REFLECTIVE TEACHING

Imagine that there is a great field stretching before you of white, untouched snow. You walk across it enjoying the apple-crunching sound underneath your boots. Sometimes your boots dig further into the snow than you expect, sometimes the snow is softer or harder than you anticipate; each time, you adjust your steps to account for the variations. You are now on the other side of the field, you turn around to look at the footprints that you have made and the path you have taken. At first glance, your path appears straight and your footprints look similar. However, under further scrutiny, you notice that some prints are deeper than others. Your path is not as straight as you had first thought and the prints are not made of white snow but dark and muddied. What happened here? Well, your observations of the footprints changed, the longer that you looked at them.

At the beginning, you based your interpretations largely on expectations and then slowly you recalibrated your thoughts as your scrutiny intensified. Once you had noticed one deviation from an expectation, you began to look more critically for other variations and additionally began to hypothesize about what had caused them. This thought process is similar to what occurs when we reflect on our lessons. Initially, we make general observations based predominantly on what our expectations of the lesson had been and the impression of the lesson. We then look more closely and maybe see things more clearly, we see or recall more details. We begin to consider why the things that happened actually happened. Additionally, we try to consider how we might do things differently. In short, we reflect, and as we do so, we grow.
THE CHAPTER AT A GLANCE

What do you already know about reflective practice?

What do you expect to learn in this chapter?

What issues about reflection and reflective practice have you heard your colleagues/cooperating teacher discuss? Why are they important/relevant?
Read the following comments from teachers regarding Reflective Practice.

- I don’t have time to reflect. I teach almost eight hours a day and then I have to plan and correct my students’ work.
- I take a few minutes at the end of every class to think about what went well and what did not go as planned. I do this even if I don’t have time, for example, while I walk from one classroom to the next.
- I used to reflect on teaching when I was doing my teacher training. My instructor always insisted that I write a short reflection after each lesson I taught. But I am experienced now and I do not need to reflect.
- I reflect systematically about my teaching. This is what helps me grow. I am lucky to work in a school that values this kind of practice, so I often talk to my colleagues about my teaching.
- I cannot conceive of teaching without reflection that is why, still today, after so many years of teaching, I keep a journal where I write my reflections.

To what extent do you identify yourself with these comments? Why?

UNDERSTANDING REFLECTION

In teaching, reflection, or the process of reflection, begins at the planning stage. We consider how the lesson will be received by our students, how clear our objectives are, how well staged the lesson is, and how logical it is. Ultimately, we reflect as a way of finding out, before teaching it, whether our planned lesson will facilitate student’s learning.
Along that process, we consider what could go right and wrong largely based on previous experiences. In that respect, we have expectations about our efficacy in the classroom, based on our past performance.

Additionally, during the lesson, things change: an activity takes longer than expected, students find the material easier or more challenging than expected, and a myriad of other such events that are impossible to systematically predict. Hence, while we are teaching, we continually reflect and adapt our plans to suit the emerging changes that our interaction with students may provoke. In other words we think on our feet.

Once the lesson is over, we look back at how the lesson went. We consider what worked, what was effective or ineffective and hypothesize why our expectations and the actual lesson maybe did not match. Again, this is reflection. For most of us, it is natural to reflect in an effort to process our classroom experiences. However, in order for reflection to be productive, we need to ensure that it leads to useful and usable insights or takeaways, which inform future lessons. In other words, we look back in order to move forwards.

IT’S ALL IN THE QUESTIONS

Why did we ask the above questions? When we first walk out of a lesson, we have an overall impression of the lesson and how it went. We often use the words: “Good,” “It went well,” “It was okay,” “It was a disaster” or “It was not how I expected.” This initial reflection is not
usually more than a few words and often based on a feeling, as opposed to fact or evidence.

The first question above is an obvious one to ask but not that useful or insightful. It only helps us process a personal reaction, at the level of feelings. However, we need to dig deeper into the actual lesson events, hence the second question. This question requires that we trawl over the events of the lesson and select one incident or critical incident (Farrell, 2008) to examine. Farrell argues that it is often only one event or ‘critical incident’ that provides the greatest insights into overall lessons. At this point, a few things occur, we begin to objectify the lesson and slightly disengage from the reflective process on a purely personal level. It is no longer simply about how we felt the lesson went, but about the evidence that we can gain from real classroom occurrences. We begin to look at these events in terms of what we can learn from them and prioritize those, which are the most important or useful.

