

Reflective Practice for Educators

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Defining Reflective Practice

To the contrary, reflective practice is a challenging, demanding, and often trying process that is most successful as a collaborative effort.

To achieve this perspective, individuals must come to an understanding of their own behavior; they must develop a conscious awareness of their own actions and effects and the ideas or theories-in-use that shape their action strategies.

So, if the purpose of reflective practice is to enhance awareness of our own thoughts and action, as a means of professional growth, how do we begin this process of reflection? How do we begin to develop a critical awareness about our own professional practice? Where do we start?

Reflective Practice as Experiential Learning

Experiential learning theorist, including Dewey, Lewin, and Piaget, maintain that learning is most effective, most likely to lead to behavioral change, when it begins with experience, and specifically problematic experience.

In professional programs, for example, fruitful learning often doesn't begin until the person is on the job.

Experiential learning theory maintains further that learning is a dialectic and cyclical process consisting of four stages: experience, observation and reflection, abstract re-conceptualization, and experimentation (Koib, 1984).

Reflective practice, then, integrating theory and practice, thought and action, is, as Schon described, a "dialogue of thinking and doing through which I become more skillful" (1987, p. 31).

Concrete Experience

In whatever form, problems arise out of a sense of discomfort or a desire to change. There is a discrepancy between what we perceive to be and what we consider desirable; in some way, the situation falls short of the ideal.

In reflective practice, we are seeking deep engagement in learning, and relevance produces engagement: A relevant problem rivets attention and arouses the need to learn.

Adults are not very different: Problems are often seen as an indicator of incompetence and failure. As a result, most of us have effective defenses for preventing problem recognition.

Observation and Analysis

In the first stage of the process, the inquiry is focused on a particular aspect of practice. Finding the problem motivates the practitioner; there is a genuine need for new information. In the second stage of the process, the practitioner assumes the role of a researcher and begins to gather information.

We become the critic watching our own actions on stage.

Actions are influenced not only by ideas but by feelings as well; only by understanding the personal reactions of ourselves and others can we come to a full understanding of the problem and develop appropriate solutions.

Much, if not most, of the data we collect in the observational phase will be qualitative rather than quantitative. The basic issues remain—usefulness, richness, and comprehensiveness.

Nonetheless, because of the deeply ingrained nature of our behavioral patterns, it is sometimes difficult to develop a critical perspective on our own behavior. For that reason alone, analysis occurring in a collaborative and cooperative environment is likely to lead to greater learning.

Argyris and Schon (1974) made a distinction between single-loop learning and double-loop learning. The “fix-it” model is a form of single-loop learning: A solution is developed to correct the presenting problem, but the underlying causes of the problem are neither recognized nor addressed. Single-loop learning is largely ineffective in contributing to long-term solutions to problems because the underlying assumptions that reinforce the ineffective behaviors are never examined. Double-loop learning, on the other hand, holds the potential for real change because it examines these underlying assumptions, or theories-in-use, as part of the problem-solving process. Analysis within the framework of reflective practice is designed to lead to double-loop learning.

Abstract Re-conceptualization

This point in the cycle involves an active search for new ideas and new strategies.

The objective now is to develop alternate hypotheses or action research strategies that may address the problem.

At every stage of the cycle, the nature of the learning has been personal and engaging.

The problem is self-defined and relevant, and the process of observation and analysis in focusing on the individual role in the problem context generates felt need to improve, change, or reinforce effective behaviors.

Confronted with the problem and now with a clearer understanding of the problem and our own role in that problem, the search for knowledge becomes more directed and focused, and—an important distinction—the search is self-directed.

Active Experimentation

In this stage of the cycle, we begin to test this assumption. We make a conscious decision to act in a particular way to test this new conceptualization: We engage in behavioral experiments. These may be trials of our new ideas in actual workplaces or they may be role plays in the relative safety of a reflection group.

Traditional Professional Development: A Portrait

Although ostensibly geared to “success” in the professional context, professional education consists primarily of transmission of knowledge. In this process, knowledge is the province of experts, and learners have access to it through the instructor. The instructor’s role is to convey that information in a clear and concise manner; the learner’s role is to absorb it.

Reflective Professional Development: A Portrait

While the particular activity occurring in a reflectively based development session is more difficult to predict than in a traditionally based session, there are expected behavioral regularities. Students are active participants in the learning process, helping to establish the agenda and shaping the learning process to meet their own needs. The nature of the discussion is as likely to focus on emotions as on ideas and the ideas discussed are those gathered from personal experience as well as from reading and research. Information is provided by all participants.

Purpose

The immediate as well as ultimate purpose of reflective professional development is not knowledge acquisition per se but behavioral change and improved performance.

Assumptions

In the traditional model, most of the time is consumed in giving and receiving public knowledge, knowledge that is available to all and that is not personal or based on individual experience. The primary assumption is that acquisition of shared knowledge will lead to behavioral change.

“The assumptions made about behavioral change in the reflective practice model are more complex than in the traditional model of professional development. Behavioral change comes through self-awareness of formerly unrecognized assumptions lying in the theory-in-use, unrecognized habitual behaviors, and unrecognized negative outcomes of these behaviors. Change is a process begun not by learning a new idea from an expert but by recognition that something is not exactly “right” in one’s own professional practice.

When the “fix” is not supported by the surrounding culture, it is quickly rejected. This is especially true when the relationship between behavior and culture remains unrecognized.

Content

The kind of knowledge transmitted in traditional approaches, especially graduate courses, is often called “theory,” or what Schon described as a knowledge that is “specialized, firmly bounded, scientific, and standardized” (1983, p. 23).

The knowledge bases employed in the reflective practice approach to professional development are more varied and complex than those in the traditional approach.

In reflective practice, other varieties of knowledge are central. These are described as personal knowledge, knowledge as problematic, and knowledge as process. A personal knowledge perspective assumes that “worthwhileness . . . cannot be judged apart from its relationship to the knower. Knowledge is useful only in so far [*sic*] as it enable persons to make sense of experience. [It] is gained from the ‘inside.’ [It] has the connotation of *Verstehen* or holistic understanding” (Berlak & Berlac, 1981, p. 145).

In the reflective practice mode, the link between theory and practice is explicit—not implicit as in the traditional approach—and the developmental process begins with practice.

The central knowledge questions are much broader than in the traditional approach: “What do we do, and why do we do it?” “How do our knowledge, our understanding, our personal theoretical framework affect our own behavior?” Given new knowledge, what will we do differently?”

Process

The learner is active and directive in the learning process, and the facilitator and learner—each of whom brings knowledge and expertise to the situation—become collaborators working on a shared task.

Reflective practice assumes a holistic approach to learning. Beginning with individual behavior, anything related to it becomes part of the process. At the very least, this includes the individual’s background and cultural context.

The concept of cognition also expands from a narrow emphasis on information gathering or recall to the development of analytic and conceptual skills that enable the individual to create knowledge needed to respond to the diverse demands of practice.

In reflective practice, learning is cooperatively based. Collaboration extends beyond the learner-facilitator relationship to include all of the individuals in an interdependent learning process.