

# EXPLORING AND TRANSFORMING: A DIALOGUE ON SELF-REFLECTIVE PRACTICES FOR TEACHER DEVELOPMENT

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*Critical self-reflection is an example of a transformative process. We can use it to reshape existing knowledge and beliefs, and enhance what we do on a professional and personal level. As an application of self-reflective practices, this post-conference report has been written as a dialogue. Reflecting together, as we have done, has proved to be a powerful way for us to develop our individual thinking and open up new perspectives on critical reflection on our work and working environments. We hope that this dialogue, in turn, will act as a catalyst for change in our own professional development, and serve as an inspiration to our colleagues and our students.*

批判的に自己を振り返ることは潜在的な変化の過程である。自分が持っている知識や信条を作り直すため、教師、個人レベルでの考えや実践を高めるために、批判的な自己の振り返りを使うことができる。自己の振り返りを発展させるものとして、この大会後のレポートは対話形式で書かれている。この形式は、著者にとって個人の思考を超え、新たな視点を開くために有効な道具になると考えたからだ。そしてそれが私達自身が教師として成長するための触媒の役目を果たし、学習者にも同じ効果をもたらすことを期待するものである。

## **Origins: A Chat in the Teachers College Library, August 2010**

Our roundtable presentation at the Realizing Autonomy conference grew out of a poster presentation we gave at Nakasendo in June 2011, which, in turn, evolved from a chance meeting in the library at Teachers College, Tokyo a while back. The chat that day went something like this:

**Rob:** So, what's your MA paper on, Jackie?

**Jackie:** Well, overall, it's about teacher autonomy in relation to teacher development on a professional and also a personal level. I talk about how people like Dick Allwright, Phil Benson and others maintain that teacher education is most effective when it's blended with approaches like reflective practice, action research, and exploratory practice.

**Rob:** What are the differences between these practices?

**Jackie:** Well, basically, reflective practice requires teachers to critically reflect on the relationship between teaching and learning; action research is studying classroom practices in order to understand them better or solve particular problems; and exploratory practice is where teachers work together with their students to develop their mutual knowledge and understanding of learning. You could say that action research focuses more on investigating a problem, with the end result being an action taken to improve the quality of teaching. Action research also tends to require a lot more planning and adherence to an academic research model, compared to exploratory practice, which seeks to tackle “puzzles” in the classroom in creative and practical ways that involve and benefit learners (Allwright & Hanks, 2009). So exploratory practice focuses less on the action per se and more on understanding. But both types of research require teachers to engage in reflection, which, in turn, can lead to greater teaching expertise.

**Rob:** I see. I wrote about teacher development too. And I also discussed the need for teachers to focus on self-reflection as a way to continue to grow and develop throughout their careers. In my paper, I wrote about one goal of teacher education programs being the fostering of professionalism and life-long development in teachers, and about the central role that self-reflection plays in accomplishing this. In teacher training courses, novice teachers usually study a variety of core subjects, such as second language acquisition, grammar, and phonetics and phonology, among others, which can be extremely useful in developing a knowledge base that allows teachers to better understand the subject they are teaching. However, this is only one part of the picture. There must also be a focus on how teachers can adapt this knowledge to better suit the needs of their teaching contexts and then continue to refine their understanding to meet the changing dynamics of their classrooms. With the understanding gained through self-reflection, teachers can improve their teaching methodology and create more learning opportunities for students. An added bonus of this is that, in being reflective practitioners themselves, teachers may become role models for their students, encouraging them to develop their own reflective practices and find strategies that might help them become more effective language learners.

**Jackie:** So, while both of us have looked into reflective practice, I’ve approached it through action research and exploratory research as ways to understand and solve problems of learning, whereas you come at it from the point of view of enhancing teachers’ professional development.

### **Before the Conference: Reflections on the Planning Stage**

As the date of the Realizing Autonomy Conference drew nearer, we put our heads together to come up with issues that interested or puzzled us about critical reflection.

**Rob:** So, what kind of things did you think about when we started to plan our presentation?

**Jackie:** I thought about the constraints and limitations that reflective practitioners have to deal with. From personal experience, many teachers don't get much opportunity or encouragement at work to engage in reflection. Professional or personal self-development is something that tends to occur, for many of us, outside of our teaching jobs. In my case, this started with my MA. For others, it may be through involvement with a group like the Learner Development SIG. So, with little or no guidance or support from our places of work, an initial problem is knowing where or how to start.

**Rob:** I agree it can be a pretty overwhelming task. As teachers today seem to be becoming busier and busier, they might think they really don't have the time to look critically at their teaching practice and the context in which they work.

**Jackie:** And then, on the other hand, some teachers do have the time, but may not have the awareness that what happens in their classrooms could be improved as a result of taking time for reflection. So a basic aim of our presentation was to highlight that critical self-reflection requires relatively little time, but can offer substantial rewards.