The next two questions, questions three and four, probe further into this idea. The subtle shift in these questions is that the focus is removed from solely teacher actions to integrating students’ behaviors also. This forces us to look at the lesson through the students’ lens. This is not a minor detail, on the contrary. The ultimate purpose of teaching is to promote effective, quality learning for all students, and putting them and their learning process at the center of our reflection is a fundamental trait of a reflective practitioner.

The final questions frame reflection as a means for development, growth, and change, which is why reflective practice is critical and ultimately can be equated to learning. As Wallace (1991, p. 54) states “fruitful change is extremely difficult without reflection.”

Growth means change and change means taking risks, stepping from the known to the unknown. However, growth is not easy. We all have to ask ourselves: Am I open-minded enough to reflect?

John Dewey posited that in order for teachers to reflect effectively, they need to be openminded, have an open heart and take responsibility.

“Reflective thinking as a distinction from other operations to which we apply the name of thought involves (1) a state of doubt, hesitation, perplexity, mental difficulty, in which thinking
originates, and (2) an act of searching, hunting, inquiring, to find material that will resolve the doubt, settle and dispose of the perplexity.” (Dewey, 1933, p. 12)

As mentioned previously, and as it can be seen from the quote above, engaging in reflection is not easy. It is doubtful that any of us truly appreciates being in a ‘state of doubt’ or ‘mental difficulty’ both of which imply discomfort and the necessity for effort and time, something which is in short supply for most teachers. In addition, what compounds the difficulty is that the subject we are reflecting on (teaching) is a highly personal and personalized endeavor. It is rooted in our belief systems, which may have developed over many years and may have been influenced and fostered by several factors including: our favorite teachers, our favorite classes and our own learning styles and preferences. We are attached to our beliefs and may find it difficult to move away from them. There is a certain amount of vulnerability generated when we are asked to question our own teaching. As a consequence, we naturally have a tendency to think about lessons in a way that suits what we are able to process or what we want to think.

In order for reflection to effect the changes in our development that we expect to get from engaging in the process, egos and emotions need to be set aside. This honest self-evaluation, a requirement of all kinds of reflection, can be best described as meeting yourself.

In other words, you look at yourself and your actions completely or, as Dewey described, with an ‘open heart’ rather than in the way the wicked queen asked for feedback: “Mirror, mirror on the wall who is the fairest of them all?” The only thing the witch wanted to know was that she was the fairest. The truth was not useful.

Being resistant to critically analyzing lessons usefully can lead to teacher stagnation, ‘routinization’ (not trying new things in our lessons) and the adoption of what van Manen described as a “narrow doctrinaire perspective” (van Manen, 1977, p. 206). As one of our teachers in training admitted during feedback to a practicum class ‘Because of my natural stubbornness, I did my assignments, as ever, but I was less inclined than I should have been to be as thoughtful as I could and should have been.’

“Expertise resides in the practices of the teacher.”
Zeichner and Liston (1996, p. 6)
This may not be the only problem: we can also be too critical, or hypercritical, of our own classroom. When this happens we are not only undermining our teaching but also our confidence and self-esteem. There has to be a middle ground in order for us to develop as teachers and create a healthy practice of reflection.

Beginning by acknowledging that reflection is an integral part of teaching and teacher learning is a fundamental first step. This should validate the practice, ensure that it is an ongoing process, and underscore the fact that teachers are constantly striving for genuine understanding (Loughran, 2002) of the students, of themselves, of the context and the material. Every lesson is an opportunity to learn something. From every lesson the students and we can gain a useful takeaway, or point of learning, which provides information for future lessons. As Dewey told us, “reflection converts action that is merely appetitive, blind, and impulsive into intelligent action” (1933, p. 17).

For this reason, reflection is a practice.

THE REFLECTIVE PRACTICE CYCLE

As we have explained so far, reflection does not come naturally to professionals. It is a painstaking process at the beginning and soon it becomes a fundamental tool for teachers’ growth and development. Various authors have tried to conceptualize the process. In our experience, whenever we have engaged in reflection, it has been as a consequence of finding dissonances between our teaching intentions and the students’ actual learning in class.

The first thing that happens is that we try to fully understand what went wrong or not according to plan (WHAT?). We then look
for potential causes or reasons (WHY?) and these generally give us additional information about the situation (WHAT ELSE?). Using all that information, we try to come up with a useful solution (HOW?), which we plan and try out in class. Sometimes, that solution works. Other times it does not work and we need to go back to our repertoire of potential solutions and we try things out again (WHAT NOW?). The following diagram depicts the way we have been engaging in reflection. However, notice that this is not the only way the process can be depicted. As we say above, this is the way we have been engaging in reflection.

