

Reflecting on Your Teaching

Learning new techniques for teaching is like the fish that provides a meal for today; reflective practice is the net that provides the meal for the rest of one's life (Biggs 2003, p. 7).

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Enhancing learning for our students involves more than just understanding and being able to apply general learning and teaching principles or guidelines. Most importantly, it involves being able to make sense of what is going on in our classrooms, which means understanding our students and being able to respond appropriately to their needs and feedback. It also involves understanding ourselves as teachers, which means being aware of why we do what we do and the impact of this upon our students' learning. We develop this awareness and understanding through engaging in an ongoing process of reflection.

The following provides an introduction to the following aspects of reflection and reflective practice:

- the benefits of reflective practice
- the critical components of reflective practice
- a framework for reflection.

THE BENEFITS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Reflection involves thinking about and critically analysing our experiences and actions, and those of our students, with the goal of improving our professional practice. It allows us to adapt general guidelines of learning and teaching to our particular contexts and disciplines, and to our own particular teaching strengths and preferences.

It is a necessary component to becoming a scholarly teacher and a "reflective practitioner" (Schon 1983), engaged in continuous self-directed development and capable of making informed decisions about approaches to learning and teaching within particular disciplinary and academic contexts.

Most importantly, reflection helps us to develop our own learning and teaching framework. Brookfield (1995) proposes that this framework:

- allows us to consciously develop our own repertoire of strategies and techniques to draw upon in our teaching, which are relevant to our particular context and discipline
- helps us take informed actions that can be justified and explained to others and that we can use to generate answers to teaching problems
- allows us to adjust and respond to issues and problems. For instance, rather than being devastated by a poor teaching evaluation, it allows us to investigate and understand

what underlies these evaluations and to take appropriate action, which might be to adjust our teaching

- helps us to become aware of our underlying beliefs and assumptions about learning and teaching so we understand why we do what we do and what might need to change
- helps to promote a positive learning environment. Through reflection, our teaching becomes responsive to student feedback and needs, which can serve to build trust in students when they see their feedback is valued and taken seriously through changes to teaching
- helps us to locate our teaching in the broader institutional, social, and political context and to appreciate the many factors that influence student learning. In this way, reflection helps us to keep our perspectives and to avoid blaming ourselves for every problem that arises in our classrooms.

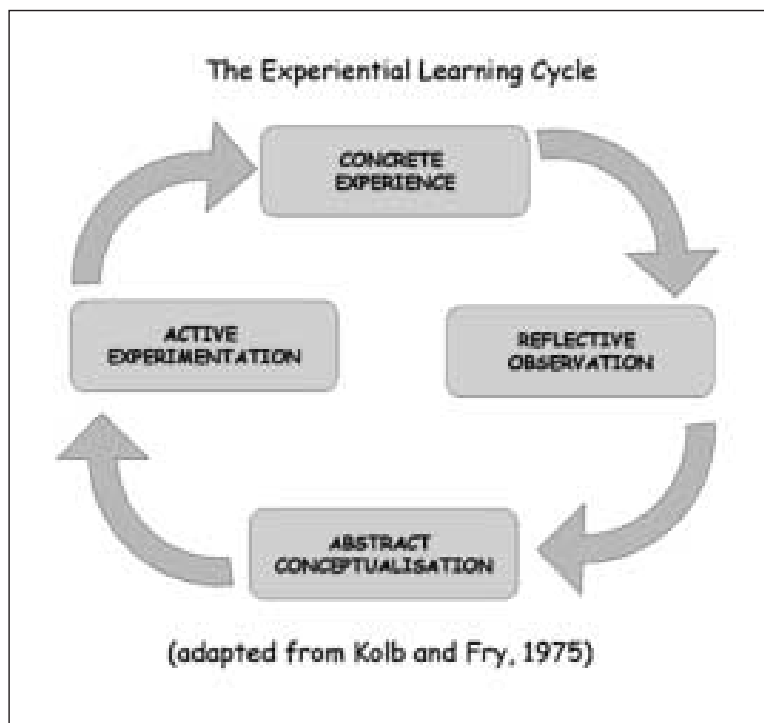
THE CRITICAL COMPONENTS OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

To be effective, reflection should be a continuous cycle in which experience and reflection on this experience are inextricably linked. This is demonstrated by a model proposed by Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) where reflection involves “returning to the experience, attending to the feelings and re-evaluating the experience based on current knowledge

and intent, and integrating this new knowledge into your conceptual framework” (pp. 26–31).

