Reflection and Teaching: The Challenge of Thinking Beyond the Doing

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She soon discovered that knowing something and teaching it are as different as dreaming and waking.  
—May Sarton, The Small Room

Preservice teachers embarking on their student teaching semester often express the belief that sustained day-to-day classroom experience is exactly what they will need to complete their “knowledge” of teaching. In a more sophisticated but similar vein, teachers who return to a university for advanced coursework or for professional development nod their heads approvingly during discussions of the benefits of “reflective teaching” and then admit that as a natural part of their planning for teaching, they indeed are all “reflective practitioners.” The two words reflection and practice are part of everyone’s general vocabulary, so it is easy to reduce the complexities and challenges of the phrase to something like “thinking about the doing.” Because no one wants to be accused of not thinking about the doing, educators—whether novice or veteran—are usually unanimous about their being reflective practitioners.

One consequence of this automatic agreement—that by virtue of being a teacher one is already a reflective teacher—can be an unproductive superficiality: “reflection with no experience is sterile and generally leads to unworkable conclusions, while experience with no reflection is shallow and at best leads to superficial knowledge”  (Posner 1989, 22). The challenge for educators is to move beyond the literal meaning of this seemingly simplistic phrase—reflective teacher—to an understanding of its pedagogical implications, which encompass (1) a respect for teachers’ ongoing professional growth (beyond learning more “things to do”), (2) a mutually beneficial dialogue between elements of one’s theory and practice (beyond a simple recounting of one’s successes), and (3) a potential for more critically deliberative classroom practices.

The concepts of reflection, reflective teaching, and reflective practitioner have gained much recent attention in the professional education literature, but a cursory reading can overlook frequent references to the work of John Dewey (and others), which provided a substantive base for reflective practices. Although a comparison of the first paragraphs of many of these teacher-as-thinker articles illustrates the observation that “there is no generally accepted definition of these concepts” (Korthagen 1993, 133), the substantive aims share a theoretical foundation that, if ignored, suggests at best a partial use and at worst a misuse of a powerful concept for teachers using their own work as “text.” The term reflective teacher in its theoretical context is more likely to provide teachers with a sense of the mindfulness and thoughtfulness from which a list of promising reflective practices is drawn and with a glimpse of the deliberative pedagogy to which it can lead. A teacher’s “intelligent practice” in a classroom . . . develops in action rather than by application of rules learned outside the context of practice” (Russell and Johnston 1988, 1). Teachers’ “intelligent action” is subsequently strengthened through the “development of the capacity for self-directed learning” so teachers emerge as their own teacher educators (Korthagen 1993, 136).

Reflective Action and Routine Action

The distinction between reflective action and routine action is one that respects teachers as professionals whose technical expertise goes beyond the application of pedagogical “treatments.” Understanding this distinction can help teachers to penetrate the superficial agreement that can come too quickly and easily when, in either preser-
vice or inservice, teachers are asked about their use of reflective practice. One current writer, in fact, characterizes routine action and its reliance on thinking about methods in absence of context as "magical" because of the powers ascribed to their use (Bartolome 1994). The well-intentioned frenzy for identifying more and better ways of doing things, he says, constitutes a "methods fetish," and Lilia Bartolome agrees with Donaldo Macedo (1994) that an anti-methods pedagogy is more likely to encourage critical (or reflective) action. In 1933, Dewey made this same distinction and likened routine action to the stream of consciousness that accompanies everyday experience, in which the ends are taken for granted but the means for getting to those ends may be problematic (the goal or desired outcome of this routine action is unexamined and any procedural deviation can be tinkered with to improve the likelihood of the desired end). Reflective action, on the other hand, entails "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 leads" (Dewey 1933, 9). In this sense, reflection is not a point of view but rather a process of deliberative examination of the interrelationship of ends, means, and contexts.

Vivian Gussin Paley engages in this reflective action in her book White Teacher (1979), in which she stands both within and above the stream of consciousness of her kindergarten teaching in a classroom with a diverse student population. She observes the children and the differences between what she expects of them and what their actions are, and then she critically questions (as Dewey's work suggests) the reliability and worth and value of the predetermined "ends" in order to validate, redirect, or modify both ends and means. In the preface to a later book, Molly Is Three (1986), Paley describes the inherent challenge of this level of reflection: "It is not easy to wait and listen. In my haste to display the real world, I offer the children solutions to unimagined problems. My neatly classified bits and pieces clamor for attention. . . . I try to stand aside . . . "(xv).

