Reflection for Professional Growth: An Organisational Strategy for a Teacher Education Degree Programme

D. Hill, J. Jesson, S. Windross, L. Grudnoff

Auckland College of Education, Auckland, New Zealand

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Abstract

Reflection is a central notion in the Auckland College of Education's Bachelor of Education (Teaching) degree. It has the highest profile in the degree’s unifying professional inquiry and practice strand. In this strand, student teachers are supported in achieving a personal synthesis of their learning and experiences across the qualification.

The aim of reflective practice is to use metacognitive processes to maximise the professional growth and performance of each individual student teacher.

In support of this goal, a decision was made in 1998 to make reflection conscious for lecturing staff. A co-ordinator of reflective staff development was appointed and lecturing staff in Teacher Education Centres of Learning (faculties) became engaged in a dialogic staff development process. This paper documents both this process and the questions that have emerged for the organisation.

I must admit that up until now I have been a little ambivalent about reflection but it’s honestly been a lifesaver for me on this practicum. These events have surprised me. I suddenly realise how reflection has become part of my professional self. I also know that if I hadn’t able to step back and consciously reflect on my situation, I simply would have given up in despair.

"Beth" a final year Bachelor of Education (Teaching) student teacher discusses her final practicum (June 1999).

In 1997, the Auckland College of Education (ACE) launched its Bachelor of Education (Teaching) degree (hereafter BEd (Tchg)). It was a groundbreaking qualification in a number of areas. This was the first education degree in New Zealand to be offered solely by a College of Education. It was the first able to be completed in three years. The BEd (Tchg) was founded specifically on a professional knowledge base related to the world of the teacher rather than the traditional liberal arts base. The approval and acceptance of this qualification by the regulatory and professional bodies has caused much debate and review nationally. Indeed the development of the degree has precipitated changes to other teacher education programmes across the country. The competitive environment surrounding education funding has intensified this reaction.
The BEd (Tchg) broke ground in a number of other ways as well. The emerging qualification, in its philosophy and founding principles, sought to consciously counter "grotesquely uninformed" attacks on teaching as a learned profession (Snook, 1992). ACE was committed to producing graduates able to combine professional knowledge, experiences and skills in a wealth of ways, graduates who were able to demonstrate "professional intelligence in its broadest sense" (Ramsay, 1994). The College set out to prepare future teachers, able to proceed beyond a repertoire of learned and rehearsed behaviours, who can "deal critically with what exists in order to improve it" (Calvert, Mobley & Marshall, 1994). In a conscious rejection of the apprenticeship, patriarchal or skills based models of teacher education (Kirk, 1986), the ACE BEd (Tchg) relies heavily on metacognitive processes. Critical reflection is especially important in the development of professional competence for these graduates.

Reflection as a notion forms the 'professional glue', which brings all the elements of the qualification together in a meaningful way for each student teacher. Conscious reflection enables the potential graduate to draw on dispositions, knowledge and experience across the three strands of the qualification to achieve the informed and considered personal synthesis fundamental to quality professional practice. Throughout the programme, the professional practice of the teacher is conceived as a complex interweaving of the various elements representative of intelligent performance in relation to specific situations. (Auckland College of Education, 1996). This complexity and multi-dimensionalism is made explicit in the BEd (Tchg)'s underpinning Matrix of the Dimensions of Teacher Education. (Windross & Lomas, 1998) This overarching outcomes statement, in which seventeen fundamental dimensions are illuminated in terms of their knowledge, dispositional and performance elements, forms the basis of all programme learning outcomes.

Against this backdrop, reflection offers the opportunity for each student teacher to consciously interweave programme and personal elements into a unique, viable and appropriately adaptable pedagogy. It also provides the opportunity to examine the social and political contexts teachers work in and to engage with the attendant moral and ethical issues. In addition, reflection encourages student teachers to take greater responsibility for their own professional growth.

While all modules and strands within the programme support students in reflection, the central Professional Inquiry and Practice (PI & P) strand is the integrative core to the qualification. Through the compulsory practicum and professional inquiry modules, and through regular one to one interaction with a Professional Development Advisor in a 'critical friend' role, student teachers are scaffolded in their understanding of, and engagement in, critical reflection.

