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Teaching Excellence Through Mindful Reflection

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TEACHING AND LEARNING

Teaching Excellence Through Mindful Reflection

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Reflective teaching is examining one's beliefs about teaching and learning and determining the alignment of those beliefs with what happens within your courses (Reflective Teaching, 2021). The goal is to think critically about one's teaching to find evidence of effective teaching as well as identifying potential areas for improvement (Palmer, 2017). The tool described here is based on the Framework for Assessing Teaching Effectiveness (FATE) and is intended to help teachers develop self-reflection around teaching and objectively describe their strengths and weaknesses in a manner consistent with the evidence of their teaching practices (Simonson, Earl, and Frary, 2021; Simonson, Frary, and Earl, 2023).

Piaget is credited with developing the constructivist model of learning, but it is John Dewey who developed the focus on constructivism as a learning theory and the role of reflection in learning (Von Glaserfeld, 1982; Kolb, 1993). In 1993, Kolb brought reflection to the forefront in his description of its role in experiential learning (Kolb, 1993). Dewey and Kolb suggest that reflection is critical for learning to occur; however, it is not just students who benefit from reflection, those who teach can also benefit from reflecting about their teaching (Brookfield, 1998).

There are many reflective tools and frameworks available. The purpose of this one is to help teachers develop self-reflection around teaching and objectively describe their strengths and weaknesses in a manner consistent with the evidence of their teaching practices. It is comprehensive, formal, and guided as it addresses the myriad aspects of teaching as identified in the Framework for Assessing Teaching Effectiveness (FATE) (Simonson, Earl, and Frary, 2021; Simonson, Frary, and Earl, 2023). When completing the series of reflective exercises, the teacher should be able to:

- define reflective teaching,
- develop strategies for self-observation,
- begin developing and/or refine tools for thinking about their teaching and their teaching effectiveness, and
- begin or continue to develop a habit of continuous quality improvement, (i.e., professional development).

Reflective teaching defined

Reflection has many definitions. Here, we are going to use two from the Merriam-Webster dictionary (Merriam-Webster, 2018):

6: a thought, idea, or opinion formed, or a remark made as a result of meditation.

7: consideration of some subject matter, idea, or purpose.

Thus, reflective teaching is considering one's teaching to form an opinion of teaching effectiveness and learner outcomes. It is based on and necessitates analyzing one's theories of teaching and learning, the alignment of these theories with the class experience, and critically assessing the student, teacher, and class experience along with successes and failures (Brookfield, 1998). Being a reflective teacher means collecting evidence about teaching and learning, thinking critically about that evidence, and drawing conclusions about teaching and learning.

Collecting, recording, and analyzing what happens in the preparation and delivery of a course helps the teacher move from just sharing information to understanding and shaping their teaching and the student learning experience. From this, areas of success and improvement can be identified and learning outcomes improved. By aligning this reflection with FATE, the intention is to orient the conclusions drawn with the components of effective teaching and actual classroom practices before, during, and after a course is taught.

To become a reflective teacher, one needs to become aware of their own thinking processes and consider sources beyond themselves—this is enhanced when made transparent to others. Doing so enables the assessment of the “why” and “how” of student learning and determines what needs to be done as a result. Brookfield (Brookfield, 1998) identifies four lenses through which to examine our teaching (figure 1 in Appendix). Our autobiography as learners significantly shapes us as teachers because our past has created an intuitive and emotional long-lasting influence that determines how we teach. This can be difficult to change, even in the face of evidence-based practices. Our own experiences play a role in the pedagogies and behaviors that appeal to and repel us, and it is useful to explore and become aware of these learned preferences to identify how they shape our teaching (Brookfield, 1998). However, because we are using our own “interpretive filters” to view ourselves, this is inherently biased and external input is necessary. The lens of our learners can help us see how the intended audience receives and perceives our teaching which allows us to teach responsively. (Anonymity is critical for learners if we want their honest appraisal.)

Understanding the learner experience allows the teacher to make informed, appropriate, and helpful pedagogical, relational, and teaching choices (Brookfield, 1998). Our colleagues' perceptions can also prove useful as they can provide content and/or teaching-specific feedback that students may not be able to and that our own autobiographical lens may interpret differently. In addition, learning how our peers handle similar situations can broaden our perspective and expose us to new strategies. There is also an emotional benefit to knowing that others have similar experiences and commiserating that can change power dynamics (Brookfield, 1998). Lastly, the theoretical, philosophical, and research literature can prove useful in making sense of our experience and observations. It names our experiences and provides an evidence-based alternative perspective to our autobiographical lens (Brookfield, 1998).

