

Reflective Practice and Teacher Professional Learning

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Abstract: This paper addresses the utilisation of reflective practice to foster teacher professional learning by critically reviewing recent research and other relevant literature. The paper concludes that reflection and reflective practice are vital to teacher professional learning owing to the theory-practice gap, the research-practice gap, limitations of the managerialist approach to professional development, and the unstable nature of the teaching career. Appropriate models and frameworks for reflection are available for application, accompanied by the suggestions to extend reflective practice beyond its private mode.

Keywords: Reflection, reflective practice (RP), professional learning.

1. Introduction

The mindset that professional development necessarily involves formal learning-which achieving by structured programmes of instruction in an educational institution-is still dominant in Vietnam [1]. Knight [2], however, argues that the event-delivery model of managerialist discourses (e.g., workshops and courses) do not benefit professional learning because it is not well-supported by theories of workplace learning which appreciate the significance of non-formal learning in communities of practice. Regarding this, Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin [3] claim that observation and reflection are greatly more useful for than abstract discussions. Besides, many professionals do not always have time available for formal professional learning [4], [5]. Also, the workplace supervisor may be unable to foster workplace learning effectively

because of the structural constraints of their role [6], and supervisors' formal role in supervision, along with individuals' attempt to prove their competence, causes low trust in supervisors to facilitate workplace learning [7]. This is actually the case in Vietnam nowadays [1]. These arguments clarify that informal learning of all kinds, one of which is learning from one's own and others' experiences, obviously has its own position in promoting professional and lifelong learning. This paper reviews theories of reflection and reflective practice and other related literature as well to address the issue of exploiting this form of informal learning to foster professional learning and development in the teaching career.

2. Defining reflection and reflective practice

Reflection was defined differently throughout the literature; however, in essence, it is an internal process in which individuals employ to critically question an experience to

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achieve new insights and deeper understandings of it; the process normally results in changes in individuals' perspectives and behaviours [8-10]. Reflective practice (hereafter RP) is the representation of reflection; it is the "practitioner's ability to access, make sense of and learn through work experience to achieve more desirable, effective and satisfying work" [11]. Schön [12] suggests two types of reflections: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. Reflection-in-action refers to immediate adjustments or improvisation in the midst of the action or in a particular context, while reflection-on-action involves making sense of an event after its occurrence. Dissimilarly, Ghaye [13] views reflection as exploiting knowledge and inquiry processes and classifies it into "reflection-for-action" and "reflection-with-action". The former relates to reflecting for a reason or particular purpose and planning action in advance, whereas the latter refers to considering available options, making a decision to act and then doing it. In short, reflection and reflective practice mirror informal, action-oriented learning processes in which individuals reflect on their prior experience to gain insights for future actions or examine an inquiry thoroughly to plan action in advance.

3. Significance of RP to teacher professional learning

Despite being informal learning in nature, RP is beneficial and essential to the teaching career for a number of reasons.

RP allows linking research findings to individuals' specific contexts. By producing new knowledge, modifying or rejecting inappropriate ideas, educational research aims to improve educational practice; however, though a great deal of effort has been made, a research-practice gap, i.e., a lack of relevance of research findings to particular practices and classrooms, still exists [[14-16] and this gap cannot be solved quickly and easily because of various factors [17]. To be precise, education research fails to indicate "what works" in

practice [18] and cannot address diverse contexts [17, 19]. RP, thus, enables individuals to find out "what works and what does not" in their contexts rather than unconsciously apply what researchers found in practice.

Besides, RP is of importance owing to the gap between theories and teaching processes. A theoretical framework for practice is essential; however, theories can only offer abstract knowledge which applies generally and does not address any particular classrooms and contexts [14]. Consequently, applying teaching methods developed in one place into another can be problematic [20-22]. Take communicative language teaching (CLT) for example. CLT is widely accepted to be the best for language teaching [23]; nevertheless, Pham [24] indicates that Vietnamese TESOL teachers encountered obstacles in implementing Western-based CLT theories (e.g., pair work and group work), which they learned in Australia, into their actual classrooms. This case probably illustrates a failure of planning to use theories in a particular context, or in other words, a failure of reflection-for-action.

Finally, teaching and learning are complicated, change over time, and have no particular right approach [25], and so reflecting on theories and recasting prior understandings and current practices are vital [26].

4. Implementing RP

RP plays a central role to professional learning and offer a rationale for teaching practice; however, Van Eekelen, Boshuizen and Vermunt [27] found that professionals' reflection was often unconscious, and its result only stopped at "getting an insight" rather than developing new behaviours. RP essentially differs from thoughtful action-which is instantaneous and has no cycles, no element of inquiry, no deliberate learning from the experience and no aims at an improvement to practice [28] - and needs to be done consciously

[29]. RP is, therefore, necessarily guided by models and frameworks.

