

Reformulating Lesson Plans For Teacher Self-Development

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Abstract

This article recommends a simple, time-efficient practice to aid teacher self-development which is called 'Reformulating Lesson Plans'. The details of this are explained in full along with the methods of trial and testing undertaken over a period of several years by the writer/researcher. A variety of similar practices studied during the past several decades are examined in order to locate the current technique in the literature. Comparisons are made and differences are highlighted. The result is a plethora of ready-to-use self-development procedures for teachers in every field to begin using today.

The Paradox

There is a frustrating paradox in teacher development and this article offers a way out. You may recognise the scenario: institution-wide employee-development plans mean that managers or mentors have to encourage teachers to be involved in self-development. And the paradox is this: someone else has to decide whether the teacher has self-developed.

To me at least, this is a floor-less (not flawless) system. Every educator wants to improve themselves and be great at what they do. However, having to do this within a prescribed time-frame, providing concrete evidence, and to then have it scrutinised and sometimes even graded by their superior can take the adventure out of teaching and possibly create resentment towards the superior and the system. For some,

the term 'forced-development' would be a more fitting term than 'self-development'.

I personally couldn't agree more with Harnett and Carr (1996, p. 49) who feel that:

'teachers should be able to choose, uncoerced and for themselves what kind of teacher development they want.'

Although this would be the ideal situation, it is rarely the case; for the purpose of ease, the methods of development selected for us are those that are most visible and therefore the easiest to monitor and evaluate. The main contenders are usually observation or peer-monitoring. These suit some but others find them stressful and intrusive.

Unfortunately, striking these methods off the list leaves limited options. A lot of teachers either struggle to provide evidence to the line

manager breathing down their neck, or at least feel uncomfortable in doing so. One reason for this discomfort is that some processes, such as teaching journals, can be quite personal in nature and the teacher might not necessarily want to share the results. For these individuals, not only are the methods of appraisal disagreeable, they are also haunted by the paradox.

So, I was naturally overjoyed when I stumbled upon a solution to this dilemma which can satisfy both teacher and manager.

Several years ago I was teaching the same lessons to 150 students. Lessons were repeated several times so that students could sign up and attend at any time they wished within a certain period, in classes of 16. I was new to the country and the culture so I needed a way to reflect on how successful certain activities had been, do a brief diagnosis of the potential reasons for any problems, and to hypothesise as to how they might be improved for the next time round.

This situation gave birth to a technique I call 'reformulating lesson plans'. I have developed this method during the intervening years whenever I have had to repeat a lesson or even with common topics or grammar points which I knew I would inevitably teach again soon. While definitely not rocket-science (and very doubtfully original) by any means, it has led to a honing and streamlining of my lesson planning and material writing.

Reformulating lesson plans

Much of the literature in this field talks of the self-discipline needed in terms of time and effort, to conduct self-development exercises. One of the reasons I have continued to enjoy reformulating lesson plans for over five years, is that it doesn't put unnecessarily large time demands on busy teachers but is nevertheless a very effective form of self-development.

This technique involves thinking reflectively just after a lesson and writing notes directly onto lesson plans in order to improve the plan for the next time this lesson is taught. I keep my notes brief and can best be described as a process or reflective spiral of adjustments and readjustments that I go through which ensures that I never fail to learn from the experience of every single lesson.

The process can involve aspects of well-established teacher-development techniques such as journal writing, analysing critical incidents, self-monitoring, and my own personal favourite; action research.

When reformulating lesson plans, I often make changes to the timing, interaction patterns, techniques for presenting new information, materials and many other aspects of the procedure. At times I have discarded some activities altogether and designed new ones, changed the order of lesson stages, or missed out less essential parts to make way for a greater focus on difficulties that were not already predicted. All of this can provide the next set of students with more support or more practice depending on the extent to which the first group of students grasp or struggle with an activity.

One major benefit of reformulating lesson plans is that the improvements are immediate for my next group of learners (in my case this used to be only three or four days later, but now may be the following semester). I know that the next time I teach that lesson it will be better designed. I also become aware of how that lesson could have been better planned from the beginning. This can then be applied as experiential knowledge (or by referring directly to reformulated lesson plans) and allows subsequent lessons to be planned much more effectively as a result.

Support for reformulating lesson plans as a technique for self-development

One day, while feeling pleased with a lesson I had improved, I was hit with a sudden bout of curiosity as to whether other teachers were using similar techniques. I had never heard other teachers talk about it or seen anyone do it where I was working. I felt it was a useful technique in terms of proven results, but I wanted to have this validated by locating it in the field of research on teacher self-development.

I began to research literature which touches on similar techniques. The results of this research are detailed in this section of this article. This small amount of research provided me with a wealth of ideas to try out; some of which I am still utilizing to this day. It is my hope that others can benefit from these ideas too.

