

The Reflective Practitioner in Higher Education: The Nature and Characteristics of Reflective Practice Among Teacher Education Faculty

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ABSTRACT

This current research study collected qualitative data to describe the nature and characteristics of reflective practice and quantitative data to test the associative strength of these characteristics with select demographic variables identified in the literature and collected by the researchers for the study population. The researchers collected data from a convenience sample of faculty members in the College of Education at Ashland University, which implements a reflection-based model of annual evaluation and professional development. An initial analysis of the data indicated that reflection for the participants is an internal, cognitive process using the brain as the primary “tool.” Second, it was evident that the participants were open to input from their peer(s); those they specifically defined as confidants. It appeared that this informal setting provided a comfort level in which the participants were open to positive and negative feedback. Third, reflection is fundamentally driven by an evaluative, judgmental frame of reference. These participants seemed concerned with finding value or judging the worth of their teaching. Finally, the brief definition of *reflection* defined by the majority of the participants referenced their beliefs and practices about their teaching; they didn’t focus on research or service.

Literature

Recently, there has been a call for greater accountability and a nationwide investment in assessing and documenting the outcomes of education (Levine, 2005). As a result universities have refocused their attention on teaching and the instructional performance of college teachers. According to Baiocco and DeWaters (1998), since faculty are the infantry, attacking the problems on the front lines within colleges and universities, it can be argued that faculty development is the key to reform. As part of their professional role, faculty are responsible for analyzing, synthesizing, evaluating, and communicating the changes that are occurring not only in the disciplines but also in society.

This refocus on college teaching is not without precedent. Boyer (1990) led a challenge to traditional conceptions of the work of college faculty with his model of scholarship—which has become ubiquitous in higher education faculty literature. His notion of the *scholarship of teaching* has permeated the global community, and become the framework for large-scale quality assurance programs in England (Ottewill and Macfarlane, 2004) and South Africa (Strydum, Zulu, and Murray, 2004).

Shuster (2003) contributed a concise rationale for the importance of this focus on faculty teaching in higher education.

“The focus on actual student learning has been neglected. Put another way, for far too long presumptions of educational quality were linked to input measures...such as the academic degrees of the faculty, the size of the library, the institutional endowment, and standardized scores of entering students...[there is a belated awareness] that such inputs are not the best potential measures of educational effectiveness and have little bearing on how well students learn”(p.17).

Shuster continues (p.16) that “the stakes are higher today” in higher education—with strictures on funding, greater competition among non-traditional providers and pressures from the global marketplace. He concludes this essay with the observation that “higher education is currently experiencing more profound changes in a shorter span of time than has ever been the case” (p.17). McNaught (2003) describes these changes as in part “being required to educate more students, from an increasing variety of backgrounds, with decreasing government funding; they [colleges] are required to compete vigorously for student enrollments and external sources of funding.” Altogether, the faculty’s capacity to manage these pressures maximizes the importance that the faculty becomes critically reflective of its role, its practice, and its goals in the academy.

Current research on higher education shows an increasing recognition that the faculty are at the center of any attempt to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Attempts to reorganize programs, develop curriculum, and improve faculty effectiveness ultimately rely on the professional development of the individual faculty members (Levine, 2005). Critical reflection may facilitate the process of making implicit beliefs explicit, allowing for these individuals to develop, reflect, and enhance their classroom practices.

Research supports the relevance and criticality of reflective practice in professional development programs both for college faculty (Wlodarsky, 2005; Hatala [Wlodarsky], 2002) and for K-12 classroom teachers (Walters, 2002). Findings suggest (1) that reflection can, but may not, lead to changes in practice; (2) reflective practice is a multi-dimensional process, and (3) reflective practice includes discreet skills which may be taught and learned (Schon, 1987; Day, 1993; Usher, 1997; Feiman-Nemser and Parker, 1992; Ferry and Ross-Gordon, 1998; Hoffman-Kipp, Artiles, and Lopez-Torres, 2003).

One of the authors of this paper has found (Wlodarsky, 2005) that reflection among college faculty members can be linked to changed beliefs and practices in their classrooms. This current research study collected qualitative data to describe the nature and characteristics of reflective practice in an authentic setting, and quantitative data to test the associative strength of these characteristics with select demographic variables identified in the literature and collected by the researchers for the study population.

