

Teaching Strategies: Strategies for Teaching Early Childhood Students to Connect Reflective Thinking to Practice

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Strategies for Teaching Early Childhood Students To Connect Reflective Thinking to Practice

This is a follow-up article to a "Teaching Strategies" column that examined how to help college and university teacher educators think about and plan for linking course content and the learning process (Grossman & Williston, 1998/99). In this article we want to focus on ideas about connecting reflective inquiry to teaching practice. We continue to encourage readers to critically examine their conceptual frameworks, teaching methods, strategies, and techniques, and to initiate dialogues with colleagues about thoughtful teaching practices. —S.G. & J.W.

Reflection (i.e., reflective teaching, reflective inquiry, reflection-on-practice) is one of the most popular concepts in education today. Through reflection, teachers gain the

personal and professional knowledge (Lieberman & Miller, 2000) that is so important to being an effective teacher and to shaping children's learning (Day, 2000; Galvez-Martin, Bowman, & Morrison, 1999; National Association for the Education of Young Children, 1996). We define reflection as the act of creating a mental space in which to contemplate a question or idea, such as, "What do I know now about teaching young children?" This moment allows a mental transformation to a time and a situation that leads to a deeper perspective.

Helping Students Learn To Reflect

Because of the vast amount of information to process today and the fast

pace of the times in which our students live, reflection is not as natural as it might have been in earlier generations. To make this process more accessible to our students, we have designed specific strategies to help their minds "bend back." We want to help them find the value of reflecting on critical issues, examining their thinking, and giving serious consideration to an idea or opinion, so that they can refine their practices and continually grow in understanding. Simply reflecting on a problem, possibly one of the most common uses of teacher reflection, is not our only, or even our primary, goal of reflection. Students must have content on which to focus their thinking. Han (1995) states that, "While the process element of