Concrete experience and reflective observation are also critical stages of the experiential learning cycle, a model developed by Kolb and Fry (1975).

These models demonstrate the cyclic nature of reflective practice, and Biggs (2003) suggests that an effective way to formally encourage and direct reflective practice is as action research which is “being systematic about changing your teaching and making sure the changes are in the right direction; that your students are now learning better than they used to” (Biggs 2003, p. 7).



Another important element is that reflection is not just about the individual and, when used effectively, can enhance the development of communities of practice. When our reflection is cyclical, our practice can develop into a systematic inquiry that begins alone with personal reflection on our own learning and teaching experiences, but becomes collective when informed by our interactions with colleagues, students, and the theoretical literature.

A FRAMEWORK FOR REFLECTION

Brookfield (1995) emphasises that reflection goes beyond just describing what we do, to thinking about why we do things and to whether they have gone as intended, why we think they may have worked well, and how we might do them differently next time. To do this effectively, we somehow need to assume the perspective of an external observer to ourselves, which can be quite a difficult thing to do. He suggests that an effective way to move beyond the limitations of our own experiences and to reframe our teaching is by viewing our practice through “lenses” that reflect back to us a differently highlighted picture of who we are and what we do.

Brookfield proposes the following four lenses:

- our autobiographies as learners
- our colleagues’ experiences and perceptions
- our students’ eyes
- the theoretical literature.

Our autobiographies as learners

We can draw great insights into how we teach by examining our own learning. Referring to our biographies puts us in the role of “other”, so we can stand back from our own experience and view it more objectively. The tools to help us do this include reflective logs or journals, diaries, concept mapping, and critical incident surveys.

Our colleagues’ experiences and perceptions

Hearing colleagues’ experiences allows us to check, reframe, and broaden our own theories of practice, and to consider new ideas, ways of doing things, and problem-solving approaches that we might not have thought of ourselves. It also makes us aware that we all share common problems and issues, which can be profoundly reassuring and can also suggest ways we can work together to overcome these challenges.

Our students’ eyes

Brookfield describes seeing ourselves through our students’ eyes as one of the most consistently surprising elements in any teacher’s career. It allows us to check student understanding and find out whether they are hearing what we intended them to hear;

it can also allow us to become aware of the diversity of meanings students interpret from our actions. Some methods for collecting this feedback include Critical Incident Questionnaires, student performance, informal feedback, and formal evaluations.

The theoretical literature

Theory can help us to understand our practice and experience by “naming” it in different ways. The theoretical literature can extend our understanding and appreciation of our own learning and teaching practice by offering interpretive frameworks. It can provide multiple perspectives on similar situations that seem challenging in different ways, and it can help us to maintain perspective by indicating that what we see as personal failings might arise from broader economic, social, and political processes.

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Developing a Statement of Teaching Philosophy

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A statement of teaching philosophy is a central component of a teaching dossier and is often required in applications for academic positions. Faculty often view developing and writing their statements of teaching philosophy as onerous and perplexing. One of the reasons for this is that faculty are not clearly aware of their own guiding philosophy or are confused by the notion of a philosophy determining their everyday activities. Therefore, it is important that in developing a statement of teaching philosophy that faculty realize that the aim is to reveal an underlying philosophy rather than trying to create one. To accomplish this we therefore need to understand what a statement of teaching philosophy is for, some general guidelines of how it can be structured and presented, but in particular how we can reflect upon our teaching and discover our own guiding philosophy.

In developing a statement of teaching philosophy, however, there are also a few points to keep in mind: