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Please cite this paper as:

Adnum, J. (2012). *Developing a framework for pre-service teacher reflective practice*. Refereed paper presented at 'Going for gold! Reshaping teacher education for the future', the annual conference of the Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA), Adelaide, 1–4 July.

Published by: Australian Teacher Education Association (ATEA)

Available via stable URL: https://atea.edu.au/wp-content/uploads/2012_adnum.pdf

Review status: Refereed—abstract and full paper blind peer-reviewed

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Developing a framework for pre-service teacher reflective practice_

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Abstract

Six academics from the Department of Education at Macquarie University were interviewed to determine how they incorporated reflective practice into their methodology units. The interview data were summarised in a model to describe the processes of reflective thinking in teacher education. Further refining of the model led to the development of a Reflective Practice Framework which describes four hierarchical stages of reflection: Describing, Evaluating, Reflecting, Imagining. This paper describes the evolution of the framework and outlines its stages.

Introduction

Teacher education programs across Australia are currently undergoing a process of evaluation and renewal. The Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership (AITSL) recently published a new set of *Professional Teaching Standards* (AITSL, 2011) which describe the knowledge and skills teachers require at different stages in their careers. Among the *Graduate Teaching Standards* is recognition that new teachers improve their classroom practice by engaging in professional learning with colleagues and by developing their capacity for self-reflection (AITSL, 2011). Consequently, there is a need to develop a framework to assist pre-service teachers in developing methods of self-reflection. This paper describes how a group of academics at one university are developing a framework to guide teacher educators in modeling and teaching reflection to pre-service teachers.

Literature Review

Reflection is central to teacher preparation (Schön, 1987) and the professional growth of teachers at all stages in their careers (Zeichner, 1994). Reflection is a conscious and active process (Gelter, 2003) in which new knowledge is transformed into new understandings that support change (Shoffner, 2008). Such reflective thinking is beneficial because it enables pre-service teachers to recognise, examine and manage the many complex issues that occur in their classroom practice (Spalding & Wilson, 2002). Pre-service teachers who develop a capacity for reflective thinking become more aware of the assumptions on which their teaching decisions and actions are based (Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000) and are better able to make connections between theory and practice (Ward & McCotter, 2004).

Dewey (1933) identified two fundamental characteristics of reflective thinking, namely a state of doubt or hesitation in which thinking originates and an act of searching or inquiry in order to resolve the doubt. Reflective thinking begins when teachers begin to notice various aspects of their practice and then try to make sense of them (Schön, 1983). However, reflective thinking should not be reduced to a series of steps or procedures. Instead it is probably better described as a holistic way of approaching problems that involves not only rational thought but also encompasses an emotional element as well (Zeichner & Liston, 1996).

Such a holistic view of reflection can make it difficult to describe how reflective practice develops. Even so, various researchers have used models to describe how teachers' reflective practice develops. These models provide a useful way of conceptualising the reflective process. For

example, Muir and Beswick (2007) proposed a three-tier hierarchy. At the lowest level, there are technical descriptions of classroom events, such as delivering content or maintaining students' attention, but these fail to consider the significance of the events. At the next stage, critical incidents are identified and explained, and at the most sophisticated level, other views are considered and alternative actions are contemplated. Three-stage models such as this are common in the literature (for example, Cavanagh & Prescott, 2010; Lee, 2005).

However, the research literature currently lacks a more fine-grained description of how pre-service teachers' reflective practice develops during their university studies. The proposed project will address this shortcoming.

Method

The research reported in this paper is part of a larger project which consisted of three phases: (1) interviews with experienced teacher education methodology lecturers to investigate their descriptions of reflective practice and how they incorporate this in their classes; (2) the development of a framework for coding pre-service teachers' written reflections; and (3) the application of a framework to the reflective responses of a sample of pre-service teachers in order to test and refine it. This paper presents the findings of the first phase of the project.

