Chapter 5

Reflective On-Line Discourse for Pre-Service Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Discourse has been thought to be an essential aspect of high quality education (Bean & Stevens, 2002; Harkness, D’Ambrasio & Marrone, 2006; Heller, 2004; NCTM, 2000; Wade, Fauske & Thompson, 2008;). Effective discourse can advance students’ and teachers’ understanding of the learning process, listening skills, and attentiveness (Walshaw & Anthony, 2010). Research suggests that quality discourse can be effective but is complex, should be scaffolded, must provide in itself a complete resource for constructing knowledge, and involves a high degree of self-reflection (Breyfogle, 2005; McNair, 2001; Staples, 2007; Webb, Nemar & Wing, 2006). National teacher organizations support reflective discourse. For example, the standards for the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) state that accredited teacher education programs should encourage reflective practice, and certified teachers should be able to reflect on practice and act on feedback (NCATE, 2007). More and more, evidence suggests that the competent teacher is one who, through reflective practices, becomes thoughtful, clear in beliefs and actions based on these beliefs, and self-initiating (Wasserman, 2009). However, because the teaching profession is sometimes one of isolation and disconnectedness (Sparks & Hirsh, 1997; Wong & Wong, 2001; Zmuda, Kuklis & Kline, 2004), teachers may not get opportunities to engage in thoughtful discourse. With advances in on-line education, however, teachers who might otherwise not have opportunities to engage in meaningful, reflective discourse about teaching and learning can easily do so at their own relative convenience. Through an on-line venue, teachers can get involved in substantive communication about teaching and learning, address valid and invalid preconceptions about the profession, and work to improve their practice through directed meta-cognitive reflective activities.

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Reflective practice for the classroom teacher has been conceptualized in many different ways: reviewing and thinking about one’s teaching (Stronge, 2002); reviewing an experience to identify accurate and inaccurate perceptions (Marzano, 2007); thinking about teaching before, during, and after a lesson (Artzt, Armour-Thomas & Curcio, 2008); sophisticated thoughtful consideration of instructional intentions and the degree to which those intentions have been accomplished (Danielson & McGreal, 2000); a cycle of inquiry to foster building new understanding of self and teaching practice (Lambert, 1998); a mental activity where an experience is recalled, thoughtfully considered, and then evaluated, usually with some overarching purpose in mind (Richards, 1991); or a critical thinking skill that involves analyzing and making judgments about what happened (McDonald & Dominguez, 2009). Overarching purposes might be to improve instruction and influence student learning (Stronge, 2002); to uncover beliefs, as well as accurate and inaccurate perceptions about teaching and student learning (Marzano, 2007); to analyze personal teaching practices and cognitions that drive each and every lesson (Artzt et al., 2008); to build a strong sense of self-efficacy (Stronge, 2002); to develop critical stances and deliberate teacher practice on sound principles (Ostorga & Estrada, 2009); to change classrooms from teacher-centered to student centered (Stump, 2010); or to build a deeper understanding that the consequences of teacher actions can build an expanded repertoire of teaching skills (Danielson, 1998).

Reflective thought requires more than just recounting events, though. High-level reflection must also consider the “why’s” associated with those events. Simply put, for example, recounting the sequence of events of a particularly good lesson is not reflective thinking at a comprehensive level. The teacher must thoughtfully consider why that particular lesson may have been so successful. It is believed that reflective thinking by the effective teacher acts as a learning tool for the teacher and builds confidence in teaching. Indeed, reflective thinking about one’s teaching can transform an ordinary classroom into a much more productive one (Stronge, 2002). It is important, therefore, to keep in mind that not all thought is reflective thought (Ostorga & Estrada, 2009), and in order be considered high quality reflection, student discourse must be focused and must move away from superficial descriptions.

According to Richards (1991), one may consider reflection as a three step process. First is the identification of a teaching or classroom event. Second is an account of what happened, without explanation or any evaluation. Third is a conscious review of the event, where questions are asked about the event, and an evaluation is generated. For example, asked to respond to a discussion on a best and worst lesson, a student teacher might, at the first stage, simply identify that a lesson on the unit circle in trigonometry was his worst lesson. At the second stage, that same student teacher might describe the lesson as one where he derived some trigonometric expression as his students watched and then sent his students on a path to apply that trigonometry. At the third level, the student teacher might describe the lesson as one where he derived some trigonometric expression as his students watched and then sent his students on a path to apply that trigonometry. At the third level, the student teacher might suggest that the lesson was too teacher-centered and consequently many students were left disenfranchised for too long a period of time; he might further realize that students spent too much time mindlessly copying from the chalkboard without processing the underlying big mathematical ideas. Realization then sets in that students were unable to work on the application problems without a lot of help from the student teacher, who spent much of the rest of the class running around the room helping individual students. Finally, the student teacher might add an evaluation that “teacher-directed, note-taking” math classes may not be effective because of low student engagement. When this high level of reflection is met, the student teacher can make the conscious and evidence-based deci-
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