



Transforming Teaching Practice: becoming the critically reflective teacher

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ABSTRACT *This article proposes a framework for conceptualizing developing as a critically reflective teacher. The author posits that critical reflection is the distinguishing attribute of reflective practitioners. The term critical reflection as developed here merges critical inquiry, the conscious consideration of the ethical implications and consequences of teaching practice, with self-reflection, deep examination of personal beliefs, and assumptions about human potential and learning. Essential practices for developing critical reflection are discussed. This article defines processes fundamental to reflective practice. Teacher beliefs are self-generating, and often unchallenged. Unless teachers develop the practice of critical reflection, they stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations. Approaching teaching as a reflective practitioner involves infusing personal beliefs and values into a professional identity, resulting in developing a deliberate code of conduct.*

Introduction

Today's classroom is dynamic and complex. More students are coming to school neglected, abused, hungry, and ill-prepared to learn and work productively. To combat increasing student alienation, and meet the scope and intensity of the academic, social and emotional needs of today's students, those entering the teaching profession will need to find ways to create authentic learning communities by adjusting the power dynamics to turn power *over* into power *with* learners. These changing demands call for teaching styles that better align with emerging metaphors of teacher as social mediator, learning facilitator, and reflective practitioner. Being able to function in these roles begins with teacher self-awareness, self-inquiry, and self-reflection, not with the students.

Becoming an effective teacher involves considerably more than accumulating skills and strategies. Without tying teaching and management decisions to personal beliefs about teaching, learning, and development, a teacher will have only the bricks. The real 'stuff' of teaching is the mortar—what holds the bricks in place and provides a foundation. Being successful in today's classroom environment goes beyond taking on fragmented techniques for managing instruction, keeping students on-task, and handling student behavior. It requires that the teacher remain fluid and able to move

in many directions, rather than stuck only being able to move in one direction as situations occur. Effective teaching is much more than a compilation of skills and strategies. It is a deliberate philosophical and ethical code of conduct.

When teachers become reflective practitioners, they move beyond a knowledge base of discrete skills to a stage where they integrate and modify skills to fit specific contexts, and eventually, to a point where the skills are internalized enabling them to invent new strategies. They develop the necessary sense of self-efficacy to create personal solutions to problems.

If teachers latch onto techniques without examination of what kinds of teaching practices would be congruent with their beliefs, aligned with their designated teaching structures, and harmonious with their personal styles, they will have just a bag of tricks. Without tying teaching decisions to beliefs about the teaching/learning process and assumptions about, and expectations for students, teachers will have only isolated techniques. Unless teachers engage in critical reflection and ongoing discovery they stay trapped in unexamined judgments, interpretations, assumptions, and expectations.

On Becoming the Critically Reflective Teacher

Developing as a critically reflective teacher encompasses both the capacity for critical inquiry and self-reflection. Critical inquiry involves the conscious consideration of the moral and ethical implications and consequences of classroom practices on students. Few teachers get through a day without facing ethical dilemmas. Even routine evaluative judgments of students' work is partly an ethical decision, in that lack of opportunity to learn as well as impact on self-concept are ever-present considerations. Self-reflection goes beyond critical inquiry by adding to conscious consideration the dimension of deep examination of personal values and beliefs, embodied in the assumptions teachers make and the expectations they have for students. For discussion purposes, the term *critical reflection* will be used to merge the two concepts of critical inquiry and self-reflection, and define the distinguishing attribute of reflective practitioners. Critical reflection involves examination of personal and professional belief systems, as well as the deliberate consideration of the ethical implications and impact of practices.

