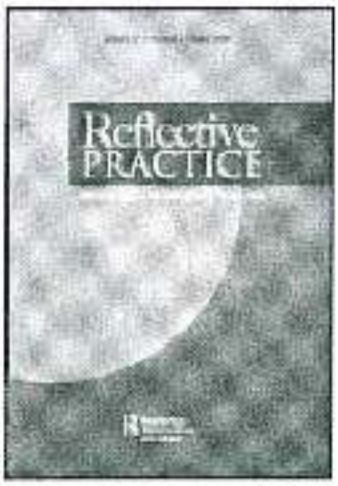

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Can reflective practice be taught?

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Professional educators often advocate reflective practice; it is less clear that they model it and provide explicit instruction. Working with illustrations from initial teacher education, this paper describes the author's own reflection-in-action that resulted in an explicit strategy for helping new professionals experience the potential benefits of reflective practice through their program of professional preparation. The author concludes that reflective practice can and should be taught. The results of explicit instruction seem far more productive than merely advocating reflective practice and assuming that individuals will understand how reflective practice differs profoundly from our everyday sense of reflection.

There seems to be more rhetoric about the value of reflective practice than there is detail about how professional educators can help beginning professionals develop the skills of reflective practice and acquire initial experiences. My own interest in reflective practice resides in the context of pre-service and in-service teacher education. My experiences in pre-service teacher education began in 1977 and thus preceded the arrival of Schön's (1983) explicit naming of 'the reflective practitioner' as a goal for education in the professions. Initial teacher education already had a strong commitment to having students keep journals of their practicum experiences in professional settings, and I can recall student complaints that virtually every person teaching them seemed to require a separate journal. Thus I was not at all surprised when reflective practice attracted a great deal of attention in the mid-1980s and then seemed to fade away when there was little evidence that reflective practice prepared better new professionals.

More than 20 years later, there is a journal named *Reflective practice* that confirms that many professional educators continue to pursue reflective practice as an important element of professional preparation. There is also healthy and important debate about reflection; writers such as Fendler (2003) might challenge the approach offered in this paper. As many teacher education mission statements attest, initial teacher

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education continues to espouse the importance of reflective practice. Yet year after year those whom I teach report that many of their teachers urge them to engage in reflective practice but no one either helps them develop specific skills or provides a personal model of reflective practice. Others have also made similar observations:

> We have often asked our students to reflect on field experiences without ever discussing the qualities of good reflection, often with disappointing results. Students do not automatically know what we mean by reflection; often they assume reflection is an introspective after-the-fact description of teaching. Reflection, meant to make teaching and learning understandable and open, has itself been an invisible process to many of our pre-service teachers. (Ward & McCotter, 2004, p. 255)

In recent years I have attempted to explore this issue personally, with encouraging results. I argue here that the question 'Can reflective practice be taught?' deserves the explicit attention of professional educators. My illustrations are drawn from my personal practice in initial teacher education, in the tradition of self-study (Bullough & Pinnegar, 2001; Loughran *et al.*, 2004).

What is reflective practice?

The absence of any clear agreement about what reflective practice is and how we recognize it helps us understand why it is not clear how to teach it. Several research projects in the 10 years following publication of *The reflective practitioner* in 1983 helped me to develop a personal understanding of what might be new and significant in Schön's work (Russell & Munby, 1991; Munby & Russell, 1994). Schön distinguished between reflection-*on*-action (which seems to closely resemble our everyday concept of reflection as thinking back through recent events) and reflection-*in*-action. Three elements of Schön's (1983) account of reflection-in-action attracted my attention: (1) a puzzling or surprising event during teaching might stimulate 'reframing,' recognizing a new way of perceiving or thinking about the professional situation of practice; (2) the new perspective might stimulate a novel course of action; and (3) actually carrying out the novel course of action might provide evidence for deciding if the new perspective and associated new actions deserved to be included in future professional practice. In this paper, I organize the presentation of my argument to illustrate these three steps of my own reflective practice as I explored the question, 'Can reflective practice be taught?'

