practice. It is indeed a significant achievement for educators in the western world to consider reflection as a professional development process for improving their professional work.

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