

INTERNSHIP LEARNING CONNECTS THE DOTS: THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF REFLECTION



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ABSTRACT

In a series of papers (Clarke, Power & Hine, 2001; Power, Clarke & Hine, 2002) have investigated how reflection on practice can contribute to professional learning. The University of Western Sydney Bachelor of Education Primary fourth year Internship Program has been the focus of these studies.

This paper continues this journey and investigates how Van Manen's (1977) levels of reflection can be developed by student teachers to frame their understanding of their reflection and assist them in their professional learning. Additional focus group meetings with colleague teachers (classroom teachers) and associate teachers (student teachers) and the introduction of a reflective journal have been added to the repertoire of strategies used in the internship program to support the development and sustaining value of reflection on teaching practice. This study will critically examine these innovations and review their effectiveness in supporting reflective practice.

Introduction

Associate teachers on internship have different experiences from the short practicums which characterise the early stages of teacher education. The power of the internship or extended practicum according to Walker and Halse (1995) is that workplace learning occurs over a sustained period of time. The associates report developing a familiarity with school routines and having the time to complete work and investigative experiences they have commenced. This paper reports on research conducted in 2002 examining the reflection of pre-service teachers according to Van Manen's (1977) levels of reflection as a tool to assist the associates in their professional learning.

The journey on which the associates embark has several identifiable early aspects. It is of primary importance to "have everything work as smoothly as possible" (Melinda, 2002 intern). That involves the day-to-day basics: being fully prepared with plans and resources; knowing the children's learning styles, behaviour issues and individual needs; and being involved with two-way communication with the colleague teachers. Taking time out to reflect on, and make sense of, experiences and goals can seem to the associates like a luxury that they are loathe to try to "fit in" to their busy preparation time. The internship program has moved to emphasise with the associates the importance of reflection, allowing time for learning to crystallise and to express feelings that had not previously surfaced.

Literature on reflection

Reflective practice has been the subject of attention by teacher educators for some years. Essential to the development of reflective practice is the opportunity for beginner teachers to communicate with colleagues and discuss experiences as the basis for their reflections (Yost, Sentner & Forlenza-Bailey 2000). Research suggests that repeated exposure to reflection, however, does not guarantee that beginner teachers will go on to develop critical or higher levels of reflective thinking (Bean & Stevens, 2002). There is growing evidence that beginner teachers are still struggling to make the psychological shift required when moving into their roles as teachers. In their preoccupation with the process of teaching the process of learning is frequently overlooked (Collier, 1993).

Schon (1983, 1990) and Surbeck, Han & Moyer (1991) describe reflection with models that develop in a cumulative way. Schon (1983) argues there are initially two types of reflection with the first two levels of reflective practice being reactive: *reflection on action* and *reflection*

in action. The third level, *reflection for action* is a looked-for outcome of the previous two types of reflection and is proactive in nature. Surbeck, Han & Moyer chart reflection as having three categories including reaction, elaboration and contemplation (Collier, 1999).

Dewey (1933) identified the three characteristics or attitudes of people who are reflective as open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness. Open-mindedness is defined as an interest to listen to more than one point of view on an issue, together with a questioning attitude. Responsibility involves a search for the truth along with the application of information gleaned to the situation/problem in question. Wholeheartedness is interpreted as a willingness to overcome personal fears demonstrating a sincere and generous attitude in order to bring about change. According to Dewey (1933) there are five phases or sequences in the development of reflection: suggestions; problem; hypothesis, reasoning and testing. For Dewey these five phases are the "indispensable traits of reflective thinking" (Loughran, 1996, p64). The sequences in which these phases occur vary according to each situation but are indicative that "genuine thinking is educative" (Loughran, 1996, p72).

A model of reflection proposed by Van Manen (1977) includes three stages of reflection. The first stage, Technical Rationality, includes focusing upon what works in classroom practice; analysis at this level is on the success or failure of strategies used in the classroom. The experience is personal and unproblematic. The second stage of reflection, Reflection as Practical Action, focuses upon the learning experience of the student. At this level the consequences of educational practices are considered and there is a demonstrable commitment to learning theory. The learning situation is seen as problematic. The third level, Critical Reflection, focuses on what knowledge is of value and to whom. This kind of reflection considers the moral and social implications of classroom practice (Furlong & Maynard, 1995). At this level of reflection, teachers ask questions as to what supports or influences their student's learning experience (Collier, 1999). Van Manen's model has also been adapted by a number of researchers including Ziechner & Liston (1987), Pultorak (1993) and Collier (1999) in her study of students in an 8-week field placement. Wellington (1996) follows Van Manen's model in a way that emphasises values; and he argues that people are understood as thinking and writing about what is practical in ways that they recognise and according to their values about education (Wellington, 1996).

Reflective journals are considered by educators to connect theory and practice, these narratives assist through the articulation of thoughts emerging in the minds of the student teachers, encouraging a self awareness of attitudes and beliefs over time (Collier, 1999). Focus group meetings provide an alternative form of dialogue where ideas and observations can be shared in a non-threatening environment. This provides an opportunity for the beginner teacher to expand their worldview through the sharing of observations, experiences, successes and failures (Collier, 1999).

