

Improving Exercises of Reflective Thinking and Practice in Teacher Education at a State University in USA

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Abstract

Reflective practice since its inception became a significant part of teacher preparation and professional development programs around the world. Teachers like any other professionals are expected to review and reflect upon their current practices for improving their future performance. This paper explores the current exercises of reflective thinking and practice within an undergraduate teacher preparation program at a state university in USA. The findings are based upon descriptive and narrative data analysis of interviews conducted with two professors and six course and field instructors. After open coding with question oriented analysis, the author has reduced the analysis to current practices and suggestions for improvement in relation to the related literature.

Keywords: Reflection, reflective practice, teacher education.

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Introduction

Teaching like any other profession is a continuous learning experience. In an informal mode we always keep learning through our experiences and this informal learning is based upon our perceptions, knowledge, beliefs and thoughts about the events that we go through and practices that we do. “*Reflective thinking*” as described by Dewey (1910) “*active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends*” (p. 6). Studying further about *reflective thinking and reflective practices* I found interesting themes, given various titles by various theorists. Kolb (1984) includes “*reflection*” in the four-stage “*Experiential Learning Cycle*” “*as one that follows the first stage – “Concrete Experience”, and is followed by further two stages – “Abstract Conceptualization and Active Experimentation”*. One of the most widely applied and accepted version is Schon’s work (1983, 1987) that provides expansion of two basic kinds of “*reflection*” among practitioners, recognized as “*reflection-on-action & reflection-in-action*”.

Many researchers and theorists after Schon have been developing the ideas further such as Killion and Todnem (1991) as cited by Reagan et al. (1993) have differentiated among three types of reflection: *reflection-on-action*, *reflection-in-action*, and *reflection-for action*. As a common understanding of Schon’s work *Reflection-on-action* refers to the process of reflection after an event has occurred while *reflection-in-action* refers to reflect upon practice during an event; while the notion of *reflection-for-action* given by Killion and Todnem as quoted by Reagan et al. (1993) is to reflect for a “*future action*” which helps in preparation for a practice or action. Reagan et al. (1993) further mentioned that “*reflection-for-practice is the manifestation of the proactive nature of both reflection-in-practice and reflection-on-practice*” (p. 265). Hence the direction of reflection is not backward, but it is mainly forward in the sense that through recalling the events as they pass a reflective practitioner aims to improve practice in the coming events.

I come from a background of teacher education, curriculum planning and course designing in a distance education university of Pakistan. Looking closely at all three types of reflection, as a curriculum planner of teacher education programs, I believe that *Reflection and Reflective Practices* can be the best ways to improve teaching and teacher education. Within teacher education programs around the USA almost all these ideas and philosophies related to reflective practice in education

have already been applied and researched; yet during my conversations with members of faculty at a state university I heard many diverse opinions about the theory and practical implications of it. This encouraged me to look into the literature that speaks more about how these ideas have been utilized in Teacher Education programs and to my amazement this is not only one of the most applied theories in Teacher Education but it has also been discussed a lot by many authors and researchers.

Literature Review

Beginning from Dewey's concept of *reflective thinking*, the later researches and work upon *reflective practices* prove that thinking and reflecting upon the practices help practitioners to improve. Theorists though described various stages and mental processes involved in *reflection and reflective practices*, a common feature among all of them is that by gaining a better understanding of their own beliefs, practices and styles through reflective practice, practitioners can improve their performance. Building upon this, ideas of *Reflection and Reflective Practices* have widely been used in educational programs of various professions such as in Law and Nursing. Colleges and departments of teacher education have trusted the theory of *Reflection and Reflective Practices* in designing pre-service teacher education as well as in-service professional development.

