



The Effective Teacher as a "Reflective Practitioner"

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Abstract

The development of lifelong and lifewide learning dimensions represents the key element for the promotion of a learning society through the access to new and improved basic skills for all, innovation in teaching and learning, guidance and counselling and the possibility of learning in structures closer to one's home. These elements are essential to promote an active citizenship, to ensure a wider access to education and to promote participation in all spheres of social and economic life. The focus on teacher training and the need to develop appropriate competences are key elements promoting quality in lifelong learning courses. This kind of approach is essential for teachers in order to improve competences throughout one's working life.

Reflective practice suggests that experience alone is not sufficient to vouch for professional growth and teaching effectiveness; but experience view through reflection can be the catalyst for teacher development.

1. Teacher effectiveness

The studies and the research on "educational effectiveness" started in the United Kingdom, Australia, the Netherlands and Honk Kong in the 1980s.

This year, many theories and studies have been published, have offered explanations for educational outcomes (Creemers, 1994; Stringfield, 1994; Slater and Reddlie, 1992) and have illustrated the state of the art (Cheng, 1996; Sammons, Hillman and Mortimore, 1995; Townsend, 1994; Creemers, 1994).

Over the years many research and studies have focused their attention on effective teaching competences and skills (Philpott, 2009; Kyriacou, 2007; Muijs and Reynolds, 2005), different teaching styles (Opdenakker and Van Damme, 2006; Galton, Simon and Croll, 1980;) and different teaching methodologies (Joyce, Weil and Calhoun, 2000; Joyce, Calhoun and Hopkins, 1997).

To sum up, "effectiveness" is a term that is often perceived as closely related to professional competency and accountability, but beliefs about what a 'good' or 'high' quality teaching means or about what an "effective teacher" is, can vary at different times and in different contexts.

It's important to recognize that teachers work in school contexts and in local and national educational systems (Teddlie e Reynolds, 2000; Sammons, 1999, Mortimore, 1998; Fitz-Gibbon, 1996, 1994; Scheerens and Bosker, 1997; Sammons et al., 1995).

Furthermore, as nowadays' teachers are called to face different challenges in and out the classroom due to the complexity of life; their work has extended far beyond the instructional or pedagogical role in the classroom; they may cover leadership roles at school, enhance teaching quality through reflection and take care of professional development programs as well.

This suggests that any measure of effectiveness and/or identification of an index of effectiveness should take into account contextual issues (Hopkins and Reynolds, 2001; Campbell et al, 2003, 2004) and recognize that social, economic and political factors have a major impact on effectiveness.

However, it's important to take into account the theory about adult learning based on experiential learning.

This theory views learning as a dialectic and cyclical process based on four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active experimentation (Kolb, 2000, 1984).



Kolb's learning cycle shows that experience is translated into concepts through reflection. Alternately, these concepts are used as guides for the active experimentation and for new experiences. So, it's possible to say that reflective practice, integrates theory and practice, thought and action.

The reflective practice could therefore be the main focus of improvement in order to become an increasingly more effective teacher.

2. Reflective practices

In general, the reflective practice is understood as the process of learning through and from experience towards the development of new insights about oneself and/or about practice (Jarvis, 1992; Boud et al 1985; Boyd and Fales, 1983; Mezirow, 1981).

It's necessary for the individual to be self-aware and to evaluate in a critical way his/her everyday practice when reacting to situations.

According to Bolton, reflective practice involves «paying critical attention to the practical values and theories which inform everyday actions, by examining practice reflectively and reflexively. This leads to developmental insight» (Bolton, 2010, p. XIX).

Reflective practice can offer teachers an opportunity to develop competences and skills, to reflect on their way of teaching and on didactic methodologies. To sum up reflective practice could help teachers becoming more and more effective.

It's a process of self-observation and self-assessment. This could help them to understand thoroughly their own action and reaction in teaching activities and to plan professional development.

Another important voice about reflective practice is offered by Donald Schön (1983) according to whom reflective practice means the ability to reflect on action and to engage in a process of continuous learning. It is one of the defining characteristics of learning practice. Furthermore, he distinguished between reflection in action (while doing something/an action/an activity) and on action (after doing something/an action/an activity).

To summarize it all, the work on reflective practice describes the "reflective practitioner" as someone who explores in a conscious way his/her own experiences and practices of learning, in order to understand in a better way how they are learning and to plan how to improve their further learning.

Dewey (1993), the first author who wrote about reflective practice, states that reflection requires the development of the following requisite attitudes:

- introspection: (that is) about the reconsideration of all that happens keeping in mind improvement;
- open-mindedness: (that is) about the willingness to consider new learning and to recognize the probability of possible difficulties;
- willingness: (that is) about taking on responsibility for decisions and actions.

Different methodologies could be useful for reflective practice: keeping a diary, trying to develop it with other colleagues (peer review, mentoring, supervision); using a support tool to reflect on activities, practices (methods) and so on.

Merely describes what happens in a teaching and learning activity is inadequate, but this could be a starting point, as suggested by the following model.

The Discroll model (2000) is based on three key-questions: What?, So what?, Now what?

- What? Returning to the situation and describing it (what happened? did I see it/did it? What was my reaction to it?...);
- So what? Understanding the context, feelings and effects of the different actions (How did I feel at the time of the event? What are my feelings now after the event? Are they different from what I experienced at the time? ...);
- Now what? Modifying future outcomes. What would I change? (Which aspect should be tackled first? Where can I get more information to be able to face a similar situation again? ...).

The reflective practice is really effective when is transformative; when one's teaching is changed as a result of reflection. In this way teachers are able to create an improved teaching environment suited to their own context and to plan and manage their own paths of development.



«When you stand in front of a mirror what you see is your reflection, what you are at the time. Transformative reflection is rather like the mirror in Snow White: it tells you what you might become. This mirror uses theory to enable the transformation from the unsatisfactory what-is to the more effective what-might-be» (Biggs and Tang, 2007, p. 43).

3. Conclusion

A reflective approach to teaching involves changes where teachers usually perceive their own teaching and role. As many studies show, teachers who explore their own teaching practices through reflection, develop attitudes and awareness changes which they believe can benefit their professional growth as teachers, as well as improve the kind of support they provide for their students (Biggs, 2003; Boud et al., 1985; Lyons, 2002).

Reflective practice suggests that experience alone is not sufficient to vouch for professional growth and teaching effectiveness; but experience view through reflection can be the catalyst for teacher development.

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