

Is reflective practice worth all the effort?

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Reflective practice has dominated the narrative of initial teacher training and professional development for the best part of thirty years, despite persistent questions over its value. **Professor Russell Grigg** and **Helen Lewis** explore what we know about reflective practice, demystify the process and consider what reflective practice really has to offer teachers and leaders.



Pasi Sahlberg, Finland's leading educational expert, suggests that one of the reasons why the country has done so well compared to many Anglo American countries is that their teachers teach less and reflect more.

In this first of three articles, we look at the meaning, origin and contribution of reflective practice. The second article introduces various tools for reflection, including the use of technologies. Finally, we consider how leaders can develop a whole-school culture of reflection and evaluate the thorny question of its impact. In each article, we discuss a particular model to illustrate reflective practice in action.

What is it?

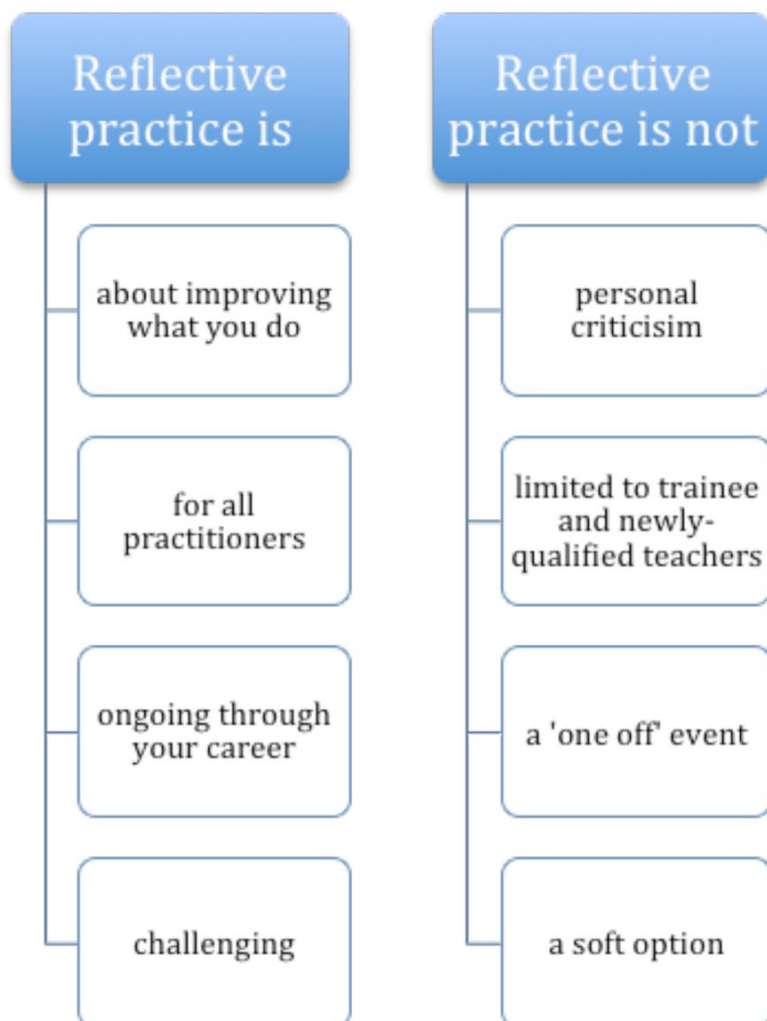
Reflective practice has spawned an industry of books, journal articles, conference papers and websites. While this has produced various definitions, most revolve around the notion of revisiting, mulling over and evaluating experience with a view to changing or improving practice. Reflective practice is an active, spiral and deliberate process of thinking that seeks to address practical problems. This requires intellectual curiosity in challenging taken-for-granted assumptions, such as assuming that children sitting quietly are necessarily listening to the teacher. It calls for a commitment to self-improvement by asking searching questions such as 'why?' and 'so what?'

It takes various forms. It can be retrospective, of-the-moment or forward-looking. Most teachers are familiar with post-lesson reviews following observations, which tend to focus on what went well in the lesson and what could be improved.