Reflecting-in-action on the teaching of reflective practice

A puzzling event

In 2000, several individuals in our initial teacher education program spoke openly about reflection as 'fluff', particularly when they compared it to the work they had been assigned in the final years of their undergraduate studies. Virtually anything they wrote seemed to count as 'reflection' and they reported that stories circulated of individuals who invented experiences simply in order to complete an assignment quickly.

This hardly seems a productive introduction to the nature of professional learning, particularly when professional educators themselves attribute high value to reflection. I resolved to try to understand the issue more completely and attempt some changes to my own practices intended to foster reflective practice.

Reframing to develop a novel course of action

In 2001, one student seemed to pay particular attention to my teaching. He had more time than others because he did not intend to become a teacher; he was completing our pre-service program while waiting to start a training program in another field. He was the one person that year who accepted my invitation to send electronically a weekly practicum report during the 10-week practicum in the first half of the program. I responded each week with comments, usually within 24 hours. At the end of the program, his advice to me and my colleagues could be summed up as 'Talk far less about reflection and becoming a critically reflective practitioner'. Instead, *teach people how to reflect*, through the assignments given, and then conclude the year by demonstrating how the assignments had developed skills of 'reflective practice'. This individual offered the following comments on our structured discussion of his practicum.

> Writing my side of the story allowed me to reflect back on what had gone on over the previous week and forced me to formalize my thoughts and opinions based on my experiences to that point (versus just keeping a mental picture).
>
> Our discussion in the story ended up being more general in nature as opposed to detailed. Issues or events I mentioned tended to be turned into a broader subject (i.e., debriefs and strategy tips turned into watching for why experienced teachers do what they do vs. what they do). In this sense, the interaction tended to be more in-depth than conversation with other teacher candidates, as we tended to want to tell anecdotes to each other and were limited in our abilities to mentor each other. The daily grind was front and centre among the teacher candidates, but the story often pulled the discussion towards more fruitful topics.
>
> The benefits of the story were hindered due to the way in which our dialogue took place. I wrote up my experiences of the past week and you promptly responded. In reading the reply, I would often spend just a short time digesting what was being said and quickly fall back into the world of practice teaching, all but forgetting what was said.
>
> The true benefits of the story came when I went back [to Queen's] in January and commented on everything both you and I wrote. I was able to reflect back on the practicum as a whole and was not under any real time restrictions.
>
> In revisiting my thoughts I was able to take a more objective look at my thoughts and discard or reinforce them as I went. I was also able to spend more time examining what you had said. Although I would not be able to put suggestions into practice, I was in a better position to evaluate the potential impact of your suggestions with the experience I had gained over the practicum.
>
> Overall, this was an exercise in reflection. Each week, I would write about the main events of the previous week and their impact. I would then (albeit for a short time) revisit the previous week when I received your response. Finally, I was able to devote my full attention to what had happened when reviewing and commenting on the entire dialogue. By going back to the story ... my experiences were kept fresh in my memory.

> I can say that I have spent more time thinking about what happened during my year than I would have had I not engaged in this dialogue. (Anonymous candidate, personal communication, 28 August 2002)

These encouraging comments suggested a potentially valuable contribution to professional development. They also provided helpful insights into how the electronic 'discussion' compared to discussions with others. I resolved to extend this approach to teaching and supporting reflection to my work with an entire class of teacher candidates.

Exploring the new perspective in action

The 2003–2004 program year provided my first opportunity to explore a explicit approach to teaching reflection. For many years I had asked teacher candidates to write the 'story of their year learning to teach' in installments at several points through the program; I provided little structure, and the results were extremely varied.