Typically, the terms reflective thinking, critical thinking, reflective judgment as well as critical reflection have each been used to define a way of thinking that accepts uncertainty and acknowledges dilemmas, while ascribing less significance to the role of self in the reflective process (e.g., Dewey, 1933,1938; King & Kitchener, 1994; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991; Zehm & Kottler, 1993). In Dewey's (1933,1938) writings, he asserted that the capacity to reflect is initiated only after recognition of a problem or dilemma *and* the acceptance of uncertainty). The dissonance created in understanding that a problem exists engages the reflective thinker to become an *active inquirer*, involved both in the critique of current conclusions and the generation of new hypotheses. According to Dewey, reflective thinking requires continual evaluation of beliefs, assumptions, and hypotheses against existing data, and against other plausible interpretations of the data. Resulting decisions remain open to

further scrutiny and reformulation. Similarly, King & Kitchener (1994) posited that one operating at the highest stage of reflective judgment knows that a solution is only a hypothetical conjecture of what is, recognizing the temporary nature of any solution. These definitions of critical or reflective thinking seem to suggest that it is primarily cognitive problem solving.

The definition of critical reflection to be developed here attributes greater influence to the role of self-reflection and critically challenging self-imposed limitations as well as idealizations. More aligned with this conceptualization, Brookfield (1995) depicts critical reflection as a matter of 'stance and dance'. The stance toward teaching practice is one of inquiry, it being in constant formation and always open to further investigation. The dance is one of experimentation and risk, modifying practice while moving to fluctuating and sometimes contrary rhythms. Often a contradictory tempo is created through realization that students may experience the educational processes a teacher initiates in unintended ways (i.e. self-reflection). Despite honorable intentions, the teacher may discover that students are humiliated or confused by actions intended to be supportive or clarifying.

Engaging in critical reflection brings commonly-held beliefs into question. Beliefs are convictions we hold dearly, having confidence in their truth, while acknowledging they are not susceptible to proof. Our beliefs shape our identity; hence shedding a dearly-held belief shakes our very existence. If a teacher tries to shed the belief that the teacher must be in control to be effective, it means revealing uncertainty and vulnerability.

As with all mental models, there is a clear distinction between what we profess to believe in and our *values in action*, those that actually guide our behavior (Senge *et al.*, 1994). Our operating values steer how we behave on a daily basis to pursue educational goals and student outcomes. They also define the lines we will and will not cross. Values are our ideals; hence, they are subjective and arouse an emotional response. In teaching, often sets of values are in conflict, challenging the teacher to weigh competing values against one another and play them off against the facts available. For example, a teacher may value being consistent while simultaneously valuing treating students justly, and there are times when to be fair is to be inconsistent. To be critically reflective is to act with integrity, openness, and commitment rather than compromise, defensiveness, or fear.

Argyris (1990) pointed out how our beliefs are self-generating, and often untested, based on conclusions inferred from our selected observations. In other words, from all the data available to us, we select data by literally choosing to see some things, and ignore others. He coined the term 'reflexive loop' to describe the circular process by which we select data, add personal meaning, make assumptions based on our interpretations of the selected data, draw conclusions, adopt beliefs, and ultimately take action. We stay in a reflexive loop where our unexamined beliefs affect what data we select. Likewise, Senge (1990) referred to such deeply ingrained assumptions, generalizations, and images as 'mental models' that sway how we understand the world and consequently act. We frequently are not aware either of our mental models, or their effect on our actions. What we articulate is important, or 'espouse' is often out of line with our mental models, or core beliefs. However,

we do act in accordance with our mental models, often rendering our actions incongruent with what we espouse.

We develop mental habits, biases, and presuppositions that tend to close off new ways of perceiving and interpreting our experiences. While advocates of reflective practice emphasize starting with one's personal experiences, they also stress the importance of critical analysis and reformulation of that experience (e.g. Argyris, 1990; Brookfield, 1995; Burbules, 1993; Kasl *et al.*, 1993; Knowles, 1992; Mezirow, 1991; Senge, 1990; Senge *et al.*, 1994; Sokol & Cranton, 1998). While acknowledging the importance of experience, it is also important to recognize its potential for distortion. Experience is culturally and personally 'sculpted'. Experience is not pure—everything is contextually bound. Personal experiences need the critical checks provided by multiple lenses of students' and colleagues' perspectives.

Critical reflection involves a deep exploration process that exposes unexamined beliefs, assumptions, and expectations and makes visible our personal reflexive loops. Becoming a reflective practitioner calls teachers to the task of facing deeply-rooted personal attitudes concerning human nature, human potential, and human learning. Reflective practitioners challenge assumptions and question existing practices, thereby continuously accessing new lens to view their practice and alter their perspectives.

