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The Reflexive Classroom Manager: A Required Pre-Service Mode

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In North America, interests that pervade post-secondary institutions are often covert, yet there is an identifiable pulse driving programs, research, conferences, and community service. The pulse can be identified as improvement, change, and innovation. We do this not because we are unwell, but rather as an ethical endeavor that infuses both mind and body in our search to advance our practices, society, and ourselves. Whether we are a student attending these large institutions or simply reflecting upon our current role as faculty we will be able to recall what our teachers did, or did not do, to help us in the past. If we could go back and talk to our teachers, we would identify what was done well and suggest what they might do to improve their teaching. Teacher improvement and training is something that touches all of us as it affects students, parents, professors, and the community at large.

As a teacher educator I have reflected upon, researched, and even provided input that has changed the way teachers at all levels are trained at our Faculty of Education. I have taught at the elementary, secondary and university levels and attempted to improve my practice at each level. Most often, I did this on my own yet on a few occasions, I became part of a larger group that had a common goal which was to improve praxis. At the university level I look forward to (what will be) and back to the way it was in order to improve our program and help our student teachers learn how to reflect, change and improve practice.

Admittedly, even with the scrutiny of faculty members teacher education programs still need to monitor, improve and change because:

teacher education is not the equivalent of switching on the ability to think like a teacher. Candidates must first comprehend and question the learning to teach process **from within** their own limited and personal perspectives created by years of observing teachers. While the details of innovative programs differ, structural similarities include: (a) making explicit what teachers actually do and **think** in the course of planning, implementing, and evaluating their teaching, (b) taking candidates' experiences and concerns as central in discussions that enable them to **study their own** fledgling practice as they work to see the theory involved in practical decisions, (c) creating **collaborative** environments, within student cohorts, between school boards and faculties, within university departments, and among teacher educators, trained mentors, and candidates. (Russell and MacPherson, 2001, p. 8)

It is this self-development from within, by means of systematic observation, self-study, and collaboration that drive our faculties of education. The goal may be clear yet the path is not. Pre-service students often struggle to complete reflective tasks that result in professional learning, change and

improvement. This requires great effort as “professional learning is not just an intellectual process (a process of acquisition and application of knowledge), but also a process of practical action in which knowledge is enacted in reflecting and developing a specific action “ (Altrichter, 2005, p. 11). I teach my student teachers that reflection is the process of recalling actions, thoughts, and feelings during an experience in order to generate new understandings of teaching (Ryan, 2001). I explain that “reflection has the potential to lead to significant growth as an educator. These thoughtful considerations of . . . teaching and student learning will lay the groundwork for a successful career in education “(Henniger, 2004, p. 369). One of our many goals in the Faculty of Education is to help new educators put in place a habitual mode of thought, practice and refinement or reflection.

I remind my students that educators must make decisions that impact the lives of others and their abilities as educators to reflect upon their experiences are fundamental to the construction of their own new knowledge, skills, and attitudes as they improve and move forward. Faculty of education assignments often require students to research their own teaching via reflective tasks that generate new perceptions, and pathways as students critically evaluate their practice. In fact, the pre-service experience is about students getting to know themselves via reflective individual and group tasks.

I also point out that ultimately, “intern teachers are better prepared to teach and learn if they use critical reflection as a tool to enhance their performance as professionals” (Goethals, Howard & Sanders, 2004, p. 181). I believe all educational programs use questions to direct attention to theory and practice. These probes or questions are linked with teacher growth as questioning develops awareness and refines assumptions. The process can be thought of as standard procedure to facilitate growth and development.

