Collect, Select, Reflect: Reflective Writing - the Focal Point of a Student Teacher ePortfolio

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Abstract

The idea of teachers as reflective practitioners is strongly emphasized in the teacher training degree course offered by the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta. To enhance competence and improve professional development, student teachers must reflect critically on both the theory and practice regarding teaching. Reflection is, in fact, a critical questioning of one's own practice. Student teachers are encouraged to initiate self-assessment and reflection by developing an ePortfolio (STeP) through the PDP (Professional Development Portfolio) sessions as part of their four year course. In the absence of self-assessing skills, the ePortfolio helps provide students with guidelines for self-assessment by incorporating examples of self-reflection and guidelines regarding the preparation of reflective writing and prompt feedback. Reflection is a crucial part of the ePortfolio process and without it, the ePortfolio becomes merely storage. Through the ePortfolio, student teachers are invited to carefully assess their own practices and to be critical so as to nurture a reflective attitude. The ePortfolio is intended to be the appropriate tool for the student teacher to give information about and interpret his/her practising philosophy as well as to show the characteristics of effective teaching practice. It is an important individual growth experience, offering student teachers the chance to collaborate with mentors and other colleagues. In this way STeP places the responsibility for learning, professional development and career direction on the practitioner. The student teacher is taught how to write reflectively about aspects of his/her professional development as a teacher, not simply by providing evidence about his/her practice, but above all, by thought and reflection, that show the process of growth and development from a prospective teacher to a reflective practitioner.

Without doubt, one of the most complicated jobs in today's world is teaching. Especially for student teachers and for newly qualified teachers, the biggest challenge is usually classroom management. Many, if not most of novice teachers complain that their teacher training University course did little to prepare them for the realities of different classroom situations, including dealing with unruly students, and often feel overwhelmed by the most difficult students. Another big challenge is how to motivate low achievers and get them on board in class. Classes are very often made up of students with differing interests, abilities, skills and knowledge. For this reason, one size does not fit all. Teachers face the challenge of meeting the variety of needs they are confronted with. This may get even more complicated when minimal technologies are available at school. In today's technological era, teachers continually ask themselves "What are the tools I can be using to most effectively teach my students what they need to know?" Now this brings another challenge, learning not just how to use the technologies available but, above all, how to make the best use of them in class for the benefit of the students. Students today are technophiles. They love their video games—all fast-paced and addictive—and they can't put down their smart phones, iPods, and social networks. Most teachers too might love new technologies, but even if they don't, they realize that technology often is the key to locking in a student's interest. The challenge is how. All this means that teaching demands broad knowledge of subject matter, curriculum and standards; enthusiasm, a caring attitude, and a love of learning; knowledge of discipline and classroom management techniques, and much more. With all these qualities required, it is no wonder that teacher training has become a very difficult mission to accomplish, even more so if our aim as teacher trainers is to make of our student teachers reflective practitioners.

Several studies show how the single most important factor determining the quality of the education a child receives is the quality of his teacher. In many countries, a person who wishes to become a teacher must first obtain specified professional qualifications or credentials from a

university or college. In Malta there are two paths to obtaining a teacher's qualification and warrant. The first is the course leading to the Bachelor of Education (Honours) at the Faculty of Education of the University of Malta, which is a 4 year full time course, and where students can choose between 2 different courses of studies, one leading to Primary Education and another one leading to Secondary Education. The second course is the P.G.C.E. (Post Graduate Certificate in Education) which is a one year full time post graduate course in pedagogy. Both the B.Ed.(Hons.) degree course as well as the P.G.C.E. course qualify to Professional Teacher Status and the award of the Teacher's Warrant. Both professional qualifications are based on the study of pedagogy and the ultimate aim is an individual growth experience, offering student teachers the chance to collaborate with mentors and other colleagues in a process of growth and development from a prospective teacher to a reflective practitioner.

Within any university teacher training program, encouraging reflective practice is important for preparing thinking practitioners who show that they can adapt to new technologies, new standards, and new environments. The emphasis on reflective practice is viewed as an attempt to merge theory and practice in teacher education (Orland-Barak & Yinon, 2007) [1]. Reflection is a highly valued attribute of effective teachers for without the disposition to reflect on their performance, teachers are less likely to improve their practice or to be able to see the links between theory and practice. To enhance competence and improve professional development, teachers must reflect critically on the actions performed in instruction. In fact several studies show that when teachers reflect, they enhance the repertoire of pedagogical knowledge and to do this prospective teachers rely only on cooperating teachers and university supervisors to provide them with feedback about their work [2]. Reflective teaching means looking at what one does in the classroom, thinking about why s/he does it, and thinking about if it works - a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. By collecting information about what goes on in the classroom, and by analysing and evaluating this information, the student teacher identifies and explores his/her own practices and underlying beliefs. This should lead to changes and improvements in teaching.