Essential Practices for Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

The process of becoming a reflective practitioner cannot be prescribed. It is a personal awareness discovery process. While it is not possible to prescribe a linear process or define a step-by-step procedure, there are actions and practices that are fundamental to developing as a reflective practitioner. The following three practices are essential: making time for solitary reflection, becoming a perpetual problem-solver and questioning the status quo (Larrivee, 1999). The first creates an opening for the possibility of reflection while the others allow for a way of developing teaching practice that accepts uncertainty, recognizes contextual bounds and considers multiple plausible causal explanations for events and circumstances.

Making Time for Solitary Reflection. Engaging in systematic reflection means making it an integral part of daily practice. Making time for thoughtful consideration of their actions and critical inquiry into the impact of their own behavior keeps teachers alert to the consequences of their actions on students. Teachers also need reflective time to consider the inevitable uncertainties, dilemmas, and tradeoffs involved in everyday decisions that affect the lives of students. Any effort to become a critically reflective teacher involves negotiating feelings of frustration, insecurity, and rejection. Taking solitary time helps teachers come to accept that such feelings are a natural part of the change process.

Keeping a reflective journal is one vehicle for ensuring time is set aside for daily reflection. Journal writing is a reflective process that allows teachers to chart their development and become more aware of their contribution to the experiences

they encounter. This process of systematic self-reflection can provide the clarification necessary for teachers to gain, or regain, a sense of meaning and purpose in their teaching. Finding personal meaning is a key element in preventing teacher burnout. Journals can serve several important purposes for teachers. They can provide a safe haven for dumping daily frustrations, working through internal conflicts, recording critical incidents, posing questions, naming issues, solving problems, identifying relationships, seeing patterns over time, and tracing life patterns and themes.

Beliefs about teaching and interacting with students are the result of attitudes and experiences gained over time. By making journal entries, teachers can look more objectively at their behaviors in the classroom. Journal writing is also a helpful tool for examining personal biases and prejudices that may unwittingly play out in interactions with students. Teachers are not always conscious of inappropriate responses to students on the basis of culture, race, gender or social class. Making journal entries could allow teachers to look more objectively at their behavior toward students from diverse cultural and social settings.

Becoming a Perpetual Problem-solver. A teacher's *modus operandus* should be solving problems not enforcing preset standards of operation. Problems surface as natural resistance to taking action toward a new possibility. The classroom should be a laboratory for purposeful experimentation. A practice or procedure is never permanent. New insights, understandings, and perspectives bring previous decisions up for reevaluation and consideration.

When all aspects of practice become the object of systematic inquiry, teachers must confront issues of power and control in the classroom. As teachers think more deliberately, articulating the rationale that underlies their teaching decisions, they begin to name and confront the dilemmas and contradictions they face on a daily basis. Becoming a perpetual problem-solver involves synthesizing experiences, integrating information and feedback, uncovering underlying reasons, and discovering new meaning.

Teachers who engage in critical reflection infuse their practice with a sense of vision and purpose as they continually forge new ground. While they learn from the past, they thrive in the present. They know that much of what occurs cannot be predicted but they also know that they are not victims of fate. Not to be critically reflective puts teachers in danger of what Freire (1993) calls 'magical consciousness', viewing life in the classroom as beyond their control subject to whimsical blessings and curses.

Questioning the Status Quo. When teachers make a practice of questioning the status quo and conventional wisdom, they seek their own truth and remain open to examining the assumptions that underlie classroom practices. Because school policies and teaching practices are both culturally and politically imbedded, changing aspects of individual practice often requires a collective effort. Challenging currently-held beliefs, assumptions, and expectations that translate into school policies and classroom procedures often brings a teacher into direct conflict with school

priorities and hierarchies of power. By questioning institutionalized definitions of acceptable teacher and student roles, a teacher challenges familiar routines and a way of thinking that is comfortable for colleagues. Hence, those questioning the status quo will need to learn ways of prompting colleagues to question their commonly-accepted assumptions and practices that are as non-threatening as possible so they don't become the enemy, shaking up established practices. Although questioning the status quo is always risky business, the risk can be minimized if the reflective teacher can engage others in ways that are invitational rather than confrontational.