In Phase 1 of the project, a research assistant individually interviewed six lecturers in Macquarie University's Teacher Education Program (TEP) for about 30 minutes on the topic of Reflective Practice (RP). The interviewees were self-nominated and were asked what they understood by the term RP, how they include RP in the units they convene, whether the RP tasks they give their students make reference to the teaching standards or research literature, and if there was anything else they would like to add concerning their own RP. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis. The research assistant analysed the interview transcripts by summarising the lecturers' responses for each of the first three questions. The transcripts for each question were carefully read several times and recurring themes were noted. These themes were then checked for validity by re-reading the transcripts.

Results

The results of the lecturer interviews are reported according to the first three interview questions.

1. What the lecturers understand by reflective practice

The interviewees all believed that Reflective Practice is essential if the teachers and pre-service teachers they teach are to learn from their own teaching experiences and the experiences of others. It was referred to as "...a **habit of mind**...a way of approaching things, a way of questioning everything you do...a **constant attempt** to improve the quality of learning". The importance of feedback also was a common feature. "Getting **feedback** from others enhances your reflective practice".

Figure 1 summarises the essential elements of what the interviewees understood as the process of RP.

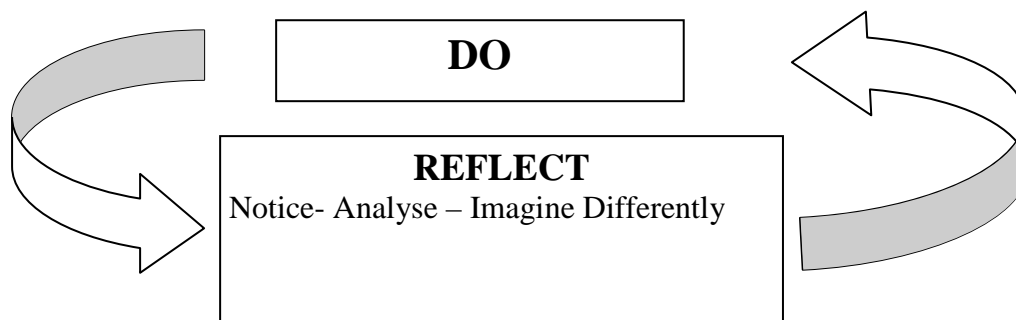


Figure 1. The process of reflective practice

“Noticing” includes being aware of what is happening in the classroom, recognising verbal and non-verbal responses and obtaining feedback. In particular, reflective teachers focus their attention not so much on what they are doing themselves, but rather on the impact of their practice on student learning. Becoming reflective means noticing how well the student learning outcomes for the lesson are being achieved.

The “Analysing” phase refers to the ways in which teachers make sense of what they have noticed in the classroom. Reflective practice requires a conscious effort on the part of the teacher to search for causes to explain student’s verbal and non-verbal responses. In doing so, reflective teachers will, at times, begin to examine some of their personal beliefs and assumptions.

“Imagining differently” is when the processes of noticing and analysing are used to envisage alternative approaches and innovative practices. This phase requires creativity and openness to new ideas and a willingness to experiment with untested strategies.

In addition to the key phases outlined in Figure 1, all of the interviewees commented on the social nature of reflective practice. By interacting with others regarding their practice, teachers are able to learn a great deal and are able to assist each other with the issues they are experiencing in the classroom.

2. How the lecturers included reflective practice into their units.

Reflective practice appeared in diverse ways in each lecturer’s units. While four of the lecturers had a formal task dedicated to reflection, these ranged in terms of weighting, frequency and timing within the course. The variety included reflections on personal practice, reflections on another’s practices, reflections on another’s handling on a specific issue (e.g., classroom management), blogs that required weekly postings on how technology might be used within a classroom and open ended reflections with the lecturer occasionally offering a reflection on points of interest. In various units, literature on reflection is provided and is expected to be referred to in the reflections to add a depth of insight and become a differentiator in the marking rubric. Weighting ranged from 10% to 35%. It was the first assessment in one unit and an ongoing assessment or an embedded component in other units. All lecturers had it as an integral component with the following philosophy underpinning assessment practices regardless. “When students have to ask themselves what they think they have done, why they think that way and how they believe they have progressed, they find it quite difficult but they also find it incredibly rewarding that they’ve stopped and taken the time to think about their actions professionally and consciously”.