If the students bring their previous experience of studentship into teaching this cannot be considered enough to become a teacher. A patient does not claim to be a good doctor, a client does not claim to be a good lawyer but the educated people often have an assumption that they can teach and that they can teach very well. It is not necessarily wrong in each case. But it has to be verified and professional skills are needed to be developed through focused professional education. Going through such professional education it is also very important to verify or modify personal beliefs with the help of theory and practice. "Reflection" is believed to be a way of re-thinking personal beliefs in connection to theory and practice. But how to enable the student teachers do it effectively has been a big challenge in TE programs. "Reflection" seems to be an effective way of doing it if it is taken as described by Korthagen, (2001) is "the mental process of trying to structure or restructure an experience, a problem, or existing knowledge or insights"(p.58) . This definition helps teacher educators understand the purposes of reflection. It is not only reviewing an event or instance of practice rather it is described here as a

process through which knowledge and experiences are revisited consciously. It is worth noting that Schon's ideas about the interaction of practitioner and practice has been appreciated as well as its application in teacher education is still being experimented, analyzed and challenged by researchers. Newman (1999) in his book "*Philosophy and Teacher Education: A reinterpretation of Donald A. Schon's Epistemology of reflective practice*" has explored in detail how the philosophy of *reflective practices* is applied in teacher education. On one hand he has mentioned the complexities of the application Schon's work at various levels but on the other had he also states:

The alleged gap between research and practice, and between means and ends, which have been used as a criticism of teacher education by some, would be gaps which would be closed if Schon's arguments are accepted, and further empirical work along the lines advocated by Schon would presumably be helpful to practicing teachers and teacher educators. (p.63)

Though reading the part of his book "*Schon and the reflective practicum*" (p.144-148) I felt that to implement the *reflective practicum* as Schon suggested is not only difficult but next to impossible. The criticism quoted within various chapters of the book also make me think that the institutions with large enrolment of student teachers and the schools with heavy work load are not at all in a position to give space and time to each teacher to practice and reflect in true meanings. Loughran (2006) states "Reflection has become the corner stone of many teacher education programs. However what reflection is the way it is used, taught, and (sadly) assessed, is as varied as he programs themselves". (p.129)

The whole array of literature about "*Reflection*" in teacher education is highlighting various kinds of confusions and complexities but an interesting and rather challenging piece of criticism upon the use of the notions of *reflection* and *reflective practice* is presented by Fendler (2003) in which she has provided a strong argument for teacher educators to re-think about the whole range of theoretical perspectives and practices of these ideas. In her article *Teacher Reflection in a Hall of Mirrors: Historical Influences and Political Reverberations* she has described her major focus as "A major focus of criticism is the degree to which reflective practices serve to reinforce existing beliefs rather than challenge assumptions. Some reflective practices may simply be exercises in reconfirming, justifying or rationalizing pre-conceived ideas" (p.16).

She has first mentioned the process of development and various dimensions (completely contrasting at times) of the idea of *reflection* through the influences of Descartes, Dewey, Schon and feminism. She closes the first part of her article in which she critically analyzed the historical perspectives by stating:

Today's discourse of reflection incorporates an array of meanings: a demonstration of self-consciousness, a scientific approach to planning for the future, a tacit and intuitive understanding of practice, a discipline to become more professional, a way to tap into one's authentic inner voice, a means to become a more effective teacher, and a strategy to redress injustices in society. Reflective teaching has become a catchall term for competing programs of teacher education reform. It is no wonder then that current research and practices relating to reflection tend to embody mixed messages and confusing agendas. (p.20)

After highlighting the misconceptions and off beam use of the notions of "*Reflective Teaching*" and "Reflection" she has then based the next part of her article is on the four arguments that she describes as: First, I follow Bruno Latour to argue against a hierarchical order for types of reflection. Second, I suggest that the effort to distinguish instrumental reflection from politically engaged reflection is problematic. Third, using the Foucaultian concept of governmentality, I argue that there is no essential unsocialized way of thinking that can be depended upon as the basis for critical reflection on social power relations. (p.20)

Through discussing around these four arguments and describing the "*Orders of Reflection*" she has highlighted the major issue of "*hierarchical nature*" and "*power relations*" of *reflective practices* which empower a certain group keeping them as authority and results in giving the other group a submissive position. This article really makes the reader think again if we should stick with the notion of "reflection" or begin to think beyond that. Studying at a state university that is ranked at top in its teacher education program I realized that moving from behaviorism to constructivism teacher education programs today require to go beyond traditional notion of reflection as well. Thus I conducted this study to learn deeper how the theories of reflection are brought into practice at this university.