During 1998 members from the Centre for Professional Inquiry, (Fox et al 1998) had considered the notion reflection and some organisational challenges for the future were presented to colleagues for consideration. One of these was that not only are various meanings attributed to reflection but that reflection is also presented in the guise of a number of models, thus necessitating widespread ongoing debate and discussion in order to achieve a working understanding of reflective practice. At that time it was noted that a shared College-wide understanding of reflection had not yet been reached and that the commitment to the value of reflection by colleagues in other Centres was largely unknown. A further question was raised as to whether a College-wide community of inquiry could even be developed and sustained in order to support reflection as so central to the degree. Valli's (1992) conclusion to an analysis of the development of reflective practice in pre-service teacher education programmes was that reflection was confined largely to professional education and practice components with few inroads being made into integrating reflection into curriculum components.
Although it was unclear whether this conclusion could be applied to ACE in 1998, it is now possible to draw some tentative but positive conclusions for the institution towards the end of 1999.

In 1998 there were some firm indications from the initial evaluations from students that the goals of synthesis, enhanced responsibility and empowerment are being achieved effectively for a large number of students in the PI & P strand. While this is worthy of celebration in itself, it further raised questions about some distinct differences in the support and experience for individual students as they experience all of the other aspects of their degree.

The ACE model of reflective staff development in action

By the end of 1998 then it had become apparent that cognisance of reflection and reflective practice by staff across all Centres and programmes within the Teacher Education sector, was crucial to the ongoing process of optimising reflective practice amongst student teachers. The decision was taken to make reflection conscious for the lecturing staff in the BEd (Tchg). A coordinator of reflection staff development was appointed, a programme developed and all lecturing staff in Teacher Education Centres of Learning became involved in a two year dialogical process to consider reflection in terms of their own pedagogy and their course assessment.

The ACE model of reflective staff development programme is outlined below:

- Appointment of a coordinator: November 1998
- Initiating debate, lectures and workshops: February 1999
- Establishment of reflection staff development team and advisory group: March 1999
- Dialogic discussion initiated: March, April 1999
- Action Research process: March through to November 1999
- Report back to colleagues of findings: October, November 1999
- Development of phase two of dialogic discussion for year two: November 1999
- Final evaluation and direction setting where to next debate: November 2000

Initiating the debate

In February 1999, Dr. David Smith from the University of Sydney presented two keynote addresses to all staff and facilitated a series of workshops over four days as part of a staff development programme focusing on reflective practice. The participants in the workshops included a representative from each Centre and all academic staff from the Centres for Practicum and Professional Inquiry. The workshops explored the nature of reflection and the personal understandings of reflective practice. This was followed by the identification of strategies for developing reflective practice in student teachers. By the conclusion of this workshop, participants had made progress toward developing statements which identified expectations that they had for reflective student teachers.

Establishment of reflection staff development team and advisory group

Following these sessions with David Smith, the detail of the staff development plan spanning two years was drawn up. The coordinator for reflection staff development was to lead a team comprised of Centre representatives who had participated in the workshops. An advisory/supervisory group was also established to support the coordinator.

The reflection staff development team became a vital and necessary conduit for sharing the institution’s vision for reflective student teachers with all staff. Over the course of the year the team members worked particularly hard within their Centres to dispel perceptions of
'management' and 'control' over reflective practice within teacher education programmes. They became crucial to the facilitation of a process that would lead to a clear and shared understanding of expectations of student teachers as reflective practitioners. This process was hoped to include the development of reflective strategies within Centres and programmes. The minutes of the discussions at all levels were what formed the data of the action research process.

At the very first meeting of the team, members shared their own and colleagues’ responses to the prospect of a year of staff development on reflection. Reading to clarify the terms (the jargon) was requested and concern was expressed about keeping the context for reflection broad and open to a range of models and perspectives. Team members talked of the importance of seeing reflection in the first instance as something personal and subjective where awareness of one’s own reflective capacities and their possible latency may initially be more important than understanding reflection in an academic sense. Several members mentioned that it was David Smith’s personal metaphor approach to reflection that had occasioned a "eureka" response. Another focus of debate during this first meeting was that reflection does produce necessary tensions and this must be accepted in order to engage in discussion on such topics as the place of reflection in a credentialling institution.

At the first meeting of the advisory group it was agreed that the advisory group’s primary role was to support the coordinator, steer the process, develop and monitor the timeline and identify strategies for ongoing staff development. It was acknowledged that reflection is unsettling for some staff especially when the centre of attention is the self rather than the student teachers. It was decided by the advisory group that the focus of the next all-staff development day would be a baseline statement of what the institution might expect in terms of reflection from graduates of teacher education programmes at ACE. This was to be worked on before April by the reflection staff development team. This requirement generated an on-going tension between the output focus of the advisory group and the process orientation of the reflection staff development team.

