

**Reflecting at the edge of order and chaos**

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Maybe reflective practices offer us a way of trying to make sense of the uncertainty in our workplaces and the courage to work competently and ethically at the edge of order and chaos... (Ghaye, 2000, p.7)

**Abstract**

This paper explores the reflection process of a trainee teacher. It starts with the thought process behind selecting, from various theorists, an appropriate model of reflection suitable for both the individual's style of teaching and the school's existing practices, and how aspects of other models will be incorporated. It then goes on to provide an honest and practical account of how this reflective method is implemented practically across various situations encountered during the course of the term and how it scaffolds the growth of the pupils and the trainee. Challenges, drawbacks and realisations are discussed as part of this process, ending with the retrospective view of the trainee on the journey they have made so far.

**The nature of reflection**

Reflection is a topic at the forefront of discourse (inside and outside the education sphere), both as a vital tool in the growth of new teachers and for experienced professionals to keep techniques sharp and current (Pollard, 2002). Though criticality and reflection are an expectation of most organisations, true and effective reflection comes from the desire to excel and improve oneself (Bassot 2016). It also helps deal with surprising or unscripted situations, a daily occurrence in the field of teaching, so that one would know how to react to this. Furthermore, reflection ensures that overlearning or mechanical teaching practice does not occur (Schön 1983), this being a slippery slope to passionless and difficult to engage with practice.

**Choosing a model**

Due to the clear importance of reflection, my first task was to decide which model I would choose to use to guide my self-improvement. Choosing a model is a necessary task, as even "thinking hard" about a topic may not be fruitful without a framework, and models can help break down the various stages of processes of reflective practice so there is more clarity for the teacher about what to consider, and the next steps. This is substantiated by Dewey (1997, pg16), in which he states that "Each step serves to inform and form the next making it consecutive actions not simply a sequence of events", thus the frameworks will help me adapt as I progress through the reflective process.

I considered several models, initially drawn to Dewey's idea of considering the validity of "taken-for-granted" knowledge that may not be working smoothly in practice. Moving me from the "experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled or harmonious (1933, p. 100)", and foremost, helping rid me of many misconceptions I had both about the practicalities of teaching and education as a system. Further to this, Schön's (1983) work on "in-action" and "on-action" reflection, his facilitation of practitioner development and building of tacit knowledge. Despite criticisms of the practicality of "in-action" reflection (Hébert, 2015, pp.368), aspects of Schön's model have helped guide my own reflective journey in this very manner.

**Citation**

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Though aspects of these models would find place in my reflections, I finally settled on Brookfield's model, termed the "Four Lenses of Critical Reflection" and the notion of critical reflection. The most poignant aspect of this to me was that of questioning assumptions, as 'our actions are based on assumptions we have about how best to help students learn' (Brookfield, 2017, pg2) with these assumptions originating from both our own experience. Our assumptions can have varying validity, and often are so ingrained we are unable to see them clearly, and so alternate vantage points such as these four lenses allow us to increase our awareness of ourselves. I choose this as my main model for several reasons. Firstly, it coincided with my school's existing practice, especially in the aspects of colleague aided reflection through observation and mentoring. Further to this, children are encouraged to give feedback about what they like and dislike in their school environment, which lends itself to the colleague lens and student lens respectively.

### **From theory to practice – expanding my view**

The first opportunity to use Brookfield occurred during a history lesson (Critical incident extract 1), in which, as a nervous trainee teacher, I realised I had yet to take into account a crucial viewpoint in formulating my work, that of my pupils.

(Unprompted student feedback informing future lesson development)

Engagement and energy in class has been low in History until today, where they participated in a social farming simulation to immerse in Anglo-Saxon culture. They surprised me at the end by telling me it was their favourite lesson, they loved pretending to be someone from the past and working with the whole class. Link to Vygotsky's social learning theory (1978) and how social interaction is the key for cognitive development? And in this case further linked to engagement, without which the lesson is stunted. As long as I am aware of the more introverted students, factoring this performance loving nature into future lessons may well increase engagement and learning.

