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REFLECTIVE PRACTICE: A TOOL FOR TEACHERS TO ENHANCE QUALITY IN HIGHER EDUCATION

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Abstract

Higher education is becoming a major driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy and has given ample proof of its ability to induce change and progress in the society. The quality of higher education is closely influenced by the professional development of teachers and reflection is an integral component of this. The process of reflective practice results in life-long learning where a practitioner analyses experiences in order to learn from them. The use of reflective practice in teacher professional development is based on the belief that teachers can improve their own teaching by consciously and systematically reflecting on their teaching experiences. Teachers can engage in a range of activities that facilitate reflection. These activities are discussions with colleagues, classroom observations, teaching journals and teaching portfolios. Teachers who engage in reflective practice can develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, assess their professional growth, develop informed decision-making skills, and become proactive and confident in their teaching. Thus, Professional development through reflective practice can be seen as a process of 'mental growth spurred from within' which is an ongoing process. The various models of reflective practices described in this paper may be an effective tool for professional development of teachers. Teachers can engage in any of these reflective activities at different stages of their careers for constructing their own personal theories of teaching as well as to improve their instructional practice leading to an improvement of quality in higher education.

Keywords: Reflective Practice, Discussions with Colleagues, Classroom Observations, Teaching Journals Teaching Portfolios.

Introduction

The teacher who excels in teaching profession and gives significant contribution to the enhancement of quality in education is the utmost requirement of the time. Higher education is becoming a major driver of economic competitiveness in an increasingly knowledge-driven global economy and has given ample proof of its ability to induce change and progress in the society. The quality of higher education is closely influenced by the professional development of teachers. Current research on higher education shows that the teachers are at the center of any attempt to improve the quality of teaching and learning. Attempts to reorganize programs, develop curriculum, and improve faculty effectiveness ultimately rely on the professional development of the individual faculty members (Levine, 2005). Dewey (1933) explored the concept of reflection in the early twentieth century and asserted that experience should be the basis of professional development. He drew on the ideas of many earlier educators, including Plato, Aristotle, Confucius, Lao Tzu, Solomon and Buddha in this regard (Houston, 1988). Reflections on the experiences are essential for continuous professional development of teachers (Schon 1991). This article examines the various models of reflective practices and suggests how it might become an effective tool for the professional development of teachers and there by the enhancement of quality in higher education.

Perspectives on Reflection

Taylor (2000) defined reflection as "the throwing back of thoughts and memories, in cognitive acts such as thinking, contemplation, meditation and any other form of attentive consideration, in order to make sense of them, and to make contextually appropriate changes if they are required" (p.3). This definition allows for a wide variety of thinking as the basis for reflection, and it is similar to many other explanations (Street, 1992) which suggest that reflective thinking is a rational and intuitive process, which potentiates positive change. Atkins and Murphy (1993) performed a meta-analysis of the many definitions of reflection present in the literature and noted that there are three common elements essential to this process. First is a trigger event, which is typically an awareness of some uncomfortable feelings and/or thoughts (i.e., positive or negative). Second is a critical analysis of these feelings and thoughts and the experience itself. Third is the development of new perspectives as a result of this analysis. For trainees, this analysis could mean the development of new perspectives on their lived experiences, which may result in more informed decisions (Atkins & Murphy, 1993). Thus, reflection refers to an activity or process in which an experience is recalled, considered and evaluated in relation to a broader purpose. It is a response to past experience and involves conscious recall and examination of the experiences as a basis for evaluation and decision-making and as a source for planning and action.

Levels of reflection

Van Manen (1977) created a three-level-taxonomy of critical reflection: technical, contextual and critical. Technical reflection is the initial level of reflective thinking which consists in linking theory with practice and finding out the relevancy of knowledge, skills, activities and objectives. This analyses the problem or situation itself. Contextual reflection involves analysis, clarification and elaboration of underlying assumptions and predispositions of classroom practices as well as the consequences of strategies used. This



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analysis is about how the situation was handled. Critical reflection deals with questions of moral and ethical dimensions related to directly and indirectly to teaching practices. This is the higher level of reflective thinking and through this process, a person adjusted meaning as it opened the possibility of perspective transformation. In tune with the contextual reflection of Van Manen, Schon (1983) in his book *The Reflective Practitioner*, introduces concepts such as ‘reflection on action’ (looking back on an incident after the event) and ‘reflection in-action’ (considering the incident as it unfolds, action-present). Reflection on action is a more deliberative and conscious process and can involve the actual writing down of what happened and why (Bolton, 2010). Killion and Todnem (1991) included reflection-for-action, the desired outcome to guide future action. Thus, the reflection process simultaneously includes past, present and future timeframes which can ultimately lead to personal growth, meaningful change and professional growth of the individual. Being a reflective practitioner is a highly desirable attribute for professionals because it signifies quality assurance through a sustained cyclical process of self-examination, self-evaluation, self-directed learning, enlightenment, self-optimization and transformation.