Critically reflective teachers also need to develop measures of tactical astuteness that will enable them to take a contrary stand and not have their voices dismissed. One way to keep from committing cultural suicide is to build prior alliances both within and outside the institution by taking on tasks that demonstrate school loyalty and build a reputation of commitment. Against a history of organizational contributions, a teacher is better positioned to challenge current practices and is less readily discounted. As Shor & Freire (1987) note, the most effective change agents are able to secure social and organizational changes while simultaneously doing personal damage control.

By making time for solitary reflection, becoming a perpetual problem-solver, and questioning the status quo, teachers come to recognize their repetitive cycles and reflexive loops which limit their potential for tolerance and acceptance—the vital elements for effectively managing classrooms composed of students from different cultural and social backgrounds with diverse beliefs and values. Reflective practitioners find a means to catch themselves when they try to unjustly impose their values or dismiss students' perspectives without due consideration.

Developing the Practice of Self-reflection

The challenge of effectively managing today's diverse classroom involves self-reflection as well as critical inquiry. By developing self-reflection, teachers become more cognizant of the interdependence between teacher responses to students and student responses to teachers. Through self-reflection, teachers become increasingly aware of how they are interactive participants in classroom encounters rather than innocent bystanders, or victims.

Self-reflection involves developing the ability to look at what is happening, withholding judgment, while simultaneously recognizing that the meaning we attribute to it is no more than our interpretation filtered through our cumulative experience. When teachers develop the practice of self-reflection, they learn to: (1) slow down their thinking and reasoning process to become more aware of how they perceive and react to students, and (2) bring to the surface some of their unconscious ways of responding to students.

Self-reflection encompasses reflection, deliberation, awareness, and insight turned inward so we continually discover new dimensions of ourselves. This complex process is not prescriptive in nature, rather it is a process that allows insights to surface which serve to challenge our familiar behavior patterns. It is more a way of knowing than a knowing how.

Developing the practice of self-reflection allows teachers to recognize that what they see goes through a series of internal, interpretive filters reflecting personal belief systems. Perception is subjective—it is not pure, and it can be distorted. When a student acts out, one teacher sees a cry for help, another a personal attack. It is the teacher's interpretation of the student's behavior, or the meaning the teacher attaches to the behavior, that determines how the teacher will respond. Through self-reflection, teachers can learn to see beyond the filters of their past and the blinders of their expectations.

Teachers can learn to reframe or 'reposition' classroom situations and school circumstances. The term reposition connotes the notion of changing our perception by 'moving out of' our old position and creating a new position from which to view a situation (Larrivee, 1996). It is our personal framing that shapes how we attribute meaning to our experiences. Seeing new ways of interpreting a situation enables teachers to move beyond a limited perspective. By challenging themselves to create a new vantage point, teachers can assign new meaning to the classroom situations they confront.

By repositioning a seemingly negative event, the teacher seizes the opportunity to discover the positive potential in a situation. In repositioning, the teacher looks for openings to extend and learn in any situation. Some productive ways of repositioning for the classroom setting include: repositioning conflict as opportunity to be uncovered; repositioning confrontation as energy to be rechanneled; repositioning aggression as a cry for help; repositioning defiance as a request for communication; and repositioning attention-seeking as a plea for recognition.

Our Screening Process: examining our personal filtering system

The meaning we attribute to our experiences is influenced by various factors that effectively *screen out* some responses while letting others through. This screening process leads to differing perceptions of circumstances and events, resulting in different interpretations, and subsequently in different responses. When we critically examine our screens, we can become more aware of how our screens may be filtering out potentially more effective responses to classroom situations and students' challenging behavior.

Actions are governed by multiple screens, which can be envisioned as a series of interpretive filters (see Figure 1). Each level of screen serves to eliminate some potential responses while allowing others to filter through. Past experiences, beliefs, assumptions, and expectations, feelings and mood, and personal agendas and aspirations can either serve to limit or expand the repertoire of responses available to a teacher in any situation (Larrivee, 1999). Beliefs about students' capacity and willingness to learn, assumptions about the behavior of students, especially those from different ethnic and social backgrounds, and expectations formulated on the basis of our own value system can potentially be sources for responding inappropriately to students.