All lecturers were able to see that student reflections could fit into four levels (Descriptive, Evaluative, Reflective, Imaginative) described later in this paper.

3. Do the tasks make reference to the teaching standards or research literature.

Reflective Practice has been practised and valued by the lecturers and so it is passed on as a valuable tool that supports teaching. Most of the lecturers referred to reflective practice literature at some stage within their unit but not necessarily strictly tied to the assessment on RP. It was most often to show the evidence that there is value in reflective practice. The literature was also to show a model of what some reflective practitioners saw as the qualities of RP. Students may or may not use it to write their own reflections.

Discussion

As a foundation for the project, and based upon the common ideas that emerged from the lecturer interviews, the project team met to develop a preliminary framework for analyzing pre-service teachers’ written reflections. This framework includes four key stages in the reflection process which are closely aligned to the elements of reflective practice identified by the lecturers during

their interviews. The four stages are descriptive, evaluative, reflective and imaginative. A description of each stage follows.

Descriptive: (What pre-service teachers notice). This was where student-teachers retold or described what had occurred within the classroom. In other words, what they had noticed. For example, “Lots of boys wrote very little and did very little work the entire lesson”. So, while the pre-service teacher ‘saw’ or ‘noticed’ an action, the reflection stopped at that point and there was no attempt to evaluate or interpret what had been described.

Evaluative: (What pre-service teachers think about what they have noticed – whether it was good or not). At this step, student-teachers added a ‘value’ to their lesson observations in terms of ‘good’ or ‘bad’. One student said, “The teacher was really good at questioning. I tend to ask the question and give the answer straight away. This teacher paused and allowed “think time.” This was really good.” So this stage of reflection seems different again. A value has been placed on the teaching as opposed to describing or reflecting. Pre-service teachers are now evaluating. In order to evaluate, they have first had to notice and they have begun the process of reflecting, though only in a fairly rudimentary way. At this stage a perception of what a ‘good’ lesson or teaching sequence has been decided by the pre-service teacher.

Reflective: (What made the lesson more or less effective. If not effective, what could be done differently) student-teachers begin to analyse what worked or not and why. They had **noticed** and now, moved a step further began reflecting by asking what made it effective or ineffective. They then asked how to improve it if necessary. An example of this reflection was “The teacher constantly had to quieten the boys down. (Notice or describe) This issue should have been dealt with straight away, in order to keep the class focussed on the activity”. (Reflect on how to resolve or improve this.)

Imaginative: (What the pre-service teacher would do if she or he was the teacher.) In this stage, student-teachers begin to write in terms of “ If ... I would...”. The key is that it is at this point, pre-service teachers place the ‘me’ or ‘personal’ into their reflection and even consider what may happen or what they would like to happen in their future teaching. In doing so, they consider questions such as, “What is the significance for my teaching?” and “If this were my classroom, what would I do differently?” or “What would I like to occur?”. For example, “I saw a number of students drawing a triangle of the right size but on the wrong spot. This may be a result of the teacher's assumption "it is only drawing" and that teacher assumed that it is easy for students to spot. As a student teacher I can see myself making lots of false assumptions for a class, I'll use today's experience to remind myself of this problem”.

Conclusion

This study is phase one of a larger project. The purpose of this study was to investigate whether a consistent framework could be used when categorising the written reflections of pre-service teachers.

Initial data returns suggest the benefits of explicit support in assisting students to identify what to look for when reflecting on their practice. However, it was also important that students were not left feeling overly constrained by an imposed framework. The four levels suggested above do not lock students into a narrow perspective but offer levels of reflection.

In extending the research, the project team also intend to examine how student-teachers implement identified changes in their classroom practice.

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