In his 1993 experiential learning discussion, Kolb describes how reflection impacts learning and behavior and the cyclical nature of it (Kolb, 1993). This applies to the growth of teachers as well. According to Kolb, learning is the modification of ideas or concepts based on experience and occurs when the incongruity between observations and expectations is considered and resolved. This process is cyclical in nature in that we experience an event, we interpret that event based on our past experiences and expectations, and we identify how that event met or did not meet our expectations. We then think about and modify our expectations and our behaviors for the next time that event occurs, and we repeat the cycle (figure 2) (Kolb, 1993). For example, a teacher leads an in-class discussion in which the majority of students are hesitant to participate. Based on prior experience and this teacher's own autobiography as a learner, they may interpret this as students being unprepared. They then reflect and explore options for increasing student preparation and institute a pre-class readiness quiz. They then lead the class in another discussion and observe the level of participation and reflect on the level of success.

Just like with our students, a growth mindset enhances reflection, and there are attitudes and behaviors that engender this mindset. The reflective educator should have self-acceptance with a desire to improve, patience with themselves and their students, the organizational and time-management skills to incorporate reflection, and the ability to self-analyze and identify their strengths, weaknesses, goals, and challenges (Leon-Henri, 2020). From here, a framework on which to build reflection skills is useful. The reflection tool provided in the Appendix is based on a

reflection tool developed by the Danielson group and aligned with the FATE definition of effective teaching (Danielson, 2021; Simonson, Earl, and Frary, 2021; Simonson, Frary, and Earl, 2023). The intent is to help the instructor think critically about their teaching and look for evidence of effective teaching. Beyond completing the prompts provided in this framework, there are additional tools that will aid reflection including, but not limited to, journaling, various modes of student feedback, peer feedback, student work analysis, recording teaching, and others. In addition, teaching reflection can be supported and enhanced through collaboration and dialogue with peers because, while no one has the same experience, there are enough similarities and parallels with others to make sharing more likely to result in the discovery of common threads that can lead to critical insights and actions (Brookfield, 1998).

Use of the FATE-aligned tool

The FATE reflection tool (Appendix) consists of seven writing exercises and four plans for improvement. It is not intended that it all be completed in one sitting. Distributing it across time may actually prove more useful. An instructor might start with the first two writing exercises to explore what they think they do well and need to improve upon. The next four writing exercises include personal assessments of the various aspects of teaching, reflections about those assessments from both the student and personal impacts, and then an improvement plan for those aspects of teaching. The final writing exercise is an overall summary and plan for continuing the journey as a reflective teacher. In other words, the first six writing exercises focus on teaching and the last on reflection.

Over the past two years, this framework has been used at six workshops. Because this has been a reflective process and participants may have been uncomfortable sharing their responses, limited data was collected from participants. They did indicate that they gained new knowledge and/or skills they can use. Participants also indicated that they enjoyed the reflection process and found it valuable to pause and think about their teaching and student learning. Also appreciated were the perspectives and guidance on ways to reflect and improve teaching. Participants indicated that completing the four tables helped them realize that there were many aspects of teaching they had not previously considered. In addition, this helped participants learn about best practices and begin to think about how to teach and communicate differently.

Summary

Reflective teaching is examining one's beliefs about teaching and learning and determining the alignment of those beliefs with course planning, classroom implementation, and post-teaching course modification. The goal is to think critically about one's teaching to find evidence of effective teaching as well as identifying potential areas for improvement. Effective and reflective educators systematically gather, document, and assess all occurrences during a lesson, transitioning from mere experience to comprehension. This process aids in recognizing and pinpointing areas for improvement, ultimately leading to improved learning outcomes. Thus, to move forward and develop as a reflective teacher, you can:

- Get into the habit of reflecting on your work
- Think about when you readily reflect and when you avoid reflection
- Identify what you are good at and what you can improve upon
- Collect evidence that supports this
- Familiarize yourself with the evaluative criteria
- Structure your process across the evaluation period
- Make the most of professional development
- Target opportunities that will best meet your needs
- Show what you have learned
- Keep your portfolio up to date

Download the Appendix: The FATE Reflection Tool (<https://s39613.pcdn.co/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/Teaching-Excellence-Through-Mindful-Reflection-1-1.pdf>)

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