Figure 2.1 - The Reflective Learning Cycle
What you have just engaged in was an example of a reflective practice cycle: noticing a problem, investigating possible causes of the problem and experimenting with possible solutions. This type of reflective practice is purposeful, directed and facilitates a dynamic working relationship between you, the material and the students. Richards (1991, p. 5) states that the process “involves conscious recall and examination of the experience as a basis for evaluation and decision-making, and as a source for planning and action.” This cycle adheres to the principle that “experience plays a central role in the part of the learning process” (Kolb, 1984, p. 20) and encourages teachers “to view problems from different perspectives” (Loughran, 1996, p. 4). A useful summary of these points could be that meaning, and consequently learning, are born out of experiences.

Can you think of an issue or problem that occurred in a class that you recently taught or observed? Possibly a student dominated the class, and you found it difficult to use the student’s energy effectively, or maybe you had difficulty conveying the meaning of a language structure that had appeared straightforward before the lesson but once in the lesson seemed to unravel. Try to follow these steps in thinking about the problem. How do you feel following these steps?

1) Define the problem.

2) Consider what caused it.

3) Consider whether your actions helped or exacerbated the problem.

4) Think of possible alternatives to address the problem in the future.

5) Test out one or two of your proposed solutions in class.

6) Once you have experimented with a few solutions, consider how successful you were in tackling the problem and which proposed solution was most effective.

TOWARDS EVIDENCE-BASED REFLECTION

One thing to keep in mind is that reflecting for reflection’s sake is an unproductive endeavor. Many times, the source of reflection we have is merely a hunch or an intuition. This is because teaching can be a solitary business. When we are in the classroom, we are with our students but there is generally no one to guide us or to see and comment on what is happening other than ourselves. In the reflective practice cycle we have just described, a fundamental element—the sources that triggers a cascade of reflective actions—is some concrete evidence that a change is needed. Because generally we are our own resource in the classroom, we need to use assists in order to gather useful, concrete evidence to guide our reflection. These assists include our students, the record of our work on the whiteboard, filming our lessons and reviewing our plans after the lesson has been taught. All of these assists can provide rich insights and help to further explore the actual execution of the lesson.

Filming or audio recording our classes

It is easy to forget everything that happened or to miss critical incidents once the lesson is over. Filming or audio recording lessons provides a record of what actually occurred and was said in class; in other words, we have evidence on which we can reflect. Consider this teacher in training’s comment after using video to help her examine her class:

“The Wonder of Video: The good, the bad, the ugly and the ‘eh-not so bad.’ It is invaluable to watch videos of others teaching but even more so of ourselves. It really keeps you honest. Once over the initial shock of our appearance, a visual record of a lesson provides insight into our teaching techniques, our comportment and our behavior towards students. By seeing myself in the first video, I realized my lesson plans were not well sequenced and I needed to prepare myself better for the class.”
Additionally, we can transcribe our own or the student’s language in order to further investigate our classes. Doing this can help us understand how we communicate with students, how many opportunities for communication we give them and also, more importantly, which the areas of our interaction with students that need to be rethought are.

**Reviewing the Whiteboard/Blackboard**

A teacher trainer once said that you could judge how clear or logical a lesson has been by looking at the white or blackboard. This might be a slight exaggeration but what we can do once we have finished teaching, and the students have left the room, is ask ourselves the following questions:

- Is the learning objective evident from what is written on the board?
- Is the board logically planned? Is it cluttered?
- Have I used the board as a notepad for myself or as a learning tool for my students?
- Does it look as though this was a lesson for the level of students I had i.e. was the lesson level appropriate?
These questions, prompt us to look at what the students were looking at while we were teaching. It also gets us to consider whether the board was cluttered, whether we packed the lesson too full of information and, more importantly, what the students have written in their notebooks and taken home as a record of the lesson. If the board is planned well, was the lesson well executed? There is no clear-cut answer to this question. Nevertheless, we should remember that what was left on the board is the record of the lesson that students will use in order to review or study. Hence, it should be properly planned and intentionally used.