Certain responses can be eliminated by being screened through our past experiences. For instance, the sight of a snake can conjure up a multitude of differing

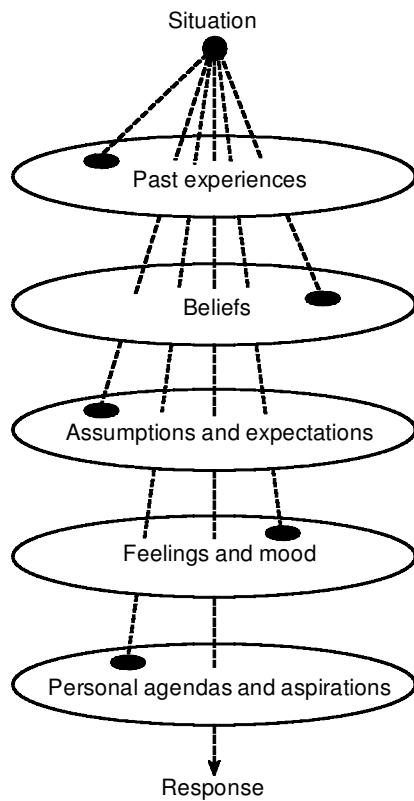


FIG. 1.

reactions on a continuum from absolute terror to curiosity to pleasure, based on what our experiences have been. Additional potential responses are ruled out, or in, on the basis of the beliefs we hold. Beliefs can be affirming or defeating, expansive or limiting, rational or irrational. The assumptions that we make and the expectations that we have can make more responses available, or unavailable. Feelings, both those directly related to the immediate situation and those resulting from other experiences, can either serve to screen out responses, or to avail us to additional responses. Finally, the agenda we set for ourselves, and the aspirations we have, act as still another filter. We may become driven by our personal goals and lose sight of what we stand for. For example, a teacher might be so concerned about keeping her job that she goes against her own values to keep the classroom quiet because that is what the principal values.

The way we respond to circumstances and situations is determined by this personal filtering system. This filtering system serves as a subjective mediating process. At the simplest level, there is an immediate reflexive response with no thought process occurring. A reflexive reaction, like removing your hand from a hot burner, is a reaction without conscious consideration of alternative responses. This type of response is often referred to as a 'knee-jerk' response connoting that the

response is automatic. Often teachers operate on ‘automatic pilot’, closed off from entertaining a continuum of responses. When they do this in the classroom setting, they run the risk of responding to students in intolerant and disrespectful ways, and can easily escalate, rather than de-escalate, student reactions.

Bringing personal screens into awareness, expands the intermediate thought process between a situation and a resulting reaction. By bringing a greater portion of the mediating process into awareness, teachers can increase their range of possible responses to the often difficult classroom situations they face daily.

As an example, consider a teacher’s typical response to being criticized by a student. Suppose the *reflexive reaction* is to automatically offer a defense to the criticism, usually responding with a ‘but ...’, rather than merely ‘taking in’ the criticism, or exploring it further. Becoming aware of the teacher’s own resistance and asking oneself questions like ‘Why am I being defensive?’ or ‘What am I defending?’ or ‘Why do I need to be right?’ or ‘Why do I need to have the last word?’ would represent challenging one’s screening process at the *assumptions and expectations* layer. By challenging the usual way of reacting, the teacher allows a greater range of responses to filter through the interpretive screen.

Our cumulative layers of screens can lead to responding to situations in conditioned and rigid ways. To have the greatest freedom of choice and the capacity to respond uniquely to each classroom situation encountered calls for constantly examining choices to see how personal screens are influencing the ability to respond in unconditioned ways. As teachers challenge their screens and consider alternate responses to reoccurring classroom situations, they become open to more possibilities and no possible response is automatically ruled out or in.

