The Reflective Practitioner

Conceptual Framework for Education Programs
University of Hartford
College of Education, Nursing and Health Professions
Introduction:
The Reflective Practitioner

The overarching goal in our work with candidates in each of our programs is to develop reflective practitioners. Reflective practitioners possess the knowledge, skills and dispositions to care passionately and reason clearly. Rather than consulting a rote set of prescriptions, they have developed a way of thinking about their work that allows them to make decisions in a variety of situations, both familiar and unfamiliar. Furthermore, reflective practitioners are constantly reviewing and revising this decision making framework by considering the results of their actions. Schon (1987) calls this a process of continuous action and reflection on everyday problems.

Viewing a professional as a reflective practitioner recognizes the importance of theory and experience and connects the two in a dialectical relationship. In educating the reflective practitioner, we do not concentrate on one theory or approach. Instead we seek to acquaint the prospective practitioner with a variety of theories and ideas. More importantly, we seek to promote a disposition of reflection on and the continued development of what Schon (1987) has referred to as their appreciation system - those assumptions, theories, practices, knowledge and values that influence how situations are defined, what information is noticed, what kinds of assessments are made and what kinds of approaches are used. So, in the tradition of metacognition (Ferri & Sternberg, 1998; Flavell, 1999), we seek not only to help candidates think, but to help them think about, or reflect upon their own thought processes. We hope over time to see growth in the number of perspectives represented in a candidate’s appreciation system as well as in the depth of understanding that candidate has and brings to bear on practice within each of those perspectives.

The idea of professionals as reflective practitioners can be traced back to the work of John Dewey, and many versions of the idea have been advanced (Hatton & Smith, 1995; Osterman, 1993; Posner, 1996; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). Our model is most closely reflected in the work of Schon (1983, 1987). Schon calls his model “reflection in action” and describes a progression from rote following of rules to questioning, criticizing and reforming assumptions through a continuous process he calls a “reflective conversation” with the situation. Reflection in action is a sophisticated process and we are committed to building bridges, or scaffolds (Bruner, 1996) to help candidates move towards this goal. We begin by encouraging the skill and habit of reflectivity. We then move to helping candidates reflect on decisions others have made as well as on decisions they face in practical situations. We also ask them to reflect on both their decisions they made and the results of those decisions. We also ask that they consider both what they might do differently and, more importantly, how they might think differently about their work.

Our choice of the reflective practitioner as a model comes from our beliefs about education as well as our review of the literature. First of all, as Kennedy (1989) has pointed out, both theory and experience are useful only to the extent that they are applied in new situations. Professionals operate in a complex, fast moving, situation-specific environment that demands they monitor their effectiveness while their work is in progress (Porter and Brophy, 1988; Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). Furthermore, professionals in schools and community agencies operate with a set of implicit
assumptions that influence their work. Ostrander and Thompson (1991) have reviewed several authors who point to candidates’ preconceptions about teaching and learning as an important issue to be examined and transcended in teacher preparation. This same tendency has been noted in administrators, leaders, and members of the helping professions (Carter, 1990; Foster, 1986; Murphy, 1992; Sergiovanni, 1986). These preconceptions are often the result of earlier experiences as learners (Barnes, 1987). If candidates are to transcend them they must first become aware of them. Then they must learn to see them as one of many possibilities and to choose intentionally and rationally among the options available to them. They must, in short, begin their reflection right away and continue it throughout their career.

Zeichner and Tabachnick (1991) discuss four varieties of reflective practice: an academic version, that stresses reflection upon subject matter; a social efficiency version that stresses methods and strategies; a developmental version, that emphasizes patterns of developmental growth; and a social reconstructionist version. We embrace all these forms of reflection and in fact see them as a developmental progression for candidates. Beginning candidates’ first concerns are likely to center on content and technique. Shifting the focus from teaching to learning helps them take a developmental perspective on their students or clients as individuals and their classrooms, schools and agencies as groups. The step to social reconstructionism is both a special challenge and an important opportunity. Candidates need to engage in critical reflection about the institutions in which they work and in which their students, clients and colleagues operate, and to consider their role in perpetuating or altering those institutional dynamics. Wherever possible, they should seek to empower those with whom they interact to deal with these institutions on their own.

