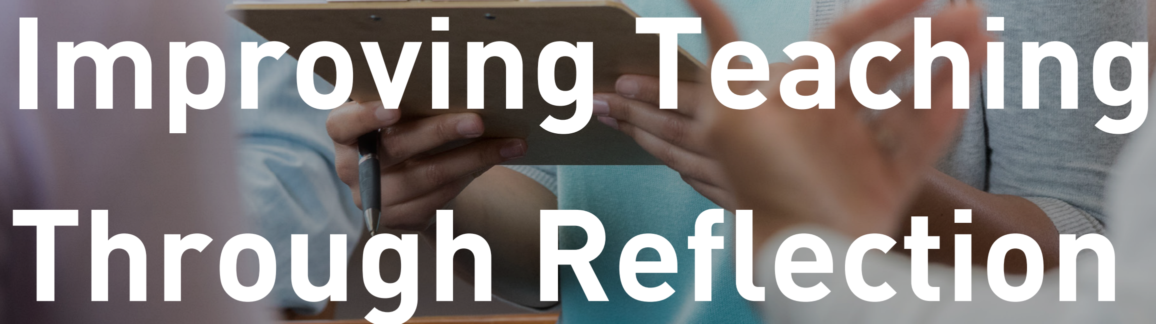

Improving Teaching Through Reflection

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Nothing gives pause like reflection. The act of reflecting is unparalleled in its ability to surface consciousness and bring awareness. Our reflections may surprise, enlighten, challenge, or confound us. Reflection is, in fact, a critical element in any form of learning. Reflection is one way of processing human experience and can turn experience into learning (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985/2015). Reflection, in and of itself, is an effective pedagogy.

Yet not enough college faculty take time to reflect on their own teaching. Despite its effectiveness as an approach with students, reflection is often incompatible with the frenetic pace of college instruction. Our colleagues, especially those with heavy teaching loads, have few precious moments to think about what they are doing when they teach. This is a missed opportunity.

Moreover, good faculty have achieved a kind of automaticity commonly associated with expert practice. The longer a professor teaches, the more compressed (skilled but *unreflective*) that practice may become. As a result, years of experience etch in behaviors that are second nature and potentially fixed.

But teaching without reflecting on one's practice risks becoming repetitive and mundane, even for passionate instructors. Without reflection, how do I begin to know how well I am doing? Reflecting critically on what I do in the classroom slows the clock and allows me to carefully consider my current and future teaching actions and behaviors. Critical reflection is a tool for college faculty to use and alter their teaching practice in powerfully beneficial ways.

Reflection has added significance for faculty, as the ability to make meaning is essential for adult learning to occur (Mezirow & Associates, 1990; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). When reflecting on their teaching, faculty function as expert adult learners. Significant learning experiences in adulthood involve critical self-reflection, reassessing the way we think about things as well as our own orientation to action. By giving meaning to these experiences, faculty can grow their knowledge of teaching and teaching practice. Reflection functions as the metacognitive process to evaluate and improve.

In 2014, California State University, Los Angeles (Cal State LA) became a founding partner to the Association of College and University Educators (ACUE). Through our Center for Effective Teaching and Learning (CETL), we advised on the development of ACUE's learning modules and courses of study in effective instruction for faculty. Along with colleagues from colleges and universities nationwide, we engaged in an iterative design process to identify, create, test, and refine offerings that follow an experiential model of preparation, engagement, and processing (Boud et al., 1985/2015). This experiential cycle allows faculty to progressively build knowledge about teaching that helps to expand their repertoire, using their current experiences in the classroom and then linking these with future teaching actions.

Reflection is woven throughout ACUE's design, heeding Boud et al.'s (1985/2015) finding that

> reflection is needed at various points: at the start in anticipation of the experience, during the experience as a way of dealing with the vast array of inputs and coping with the feelings that are generated, and following the experience during the phase of writing and consolidation. (p. 10)

Every ACUE learning module includes opening questions that prompt faculty to reflect on their past experiences with a teaching situation or pedagogical approach, priming their prior knowledge to support new learning. Faculty collaborate with peers to observe and analyze demonstration lessons, reflecting on pedagogical choices in relatable teaching situations and

exploring what different choices they might make. Faculty must also write reflections about their experience implementing a new approach and receive timely feedback for further consideration. Every learning module also concludes with an opportunity for faculty to participate in summary discussions, reflecting on and learning from the experience of others.

This interwoven approach captures reflection *in* action and is notably different from the Schön (1983) model of professionals reflecting *on* action. The design that we, and others, helped ACUE develop is more immediate. The regular opportunities for reflection capture teaching in the moment, in active classroom settings where the action is "hot and rapid" rather than "cool and deliberate" (Eraut, 1995).

Such sustained and critical reflection, guided by feedback from expert facilitators and peers, allows faculty to safely challenge closely held assumptions that might at first be largely invisible, if not embedded in prior knowledge and experiences. Although exemplary college instructors possess considerable knowledge about how learners learn and about their students (McAlpine & Weston, 2000), the ways that we interpret our experiences are never bias free (Mezirow & Associates, 1990). The structured reflection in ACUE's design enables faculty to make their implicit beliefs explicit, helpfully exposing hidden constructions about teaching and learning to rational discourse.

The Center for Advanced Study in Education (CASE) at The City University of New York recently conducted a content analysis of written reflections submitted by Cal State LA faculty who are learning about effective teaching practices through our center's ongoing collaboration with ACUE. Consistent with extant literature, CASE found that structured reflection brings up many ideas, feelings, and behaviors that faculty want to sort through. Themes and patterns identified through this analysis suggest that the interwoven reflection cycle of ACUE's learning model does several things to turn thinking into behavior. Specifically, CASE found that the reflective experiences

- prompted faculty to acknowledge that their teaching is a topic worthy of ongoing reflection;
- leveraged current classroom experience, meeting faculty "where they are" to contextualize new knowledge;
- provided structure to teaching knowledge;
- were affective, making the learning process personally meaningful;
- helped faculty stay focused and intentional, due to the pattern of ongoing practice and feedback;
- turned teaching experience into knowledge about teaching, bringing faculty to a point of decision about future action;
- were more effective when faculty had multiple iterations, by engaging with numerous learning modules; in other words, faculty hit their stride, and were more likely to set goals and monitor their own behaviors, through repetition and the opportunity to track progress over time; and
- indicated that not all faculty may change their practice; the decision to modify teaching is dependent on faculty tolerance for change (McAlpine & Weston, 2000).

Recurring themes demonstrated the importance of being a reflective educator, including planning, affect, and mindful communication, all of which encapsulate the reflective process. With time, we noticed greater nuance in these reflections. It was not uncommon for faculty to write about gaps in their understanding or express delight at changes they saw in their students' learning. We observed faculty who experienced personal epiphanies with regard to their teaching. Through this process, we also observed faculty reconstructing their classroom experiences based upon what they learned in the modules, and we noticed faculty

attempt to give meaning to their experiences.

Many professionals do not understand or tend to underestimate the power of reflection to refine practice (Porter, 2017). To reflect, one must slow down, remain curious, and tolerate ambiguity. At Cal State LA, we discovered early on that reflection as a way of learning works especially well for faculty who want to change their practice. At our center, all of our programming features a metacognitive element that asks faculty to engage with an issue or challenge using critical reflection. If the goal is to transform practice, then ongoing reflection is seminal to faculty professional development. There is never a reason not to think about our teaching. Reflection is good professional practice.

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