Population and Sample

The researchers recruited a voluntary sample from a population of faculty members within a college of education at a private, liberal arts university located in the Midwest. This college implements a reflection-based model of annual faculty review and professional development. College documents signify a faculty belief that teachers are *reflective decision makers* who merge theory and practice; possess ethical character; value the individual and unity; embrace tradition and change; and acknowledge the service nature of educating. The characteristics of this college suggested to the researchers that it was an appropriate venue for the current research study. Sampling bias was controlled in part through the use of archival documents that were developed prior to the study announcement. The sample included individuals who selected to participate at one of three levels as follows.

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| Level 1 | Anonymous participation by completing a survey only. |
| Level 2 | Anonymous participation by completing a survey and attaching it to any narrative documents (archival data/reports) which may have already been written containing personal reflections on teaching, scholarship and service, such as narratives submitted for purposes of annual reviews, third year review, and/or promotion and tenure. |
| Level 3 | Confidential participation by completing levels one and two above, and participation in structured, follow-up interviews with the researchers. |

A total of 22 professors have provided narrative documents and/or surveys as Level 1 and 2 participants in the study. A total of 8 professors have agreed to participate

in structured interviews with the researchers under Level 3 participation. At the time of the preparation of this report, the researchers had not begun the interview process.

Research Questions

The research questions that were answered using the data collected are as follows:

1. What are the characteristics of reflective systems?
2. Can scaffolding and guidance affect the nature of reflection?
3. What typologies of reflection are evidenced in the COE among faculty?
4. What is professional development for a college faculty member, and is there evidence that the reflective process results in professional development under this definition?
5. Does an individual's stage in the professional developmental continuum affect the nature of reflection?

Credibility and Validity

The researchers worked independently of each other to establish initial themes and categories among qualitative data as a first step in enhancing the credibility of the project. The themes that emerged have been observed in related literature as cited throughout this manuscript, providing confirmatory support for the reliability of these emerging themes. The separate tentative findings of the individual researchers were synthesized to develop this paper.

Data Sources

Annually, faculty members in the college complete a *self-report* of activity in teaching, scholarship and service during the previous year. The annual review template solicits personal reflections on these activities, which are frequently contextualized to a personal plan for action in the upcoming contract year. The researchers solicited volunteers from the college faculty who were willing to participate in the study as outlined above. When the research study was announced, all faculty received a brief survey to collect demographic information that has been associated in previous research with reflective capacity and its characteristics. The researchers asked the

faculty to define reflection, and to provide select tools that they may use to facilitate reflection on their own professional development. These surveys were numbered, with a corresponding number assigned to the reflection narrative to allow correlation of demographics to emergent qualitative themes and categories without jeopardizing participant anonymity.

Data Analyses and Findings

Respondents were asked to compose a response to the following item in a text box on the survey instrument:

In the space provided below, please write out a brief definition of reflection and describe how this practice might relate to your professional development as a faculty member. As part of your definition, describe the tools you use to facilitate your reflection(s). Examples of tools include but are not limited to: portfolios, journal writing, student comments, peer feedback, course artifacts, discussions, inquiry questions, and video/audio-taping. Please indicate any other tools you have used to facilitate your reflection(s).

Constant comparative procedures were used to identify emergent themes and categories that pertain to the nature and characteristics of the reflective practices of the participants. The researchers coded the narrative separately to monitor researcher bias, and to support the credibility of the themes identified. After separate coding of the narrative, the researchers identified several clusters that emerged. The chart below delineates these clusters around the overall category of reflection.