**Looking at Students’ Notebooks**

Another source of evidence for reflection entails looking at what students have written during our lesson. This will give us evidence of how our intended plan actually played out in reality. At the end of a lesson, ask one or two students to show you their notebooks. Look at how and what they have taken notes on during the lesson. Ask yourself:

- Is the organization of the notes clear?
- Is the learning objective obvious?
- Will they be able to use these notes as a study guide at home?
The answers to these questions will illustrate and evidence not only the students’ ability to organize their own learning but also suggest in part the clarity of your instruction. You may want to photocopy the notebooks or take notes yourself on what the students saw as being vital to note down and compare this to the actual lesson objectives. You may also want to choose students’ notebooks from the two ends of the ability range in your class, meaning you look at the student who is most able in class and the one who is the least able. Again, you can compare what each student has taken away from your lesson and reflect on whether or not you have provided adequate supports at both ends as well as what you should have done in order to support learning.

**Asking the Students**

During the term, you may want to institutionalize feedback sessions with the students. These are points in the semester when you meet each student, one on one, to check on how the students feel about the lessons and their progress. You may want to weave into these discussions questions about instructional techniques or overall clarity of lessons. You may also want to ask the students to provide you with written feedback using questions such as:
• What did you like about this lesson?
• What did you not like about this lesson?
• What did you learn during this lesson?
• What homework will you do?

You may want to do this at the end of every unit, or at the end of each semester. Additionally, you can use proactive assessment for learning tools (see Chapter 11) such as one-minute papers, or exit slips to gather information about every lesson, at the point of need.

We should remember that students might feel slightly uncomfortable about noting down things that they did not like. Because of this, you will need to navigate how best to question your particular groups of students. The question that is possibly the most useful is what the students learnt during the lesson. This will give you the greatest insight into whether you accomplished the learning objective for the lesson, or not, and what options you have when planning lessons.

**Re-writing the Plan**

As already mentioned, we reflect during lessons constantly and make changes to the lesson accordingly. Therefore, the written lesson plan and what actually happened in class may differ greatly. In order
to understand the reason for these differences, once the lesson is over, take out your plan again and add the changes that you made including changes to the timing, extended or dropped activities, and so forth. These changes will give you insights into your planning and your execution. Additionally, you will be getting insights into your planning, your execution and the pace of the lesson as experienced by the students. In rewriting your plan, you will be able to analyze why a particular activity needed to be dropped which should in turn inform future lessons.

A note to end on

As vital as it is to make reflection a practice, we must not fall into routinized reflection-in other words reflecting because we know we should. True, purposeful reflection has to impact teachers’ actions and result in change.

Zeichner and Liston (1990, p. 167), question whether “teachers’ actions are necessarily better just because they are more deliberate or intentional.” This is a useful consideration. Reflection cannot simply be something that happens after a class and ends there. It needs to be utilized and should result in action.

Along the same lines, Fendler (2003, p. 6) provides this interesting observation:

“Today’s discourse of reflection incorporates an array of meanings: a demonstration of self consciousness, a scientific approach to planning for the future, a tacit and intuitive understanding of practice, a discipline to become more professional, a way to tap into one’s authentic inner voice, and a means to become a more effective teacher.”

SEEING REFLECTION IN PRACTICE

Read the following reflection on a lesson written by a teacher in training. As you are reading, compare it to your own reflection and also
consider how useful the following reflection is. What evidence is there that this teacher is analyzing her lesson productively?

Overall, I feel pretty good about this lesson— at least better than my previous one. I felt that by planning out the rationale and really breaking down each aspect of the lesson helped out, so it does speak volumes to the importance of lesson planning. I chose to use technology again (and a great excuse to use my brand spankin’ new computer). The use of the presentation not only helped scaffold the entire lesson for the student, but also helped me organize my thoughts and see how each macro and micro skill was being assessed and focused on. I think the most successful part was scaffolding the vocabulary the way I did. The students had fewer questions about the article because I pre-taught the vocabulary. That was a big improvement for my class and I will continue to use this strategy in all of my Hot Topics courses. I really enjoyed the use of the PowerPoint. The whole problem now is getting all of my students on the same article each week so I can just create one presentation — I don’t have time to create four or five different PowerPoints.

One thing that the lesson did fall short on was the amount of fluency practice the student received. We could have kept going because I didn’t have a class afterwards, but since they are paying for 40-minutes, they get 40 minutes. So, I did run out of time.