Areas of Reflectivity and Student Objectives

While reflective practice is our general goal, as Zeichner and Tabachnick (1991) have pointed out, it does matter what teachers reflect about. It is also important that teachers think about a variety of factors, and reflect on their thinking about them. In fact, Kennedy (1989) has taken the position that the difference between good and bad practice is the number and kinds of variables taken into consideration when making a decision. Thus, both the quality and quantity of reflection are important. We have identified nine major areas in which to promote reflection. In each of these areas, we seek to acquaint candidates with a variety of ideas and theories. However, we also seek to help them learn which questions to ask and what phenomena to observe, in order to develop their reflective capabilities in each area. Finally, and most important, while these perspectives can be separated for the purposes of discussion, and even for study, in the end they must be integrated for practice to reach its full potential.

What follows is a description of each area of reflectivity and specific candidate outcomes that we as a Division hold ourselves and our candidates accountable for. Each program in the division has their own detailed set of candidates outcomes:
1. Subject Matter

A school seeks to impart knowledge of certain subjects. A community agency seeks to prevent or intervene in certain problems. In these endeavors, certain content knowledge is critical. In any discipline, new knowledge is being generated constantly, and disciplinary conversations are occurring about what is critical in various situations. The world wide web and other technological advances make it possible for practitioners to have new information at their fingertips. Reflective practitioners are aware of the salient issues in their content areas, as well as the relevant state and national standards. They are also aware the impact of international or global diversity on these issues. They use all of this knowledge in designing and assessing curriculum and interventions.

Outcome: *Candidates will demonstrate the ability to use state and national content standards in designing effective, supportive lessons, interventions, or leadership strategies.*

2. Learners as Whole Persons

Reflective practitioners must be aware of the physical, cognitive, and emotional needs of their constituents - the clients, students, colleagues and communities with whom they work. As they consider individual constituents as whole persons, an appreciation for the multitude of factors which interact with learning and growth evolves. Thus, professionals reflect on the developmental position and potential of each person. This requires that they understand how to think about development in a variety of domains, about the diversity of developmental paths within each domain, as well as the relationships between these domains (Kegan, 1982; 1994). Important domains include, the intellectual (Belenky, et al., 1986; Fischer, 1980; Piaget, 1971) moral (Kohlberg, 1984; Gilligan, 1982; Gilligan et al., 1988) and social (Selman, 1982; Tannen, 1990). Howard Gardner’s work on Multiple Intelligences (1983, 1993) forms another useful framework for reflectivity. Each person has a unique constellation of strengths and learning styles within the various intelligences, which may in turn be influenced by their cultural and social group membership, and professionals must be able to analyze their clients, and themselves, along these dimensions (Claxton & Murrell, 1987). It is also important that candidates understand the special cognitive and affective needs of a variety of exceptional populations. Technology will have different effects on students depending on their constellation of intelligences and learning styles, and their constellation, in turn, must be considered when matching technological techniques to their needs. In developing goals for all students, colleagues or clients, all aspects of their development, intelligence and style must be considered and blended into a unified approach.

Outcome: *Candidates will show how their lessons, interventions, or leadership strategies are grounded in knowledge of the developmental and learning styles of their intended or actual audiences.*
3. Cultural Diversity

Reflective practitioners need to be aware of the impact of culture on the ways their students, clients and colleagues see the world. They must also value and support diversity, and seize the potential for cultural diversity to enhance excellence for all students, clients, and colleagues. Each person has a cultural profile, consisting of the various groups in society to which they belong (also know as parallel or micro-cultures) and the degree to which that membership affects their world view and the way they are perceived by others. Reflective practitioners must understand various categories of parallel or micro cultures (such as race, gender, social class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, ability/disability and so on) and must constantly seek to expand their understanding of the cultural norms and specific strengths of various parallel or micro cultures within each group. They must also draw on this knowledge when planning, executing, and assessing strategies and interventions for all students/clients.

Outcome: Candidates will show how their lessons, interventions, or leadership strategies are grounded in knowledge of the cultural profiles of their intended or actual audience and a commitment to diversity as an essential component of excellence.