Challenging Beliefs and Limiting Assumptions and Expectations

Becoming a reflective practitioner means perpetually growing and expanding, opening up to a greater range of possible choices and responses to classroom situations and individual student behaviors. Teachers have to continually challenge the underlying beliefs that drive their present behavior. However, the channel to changing beliefs is not direct; it is through critically examining assumptions, interpretations, and expectations.

Self-created assumptions and limiting expectations can wreak havoc in the classroom by creating a mental picture of how things ought to be. Assumptions such as ‘It’s impossible to teach this class the way they behave’ or ‘These kids just don’t want to learn’ or ‘I should be able to control all the students in my class’ provide the backdrop for the expectations teachers have for their classrooms. Such limiting expectations can set teachers up for disillusionment and a loss of a sense of self-efficacy. Self-efficacy refers to the teacher’s perceived ability to be effective, find reasonable solutions to problems and maintain a belief in one’s own capacity to effect positive change.

What teachers think about themselves has much influence on the choices they make in the classroom. In addition to the anxiety created by the often-unreasonable demands of today’s classroom, the teacher’s own dissatisfaction with self adds to the

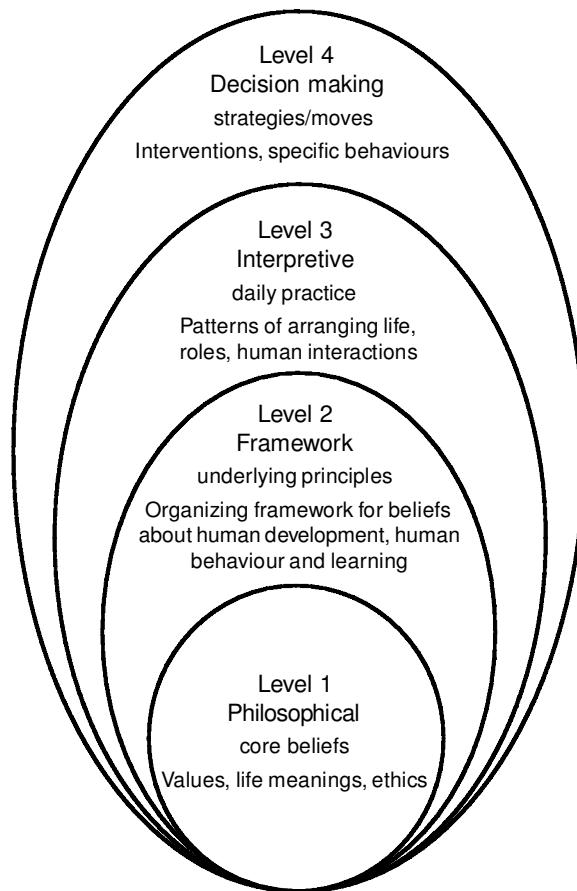


FIG. 2.

feelings of helplessness. Often teachers fail to discriminate between the actual demands of teaching and their own self-imposed demands. The pressure to conform to a picture of the perfect teacher lies at the root of much self-induced stress. Idealism, dedication, and commitment can result in unreasonable, and virtually unattainable, expectations. A teacher's own limiting assumptions about a problem, or student perceived as a problem, can drive behavior in unproductive directions.

Beliefs about the roles of the teacher and the learner, the nature and purposes of learning, and the teaching and learning environment best suited to these purposes shape a teacher's classroom decisions. These beliefs disclose a teacher's operating principles related to how the teacher views student potential, motivation, development, and growth.

Examining Core Beliefs

Examining our core beliefs is a critical aspect of self-reflection. A core belief is a fundamental belief about human nature, development or learning. Our beliefs are adopted based on conclusions *inferred* from our observations and interpretations,

and they often remain largely untested. Developing the practice of self-reflection involves observing patterns of behavior and examining behavior in light of what we truly believe. This process can be envisioned as flowing through several levels, from the level of core beliefs to the level of specific actions. Similar to a model developed by Shapiro & Reiff (1993) to examine the congruence between core beliefs and job performance, this multi-level process has four levels: philosophical, framework, interpretive, and decision-making (see Figure 2).