There are a few reasons why this teacher’s reflections are constructive. Firstly, she looks at her lesson in sufficient detail and she identifies specific areas that were both effective and ineffective. At the beginning of her reflection, she identifies a few key points that made the lesson “good.” Her initial, general reflection on this lesson includes these positive aspects: the use of technology, scaffolding, and breaking down each aspect of his lesson. She attributes the success of the organization to the lesson to her planning; by so doing, she provides herself with a tool to repeatedly use and build upon in order to maintain her success. This is one of the **takeaways**. She identifies one negative point: the lack of fluency practice, and muses on how best to deal with this in the future presenting herself with one key area to work on. By doing this, she
is reducing the number of choices, and hence, the number of things she must attend to prior to and during the lesson. As we will keep reiterating throughout this book, in teaching, less is usually much more.

Identifying one aspect of your teaching that you would like to work on after a lesson is both manageable and more constructive than presenting yourself with a shopping list of “TO DOs” which, as we have alluded to previously, can be both unwieldy and demotivating.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, we have looked at what reflection is, what can impede it and what the key reasons for reflective practice are. We have also looked at why we engage in reflective practice and how it helps us to inform our own development as we work with specific groups of students. Essentially, reflection is a tool to empower teachers and support them in the classroom. Any challenge that arises in class whether it is that students will not work in pairs, they are not motivated, they do not do their homework or that the teacher finds it difficult to help students improve their pronunciation should be seen as opportunities to learn. This can and does happen mostly through reflection.
CHAPTER 2

Observation task

As you go about your daily teaching routine, note down in a special notebook or even in your reflective journal, all those times when you catch yourself wondering and reflecting. Write down the place, time and describe the situation so that you can remember it well. Also, it is important to write down the questions you are asking yourself. Are they ‘good’ reflective questions? If you have the chance, share your wonderings with your cooperating teacher, or a colleague and note down their comments and reactions to your musings.

Reflective journal task

Think back to when you were a student at school, college or university. Can you remember any specific lessons? This is not an easy task but it is useful. Lesley, for example, distinctly remembers a lesson from her elementary school days. Read about her lesson on the following page and pay close attention to the final questions in her recount. Then, in your journal, think back to a learning experience that you have had which has impacted your teaching. Break down the experience and reflect on why it was important to you.

A TIP:
We recommend that you make a few notes after all lessons, maybe only write down one or two things that occurred in your classroom that changed the direction of your lesson, presented an obstacle, or were unexpected. Note down how you reacted to the incidents; try to hypothesize why they occurred and consider what you might do differently with hindsight. Make journaling about your in class experiences a habit.

Portfolio task

Here are some definitions of reflective practice made by teachers-in-training. Which definition aligns most closely to your view of reflective practice?

1. “Looking at what worked and what didn’t”
2. “Exploring and challenging instinctive reactions”
3. “Taking time to think about the reasoning behind what we do and do not do”
4. “Methodology must connect with practical application, reflective practice allows this to happen”
5. “Reflective practice means we are not doing anything automatically.”
6. “Reflective practice is the ongoing willingness to learn from successes and failures.”
7. “It requires honesty and humility.”

Write your own definition of Reflective Practice to include in your portfolio.
"The memory of this lesson has remained with me throughout my own teaching and has greatly influenced me. It was a lesson about the Vikings. My class had just completed a long project about marauding Vikings. We had read about them, drawn pictures of them, and completed worksheets about them. Sensing that we had probably had enough of deskwork, my teacher took us outside onto the school's playing field. She told us to think about what we had read and what the Vikings were really like. She told us to think about how villagers felt when they saw Vikings coming to takeover their villages. We divided into two teams: villagers and Vikings and began to act out a village being taken over by Vikings. We thought it was wonderful, we screamed, shouted and ran about until we were exhausted. When I look back at the lesson, I can discern a few components that contribute to why it was and still is important and ultimately very useful to me:

1) The teacher asked us to act. For young learners, it is important to integrate kinesthetic activities into lessons so that they can use their energy creatively and productively; not using this energy can lead to not only boredom but also disruptive behavior. My teacher clearly sensed that we needed a change of pace and more dynamic activities. I still find it difficult to sit at a desk for long periods of time and consequently in my lessons try to plan for stretch breaks (two minutes break of standing and stretching).

2) Clearly, my teacher had 'read' her students and reflected on what would be best for her students. She made a decision and acted on it. (reflection in action).

The legacy of the Viking lesson questions:
1. Are the lessons that I am teaching memorable for my students?
2. Can I reflect in action?
3. Would I like to be taught by me?