

Thought piece: To what extent could the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing strategy be incorporated in lesson study?

Abstract

This thought piece draws the readers' attention to the pervasive nature of reflection, reflective teaching and learning and the use of questions. Specifically discussed; are the theoretical framework that guides the piece, reflective teaching, the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing (RATPD) and lesson study. Provided is an example that incorporates the RATPD primarily in the post-lesson discussions/colloquia while being faithful to the collaborative nature of lesson study. Achieving these answers the question: "To what extent could the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing strategy be incorporated in lesson study?" The piece ends with a question that challenges readers to conclude and perhaps engage in further reflection on the discussed topic.

Keywords: reflection; reflective teaching, and learning; lesson study; education

Introduction

For several years I have sought to display in my research the connection between reflection, reflective teaching and various disciplines and areas of study. For example, there are titles such as reflective teaching and the teacher's tasks in the inclusive classroom (British Journal of Special Education); reflective teaching and critical literacy (Reflective Practice, International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives); reflective teaching and teaching practicum (Teacher Education and Practice); reflective teaching and the differentiated instructional process (College Quarterly, a Journal of Research and Discussion for College Educators across Canada); reflection and clerical staff (Reflective Practice, International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives); Reflection in the role of examination invigilators (Journal of Workplace Learning) and reflective teaching and self-directed professional development (Professional Development in Education). A careful reading of these and others of my articles will reveal not just a connection but the pervasive nature of reflection, teaching reflectively, and reflective learning. This thought piece which seeks to answer the question, "To what extent could the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing strategy be incorporated in lesson study?" is in line with my present research focus because it connects the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing strategy to lesson study.

The theoretical framework which guides this piece, and my thinking is that of reflection-on-action by Donald Schon (1983 and 1987) and the importance of questions in the reflective teaching process highlighted by the work of Zeichner and Liston (1996). Schon (1987) states that reflection occurs before and after action and coined the phrase reflection-on-action. For example, before teaching, teachers reflect and plan the lesson and, after implementing the plan, they consider or think about what occurred. This process requires the teacher to take some time to consider what to include in the lesson based on the students, classroom environment and subject content. After teaching the lesson, the teacher reviews, analyses and evaluates the lesson and, the process involves identifying what worked and what did not work and why. This idea of reflection-on-action after the lesson drives the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing strategy because it is used at the end of a teaching episode and requires teachers to identify what worked and what did not work and why. Discussed later in this paper is the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing.

A key component of reflection-on-action and the reflective teaching process is the ability to frame a problem (Schon 1983, 1987). Schon (1987) states, in framing a problem, teachers select in a qualified and circumscribed sense what to treat as the problem.

Teachers set the boundaries of their attention to the problem, impose on it a coherence, which allows them to say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs changing. By employing the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing strategy, teachers identify problems with their teaching and say what is wrong and in what directions the situation needs changing.

Zeichner and Liston (1996) agree with and builds on Schon (1983 and 1987) when they point out that reflective teaching involves teachers in examining, framing, attempting to solve dilemmas of classroom and schools, and asking questions about assumptions and values they bring to teaching. It also involves attending to the institutional and cultural context in which they teach, taking part in curriculum development, being involved in school change, and taking responsibility for their professional development. However, the thought of these writers on the centrality of questioning in the reflective teaching process influences this piece and the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing strategy. This is so because the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing is enacted through the use of selected reflective questions. Discussed later in this piece is the idea of questioning.

While the discussion of a theoretical framework provides a backdrop of the ideas undergirding this thought piece, to answer the question on which this piece centres requires an understanding of reflective teaching, the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing (RATPD), lesson study, and a clear example of how the RATPD could be incorporated in lesson study.

Understanding Reflective Teaching

Zeichner and Liston (1996) provide a starting point for our understanding of reflective teaching. They assert, "If a teacher never questions the goals and the values that guide his or her work, the context in which he or she teaches, or never examines his or her assumptions, then it is our belief that this individual is not engaged in reflective teaching" (p. 1).

Given this statement, I define reflective teaching as involving a questioning disposition and critically thinking about one's teaching techniques, personal goals, values, beliefs, assumptions about teaching, and the teaching context. This means that the desire and willingness to question and think critically must come naturally or be cultivated through practice. Posner (1989) supports the idea of developing this disposition through practice when the writer points out that all humans can question and think critically because these are human characteristics.

