

3

Critically reflective teaching asks community college teachers to discover and research the assumptions they make about teaching and learning by using the four lenses available to them: students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, educational literature, and teachers' autobiographical experiences as learners. Viewing classroom practice through these four lenses helps teachers make more informed judgments and take more informed actions, in community college classrooms.

Using the Lenses of Critically Reflective Teaching in the Community College Classroom

Stephen D. Brookfield

Community college classrooms represent the ultimate in open-entry admissions in American higher education. Characterized by student diversity in all its facets—racial, gender, and socioeconomic as well as by wide differences in ability, educational readiness, motivation, and age—the community college classroom is a varied and sometimes volatile mix. A critically reflective stance toward the practice of community college teaching can help teachers feel more confident that their judgments are informed and leave them with energy and intent to do good work.

This chapter explores the idea of critical reflection as it is informed by the literature of reflective teaching in general and by two subcategories of this literature in particular—teacher decision making and classroom assessment. A frequently mentioned premise of reflective practice is that it helps teachers make more informed decisions (Valli, 1993; Calderhead and Gates, 1993; Brubacher, Case, and Reagan, 1994). If teachers are more reflective, the argument goes, they will be better placed to make good judgments about appropriate instructional approaches, accurate evaluative criteria, helpful curricular sequencing, and useful responses to group problems and other matters. Therefore, informed decision making can be considered the heart of good teaching. The literature on teacher thinking and decision making (Day, Calderhead, and Denicolo, 1993; Day, Pope, and Denicolo, 1990; Carlgren, Handal, and Vaage, 1994) supports this contention, emphasizing the importance of teachers checking their assumptions about good practice against the insights gleaned from colleagues. The literature on classroom

research and assessment provides a wealth of examples of how information gained from students concerning their learning can help teachers ground their actions in an informed understanding of a particular classroom's dynamics (Angelo, 1998; Brookhart, 2000). As well as examining how colleagues' perceptions and students' opinions can help teachers unearth and challenge their assumptions, this chapter will explore how teachers' autobiographical experiences as learners and their reading of educational theory can help them view their practice from different, and helpful, angles.

Advocates of reflective practice are interested in helping teachers understand, question, investigate, and take seriously their own learning and practice. They argue that professional education has taken a wrong turn in seeing the role of practitioner as interpreter, translator, and implementer of theory produced by academic thinkers and researchers. They believe instead that practitioners develop their own contextually sensitive theories of practice rather than importing them from outside. Work on teachers' personal theorizing (Ross, Cornett, and McCutcheon, 1992; Tann, 1993) describes how reflective teachers are engaged in a continual investigation and monitoring of their efforts. In Smyth's (1992) words, they "perceive themselves as 'active' learners, inquirers and advocates of their own practices, . . . critical theoreticians in their own teaching and the structures in which they are located" (p. 32).

Teaching in a critically reflective way involves teachers trying to discover, and research, the assumptions that frame how they teach. In researching these assumptions, teachers have four complementary lenses through which they can view their practice; the lens of their own autobiographies as learners, the lens of students' eyes, the lens of colleagues' perceptions, and the lens of educational literature. Reviewing practice through these lenses helps surface the assumptions we hold about pedagogic methods, techniques, and approaches and the assumptions we make concerning the conditions that best foster student learning. But critical reflection also forces us to confront deeper assumptions concerning the submerged and unacknowledged power dynamics that infuse all practice settings. It also helps us detect hegemonic assumptions—assumptions that we think are in our own best interests but that actually work against us in the long term.