To give the revised approach appropriate structure, I prepared a word-processing file containing five tables, one to be completed at each of five points through the program: (1) after four weeks of classes prior to the first practicum; (2) after five weeks of teaching; (3) after 10 weeks of teaching; (4) after seven more weeks of education classes; and (5) at the conclusion of the program. Each table has three columns—the first with questions intended to foster thinking about professional learning, the second for responses, and the third for my subsequent comments. The table format is advantageous because each cell expands as one types, permitting responses of any length. Questions are posed about particular features of the recently completed phase of the program and about broader issues related to development as a professional. The following examples are indicative:

- What do you see as your major strengths as a new teacher?
- What challenges do you see in learning from experience?
- Summarize your major insights into the nature and challenges of teaching during the practicum.
- In what deliberate ways will you try to change your teaching style in the final practicum?
- In what specific ways could we improve the contribution of theory to practice?
- To what extent has this assignment helped you understand your early development as a teacher?

Assessing the impact of the reframed approach

Responses exceeded my expectations. I began the year by speaking of reflection as 'the R-word,' not to be mentioned in our classes despite its frequent mention in other classes. I wanted experience, not my talking, to introduce the process. Only after my students received my comments on their first responses could they begin to get a sense that they were actually engaging in reflective practice rather than being told

about it. The exchange of files five times over the duration the program proved helpful in creating a personal relationship with each individual in a class of 30. In our final class meeting, I drew explicit links to reflection and people did seem to see that they had experienced significant guidance in how to reflect. My course evaluations were the most positive of my career, and one factor seemed to be this structured approach to a personal dialogue that created a written record of significant experiences and reframed perspectives over the duration of our pre-service program.

Now in my second year with the new approach, one member of my physics method class sent the following comment with the third of five installments of the assignment (referred to as 'Story'):

> Story is by far the best assignment of my B.Ed. I look back on parts 1 and 2 and I'm amazed at what I wrote. It is truly an excellent record of this adventure. (Anonymous candidate, personal communication, 2 January 2005)

Intrigued, I requested details and received the following elaboration:

> Story is a dialogue, a communication between you and me, rather than a one-way essay. It enables me to focus my thoughts and discover what I am actually thinking and feeling. The volume of words is not that great, but I spend a great deal of time writing it.
>
> Doing Story is quality time. I'm investing a year of my life and a lot of money on this venture. When I do Story, I'm learning; it's time well spent. It's all about me. I won't find answers in any book or journal; it all comes from within, and there are no RIGHT answers.
>
> I know you are actually reading, thinking about and reacting to my inputs. I really look forward to reading your comments.
>
> It's an excellent record of my B.Ed. I simply won't have any other; journals just don't work for me. (Anonymous candidate, personal communication, 3 January 2005)

This is only one individual's perspective, yet the message that this particular set of assignments is fostering reflection in these ways indicates a good match between the reported values and the ones I believe are important in the development of teachers' professional knowledge (Munby *et al.*, 2001).

Can reflective practice be taught?

My interest in discussing practicum experiences with those I teach led me to develop a suitable structure and process at a time when I was also prompted to think more carefully about the gap between the goal of developing critically reflective practitioners and the lack of explicit strategies and support for reaching that goal. I continue to explore the effects of a new practice that was stimulated by a new way of listening to future teachers. I now believe that professional educators may have underestimated the complexity of Schön's (1983) contribution to how we think about the nature of professional learning. Fostering reflective practice requires far more than telling people to reflect and then simply hoping for the best. I now believe that reflective practice can and should be taught – explicitly, directly, thoughtfully and patiently—using personal reflection-in-action to interpret and improve one's teaching of

reflective practice to others. Further research on strategies for teaching reflective practice should prove valuable for professional educators.

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Tom Russell is a Professor in the Faculty of Education at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. His research focuses on how we learn to teach, with special attention to developing skills of reflective practice and learning from experience. He teaches preservice physics methods, supervises the preservice practicum, and teaches action research in the graduate program. Tom is a Co-Editor of the *International handbook on self-study of teaching and teacher education practices* (Kluwer, 2004) and a Co-Editor of the journal *Studying teacher education*.

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