There are several characteristics of reflective teaching and teachers revealed in the literature.

- Reflective teaching demands that teachers employ and develop their cognitive skills as a means of improving their practice. They should be able to recall, consider, and evaluate their teaching experiences as a means of improving future ones (Farrell, 2001).
- Reflective teachers need to develop and use self-directed critical thinking and ongoing critical inquiry in their practice, initiated by them and not administratively decreed. This results in the development of contextualized knowledge (Cole, 1997; Hyrkas, Tarkka, & Ilmonen, 2001).

- Reflective teachers think critically, which involves the willingness to question, take risks in learning, try out new strategies and ideas, seek alternatives, take control of their learning, use higher-order thinking skills, and reflect on their learning processes. They would discuss with others and analyze problems they encounter in their classroom to aid their analysis of situations, which could result in improved future classroom encounters (Elder & Paul 1994).
- Reflective teaching demands that teachers use and develop their affective skills as a means of improving their practice. They use their intuition, initiative, values, and experience during teaching and exercise judgment about the use of various teaching and research skills (Markham, 1999).
- Reflective teachers identify the personal meaning or significance of a classroom or school situation, and this would include the disclosure and examination of feelings (Reiman, 1999).
- Reflective teachers take personal risks, for reflective teaching demands the sharing of perceptions and beliefs with others. They engage in sharing ideas, receiving, and giving feedback as a part of a collaborative experience, and they confront the uncertainty about their teaching philosophies and, indeed, their competence (Cunningham, 2001; Day, 1999; Markham, 1999)

A careful review of these and other literary sources points out the benefits experienced by teachers and schools employing the practice. Firstly, they highlight that the main aim of teaching reflectively is the ongoing improvement of practice (Farrell, 2001, Hyrkas, Tarkka & Ilmonen, 2001). Secondly, reflective teaching involves the use and development of affective skills to improve practice (Zeichner and Liston 1996, Markham, 1999 and Day, 1999). Thirdly, the literature also suggests that schools' benefit when reflective teaching is encouraged. Hyrkas, Tarkka & Ilmonen (2001) point out that reflective teaching can lead to creative and innovative approaches to classroom and school situations and problems that could eventuate into improved learning opportunities for students. When this happens, the school could boast improvement in students' learning. Posner (1989) argues that reflective teaching involves critical thinking that aids teachers to deliberately devise new teaching methods rather than being a slave to traditions. Critical thinking also causes teachers to challenge accepted ways that teaching occurs in schools.

As a proponent of reflective teaching with a deep interest in ensuring that teacher education programmes offer learning experiences that encourage the development of students' reflective capabilities and the characteristics of reflective teaching and teachers outlined above, I devised, implemented, and evaluated the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing (RATPD).

The reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing

The reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing (RATPD) combines elements of reflective teaching—in particular, reflection-on-action—with student teachers' practicum debriefing tutorials. The theoretical underpinning for the approach is a combination of the idea of reflection-on-action (Schön, 1987) and the idea that reflective teaching and learning must involve not just questioning teaching techniques but also the teacher's goals, values,

beliefs, assumptions about teaching, and the teaching context (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). The approach encourages student teachers to reflect on their actions and those of the mentor teachers observed during their practicum exercise in schools. The use of questions is a central tenet of the RATPD. The questions are:

1. What have you learned about teaching?
2. To what extent has the observation caused any changes in your beliefs, values, and assumptions about teaching?
3. What have you learned about 'self' as a teacher?

It is through these reflective questions that the RATPD is enacted. The questions also guide discussions during debriefing sessions. I refer to the questions as "reflective" because they emerge from my understanding of reflective teaching. But, more importantly, they help to encourage student teachers to think critically about what they had observed in schools during their practicum and their learning and behaviours as potential teachers.

Lesson study

Generally speaking, lesson study is a professional development activity that originated in Japan and involves teachers collaborating to explore classroom practice with the goal of becoming more effective teachers. The process also involves a "research lesson" (RL) in which teachers make a detailed plan, implement, and select a specific goal and research questions to explore. Through this planning process, a group of teachers determine what students should understand about the lesson content and how best to teach this content (Myers, 2012). McMillan and Jess (2021) state that teachers demonstrate positive changes in teaching, professional beliefs, pedagogical skills, and content knowledge by employing lesson study. Specifically, Dudley (2016) sees the process of Lesson Study as cyclical and identifies several stages of the lesson study cycle. These are planning, teaching, observing students, discussing and analysing or colloquia, and recording and reporting findings. To make clear the steps and principles of Lesson Study, the stages are discussed.