Korthagen [30] developed a spiral RP model termed ALACT, named after its five phases: action, looking back, awareness of essential aspects, creating alternative methods of action and trial. The model is diagrammed as follows:

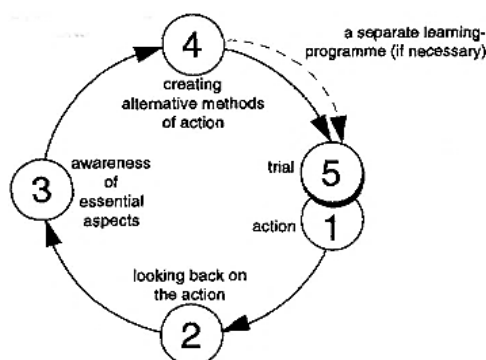


Figure 1. The ALACT model (Adapted from Korthagen & Kessels, 1999).

The ALACT is actually a model of reflection-on-action. Korthagen and Kessels [31] provide a set of questions to guide the practitioner in each phase of the model (Table 1):

Similar to Korthagen [30], Gibbs [32] provides a set of questions for reflection using his reflective cycle (Table 2).

Ghaye [13] has developed RP from a model to a framework. The author emphasises the role of attitude in reflection and argues that a deficit-based approach to reflection leads to spirals of deficit-based action. To avoid this, the author suggests a strength-based reflective framework which emphasises behavioural changes from the positive side of an experience. His framework for reflection is illustrated as follows (Figure 3):

The big “R” reminds us all that each question needs to be reflected upon. “To appreciate” involves appreciating and understanding our own and others’ capability, limitations, self-worth, identity, responsibilities and accountability; it also relates to developing a deeper understanding of our own learning agenda, self of sense, self-knowledge, self-

efficacy and purpose. “To imagine” means using RP to generate, manage and utilise knowledge, re-frame and then record it in some way. “To design” involves exploiting individual expertise and innovative ideas critically and creatively. “To act” refers to documenting the decisions being made and the reasons for them and taking action (or taking no action if necessary).

In summary, many other models of reflection exist. However, the above-mentioned ones could potentially contribute to professional learning because of three factors: appropriateness to teacher professional learning, feasibility and applicability in practice, and action-oriented nature. Unfortunately, RP models emphasise the production of individual knowledge [12]; this reduces the reliability and public benefits of RP. RP should, therefore, be used in the way in which many benefits from one and vice versa, and this suggests the vitality of communities of practice in RP.

Table 1. ALACT’s reflection questions

Phase 1 and Phase 5

- 1 What did I want to achieve?
- 2 What did I want to pay attention to?
- 3 What did I want to try out?

Phase 2

- 4 What were the concrete events?
 - What did I want?
 - What did I do
 - What did I think?
 - How did I feel?
 - What think I feel the pupils wanted, did, thought, felt?

Phase 3

- 5 What is the connection between the answers to the previous questions?
- 6 What is the influence of the context/ the school as a whole?
- 7 What does that mean for me?
- 8 What is the problem (or the positive discovery)?

Phase 4

- 9 What alternatives do I see? (Solutions or ways to make use of my discovery)?
 - 10 What are the advantages and disadvantages of each?
 - 11 What do I resolve to do next time?
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Gibbs [32] suggested an alternative to implement RP using “structured debriefing” to facilitate reflection, which is often cited as Gibbs' reflective cycle or Gibbs' model of reflection and is illustrated as follows:



Figure 2. Gibbs' model of reflection (Adapted from Gibbs, 1988).

Table 2. Reflection questions for Gibbs' model of reflection

Description	What happened? Don't make judgements yet or try to draw conclusions; simply describe.
Feelings	What were your reactions and feelings? Again don't move on to analysing these yet.
Evaluation	What was good or bad about the experience? Make value judgements.
Analysis	What sense can you make of the situation? Bring in ideas from outside the experience to help you. What was really going on? Were different people's experiences similar or different in important ways?
Conclusion (general)	What can be concluded, in general sense, from these experiences and the analyses you have undertaken?
Conclusion (specific)	What can be concluded about your own specific, unique, personal; situation or ways of working?
Personal plans	What are you going to do differently in this type of situation next time? What steps are you going to take on the basis of what you have learnt?

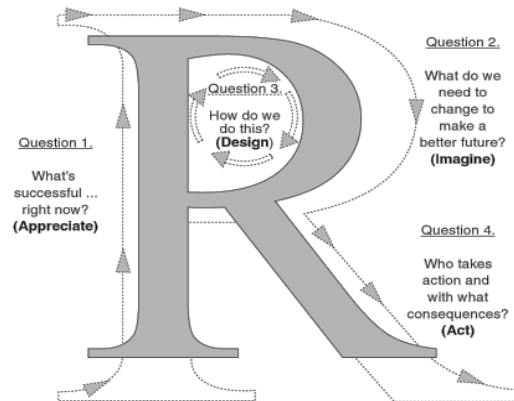


Figure 3. Ghaye's strength-based reflective framework (Adapted from Ghaye, 2010).