Critical Incident Extract 1

This opened my eyes to how limited my singular autobiographical viewpoint was, and led me to realise that I had much to learn in lesson creation. In almost all future lessons I began to add more interactive aspects, and this has greatly increased engagement and in turn lowered undesirable behaviour. By considering Vygotsky's social learning theory and Zones of development (Pollard et al, 2014) I have used a range of mixed ability groups to further the cohesiveness and achievements of my less able or less engaged individuals. I initially shied away from groups that would generate a lot of energy, however, properly directed, this has been conducive to improving engagement and attainment. This was reminiscent of Brookfield's (1995) characterisation of critical reflection as 'stance and dance'. The critically reflective teacher's stance toward teaching being one of inquiry and being open to further investigation. The dance involves experimentation and risk towards modifying practice while moving to fluctuating, and possibly contradictory, rhythms (Larrivee, 2000). Furthermore, considering Kolb's (2005) work prompted me to think critically on how to design my activities to be accessible to the learner thus encouraging engagement as well as identifying weaker areas and strengthening them through use of reflection. Realising that engagement was a crucial area for my students I had to correct my own misconception that the students were unable to do the tasks set them. The reality, I came to realise, was that they would engage, but only on a level that was accessible for them (Kolb 2005), and that facilitating that for them should be a top priority for me, as student engagement is necessary and beneficial for students' academic competencies, achievements, socialization, welfare, life satisfaction as well as for effective learning (Willms et al 2009).

The benefits of the four lens' approach only became apparent when I discovered that purely autobiographical reflection is limited in its efficacy (Critical Incident extract 2, week 1 and week 2).

Week 1

First attempt at behaviour management very limited success, with a lot of low level disruption limiting efficacy of lessons. Mentor highlighted usefulness of using experienced colleagues tactics in my own lessons and so has set up observation opportunities.

Week 2

Using embedded strategies learned from observing other colleagues (e.g. clapping, voices off) has led to better success, observed in observation and in PPA in other year groups. Effective at settling class and gaining attention rather than trying unfamiliar strategies. Will continue to gather such well established techniques.

Critical Incident 2, 2 week review

Looking back at a recently taught (and observed) lesson, I *believed* that my behaviour management was very effective, bringing down an excitable class to a teachable, engaged level. Contrary to this however, my experienced colleague who observed me differed, and that was when I realised that only using a single, autobiographical lens did not allow me a clear view of the overall picture. Her explanation showed me that I was not even aware of tactics that were not working, or of a lot of basic classroom techniques that would, in the coming weeks, be something I worked to strengthen. She noted that there was a lot of low level disruption around the classroom, but due to this improving from high level disruption, I was personally less aware of it. Though this was initially disheartening it was the perfect opportunity for me to factor in the colleague lens into my reflective process.

Adopting the colleague lens in developing my reflection brought many benefits to me, allowing me to capitalise on the social nature of my own learning (Vygotsky, 1978) as well as to weave my own values and innovation into the policies and values of the school itself. This serves to temper misconceptions I had as a trainee with the collective experience of those around me, yet still allow me to inject my own personality into the work itself, keeping me both fulfilled yet educationally effective (Kohl, 1986; Nias, 1989). Not only has my colleague's viewpoints expanded what I am able to consider when reflecting, they have been able to scaffold my own reflective process using their personal experiences with their own reflection (Coulson and Harvey, 2013).

### Combining the lenses

The majority demographic of my students is that of severe economic deprivation, high ratio of special needs and minimal parental support. This brings to me challenges that at first, I struggled to overcome. Extract 3 shows my reflection with one such pupil (one of many incidents across my class) but epitomises the usefulness of combining all four lenses.

Student who is violently head banging and other Self Injurious Behaviour, what to do when having a negative effect on others in class, Bronfenbrenner's theory, learning my values and beliefs are not accurate for all. I need to seek advice from SENDCO and Home Link Worker. Can I use my previous knowledge of preventing SIB from previous work with autistic children (SIB as function of gaining attention)? Also need to look into studies on reducing demand without distinguishing pupil from class.

