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Developing different forms of student feedback to promote teacher reflection: A 10-year collaboration

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Abstract

This paper describes a 10-year collaboration between a teacher educator and a high-school science teacher as they investigated different ways to gather student feedback to enhance teacher reflection. Four different procedures were developed during this time: (i) interviews by a teacher educator with students; (ii) learning logs written by students; (iii) observation schedules completed by students; and (iv) a survey completed by students and teachers. Of the four procedures, the most meaningful for teacher reflection was the student interviews because they were the most personal. However, other procedures for gathering student feedback may be more useful to initiate teacher reflection because they are less confronting.

Keywords: Reflection; Student feedback; Collaboration; Teacher beliefs

1. Introduction

> I still see student feedback for teachers as crucial and over the 10 years I have been doing it, I can see the need now more than ever. Every time I try something new in terms of student feedback, it reinforces that students really do have a lot to say about how teachers teach and teachers have a lot to learn from what students say (Geoff's interview, February 2004).

Geoff, a high-school science teacher, made this comment in an interview with Garry, a teacher educator, following a 3-h workshop on teacher learning that they had organised for a group of principals from a school district in Sydney, Australia. What is unique about this collaborative relationship is that it started as a research project on professional development in 1994 and has continued over 10 years to produce four different procedures for collecting data on student learning to support teacher reflection. The procedures evolved over the years in response to different circumstances as Geoff changed schools and required new ways of accessing student data. He is now a principal at a large high school with 75 full-time staff and one of his roles is to promote in-school professional development. He believes that the key to this is building a culture of professional learning within the school by using student feedback to promote teacher reflection. Importantly, he sees this as a 2–3-year process.

The rest of this article unfolds in three sections and tells the story of how four different procedures

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for gathering student feedback evolved over 10 years. First, a brief review of literature on teacher reflection is provided as a theoretical platform for the data collected in the research. Second, the four procedures for accessing student data are explained and includes interview data from Geoff as he describes his beliefs about his teaching and reflection at different times over the 10 years. Third, the paper concludes with a comparison of the four different forms of student feedback and their role in supporting teachers' professional learning as well as providing insights into the collaborative relationship about why it has sustained itself for such a long time.

2. A theoretical basis for reflection

Fullan (1999) argues that it is only through reflection at the personal, group, and organisational level that teachers will begin to question their practice and think differently about classroom practice. This notion of reflection originated in the writings of John Dewey (1933) as a way of thinking about a problematic situation that needs to be resolved:

> The function of reflective thought is, therefore, to transform a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled, harmonious (pp. 100–101).

Dewey argued that this process commenced with pre-reflection in which an individual became perplexed about a situation followed by five phases to resolve the problem: (i) suggestion; (ii) intellectualization; (iii) hypothesis; (iv) reasoning; and (v) testing. Building on the work of Dewey, Schön (1983, 1987) noted two types of reflection—reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action—stating that reflection is not only a way of thinking, but is a hallmark of being a professional. He contended that professionals need to recognise the "complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value-conflict" (1983, p. 39) of a work setting and frame and reframe their practice. van Manen (1977) expanded our understanding about reflection when he noted three different levels: (i) technical reflection which refers to the means to achieve certain goals; (ii) practical reflection which refers to the means and assumptions that underpin practice; and (iii) critical reflection which includes a consideration of moral and ethical viewpoints. These notions about reflection have been a key platform in teacher education over the last 20 years (Barnes, 1992; Brookfield, 1995; Clarke, 1995; Grimmett & Erickson, 1988; Hatton & Smith, 1995; Jay & Johnson, 2002; Korthagen, 1985; Korthagen & Kessels, 1999; LaBoskey, 1994; Loughran, 1996; Valli, 1992; Zeichner, 1983).

A feature that is common to views on reflection is a self-awareness that a problem exists within one's work practices (Loughran, 2002). This is highlighted in Dewey's phases of "pre-reflection", "suggestion" and "intellectualisation", in Schön's phases of "trigger" and "framing", and van Manen's higher levels of reflection. It is this recognition of uncertainty involving a problematic situation that initiates and drives the reflective process (Hoban, 2000). If a solution is obvious, then the need for reflection is reduced. If there is no perceived problem embedded in one's practice, then there is little motivation for reflection at all. Key to sustaining the process of reflection, therefore, is not only becoming aware that a problem exists, but seeking a range of ways to understand a problem (Loughran, 2002).

Fendler's (2003) critique of the notion of reflection demonstrated that there are many different interpretations in the literature which are sometimes contradictory and complex. She compared Dewey's scientifically rational approach to reflection with Schön's intuitive and uncertainty approach noting that both are limited by a person's existing ways of thinking. For example, it is common to encourage teachers to write reflective journals or autobiographical narratives, however, these are often "confessional" writings resulting in little or no change in their practice:

> When the device of autobiographical narrative is considered together with the technique of self-disclosure in journal writing, the combination functions to construct the idea of teachers as a people who repeatedly confess and affirm their identity in terms of categories that reflect existing popular assumptions. This construction is a technology of the self that tends to perpetuate the status quo because the autobiographical markers are based on stereotypes and the conventions of what constitutes an autobiography are historically constructed (Fendler, 2003, p. 23).

She concluded that in some circumstances, reflection is an undesirable practice because it involves