Critically Reflective Lens One: Autobiographical Experiences of Learning

As case studies of beginning and experienced teachers have shown (Bullough, Knowles, and Crow, 1992; Berman and others, 1991; Dollase, 1992), much of how teachers teach is in direct response to how they learned. They try to avoid reproducing the humiliations that they felt were visited upon them as learners and they seek to replicate the things their own teachers did that affirmed or inspired them. One teacher (Knowles, 1993) sums up this autobiographical connection as follows:

As I tried on various roles as a young beginning teacher there were certain cloaks of practice that did not match the rest of my attire—they did not jibe with the kinds of experiences I knew to be most valuable to *me* as a student—and I tended to dismiss them as being not appropriate for the wardrobe of my teaching repertoire. On deeper examination, in some cases, the particular practices in question were connected to approaches or experiences with which or through which I had suffered (such as at the hands of an unethical teacher) or which were associated with punishment or fear of failure (p. 75).

The insights and meanings for practice drawn from experiences of learning are likely to have a profound and long-lasting influence. Teachers may think they are teaching according to a widely accepted curricular or pedagogic model only to find, on reflection, that the foundations of how they work have been laid in their autobiographies as learners. As Day, Denicolo, and Pope (1990) note, when teachers are asked to explain why they favor certain approaches, “frequently they evidence their choice of method, for instance, by reference to a formative experience of their own, whether it be a positive one which they seek to emulate for their students or a negative one which they strive to avoid reiterating for others” (p. 156). A good example of how an experience of learning frames a teacher’s life is Andresen’s (1993) examination of his own pedagogy. Remembering the joy he felt as a science student at discovering that the physical world could be explained and manipulated, he came to understand his career as a teacher “as a search, a pilgrimage, toward recapturing this primary joy” (p. 62). Clearly, then, studying autobiographical experiences of learning can help explain to teachers why they gravitate to certain ways of working and instinctively turn away from others.

Critically Reflective Lens Two: Learners’ Eyes

Seeing yourself through learners’ eyes constitutes one of the most consistently surprising elements in any community college teacher’s career. In recent years the literature on classroom assessment and classroom research has explored this process and provided numerous suggestions for techniques such as “the muddiest point” and the “one minute paper” that have become popular among many instructors (Angelo, 1998). At the heart of classroom research is the belief that informed decision making depends on teachers’ having accurate information regarding how and what students are learning. Whenever teachers use some form of classroom assessment to find out how their students are experiencing the class, they learn something. As Hammersley (1986, 1993) documents, sometimes what they find is reassuring. They discover that learners are interpreting their actions in the way they are intended to or that students are roughly at the point in their understanding of subject matter that teachers believe them to be.

But often teachers are profoundly surprised by the diversity of meanings people read into their words and actions or by the spread of abilities and levels of student comprehension revealed.

Seeing their practice through learners' eyes helps teachers teach more responsively. Having a sense of what is happening to students as they grapple with the difficult, threatening, and exhilarating process of learning constitutes instructors' primary pedagogic information. Without this information it is hard to teach well. It is obviously important to have a good grasp of methods, but it is just as important to gain some regular insight into what is happening to learners as those methods are put into practice. Without an appreciation of how people are experiencing learning, any methodological choices we make risk being ill informed, inappropriate, or harmful.

Critically Reflective Lens Three: Our Colleagues' Experiences

In their study of the social realities of teaching, Lieberman and Miller (1991) note that among teachers "there is a general lack of confidence, a pervasive feeling of vulnerability, a fear of being 'found out.' Such feelings are made worse because of the privacy ethic. There is no safe place to air one's uncertainties and to get the kind of feedback necessary to reduce the anxiety about being a good teacher, or at least an adequate one" (p. 103). One way to counter this isolation is through teacher reflection groups (Hauser, 1994), "talking teaching" groups (Clark, 2001), and conversation circles on pedagogy (Collay, Dunlap, Enloe, and Gagnon, 1998). In these groups teachers use one another as critical mirrors and sounding boards, providing them with images and interpretations of their practice that often take them by surprise. By reviewing experiences dealing with the same crises and dilemmas they face, teachers can check, reframe, and broaden their own theories of practice. Case studies of teacher reflection groups (Berkey and others, 1990; Miller, 1990; Osterman and Kottkamp, 1993) report that talking to colleagues about problems they have in common increases teachers' chances of stumbling across interpretations that fit what is happening in a particular situation.

