

The Role of Reflection in Teaching

Do You Need to Change Your Teaching Practices?

How do you answer this question? How do you know if you need to change? One way to find out is to think about your own teaching; think about it regularly, thoroughly, and systematically; in other words, become a *reflective practitioner*.

Why Reflect on Your Teaching?

Faculty members may change their teaching practices if such practices are made the objects of their thought and consideration; this is what reflection on teaching means.

Reflecting on your teaching is a way to make you aware of how you teach. It is a method for self-assessment.

If we don't reflect, then we are teaching "in the dark" without knowing if we are effective and if we should modify our teaching.

Reflecting requires us to answer a number of questions, including the following:

- How do I interact with students?
- How do I respond when they ask questions?
- What kind of classroom atmosphere do I create?
- What kinds of questions do I ask?
- Is my classroom spontaneous or is it predictable?
- Are my students involved?
- Why didn't a lecture go over well?
- Why did a lecture work?

All faculty members ask themselves questions like these from time to time.

Reflective practitioners not only ask questions routinely and deliberately, but they also use the answers to these questions to guide and change their instructional practices so they can be more effective.

What Should You Look for in Your Teaching?

One of the hardest things to do as you begin to examine and think about your teaching practices is to figure out what to look for. You may try to answer question like the following:

- Am I determining what the students "know"?
 - What kind of questions do I ask?
- Genuine questions for which I do not know the answers?
- Testing questions to find out what my students know?
- Focusing questions that encourage students to think further about some idea; to explain, justify, or hypothesize.
- Am I using wait time before and after I receive responses to questions?
 - Am I exploring alternative strategies posed by different students?
 - Am I exploring unproductive thinking?
 - Am I using various forms of communication; reading, writing, listening, and speaking?
 - Am I modeling scientifically thinking?
- What kind of questions are my students asking?
 - Are my students talking to each other- disagreeing, challenging, and debating?
 - Are my students willing to take risks?
 - Are my students listening to each other?
 - Are my students taking time to think about the problem, question, idea, or the like?
 - Are my students able to explain their ideas clearly and precisely?
 - Are my students able to reflect on the experience and identify that was hard or easy for them; what worked and what didn't; what they liked and what they didn't?

Tools for Enhancing Discourse

- Am I making use of the technology that is available?
- Are representational models available for the students?
- Do I encourage using various tools to communicate ideas?

- Are the students' desks arranged to facilitate discussion?
- Are students encouraged to show respect for, and listen to, other students?

When Should You Reflect on Your Teaching?

We all reflect on, or informally think about, pedagogical experiences we have during a day. This article is suggesting a more formal, designated time to consider your classroom experiences. You can think about your teaching before, during, and after a lecture or set of lectures. No single time is right in every circumstance.

Before teaching a lecture or planning a unit: Understand your teaching goals and develop a plan. First identify your goals for the unit and ways this lecture might facilitate them. Be clear on which lectures are introductory, which are developing or continuing ideas, and which are review. Think about the students. What learning behaviors are most effective, such as verbal interaction, hands-on manipulation, demonstration, writing, drawing, or working with a partner or in a small group? Consider the thinking and understanding you want your students to achieve, such as conjecturing, inventing, verifying, or problem solving. Then ask what teaching behaviors would help students, such as questioning, modeling, facilitating, or telling. Next anticipate what might happen; how students might respond, what misconceptions might occur, and how you are prepared for those misconceptions. What if you get very divergent responses to your questions? What if you get wrong answers? What if students want to go off in a different direction? What will you do? How will you react?

During teaching: Carrying out your plan. The reflective practitioner does not think of teaching as a script to deliver. You will have to think about what you are going to do next as you are doing something else! You may need to revise your lecture plan in midstream. You may have to ask for a moment to think about a question and then share your ideas. Maybe you did not fully anticipate the complexity of the concept being developed when you planned. Maybe you thought the students already understood certain ideas that you find are clearly not understood as you teach.

Be willing to take the time to think about your teaching as you are teaching. This approach is not, however, as difficult as it may sound. Just as a good student should think about a scientific problem while solving it, a good faculty member should think about the teaching problems while teaching.

After teaching. Look back. Take the time to ask yourself some questions about the lecture. What worked? What didn't work? What would you do differently if you taught it again? What will you do tomorrow? Did you do a better job on whatever teaching behavior you are trying to improve, for instance, wait time, calling on all students by name, , or asking for justification?

How Do You Reflect on Your Teaching?

You might use several ways to reflect on your teaching practices. Here are a few that our colleagues have tried.

1- **Videotape yourself.** Some faculty members still say, "Oh, I could never do that!" We say, "Yes, you can!" After you get past the way you look and the way you sound, the videotape offers rich information about your teaching practices and how your students are thinking about the subject . Try to tape yourself once a month. Focus on some particular behaviors like those mentioned earlier and look for change over the academic year.

2- **Written logs.** Keep a weekly reflection log or diary for each class. Let the students keep logs, too. Spend the last ten minutes of class each Friday filling them out. Ask yourself what went well that week. Did you make progress in your effort to listen more attentively to students' responses? To give better wait time? What would you do differently next year when you teach the same topics? What do you want to accomplish next week? Go back periodically and read your logs. You will learn a lot about yourself as a faculty member. Equally important is to read what your students say. You will learn a lot about their perceptions of subject class.

3-**Oral reflections.** Do you glance at your watch at the end of class and think, "Oh, good, time for one more task" or "Time for me to summarize?" Although these options are appropriate at certain times, occasionally try spending that time talking with the class about the lecture . Ask them what they learned today. What was hard about the lecture? What was easy? What would you tell a friend who was absent about what happened in class? You will be surprised at what you learn! Also tell students what you learned and what you will share with other subject faculty members.

4- Let another teacher observe you. Teaching is a very isolated activity. Yet one of the very best resources that you have available to help you reflect on your teaching is right in your college building. Find another faculty who is interested in bettering instructional practices and ask him or her to observe you. Have a particular trait in mind on which you would like the colleague to concentrate. For example, tell the peer that you are trying to improve your questioning strategies. Ask him or her to take note of how many questions have only one right answer and how many are more open-ended. Or ask the teacher to observe your use of wait time. Are you giving students time to think? Critical to the observation is spending some time afterward in a debriefing session about your and your colleague's perceptions of the lecture.

5- Observe other faculty members. Arrange to observe someone who is known to be an effective teacher and is willing to let you observe a class. What does this faculty member do that is working? What can you learn from this faculty member? Allow discussion time after each observation so that both faculty members grow professionally.

Some Final Thoughts

Remember that change takes time. Most of us won't change our teaching practices overnight. We have been trying to implement these ideas for several years and still have the old show-them-how-to-do-it tendencies.

Also, you won't want or need to change everything about your teaching. Some of what you are doing is working. If you usually make effective use of wait time, keep that technique. If you usually ask students to justify their comments, both right and wrong, continue to ask. Look for the positive in what you do.

Don't try to change everything at once. Take one piece at a time. Make it your own then try something else. If you think you need to work on questioning, start there. Make that the focus of your reflection. Maybe then you want to work on listening more carefully to your students. Work on that. This is not to suggest that you shouldn't notice other things. You should. And the more reflective you become, the more you will notice. Take it one day at a time.

The greatest reward of becoming a reflective practitioner is that you become aware of how insightful and capable your students are. Teaching becomes a positive and rewarding experience from which you learn every day.

**Let's Work Together to Ensure Academic
Excellence**

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