

Critical Reflections on Teaching

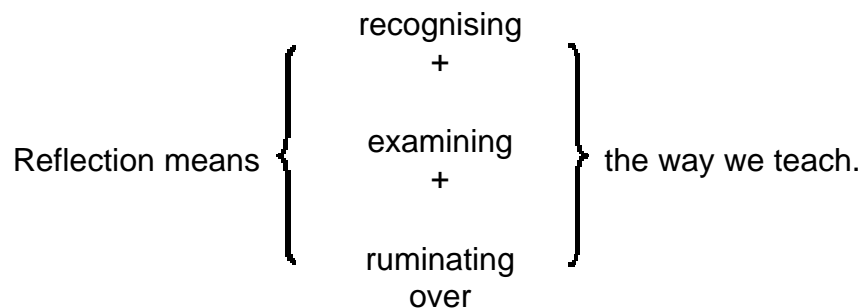
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What is Reflective Teaching?

Reflection defined



Reflection involves more than just describing what we do or what we have done.

As individuals, each with our own background and experience, we bring certain beliefs, assumptions, knowledge, attitudes and values to teaching.

Our teaching takes place in a social setting that has its own unique characteristics, opportunities and constraints.

Reflective teaching means exploring the implications of all these complex factors with the intention of understanding and improving our practice.

A good place to start is by considering our own pasts as learners and teachers, and reflecting on the beliefs, knowledge and values that we have developed from our experiences.

Levels of Reflection

In a sense, we reflect constantly as we teach, responding to ongoing situations in the classroom as they arise. This is sometimes called reflection-*in-action*.

Reflection-in-action usually happens very fast, perhaps even intuitively. It can be transient and quickly forgotten. It is only after a teaching event that there is time for in-depth reflection. This is sometimes called reflection-*on-action*.

When the process of reflection-on-action is rigorous, systematic and ongoing, teachers are acting as reflective practitioners.

Table 1 differentiates levels at which reflection can take place, from the fleeting and transient to the in-depth, ongoing critical examination of teaching.

Table 1: Levels of reflection

Rapid reflection	Immediate and automatic	Ongoing decision-making while teaching happens very fast, almost constantly, often privately.
Repair	Thoughtful	Teacher makes a decision to alter behaviour in response to cues from students.
Review	Less formal At a particular point in time	Teacher thinks about, writes about or discusses some element of teaching or students' learning; often interpersonal and collegial.
Research	More systematic Over a period of time	Thinking and observation become more sharply focussed around particular issues; involves collecting data over time, eg Action Research, exploratory practice, teaching journals.
Retheorizing and Reformulating	Long term Informed by public academic theories	More abstract and more rigorous; teachers critically examine their practical theories, and consider these in the light of academic theories.

Adapted from Zeichner and Liston 1996: 47, cited in Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001).

Teaching Beliefs

The power of beliefs to influence teaching

The teaching repertoire of any individual teacher is an amalgam of beliefs, knowledge and assumptions. Together these elements make up the person's unique 'teaching schemata'.

The role of beliefs is particularly powerful. Williams and Burden (1997: 56) report 'a growing body of evidence to indicate that teachers are highly influenced by their beliefs, which in turn are closely linked to their values, to their views of the world and to their conceptions of their place within it.' Pajares (1992), cited in Williams and Burden (*ibid*), goes so far as to claim that teachers' beliefs are more influential than their knowledge in determining teaching behaviour. Williams and Burden reiterate this themselves:

Teachers' beliefs about learning will affect everything they do in the classroom ... deep-rooted beliefs ... will pervade their classroom actions more than a particular methodology they are told to adopt or course-book they follow.

Williams and Burden 1997: 57

Definitions

The term 'belief' generally refers to acceptance of a proposition for which there is no conventional knowledge, one that is not demonstrable, and for which there is accepted disagreement (Woods 1996: 195):

Knowledge refers to things we 'know' — conventionally accepted facts [that] ... in our society today ... generally means [something] that ... has been demonstrated or is demonstrable

Woods 1996: 195

An Assumption, in contrast, is the temporary acceptance of a fact that we cannot say we know, and which has not been demonstrated but which we are taking as true for the time being.