Just as important as checking readings of problems, responses, assumptions, and justifications against the readings offered by colleagues is the emotional sustenance such conversation provides. According to participants in the studies mentioned above, teachers start to realize that what they thought were unique problems and idiosyncratic failings are shared by many others who work in situations like theirs. Just knowing that they are not alone in their struggles can, as Berlak and Berlak (1981) show, relieve teachers of unwarranted feelings of incompetence. So although critical reflection often begins alone, it is most fruitfully conducted as a collective

endeavor. Teachers need colleagues to help them know what their assumptions are, how these could be researched, and how they might change their practices.

Critically Reflective Lens Four: Theoretical Literature

Theory can help teachers “name” their practice by illuminating the general elements of what they think are idiosyncratic experiences. It can provide multiple perspectives on familiar situations. In particular, studying theory can help teachers combat the sense of impostorship that frequently troubles their existence. As told by teachers themselves, impostorship is the sense teachers possess that they do not really deserve to be taken seriously as competent professionals because they know they do not really know what they’re doing. All they are certain of is that unless they are very careful, they will be found out to be teaching under false pretences. Elbaz (1987) notes that teachers who feel like impostors have a destructive tendency to accept all the blame for failure in a particular situation. Sometimes teachers’ feelings of impostorship are communicated to students, inducing in them an unnecessary anxiety and level of mistrust or doubt. For example, Brems, Baldwin, Davis, and Namyniuk (1994) report that teachers with self-reported feelings of impostorship are viewed less favorably by students.

One effect of impostorship is that teachers who feel it are reluctant to ask for assistance. As Clark (1992) comments, “Asking for help makes us feel vulnerable—vulnerable to being discovered as impostors who don’t know as much as we pretend to know” (p. 82). For those teachers unable to approach colleagues for aid, a text can be a useful substitute. Educational literature can provide teachers with an analysis of dilemmas and problematic situations that can be enormously helpful. In her study of classroom chronicles, Isenberg (1994) shows how reading others’ depictions of the crises, anxieties, and dilemmas that she thought were uniquely her own helped her put her own problems in perspective. The burgeoning literature on how teachers can learn from reading narratives of teaching (Jalongo and Isenberg, 1995; Preskill and Jacobwitz, 2001) shows that this activity can help teachers realize that what they thought were signs of their personal failings as practitioners are sometimes situations that were externally created and over which they have little control. This stops them from falling victim to the belief that they are responsible for everything that happens in their classrooms.

This belief is vividly documented in Britzman’s (1991) study of beginning teachers. Britzman records how “because they took on the myth that everything depends on the teacher, when things went awry, all they could do was blame themselves rather than reflect upon the complexity of pedagogical encounters” (p. 227). Teachers who subscribe to this myth often assume that student lassitude or hostility is the result of teachers not being enthusiastic enough. They believe they have failed to use the right pedagogical

approaches, or that they have not been sufficiently creative in finding points of connection between the subject matter they teach and their students' lives. It can be an important act of critical reflection for teachers to read a theoretical analysis that helps them to switch their interpretive frame so that they view the reasons for students' apathy or anger differently. Theories of cognitive and developmental psychology suggest that when learners realize that they are on the verge of changing, or scrutinizing, aspects of their thinking that they would prefer to leave untouched, the fear and resentment this produces are directed at teachers (Perry, 1988; Basseches, 1984; King and Kitchener, 1994; Ignelzi, 2000).

Conclusion

This chapter has drawn on the literature of reflective practice, teacher thinking, and classroom research to argue that critical reflection is important to community college teachers' mental health and professional competence. Researchers argue that being critically reflective helps teachers make informed decisions in the classroom. It helps them distinguish the dimensions of students' actions and motivations they can affect from those that are beyond their influence. It also helps them develop a rationale for their practice that they can call on to guide them in making difficult decisions in unpredictable situations. As work on classroom research demonstrates, checking teachers' assumptions about teaching practices against students' perceptions of those same practices can alert them to those assumptions they can depend on and those they need to reframe.

