The Art of Teaching - A Reflective Essay

Rasha A. Qaisi

University of Windsor

The Faculty of Education

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The Teacher as a Reflective Practitioner

Many new teachers walk into a classroom setting with a certain ideology or a strongly held belief about how their teaching experience is going to be. However, there is a significant difference between expectations and reality. Teachers experienced and new alike may benefit greatly by engaging in self-reflection and self-evaluation. While some teachers may sound perfect on paper when lesson planning, they may not be as successful during the implementation of the same lesson plan. In Bridging English, Joseph and Lucy Milner, and Joan Mitchell quote Janet Allen (1995) who "believes that the real success stories often come after struggle and even failure" (Milner et al., 2012, p. 452). It is natural for new teachers to make mistakes and such mistakes can very easily serve as beneficial learning experiences.

While on practicum, during a lunch period, a fellow teacher made a few comments on her first year as a teacher - which was a miserable year where nothing went according to plan. And what a refined plan it had been. This particular teacher expressed her frustration when her lesson plans did not unfold similarly to the way they were written. This extended to classroom management, students' noise level and pacing and time management. However, with time she realized that it was increasingly beneficial for her to write new lesson plans using the failure of other lessons plans. Taking all that went wrong and re-writing lesson plans to fix her methods helped her in front of the class and helped engage her students in the lesson as well. Like many new teachers, the then new teacher "faced and reflected on setbacks, failures, and "intriguing intellectual problems that have kept [her] interested in teaching" (Milner et al., 2012, p. 452).

Milner, Milner, and Mitchell have commented on the fact that self-evaluation and the act of a teacher as a reflective practitioner do not have to be a job done alone. The writers state that "we value informal conversations with students throughout the year during day-to-day activities. We want to know what is working for our students and what is not while we are doing it rather than finding out at the end of the semester that something did not work" (Milner et al. 2012, p. 461). Self-evaluations and reflecting on one's work can be done informally and spontaneously as a lesson is taught or administering instruction for an in-class activity. Writing little notes on the printed lesson plan is a great way to note down what is working and what is not. In addition, Milner, Milner, and Mitchell advice giving students the opportunity to communicate their thoughts and opinions as what they felt worked and what did not work during a particular lesson; after all, they are the subject of interest and the self-evaluation and reflection is done for their benefit. Inviting students to reflect on the lesson is a great way to help them feel like the classroom is really theirs. New teachers should not fear self-evaluation or reflection. After all, "this is a profession dedicated to change and growth in ourselves as well as our students" (Milner et al., 2012, p. 452).

Strategies for Supporting Effective Teaching and Learning

In an attempt to define what makes an effective teacher, Richard and Jo Anne Vacca, and Maryann Mraz provide clear definitions and 'guidelines' highlighting teacher quality and teaching quality. They state that a teacher of quality is someone who expresses "strong general intelligence and verbal ability" (Vacca et al., 2014, p. 6), holds "strong content knowledge" (Vacca et al., 2014, p. 6), and possesses "an understanding of learners and their learning and development" (Vacca et al., 2014, p. 6). On the other hand, quality teaching includes teachers acting on the understanding the power to transform classroom education into life education, teachers understanding why they teach, teachers who expect the unexpected and can use that as a teaching opportunity, teachers who are flexible, and teachers who serve students to the best of their abilities (Vacca et al., 2014, p. 7).

It is vital for teachers to distance themselves from the 'assign-and-tell' teaching strategies where students are told what they are learning instead of having the opportunity to learn through self-discovery. Vacca, Vacca, and Mraz (2014) state, "When teachers become the dispensers of knowledge, students become nonparticipants in the academic life of the classroom" (p.11). In addition, Milner, Milner, and Mitchell (2012) express the importance for a teacher to identify him or herself as a fellow learner in front of his or her students. According to them, teachers who also hold high expectations for themselves and their students tend to be teachers that are more effective. These teachers "challenge students to reach beyond the grasp and provide students with confidence in what they are learning because they feel tangible growth" (p. 446).

In every classroom today, teachers will face students with various needs. It is increasingly vital that teachers pay attention and accommodate "student variability (differences among students in regard to their developmental needs, interests, abilities, and disabilities)" (Parkay et al., 2010, p. 4). Effective teachers are those who are able to differentiate their instructions and vary their teaching strategies in order to cover a wide range of students. In today's classroom, teachers are introduced to various types of learners; categories that include visual learners, auditory learners, tactile/kinesthetic learners, active learners, reflective learners, sensing learners, intuitive learners, sequential learners, and global learners (Milner et al., 2012, p. 16). Effective teachers are those who are able to include activities and vary their instructions to accommodate for all the different learning styles found in the classroom. Milner, Milner, and Mitchell (2012) claim that,

Understanding this diversity matters to teachers in how they present new ideas, in what they ask students to do with that new information, and in how they assess student learning. Acknowledging students' differences is an important step in trying to grasp what is going to within the minds of individual students and the class (p. 16).

Including students' interests and accommodating their learning styles can prove to be a difficult and an exciting challenge for a new or experienced teacher.

Teaching and Education on the 21st Century

The 21st-century classroom

It is vital that teachers are shaping global citizens by teaching their students all that they need to know and providing them with effective ways to apply their newfound knowledge in life outside the classroom. It is increasingly important for teachers to help students develop their problem-solving skills, critical thinking abilities, and apply their creativity. It is vital for students to learn how to "cope with change, how to participate alternative future developments, how to think critically, and how to analyze and synthesize large amounts of complex data" (Parkay et al., 2010, p. 352). In a 21st century classroom, students are no longer empty vessels awaiting some authoritative figure to come into the classroom and fill them with "useful" information. No longer is it acceptable for "the teacher to simply transfer his or her knowledge to students" (Milner et al., 2012, p. 8). Students are now more engaged in the learning process than ever before. Students take into consideration their futures and interests and communicate such information to the teacher. Students are more active in the teaching and learning process and are demanding interactive classrooms that cater to their individual needs.

Technology in the classroom

Today "electronic media is increasingly seductive, influential, and pervasive, yet most schools treat written word as the only means of communication worthy of study" (Parkay et al., 2010, p. 14). Technology has infiltrated the lives of students everywhere and they now hold more information between their hands than any other generation that came before them. It is vital to utilize such advantage and direct students to effective utilization of such technology within the classroom. The world is advancing and adapting to new ways of communicating, learning, and processing, and so should schools. It is important to recognize that technology can help improve "students' inquiry, reflection, and problem-solving" (Parkay et al., 2010, p. 14). There is a significant difference between reading printed texts and reading through a "digital medium. Printed texts proceed from front to back, reading from right to left, and have information coming in the same way and order for every reader; however, reading on the internet allows one to click on a hyperlink" (Vacca et al., 2014, p. 13). Since "reading texts in a digital environment is not a linear activity" (Vacca et al., 2014, p. 13), things such hyperlinks that only exist on electronic mediums help individual the reader's experience. A student may find a hyperlink that interests him or her and clicks on it in order to expand reading on a specific topic. Students are also taught to "critically evaluate information" (Vacca et al., 2014, p. 14) before they decide to adopt it. With technology, reading becomes "individualized and is based on the immediate interests and characteristics of the reader" (Vacca et al., 2014, p. 34).

References

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