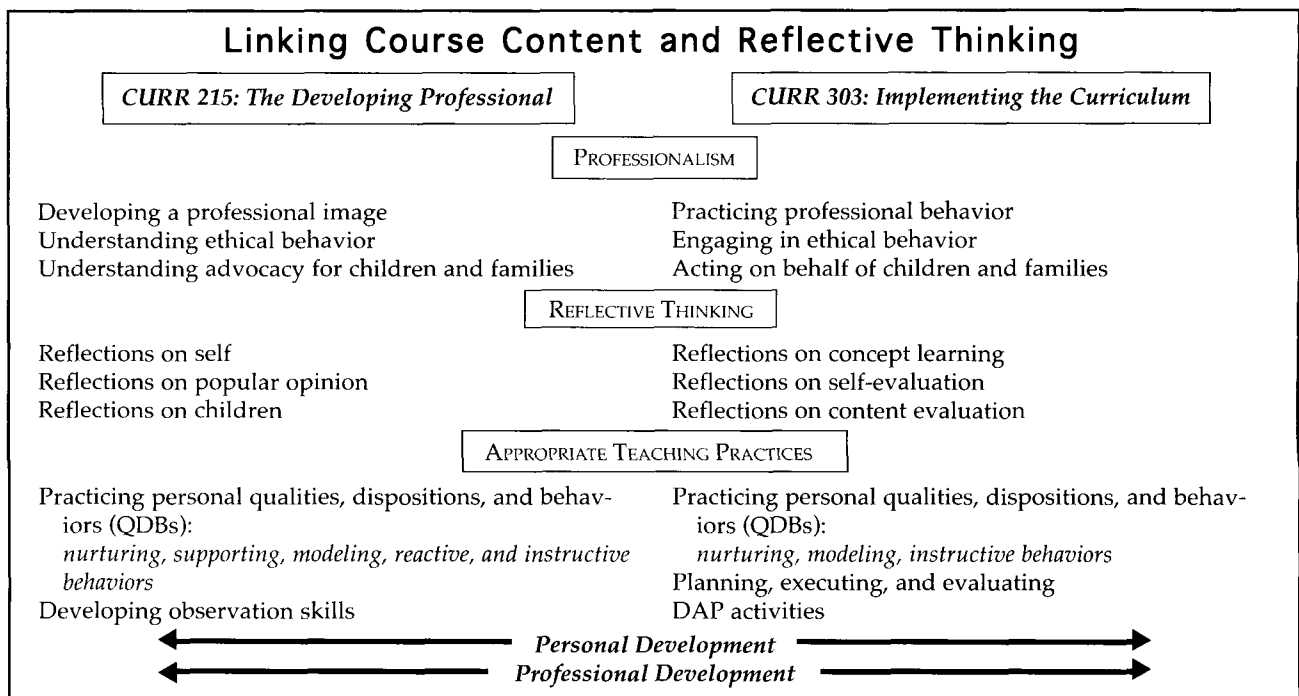


Figure 1

reflection emphasizes how teachers make decisions, content stresses the substance that drives the thinking" (p. 228). While reflective inquiry may set the stage for learning how to be a good teacher, reflection cannot happen without content knowledge (Bowman, 1989).

Critical reflection has had ample visibility in the literature for more than a decade (Bowman, 1989; Boyd, Boll, Brawner, & Villaume, 1998; Cruickshank, 1985; Duff, Brown, & Van Scoy, 1995; Ghaye, 2000; Schon, 1983, 1987; Vukelich & Wrenn, 1999). Typically, stu-

dents in introductory early childhood education courses are introduced to the role of the teacher, and to relevant teaching tasks (Bowman, 1989; Noordhoff & Kleinfeld, 1988). We believe they also should be introduced to reflection as a natural way of processing how each of us makes decisions, forms opinions, and examines the contexts and content of our lives. In intermediate courses, students need to learn how to use reflective thinking, not only as a way of assessing lessons and children's learning outcomes, and evaluating one's teaching efficacy, but also as a way of facilitating immediate and future actions.

How do we prepare undergraduate students to use reflection to guide their current and future responsibilities? In the introductory and intermediate courses we teach, reflection centers on discovering students' personal identities; developing a professional disposition toward understanding children, parents, and colleagues; and building moral and ethical teaching practices. We have planned strategies, activities, and assignments that help students examine their ideas and perspectives. Reflective inquiry opportunities in other early childhood education classes continue to help our students define their personal and professional identities. Such opportunities include strategies such as writing autobiographies, case studies, and journal entries; simulating teaching situations; and analyzing curriculum. The class assignments and discussions center on the following themes: self, children, content learning, evaluation, preprofessional teaching, and popular opinion.

At Eastern Michigan University, students entering the early childhood program take *The Developing Professional* course, and students at the intermediate stage of their program take the *Implementing the Curriculum in Early Childhood Education* course. Each course has: a co-requisite with another course (it cannot be taken out of sequence), and a weekly 1 1/2-hour recitation class, with additional time spent each week on guided experiences with children in the campus child care center and at the Children's Institute. The courses share concepts and strategies in a developmental framework.

In the *Developing Professional* course, students learn and practice communication skills, learn how to interpret child and adult behaviors, and learn how to build relationships with children, peers, and teacher supervisors. *Implementing the Curriculum* teaches students how to implement and evaluate curriculum, plan safe and creative environments, and interact effectively with peers, teachers, and parents.

Initially, we set the stage for discussion by using many of the environmental conditions that encourage reflection: a safe and nurturing environment; the use of interpersonal skills that model reflection, such as active listening and speaking; and an atmosphere of trust that encourages students to take risks (Colton & Sparks, 1993; Pugach & Johnson, 1988). We start within

Reflecting on Self
<i>CURR 215: The Developing Professional</i>
<p>Preprofessional Self-Assessment Write at least eight sentences about the qualities, dispositions, and behaviors that describe you in the present, past, and future.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The way I am now • The way I was as a child • The way I will be in my 5th year of teaching
<p>Questions To Ask Yourself Before You Graduate Think about these questions and be ready to share answers with your adviser, instead of stating that you "can't wait to get out of college!"</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What do I think I know? • What do I want to learn? • How can I find out about . . . ? • How will I show what I've learned? • What problems can come up in the classroom? • What problems can I resolve with children?
Draw "Self" Within Early Childhood Classroom
<i>CURR 303 - Implementing the Curriculum</i>
<p>Personal and Professional Confidence Respond in writing to the following statements:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • During this session at the Children's Institute, I felt like an early childhood professional when_____. • An example of how I have grown as a professional since taking CURR 215 is_____. • To help me feel more confident for the next practicum I plan to (name two things you will do as you work in the classroom).
<p>Partnership Evaluation Respond in writing to the following questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How did your partner respond during the planning and implementation of the activity (i.e., what did s/he say and/or do)? • What did you learn about directing another adult and working in a partnership? • If you were to do a partnership assignment again, what would you do differently?