Student teachers and reflection have become the subjects of research. Collier's study of four student teachers found that reflective practice was typically at Van Manen's (1977) first level, with only one student demonstrating an ability to reflect at the third and critical level of reflection. In a study exploring the use of "scaffolded reflection" with student teachers reflection was also found to remain at a superficial level (Bean & Stevens, 2002, p215). Student teachers they found, by and large, remained heavily reliant upon "deficit theories, stereotypical thinking, and technical-reductionist problem solving" (Bean & Stevens, 2002, p216). Furthermore, societal discourse was drawn on by student teachers to reproduce existing dogma rather than to challenge it (Bean & Stevens, 2002).

"In terms of larger critical discourse issues related to societal expectations, power structures, and where schools fit within these larger layers of ideology (Fairclough, 1989) these teachers rarely departed from local discourse

related to their individual classrooms. Institutional and societal discourse was an anomaly in their reflective comments" (Bean & Stevens, 2002, p215).

There are significant implications for researching the reflective practice of beginner teachers. Do they, too, remain stuck at the first level in the technical process of teaching? Teachers construct a reality about teaching during their experience in the classroom but how this construction manifests will depend upon their individual orientations. These orientations emerge from their 'personal ways of knowing' or 'personal biographies' (Collier, 1993, p174). Defining one's orientation is another way for individuals to identify their "action-world", asking such questions as, what it is "to be true, to be valuable, and to be real" (Parsons, 1949 in Van Manen, 1977, p. 211). Beginner teachers need to be, encouraged, supported and challenged to grow their personal worldview of teaching and learning.

Internship Model at the University of Western Sydney:

Since 1995, the internship at the University of Western Sydney has operated as a collaborative venture involving the Department of Education and Training, the University's Schools of Education, students and local schools. In 2002, there were 13 associates and 13 colleague teachers involved in the program. The internship occupies the third term of the school year. The colleague teachers (qualified teachers in a school) are freed from teaching for three days per week to take part in negotiated educational projects in their school. Associate teachers (current students undertaking the Internship) experience a supported introduction to teaching while they engage in reflection on the characteristics of teaching via action research and undertake a trial of an integrated curriculum. During the remaining days the associate teacher engages in action research at the school and at the University.

Method

The research participants were all of the 13 associate teachers in the 2002 internship cohort. The research was carried out in three phases:

Phase 1. At the beginning of the year before the internship commenced (pre-test), the participating associates made a written response to the Reflection Questions (RQ) and sent their responses to the researchers. These questions were revisited at one of the later focus group meetings.

Phase 2. There were four focus groups meetings held (two meetings with each half of the cohort of associates and their colleagues) chaired by the researchers. The meetings addressed the ongoing reflective practice of the associates and provided a forum for sharing ideas. At the last of these meetings both the associates and the colleague teachers were asked to individually write a definition of reflection. In groups of three the colleagues and associate teachers synthesised their ideas into a combined definition of reflection. Each small group then shared their definition of reflection with the larger group and discussed the main ideas in their definition. At the completion of this task the associates formed one group and responded to Focus-group Reflection Questions, posed by the researchers. (FRQ) Summary sheets of the associates group ideas were prepared by the associates and these were later transcribed to provide further data.

In Phase 3 after the internship practice in schools (post-test), a meeting was held with the internships to discuss their reflective journals. At this meeting a further set of Reflective Questions were distributed to students based on Van Manen's levels (VMRQ). Data was collected from the written responses to the reflection questions and also excerpts from the

associates' journals reflecting on teaching practice. Transcripts were produced of each written response to the questions to facilitate data analysis. Participants had the opportunity to check the transcripts, to correct them if necessary, or to explain what was meant if it had been misunderstood. Content analysis of the responses and journals formed the basis of analysis. A summary of the issues raised in the responses and journals was collated and circulated to participants for reviewing and checking for accuracy. All sources of data were then categorised according to the levels of reflection put forward by Van Manen.

Findings

Before the internship, the associates answered the Reflection Questions (RQ). Rankings of these responses are shown in Tables 1 and 2. For the associates considering the "how" of reflecting, journalling was certainly important. It was useful to see the associates acknowledging that their reflections would be framed by shared observations with colleagues as well as observing students learning, as shown in Table 1. In considering the "what" of reflecting, the associates considered a range of responses. Successful teaching was the highest ranked. Assessment and management strategies, and personal growth are also significant in the list, as shown in Table 2.

