

Critical Friendships: Facilitating Teacher Reflection for Professional Development

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As both authors moved into new teaching positions, they realized over coffee that both were looking for a critical friendship in which they could discuss and reflect upon their workplace adjustments (Farrell, 2013). Bristow and Wagner's (2017) use of interviews supplemented with academic articles to facilitate professional development was adapted for the conversations in which the authors engaged. On this journey, one author facilitated the other's reflection on her adjustment to a new teaching context while the other author facilitated her partner's reflection on the adjustment into a more administrative role focused on teacher development. This paper begins with an overview of literature on reflection and reflective practice, followed by an explanation of the process implemented and concludes with reflections from both authors on their roles as participants and facilitators of reflective practice. This research was presented at the 2018 Teacher Journeys conference held in June of 2018 in Tokyo, Japan.

A Tale of Two ELTs

This article shares the journey of two academic women and their love of chai. The research grew out of a variety of experiences for two friends and language teaching professionals. The first seed was planted in 2014 when Tom Farrell spoke about language teacher reflective practice at a Japanese Association for Language Teaching (JALT) annual conference plenary. It led one author to pursue reflective practice with a colleague at her institution. This critical friendship developed into a presentation on reflective practice in high school teacher workshops. Around the same time, the two authors began working at the same institution together and frequently discussed ideas related to reflective practice. Both of them expressed a desire to explore this, but were unsure of how to do so. A few years later at the 2017 TESOL Conference, one author saw a presentation that introduced an approach to self-reflective professional development that seemed achievable in a Japanese context. She returned, motivated and excited to tell the other author about this. Ideas continued to be exchanged for another year until both authors attended a workshop in early 2018 on teacher reflection facilitated by Ken Tamai. This session and the motivation it generated proved to be what finally clarified how they could engage in reflective practice research together. What follows is a description of that project and how the authors have grown through self-reflection as well as the

facilitation of each other's reflective practice. The initial stages of this research were presented at the 2018 Teacher Journeys conference in Tokyo.

Review of the Literature

There are numerous definitions of reflection and reflective practice available, so it is important for teachers engaging in reflective activities to identify which definition is most meaningful to them. Dewey (1933) encouraged teachers to engage in "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" (cited in Farrell, 2018, p. 2). Mann (2005) combines multiple definitions to describe reflection as,

A process of inner dialogue and 'conversation with self' and in this cognitive space the language teacher develops awareness of practice. Awareness is an outcome of a reflexive dialogue between knowledge and experience and can happen individually and collaboratively," (Bolton, 2002 as cited in Mann, 2005, p. 108; Prawat, 1992 as cited in Mann, 2005, p. 108).

In shifting the focus to reflective practice definitions, similar elements are present, but with more focus on taking some sort of action. Farrell defines it as:

Reflective practice means more than fleeting thoughts before, during or after a lesson; it means examining what you do in the classroom and why you do it...reflective practice also means thinking about the beliefs and values related to English language teaching, and seeing if classroom practices are consistent with these beliefs and values. (2013, p. 4)

While Farrell emphasizes determining if practices are matching beliefs, Watanabe (2016) focuses on interpreting one's actions for a new purpose thus defining reflective practice as "the activity of looking back over one's actions, thoughts, written and spoken ideas, feelings and interactions, all with the goal of making new meaning for oneself, an activity conducted in dialogue with the self and with others" (p. 47). Another similar interpretation is of reflective practice as a systematic exploration of a teacher's experiences which can occur through activities such as inquiry into situations, description of what happened and analysis of what could have been done differently (Tamai, 2018). Farrell (2018) also emphatically supports the idea that such practice be systematic for teachers to maximize their self-understanding and growth. While other definitions exist, those included above are the ones which held the most meaning to the authors of this paper. This helped form the foundation of the research project and guided the exploration of their individual teacher journeys.

Of the many ways teachers can engage in professional development, critical friendships are particularly effective for fostering community and collaboration through reflective practice. Farrell (2007) describes these as working "with a teacher and giv[ing] advice as a friend rather than a consultant" (p. 149). This appealed to this project's authors because of their close friendship and professional connection. Bristow & Wagner (2017) explored professional development by using a similar relationship as a base for more extensive reflective practice in which one educator facilitated the reflection of the other through both spoken and written dialogues; in addition, recommending articles for further inspiration and discussion. This approach is particularly effective as "competencies are acquired by participants who have an active role in their own development, which in turn is based on two types of knowledge: received knowledge and experiential knowledge," (Wallace, 1991, p. 14). This approach seemed appropriate to both of the authors because it seems to be a natural extension of their friendship and professional relationship.