5. Making the most of RP

Communities of practice (CoPs) are groups of people who have a shared domain of interest and competence, gain from joint activities and discussions, mutual assistance and information sharing, and develop a shared repertoire of resources; CoPs can be face-to-face or online [33]. CoPs have been documented to foster professional development in various ways such as polishing individual skills and assessing collective resources [2, 14]; sharpening pedagogical competence and stimulating learner-centered, inquiry-based teaching [34]. Similarly, online CoPs are perceived as a means of social and professional linkage and a mechanism to alleviate the isolation resulting from the job function and geographical location [35], improve individuals' job performance [36], enhance teachers' belief in the value of changes and motivation to continuous learning [36].

Both real and online CoPs are important gateways for reflection. CoPs expand the scope for understanding the complexities of practice, so moves reflection into the public domain [39]. Holmes [36] and Ertmer [40] found that CoPs allowed teachers who could not try out ideas directly to learn vicariously by reflecting with others in the community. Following Boud and Walker [41], CoPs function as a “micro-context” likely for school teachers to reflect

intellectually and emotionally. Also, online activities, along with desires to apply ideas in teaching, foster reflection-in-practice through peers' practical stories, examples of good practice and suggestions of what works and what does not [40]. More importantly, online CoPs allow exchanging experiences and information across contexts and cultures, which could encourage the production of new knowledge and invention of new ways of teaching and learning. A good case for this is language teaching. While Asian instructors are struggling with adapting CLT to their contexts [24, 43], their counterparts in other parts of the world has been introduced to an alternative language teaching model-intercultural language teaching [44]. Hence, the membership of online CoPs could offer cross-cultural reflection, which might bring new ideas to individuals' practice; however, distinctive skills of RP are required in this form of reflection.

So far, many skills of RP (e.g., analysis and evaluation) have been discussed, together with the models and frameworks of reflection. However, reflection in a community or 'public reflection' needs five advanced skills: Being, Speaking, Disclosing, Testing, and Probing [45]. These skills belong to three modes (frame, individual and collective) and move between two cross dimensions - "staying with self" and "taking action towards others". The author illustrates her suggestion in the following diagram (Figure 4).

The skill of "Being" is central and pervasive, belonging to the "frame" mode and cutting across the others. It involves selecting, naming, and organising facts of an experience, i.e., describing situations without evaluating them. It also refers to exploring differences and diverse experiences by welcoming questions and comments, viewing others' positions as hypotheses to be tested, accepting others' experiences. "Disclosing" belongs to the "individual" mode and involves sharing one's doubts, articulating one's passion, unveiling one's feelings or revealing one's experience. Another skill of the "individual" mode is

"Probing"; it refers to finding out the facts, reasons, assumptions, inferences and possible consequences of a given suggestion (or action), without making others feel interrogated defensive. "Speaking" and "Testing" belong to the "collective" mode. The former implies extending one's contributions and enquiry to all the members of communities, seeking to articulate a collective voice from within oneself, and bringing out uncertainties or unfounded assumptions. The later refers to the process of collective inquiry to uncover new ways of thinking or seek available methods to address the problem at hand.

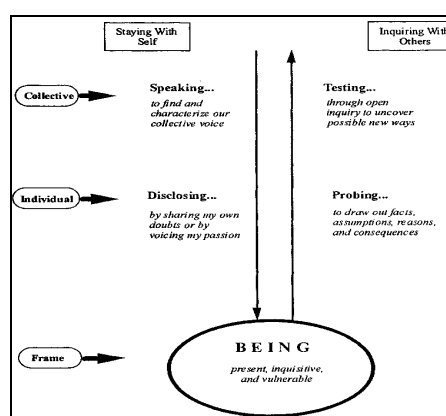


Figure 4. The five skills of reflective practice (Adapted from Raelin, 2001).

6. Conclusion

Several judgements about RP in the context of teacher professional learning can be made.

Firstly, reflection, both in its private and public mode, is deeply underpinned by the social theory of learning; private reflection occurs, and communications and interactions with others extend and develop that reflection. To be precise, Vygotskian social theory of learning emphasises the importance of past experiences and prior knowledge in making sense of new situations or present experiences [46]. Also, the social theory of learning contends that human-beings, before trying out new or altered behaviours, first observe what others do to

achieve guidance for their trials [47], and that learning occurs through interacting and communicating with others [47].

Secondly, of many paths to teacher professional learning, reflection has its own place because of the gaps between the theory-practice gap, the research-practice gap, limitations of the managerialist approach to professional development, and the nature of the teaching career.

Thirdly, although reflection is a form of informal learning, it should be done consciously and structurally. Of many models or frameworks of RP, there are ones that are particularly appropriate to teacher professional learning.

Besides, for productive reflection, individuals need to equip themselves or to be equipped with a certain set of skills.

Finally, RP can move out of individuals' particular context, and it could be both mono- and cross-cultural.

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