ibid: 195

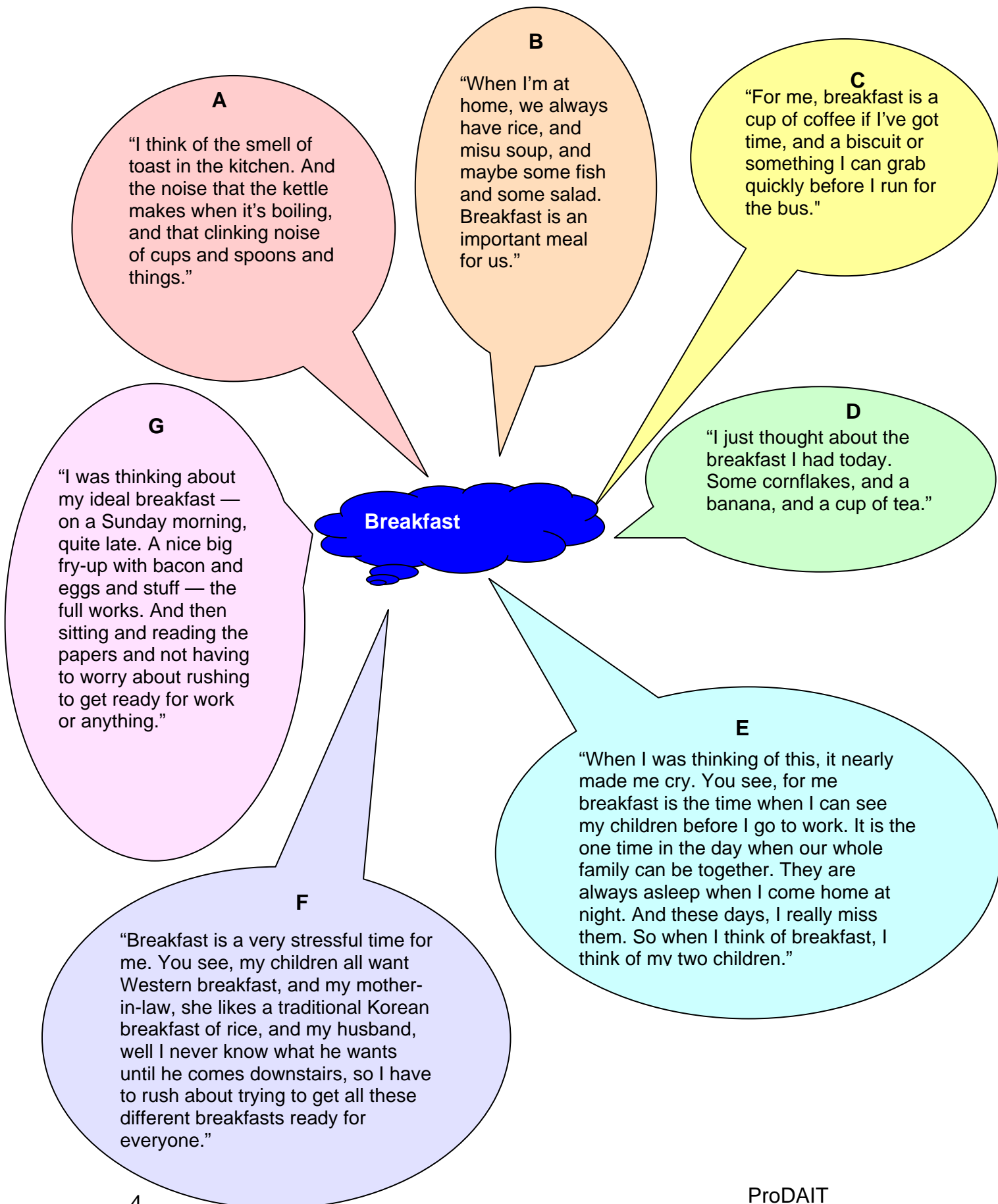
According to writers such as Woods, knowledge, assumptions and beliefs are part of a single system, where the more belief characteristics that are present, the more we can think of a structure as being a belief rather than knowledge; that is, beliefs, assumptions and knowledge are seen not as distinct concepts, but as points on a spectrum of meaning (*ibid:* 195).

The Role of Belief Systems

Introduction

Here is a simple word — **BREAKFAST**— but if you look at Figure 1, you will see that it evokes a host of responses from different individuals.