4. Self Understanding

In facilitating the development of individuals and communities, professionals bring to their work their own subjective system of meaning making, which is both made up of and a product of their development positions, assumptions, reaction patterns, values and ethics. We believe that professionals need to reflect upon their attitudes, judgments, values, biases, perceptions, and insights, as well as on factors such as family patterns, culture and subculture that helped form their meaning making systems. Thus, reflective practitioners need the knowledge, skills and disposition to reflect on their own uniqueness. This reflection helps them think more complexly about students, colleagues and clients and supports others in their efforts to do the same. On the other hand, if they are not aware of their own biases and tendencies, they may project them onto others, thus failing to see the unique features of the situation and possibly making poor decisions (Brill, 2000; Ostrander & Thompson, 1991).

Outcome: Candidates will demonstrate an understanding of how their values, reaction patterns, cultural profile and learning styles impact their interaction with students, clients, and colleagues.

5. Pedagogy/Intervention/Leadership

Practitioners must not only have a repertoire of techniques; they must be able to question which ones are most effective in particular situations, with particular groups of constituents, and for various content areas. This ability can only be developed through reflective practice (Feiman-Nemser & Buchman, 1985). The reflective professional can also adapt her or his approaches while in the process of implementation. They reflect on the feedback they receive and adjust accordingly as part of “reflection in action” (Porter & Brophy, 1988; Anderson, 1989; Schon, 1983; 1987). For teachers, this ability is captured in Shulman’s conception of “pedagogical content knowledge” (1987), which is the ability to know the connections between content and
pedagogy, and how to transform particular content into forms that are pedagogically powerful. Furthermore, reflective practitioners are committed to continuous assessment, so that their decisions are informed by a variety of performance data. Each candidate, then, must be familiar with the latest techniques, including technology, in planning, instruction and assessment, know how to use them, and know how to select among them to meet the needs of all constituents.

Outcome: Candidates will match and implement a range of appropriate teaching/intervention/leadership techniques with the needs of students/constituents and the demands of the content.

6. Human Relations

One to one and small group interactions make up a large portion of the work of a teacher, counselor, or administrator. Recent technological advances have created new media for interpersonal interaction, such as emails and instant messages, and these media have their own unique dynamics. An effective practitioner must be able to examine and reflect on the interactional dynamics occurring in the complex web of the classroom, the school and/or the agency, and to take these into account when designing interventions and choosing strategies.

Outcome: Candidates will design and implement strategies appropriate to their settings that reflect an understanding of effective dyadic and small group communication skills.

7. Social and Political Contexts

Reflective practitioners understand both individuals and the environmental context in which those individuals grow and develop. They are further able to think about the interaction between the person and the environment. All professionals will function in some sort of group and/or organizational context. They must learn to consider these organizations as dynamic systems (Egan, 1984) and as cultures (Smircich, 1993; Schein, 1992). These systemic dynamics not only have an impact on the delivery of the educational and social services; they are themselves part of the learning – the hidden or enacted curriculum – for the students, colleagues and clients with whom they interact. Reflective practitioners also consider the neighborhood, community, regional, national and global contexts for their work. In the tradition of social reconstructivism, it is also important that professionals not simply understand these contexts, but that they be able to take a perspective on them. Professionals who are not able to do so will only be able to adjust, and help others adjust, to the prevailing contexts. Reflective practitioners, on the other hand, consider and help others to consider the possibility of transforming the contexts in which they work.

Outcome: Candidates will set goals and select methods that reflect their understanding of the dynamics of small and large social systems and organizations.
8. Ethics

Those who work in education and the helping professions will be presented with a wide variety of decisions, most of which have ethical components whether they are recognized as such or not. Professionals need to learn to recognize the ethical issues inherent in their profession and in their daily lives. They need to be familiar with major positions on important ethical issues as espoused by philosophers, ethical theorists, and professional organizations. More importantly, they need to develop approaches for reflecting on and arriving at ethical decisions.

Outcome: Candidates will state and defend their positions on the major ethical issues common to their field.

9. Outcomes

Reflective practitioners do not fit the outcome of their work to the intervention or method. Rather, they begin with a clear sense of outcomes, informed by their understanding of content, diversity, learners as whole persons and social contexts. They then design strategies and interventions to reach those outcomes. These strategies and interventions are in turn assessed with regard not to how smoothly they were implemented, but the extent to which they achieved the desired outcomes. (Wiggins & McTighe, 1998).

Outcome: Candidates will plan their lessons, interventions, and/or leadership strategies using an outcomes orientation.
REFERENCES


Posner, 1996


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