Significance of Reflective Practice in Higher Education

In higher education, reflective practice refers to the analysis of the educator about his or her own roles as information provider, learning facilitator, mentor, personal adviser or tutor, role model, examiner, curriculum planner, course organizer, resource developer and determining what strategies works best for the students in these various dimensions. Generally, teachers like to follow routine in their teaching for easiness, but with time, it gets boring and finally becomes so habitual that it is tantamount to a mechanical act. According to Hillier (2002) without critical reflection, teaching will remain at best uninformed, and at worst ineffective, prejudiced and constraining. One way of identifying routine, and of counteracting burnout, is by engaging in reflective teaching.

The process of reflective practice results in life-long learning where a practitioner analyses experiences in order to learn from them. Schon (1983) suggested professional practice could be developed through a spiral of action and reflection, where the practitioner acts, reflects on the action and plans new action, which is informed by the results of the reflection. More and more experience, does not guarantee more and more learning. Twenty years of teaching may not equate to twenty years of learning about teaching but may be only one year repeated twenty times. Hence one should not rely solely on the natural process of reflecting on experience, but actively seek ways to ensure that reflection itself becomes a habit, ensuring continuing development as a professional teacher (Schon, 1991).

The use of reflective practice in teacher professional development is based on the belief that teachers can improve their own teaching by consciously and systematically reflecting on their teaching experiences (Farrell, 2004, 2007). As Valli (1997) suggests, teachers can “look back on events, make judgments about them, and alter their teaching behaviors in light of craft, research, and ethical knowledge” (p. 70). Thus, reflective practice of teachers consists of asking “what, why and how” questions to the instructional techniques, curriculum, learning community, educational context, and the ends of education in order to improve the educational practices. The key to reflection is learning how to take perspective on one’s own actions and experience. Reflective practice empowers teachers to learn from experience about themselves, their work, and the way they relate to the educational institution, colleagues, students and wider society and culture. It gives strategies to bring things out into the open, and frame appropriate and searching questions never asked before. In addition, reflective practice can provide relatively safe and confidential ways to explore and express experiences otherwise difficult to communicate. It also challenges assumptions, ideological illusions, damaging social and cultural biases, inequalities, and questions personal behaviours which perhaps silence the voices of others or otherwise marginalise them.

Dewey (1933) called for teachers to take reflective action that entails active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further consequences to which it leads. He suggested that teachers who want to be reflective practitioners must possess three characteristics: open-minded, responsibility and whole heartedness. Open-mindedness is a desire to listen to more than one side of an issue and to give attention to alternative views. Responsibility involves careful consideration of consequences to which an action lead. Wholeheartedness is one’s commitment to an idea or project which is capable of braining about a meaningful personal and professional change. These characteristics of reflective practice are important to bring about change and development in higher educational scenario.

Models of Reflective Practice for Teachers

Teachers can engage in a range of activities that facilitate reflection. These activities are discussions with colleagues, classroom observations, teaching journals and teaching portfolios.