Many different approaches can be employed to help student teachers become critically reflective teachers, One very effective approach is the use of reflective writing by means of a reflective ePortfolio . STeP, the web-based Student Teacher's ePortfolio system for the Faculty of Education at the University of Malta has, as one of its primary aims, to enhance student teachers' professional development through reflective writing by means of electronic discussions, self-assessments, and peer coaching. Student teachers are encouraged to initiate self-assessment and reflection by developing an ePortfolio (STeP) through the PDP (Professional Development Portfolio) sessions as part of their four year course. In the absence of self-assessing skills, the ePortfolio helps provide students with guidelines for self-assessment by incorporating examples of self-reflection and guidelines regarding the preparation of reflective writing and prompt feedback. Reflection is a crucial part of the ePortfolio process and without it, the ePortfolio becomes merely storage. Through the ePortfolio, student teachers are invited to carefully assess their own practices and to be critical so as to nurture a reflective attitude. The ePortfolio is intended to be the appropriate tool for the student teacher to give information about and interpret his/her practising philosophy as well as to show the characteristics of effective teaching practice. It is an important individual growth experience, offering student teachers the chance to collaborate with mentors and other colleagues. In this way STeP places the responsibility for learning, professional development and career direction on the practitioner. The student teacher is taught how to write reflectively about aspects of his/her professional development as a teacher, not simply by providing evidence about his/her practice, but above all, by thought and reflection, showing the process of growth and development from a prospective teacher to a reflective practitioner.

To help our students reach the goal of producing good reflective writing, at the third year of their course, prospective teachers start working on the ePortfolio. The PDP sessions with student teachers usually consist of tutorial sessions spreading over the third and fourth year of the B.Ed. (Hons.) course and are intended to be interactive forums where concerns, successes and achievements can be shared. The student teacher is helped to start writing reflectively about aspects of his/her professional development as a teacher right from the start of STeP and throughout its first two sections. Section 1 starts with a brief definition of what a portfolio consists of with particular emphasis, right from the very beginning, on reflective practice:

Your portfolio (PDP) is a collection of work which you will be doing as part of your teaching degree. It is unique in that it will provide a complete picture of your professional growth and development throughout the B.Ed.(Hons.) course......The PDP however is not just a collection of artefacts in a scrapbook. It is more than that because it includes reflections on your practice. Being reflective about

your practice means that you can think about your strengths, and your weaknesses and use these thoughts to continually renew and improve your practice. It will help you develop your own philosophy of teaching and learning which you will use in your classroom teaching. [3]

This is followed by a section on reflective writing, where students are presented with the following definition and are asked to think about it and discuss it:

The reflective writings

Reflection is a critical questioning of your own practice. Sometimes when you are working on an assignment, listening to a lecture or doing a lesson in a school you might question why you are doing what you are doing. You might ask yourself: How does this philosophy relate to my classroom practice? How could I use this in my teaching? How could I do this better? Could I have done this differently? What were the main strengths of this lesson? What were the weaknesses? What is the next step that I need to take to make my lessons more interesting? Questioning is an integral part of becoming a reflective practitioner. Becoming a reflective practioner ensures successful lessons in the classroom and ensures that you know why you are doing certain things. It is a connection between the theory learnt at University and the teaching and learning process in the classroom. Nothing happens on its own. For a lesson to be successful for the students to be motivated and interested we need to plan and we need to think, before the lesson, during the lesson and after the lesson.

This is followed by another section in which the student teachers discuss what should be included in a piece of reflective writing, namely:

Move beyond simple description of the artefact or activity.

Show exactly what you learnt from the artefact you presented.

Have a clear focus. This means that you should be writing about the artefact presented and not about anything else.

Identify any particular strengths or anything which you enjoyed while carrying out the activity.

Identify any weaknesses.

Identify areas which could have been improved or done differently.

Be personal and show what you actually felt.

Show an element of critical analysis through questioning.

Show how the particular artefact contributed to your professional development.

Having discussed all these aspects of reflective writing, the student teacher is then asked to start the actual writing. Once again the student teacher is guided with the following template found in Section 2 of STeP entitled, "My Teaching Philosophy and Goals":

My Philosophy and goals as a teacher

This section should include your philosophy and goals as a teacher. It should include ideas about:

- *Why did you want to become a teacher?*
- *What were your initial views of teaching?*
- *How did these ideas change as you progressed in the course?*
- *What are your aims and goals?*
- *What are the things that inspire you as a teacher?*
- *What main educational theories do you base your own teaching on? Describe any specific situations during teaching practice where you can see this theory applied or ignored.*

In this way, STeP can be viewed as a space where student teachers can represent their unique conceptions of what it means to teach by analysing, discussing and evaluating their own teaching practices and professional growth whilst providing opportunities for deeper conversations and discussions between themselves, their peers and their supervisors about the art of teaching. A reflective approach to teaching brings about changes in the way teaching is usually perceived and the teacher's role in the process of teaching. Through critical reflection, teachers develop changes in attitudes and awareness not just for the benefit of their professional growth as teachers but also, and above all to improve the support they provide to their students. Although it is time-consuming, student teachers engaged in reflective analysis of their own teaching report that it is a valuable tool for self-evaluation and professional growth.

References

[1] Orland-Barak, L., & Yinon, H. (2007). When theory meets practice: What student teachers learn from guided reflection on their own classroom discourse. Teaching and Teacher Education, 23(6), 957-969.

[2] Miyata, H. (2002). A Study of Developing Reflective Practices for Pre-service Teachers through a Web-Based Electronic Teaching Portfolio and Video-on-Demand Assessment Program. In

Proceedings of the international Conference on Computers in Education (December 03 - 06, 2002). CCE. IEEE Computer Society, Washington, DC, p. 1039.

[3] STeP is hosted at the IT services at the University of Malta and can be accessed on: https://educeport.research.um.edu.mt/.