Figure 2

the first two weeks of the semester with discussions on self, children, and teachers, and then proceed to other foci, such as content learning and popular opinion. The following are examples of our strategies for teaching reflection.

Areas of Student Reflection

Reflecting on Self. Knowledge of self is the foundation of professional competence. Teachers lacking self-knowledge are likely to externalize the locus of control (i.e., blame and criticize others for problems they themselves may have created). To stimulate students' self-reflection, we ask them to respond to the questions or statements in Figure 2.

Reflecting on Children. Knowledge of child growth and development is at the heart of educating children of all ages. Reflecting on children's development and behavior increases understanding of the learning process and improves teaching practices. In the introductory

course, students are presented with "Moments in Time," episodes that describe children in hypothetical situations (see Figure 3). In addition, students' personal experiences from their practice are shared and used for group reflections, and to connect classroom content with practice.

Early in the intermediate course, students select one child in their practicum classroom for focused observation (see Figure 3). The culminating assignment is to translate, in the form of a letter to parents, observational data into appropriate language. This assignment allows the instructor to assess whether or not the student can effectively use observed information to inform parents about their child's classroom behavior.

Reflecting on Content Learning. At the end of the semester, we ask students to reflect on the value of the content by filling out a content questionnaire. These questionnaires include all of the major components of each course (see Figure 4), and they provide us with information

about the meaning students take from the course content. The value for the students is that they must reflect on what they have learned since the beginning of the semester.

Following this questionnaire activity, we also hold open classroom conversations with students about what they have learned, as well as what they need to learn. At this time, a student hears from her peers about what they have learned, which may be quite different from what she herself has learned. In this process, we observe students reconstructing their own knowledge gleaned from the course. This exercise in metacognition is another form of reflection.

Reflecting on Preprofessional Teaching Experiences. The introductory course provides students with their first supervised preprofessional experience with children; the intermediate course provides their second. Supervising teachers, all of whom have master's degrees in early childhood education, use a Likert scale evaluation form on students twice each semester: once at the mid-point, when it is formative; and again at the semester's end, when it is summative.

In addition to evaluating what students have learned in our classrooms, we ask them to assess what they learned in their practicum experience with young children. This assessment allows students to become aware of what they have learned and how they have grown. It encourages them to acknowledge areas in which they may yet need improvement, to bridge theory from education classes to practice, to connect their past and present experiences, and to make sense of their learning. We expect to see statements that are both philosophical and concrete. Figure 5 includes a selection of the focus statements to which we ask students to respond. Early in the semester, students receive copies of all the evaluation tools.

Reflecting on Children

CURR 215: The Developing Professional

Moments in Time: Episode #1
Andy is 2 1/2 years old. Usually quite active, he is now sitting quietly, playing with a truck in the carpeted area of the room. Billy, also 2 1/2 years old, sees Andy across the room playing with the truck. Billy runs over to Andy and pulls the truck out of Andy's hands, yelling "Mine!" Andy tries unsuccessfully to grab the truck back, and then bites Billy on the hand. Billy begins crying loudly, which attracts the attention of the student teacher. The student walks over to Andy and Billy, sits on the floor, and in a harsh voice says, "Andy, that wasn't very nice. We need to be nice to our friends and share. Now tell Billy you're sorry."

(Multiple choices are offered, followed by questions, such as: Would there have been a more appropriate way to deal with this situation? What would you have said, and why?)

CURR 303 - Implementing the Curriculum

Child Observation Report
During the semester each student observes and informally assesses a child in each of five developmental areas: cognitive, physical, social, emotional, and creative. Students observe and comment on at least three of the five areas in the report, using the textbook as a guide.