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Discussions with colleagues

Discussion with colleagues can be a highly productive means of developing reflective practice, breaking down the isolation of teaching through the sharing of ideas and experiences and providing a means of improving teaching. Teachers can form small groups or pairs, share different knowledge, skills, expertise, views and experiences in the classrooms and have oral inquiry about their performance. Thus, teachers build on one another's insights to analyse and interpret classroom data and their experiences. When viewpoints differ, pairs or group members can have the experience of looking at the same topic or problem from angles that they would not have had reflecting alone. Critical friendship is seen as an arrangement to aid group discussion. Head and Taylor (1997) define critical friendship as any form of co-operative and ongoing arrangement between two or more teachers to work together on their own personal and professional development. A group of teachers working together can achieve outcomes that may not be possible for an individual teacher working alone, because the group can generate more ideas about classroom issues than can any one individual. These critical friends can challenge each other in positive ways, in a safe environment, so that both friends grow as teachers. The main emphasis here is on the friend aspect rather than the critical. Farrell (2007) cites three types critical friendship groups: peer groups within an institution, teacher groups that operate outside the institution and within a district, and virtual groups that can be formed anywhere on the Internet. When teachers come together in this way, they can help each other, articulate their thoughts about their work and all grow professionally together. When teachers have become comfortable looking at their own teaching and have examined their beliefs about teaching, they may feel the need to pair up with another teacher or join a group of teachers for sharing their reflective experiences. A set of built-in rules for critical friends is not easily suggested because there must be elements of trust and openness so that the critical aspect does not negatively affect the friendship. Critical friends both support and challenge each other to have more profound reflections on their teaching.

Classroom Observations

A teacher can carry out classroom observation alone, with another teacher (as in peer observation and critical friendships), or with a group of teachers. For teachers to 'observe' their own teaching, they need to use equipment such as tape recorders or video recorders. The data thus collected should be analysed and interpreted by the teacher (if reflecting alone) or by pairs and teams working together (Farrell, 2007).

Teachers may want to start with audio recording their classes-before videotaping, as audio-recorded classes may be less threatening, for both them and their students. If teachers and students do not get comfortable with the camera, the data gathered could be heavily influenced by the ripple effect (i.e., when a stone is thrown in water, it produces ripples; when an observer, tape recorder, or video camera is present in class, it too affects the flow of the lesson). This can be minimized by giving the class time to get used to being observed.

Next, the teachers should reflect on what happened and analyze the events they found most interesting. They can do this by asking themselves and their peer observers questions such as, "Why do I teach this way?" or "Do my beliefs and classroom practices align?" By seeking answers to these questions, teachers can challenge themselves (or be challenged by peers) to become reflective and obtain greater awareness about what they do. After some self-analysis, they can decide if they want to continue to teach as they do, or change.

When teachers become more confident in observing their own classes with the use of technology, they may then want to share their findings with other teachers by discussing what they noted. Such discussion can lead to the initiation of peer observation. Colleagues can contribute to classroom observation through proper listening, asking helpful questions and giving supportive feedback. But peer observation is not always possible, as it involves establishing a high level of trust with another teacher. Also, certain rules must be established before commencing the observations, such as defining the role of the observer, determining the number of observations to be conducted, and deciding if both teachers will have their classes observed. For the successful implementation of peer observation schemes emphasis should be given to the following: 1) Setting clear objectives, time-scales and action plans; 2) Preparing carefully for the observation and reflection sessions; and 3) Establishing a supportive and non-judgmental feedback for all activities.

There are several ways teachers can approach classroom observation i.e., both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Using a qualitative point of view means looking at a classroom from many different angles, then putting all the information together at the end to see what picture has been painted. To do this, teachers must gather data from audio or video recordings or both, by sitting in on and observing a class while taking ethnographic notes (describing what happens as it happens), and by asking the observed teacher for thoughts on how the class went. This information is then mixed with the overall picture of the classroom, the students, their backgrounds, the teacher and his or her background, and the context within the learning institutions and the wider community (Farrell, 2007).



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Teaching Journals

Holly (1989) views journals as a synthesis of log and diary. A log is a record of information that is a highly structured, factual account maintained over time. A diary is a daily record of personal experiences and observations in which thoughts, feelings, and ideas are expressed. A journal combines the objective aspect of the log with the personal aspect of the diary. Farrell (2007) suggests that when starting a teaching journal for the first time, the teacher first reflects on a recent teaching practice or experience in the classroom, positive or negative, that caused the teacher to stop and think, and ask the following questions related to the experience: “What happened before this incident? What happened after it? Why was this incident important? What does this incident tell me about myself as a teacher?” Next, the teacher writes this up in a teaching journal and continues to write about it as he or she continues teaching. Then, after each journal entry the teacher asks two or three questions about what he or she has written. After that, the teacher keeps writing about the chosen topic for at least a month, reviewing entries each week. Throughout the process, teachers think about ways that journal writing can help them reflect on their practice (Farrell, 2004).