Fifty years after Dewey identified three attitudes—open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness—that characterize reflective practice (attitudes evident in Paley's accounts), other writers are reiterating that reflective practice is "neither a solitary nor meditative process . . . [It is] a challenging, demanding, and often trying process that is most successful as a collaborative effort" (Osterman and Kottkamp 1993, 19). Dewey defined open-mindedness as "an active desire to listen to more sides than one; to give heed to the facts from whatever source they come; to err in the beliefs that are dearest to us" (29). Responsibility he viewed as being a deliberative consideration of the consequences of actions, and wholeheartedness he equated with an abiding commitment to open-mindedness and responsibility. Taken together, these attitudes have much in common with the "believing and doubting game" that Peter Elbow writes about in Embracing Contraries (1986)—an acceptance that "certainty evades us" (254)—and with the need to examine our certainty in order to move to a more thorough and substantive level of understanding.

The resulting reflective action, Dewey maintained, moves teachers away from impulsive and routine activity; reflective action thus places inquiry, not response, in the foreground. Such inquiry-oriented teaching places the teacher-as-learner in a prominent position while at the same time it challenges the teacher to delve deeper into the "doing" of teaching. Donald Schon (1983) voices the conviction that "competent practitioners usually know more than they can say" (viii), and teachers like Vivian Paley demonstrate that when deliberative reflection gives voice to one's knowing and not knowing, professional growth and development accelerates; thus reflection has the potential to benefit both the teacher and the taught. This view echoes the distinctions of "knowledge telling" and "knowledge transforming" (Bereiter and Scardamalia 1987), but it places an internal, rather than external, audience in the foreground.

Problem Solving and Problem Setting

The artificial but pervasive dichotomy of theory and practice presents an obstacle for viewing reflective practice as a powerful contributor to a teacher's professional development. Building partly on Dewey's notion of reflection, Schon (1983) proposes a reorganization of the way we think about professional practice and the relationship between theory and practice. He criticizes the still-prevailing model of technical rationality: "According to the model of Technical Rationality—the view of professional knowledge which has most powerfully shaped both our thinking about the professions and the institutional relations of research, education and practice—professional activity consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique" (21).

Selection of a technique from a broad professional repertoire based solely on the matching of sets of pre-identified characteristics can serve to elevate teaching rituals, tradition, and decontextualized authority to unrealistic levels. On the other hand, actions based solely on intuition and one's own biography can result in an equally isolated (and idiosyncratic) approach. The potential for professional growth comes, in Schon's view, from a persistent and rigorous acknowledgment of both spheres, "a dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skillful" (1987, 31). One vehicle for engaging in this dialogue is the distinction between problem solving and problem setting:

In real world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as given. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations that are puzzling, troubling, uncertain. When we set the problem, we select what we will treat as "things" of the situation, we set
the boundaries of our attention to it, and we impose upon it a coherence which allows us to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs to be changed. Problem setting is a process in which interactively, we name the things to which we will attend and frame the context in which we will attend to them. (Schon 1983, 40)

Problem setting demands a broader view than problem solving. In teachers' published accounts of their own growth, many, like Paley, engage in more than problem identification and, in fact, end up re-orienting their views of what a "problem" is and what theory and practice can both contribute to any kind of resolution. In Uptight (1970), an account of his uneasiness with college teaching, Ken Macrorie provides a record of the reflection that led to changes in his approach to teaching (later developed as a text, Writing to be Read); similarly, Peter Elbow recounts his reflective journey in Embracing Contraries and in many ways places his earlier text, Writing without Teachers (1973), in the realm of problem setting; poet Richard Hugo shares a view of his growth and reflection as a teacher of creative writing in Triggering Town (1979); teacher educator William Ayers explores the intertwining of his own teaching, learning, and parenting in To Teach: The Journey of a Teacher (1993). It is not by accident that touchstones such as these were written by teachers of writing, people who are more practiced at putting a voice to the reflective process. These and other books, however, allow individual teachers (preservice or inservice) or groups of teachers from any grade or subject matter to eavesdrop on another educator's process of reflection. A newly developed group of educational cases (Case Studies for Teacher Problem Solving by Silverman, Welty, and Lyon [1992]; Diversity in the Classroom: A Casebook for Teachers and Teacher Educators by Shulman and Mesa-Bains [1993]) can be used in inservice sessions to help teachers develop skills in problem setting and recognizing the distinctions that Schon makes. The cases themselves can be used superficially, where limited discussion is presumed to constitute "reflective practice." Basing case discussions primarily on one's experiences as a teacher and learner can deft experience, however, and the result is "telling" with little likelihood of "transforming" one's pedagogy (McAninch 1993).

