

# **The reflective teacher: Towards self-actualization**

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Imagine that we teachers were able to be the students in our classes for just one day. What would we see? What would we think? How would we feel? Imagine all that we could learn from this unique perspective. Although everyday classroom experiences can provide us with the potential to understand and learn more about our individual pedagogic practice, in the hectic activity of teaching we often have little time to consider the reasons for and implications of the many “instinctive and automatic” (Peck, 1993, p. 83) decisions we make in our classes. Moreover, there is often too much unfolding at one time to process, respond to, and remember all aspects of a particular lesson. Since much of what happens may remain hidden or unknown to the teacher (Richards & Lockhart, 1994), we need to make opportunities to revisit our teaching experiences in order to increase our awareness of what it is we actually do, to understand it, challenge it, modify it, and develop from it. As Edge (2002) states:

Everyone has experience. Not everyone learns very much from it. I want to take on the responsibility of doing so (p.15).

This responsibility is “a process of continual, intellectual, experiential, attitudinal growth for teachers” (Lange, 1990, p. 250). It is an ongoing

commitment to try to discover more about our classes, to identify problems or puzzles and experiment with possible methods to solve them. It is accepting the need to keep consciously exploring and learning from our experiences; to keep questioning our intuitions, ideas, and beliefs; to keep expanding our teaching repertoire and to keep increasing our ability to respond to the many diverse needs of our students. Through critical reflection both ‘in’ the act of teaching (our spontaneous responses towards critical incidents in the classroom) and ‘on’ the act of teaching (our sustained thoughts and reflections post-lesson regarding our actions and their consequences) (Schon, 1983), we may “evolve in the use, adaption, and application of our art and craft” (Lange, 1990, p. 250) and empower ourselves towards self-actualization; the realization of our full potential as teachers.

## **The ritualistic teacher: Towards over-routinization**

As we try out new ideas or activities in the classroom either when thinking on our feet or planned, we tend to pay them great attention in terms of their success or failure, their contribution to achieving the lesson outcomes, and their

reception by the students. Once used a couple of times, the particular ideas or activities may become habitual, routine, a recurrent part of our pedagogic bag of tricks. As classroom actions and behavior are repeated over a period of time, we may begin to accept without question or regard our existing beliefs and classroom procedures. The danger here is that if this continues, our teaching may become ritualistic, mechanical, and overroutinized. As Prabhu (1990) states our sense of what may be plausible at any given moment in a lesson may become “frozen, ossified, or inaccessibly submerged, leaving only a schedule of routines” (p. 174). Thus, it is through continual critical reflection on what we do by which we remain open, active, and alive to the possibilities each lesson provides for the growth of our students and for ourselves as teachers.

## Strategies for reflecting

### 1. Self-monitoring

Self-monitoring refers to “a systematic approach to the observation, evaluation, and management of one’s own teaching behavior” (Richards & Farrell, 2005, p. 34) in order to achieve a greater understanding about it. Here, teachers develop their own methods of recording their classes so that information can be accessed later for self-review. Such strategies as using pre-designed checklists, keeping diaries, and video-recording lessons allow teachers stimulus towards recall when reflecting on classroom events. However, in a typical busy working day, it is often difficult to find the time either during or after teaching to document, examine, and explore the many critical classroom incidents or habitual actions that have occurred in each lesson. Thus, we need a quick and immediate means of self-evaluating our performance after each class to help jog our memories of what has happened and to facilitate reflection at a more convenient period of the day. Thus, I often assign lessons a football score (soccer for the American readers!) as a method of

self-monitoring. The ‘match’ has two teams; the teacher and students working together towards achieving the lesson objectives on one side (Teacher and Students United – T.S. Utd) versus things not working as expected on the other side (Unforeseen chaos / Collapse – Un F.C.). Let me explain how this may work. A lesson begins well, the students are on task, and actively engaged in using the L2 (The score is T.S. Utd. 1 Un F.C. 0). In the middle of the lesson, one activity is too difficult for the students. This results in several students code-switching to the L1, whilst others simply do not complete the assigned task and begin to play with their cellular phones (The score is now T.S. Utd. 1 Un F.C. 1). The teacher makes an immediate decision to modify the activity, to provide more scaffolding, and to introduce a game element. The students respond positively to this and the lesson is back on track (The final score is T.S. Utd. 2 Un. F.C. 1). Football scores can be used to evaluate many aspects such as student motivational behavior, comprehensibility of teacher instructions, student reactions to material and activities and so on. Scores can be quickly written down after each lesson and then reviewed and reflected on during the commute back home at the end of a working day.

### 2. Exploring our teaching within dialogic meditational spaces

Johnson (2009) outlines several frameworks for reflective practice that place value on teachers’ narrative accounts of their pedagogic experiences and:

create the potential for sustained dialogic mediation among teachers as they engage in goal-directed activity...and struggle through issues that are directly relevant to their classroom lives (p.95).

One such framework is Edge’s (2002) Cooperative Development (CD) in which two teachers agree to work together for a set period of time to discuss their teaching. The

meditational space is “deliberate and carefully regulated” (Johnson, 2009, p. 105) to maximize the opportunity for one teacher (The Speaker) to talk about and explore a topic of his or her choice whilst being supported by a supportive, non-judgmental listener (The Understander). Through a process of articulating about classroom experiences and explaining them in a way that can be understood by the Understander, the Speaker can externalize and give coherency to his or her previously internal random and chaotic thoughts. As talk continues, the Speaker may heighten recognition and awareness of specific classroom events, discover new perspectives on his or her teaching, and begin to make a plan of action regarding ways to deal with a particular teaching puzzle or critical incident in subsequent classes.

During CD, the Understander withholds any advice, suggestions, opinions, evaluations, or personal anecdotes to make space for the Speaker’s ideas to grow. Being freed from the need to contribute a response from his or her own frame of reference, the Understander is able to focus wholly on listening to and understanding the Speaker and communicating back what he or she has understood. Hearing one’s words repeated back by the Understander as a carefully constructed summary of his or her ongoing thoughts, ideas, and emotions, the Speaker feels encouraged to move forward, to keep exploring, and the potential for new realizations is thereby enhanced. (For further reading on studies conducted in the field of CD and its online version; IMCD, please refer to Boon, 2011).

## Conclusion

Reflection is at the core of teaching. By reflecting in the act of teaching, we make continual, spontaneous decisions on how best to proceed at any given moment within a lesson. However, to learn and grow from our experiences,

to remain fresh and innovative, we need to reflect carefully on what it is we do each day. Whatever strategies we may choose to engage in reflective practice, our goal is to seek pedagogic solutions, evolutions, and revolutions as we strive towards the dizzy heights of self-actualization.

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