Undertaking the action research process

The coordinator met with staff from the Centres for Language, Arts, Education, Social Science and Science Education in meetings arranged by and facilitated by the Centre representative on the reflection staff development team. The discussion was invariably frank and honest. Some of the concerns expressed included:

- the desire to see reflection as being more than "various levels of naval gazing";
- the need for staff to maintain currency in their academic understanding of reflection and its sociopolitical context;
- the need for staff to understand fully the purpose, intent and philosophy of each teacher education programme offered at ACE.

This latter concern included staff understanding better the diverse roles required within and across programmes - for example, knowing how to be a professional development advisor.

Staff saw it as crucial that they work in an atmosphere of respect and trust and that they feel able to voice their concerns. The place of the institution and perceived institutional constraints and barriers were frequently raised as topics of discussion. This led on to tentative thoughts about who constituted the institution, the responsibilities of individual staff towards the institution and the place of reflective capacity as part of this responsibility.

In late March the reflection staff development team met again in order to plan the staff development day in April. A major concern was expressed about the intention to formulate a
baseline statement regarding the reflective graduate. Staff on the team considered their own statements, formulated during the staff development days with David Smith, to be formative, rudimentary and indicative of their still developing understanding of reflection. The problematic nature of reflection itself and the need for more time to discuss and debate issues concerning reflection were suggested as the focus of the staff development day. Team members were willing to facilitate open but purposeful cross-centre and cross-sector discussion on key aspects of reflection to be developed with student teachers. This then, after some consultation with the advisory group, became the focal point of the staff development day, which was well attended by about one hundred staff in Teacher Education.

On the actual day, the purpose was once again clarified for all participants. The day was to be a continuation of the work begun during the David Smith workshop days. It was an opportunity for all staff to debate and discuss their own perceptions and understandings of reflection with other staff and to ensure that these become part of the group process. Dewey’s foundational attitudes for reflection as a method of knowing: directness, openmindedness, wholeheartedness and responsibility (Dewey 1916 pp173-179) formed the context for the day. It was made clear that while the focus was to be the reflective graduate and while a baseline statement would be developed subsequently by the reflection staff development team; the feedback from all staff was paramount. Ownership was critical to the reflective process.

During the afternoon the Centre for Professional Inquiry gave a presentation on Reflection as Curriculum, or, more accurately as organisational culture, based on the collaborative nature of the 1998 NZARE paper (Fox et.al.1998). Although this paper was intended to be the sharing of a journey, a reflective process itself, it was however seen by some staff as 'self-aggrandisement'. It was later suggested by a reflection staff development team member that this opinion was in line with one view expressed in her own centre that reflection is negative and disempowering - "reflection means you are always having to be better"... "reflection is beating yourself up".

Following the Centre for Professional Inquiry’s presentation staff had the opportunity to discuss the day in their own centre as well as share the reflective strategies concerning pedagogy and assessment already in use within the centre. Reflection staff development team members from other curriculum areas commented almost unanimously at the next team meeting that staff in their Centres were at different places in terms of reflection and therefore at different points for discussion.

The matter of familiarity with the jargon arose again. Staff from the Centre for Professional Inquiry were considered to be "talking a different language". As one person described it, this was "knowing what it is like not to know".

This second half of the reflection staff development day precipitated a further range of questions and issues for discussion:

- Why can reflection be such a negative term and how, when and why does it shift from being disempowering to empowering?
- Should the word "reflection" be avoided in favour of words such as "consider", "evaluate"?
- How is an atmosphere for reflective discussion best created?
- What is the meaning of words such as "trust", "openness" and "commitment"?
- If time is essential for reflection does this become, above all, a management issue?
- What do college processes such as performance appraisal, course evaluation and assessment really mean?
• What is professional development?

The establishment of a small sub-group

The reflection staff development team members sustained and encouraged ongoing debate and questioning within their Centres at varying levels of intensity. At the same time, a small group from the team met with the coordinator to collate all the material from the staff development day and begin to identify the essential nature of the baseline statement. The framework chosen was a theory to practice continuum, where reflection in, on and for action, forms a midpoint on the continuum, envisaged more as a mobius strip of never-ending connection than two connected points (Hill 1998).