Figure 1: The spectrum of meaning



If an apparently simple word like 'breakfast' evokes a huge range of responses, how much more will this be so when concepts to do with learning and teaching are presented? All of us have been 'learners' affected by 'teachers' for many years; these experiences have combined to give each of us a quite well-elaborated set of ideas about good (and bad) teaching and good learning. We bring this with us, often quite unwittingly, when we become teachers ourselves.

Try the following activity to trace some of your own beliefs:

Activity: Tracing your individual beliefs

Recreating past experience

Jot down very quickly what comes into your mind when you think of each of the terms in the list below. It could be a single word ('boring!', 'inspiring!'), a person (a memorable teacher or student), a learning event that was vivid, or even a training course that affected how you thought about learning. It could be what this term meant for you as a learner, or what it means for you as a teacher. The important thing is to capture your spontaneous reaction.

- teacher
- student
- classroom
- lecture
- lecturer
- seminar
- tutor.

Reflecting on these experiences

Now return to each term and pursue that first reaction: what was it that made the experience, person or situation what it was? (Why boring ...? Why was this teacher influential ...?).

Further reflection and analysis

Now set up some oppositional pairs.

if your experience of, say, the lecture, was 'boring', and you have added 'because the lecturer just talked at us for 50 minutes as if we were experts too, and I didn't understand anything', set beside that an alternative that would have made the experience better (eg 'talking to us in language we could understand').

Conversely, if your reaction to the lecture was 'inspiring', because, perhaps, 'the lecturer's enthusiasm made me want to go and discover more about the subject', set out what would have failed to inspire you. Do this for each of the terms.

How past experience relates to present practice

Reflect back to a lecture, seminar or small group session that you taught recently.

How many of the teaching decisions you made — either in the planning or the carrying-out of that session — can you now relate to what you have written in the steps above?

How past experience bears on future practice

Now use as your example a seminar or lecture that you are planning to teach. At each step of your plan stop and ask yourself:

- a Why am I doing this?
- b What belief that I hold about teaching does it exemplify?
- c What alternative ways are there and why am I rejecting them?

Articulating your beliefs

In any individual, beliefs and personal knowledge are inextricably linked (very much a chicken and egg situation). The series of activities above has tried to illuminate the picture a little by getting your instinctive responses to key concepts in learning and teaching, and then asking you to explore how your own experiences, extended over time, have resulted in your personal set of beliefs about teaching.

You may now therefore be able to express your present set of beliefs about teaching.

Taking each key term in turn, summarize the attributes that make it a positive contribution to teaching and learning.

- A good *teacher* IS ... as shown by actions LIKE ...
- A good *lecture* can affect students in these ways ... by doing the following ...
- A good *student* has the following characteristics ... as shown in the following ways ...

Expressing your ‘philosophy of teaching’

Taking your comments above, write a few paragraphs summarizing your views about teaching; what you would call your personal ‘philosophy of teaching’.

Carrying out this sequence of activities will have given you an insight into your own ‘teaching schemata’.

The next section asks you to experiment in a different way with the mix of belief, knowledge, assumption and value.

Assumptions and Social Context

Every teaching event takes place in a social setting that involves the subjectivities of others, usually our learners. Remember that each of them must also be using their beliefs, values and assumptions to interpret the teaching events and settings.

It will be important to find out how other people view aspects of teaching and learning and to compare these views with your own.

The different views of teachers and learners about learning:

reinforce the importance of clarifying to learners the assumptions underlying teachers' classroom practices, or accommodating classroom practices to match them more closely to students' expectations ... The consequences of not doing this are likely to be misunderstanding and mistrust on the part of both teachers and learners

Richards and Lockhart, 1994: 35

Hunting Assumptions

The aim of this section is to encourage you to identify and challenge some of your own assumptions about teaching and learning.

Individual assumptions and consensus

There are many techniques and strategies that as teachers we tend to take for granted as good practice. Stephen Brookfield (1995), who has written considerably on reflection in learning and teaching, has coined the phrase 'hunting assumptions' to show that, when subjected to critical scrutiny, some of this taken-for-granted-ness starts to break down. When we look more closely, what we saw as teaching axioms can come to look more like unquestioningly adopted, unexamined assumptions.