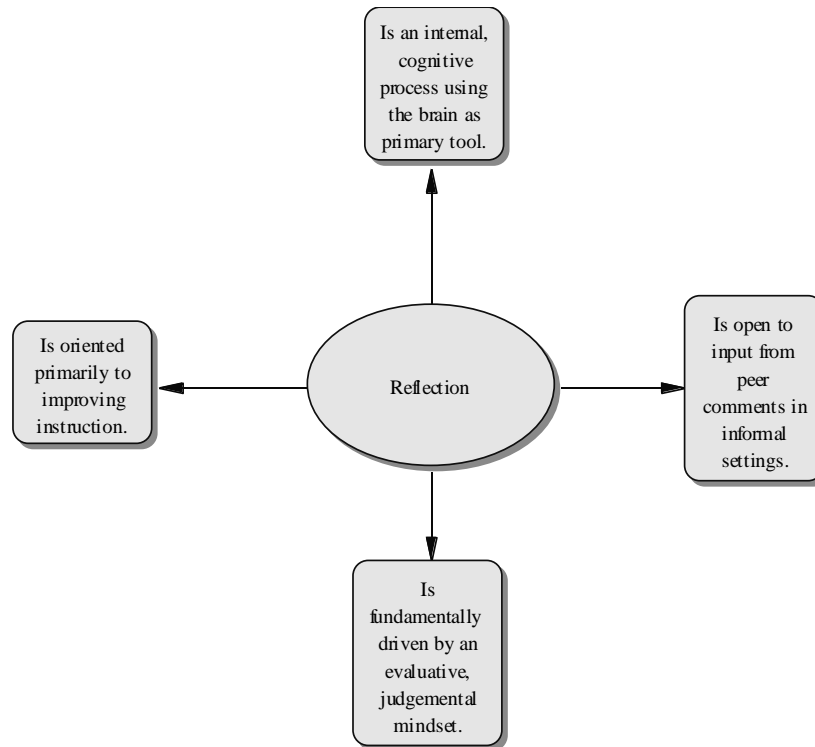


Chart 1. Conceptual Clusters from Survey Instrument

Reflection as an Internal Cognitive Process

Analysis of the survey indicated that reflection for the participants is an internal, cognitive process using the brain as the primary “tool.” External planning documents, formalized data collection or analysis, or journals were not typically incorporated to assist reflection or to help the faculty member overcome personal biases which may have been overly critical. The tendency for participants was to evaluate their beliefs and practices using cognition as a means to an end; the goal being to improve practices deemed unsuccessful, or weak. The participants engaged in a cognitive process whereby an awareness surfaced—a sense of knowing emerged. In short, they had to “think about” their experiences for some period of time. The reflective process was clearly localized, personal, and cognitive. Although they were willing to listen to input from their peers, a significant part of the process was private, a process which no one else knew about unless the participant decided to reveal it—the hidden thoughts of the faculty member. Select narrative quotations that support this theme include:

“I use my two hour commute to critically examine why something was successful in my class and what may have impacted successes and failures.”

“I define reflection as focused thinking about my teaching. I do this informally after each class by asking myself what went well.”

“I tend to do this [reflection] while I am commuting but would like to begin journaling.”

“The technique that I have found to be quite helpful is to try to do a written daily recap of each class that I teach. Sometimes the recap is quite brief; other days it may be somewhat detailed. When I teach the course again, I can refer to these daily recaps to reflect upon changes that need to be made.”

“In terms of my professional practice, the tools I use include course evaluations and the occasional promotion and tenure portfolios as formal reflections. For me, I reflect in a more informal sense most especially in my car, or late at night. It is those times that I am most in my own head.”

The connection between cognition and reflection was described by King and Kitchener (1994, 2004; King, 2000; King, 1992) as the development of *reflective judgment* or *epistemic cognition*. These terms are defined as “a developmental progression that occurs between childhood and adulthood in the way people understand the process of knowing and in the corresponding ways that they justify their beliefs about ill-structured problems (1994, p.13). This cognition-reflection model has been validated in studies with nurses (Platzer, 2000; Platzer, Drake & Ashford, 2000); pre-service education majors (Amobi, 2003); economics majors in B.S. degree programs (Ilacqua & Prescott, 2003); with female students (Friedman, 2004); with seminary students (Dale, 2005); with both young and middle-years adults (Pirttila-Backman and Kajanne, 2001), and with lay-adults in Finland (Kajanne, 2003). Pascarella & Terenzini (1991) suggest the King and Kitchener model may be the “best known and most extensively studied” cognitive growth model. However, the researchers for this current study have failed to find a study where the model has been applied to the ill-structured problems inherent in the professional practices of higher education faculty members.

King and Kitchener (1994 and 2004) suggest that the emergence of both cognition and reflective capacity in adulthood is developmental—as a stage theory. These stages are viewed as both optimal (the upper limits of capability) and functional (the typical level of operation), and adults frequently apply cognitive strategies or epistemologies from more than one stage to any given problem-solving scenario. Of interest to this current study is the movement from personal cognition in problem-solving (King and Kitchener’s stages one through three) toward a social cognition of problem-solving (stages 4 and 5) wherein the individual is capable of allowing “others” access to the reflection and cognition process. We detected this phenomena in many participants in our study—where they identify the role of a trusted peer in critical reflection on performance, and we pursue this concept further in the section below. More specifically to this current section, is the observation at the higher stages, i.e. 6 and 7, that “complex

problems require some type of thinking action before a resolution can be constructed” (1994, p. 67). Hence, when we capture the terms *thinking*, *thinking about*, *examine* or *focused thinking* in participant narratives, we are most likely observing higher-level reflection by the participants under the King and Kitchener model.