But reflective practice is more than just thinking about lessons. It focuses on increasing self-awareness and improvements in the quality of teaching and learning. While reflective practice is concerned with examining previous experience, it also anticipates change and how this can be best accommodated. So, when a teacher thinks through the implications of planned actions and reflects on how these connect to past experiences, this becomes reflection-for-action. This anticipatory reflection is about imagining what teaching and learning could be like and contingency planning if things go awry.

We know that reflective practice is not a purely cognitive exercise – when reflecting, it is difficult to separate the 'head from the heart.' Reflecting on teaching, which itself is about nurturing, empathy and care, is inevitably an emotional enterprise as individuals examine the motives, values, beliefs and feelings that underpin what they do and why. In a sense, reflective practitioners take a dual role as actors on the stage and critics who sit in the audience.

Figure 1. What reflective practice is and is not



Why bother with reflective practice?

Support for reflective practice is widespread and extends beyond the teaching profession into such diverse fields as nursing, social care and sports coaching. Advocates point to the opportunities for practitioners to pause, revisit and learn from experience rather than continue to teach uncritically. If teachers and others do not reflect on and learn from their practice, they are likely to continue doing what they have always done.

By generating their own solutions to problems, drawing on a range of evidence, teachers take a proactive approach to their professional development. Relationships with learners and colleagues can be strengthened when common goals are established. Above all, reflective practice offers educators unique insights where externally prescribed interventions may not be appropriate. The value of reflection is that it gives shape to 'messy' classroom problems – perhaps a student appears fidgety and doesn't seem to follow along. If teachers do not engage in regular reflective practice, there is a danger that poor decisions are made and learning potential is not realised.



Research tells us that effective teaching is strongly linked to reflection, inquiry and professional growth. International evidence suggests that teachers need to develop their skills for reflective practice alongside their subject and pedagogical knowledge (OECD, 2005). Reflection is generally accepted as valuable for teachers at all stages of their careers. For instance, in a recent survey of 160 primary PGCE students, we found that 96 per cent agreed that, to be a good teacher, it was important to be reflective. In another survey of 221 primary and secondary teachers, 99 per cent considered that reflecting on their own practice was the best means of professional development (Grigg, 2016).

In England, The *Teachers Standards* acknowledge that reflection is critical to improving teachers' practice at all career stages. Teachers are expected to 'reflect systematically on the effectiveness of lessons and approaches to teaching' (DfE, 2013: 4).

However, this is a rather limited conception of reflection, which is cast within a performance management context of achieving standards. In reality, workload pressures can squeeze out time for serious reflection, reducing it to nothing more than a ritualistic tick-box experience. This stands in contrast to the Northern Ireland model of teacher education, where qualified teachers are expected to be reflective practitioners 'concerned with the purposes and consequences of education, as well as what might be called technical proficiency' (GTCNI, 2008: 9).

Where did the concept originate?

Although reflection has a long history traced back to ancient western and eastern philosophers such as Plato, Buddha and Lao Tzu, the modern notion of reflective practice is largely indebted to two American philosophers. In the early twentieth

century, John Dewey contrasted reflective thinking with routine and impulsive action. The reflective teacher needs to be open-minded, wholehearted and responsible. This means being open to alternative ways of working, committed to improvement and taking responsibility for professional learning. Dewey (1938) saw the reflective process as thinking through doubts by posing questions, hypothesising, reasoning and testing.

Inspired by Dewey, numerous writers in the 1980s and 1990s contributed to our understanding of reflective practice. Most notably, Donald Schön (1983) described how expert teachers draw on tacit knowledge to navigate through a 'swamp' of classroom uncertainties and complexities. He described the importance of reflection-in-action, when teachers make quick decisions on their feet, and reflecting-on-action, after lessons when teachers look back to learn from experience. Schön provided the intellectual basis for many models and we will return to his ideas in the series.

Using a simple model - Brookfield's four lenses

One of the most important aspects of reflective practice is to consider alternative interpretations of events. Stephen Brookfield (1995) suggests that, to become critically reflective, teachers should examine their practice through four lenses (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Brookfield's lenses



This begins with self-reflection in which teachers explore their own personal stories to understand why they feel, think or act in particular situations. Research tells us that personal beliefs about the nature of learning play an important part in teacher effectiveness and choice of practices.