When there is a large body of such taken-for-granted assumptions, what emerges is a general teaching consensus, whose evolution is not unlike the evolution of our personal teaching schemata — an amalgam of beliefs, values, knowledge and assumptions, functioning at a societal level at a given point in time, rather than at the level of the solitary individual. There will, ipso facto, be a significant overlap between this general consensus and the beliefs of an individual taught and teaching in that cultural setting.

Brookfield is not saying that these assumptions about good teaching are necessarily wrong, just that although they tend to be unquestioningly accepted, they are not necessarily axiomatically right, or right for everyone, or right every time.

His technique is to take a 'common-sense assumption' and provide one or more perfectly plausible alternative interpretations, thus undermining the taken-for-granted-ness of the assumption. This will be illustrated in following sections.

Brookfield's method for 'hunting assumptions'

Brookfield takes a commonly held assumption, for example:

It's common sense to visit small groups after you've set them a task, since this demonstrates your commitment to helping them learn. Visiting groups is an example of respectful, attentive, student-centred teaching.

He then goes on to give some different interpretations of this behaviour.

First he says 'Visiting small groups after you've set them a task can seem like a form of assessment — a way of checking up ... This can be insulting to students, since it implies that you don't trust them enough to do what you've asked.'

Second, he points out that the habit might even get in the way of students doing good learning: 'Students might change their behaviour during your visit to the group as a way of impressing you with the kinds of behaviours they think you want to see. Their overwhelming concern is showing you what good, efficient, task-oriented learners they are, rather than thoughtfully analyzing and critiquing the task at hand'.

In this example, Brookfield looks at the supposedly ideal teacher behaviour from another perspective — through the eyes of the students, in terms of:

- a the students' interpretation of what the teacher's behaviour stands for
- b the students' ideas of what they think teachers want to see.

This move, from the 'me-centred' perspective of the teacher, to the perspective ('lens' is Brookfield's word) of other agents in the teaching situation, is the crucial one. Our actions as teachers will unavoidably be interpreted through the multitude of factors that constitute the learning and teaching belief system of each of our students — their age, gender, personal disposition, economic circumstances, the previous education they have experienced. We cannot, in other words, expect that what we mean by what we do and say is experienced by our students as having the same meaning. Behaviour is not transparent between people — it is interpreted, and its meaning is constructed by those who experience it.

Further examples of ‘hunting assumptions’

Here are some other examples that Brookfield cites. In each case, go beneath the surface assumption. Try to take the perspective of different kinds of students and teachers. Jot down different views each might have on the assumption. Does this exercise question the presumed unchallengability of the assumption?

Assumption 1

It's common sense to cut lecturing down to a minimum, since lecturing induces passivity in students and kills critical thinking.

Assumption 2

It's common sense that students like group discussion because they feel involved and respected in such a setting. Discussion methods build on principles of participatory, active learning.

Assumption 3

It's common sense that respectful, empathic teachers will downplay their position of presumed superiority and acknowledge their students as co-teachers.

Assumption 4

It's common sense that teaching is essentially mysterious, so if we try to dissect it or understand its essence, we will kill it.

Assumption 5

It's common sense that teachers who have been working the longest have the best instincts about what students want and what approaches work best. If my own instincts as a novice conflict with what experienced teachers tell me is true I should put these instincts aside and defer to the wisdom of their experience.

- a Do you share the assumptions in the examples above?
- b What are your reasons?
- c Might different students have different perspectives on this?
- d With what validity?
- e Might different teachers have different perspectives on this?

Assumptions of Other Teaching and Learning Cultures

The gulf between what we mean and what our students perceive us as meaning is potentially even wider when we consider the increasing internationalisation of the student (and teacher) profile.

As we have seen, learners and teachers bring beliefs, values and assumptions with them about what 'learning' and 'teaching' mean. There are considerable differences between the Anglo/Australasian/American teaching cultures and those of say, Continental Europe and the Far East. For example, in strongly collectivist cultures, such as are found in many Asian countries, subjective norms (perceptions of other people's opinions) will play an even more decisive role than in Western-style individualist societies (see Hofstede, 1986, for a discussion of cultural types).

In Japan, for example, conformity to what is considered to be socially acceptable behaviour is extremely important and any deviance will meet with strong disapproval. In classrooms, this may mean that students from certain backgrounds are reluctant to volunteer opinions even when invited to. They may expect the tutor to provide them with the 'correct' answer, which it is their responsibility to memorise. Such situations can easily lead to a breakdown of rapport between teachers and students, as teachers in individualist cultures will interpret the behaviour as a refusal to join in and a wish to be spoon-fed.