Methodology

To find out exactly how the theories of *reflective practice* and *reflection* are being applied and which exercises are being used in a well

established and top ranked Teacher Education Program offered for more than a decade at a Midwestern state university; I used narrative inquiry following the interpretive tradition. An elaborated definition of narrative inquiry given by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) in which it is mentioned that “Narrative inquiry, the study of experience as story, then, is first and foremost a way of thinking about experience”; they have further maintained “Narrative inquiry as a methodology entails a view of the phenomenon. To use narrative inquiry methodology is to adopt a particular view of experience as phenomenon under study” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 375). I talked to six course/field instructors as well as two of the faculty members and recorded their interviews. With the course and fields instructors I mainly talked about how they are using various exercises for reflection. I met the program coordinator to understand the issues of reflective practices that she had raised in one of her articles. While the purpose to meet the other professor coordinating the field instruction was to share ideas of improvement as she is also the course instructor for the field instructors and everyone on campus and around admired her approach towards reflective thinking and reflective practices. I used open coding and pragmatic analysis of data to reduce it to practices and improvements suggested by the participants of the study.

Results

Practices

Following were the major practices already there within teacher education program as identified by the respondents.

Reflection Papers

a. Quick writes in Classroom

The course instructors mentioned that during the classroom interaction they ask student teachers to reflect upon the content being discussed in classroom and they write mini reflection passages or pages to share what they think.

Some instructors also mentioned that they use case studies for classroom discussions and the student teachers reflect upon those verbally as well as in writing.

b. On the prompts

Course instructors create prompts /questions for student teachers to write reflection papers. Some of them give brief verbal description for guiding the student teachers and some give written description to them. Wiki pages are also being used for description of prompts

Videos

Only a few instructors mentioned that they are using videos/ video cases specifically for reflection. Specifically in the Math Ed course “Developing Mathematical Ideas” an instructor mentioned using “Building the System of Tens” with videos. It is one of the books in a series with which video cases are used for classroom discussion and reflection.

Movies

One of the instructors mentioned that she has though not used classroom teaching videos but she has used some movies such as “To Sir with Love” and then she asks student teachers to write about their own perceptions and reflections on this movie. She mentioned that for this activity she gives them questions like *how do they feel about it? Or how did the movie change their perceptions about teaching or teachers?*

Classroom Instruction/Lesson Plans

The field instructors shared that all the teachers in field experience/ internship year regularly reflect upon their own classroom instruction as well as upon peers’ lessons that they observe. These reflections are shared in different forms, one is through discussion with field instructors and mentors, and another is brief written reflection on their own lesson plans. Some of the field instructors use web based techniques:

i. Reflections on a Wiki

Teachers during field experience share their reflections on their own experiences on a wiki page where the instructor and peers could comment and discuss further.

ii. Self-videos

One of the instructors mentioned that he uses videos of classroom instruction for group discussion. These are the videos of the teachers teaching during internship/ field experience.

Another instructor is using a web tool called “Viddler” where they upload the classroom teaching videos and she can then post comments on the video at different points and the teachers can respond back to her comments too.

Common Case

Student teachers in the field experience also do some common cases and while doing these cases they consult with the field instructors at various stages; such as first of all for the selection of cases, then analyzing and discussing what to do and how to do it, then as they work further upon these cases they keep sharing with the field instructors. During this conversation with instructors I thought of all that literature talks about bridging the gap between theory and practice. At the end of each interview I asked the instructors if the student teachers while writing their reflections ever relate back to theoretical perspectives that they have been studying in classroom. The common reply from instructors was that they rarely do. They mentioned they only relate back if they are asked specific questions.