Writing about experiences is a useful tool for reflection, because it enables to make explicit the knowledge that is implicit in their actions (Schon, 1991). Farrell (2004) argues that journal writing can help teachers question and analyze what they do both inside and outside the classroom, thus consciously exploring and analyzing their practice. Farrell (2007) suggests that writing regularly in a teaching journal can help teachers clarify their own thinking, explore their own beliefs and practices, become more aware of their teaching styles, and be better able to monitor their own practices.

Journals are simple to create and maintain and can promote the development of reflective teaching. Teachers can write in their journals at any time of the working day or after. They can record criticisms, doubts, frustrations, questions, the joys of teaching, and the results of experiments. Writing is a process of discovery for the writer and helps to be more systematic in reflections. Holly (1989) has pointed out that reflective journal writing can give time to think about the work long enough to reflect on it and to begin to understand it. Regularly writing in a journal can be a cathartic experience, especially if the journal is used to let off steam about frustrations encountered during the teaching day.

Teaching portfolios

A teaching portfolio is a collection of information about a teacher's practice. It is an album, much like a photo album, contains many aspects of a teacher's work. It tells the story of the teacher efforts, skills, abilities, achievements, and contributions to students, colleagues, institutions, academic disciplines, and community. Evans (2003) defines a teaching portfolio in the following way: “professional portfolio is an evolving collection of carefully selected or composed professional thoughts, goals and experiences that are threaded with reflection and self-assessment” (p. 11).

A teaching portfolio can contain an unlimited variety of materials, including lists of courses taught, teaching innovations, personal teaching philosophies, evidence of successes and evidence of commitment to professional development such as lesson plans, anecdotal records, student projects, class newsletters, annual evaluations, and letters of recommendation. It should be remembered that the teaching portfolio is not a one-time snapshot of where the teacher is at present; it is a growing collection of carefully selected and recorded professional experiences, thoughts, and goals. After collecting and assembling all the materials for their teaching portfolios, teachers must reflect on what they have put together and assess their current and future teaching plans. Teaching portfolios foster reflection because to compile a teaching portfolio, teachers must examine their professional strengths and weaknesses; thus, they become more aware of their work.

There are three main types of portfolios (Costantino & De Lorenzo, 2002) that practicing teachers can compile. These are

a) **The Working Portfolio:** Teachers use a working portfolio to document growth and development of performance of teachers to the standards that may have been set within the institution, the state, or at the national level. The materials included in this portfolio are intended to give an idea about the activities of the teachers, its progress and growth over time: they are not intended to be polished documents.

b) **The Showcase Portfolio:** Teachers use this portfolio to literally showcase a collection of exemplary documents that highlight their best work and accomplishments. Teachers can use showcase portfolios to share information about themselves with colleagues and administrators. And also, can be presented to employers when pursuing promotion and for seeking further employment.

c) **The Critical Incident Portfolio:** Teachers use this portfolio to document events that they found to be particularly provocative and illuminating and should include captions that explain the rationale for choosing them and reflective statements about the critical incidents. In this way, teachers can outline their underlying philosophy of teaching and learning.



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As a reflective device, a portfolio offers teachers the chance to get truly good looks at themselves, as if looking into a mirror. It literally allows teachers to see how they have evolved over time. After reviewing the evidence collected over time, teachers can reflect on where they were, where they currently are, and most important, where they want to go. As a source of direction, a portfolio is a starting point for further development, as the teacher creates a plan for the future and sets goals. Teaching portfolios can provide teachers with opportunities for self-reflection and collaboration with colleagues in addition to opportunities to plan individual professional development paths.

Conclusion

Research on effective teaching in higher education over the past two decades has shown that successful practice is linked to inquiry and reflection (Harris, 1998). Teachers who engage in reflective practice can develop a deeper understanding of their teaching, assess their professional growth, develop informed decision-making skills, and become proactive and confident in their teaching. Thus, Professional development through reflective practice can be seen as a process of ‘mental growth spurred from within’ which is an ongoing process (Feiman-Namser & Floden, 1986).

Reflection is only half of the equation; the other half is action. Reflective practice occurs when teachers consciously take on the role of reflective practitioner, subject their own beliefs about teaching and learning to critical analysis, take full responsibility for their actions in the teaching learning context.

Today in our country teachers should play the role of a catalyst in improving the quality improvement and excellence in higher education. The various models of reflective practices described in this paper may be an effective tool for professional development of teachers. Teachers can engage in any of these reflective activities at different stages of their careers for constructing their own personal theories of teaching as well as to improve their instructional practice leading to an improvement of quality in higher education.

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