Further reading

For more on this topic, here is a selection of relevant reading, including some online articles:

- Chalmers, D. (1994) Local and overseas students' goals and management of study *Issues in Educational Research*, 4(2) 25–56.
- Chalmers, D. and Volet, S. (1997) Common Misconceptions about Students from South-East Asia Studying in Australia, *Higher Education Research & Development*, 16(1) 87–98.
- Hofstede, G. (1986) Cultural differences in teaching and learning, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 10 301–32

In the following sections you are asked to get beneath the surface assumption and try to see the behaviour through as many 'lenses' (students and teachers) as possible. It would be particularly interesting to try out some of these with teaching colleagues from different learning cultures.

Reflecting on Assumptions

Illuminating limitations

The result of this assumption-challenging exercise is not to be dispiriting ('can we be confident about anything in teaching?'), but to illuminate the limitations of teaching methods that we have unquestioningly been using. Conversely, it also helps us to reconsider techniques that might currently be less fashionable, but may nonetheless have merit.

It might be useful now, either on your own or with colleagues, to think of some assumptions in teaching that you have unquestioningly accepted. Try to view these assumptions from other perspectives and consider whether you are still so confident about their universal validity.

What should you do with a 'hunted assumption'?

Once an assumption has been hunted down, the point is certainly not to abandon it. 'Hunting assumptions' is a technique that helps you more fully examine the potential of any teaching method, not necessarily to reject it, but to use it wittingly rather than unwittingly.

Seeing Teaching and Learning through Different 'Lenses'

The next step for critical reflection is to extend the technique further and look at our teaching more systematically through a range of perspectives other than our own. Brookfield (1995) uses the word 'lenses'. Apart from our own personal beliefs, values, assumptions and experiences, there are three other main 'lenses': students', colleagues', and theoretical literature. Viewing our teaching from these perspectives can illuminate and further inform our practice.

There are other perspectives you may also want to consider: employers, funders or similar stakeholders; former or future students; experts in other communications or interpersonal fields, for example counsellors, psychologists, mentors, coaches; quality assurance personnel; other lay people.

The student 'lens' for viewing teaching and learning

If you become more aware of your students' beliefs, assumptions and expectations about learning, you will be able to take appropriate action where any conflicting beliefs are identified. Try investigating approaches to learning directly with your students.

Target a specific area of studying (taking notes, learning from lectures, writing essays etc). Either frame a few questions to elicit the students' ideas, or ask them to come up with their own strategies.

The University of Birmingham's Guide to Effective Learning site gives links to other universities' Study Skills materials — see www.is.bham.ac.uk/gel/SSE.htm.

Method

- a Set aside 15–20 minutes of class time to ask students what learning strategies or techniques they normally use when studying (either self-generated, or from your prepared list). They should rank these in order of usefulness.
- b Ask them to work on this in small groups to compare and contrast their ideas. They should try to say why they find particular strategies effective.
- c Ask the groups to highlight any disagreements over the usefulness of strategies and why they have differing views.
- d Open discussion to the whole group and take brief notes (or record the discussion).
- e Go through their responses on your own later and decide which of the strategies suggested by the students support your own beliefs about how your subject can be learned effectively. Where the students' methods conflict with your own beliefs, consider why you would not use these strategies yourself, especially in the light of explanations given by the students.

Consider how you will cater for differences in preference of learning strategies among class members, or between the students and your own beliefs about approaches that facilitate learning.

Other techniques for eliciting the students' perspective on teaching and learning include:

- evaluation questionnaires — using those of the institution, purpose-designed ones to evaluate a specific piece of learning, or using or adapting questionnaires on websites
- classroom critical incident questionnaires (see www.prodait.org/approaches/cia/analysis.php)
- student focus groups — critical conversations
- analysing students' assessed work
- engaging in exploratory practice work (see www.prodait.org/approaches/exploratory/).