Another question that I asked them was if these efforts really help the student teachers to think critically and independently, some of them said yes and some of them said no. One of the field instructors said that she believes we can develop habits of mind through teacher education program just like they have habits of mind from previous experience but for that we have to put them into practice earlier in the course and discuss everything with them explicitly for which she felt she needed to spend more time with the student teachers in the field.

Suggestions for Improving Current Practices

Coming from Pakistan where *reflective practices* are being looked at with a hope to solve teacher education and teaching problems this exercise helped me to think further and look for better ways of developing critical and reflective thinking or as suggested by a professor during discussion. She proposed that *let's not only see and reflect but do and talk about it.*

Following are some proposed strategies that I am sure will be useful for me and other course designers when we begin to plan our new teacher preparation courses or professional development programs:

Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice: Using Guiding Questions/Prompts

Talking about the exercise of writing biographies Smyth (1989, p.7) describes that "when teachers write about their own biographies and how they feel these have shaped the construction of their values, they are able to see more clearly how social and institutional forces beyond the classroom and school have been influential". He also mentions that to provide some structure teachers can approach the confrontation of local theories of teaching through a series of guiding questions, that might include these - What do my practices say about my assumptions, values, and beliefs about teaching? Where did these ideas come from?, What social practices are expressed in these ideas? What is it that causes me to maintain my theories? What views of power do they embody? Whose interests seem to be served by my practices? and What is it that acts to constrain my views of what is possible in teaching? (p.7)

I think all these questions seem to open up the ways towards a more critical analysis of personal beliefs and knowledge. To me using guiding and probing questions effectively can be a really helpful exercise to enable the teachers to think and re-think more deeply and critically. But it has to be a frequent practice if not regular so that teachers may develop a habit of mind to ask themselves again and again what they are doing? Why they are doing it? How could they do it better? etc. When I shared this with a professor she shared with me a prompt that she had used in a Masters' course. The prompt had four sections –*purpose, procedure, product* and in the footnote *Language for talking about critical thinking or "Criticality"*.

The important issue to deal with is the balance of clear instructions and guidelines but not letting it be influential on thinking of the student teachers; so that they may be able to think independently and critically not for answering or reflecting as we want them to but as they actually think, believe and practice.

Using Actual Cases for analysis: videos/case studies/common cases

After talking to the instructors and coordinators I came to the conclusion that the best way to provide a chance to the prospective teachers in the beginning years at sophomore and junior level for

example is to use real cases. These cases can be used in two ways broadly. One is in the form of written case studies which can come from the common cases that are studied during internship year.

The other way is to use video cases which might take a lot of effort at the part of university. I remember my own experience of selecting video cases to be used with the course materials. It not only adds expenses of course development but the procedures to follow also take time. And as mentioned by a professor the issue of consent from schools, parents and teachers for showing these classroom videos to a larger population will also be necessary.

I believe looking into the hurdles does not mean that we cannot adopt this way; rather the reason to indicate the problems is to be sure that if we decide to adopt this method or technique, we may already know how to handle all the prospects and issues.

An interesting version of use of videos is proposed by Sherin and van Es (2009) in their article *Effects of Video Club Participation on Teachers' Professional Vision*. Here they have experimented an innovative way of using videos for enabling teacher groups to develop "professional vision". I think this can also be a very useful way of developing collective thinking among teachers to analyze problems of practice.

Shared Experiences across the Program

The instructors and professors mentioned that there lies a big difference in the teaching –learning experience of freshman, juniors and seniors. The long previous experience as students has invested a lot in student teachers beliefs and attitudes. It is important that the time they spend in teacher education program may compel them to reflect upon their beliefs and practices. If the experiences and learning is shared across the program this can help them challenge their own beliefs. One way of doing it is that the common cases and videos being made during internship/field experiences may be shared with the freshmen as cases to reflect upon. They can also be grouped for certain case studies with those who are in the field experience. The freshmen might not be teaching but through this grouping they can learn about a lot of practical experiences.