**Rob:** I know that we were both excited about sharing the knowledge we had gained from reading the literature on reflective practice. Let me just read this quote from Brookfield (1995), which I've found very helpful as a way to think about the benefits of reflection:

Reflection becomes critical when it has two distinct purposes. First is to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame and distort educational processes and interactions. The second is to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our own best long-term interests. (p. 8)

**Jackie:** That's a pretty powerful statement. I think that it takes a lot of courage to acknowledge the constraints of power. It's easier to take for granted the conditions of our teaching context, for example, an uncongenial arrangement of desks in the classroom or a restrictive curriculum, rather than questioning and, perhaps, seeking to change them. Similarly, relating to Brookfield's second purpose, many of us may feel that questioning our own beliefs is easier to forego than to face. In fact, if we don't reflect deeply, it may sometimes be because we are too attached to our beliefs and don't want to consider the possibility of changing them—even when changing them would clearly be beneficial.

**Rob:** That's right. Brookfield, again, gives some good examples of the danger of being too attached to our own and others' beliefs. I like his example of how student journals and learning logs are now all the rage (Brookfield, 1995, p. 13). Because it is such a common practice, a teacher may believe that logs must be beneficial to all their students across the board. But, for some students who don't feel they have such interesting lives, writing a journal may become an activity that just makes them feel even more inadequate, instead of being a positive means to express themselves in English. This example shows the need for teachers to try to get inside the heads of their students, and avoid just sticking to "accepted" methods and procedures. I

feel that digging deeper to understand our practice better is something that can evolve over time.

**Jackie:** Yes, becoming a critically reflective practitioner is something that doesn't happen overnight. So, I think that we should always remember to question what we are doing with our learners and why, and encourage our students to do the same.

### At the Conference: Reflections on How the Events Unfurled

On the day of the conference, we looked forward to presenting and discussing these ideas with participants. We set the scene with a brief review of the literature on autonomy, teacher autonomy, critical reflection and how these concepts are interrelated. Then we invited the 12 participants to form groups and brainstorm answers to the following questions: What is reflection? What are the reasons for engaging in reflection, and what are the reasons we often don't? How should we go about reflection? When is a good time to reflect? After brainstorming, the participants made posters of their ideas.

**Rob:** I like how we staged our roundtable presentation. The participants appeared to share our enthusiasm for the subject and were very receptive to what we had to share.

**Jackie:** Yes, that worked well, but I think we both felt that we could have cut down on some time spent on the review of the literature, so that we could have moved more quickly on to the discussion.

**Rob:** You're right. I also think we were a bit overambitious. But what did you think of the poster-making section?



Figure 1. Poster with ideas about how we should reflect as teachers.



Figure 2. Poster with ideas about when we should reflect as teachers.



Figure 3. Poster with ideas about how we should reflect as teachers.

**Jackie:** When I had a look at the video of the presentation, I could see that the poster-making session was a productive activity and everyone was engaged in animated conversations about their reflection topic. Of course, we did have a number of distinguished participants, which definitely helped.

**Rob:** Many of the comments on the posters were very intriguing, and some touched a personal note concerning certain limitations in the way I reflect now. For example, one of the posters (Figure 1) simply stated, “Comments later don’t make sense.” I recalled how many of the

jottings in my notebooks fit that description perfectly. This has encouraged me to try to be more systematic about my reflections to avoid such random jottings in the future. I also thought the poster that depicted reflection as a cycle of moments before, during, and after teaching was effective (Figure 2) because it tied in with Schön's (1987) ideas of reflecting-in-action and reflecting-on-action. That's to say, thinking on your feet and reflecting on these decisions afterwards can be an important part of teacher development. It's good to remind yourself that reflection is a process, and not just a point in time. What did you discover, Jackie?

**Jackie:** The comments "Don't fill the vacuum" (Figure 3) and "detachment" (Figure 1) hit home especially for me. Personally, I feel that these two concepts are always wrestling with each other. When I set aside time for reflection and try to detach myself to see the bigger picture, I find that the pressures of time and the desire to do other things (making materials, researching the literature, etc.) are pulling me in the other direction. This, I have realized, is to some extent a time-management issue. Also, I feel that I need to be mindful of how I spend my time and cultivate new habits of reflection without turning that practice into a mechanical routine. I think one way I can do this is to remind myself of the immense benefits reflection could bring to both my students and myself.

**Rob:** The posters and discussion were really the highlight of the session, but I'm glad we got to fit a survey into the final few minutes (see Appendix A). We got a lot of interesting comments, didn't we?

**Jackie:** We certainly did. Both the survey and the round table discussions reinforced my suspicions that, although we are well aware of the need to reflect, many of us fail to do so for a number of reasons. I'll just review what some of the participants said. Perhaps not surprisingly, everyone who attended the session said that they do reflect on their teaching. On a scale of 1 to 5, ten people wrote 5, that it was very important to engage in self-reflection, and two people wrote 4. However, although most participants said they engage in reflection, when asked "what factors might keep you from reflecting on your teaching?" one person stated they "have no one to reflect with", while another commented they "don't see the value in it". Moreover, two people wrote that they have "work overload" and seven people said that they "don't have time" to reflect. This suggests that we need to find creative ways to tackle these obstacles that, despite our best intentions, prevent us from engaging in self-reflection. I understand that this may be easier said than done, but feel that if we don't make the time to detach and reflect from time to time in both a professional and personal capacity, we are going to miss out on opportunities for discovery and development.