- **Planning**

Detailed planning with two or more teachers occurs. Planning involves discussions of the focus of the 'RL' that is a specific issue or topic chosen by the teachers, accessing research articles, theoretical frameworks, curriculum policy guidelines and other materials. Also, during the planning stage, selected pupils are targeted to be the focus at the observation stage. Interviewing pupils will also reveal insights about the chosen topic.

- **Teaching and Observation of students during the RL**

During the 'RL', one teacher leads the teaching and others act as observers. The observation focuses on how the lesson, planned by all the teachers, actually plays out in practice. In other words, the observers compare what they predicted students would learn with what they had observed. During this teaching and observation process, the students and not the teacher is the overall focus.

- **Discussing and Analysing (colloquium)**

McMillan, Jess, and Irvine (2020), McMillan and Jess (2021) and Dudley (2016) refer to this stage as the post-lesson discussion or colloquium. This stage involves interviewing the targeted students about their experiences and teachers' discussing lesson observation notes. During this time, the focus is on student's learning and not on aspects of teaching. Collaborative reflection is a central feature where group members learn with and from each other, make sense of observations, challenge existing ideas and misconceptions, tackle difficult practice issues, and confront underlying value systems.

- **Recording and reporting findings**

During the recording and reporting of finding stage, the teaching community or school or department receives feedback on the research lesson or lessons from the research group. This assists the learning of other teachers in the community so contributing to their professional development.

In addition to a growth in the use of lesson study internationally, Myers (2012) displays the centrality of reflection in lesson study. For example, the writer pointed out that using critical thinking, teachers involved in lesson study discover gaps in their knowledge and acquire the needed information. The cyclical nature of lesson study allows teachers to reflect on personal strengths, weaknesses, and areas in need of development. The writer concludes that the qualities of lesson study, including its cyclical and collaborative nature, seem to make it the ideal tool for promoting reflection. While I agree with Myers (2012) that lesson study can develop the reflective capabilities of student teachers and, I will add, experienced teachers, it is in the post-lesson discussions or colloquia that the RATPD could be incorporated.

Incorporating the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing into lesson study

There are two ways the RATPD could be incorporated into the lesson study colloquia. **One**, the three reflective questions can be modified to fit a specific issue or topic or context of the 'research lesson'. For example, after teaching and observing a lesson in music composition, the following questions could be added to the group discussion:

1. What have we learned from teaching and observing the lesson on composition and what could be improved?
2. To what extent have the teaching and observation carried out caused changes in our beliefs, values, and assumptions about composition and teaching composition?
3. What have we learned about ourselves as teachers and composers?

Reflective question one would encourage group members to reveal what they learned and observed—bearing in mind the nature of observation in lesson study—and to suggest improvements to be implemented later. Reflective question two would encourage group members to think affectively by targeting their emotional state concerning the lesson observed. Reflective question three would allow group members to internalise the lesson by taking ownership of positive attitudes and behaviour as a part of their nature. It is important to note that these questions would be employed in a collaborative setting. McMillan, Jess, and Irvine (2020) and Dudley (2016) emphasise the importance of a collaborative approach to colloquia and writers such as Elder & Paul (1994), Cunningham (2001), Day (1999) and

Markham (1999) discussed above, point out the importance of reflection in teachers' collaborative learning.

Two, the RATPD offers a structure to guide colloquia. I found the RATPD, and the questions asked help to keep debriefing sessions between 30 and 40 minutes and act as a guide for participants' thoughts.

Conclusion

This thought piece draws the readers' attention to the pervasive nature of reflection, aspects of teaching reflectively and the use of questions (Zeichner and Liston, 1996), and reflective learning. More importantly, provided is an example of how the RATPD could be incorporated into lesson study, primarily the post-lesson discussion, while maintaining the collaborative dimension of the colloquia. From my viewpoint, these answer the question central to this thought piece. However, given all the discussion, what do you think is the extent to which the reflective approach to teaching practicum debriefing strategy could be incorporated into Lesson Study?

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