The three areas within which student teachers develop professionally (knowledge, disposition and performance) indicated in the BEd (Tchg) matrix (Windross and Lomas 1998) was aligned with the continuum. Every word and phrase was acknowledged and placed in one of the three areas and the unedited end product was circulated amongst all staff for feedback. It remained crucial that all staff feel able to offer their views and comments at any time through their team representative or directly to the coordinator.

(See Appendix 1 Framework for collating responses)

Ongoing dialogic debate in the wider College community

One of the spin-offs of this action research process has been the opening up of debate in the wider College community about reflection. Soon after the initial staff development day and as part of the College’s normal weekly research seminars series, a staff member who had been doing Masters work on reflection presented a seminar entitled 'Reflection before Smyth: Alternative models'. (Haynes 1999) This was followed in May by a further staff member’s Foucaultian contribution entitled 'Reflection: internalising the prison?' (Rata 1999). In August, another seminar contribution came from a staff member in another programme doing Doctoral work in reflection: 'If reflection is the answer, what's the question? Reading the research with a critical eye'. (Ovens 1999)

These seminars have ensured a continuing focus on reflection, fuelled the general debate and assisted staff in considering the many facets of reflection, both practical and theoretical, both personal and professional.

Over the time that the feedback from the April staff development day was being processed and the seminars were presented, there have been varying responses from individual staff ranging from a verbal expression of delight in the opportunity for discussion to a written and anonymous expression of frustrated humour:

" Remedial reflection group - there is a meeting of this group at lunchtime - please bring a mirror, a large rock to sit on and a razor for the hairy navel".

Some staff saw the major issue for them as making sense of their own lecturing commitments relative to the integration of modules or courses across any one programme.

During a meeting with the staff from one Centre, the theory component of the degree (defined by them as being the content delivered by the Education and Professional Inquiry Centres) was questioned as to its relevance to their curriculum area. The query referred particularly to the "poststructural, postmodern" theoretical perspectives being presented to student teachers. Was it "excessive", or "out of kilter"?
A number of staff were concerned that they be able to continue grounding their lecturing in "reality"? A concern was raised about the effect that such theory being presented to student teachers had on the practical issues some staff felt were at the heart of teaching. This nervousness, or ambivalence for some, extended also to their roles as visiting lecturers during practicum and their roles as professional development advisors. The development of the new degree, the changes in the political context of teacher education and this process of reflection all appeared to have conspired against the continuation of practice-based teacher education.

In June the members of the reflection staff development team each wrote a brief mid-year report on how they saw reflection staff development progressing within their own centre. There was evidence of increasing confidence and ownership, especially amongst the staff who earlier in the year, had expressed reluctance to engage.

"Appraisals involve reflection on our own teaching and learning - we then set goals based on the reflective process"…..

"We will continue to look at the process of reflection within triadic assessment and in our role as PDA"….

"the centre has moved from journalling to consider other modes of reflection as part of assessment"…..

"we have noted a need to lower our expectations of students' ability to reflect in depth in areas where they have had limited teaching experience"…..

"there is possibly a need for new staff to be enlightened and more involved in the discussion of and practice of reflection"…..

"Of particular importance to Centre staff are practical strategies for developing reflection skills and their application to the classroom environment"….

"staff have ongoing discussions using a critical friend approach"…..

"discussion continues to be positive and lively"…

"We reflect in reviewing our modules and module content and assignments are adjusted accordingly"…..

"the disempowering aspects to reflection continue to be an issue for staff"…..

"our goal for 2000 is to develop module assignments with a more reflective process"…..

"models (for reflection) must not be seen as an end in themselves"…

"we have brainstormed our own definition of reflective practice using the readings as a reference point"…..

"we are looking at the possibility of inviting another centre to share developments to date"…
"our centre has expressed a concern about the way in which students might be compromised by their view of reflection and having to play the 'game of College' to get through"…

"The question is asked by staff in our centre if foregrounding reflection is what should be happening - is it just one tool in developing a critical pedagogy?"…..

"Barriers to the development of our full reflective potential include lack of time, heavy workload and the fatigue which is endemic in a committed staff working to a stretched capacity in a tight timeframe linked to a constantly changing environment".