**Rob:** I was thinking about this a bit, Jackie, and there are lots of ways that teachers can tackle the problem of being busy and having a limited amount of time to reflect. Like many people, I find that discussing various teaching issues at lunchtime or during breaks at work has been really rewarding.

**Jackie:** That's a good point, which relates to the answers we received from another question we asked: "What form of self-reflection do you engage in?" Most people replied that they

engaged in peer discussions or journal writing. I personally prefer dialogue to written journal reflections, as the objective voice of a peer can really help push the boundaries of my own perspectives. Also, these kinds of reflective discoveries can emerge from a spontaneous conversation or a preplanned meeting with a colleague or peer. At my university, my colleagues and I have decided to invite full- and part-time English teachers from the International Culture Department to take part in bimonthly, informal meetings where we can reflect on our teaching and exchange ideas about our practice.

**Rob:** Yes, monthly or regular get-togethers would be a good place to have reflective discussions with our peers. One thing we didn't really have time for in the session was the booklet that we had prepared (Appendix B, downloadable at <http://ld-sig.org/LL/19two/moreau-suginaga-AppendixB.pdf>).

**Jackie:** Yes, it was too bad that we didn't manage to get feedback from the participants. The booklet was a tool that we developed from our own struggles to get started with self-reflection. For example, when I first started writing journals, I felt, after a while, that I was just writing for the sake of it. I never really looked at the reflections again and it became another thing on my to-do list rather than a productive exercise. So I had to rethink this process and realized that I needed more guidance in what to reflect on and how to do it critically. This was one reason why we made the booklet, wasn't it, Rob? Our aim was to give teachers something to work with and adapt to their teaching contexts based on materials we have created ourselves and adapted from the literature.

**Rob:** Yes, in preparing the booklet, I could also see the benefits of the various approaches for keeping track of reflections.

**Jackie:** We included some worksheets like Planning for the Classroom, so teachers can reflect on questions relating to lesson planning. There's also a worksheet with a list of issues in teaching, including error correction, homework, testing, and so on, so that teachers can write about their current beliefs. It's only by becoming more aware of our beliefs that we can start to transform them gradually. Then a couple of worksheets focus on student reflections. On one, teachers can write general observations about their students while the other is a student feedback form, where students can list all the class activities and make notes about what they learned, didn't understand, or want to know more about.

**Rob:** Actually, I personally felt that the booklet contained too much information. For my own use, I would take only the key points of what we put together and create an A4-sized reflection template that could be used on a daily basis without taking up so much time. The small items of information that I could collect over a period of time may allow me to create a fairly detailed picture of my teaching and having this information recorded in a consistent fashion might take the randomness out of my current notebook-based approach. I guess that was the point of the reflection-materials handout anyway—to adapt the ideas to best suit our needs.

**Jackie:** So, when we revise the booklet for our next conference, we could think about the organization. It might be good to separate the materials for teachers and students, and maybe add some examples of reflections from our students, and some personal perspectives from teachers who have used or adapted their own reflective materials.

### **From Reflection to Action**

With the conference behind us, it's back to business as usual in our classes. So what were the most significant things we learned from reflecting on our session, and, more importantly, how will this change our own practice?

**Rob:** Well, we talked about the problem of having too little time in which to present all of the things we wanted to at the conference, but I think that, at the end of the day, the presentation provided an opportunity for people to talk about reflection and get excited about it. As a next step, it would be good to do a workshop where we could create a space to get people's feedback based on the worksheet activities and how these could be adapted more specifically to various teaching contexts. The opportunity would be there for us to talk about some of the techniques and methods that we have developed in our own practices as a result of the reflection we've done before, during, and since the Realizing Autonomy Conference.

**Jackie:** That sounds good. We could also talk about some of the assumptions that we have questioned in relation to our practice. For example, I would like to review my assumption that group work is always the best way for all students. I think some less extroverted students might be more productive if they engaged less in group work. I have many other ideas to explore. And I agree that our next workshop should move beyond highlighting the long-term benefits of critical reflection, and give people an opportunity to explore some practical ways to incorporate critical reflection into their individual contexts.

**Rob:** One final thing I'd like to mention is that doing the presentation really reinforced, for me, the idea that we don't have to be in search of any one specific method of reflection. The most important thing is to develop what works for us individually at the time and then adapt it as the need arises. It seems to me that, as we develop as teachers, we need to constantly reevaluate the ways that we look at our practice. Sharing thoughts with our participants brought home the fact that reflection on teaching is a complex activity. It is important to keep trying new ways of delving into our individual practices and our individual belief systems. Any final thoughts, Jackie?

**Jackie:** Well, Rob, I think that in teaching, and in life in general, it's good to stop and take a look around; otherwise, we might miss out on something important. In both our professional and personal lives, critical self-reflection is a transferable skill that can be used to help us gain a better understanding of any experience. We're always reshaping existing knowledge and beliefs to become better teachers and also better people. Our lives as teachers are often very

demanding, so in order for us be able to tackle challenges and deal with constraints, we need to be ready and equipped not just professionally but in a holistic sense, as human beings.

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