

An academic critique of current thinking in relation to the use of reflective practice in teaching and learning.

Reflection is a powerful tool. Not only does it help the individual to look back and retrace events, but it also allows the person to learn from experience and to change future practice and behaviours where necessary. It could be argued that in the realms of teaching and learning, it is vital that those working in this sector are able to reflect on their practice; how can things possibly improve without reflection?

“Essentially, reflective practice is a process of thinking through professional issues, problems or dilemmas, which do not have an obvious solution. We don’t usually reflect on relatively straightforward matters such as collecting lunch money or taking the register”, (Welsh Government, 2016. p.5).

When teachers encounter difficulties in practice, or when the lesson plan does not go as it should, teachers can feel a sense of failure and despair, however, Dewey (1933) believed that these were the exact key moments in a teacher’s professional practice that could be pivotal learning points. Dewey (1933) also stated that reflection usually happens at a point when a person feels perplexed or doubtful. For teachers, this can be when things do not go according to plan, or when they encounter difficult learners, new environments, or a new class of students.

The need to reflect is vital to improve practice, and it is a way to learn from experiences. It could be said that good teachers are made, not born, as the old saying goes. Reflection is a the key to

this process of being made, and it is a way of learning from mistakes and experiences and coming out the other side stronger, and better at what they do.

Critics of reflective practice have said that reflection “has no meaning other than be worried about what you do, and talk about it or write it down. (Hayes et al., 2007, p.170). This could be true, and if too much of the reflection process is weighted heavily by negative reflection then it could be the case. However, as Kolb argues: “learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience”, (Kolb, 1984, p. 38), and as such, mistakes can be utilized as stepping stones to better practice. Kolb’s Experiential Learning involves four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation of the new experience, abstract conceptualisation, and finally, active experimentation. Concrete experience relates to the new experience or situation presented to the individual. Reflective observation takes place when the individual reviews the experience that has taken place. Abstract conceptualisation happens when the individual has a new idea or realises what they have learned from the initial experience. Active experimentation is the final stage, and this is where the individual applies what they have learned throughout the process to a new experience.

Kolb’s reflection process is still widely used today as a way for teachers and those working in education as a tool to assess practice and evaluate experiences. It can be a very successful method for reflecting on practice.

Another of the most famous and popular reflection process models is Gibbs’ Reflective Cycle (1988), and although it is over thirty years old, it is still widely used today as a reflection

exercise amongst teachers and education professionals. Gibbs Reflective Cycle differs slightly to Kolb's in that the names of the stages are described in much simpler terms, and therefore, could be used by just about anybody. Gibbs' cycle is usually the preferred reflection method due to the fact that it can be transferred between different disciplines. It also has six stages, not four. The cycle begins with the first stage which is description. This is where the individual describes what he or she has experienced. This could be in written form or verbally; however way the person wants to record the information is up to them, but keeping a journal or diary is most useful. The next stage is feelings, and this is important because feelings often have a large influence on the way a person views and remembers experience and can often be the lens by which they look back on events that have occurred. The third stage is evaluation, which gives the person an opportunity to note the positive and negative aspects of the initial experience. Analysis comes next, and this is where the individual can rationalise and make sense of the experience. Conclusion comes next in the cycle and this gives the individual an opportunity to decide on what could have been done differently. Lastly, the final stage is the action plan, which is a vital part of the reflection process because it allows the person to suggest future improvements and how things could be done differently.

Gibbs' model works very well in the realm of teaching and education because it ends positively, and not negatively. The action plan stage in the cycle allows the individual to make constructive and positive steps towards improved practice. This is vital in reflection because at times, there is a danger for a person to be over critical about themselves or what has happened, and this could mean that the person develops a negative association with the experience to such an extent that it

causes more harm than good. An example of this could be a lesson that goes awry for a student teacher. The student teacher could become so discouraged and distraught at the experience that they may choose to leave teaching altogether. This is why the feelings stage is vital as well as the action plan stage, so that instances like this can be avoided.

The Welsh Government (2016) state that successful reflective practice by teachers can be conducted with the learners feedback. A way in which this could be achieved is via indirect questioning and evaluating rather than full on aggressive questioning. Activities such as a question and answer box or a learning wall where learners can put suggestions on post it notes can be a useful and indirect way to reflect and gain valuable feedback.

So reflective practice is about improving what teachers do, and could be more about moving professional teachers out of working in “autopilot” mode. It is about moving out of routine and really taking stock of what is happening in professional practice. Being reflective also develops empathy and emotional intelligence, as suggested by Goldman (1995), who argues that developing self awareness skills helps an individual to manage feelings better, which is vital in the reflection process when there is a danger to become inward looking and negative. Goldman (1995) strongly argues that a lack of emotional intelligence can actually sabotage efforts in professional development, career opportunities, professional and also personal relationships.

It should also be stressed that reflection should not be about creating more work for the teacher or to pinpoint every flaw. There will always be flaws because no one is perfect; but it is also true

to say that there is always room for improvement. Reflection can help the teacher to summarise everything, and to pinpoint the areas needed for improvement. This should not be done in a self critical way, but rather as a means of building up and encouraging, and not tearing down in defeat.

In conclusion, professional reflection is a great tool for developing teachers, and it should not be overly negative or critical, but rather approached in a positive and constructive way. Kolb and Gibbs both have reflective models which are used successfully to help individuals to work through the reflection process, and although both of these models are over thirty years old, they are still pertinent and useful to date, and are still promoted by many institutions of further and higher education alike as a means of helping their staff reflect. Reflection should be structured, deliberate, and about change and development. It can also be used directly with learners, who can also be involved in helping the teacher to reflect on their own practice, however, it is advised that this is done in a discreet and rather indirect way (note: this is not a “rate the teacher” game), so as to not undermine the teacher or for it to become a situation where the teacher is being disparaged.

Reflection is the key to improvement, and all teachers, whatever their field of work or subject, would do well to do it often, and in a way which links theory to practice each time it is undertaken. It should always be about the learning.

References

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