Methods that have been documented as helpful to community college teachers' critical reflection include classroom critical-incident questionnaires, student-learning audits, teacher-assumption inventories, protocols of critical conversation, selective reading in the literature of teachers' stories, teacher portfolios, and teachers placing themselves in the role of learners (Brookfield, 1995). The interviews cited earlier with teachers engaged in critical-reflection groups and the research into teacher thinking (also previously cited) both document how instructors view a set of critically examined core assumptions as a survival necessity. Surfacing and examining the assumptions that frame the decisions they make in the classroom give community college teachers a greater sense of confidence in the accuracy of those choices. If asked by students or colleagues to explain the particularities of their actions, teachers can give a rationale that induces in those same students or colleagues the reassuring sense that these teachers have an examined justification for why they do what they do. Teachers also comment that the surprise, shock, and productive uncertainty occasioned by critical reflection reenergizes their sense of engagement in practice. For teachers in mid- or late career this is an important, and unlooked-for, benefit. Finally, students report that seeing their teachers talk out loud about how critical reflection is confirming or challenging their pedagogic assumptions models for those same students the process of critical thinking.

In community college settings—perhaps the ultimate in diverse, open-entry, mixed-ability classrooms—critical reflection on core assumptions can ground teachers in a moral, intellectual, and political vision of what they are trying to accomplish.

References

- Andresen, L. "On Becoming a Maker of Teachers: Journey Down a Long Hall of Mirrors." In D. Boud, R. Cohen, and D. Walker (eds.), *Using Experience for Learning*. Bristol, Pa.: The Open University Press, 1993.
- Angelo, T.A. (ed.). *Classroom Assessment and Research: An Update on Uses, Approaches, and Research Findings*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 75. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998.
- Basseches, M. *Dialectical Thinking and Adult Development*. Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1984.
- Berkey, R., and others. "Collaborating for Reflective Practice: Voices of Teachers, Administrators, and Researchers." In *Education and Urban Society*, 1990, 22(2), 204–232.
- Berlak, A., and Berlak, H. *Dilemmas of Schooling: Teaching and Social Change*. New York: Methuen, 1981.
- Berman, L. M., and others. *Toward Curriculum for Being: Voices of Educators*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.
- Brems, C., Baldwin, M. R., Davis, L., and Namyniuk, L. "The Imposter Syndrome as Related to Teaching Evaluations and Advising Relationships of University Teachers." *Journal of Higher Education*, 1994, 65(2), 183–193.
- Britzman, D. P. *Practice Makes Practice: A Critical Study of Learning to Teach*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991.
- Brookfield, S. D. *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.
- Brookhart, S. M. *The Art and Science of Classroom Assessment: The Missing Part of Pedagogy*. ASHE-ERIC Higher Education Report, 27(1). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Brubacher, J. W., Case, C. W., and Reagan, T. G. *Becoming a Reflective Educator: How to Build a Culture of Inquiry in the Schools*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 1994.
- Bullough, R. V., Knowles, J. G., and Crow, N. A. *Emerging as a Teacher*. New York: Routledge, 1992.
- Calderhead, J., and Gates, P. (eds.). *Conceptualizing Reflection in Teacher Development*. Bristol, Pa.: Falmer Press, 1993.
- Carlgrén, I., Handal, G., and Vaage, S. (eds.). *Teachers' Minds and Actions: Research on Teachers' Thinking and Practice*. Bristol, Pa.: Falmer Press, 1994.
- Clark, C. M. "Teachers as Designers in Self-Directed Development." In A. Hargreaves and M. G. Fullan (eds.), *Understanding Teacher Development*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1992.
- Clark, C. M. *Talking Shop: Authentic Conversation and Teacher Learning*. New York: Teachers College Press, 2001.
- Collay, M., Dunlap, D., Enloe, W., and Gagnon, G. W. *Learning Circles: Creating Conditions for Professional Development*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 1998.
- Day, C., Calderhead, J., and Denicolo, P. (eds.). *Research on Teacher Thinking: Understanding Professional Development*. Bristol, Pa.: Falmer Press, 1993.
- Day, C., Pope, M., and Denicolo, M. (eds.). *Insight into Teachers' Thinking and Practice*. Bristol, Pa.: Falmer Press, 1990.
- Dollase, R. H. *Voices of Beginning Teachers*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1992.
- Elbaz, F. "Teachers' Knowledge of Teaching: Strategies for Reflection." In J. Smyth (ed.), *Educating Teachers: Changing the Nature of Pedagogical Knowledge*. Philadelphia: Falmer Press, 1987.
- Hammersley, M. *Case Studies in Classroom Research*. Bristol, Pa.: Open University Press, 1986.