Input From Peers in Informal Settings

It was evident that the participants were open to input from their peer(s); those they specifically defined as confidants. This process of feedback or input tended to take place in informal settings, i.e. in the hallway, one’s office, at lunch, etc. It appeared that this informal setting provided a comfort level in which the participants were open to positive and negative feedback. The informal setting seemed to make them feel less vulnerable, and in turn, more willing to allow for input. This part of the reflective process still can be defined as internal. The participant is still choosing to process information; however, the actual information being processed is coming from an external source. Select narrative quotations that support this theme include:

“A valuable tool has been conversations with my colleagues in the car to and from our destination.”

“I ponder about how each class went at the end of every day. If something did not go well, I dwell on it for days and usually have to discuss it with someone.”

“I utilize a great many of my peer networks to reflect on both the process and product of my work.”

“Peer feedback provides another avenue for reflection. Getting another peer’s take on my teaching helped me to grow as an instructor. Discussions with students and other peers enrich my passion for teaching and I always strive for the best.”

Input from peers in an informal setting can be considered a “mentoring” experience. Weasmer and Woods (2003) found that teachers identified reflection as a primary outcome of the mentoring experience. They found that mentoring a student teacher motivated participants to rely upon reflection-on-action to validate or to reframe thinking and consider modifying practice. As the students, ripe with awareness of contemporary pedagogy, shared the classroom, learning was reciprocal. Also, because teaching is usually an isolated activity, the added presence of a student teacher in most cases resulted in a pleasant collegial environment (p.68)

Data from a study completed by Burbank and Kauchak (2003) indicated that collaborative action research was perceived positively by both preservice and inservice teachers on a number of dimensions including changing teaching practice, changing views about research and as a vehicle to dialogue about research and teaching practice.

This finding was especially robust for the experienced teachers participating in collaboration. In addition, teaming led to feelings of “community and professionalism” (p.512).

In a study completed by Hatala (2002), she argued that the simple fact that professors agreed to participate in the study was an indication that they felt that reflecting on one’s beliefs and practices was important. The participants were aware that the researcher would be asking them to think about student learning and teaching and its relationship to practice. The presence of the researcher throughout the observations, as commented by all the participants, provided an awareness of what was taking place within the classroom context that hadn’t existed before. In addition, the dialogue between the researcher and participant(s) after class observations allowed for reflection of their beliefs and practices. Last, the focus group discussions that took place throughout the study provided a means for issues to surface pertaining to student learning and teaching. Simply allowing oneself to listen and respond to others facilitated self-reflection (p.151).

Throughout Hatala (2002), different types of reflection were taking place; for example, there was private reflection during the survey and interviews and social reflection during the after-class reflections and focus groups. According to Hatala, this distinction is significant in that social reflection seemed to be more influential in terms of awareness and behavior change than did private reflection. The themes of mentoring, collegial relationships and professional dialogue account for the importance of this type of reflection in creating awareness and behavior change in college classrooms (p. 153).

Quinlan and Akerlind’s (2001) study demonstrates the importance of considering the context within which peer review of teaching and collaborative teaching activities are attempted. The discipline, the university, and the department all contribute to shaping the context and appropriate nature of such innovations. Based on current research, professors will most likely react positively to collaboration if collaborative work patterns already exist, agreement exists upon a set of external standards, an involvement in education reform is present, the faculty member desires for the need or problem to be addressed, reasonable levels of morale and trust are present between faculty, and confidence is there in terms of status and reputation.

Finally, again looking at the model proposed by King and Kitchener (1994), the movement from personal, internal reflective thought—relying on an epistemology that is closed to external interpretation of evidence—toward reflective thought that is open to ambiguity, to questioning of self-interpretation, and to greater openness and reliance on social reflection via peer and confidant communications, would be considered evidence of growth in reflective complexity. Our participants, though they began with private contemplation of professional activity—such as while driving alone in a car after class—told us they later approached a colleague for input. This observation confirms King and Kitchener’s contention that multiple stages of reflection will be incorporated around the same proximate event. This observation also demonstrates King and Kitchener’s distinction between optimal and functional reflection, i.e. our participants demonstrated a capacity for higher-level reflection, but also utilized lower-stage reflective activities regularly.