Finally, no reflective practice research would be complete without addressing the criticisms of the practice itself. Among other things, it has been seen as being dominated by models as well as written reflection, rather than spoken and not being sufficiently data-driven (Mann & Walsh, 2013). Another complaint is that those calling for reflection are not actually "practicing what they preach" (Boud & Walker, 1998; Mann & Walsh, 2013). These criticisms helped the authors of this paper to design a project that fulfilled the authors' needs as reflective practitioners while also contributing to a gap in the literature on the subject.

Context and Participants

The authors first met through their graduate school program, though Jennie was already an alumna of the program when Adrienne (hereafter referred to as Adie) began. Their paths then crossed again in 2014, when they worked together at a private university in Tokyo. Jennie was there as a full-time lecturer while Adie was a part-time lecturer. Their friendship grew both personally and professionally during that time; however, Adie left her part-time position after two years for a full-time position at another private university in Tokyo. Despite the change of circumstances the two continued to meet occasionally for coffee or dinner during which time they discussed their professional lives. In 2017, Jennie left her position in Tokyo to work as a principal lecturer at a private university in Chiba. In the new position, Jennie's duties outside of teaching increased and she took on the responsibility of coordinating professional development opportunities for the teachers at her institution. In the spring of 2018, Adie also left Tokyo to work as an assistant professor at a private university in Shizuoka. Her position too, involved more responsibility outside of teaching, most notably in regards to her Japanese language ability and research. Though the physical distance between their workplaces made it difficult to meet in person for coffee and dinners, the two continued to meet at professional development workshops in Tokyo and stayed in touch using Skype. The culmination of those experiences provided them with the groundwork to begin this current research project.

Methodology

To achieve the goal of fostering a critical friendship, the authors used the work of Bristow and Wagner (2017) as the base of their data collection design, however this research focused exclusively on spoken reflection accompanied by readings. This study intentionally avoids drawing on a particular model so that the authors retained their flexibility in facilitating reflection. The process (Figure 1) was divided into five phases: discuss, analyze, find, share and reflect. The completion of all five phases was labeled as a round. In phase one, discuss, the two authors met online through Skype for approximately an hour. During that time, they used the prompts, such as “What happened this week?”, “How was your week?” and “What did you do?” to begin the discussion. From there, the conversation did not use prompts. During the discussion, the authors were free to take notes as well as practice three types of active listening: internal, focused and global (Kato & Mynard, 2016) to help them transition smoothly into the second phase. Additionally, the audio data was recorded on a smartphone and later uploaded to a shared Google Drive folder. Then in phase two required the authors to review their notes and reflect back on what the other person had said in the discussion. They analyzed the conversations looking for keywords and phrases that appeared to be relevant and meaningful. Next in phase three the authors used the keywords and phrases found in the previous phase to locate books, scholarly articles or other relevant resources to share with their partner. The phase four was to simply share the resources with their partner and schedule or confirm the meeting time for their online reflection meeting. In the spring semester, between mid-May and the beginning of August, the authors completed four rounds. Table 1 is a detailed chart of the dates and articles used.

Figure 1. Visual Representation of Reflective Process



Table 1. *Reflection Round Schedule*

Date	Activity	Suggested Resources
May 17, 2018	Round One	
May 21, 2018		A→J “Threading a Golden Chain: An Attempt to Find Our Identities as Teacher Educators” (Lunenberg & Hamilton, 2008) J→A “Teachers as Learner” Chapter 6 (Kwo, 2010)
May 25, 2018	Adie’s reflection	
May 28, 2018	Jennie’s reflection	
June 8, 2018	Round Two	
June 12, 2018		A→J “Correlates of Work-Life Balance for Faculty Across Racial/Ethnic Groups” (Denson, Szele’nyi, & Bresonis, 2017)
June 16, 2018		J→A “Bridging the Gaps Between Students’ Perceptions of Group Project Work and Their Teachers’ Expectations” (Koh et al., 2009)
June 22, 2018	Adie’s Reflection	
June 28, 2018	Jennie’s Reflection	
	Round Three	
July 6, 2018		A→J “Planning and Realigning a Lesson in Response to Student Contributions Intentions and Decision Making” (Boyd, 2012) J→A “Relationship between EFL Learners’ Autonomy and Speaking Strategies They Use in Conversation Classes” (Salehi, 2015) Using Transcription to Improve Noticing and Develop Effective Learning plans (Werner, 2016)
July 12, 2018	Reflections	
July 20, 2018	Round Four	
July 26, 2018		A→J “Teachers Observing Teachers: A Professional Development Tool for Every School” https://www.educationworld.com/a_admin/admin/admin297.shtml The Dreaded Peer-Teaching Observation” https://www.chronicle.com/article/The-Dreaded-Peer-Teaching/49356
August 3, 2018		J→A “ 4 Ideas for Avoiding Faculty Burnout” https://www.chronicle.com/article/4-Ideas-for-Avoiding-Faculty/243010 “3 Ways Colleges Can Help Faculty Avoid Burnout” https://www.chronicle.com/article/3-Ways-Colleges-Can-Help/243134?cid=cp145