In the developmental model, a successful pre-service program is not a teacher-building factory, but rather the

first step in a long, collaborative, and reflective process that influences the professional development of a teacher’s career. A pre-service program can either set this process in motion with the appropriate tools, attitudes, and expectations, or it can set the novice up for a dizzying fall from the heights of unchallenged naive idealism. (Russell & McPherson, 2001, p. 8)

Once the pre-service student grasps the utility of reflection it is often connected to qualitative research such as action research. Students then ask, what is action research? I respond to the question with this statement,

The shortest and most straightforward definition of action research is given by John Elliott (1991:69), whose work has been influential in this 'movement': action research is 'the study of a social situation with a view to improving the quality of action within it'. This simple definition directs attention to one of the most essential motives for doing action research. It lies in the will to improve the quality of teaching and learning as well as the conditions under which teachers and students work in schools. Action research is intended to support teachers and problems of practice and carrying through innovations in a reflective way. (Altrichter, Posch & Somekh, 1993, p. 4)

With this understanding I believe student-teachers as researchers are now closer to a useful understanding of action research and may now be equipped to engage in systematic observation, data collection, and analysis in order to improve their practices. I then explain that, “action research is part of teachers’ professional life and will endure as long as teachers desire to improve their effectiveness and maintain their professionalism” (Parsons & Brown 2002, p 5). I also point out that, the need to enter into action research is widely endorsed in schools of education globally and the requirement to reflect on practice can be traced back to the work of John Dewey and

Donald Schon who put forward the notion that reflection is a critical underpinning of growth and learning. Dewey (1934) argued, “all direct experience is qualitative, and qualities are what make life-experience itself directly precious. Yet reflection goes behind immediate qualities, for it is interested in relations . . . (p. 293). Similarly, Schon (1987) suggested,

the experience of the students in any reflective practicum is that they must plunge into the doing, and try to educate themselves before they know what it is they’re trying to learn. *The teachers cannot tell them.* The teachers can say things to them but they cannot understand what’s meant at that point. (p.1)

I firmly believe that pre-service (student) teachers need to interweave practical action and reflection in a manner that builds knowledge, creates instinct, and develops skills in the face of changing circumstances (Altrichter, 2005).

Classroom Management: Today’s Concern

While reflection is essential, neither Dewey nor Schon could have imagined the extent and degree of change and challenge facing teachers today. It is likely that neither Dewey or Schon were concerned about classroom management yet it is their work that may be a singular remedy for many teachers facing needy students. A recent province-wide survey by one college of education revealed that first and second year teachers rank classroom management as the area of greatest concern (Ontario College of Teachers, 2003). Indeed, “classroom management is the most common concern cited by pre-service, beginning, and experienced teachers as well as being the focus of media reports, professional literature, and school staffroom conversations” (McCormack, 1997, p. 102). Managing your classroom whether it is a gymnasium, science laboratory, or a typical schoolroom with desks and chairs requires reflective leaders, reflexive skills, and tools (action research) to refine practice.

I explain that classroom management involves the establishment and maintenance of a healthy learning environment (Levin & Nolan, 2004). Achieving this however, is complicated enough to make teachers talk to themselves. Actually, this is exactly what is required; teachers need to listen to their inner voice and share the on-going conversation. I suggest teachers share because when educators casually share, they become interactive professionals (Fullan, 1999). I also point out that when educators choose not to share or there is not enough time in the day to get together and share, then we still have a reflexive educator. A reflexive educator is a researcher who through systematic and strategic observation of self concludes and makes adjustments to improve learning. They attend to, and record their inner voice. Reflexive professionals cultivate their inner voices by reflecting upon, documenting, analyzing and refining self-talk. Self-narratives emerge and meaning is extracted to aid reflection upon the pedagogical moment and themselves (Naested, Potvin & Waldron, 2004). However, as these images and thoughts surface, the time required to capture meaning is actually an additional burden or distraction for the busy educator who can either ignore such occurrences, make a memo, or stop everything to record in detail the moments.

I often remind students that educators must often choose to ignore their own learning because they work within a time deficit profession. A profession that imposes isolation and compels individualism hence teachers are left to resolve management problems and deal with dilemmas on their own, in a reflexive manner. This individualism increases the need for research that can make the unknown, known and it is these reflective analyses that can lead to solutions in the classroom, all the while supporting the professional community and enhancing professionalism (Altrichter, 2005).