Colleagues' 'lenses' for viewing teaching and learning

Each of us has an individual mix of knowledge, beliefs and assumptions about teaching. One way to better illuminate our personal stance is to work with colleagues and share their perspectives with our own. Colleagues may be from the same 'teaching culture' as ourselves, or from a different one, in which case some of our fundamental 'givens' about teaching may come up for

discussion. There are a number of ways that colleagues can work together to bring their personal 'lens' to the teaching situation:

- Critical conversations (see www.prodait.org/approaches/dialogue/index.php). These need to be structured to:
 - create ground rules (parameters of discussion, agreement of confidentiality and establishing of trust)
 - provide a focus of conversation (eg, why students resist learning, how to get better participation)
 - have a target outcome (eg, a technique you will both try)
- Solving teaching puzzles and problems collaboratively:
 - good practices audit (can be started by circulating a series of FAQs around the Department or School and asking for responses)
 - Action Learning (see www.prodait.org/approaches/learning/index.php)
 - Action Research (see www.prodait.org/approaches/research/index.php)
 - Cooperative Development (see www.prodait.org/approaches/development/index.php)
- Peer observation of teaching (see www.prodait.org/approaches/observation/index.php)
- Peer review of pedagogic practice (see www.prodait.org/approaches/observation/review.php).

The 'Lens' of Theory for Teaching and Learning

There is a considerable body of literature on the ideology and pedagogy of higher education, emanating principally from the UK, Australasia and the USA. The range is vast and comprehensive: 'overview' texts on the position of 'the academy' in the 21st century; materials on generic teaching and learning issues (for example, how students learn, assessment, curriculum design); topic-focused approaches (problem-based learning, blended learning); discipline-specific materials (how students learn through problem-based methods in, for example, geography).

Some of the material is thoroughly researched but some is more tentative, inviting further experimentation with ideas that have not been fully tested. Becoming involved in any of these areas of work is another way to bring new 'lenses' to our personal practice. At the very least, it can lead us to try things in our teaching that we might not have thought of. More comprehensively, a theoretical perspective can give us alternative ways of conceptualising and articulating our unique mix of beliefs, knowledge and assumptions.

- Theory can:
 - help us 'name' our practice
 - break the circle of familiarity
 - be a substitute for absent colleagues
 - prevent 'groupthink'
- Theory should make us:
 - ask questions
 - allow us to argue and challenge.

Further references

The Higher Education Academy's (HEA) Resource Database includes sections on:

- Research and Scholarly Evidence on Teaching and Research Relationships in Higher Education (see www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?process=full_record§ion=generic&id=97)
- Scholarship of Teaching (see www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp?section=generic&process=filter_fields&type=all&id=29&history=)
- Various other topics are searchable from the Resources Database home page (see www.heacademy.ac.uk/resources.asp).
- The relevant subject centre (see www.heacademy.ac.uk/SubjectNetwork.htm) of the HEA will almost certainly offer further articles on the theoretical basis of the pedagogy in your discipline.

The University of New South Wales (see www.ltu.unsw.edu.au/content/research_nexus/rtn_solt.cfm?ss=0) also has an excellent resource on the scholarship of learning and teaching.

‘Reframing’ — a Tool to Assist Change

Another powerful technique for overcoming constraints in the teaching environment is to ‘reframe’ the situation. Here is an example. A lecturer says:

I always have to provide a lecture summary on a handout because this is what my colleagues tell me the students expect.

This could be reframed as:

Lecture summary handouts are what the students expect and they get upset if they don’t get them.

This too could be reframed:

The Department accedes to student pressure on lecture handouts rather than making a pedagogical decision.

And in the case of the individual lecturer:

I believe the class would not be satisfied and might complain if I did not provide a lecture summary handout.

Reframing the situation in this hypothetical example has gone beneath the surface assumption (a lecture handout is always a good thing) to uncover a deeper reason (giving in to student pressure).

The question can now be considered from a pedagogical point of view:

Is a lecture handout ALWAYS a good thing?

You can bring various ‘lenses’ to bear on this question: theoretical, the views of your colleagues, and your own views. It is very likely that you will conclude that sometimes a lecture handout is a good thing, but sometimes there are more compelling reasons for not supplying one.

Your research into this question is also likely to throw up an immense variety of ways of using the lecture handout to make it an effective, active, learning tool in its own right. (To get further views on such issues, it’s always worthwhile doing a websearch to see if you can find an online discussion or resume of the arguments).

When reframing a teaching issue, ask yourself these key questions:

- a What is the constraint?
- b Can I reformulate the constraint to uncover its basis more fully?
- c Do I agree with its basis?
- d Can I take any action if I think it is appropriate, to remove the constraint?
- e How can I find out more about the issue or check that my perceptions are correct?

