

Reflective teaching: Exploring our own classroom practice

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Reflective teaching means looking at what you do in the classroom, thinking about why you do it, and thinking about if it works - a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. By collecting information about what goes on in our classroom, and by analysing and evaluating this information, we identify and explore our own practices and underlying beliefs. This may then lead to changes and improvements in our teaching.

Reflective teaching is therefore a means of professional development which begins in our classroom.

Why it is important

Many teachers already think about their teaching and talk to colleagues about it too. You might think or tell someone that "*My lesson went well*" or "*My students didn't seem to understand*" or "*My students were so badly behaved today.*"

However, without more time spent focussing on or discussing what has happened, we may tend to jump to conclusions about why things are happening. We may only notice reactions of the louder students. Reflective teaching therefore implies a more systematic process of collecting, recording and analysing our thoughts and observations, as well as those of our students, and then going onto making changes.

- If a lesson went well we can describe it and think about why it was successful.
- If the students didn't understand a language point we introduced we need to think about what we did and why it may have been unclear.
- If students are misbehaving - what were they doing, when and why?

Beginning the process of reflection

You may begin a process of reflection in response to a particular problem that has arisen with one or your classes, or simply as a way of finding out more about your teaching. You may decide to focus on a particular class of students, or to look at a feature of your teaching - for example how you deal with incidents of misbehaviour or how you can encourage your students to speak more English in class.

The first step is to gather information about what happens in the class. Here are some different ways of doing this.

- *Teacher diary*

This is the easiest way to begin a process of reflection since it is purely personal. After each lesson you write in a notebook about what happened. You may also describe your own reactions and feelings and those you observed on the part of the students. You are likely to begin to pose questions about what you have observed. Diary writing does require a certain discipline in taking the time to do it on a regular basis.

Here are some suggestions for areas to focus on to help you start your diary.

- *Peer observation*
Invite a colleague to come into your class to collect information about your lesson. This may be with a simple observation task or through note taking. This will relate back to the area you have identified to reflect upon. For example, you might ask your colleague to focus on which students contribute most in the lesson, what different patterns of interaction occur or how you deal with errors.
- *Recording lessons*
Video or audio recordings of lessons can provide very useful information for reflection. You may do things in class you are not aware of or there may be things happening in the class that as the teacher you do not normally see.
 - Audio recordings can be useful for considering aspects of teacher talk.
 - How much do you talk?
 - What about?
 - Are instructions and explanations clear?
 - How much time do you allocate to student talk?
 - How do you respond to student talk?
 - Video recordings can be useful in showing you aspects of your own behaviour.
 - Where do you stand?
 - Who do you speak to?
 - How do you come across to the students?
- *Student feedback*
You can also ask your students what they think about what goes on in the classroom. Their opinions and perceptions can add a different and valuable perspective. This can be done with simple questionnaires or learning diaries for example.

What to do next

Once you have some information recorded about what goes on in your classroom, what do you do?

- *Think*
You may have noticed patterns occurring in your teaching through your observation. You may also have noticed things that you were previously unaware of. You may have been surprised by some of your students' feedback. You may already have ideas for changes to implement.
- *Talk*
Just by talking about what you have discovered - to a supportive colleague or even a friend - you may be able to come up with some ideas for how to do things differently.
 - If you have colleagues who also wish to develop their teaching using reflection as a tool, you can meet to discuss issues. Discussion can be based around scenarios from your own classes.
 - Using a list of statements about teaching beliefs (for example, pairwork is a valuable activity in the language class or lexis is more important than grammar) you can discuss which ones you agree or disagree with, and which ones are reflected in your own teaching giving evidence from your self-observation.

- *Read*

You may decide that you need to find out more about a certain area. There are plenty of websites for teachers of English now where you can find useful teaching ideas, or more academic articles. There are also magazines for teachers where you can find articles on a wide range of topics. Or if you have access to a library or bookshop, there are plenty of books for English language teachers.

- *Ask*

Pose questions to websites or magazines to get ideas from other teachers. Or if you have a local teachers' association or other opportunities for in-service training, ask for a session on an area that interests you.

Conclusion

Reflective teaching is a cyclical process, because once you start to implement changes, then the reflective and evaluative cycle begins again.

- What are you doing?
- Why are you doing it?
- How effective is it?
- How are the students responding?
- How can you do it better?

As a result of your reflection you may decide to do something in a different way, or you may just decide that what you are doing is the best way. And that is what professional development is all about.