Given that we all have 'blind spots', it is important to compare our reflections with the views of a critical friend (peer) – someone who can be trusted to ask challenging questions. This can help remove what Brookfield calls 'the shroud of silence in which our practice is wrapped.' Such a critical friend might be a teaching assistant, mentor, coach, senior leader, local authority adviser, academic researcher or university tutor. Seeing our practice through the eyes of learners can be reassuring if they interpret events in the same way, or very surprising when there is a significant gap between our learning intentions and outcomes. Most schools now routinely use questionnaires, discussion groups and technologies to capture learners' views, although anonymity is important if they are to secure honest feedback.

Finally, Brookfield suggests that teachers take time to review what the broader literature has to say on any given subject. Busy teachers can benefit from the growing interest in research-informed teaching. Organisations such as the Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education (<http://www.curee.co.uk/>) and 'do tanks' such as the Sutton Trust (<http://www.suttontrust.com/>) provide useful research summaries.

The model in action

Lauren, a newly qualified teacher in a large comprehensive school in south Wales, followed Brookfield's model to reflect on the quality of her teaching. She focused on her questioning skills with a Year 8 class (Figure 3). Early on in the term, Lauren adopted a strict 'hands up' policy when she asked a question, occasionally selecting pupils who she thought were not engaging. She reflected on this strategy and concluded that this did go some way to creating a calmer learning environment. However, it also meant that some pupils could opt out of class discussions. She was eager to keep up the pace of her lessons and to keep learners engaged. So, she decided to use lots of short closed questions, often at the expense of higher order thinking questions which would have given learners the chance to deepen their understanding of the concepts that she was teaching.

Figure 3. Lauren's reflection on her questioning skills and learner responses, using Brookfield's lenses

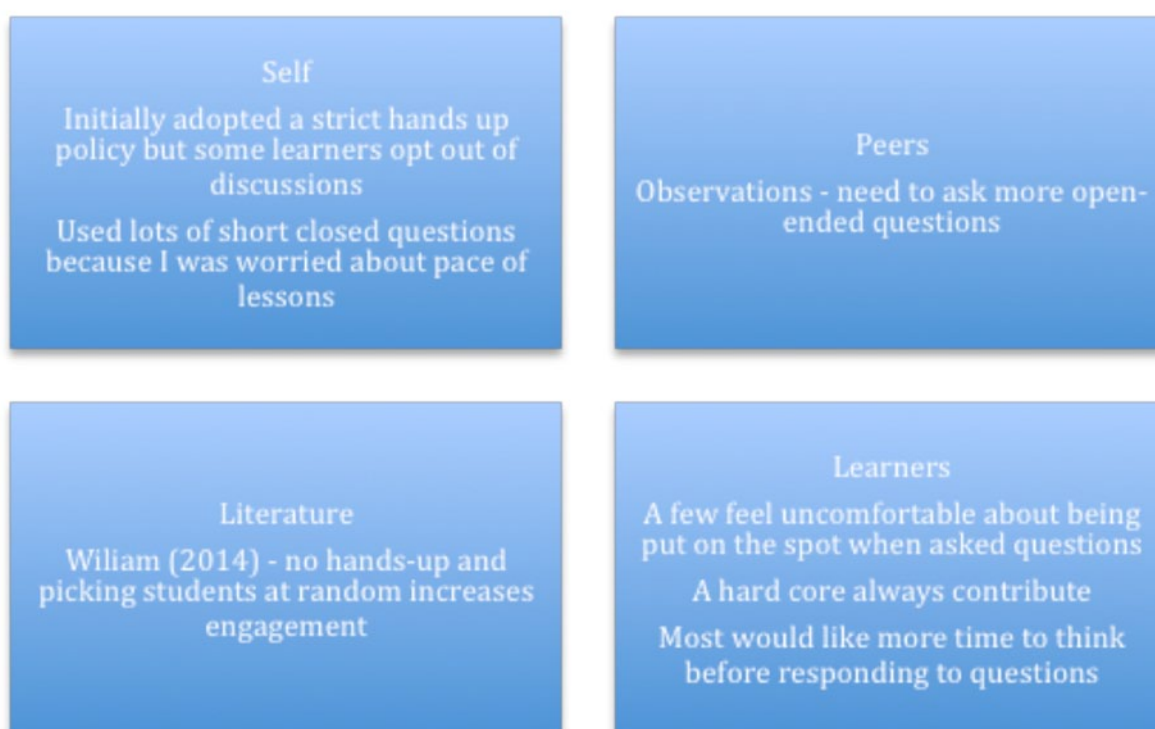
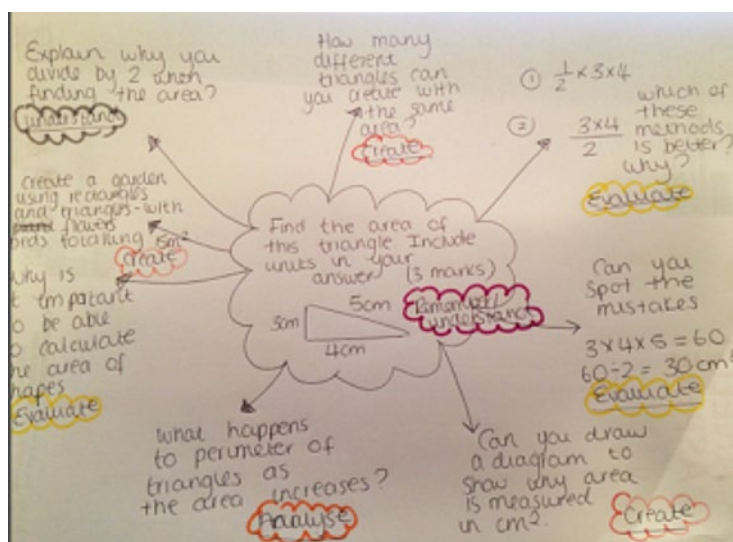


