

Techniques for mentors to support early career teachers' reflective practice

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Through my involvement with school-based mentors and early career teachers I have found that what people understand by reflective practice varies considerably. While reflective practice is included in the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011) and the initial teacher training (ITT) Core Content Framework (DfE, 2019), many students starting a PGCE course struggle to understand exactly what reflective practice is, why it is important, and how to develop it. In this article I set out my understanding of reflective practice and suggest a few approaches mentors can use with their mentees to help them understand and develop reflective practice in the classroom.

The origins of reflective practice

The concept stems from the work of Dewey (1933, p. 17) who contrasts *routine action* with *reflective action* and suggests that reflection, or the process of in-depth focused attention, 'enables us to direct our actions with foresight'. Hargreaves and Page (2013) suggest that reflection falls into four categories, and involves looking back before moving on (Figure 1). As such, it allows teachers to be critical of their teaching, make sense of their classroom experiences and use this experience to inform future classroom practice.

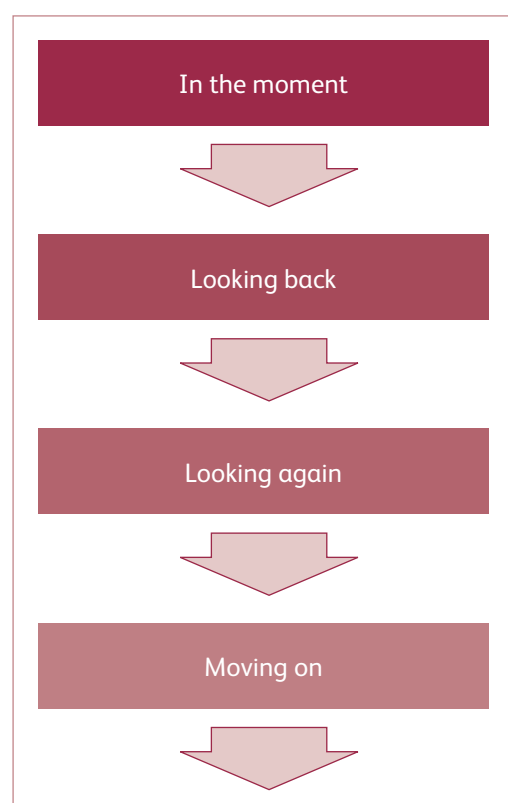
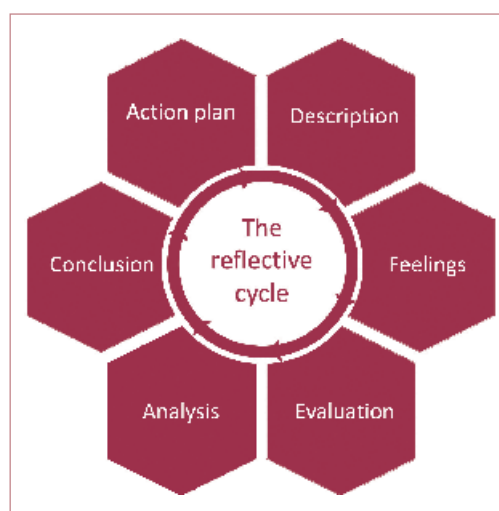


Figure 1: The reflective timeline. Source: Hargreaves and Page (2013).

This introspective analysis helps teachers articulate why they do what they do in the classroom, a process that can be illustrated using Gibb's (1988) reflective cycle (Figure 2). This encourages teachers to reflect on their classroom experiences to identify if interventions are needed to move practice on, which can trigger transformative learning.



Emma sets out her understanding of reflective practice and outlines some techniques for mentors to use.

Figure 2: The reflective cycle. Source: Gibb (1988).