Following the observations, students write a report in the form of a letter to the parent(s) that summarizes what they have observed. The letter is written as though the student is talking to the parent at a parent-teacher conference. The report is to be objective, not judgmental, using examples from the observations. (Letter is read only by the instructor.)

Figure 3

Reflecting on Popular Opinion. Some students have trouble coping with friends or family members who are antagonistic to their teaching

aspirations. In the last decade, especially, media coverage has been critical of schools and teachers. We give students copies of opinion col-

umns from local newspapers and national newsmagazines that mislead readers about education in the United States. We ask them to re-

Reflecting on Content Learning					
CURR 215: The Developing Professional					
<i>Rate the value of these components to your professional development</i>	Low		High		
Favorite Teacher Characteristics (discussing what makes good teachers)	1	2	3	4	5
Making Best Impressions (firm hand shakes, positive self-concept)	1	2	3	4	5
Starting and Maintaining Children's Conversation	1	2	3	4	5
Assignment #1: Children's Cog., Affective, Physical	1	2	3	4	5
Assignment #2: Preprofessional Self-Assessment	1	2	3	4	5
Assignment #3: Child Guidance in Classroom	1	2	3	4	5
Assignment #4: Self-Performance Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5
Child Guidance Exercises	1	2	3	4	5
Learning Conflict Resolution Techniques	1	2	3	4	5
Listening Exercises (listening for and responding to feelings)	1	2	3	4	5
Writing Exercises (using correct grammar, spelling, punctuation)	1	2	3	4	5
Story Reading	1	2	3	4	5
CURR 303 - Implementing the Curriculum					
<i>Rate the value of these components to your professional development</i>	Unimportant			Very Important	
Grammar Tests	1	2	3	4	5
Self-Reflective Assignment #1 (feeling like a professional)	1	2	3	4	5
Self-Reflective Assignment #2 (final self-evaluation)	1	2	3	4	5
Activity Plans & Evaluations	1	2	3	4	5
#1 Creative Development	1	2	3	4	5
#2 Working in a Team	1	2	3	4	5
#3 Choice Time	1	2	3	4	5
Advocacy Form	1	2	3	4	5
Lead Teacher's Evaluation	1	2	3	4	5
Written Reaction to Your Mid-Term	1	2	3	4	5
Résumé Draft	1	2	3	4	5

Figure 4

spond to such questions as: What do you think are the origins of this person's opinion(s)? What are the writer's qualifications? What are your opinions and feelings about the column or article? How might you respond to the author of this column as an informed student of education?

Summary

As instructors who are concerned about students' ability to make sense of what they are doing and to be more than "technicians," we have tried to

design reflective strategies that will help them achieve a deeper level of understanding of children, teaching, and themselves. With our students' help we have revised, eliminated, and added strategies as we have become more reflective about our guidance of students. We will continue to reflect on these strategies.

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Reflecting on Preprofessional Teaching Experiences

CURR 215: *The Developing Professional*

Student Self-Performance Evaluation

- Describe the professional qualities, dispositions, and behaviors (QDBs) you have learned that you will need to demonstrate to other professionals.
- Describe the QDBs you have learned that will be needed in your future profession with children. What QDBs do you want to improve?
- Describe your supporting and nurturing behaviors (e.g., facial gestures, physical, and verbal behaviors).
- Describe your modeling behaviors with children (e.g., the behaviors that you want children to imitate).
- Describe your reactive and instructive behaviors (e.g., encouraging children's independent behavior).
- Describe your ability to see situations from the child's point of view (i.e., being more concerned with the child's feelings than with his/her actions).
- Describe the importance of observing and recording children's behavior.
- Describe five of the most important things you learned in the practicum.

CURR 303 - *Implementing the Curriculum*

Personal Qualities

- Describe the positive qualities you demonstrated in your practicum experience this semester.
- Describe your ability to function as a member of a team, including your ability to follow directions and your reaction to guidance and constructive criticism.

Effectiveness With Children

- Describe your natural "proximity" behaviors, as well as your nonverbal communication behaviors.
- Describe how you work with children, both on a one-to-one basis and with small groups of children.

Curriculum Planning, Preparation, and Presentation

- What did you learn from the planning, preparation, and presentation of your projects?
- What do you want to learn next in curriculum planning? What do you feel you are ready for?

Figure 5