Reformulating lesson plans fits very closely with critical reflection for which there are several closely-related models.

Critical Reflection

“The preparation of reflective teachers is a goal which has a long history in teacher education.” (Zeichner, 1987)

The fundamental idea behind ‘critical reflection’ is to examine the methodological reasons behind classroom procedures. If teachers examine aspects of their teaching which could be changed, then they are more able to avoid failures, identify areas of strength, and improve what they do. One of the main attributes of this approach is that teachers can do it independently and alongside their normal teaching.

Models for the process of reflection

Over the years, teacher-researchers have produced a variety of models to explain the stages of their particular cycle of reflection. Cruickshank (Cruickshank et al. 1981, Cruickshank and Applegate 1981), and Schön (1983), among many others have pioneered research into reflective practice, which correlates closely with action research. Although they disagree slightly on the details, their models all illustrate a cycle which is essentially made up of planning, action, observing (or recording) and then reflection. The different models are all very similar but differ in the number of stages and the starting point of the cycle.

The Action Research Spiral

Of the various models for reflective practice, the spiral model devised by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) correlates with my reformulating process more closely than the simpler circular cycle because after one cycle the teacher is certainly in a different place than when they started (hence the spiral as opposed to a circular model). The steps in the second cycle may be the same, but the plan has already been reformulated. Progress has already been made.

Correlating critical reflection with reformulating lesson plans is most easily explained by dividing it into the following stages: planning the lesson, teaching the lesson, making notes on the lesson plan, and reformulating the lesson plan by making alterations to the original.

A more specific form of lesson improvement which falls within the cycles mentioned above, is Neil England’s technique for improving teaching materials which he knows will be re-used, by writing directly onto them at the end of each lesson. This appears as a vignette in Richards and Farrell (2005, p. 35). He asks himself questions

regarding whether his learners received sufficient support, whether the planned activities under- or over-estimated his learners, and about the balance and success of input and practice. This process of reflection leads Neil to revise the way he will implement the materials during subsequent lessons.

I was reassured by the parallels between this process and the process I had been using. Yet there were still further discoveries to come.

Research into keeping a teaching journal and lesson reports suggests that the process of writing itself triggers in-depth analysis on various levels. One advocate of this sort of writing is Belinda Ho.

Comparisons between my technique and Belinda Ho's reflective lesson plans

Reformulating lesson plans and reflective lesson plans are both forms of self-monitoring. These two ideas both involve improvements to lesson plans which are taught more than once, and both involve writing directly onto the lesson plans. However, although they are similar, they are certainly not identical.

The main aspect in which the two techniques differ is writing style. My own style is more functional than descriptive. I reflect on the lesson and make concise notes which indicate specific changes in procedure. In my case, principles, beliefs, and careful self-analysis are behind the notes and decisions made, but are rarely expressed in writing. However, Ho's (1995) writing style is quite similar to that of keeping a teaching journal. She suggests "write diary entries on issues related to principles and beliefs that underlie teaching, and issues that go beyond what happens in the classroom." (Ho, 1995, p. 67, emphasis mine)

An additional piece of research which I could relate to was Ho and Richards (1993), where they analysed journal entries by teachers and

judged writing about the following things (among others), to be critically reflective: justification, opinion, contradictions between theory and practice, knowledge, experience, evaluating lessons, diagnosing problems, solutions to problems, perception of self as a teacher, personal growth and goals, and asking for reasons.

When comparing this list to my own notes on the lesson plan in Appendix 1, it is clear that the reformulating process involves thinking reflectively but includes very little written evidence of issues that Ho and Richards consider to be critically reflective. However, if the process of writing about teaching can encourage the same kind of organisation of thoughts, and self-analysis as other kinds of writing (travel diaries, letters, etc.), then there is a lot to be gained from it in terms of understanding one's previously subconscious thought process. It could be possible to add a stage to this process or to change it slightly to incorporate more writing which would hopefully encourage more self-analysis.

Conclusion

Despite now having a better awareness of my learners' culture and needs, I still reformulate lesson plans in order to provide my learners with the best and most suitable activities I can provide. Teachers will be able to relate to the fact that there is no end-point at which you can sit back and say 'I'm the best teacher I can be'. Teacher self-development is a lifelong process.

It seems to me a reasonable proposition that teachers at any stage of their careers could benefit from adopting or at least experimenting with any of the approaches mentioned above. I first tried this approach after five and a half years of teaching and my students and I are still benefiting from it now.

The silver-lining is that the written evidence provided can also be given to line managers as evidence of self-development. Even though I am lucky enough to have escaped (at least temporarily) to somewhere with a more teacher-led form of development, it is comforting to know that there is a least one paradox which can be defeated.

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