Figure 4. Open-ended mathematical questions following reflection

Having reflected on colleagues' feedback, Lauren decided to change her practice

by introducing a no hands up policy. She took time to observe colleagues' strategies such as a 'random name generator' and allowing students to pass around a ball as they answered questions. While the learners enjoyed the novelty of these methods, Lauren also found it frustrating that she was unable to target specific learners during questioning. She returned to discussing this with a trusted colleague who suggested opening up closed questions, to offer a higher level of challenge to learners (Figure 4).

When Lauren consulted recent literature on questioning, she found that the traditional model, where a teacher poses a question, asks for hands up and



then immediately evaluates students' responses, leads to disengagement and can actually widen the attainment gap – confident learners participate by putting their hands up while others decline (William, 2014). On the other hand, engagement can be increased through no-hands up, picking students at random, using all-student response systems every 20 or 30 minutes and framing lessons around questions.

In reflecting on the views of her Year 8 class, Lauren found that, while a hard core of learners were often quick to answer and enjoyed being stretched, others found it difficult to articulate their answers to more challenging questions and felt uncomfortable about being put on the spot. So, Lauren introduced different methods (e.g., Think-Pair-Share and mini whiteboards) to support those pupils who were not initially engaging with the increased number of higher level thinking questions. She has reached the conclusion that changes to her approach to questioning has increased student engagement, although she recognises the need to follow up this hunch by collecting and analysing data. This is why reflective practice is closely associated with action research and evaluation. Lauren's experience illustrates how reflection is a fluid process that can sharpen and refine practice.

Conclusion

Reflective practice, then, has much to offer those who take their craft seriously. It is not a gimmick, though it is challenging to find time and space to reflect thoughtfully. Being convinced of the value of reflective practice is one thing, but how do teachers become better at reflecting? How can reflective practice be developed across the school? These questions will be discussed in the next two articles.

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Further resources

The Welsh Government's Learning Wales website hosts a range of resources on reflective practice, e.g., <http://learning.gov.wales/resources/browse-all/reflective-practice-information-booklet/?lang=en>

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