Distance education mode: allows thinking time n liberty

The materials provided to the students in classroom for discussion then should be available for access later. e.g. The videos are used in classroom for reflection and the student -teachers are asked to think critically and reflect upon the videos there and then. This does not give enough time to observe, think and react. This was my own experience in

a course during a teacher education graduate program when every participant had to analyze three small videos but many a times I felt that if I could look at the videos again while I was at home I could analyze better. Whenever I was trying to reflect I could not be sure if I am recalling the events correctly or not. I think not being a part of an experience and only viewing it as an observer can make it more difficult to memorize everything and reflect upon it. Therefore the suggestion is that whatever material is being used in the form of case studies/video cases, it may be available for students to look again and again. The course instructors' instructions may also be provided in electronic or printed form with the materials.

Interaction between Course instructor-Field Instructor-Mentor Teachers

During the classroom discussions and interviews it was mentioned again and again that sometimes the mentor, field instructor and the course instructors do not have same view point about certain practices. The student teachers are thus not sure who has the right view point. This confusion does not let them think independently and they tend to make efforts only to satisfy all the three of them. To resolve this issue one possible way can be that the mentors, field instructors and course instructors have some collaboration. If they cannot meet frequently to discuss the classroom practices, a web tool may be used in which the reflections may be posted and reviewed by all the three. Such shared wiki or blog page can be helpful not only for the instructors or mentors.

I would also suggest that as one of my fellow curriculum planners developed a proposal of a course for mentors, such opportunity for mentors as well as for field instructors can be a way to bring them on the same page. A professor during her interview also supported the idea that a pre-requisite course should be there always for all the field instructors before they go into the field, as she mentioned that not all of them have done it.

Student Evaluation

a. Peer and self-evaluation

It was mentioned by a participant that during a short term professional development course she asked the participants to develop their own evaluation rubrics based upon the syllabus description and their expectations. Then at the end of each week the participants had a chance to review their rubrics and evaluate themselves as well as one other participant in the group on the bases of these rubrics. The participant teachers mentioned it in their

feedback forms that this practice helped them a lot to think critically about their own performance. I believe this can also be a helpful strategy in teacher education programs to enable teachers reflect upon their own practices.

b. Using student evaluation for reflection

It was interesting to read about “evaluation” of students being used as an opportunity for reflection by the teachers in an article by Dunn and Shriner (1999) in which they mentioned how teachers perceive the activities “*evaluation and planning activities (informal and formal)*” providing opportunities for self-improvement.

Usually teachers reflect upon the results of their students in assessment, but they can also use the process of evaluation as a chance to reflect upon their own teaching. Even developing tests and examination can be a practice where teachers can analyze why they are doing it the way they doing it.

Conclusion

The effective practices shared by six field instructors and review of the two professors can help the planners and course designers to develop even more innovative reflective practice exercise.

Reflective thinking, reflection or reflective practices are the notions which have very deep rooted meanings. As teacher educators or planners of teacher education curriculum we need to look into the depth of these philosophies and with the development of the field we also need to keep improving our own strategies and practices as we expect teachers to do that. We as teacher educators and course designers also follow our beliefs which may have developed through our experience or our professional education. Thus one of the learning through this study is that we need to re-think and analyze our own ways of implementing theories in teacher education it may be the exercise of “reflective practices” or application of any other theoretical perspective. I wish to end with a quote of Loughran (2006) from his book “*Developing a Pedagogy of Teacher Education*”:

The place of reflection takes on greater significance when considered in concert with the experience and jointly offers genuine ways of helping students of teaching to value their developing knowledge of practice such that not only what they know, but also how they know it and the manner in which it can impact their understanding of teaching and learning across pedagogic contexts may be viewed as significant to the development of professional learning. (p.136)

Disclaimer: This paper was written as a Grad Student in Michigan State University.

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