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Promoting Ownership with Engaging Reflections

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Overview

"The most important attitude that can be formed is that of desire to go on learning."

John Dewey

The journey of a lifelong learner is marked by seeing life as opportunities for growth: learning from experience, moving forward by building upon previous knowledge, and expanding one's mind through new learning. The process of pausing to reflect in order to continue such growth as a teacher has been well researched and documented as a critical component of teacher preparation programs (Griffiths, 2000; Hagevik, Aydeniz, & Rowell, 2012; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Lupinski, Jenkins, Beard, & Jones, 2012; Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007; Yang; 2009). Reflection has been shown to provide novice educators with opportunities to reflect on beliefs about education, connect theory with classroom practice, and adjust classroom craft choices in order to meet the needs of students. However, the line of research around reflection has not extended to the benefits its systematic implementation can provide all teachers during their tenure.

From my work as an instructional coach, I see daily the positive outcomes associated when teachers reflect on their classroom practices from multiple perspectives. Data, such as wait time, student engagement, and levels of questioning, provides a teacher necessary information for reflection around high-quality instruction. According to Dewey (1938), "experiential learning takes place when a person involved in an activity looks back and evaluates it, determines what was useful or important to remember, and uses this information to perform another activity." As teachers, we want our students to engage in the educational process actively; to be transformed by their learning in a personal way. I cannot help but wonder, are teachers actively engaged in reflections about their educational process? Shouldn't teachers hold themselves to the same standard?

Of course. In a perfect world, all schools would have systems in place which create opportunities for teachers to build relationships with instructional coaches or teaching peers who could assist by providing first-hand, non-judgmental data for teachers to use as the basis for reflecting. This type of coaching relationship around collecting data and pausing to reflect has deep roots within education as it connects to the tenants of John Dewey in his work *Experience and Education*. When teachers are provided opportunities to reflect back, self-evaluate, and then make plans for moving forward, they embrace critical reflection that "allows teachers to develop a deeper understanding of themselves and their students" (Yang, 2009, 11).

However, there will always be situations that occur in the classroom when a coach, administrator or peer teacher is not present. In these situations, it is of utmost importance for teachers to pause and record their own data so that they can later reflect in an authentic and meaningful way. According to Bailey, Curtis, and Nunan (2001) these reflections can take place either as reflection-in-action (a continual process during teaching) or reflection-on-action (reflect on lessons as planned and implemented afterward).

During my time as a middle school teacher, I would attempt to reflect at the end of each day or lesson, but that did not always happen. Sometimes by the final bell, I was so exhausted from the day's events or my mind full of a list of preparations and phone calls to make, reflection time was the first item on my to-do list to be pushed aside. I would tell myself that I could make the time in the morning to record my thoughts and detailed notes about what I had witnessed in each hour. Yet, the next morning would come and inevitably I would become preoccupied with the new day's needs. The reflection that I had planned for and believed to be imperative to both the growth of my students and myself would once again be pushed aside.

If by chance I did find the time to record my reflections, many of those critical first-hand recollections floating around in my mind had disappeared. I no longer remembered second hour had specific questions about the homework and which students needed additional help in fifth hour because they had been absent. I overlooked that one group created a project so unique I wanted to share it with my other hours. I forgot. I moved on. I missed an opportunity to learn about my students' thinking and needs. I lost a chance to grow in my craft. And by extension, my students also missed out.

As the cliché goes “hindsight is 20/20”. Looking back, I realize how my classes would have benefited from a more regularly documented reflective process. To support teachers in this admirable goal, the following are suggestions for teachers looking to incorporate the critically important process of reflection in their instructional decision making process.

1. **Annotate your day.** By creating short notes as the day goes on, a teacher is able to more clearly reflect at the end of day without worrying about forgetting a key point of information. I liked to use the moments I was entering attendance for the current hour as a time to jot myself some notes about the class that just finished. These notes were often recorded as Post-it notes in my lesson-plan book which were then (ideally) recorded at the end of the day. By recording short notes as the day went on, I was more detailed with my reflections which in turn increased my ability to respond appropriately to my students in the following class periods.

2. **Use technology as a reflection tool.** If writing thoughts at the end of an hour or a day seems impossible, use a phone or tablet to record thoughts in a digital memo that can be revisited when reflecting for planning upcoming lessons. Creating short voice memos is similar to recording thoughts on post-its. If using voice memos, create a system for naming them that is succinct and easy to remember when returning to the memos for future planning.

3. **Keep a teaching journal.** If recording short memos throughout the day seems too brief or rushed, a journal might be a more convenient and in-depth way to document your thoughts and reactions from the school day. Journal writing encourages metacognition and can be shared at later points in collaborative teams centered around reflection (Yang, 2009). For tech-savvy teachers, journals could be kept digitally or create an education-themed blog to record observations and wonderings.

4. **Make it a habit.** Just like eating healthy and exercising, it takes time to turn positive actions in to a routine and see results. Reflecting is always good for classroom teachers but the true power of reflection is found when it becomes an integral part of a teacher's practice. By committing to the continual use of reflection for instructional decision making, a teacher is able to refine their craft and better meet the needs of their students.

5. **Be bold in trying new strategies and honest in your reflections.** It is important to remember that “the educator by the very nature of his work is obliged to see his present work in terms of what it accomplishes, or fails to accomplish, for a future whose objects are linked with those of the present” (Dewey, 1938). To engage in reflection, teachers must embrace a spirit of vulnerability and risk-taking. It is inevitable that some lessons will not work the first time or a specific assessment might not provide the expected data so reflections should consider

If good teaching encourages students to reflect and grow through the learning process, why wouldn't teachers also utilize reflections as a tool of professional growth?

Footnote: One important note about details in reflection, while it is critical to record information in a timely and detailed manner, confidentiality must be of primary concern whenever student information is recorded.

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