Books such as these also illustrate another distinction that belies the more simplistic definition of reflection. Schon differentiates between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (1983). Reflection-in-action is formative in that it is a part of the interactive phase of teaching in the presence of students. It is usually stimulated by some unpredictability that prompts the teacher to respond with on-the-spot restructuring, spontaneous re-evaluation of past experiences, or deliberate testing of past knowledge in order to arrive at a solution to the immediate problem. Reflection-on-action happens at another level where a teacher engages in revising experiences and knowledge, in reformulating foundational structures on which he or she bases classroom practice. This is not unlike Dewey's distinction between routine and reflective practice, but it seeks to make the two interdependent.

Doing and Thinking About the Doing

Experience in the absence of reflection is unstable (Schon 1983) because it contributes little to the deliberative development that is a part of the potential of reflective practice:

When we go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way. Often we cannot say what it is we know. When we try to describe it we find ourselves at a loss, or we produce descriptions that are obviously inappropriate. Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our action. (49)

Reflecting on this knowing-in-action is what identifies a master teacher, according to Schon. This is the "dialogue of the thinking and doing," the reflexive interchange between the immediate and the reflective that Schon has called reflection-in-action. The doing (teaching) is accompanied by a co-existing "thinking about the doing" (knowing-in-action), and then there are deliberate opportunities to think both about and beyond the doing (reflection-in-action).

Teachers, curriculum specialists, or professional development personnel who want to engage in reflection will be assisted by the recent work of several researchers and theorists. Freema Elbaz (1988), in her experiences with teachers examining their own knowledge, initially found that "autobiographical writing, combined with other types of writing, work on metaphors and imagery, and group discussion, enhanced teachers' awareness of their situations" (180). Later, Elbaz found that it was important for teachers to generate and exchange different views in a group process and to envision concrete alternative courses of action if they are to become self-sustaining in the reflective process. Henry Giroux's work explores the dialogue both within one's self as well as within one's context; his book Teachers as Intellectuals: Toward a Critical Pedagogy of Learning (1988) forges a persuasive description of the transformative potential that occurs when we combine the "language of critique with the language of possibility" (134).

Reflective practitioners often need help in developing observation skills and must be provided with opportunities for analyzing teaching (Wildman and Niles 1987). Necessary attitudes and resources, such as time and collegial support for nurturing reflection, are essential. Daily or weekly logs or some such method of recording events and personal reactions are effective tools for facilitating initial reflection. These and other reflective opportunities such as seminars, discussions, or reviews are needed to encourage reflection in and on action. Within the context of assessment, some districts and states are
seeking the formalization of teaching portfolios that document action, thought, and thought-in-action for teachers seeking status as master teachers or for career ladder advancement. The National Board of Professional Teaching Standards is pursuing an evaluation process that will include components encompassing such reflection.

Thinking Both About and Beyond the Doing

In a far more structured way, the work of Gary Fenstermacher and Virginia Richardson has focused on skills that develop a "practical rationality," which they trace to the work of Aristotle and define as "a process of thought that ends in an action or an intention to act" (102). They criticize the calls for reflective practice as being "murky" and imprecise in that "it is not enough to provide answers [to why one teaches as one does]" but that "it is also important that the answers accord with a reasonable and morally defensible conception of what it means to educate a fellow human being" (101).

Reflective teaching is a concept that can, under the press of large class sizes, increasing extracurricular responsibilities, and vociferous calls for technical reform, be set aside as something so inherent in the profession of teaching as to not need deliberate attention or support. On the contrary, however, reflective practice goes beyond just thinking about one's teaching and opens doors to professional growth and collaboration that can contribute to teachers' having a clearer and more substantive role in reform, both locally and nationally. Thinking about teaching practices is only the beginning; describing perceived classroom successes and failures is an initial step. Reflection, in the most potent sense of the word, involves searching for patterns in one's thinking about classroom practices and interrogating the reasons for one's labeling some lessons as successes or failures; it challenges one not to stop with thinking about the doing.

During her first year of university teaching, the main character in the May Sarton novel The Small Room is faced with the realization that "knowing something and teaching it are as different as dreaming and waking" (44). Thinking-beyond-the-doing challenges teachers at all levels to learn from a more deliberate wakefulness about how and why we teach as we do and then to use what we discover about ourselves to benefit the students whom we teach.

REFERENCES