Reflections on Critical Friendships

Reflection on Self

Jennie

While Adie and I have always discussed our teaching at great lengths, usually over a caffeinated beverage, this project has definitely pushed me in ways I did not anticipate. I expected our conversations to continue in the same vein they always had, which was a good balance of brainstorming, problem-solving, and venting frustrations. Those have been a part, for sure, however what has really changed for me is the depth of the reflection on my actions within my classroom. I found myself wanting to provide more justification for my actions, which were not always in the best interests of students. These conversations with Adie have forced me to explore why and when activities fail to go as smoothly as possible or why, when I had better, more effective ideas, I chose not to implement them in class. Through this, I came to a reckoning of sorts—that teaching writing to EFL students, while important to me, is no longer my number one priority. That title belongs to my role as a teacher developer. I do not want to leave the classroom, but I have had to reconcile my priorities as a teacher developer with a slightly lower quality classroom teaching performance that is “good enough.” If I had not had these conversations with Adie, I might have felt guilty, disappointed, or angry with myself for failing. After all, what kind of teacher promoting teacher development fails to commit to their best every lesson? A teacher that chooses to, at least for now, shifts the focus to the growth of another population instead, teachers. Over the months, I have become comfortable with my decisions and learned to adjust my classroom goals and preparation accordingly. It is not easy for me to admit that I am willing to do less than my best work in certain circumstances, but I feel I know myself better as a teacher and as a teacher developer. My professional identity is not the same as it was at the start of this adventure and I feel it changes a bit every month as a result of our conversations. I am sure the rest of this project will push me to grow and reflect on my future decisions in the same way.

Adie

This whole experience has felt natural to me because our friendship has served as the cornerstone of this project. While I originally moved and changed jobs for personal reasons, professionally I was offered a wonderful opportunity in my current position. However, it placed a heavy burden on my shoulders in terms of my Japanese language ability and removed the support network I had created over the 14 years of teaching in the Kanto area. By having Jennie as a friend, and a colleague even though we were separated geographically, I felt a strong sense of support and solidarity when I faced struggles in the spring semester regarding lesson planning, Japanese language ability and the overall pressures of beginning a new job. Through our discussions and reflections, I have felt relieved by sharing the mountains and pitfalls of my situation both inside and outside of the classroom but I also feel confident that what I am doing and why I am doing it has its foundations in literature. Overall, I look forward to where the second half of the academic year will lead me.

Reflection on Facilitation

Jennie

While I consider Adie a peer, I knew going into this project that I was at a different stage in my career than she was. Though we began working in Japan at the same time and in the same position, our paths differ in that I have been an active member in the professional ELT community and working in a university context longer than her. Despite knowing I was facilitating her reflection, I was concerned that I might fall into an advising role. A desire to avoid this forced me to carefully select questions and to remain quiet when, in our normal conversations, I might have shared my experiences or given unsolicited advice. It is natural to want to do this, but I had to remain focused. Actively listening pushed me to identify themes or topics within her comments that could become search terms for articles. I have been much more motivated to find articles to help her than I am to find those which might help me. I want to do right by her because she is my friend and a professional colleague who wishes to grow. Without this impetus to “get out of my head” and support Adie

and her growth, I likely would have succumbed to my own frustrations in the workplace. To quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, "it is one of the most beautiful compensations of this life that no [one] can sincerely try to help another without helping [his/her]self... Serve and thou shall be served" (National Philanthropic Trust). There is a different clarity one receives on their own practice when in the service of someone else's. I am grateful for this opportunity.

Adie

I had never thought of myself as someone who influenced another person's professional development; however, through facilitating for Jennie and finding articles that I thought would speak to her circumstances, I discovered that I am very passionate about not only my own professional development but that of others around me. I realized that in order to find a "good," or what I believe to be a good article, I must think deeply about what Jennie has said each week, and her context, which is quite different from mine. Through doing that though, I often find connections to my situation which means I frequently feel as though I am benefiting doubly. Moreover, I have found that despite our different titles, geographic locations, and teaching contexts, we often have similar issues. This provides me with a strong sense of solidarity and support. I would strongly recommend that all educators at any level find a person that they can foster a critical friendship with because the act of facilitating another person's professional development can also have a strong impact on one's own professional development. Besides, it's always nice to have a friend who will support you and push you to be the best possible professional you can be, with or without the caffeine.

Conclusion

As the authors' reflections illustrate, they have both grown in ways they did not expect and realized they have more to offer each other than just friendship and casual, caffeine-filled conversations. As their critical friendship deepens, this collaborative arrangement pushes each of them professionally. This means that both by reflecting themselves and facilitating meaningful reflective dialogue for the other person. Though this journey is not yet finished, the authors encourage teachers from all contexts and walks of life to engage in reflective practice through critical friendships.

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