Evaluative Nature of Reflection

The question arose, when analyzing the survey data, can the reflective process be detached from evaluation, or judgment? The answer seems to be *no*: reflection is fundamentally driven by an evaluative, judgmental frame of reference. These participants seemed concerned with finding value or judging the worth of their teaching. The faculty members tended to assign a value system to their reflections, i.e. clearly focusing on their weaknesses in teaching and then engaging in a thought process that would ultimately improve their teaching practices. Select narrative quotations that support this theme include:

“Reflection means thinking in an evaluative way about one’s practice and making a plan to improve”. Tools I use include student products, student evaluations, peer evaluations of teaching, feedback from annual reviews, etc.”

“Reflection is examining your curriculum and teaching practices to evaluate its [sic] strengths and weaknesses in meeting student needs.”

“Reflection is to ponder on past events/behaviors for the purpose of evaluation.”

“Reflection is the act of processing what happened on a particular day with a particular lesson. I deconstruct what had transpired, looking for an indication of what made it an effective or ineffective lesson, a good or bad day, engaging or boring, etc.”

“Reflection is the process of self-examination and self evaluation. It is examining different aspects of your professional behaviors and addressing the areas that need improvement, need explanation or emphasized.”

A later study by King and Kitchener (2004) discussed the relationship of personal epistemologies—proofs for knowledge—and the movement away from personal, unsubstantiated opinion toward evidence-based cognition and reflection. Underlying this continuum is an implicit movement in the developmental complexity of the individual away from a non-questioning, “cognitively simplistic” belief—an absolute faith in personal knowledge. Across the stages, this belief system is gradually replaced by cognitively complex, judgmental and critically reflective system of thought. There is an increased capability and proclivity to critique and judge one’s performance and tentative solutions to ill-structured problems. King & Kitchener’s model would explain our observation of the highly evaluative and judgmental frame of reference of many of our participants. In fact, to the degree that King & Kitchener are correctly describing adult development—we should predict that for higher functioning adults (which we would hope to find in higher education faculty), one should predict that higher stages of reflection would manifest themselves with or through evaluative terminology.

Reflective Process Gravitates Towards Teaching

Interestingly, the survey asked the participants to write out a brief definition of *reflection* and describe how this practice might relate to their professional development as a faculty member. The majority of the participants answered this question in reference to their beliefs and practices about their teaching; they didn't focus on research or service, which should be significant components to their professional development, as these components influence the promotion and tenure process. Select narrative quotations that support this theme include:

"I define reflection as focused thinking about my teaching."

"Reflection is the process I use to consider and reconsider my teaching methodology and its effects on student performance. It involves examining and re-examining my instruction, the projects I ask students to do, the problems I ask them to solve, their performance on assessment instruments and their reaction to my teaching performance with an eye to improving both the student's experience and outcome."

"As a teacher, I usually try to assess what worked for the students and what did not. I have responded by making careful and incremental changes to my syllabi."

Reflection is looking back on lessons, presentations, and other pieces of work for ways to improve teaching and gain knowledge and suggestions for future lessons."

Increasingly urgent pleas for improvement in the quality of college teaching have come from faculty, disciplinary societies, university task forces, campus administrators, students and their families, state legislatures, and governing boards. While all of these groups share a concern for greater quality in college teaching, they differ in terms of their reasons for being concerned (Paulsen & Feldman, 1995).

According to Dey, Ramirez, Korn, and Astin (as cited in Paulsen & Feldman, 1995), expressions of concern about the quality of college teaching arise from the faculty themselves, especially because of their attitudes about the relative importance to be placed on teaching and research. In 1992-93, 77 percent of 29,771 faculty at 289 colleges and universities reported that their primary interests were "very heavily in" or "leaning toward" teaching, while only 24 percent expressed the same sort of primary interest in research. Among faculty at public universities, 97.8 percent reported that "to be a good teacher" was a "very important" or "essential" professional goal (p. 35), but only 5.4 percent of these faculty reported that the statement "faculty are rewarded for being good teachers" was "very descriptive" of their college or university (pp. 38, 94). These findings are consistent with those of another survey of 5,450 professors at 306 colleges and universities, where 71 percent reported that their interests were "primarily in" or "leaning toward" teaching but only 29 percent reported the same level of interest in research (Carnegie Foundation 1989, p. 43). Furthermore, 35 percent of all faculty and over 50 percent of faculty at doctoral and research universities agreed with the statement, "The

pressure to publish reduces the quality of teaching at my university" (p. 51). Clearly, faculty are themselves concerned about instruction and its improvement.