Result:

After several weeks of work, there is a marked difference in the pupil and our interaction in class. Less headbanging on desk, and that to a milder degree. He is able to communicate better pre-breakdown to alleviate anxiety. Identifying function was as an escape from work, not as attention gain (previous work running Functional Behaviour Assessments helped a lot here, though he is not autistic). Work with HSLW and main teacher established a huge lack of boundaries at home, coupled with zero praise for any efforts or achievement, as well as a

family history of mental health problems and educational difficulty. Establishing boundaries and creating strict behaviour guidelines combined with huge praise for any small achievement of effort has been very effective at increasing motivation. Literature led to simple but effective tactic of giving more processing time for questions (Stahl, 1994; Rowe, 1986).

### Critical Incident Extract 3

Here I used a combination of all four of Brookfield's lenses, as well as considering Bronfenbrenner's (1979) theory of wider contexts affecting the accuracy of the whole picture. Through use of my own autobiographical lens (the foundation of critical reflection), I was able to correct my misconception of the function of the behaviour, thus affecting how I engaged with the behaviour. Secondly, the colleague lens was invaluable in bringing together individuals who had an understanding of various parts of the child's situation (and varying areas of expertise related to this) so that we could formulate a plan suitable for him to support both his educational and social needs, as well as to inform our next steps. Next, the student's lens. Better communication between the pupil, his link worker and finally his teachers helped us understand the route that we needed to take when talking with him (from a purely comforting to more matter of fact and concise language), instilling boundaries that were greatly beneficial to him (Hoghughi 1998) and simultaneously enabling him to better convey his anxiety and needs to us, informing us on his progress so we could adapt as needed. Finally, looking towards the lens concerned with theoretical literature, we were led to studies by both Stahl (1994) and Rowe (1986) on processing time in student/teacher interaction. Giving him more space to consider, process and return an answer led to an increase in engagement, decrease in feelings of social isolation (as reported by himself) and better understanding of key themes in his lessons. A further benefit was that the student's attendance increased dramatically, further showing the efficacy of the work done with him (Davis 2011).

This combination of all four lenses centred on the incidents and needs of a single child was exactly what I needed to inform and alter the way I understood and worked with him and the challenges we had to face, and without a structure to base reflection on, the end result may have been different. Furthermore, I feel the use of Brookfield's four lenses has improved my own reflective thought progress, and made me a more efficient, and open minded teacher because of it.

### **Incorporating the strengths of other styles**

Though I have mainly been focussing on using Brookfield, it is not always the most suitable model as it is quite time consuming (though it does provide a thorough inspection of critical incidents) thus I have also found value in some aspects of other theorists' models. One such occasion was during an issue of behaviour management, wherein a student was being both non-compliant and disruptive. It became apparent to me whilst dealing with the student that the embedded sanctions policy of the school actually served the function of the behaviour, which was both to escape work and gain attention from senior management. This "in-action" reflection (Schön, 1983) prompted me to change my line of action, and instead of following through with the usual, ineffective routine, I decided to take a different approach. Instead of engaging the student, I began using vicarious reinforcement (Ollendick, T 1984) (a tactic I had been shown during observations of colleagues) to praise the children around the pupil for their "amazing, ready-to-learn body language". This proved to be very effective, and helped me understand that the standard routine shown in classrooms does not work for every child, and that to deal with behaviours effectively, having a wider repertoire of responses helps cover more unanticipated situations (Egyed and Short 2006).

### **Growth for the future**

Reflection has helped me to develop myself, overcoming the chaos of the classroom to expand my strengths yet more importantly, to address my misconceptions and build on weaknesses I initially did

not even know I had. From this gain in confidence in and outside the classroom I feel I have transitioned away from a “survival” mentality to focussing on the content of my lessons and the actual learning of the students, decentring myself to become more effectively reflective (Furlong et al 1994). Brookfield’s model, among others, has helped to scaffold this growth, focusing my initial drive to learn and stripping away the preconceived ideas I had about teaching and my pupils, and enabling me to address areas that have broadened my scope of the road leading to being not only an effective, but an ever growing teacher.

Without understanding self, we run the risk of thinking good intentions and subject knowledge trump the unintentional consequences of take-it-for-granted assumptions we unwittingly bring into the classroom. (Wagenheim et al 2009)

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