- Hammersley, M. (ed.). *Controversies in Classroom Research*. Bristol, Pa.: Open University Press, 1993.
- Hauser, M. E. "Working with School Staff: Reflective Cultural Analysis in Groups." In G. D. Spindler and L. Spindler (eds.), *Pathways to Cultural Awareness: Cultural Therapy with Teachers and Students*. Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin, 1994.
- Ignelzi, M. "Meaning-Making in the Learning and Teaching Process." In M. B. Baxter Magolda (ed.), *Teaching to Promote Intellectual and Personal Maturity: Incorporating Students' Worldviews and Identities into the Learning Process*. New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 82. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000.
- Isenberg, J. *Going by the Book: The Role of Popular Classroom Chronicles in the Professional Development of Teachers*. New York: Routledge, 1994.
- Jalongo, M. R., and Isenberg, J. P. *Teachers' Stories: From Personal Narrative to Professional Insight*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.
- King, P. M., and Kitchener, K. S. *Developing Reflective Judgment: Understanding and Promoting Intellectual Growth and Critical Thinking in Adolescents and Adults*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1994.
- Knowles, J. G. "Life-History Accounts as Mirrors: A Practical Avenue for the Conceptualization of Reflection in Teacher Education." In J. Calderhead and P. Gates (eds.), *Conceptualizing Reflection in Teacher Development*. Bristol, Pa.: Falmer Press, 1993.
- Lieberman, A., and Miller, L. (eds.). *Staff Development for Education in the '90s: New Demands, New Realities, New Perspectives*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1991.
- Miller, J. L. *Creating Spaces and Finding Voices: Teachers Collaborating for Empowerment*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1990.
- Osterman, K. F., and Kottkamp, R. B. *Reflective Practice for Educators: Improving Schooling through Professional Development*. Newbury Park, Calif.: Corwin Press, 1993.
- Perry, W. G. "Different Worlds in the Same Classroom." In P. Ramsden (ed.), *Improving Learning: New Perspectives*. New York: Nichols, 1988.
- Preskill, S. L., and Jacobowitz, R. S. *Stories of Teaching*. Upper Saddle River, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 2001.
- Ross, D., Cornett, J., and McCutcheon, G. (eds.). *Teachers' Personal Theorizing*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992.
- Smyth, J. "Teachers' Work and the Politics of Reflection." *American Educational Research Journal*, 1992, 29(2), 267-300.
- Tann, S. "Eliciting Student Teachers' Personal Theories." In J. Calderhead and P. Gates (eds.), *Conceptualizing Reflection in Teacher Development*. Bristol, Pa.: Falmer Press, 1993, 53-69.
- Valli, L. (ed.). *Reflective Teacher Education: Cases and Critiques*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993.

STEPHEN D. BROOKFIELD holds the title of distinguished professor at the University of St. Thomas in Minneapolis. He is currently a visiting professor at Harvard University, Graduate School of Education.