Philosophy of life is the backdrop for all other levels and activities. The philosophical level embodies core beliefs and includes values, religious beliefs, ways of knowing, life meanings, and ethics.

Level two represents our way of providing an organizational framework for these basic beliefs and includes the theories we espouse, such as theories of human development and human behavior, theories of motivation and learning, theories of organizational development, and chaos theory. It is our framework for attaching meaning to what is happening. These underlying principles serve as the basis for how we organize what we have learned and experienced.

The next level is how we interpret these underlying principles into our general approach to daily practice. This is where we link our beliefs and theories into a way of behaving. Our daily practice is an overriding stance, a pervasive attitude for how we approach life and the situations we encounter. It is a frame of mind.

From our attitude about daily practice evolves our momentary actions. It is our way of making real our ideals and translating them into thoughts, behaviors, and actions. This last level represents the translation into moment-by-moment decision-making.

The following example illustrates the four levels of the process for examining a core belief.

Core Belief	<i>A fundamental belief about human nature:</i> Each student is doing the best that he or she can at any given moment.
Underlying Principle	<i>A principle that organizes experiences and beliefs; a framework for interpreting experiences:</i> We are all wounded by our unmet needs in childhood and our life experiences. Our wounds lead us to act in protective, and sometimes hurtful, ways toward ourselves and others.
Daily Practice	<i>Linking of beliefs with a general plan of action:</i> If I hold this core belief and understand that behavior is often driven by unmet needs, I will act in a way that refrains from judging the student and accepts the student's limitations.
Strategies, Moves	<i>Linking of beliefs with moment-to-moment decisions:</i> If I accept the student's behavior without judgment, then I will choose a behavior acknowledging that the student is not acting against me, rather to get unmet needs met.

Often reflection during, or simultaneously with, our actions is difficult because of the multiple demands we have to juggle in the classroom. For instance, focusing our attention on completing a lesson may distract from paying attention to the way in which we interact with students. Hence, self-reflection often requires a perspective of a meta-position, a looking back after the action has taken place.

The self-reflective process raises our level of consciousness and this increased awareness provides an opportunity to spot incongruence or imbalance. Effective teaching necessitates continual examining and revisiting of our core beliefs, and assessing our actions against these beliefs. Developing the practice of self-reflection keeps teachers coming back to their core beliefs and evaluating their choices in accordance with these beliefs.

Developing the Practice of Critical Reflection

The route to becoming a reflective practitioner is plagued by incremental fluctuations of irregular progress, often marked by two steps forward and one step backward. There are necessary and predictable stages in the emotional and cognitive rhythm of becoming critically reflective (Berkey *et al.*, 1990; Brookfield, 1995; Kasl *et al.*, 1993; Keane, 1987; Larrivee, 1996; Usher & Bryant, 1989). The sense of liberation at discarding a dearly-held assumption is quickly followed by the fear of being in limbo. This state leads to a longing for the abandoned assumption and a desire to revert to the familiar to keep the chaos at bay. Old ways of thinking no longer make sense but new ones have not yet gelled to take their place, leaving one dangling in the throes of uncertainty. Yet, this uncertainty is the hallmark for transformation and the emergence of new possibilities. This inner struggle is a necessary and important stage in the reflective process. In order to break through familiar cycles, one has to allow oneself to feel confused and anxious, not permanently, but for a time. Fully experiencing this sense of uncertainty is what opens the door to a personal deeper understanding, leading to a shift in ways of thinking and perceiving.

Stages in the Critical Reflection Process

Although in actual practice, the critical reflection process is more cyclical than linear, more incremental than sequential, Figure 3 suggests a framework for conceptualizing this process. The process of becoming a reflective practitioner weaves through a series of phases, the first of which is the examination stage. At this stage we start to question whether a particular action, reaction, or interaction is getting us what we want. It could be any behavior that we are bringing into question, such as getting angry, engaging in power struggles, or withdrawing. In the next phase, we begin to notice patterns in our ways of behaving and challenge the real cost attached to our current practice. When we move to the next phase, we have realized that our behavior is sustaining a state we want to change, such as frustration, discomfort, or stress. This realization creates a surface desire for change.