Cross (as cited in Paulsen & Feldman, 1995) suggested that college teachers become classroom researchers. These college instructors would view their classrooms as laboratories where they could continually collect information about what and how their students learn in relation to what and how they are being taught. Through careful reflection, instructors could establish meaningful connections between their own teaching behaviors and their students' learning processes and outcomes. Such efforts would also illuminate the content-specific characteristics of effective teaching in a particular discipline.

The involvement of teachers in searching for new knowledge about teaching effectiveness also begins to build a foundation for improved evaluation of teaching, an essential ingredient in rewarding teaching in promotion and tenure decisions. Cross states, "I can think of no action that would do quite as much for the improvement of teaching and learning as to let a thousand classroom laboratories bloom across the nation. That would be taking teaching seriously, and it would move us toward our goal of quality education for all" (Cross 1986, p. 14; as cited in Paulsen & Feldman, 1995).

Conclusion

Two observations with respect to the King and Kitchener (1994) cognitive model seem particularly suitable for further research, as they extend beyond the current understanding of this model with respect to adult cognition and reflective judgment. First, while individuals *can apply* reflective behaviors from any stage below their optimal level for any given reflective event, must they move sequentially through the lower stages as a cognitive organizational activity, or can they "jump" directly to the optimal level? The data captured in this current study seem mixed with respect to this question. Some narrative reflected a sequential, bottom-to-top movement in reflective activity, while other narrative seemed less linear. Second, in Darling-Hammond and Sykes (1999) compendium on the teaching profession, Loewenberg-Ball and Cohen (1999) propose more extensive use of videotaped classroom vignettes as cognitive tools for preservice and inservice graduate coursework and professional development, and as a source to guide personal reflection. Our findings would suggest that individual's utilizing such "non-experienced experiences" as cognitive prompts may be limited in their ability to conceptualize both the problems and potential solutions from these vignettes—lacking the personal, historical and sensory attachment to the events on the tapes. Reflection is observed, both in our study and in King and Kitchener's work, to have cognitive implications and limitations. Clearly, more work in this area would have both theoretical importance—as it enhanced our understanding of King and Kitchener's reflective judgment model—and practical importance for the development of instructional materials and resources in the cognitive domain to assist in the development of both reflective college faculty and teachers more broadly.

A second theme supported the notion of an informal mentoring experience among faculty within higher education. The participants were open to input from their peer(s); those they specifically defined as confidants. This process of feedback or input tended to take place in informal settings, i.e. in the hallway, one's office, at lunch, etc. It appeared that this informal setting provided a comfort level in which the participants were open to positive and negative feedback. The informal setting seemed to make them feel less vulnerable, and in turn, more willing to allow for input. It would seem appropriate to explore the current literature on mentoring to determine additional characteristics and/or situations that would facilitate mentoring processes, in turn, allowing for faculty to develop professionally using a team approach to reflection.

Third, one of the major themes that emerged in this study was the linking of reflection to personal improvement in somewhat of an evaluative frame of reference. Participants referred to movement from weakness to strength and from failure to success. The use of the terms *evaluation*, *evaluate*, *judge*, and *assess* suggests a deficiency model when reflecting on one's teaching. This deficiency model does not disappear when the researchers controlled for rank and tenure, i.e. full, tenured professors demonstrate this deficiency mindset as well as junior faculty. This deficiency or evaluative model of reflection should be explored further, as it has implications for post-tenure faculty development and generalized motivation for reflection. It also raises the question of whether individuals with more critical/judgmental personality types might develop reflective capacity, i.e. movement toward King and Kitchener's more complex levels, through a different developmental path than, say, professionals who are more adaptive and emotive.

Finally, improving the quality of higher education teaching is a task that has risen to national prominence, as evidenced by recent publications on quality issues in higher education (Levine, 2005; Shuster, 2003; McNaught, 2003). Nevertheless, our study finds a singular focus among study participants on the quality of their teaching—which would seem to suggest that Levine's uniform criticisms are at least over-generalized. Among the faculty who participated in this present study—there are individuals who do not prioritize research interests over and above teaching students. Whether or not this finding represents a cultural artifact of only the faculty participating in this present study and/or this specific university environment, or whether this interest in improving teaching in higher education is a characteristic of a larger population of professors should be the subject of more careful and extensive research.

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