In August the small sub-group of the reflection staff development team began developing a draft baseline statement on the basis of the feedback to the reflection staff development day. The feedback focused on the positive nature of the process itself and suggested that any baseline statement must sustain the process. The statement must not be seen as final, narrow and certain. It must not preclude opportunities for discussion and debate. It must offer the chance to increase all individuals' understandings and must have the openendedness required to see reflection as leading to questions rather than providing answers. It is a method for gaining knowledge rather than an endpoint of knowledge (Dewey 1916). With this in mind a draft statement was drawn from the words and phrases in the knowledge and disposition categories rather than the performance category which was suggestive of the finality that staff did not want. The draft statement, with five elements, was circulated amongst all staff. The statement met with almost unanimous approval that seemed to suggest that it was a witness to the process of reflection itself. (See Appendix 2).

During October the reflection staff development team, members were asked to provide initial examples of centre strategies implemented in the delivery of courses and modules, for each element of the baseline statement. These strategies were to be indicated separately for pedagogy and assessment. Staff was also asked to share any concerns and/or perceived difficulty. The responses are currently being processed and will provide the basis of continuing staff development in 2000. This paper has described how we got to this point.

Issues for the organisation

By the beginning of 2000, all of ACE’s pre-service teacher education qualifications, not just the BEd (Tchg), will be based on reflective practice. This policy change makes it even more critical that all staff have a clear and shared understanding of their expectations of student teachers as reflective practitioners and their own roles in that. The question now is whether a teacher education community of inquiry can be developed and sustained within the institution in order to support the notion of reflection that is now central to all qualifications.

The challenge for the organisation is how to develop and sustain this reflective culture in a dynamic, rapidly changing political environment. The literature suggests (Smyth, 1993; Smith 1997; Francis, 1997) that reflection is most effective within a community of inquiry. The development of this culture is facilitated by opportunities to debate and refine beliefs and practices, to talk in a ‘sustained and serious way.’ Time is needed to allow this to happen. Yet time is a scarce resource and it costs. Time is related to staff teaching loads, class-size and operational costs. The management of these scarce resources therefore becomes crucial.

The majority of staff are engaged in enhancing their academic qualifications and/or fulfilling research expectations as well as developing new courses and programmes. The organisation is continually responding and reacting to change, whether it is in direct response to government policy or to develop some new initiatives. This means that the
organisation’s priorities sometimes cut across those of the sector, in this case the Teacher Education sector. A case in point is the decision next year that the focus for all ACE staff development will be on information technology. While there is no argument on the need for this, the decision impacts on the Teacher Education sector’s ability to sustain its focus on reflection both in terms of time available and focus. Brookfield (1995) talks about structural factors over which there is little control and their effect on developing institutional practice. Developing and sustaining a culture of reflective practice is difficult in a dynamic and unpredictable environment, both at the personal and the organisational level.

A further issue for ACE as an organisation relates to the kind of culture that is necessary for reflection to occur. Brookfield (1995, p250) states that "for critical reflection to happen, there has to be a trustful atmosphere in which people know that public disclosure of private errors will not lead to their suffering negative consequences". The ability to develop trust at a personal level is dependent on opportunities for safe discussion and debate, and yet the constraints on these opportunities being made available are very much related to time and focus. The need for a ‘trustful atmosphere’ also relates to the organisation. Brookfield reminds us that critical reflection is stressful, because "in full view of your colleagues, you must continually take the lead in inviting critical analysis of your actions".

The risk taking of critical reflection occurs both at the internal organisational level and externally, even in forums such as this. Given the non-trustful atmosphere created by the competitive and overtly political environment that tertiary education now operates in, developing a reflective culture can also be seen as a high risk activity for ACE as an institution. An example: recently the Education Review Office under the instruction of the Minister of Education undertook a research project on teacher education. Both the Office and the Terms of Reference assured participants of confidentiality. Most Colleges of Education then participated, although the University Schools of Education, wisely as it turned out, did not. Members of the staff of the Colleges of Education shared both their concerns, and their ideals about their programmes. The Director of the Education Review Office when interviewed later about the project used the media opportunity to publicly name various institutions and programmes in a negative way. This of course contributed even more to the negative, competitive and overtly political environment surrounding teacher education.

What we have done in this reflection staff development project is to ask various members of our staff to share their hopes and concerns about reflection as part of a dialogic process that spirals forward. The risk for the participants is that their tentative concerns and vulnerabilities are exposed. The risk for our organisation is that such sharing will be used to influence the market against us. However, we are committed to maintaining Dewey’s foundational attitudes for reflection: directness, openmindedness, wholeheartedness and responsibility (Dewey 1916). They form the important basis of an informed reflective profession.
References

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