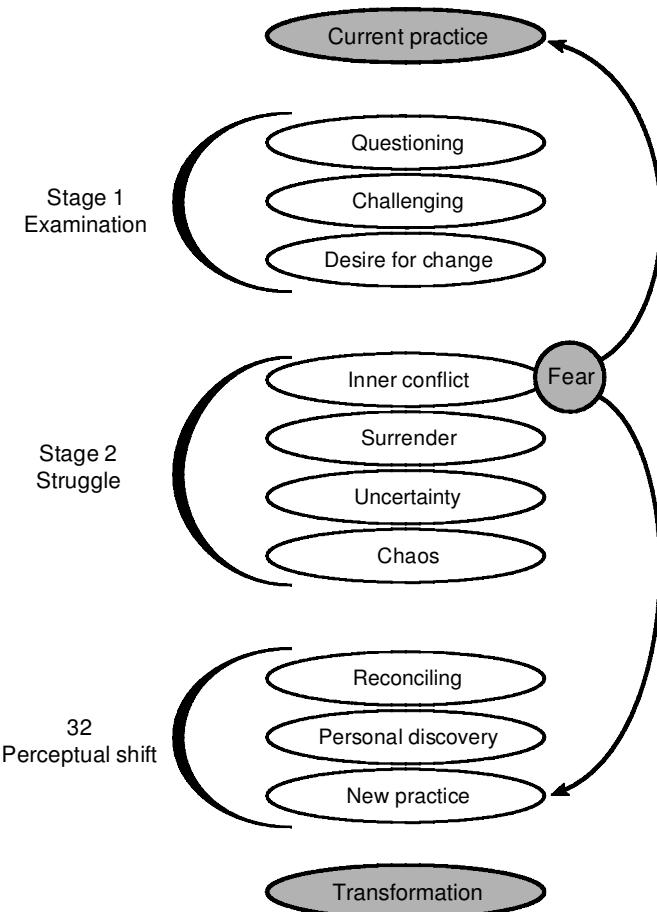


FIG. 3.

Attempting to let go of what is familiar leads to a struggle and we find ourselves in conflict. This begins a critical stage in the reflective process. If this state of inner turmoil brings about too much fear and doubt, the choice may be to close down the process and either stay with the old practice or seek a quick fix. We look for a ready-made solution, a 'prescription' for change. However, when we do this, we circumvent an essential stage in the critical reflection process.

If instead we are able to face the conflict, surrendering what is familiar, we allow ourselves to experience the uncertainty. This not knowing throws us into chaos. At this phase, if we 'move into the eye of the storm', we 'weather' the turmoil and a deeper understanding emerges, moving us to the reconciling phase. In this final stage, we have had a shift in our way of thinking and sensing. We have had a clearing and are seeing things in a new light. We engage in new patterns of thinking, and access new tools and strategies to respond more appropriately to classroom situations and circumstances.

Facing the turmoil, the conflict, the uncertainty, and the chaos allows personal discovery to emerge. By completing the cycle and moving through the struggle stage, we transcend a singular behavior change and undergo a transformation. When learning surfaces from within, tapping our own resources, we experience an ‘ahah’ and no longer need to take on other’s solutions. This shift restructures our way of thinking and changes our overall perspective. We are now capable of critically reflective practice.

Summary

There are many pathways to becoming a reflective practitioner and each teacher must find his or her own path. Any path a teacher chooses must involve a willingness to be an active participant in a perpetual growth process requiring ongoing critical reflection on classroom practices. The journey involves infusing personal beliefs and values into a professional identity, resulting in developing a deliberate code of conduct. Critical reflection is not only a way of approaching teaching—it is a way of life. The more teachers explore, the more they discover. The more they question, the more they access new realms of possibility.

The path to developing as a critically reflective teacher cannot be prescribed with an intervention formula. The route cannot be preplanned—it must be lived. Teaching in today’s classroom is a challenge of great magnitude. Meeting the challenge calls for a teacher to resist establishing a classroom culture of control and become a reflective practitioner, continuously engaging in critical reflection, consequently remaining fluid in the dynamic environment of the classroom.

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