Reflexivity and the Teacher as Researcher

Reflexivity is ubiquitous (Heartz, 1997). For instance, Nightingale and Cromby (1999) suggest that:

reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process, and an acknowledgment of the impossibility of remaining 'outside of' one's subject matter while conducting research. Reflexivity then, urges us to explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research. (p.228)

Reflexivity is the condition of taking account of the personality and presence of the researcher/teacher. May (1998) adds,

The concepts of reflexivity may be a way of bringing qualitative methods to account for themselves in a way that goes some way to satisfy the demands of scientific method. This is generally a matter of questioning how the processes of research and analysis have an effect on research outcomes. This whole process of self-examination has become known as 'reflexivity' (p. 22).

Self-examination is popular today since improving and building from within are widespread educational goals. We are committed to questioning in order to examine and improve teaching, our curricula, and ourselves. The teacher-researcher is continually adding to current knowledge and skills by building onto what exists. Often new constructions require significant modification to overcome inertia, existing structures, and established norms. The reflexive teacher-researcher resembles,

social constructionists who are always faced with the problem of having to 'parenthesize' their substantive claims (e.g. about the nature and functions of the self) as 'not true', and 'not real', in

order to foreground the anti-objectivism of their claims (that any account is 'local' and value-laden, rather than universal and morally neutral). But such an 'outsider stance' is an enormously powerful critical tool—it enables people to question 'what their doings are doing'. . . . It is this reflective and reflexive ability which allows for social and personal change, and which has been captured in most theories of the self, though especially attended to in developmental theories. (Lewis, 2003, p. 231)

Causing an educator whether new or experienced, to reconsider, change, or adapt requires inner forces. For instance, educators moving through action research projects are both excited and worried as they reflexively question their actions and thoughts. Researchers record their experiences (journals, memos, notes, photos, video) and yet, these records are unavoidably riddled with bias, misperception, and lacking detail? The goal may be to capture the experience however, "identity and reality reflect one another.... the observer and the observed are inextricably tied together in a reflection" (Journal of Neuroscience, 2003, p.1). Sorting out what is, and what is not, may confuse even the most capable teacher-researcher since the action within the research is situated not only in phenomenon, it is embedded in social systems. This situated learning, the "processes of knowledge development and . . . practice development are explicitly connected [as] they are embedded in the interactions" (Altrichter, 2005, p. 22). Therefore, each observation needs to be connected reflexively to self and the immediate social system of the classroom.

Understanding your role as teacher will help you to deal with conflict, issues, and tension among many elements that seem to underpin praxis. For instance, I explain to my pre-service teachers that educators, by law act as parents for the children in the absence of the actual parents (in loco parentis). Therefore, it may be that you need to put aside academics in order to deal with self-esteem issues and conflicts may provide opportunities to teach social skills.

Knowing when and how to shift roles will improve outcomes and your relations with individual students; the curricula, parents and administration will change as some tensions increase while others decrease. Your roles may include parent, coach, teacher, friend, and counselor and your relations with students, the environment, and curricula that will alter your inner voice and at times affect the voice you choose to make public. Each voice can help you to understand how to move forward in an effort to build healthy rapport in the classroom, school, and community.

In conclusion, self-analysis is vital to your practice and systematic reflection can enhance your ability to view issues at a higher resolution with increased accuracy which will then lead to efficiency. With time as a dictating variable, the reflexive classroom manager is able to self-monitor while teaching and make required adjustments.. For instance, the reflective awareness may involve sensing anger in relation to a situation or student. Being reflexively aware can assist teachers as they put in place reflective coping strategies that have been devised from previous observations of self. Being able to recover reflexively is essential to improve classroom management and instruction as each teacher needs to create and refine a healthy learning environment, which includes classroom control, discipline, and governance (Naested, et al., 2004).

Casual reflective actions can lead to improved praxis however; the teacher/researcher needs to become reflexively aware of self (mind and body).. The reflexive teacher is not a spectator of classroom management (McCormack, 1997). Classroom management is systematic, disciplined, and is a means to instruct just as reflexivity is a mode and tool to improve praxis. Both management and reflexivity are systematic because each requires a number of deliberate, informed, ongoing, and recursive actions to create substantive improvement.

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