Extending Reflection into Action

From beliefs and assumptions to actions: how the process works

We have looked at ways of eliciting and articulating beliefs about teaching and learning — yours and others'. We also suggest that an understanding of the complex environments in which we teach and our students learn can help us to implement changes and achieve more successful learning experiences for students.

There is a PowerPoint slide show (at www.prodait.org/teaching/critical_teaching/ajzen.ppt) that presents a model of how beliefs, intentions and actions interact. See also Ajzen (1988).

Analysing teaching situations: extending reflection into action

Think about a lecture or seminar you recently taught, and the techniques you used (interactive, didactic, student-centred, problem-based etc). To what extent was your choice of techniques influenced, either positively or negatively, by any of the following?

- *Student factors*: eg size of group, pattern of study, student level of expertise, students' expectations of what you will do, yours of them
- *Environmental factors*: eg size and layout of room, time and place of session, the weather
- *Institutional or subject discipline factors*: eg 'how we do things in this University'; conventions of teaching in your discipline; how degree programmes are organised and assessed; colleagues' and departmental attitudes to teaching; the University Learning and Teaching Strategy
- *Other factors*: eg courses about teaching you have attended; theoretical literature you have read, subject or thematic resource websites you have consulted.

Did any of the above factors encourage you to try something new? Did any of the above factors STOP you from implementing a strategy you would have liked to try (for example, 'I can't do interactive work in a lecture theatre of 100+ students'; 'students refuse to do any preparation for classes')?

If you have identified constraints, you might like to look at the FAQs section of the ProDAIT website (at www.prodait.org/doing/faq.php) for suggestions on overcoming some of the often-articulated difficulties encountered by teachers. Alternatively, use a search engine to trawl higher education websites for hints, tips and solutions.

In the light of these searches, think again about how far you have to be constrained, even though we all acknowledge that constraints exist. Sometimes we have more room for manoeuvre than we realize.

Making reflection more critical and scholarly: a current UK nationally-funded approach

There is much research into current learning and teaching environments in higher education. If you would like to follow this up, one interesting HEFCE-funded study is in progress. This is the SOMUL project (the Social and Organisational Mediation of University Learning), which you can find out about at www.open.ac.uk/cheri/SOMULhome.htm.

Briefly, the project is:

exploring sets of diversities that affect the processes and outcomes of learning in higher education ... In posing fundamental questions of 'what is learned' and how this differs for different students in different places, the project seeks to provide a way of thinking about mass higher education in Britain which is empirically grounded and which may challenge conventional thinking about institutional subject and student differences'.

Brennan and Jary, 2004: 1

The article gives a comprehensive account of the intellectual bases on which the project is based, a brief synopsis of some of the key texts in higher education pedagogy as it has influenced the UK agenda, and a statement of what it is hoped that the project will achieve.

Individual and Collegial Approaches

The techniques outlined earlier began to put reflective teaching on a critical and scholarly footing and gave examples of ways of eliciting and analysing information to inform the wider perspectives ('lenses') we may want to take on our teaching. Reflection can be turned into action to improve our teaching.

However, if this cycle of reflection–action–reflection is to be fully grounded and more than just passing thoughts, or 'hints and tips' about teaching, it has to be systematic, structured and standards of scholarly practice must be applied to the work of analysis. Below are some suggestions for further resources that give guidance on activities that will help you reflect critically and systematically about your teaching.

Individually, you can do the following:

- teaching portfolios
- teacher learning audits
- video- and audio taping
- belief exploration (see www.delphi.bham.ac.uk/ and select Module 1)
- critical incident analysis (see www.prodait.org/approaches/cia/index.php)
- learning (and teaching) journals and logs — reflections on your own learning experiences (see www.prodait.org/journals/index.php).

In working with others, the possibilities include:

- Action research (see www.prodait.org/approaches/research/)
- Exploratory practice (see www.prodait.org/approaches/exploratory/)
- Action learning (see www.prodait.org/approaches/learning/)
- Cooperative development (see www.prodait.org/approaches/development/index.php)
- Observation of teaching (see www.prodait.iehosting.co.uk/approaches/observation/)
- Peer review of pedagogic practice (see www.prodait.org/approaches/review/index.php).

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