Table 1: Associates' response to RQ1 - How Can You Reflect - raw scores (n=13) ranked from highest to lowest

Keeping a personal journal	8
Talking to colleagues	7
Observing students' learning	5
Looking at work samples	1
Asking questions of students	1
Recording self on tape	1
Reading over materials of past practice	1
Thinking of situations and own reactions/feelings	1

Table 2: Associates' response to RQ2 - On What Can You Reflect - raw scores (n=13) ranked from highest to lowest

successful teaching/learning + why	10
assessment strategies	3

management strategies 3

personal achievement + growth 3

reviewing past action 2

worries or concerns 2

relationship with staff/parents 2

relationship with students 2

catering for individual students 2

effectiveness of resources chosen 1

achievement of outcomes 1

future goals 1

organisation 1

thoughts, feelings 1

professional development 1

Van Manen Reflection Question (VMRQ)

In their journals and at the focus group meetings, the associate teachers considered situations which did not particularly call for reflection with insight. Such things included providing excursion forms. Each of the associates reflected at this technical level at some time during their internship. However, at one of the focus group meetings one of the associates, Ray, reflected in the following way:

I did have an example of this to do with the management practice of applying consequences of poor behaviour. I thought "I'll have to begin this and change my teaching practice". And I never actually changed. I'd fall back into what was protective. I didn't want to seem like "Miss Hardbitch". So for the first five weeks I didn't apply consequences for inappropriate behaviour. I did other things like rewarding good behaviour. When I started to do it, it was too late. But all through the five weeks I thought about applying consequences. And it didn't happen.

This is a situation to which the other associates could relate. Beginner teachers find it difficult negotiating the shifts between friendly facilitating and managing the dynamics of the class group. The associates could also see that Ray was still able to learn from a missed opportunity.

Several of the associates were able to recognise the assumptions underlying their teaching practice in their reflections. Vicki is passionate about maths and discussed her practice accordingly:

I believe the students need to do a lot of concrete materials in maths. It made a difference to me as a teacher - to teach it the way I think is right. Manipulating materials is a positive experience for them and their learning is better. I believe teaching maths should be about removing frustrations.

Another associate, Jude, was involved in Action Research project on questioning technique and said:

It was good to find that the children were finally grasping the idea of using evidence to support their answer - a new skill which I had introduced to them. My main objective in using questioning skills was to promote higher order thinking. Confirmation of this through student work samples made me feel like I had succeeded in engaging and encouraging students to apply their knowledge in other learning areas. This was a pivotal observation, which reflected the theories I had learned through the implementation of my Action Research in a real classroom situation. It helped me recognise theories in practice, which will in turn, allow me to use them more successfully in my future classroom to benefit both my students and myself.

Both these associates were operating here at Van Manen's practical level of reflection. In this level, there is a personal ownership and commitment to the practice that has been used. The reflection is a consolidation of the experience. In another situation Jude reflected:

One student at the beginning drove me absolutely crazy... I sat down and thought about what I was doing wrong. It finally came to me that I was not catching him doing the right thing and therefore ticks on my positive behaviour 'tick chart' were few and far between. I needed to make a conscious effort to try to give him more ticks. This worked like a charm. There was a noticeable improvement in his behaviour... He was finally trying to be good so he could be rewarded. I can honestly say that this adventure has helped me grow as a beginning teacher.

The practical level of reflection is an achievement for teachers in the early stage of their career. Three of the associates reflected on the benefits for slower learners of one-to-one teaching. One reflected on the advantages of experimenting with mixed ability groups, noting the peer teaching which took place and the responses to learning challenges. Another reflected on the things they learned from taking risks with hands-on lessons. One associate, Regan, touched on the critical reflection level when she reflected on her multi-level class and said:

Working with students of all abilities has allowed me to reach the conclusion that all children can be motivated to learn if the teaching is relevant to the students' interest. I aim to transfer my own love of learning to my students so they find it exciting... I strongly believe in children valuing co-operating with each other, developing skills to function in society. The democratic nature of my classroom and a lot of group work and role play caters for this part of children's education.

An essential element of effective teaching is being able to cater for the wide variety of individual needs. My class consisted of three grades with a vast learning ability range. I found it difficult to aim the learning tasks to suit all children. In maths sessions, I had some gifted Year 3 children, while others were working on stage 1 outcomes. I had two Year 4 children working on Year 5 work and a normal variety of Year 4 children. I also had Year 6. I feel I need to find more extension work that is relevant and ability-appropriate without additional teaching required. But I have learned that my consideration of individual needs leads to increased self esteem in my students. The students came to know that I expected a different goal for each of them and that, while they had to attempt and persevere with the task, it was achievable for them as an individual.

Discussion

Bean and Stevens (2002) found that ongoing opportunities using a variety of formats are needed for reflection to develop. Our research confirms this. On the other hand, promoting reflective practice with associate teachers has produced different qualities of reflection than Collier's (1999) project with pre-service teachers, where she found that reflective practice was typically at Van Manen's (1977) first level. It is clear that there are several factors at work in the internship. The extended professional experience is one of them. It provides the associates with time to act professionally and time to reflect professionally. The researchers also place value in the staged prompts to reflection that were used in this process. In the first stage, the associates were simply asked to consider what reflection is, how it can be effected and on what teachers might reflect. During the internship, the focus group meetings were stimulated by the presence of the colleague teachers and their reflections. After the internship, the associates considered reflective experiences in the light of what they knew of Van Manen's levels. The great outcome of this research was observing the associates' awareness of their own change in their reflection. The associates were able to identify times during their internship when they had reflected in particular ways. They referred to their journals and talked about the ways in which they now felt they acted and thought as a teacher. They discussed their 'big learning experiences' and the ideas and values which they would take into their classrooms in the future.

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