According to Bolton and Delderfield (2018, p. 5) reflective practice is 'a state of mind, an ongoing attitude to life and work, the pearl grit in the oyster of practice and education'. Such a state of mind is best developed collaboratively: education is deeply social and cannot be isolated from the broader cultural influences of school and society. This is why the role of mentors is so central to helping early career teachers develop reflective practice. Mentors model good teaching and professionalism, provide a diverse, possibly challenging, experience and support mentees with their time, resources and advice. Mentors observe, question and discuss. This enables them to set appropriate developmental targets for their mentees, broaden their thinking, and encourage them to be self-evaluative and reflective in their teaching. At the heart of teaching is the subject itself; reflection should not be generic but should focus on the question Roberts (2003) would put at the centre of any enquiry-based lesson – 'Where is the geography?'

Supporting reflective practice

Teachers engage in reflective practice every day as they make sense of the complexity and diversity of the classroom. Brookfield (2017) suggests that reflective practice becomes second nature, but the process of how this happens is difficult, almost impossible, to teach.

Schön (1983) suggests that expert teachers think and act 'in the moment' during a lesson and this 'reflection-in-action' draws on their experienced assessment of the situation. With less experience, novice teachers are more likely to carry out 'reflection-on-action' after the event. Whereas reflection-in-action is spontaneous, mentors can help student teachers reflect-on-action on a daily basis, during lesson debriefs.

The most powerful way for mentors to help student teachers to develop reflective practice is to model their own classroom experiences – when students did not learn what was intended, or a particular learning activity fell flat. Being able to visualise expert teachers' reflective processes can help the mentees change tack – rewriting a lesson sequence, or revising a case study which did not resonate with the class. It also demonstrates that even expert teachers do not always get it right.

Key techniques

The remainder of this article describes some successful mentoring techniques to encourage reflective practice.

Reflective sentence starters

These broad questions encourage positive, reflective discussions and closely connect with the Teachers' Standards (DfE, 2011):

- I know I have planned a good lesson when ...
- I know my lesson is well pitched when ...
- I know my lessons are inclusive when ...
- Effective rules in routines in my lessons include ...
- The characteristics of a good teacher include ...
- I build good relationships with my class by ...
- Effective methods for providing feedback include ...
- I address misconceptions effectively when ...
- I know I have made progress as a teacher when...

Reflective sentence starters are useful to guide conversations, when mentees are unsure quite what aspect of their teaching should be the focus and they are unfamiliar with the requirements for teachers' practice and conduct.

Critical conversations

Brookfield (2017) describes critical conversations as a method to uncover assumptions and consider multiple alternative perspectives. He suggests that participants in a conversation should take up the roles of storyteller and detective. The storyteller recalls a problem experience, dilemma or practice and the detective asks questions to reveal assumptions or explore alternative interpretations and collaboratively find a solution. Critical conversations can have focus by using Borton's Development Framework, which sets out three cue questions – What? So what? Now what? This simple practice is suitable to structure reflective journals, blogs and conversations. Driscoll (2007) expanded these cues as listed here:

What? (description)

- What happened?
- What was I trying to achieve?
- What did I/others see or do?
- What was I aware of or not aware of?
- What was good or bad about the experience?
- What was my reaction?

So what? (analysis and evaluation)

- So what were the impacts of my actions?
- So how did I feel at the time/ afterwards?
- So do I still feel troubled? If so why?
- So what did I learn from this?
- So how has my practice changed since?

Now what? (actions and next steps)

- Now what are the implications of this?
- Now how can I modify my future practice?
- Now what priorities do I have?
- Now what should I prepare before I do this again?
- Now where can I get more information or training?
- Now who has expertise and can model this for me

Learning conversations

These conversations tend to focus on the subject and on learning rather than teaching. This approach is not new. Roberts' (2003, p. 44) framework for geographical enquiry includes four stages (Figure 3), the last of which involves reflecting on learning. Broadening out her approach, we can use the following questions to initiate learning conversations:

- Were the geographical data used in the lesson contemporary and relevant?
- What geographical knowledge and/or skills have your students learned?
- How is students' conceptual understanding being developed?
- Does their geographical knowledge build on the last lesson or unit?
- Whose voices are not being heard in your classroom?
- What has been learned? How has it been learned?
- How is learning progressing your students' geographical thinking?
- How did you consider students' individual needs?
- How could your lesson be improved or further developed?
- What alternative approaches could you take if you repeated this lesson?
- What is the value of what has been learned?

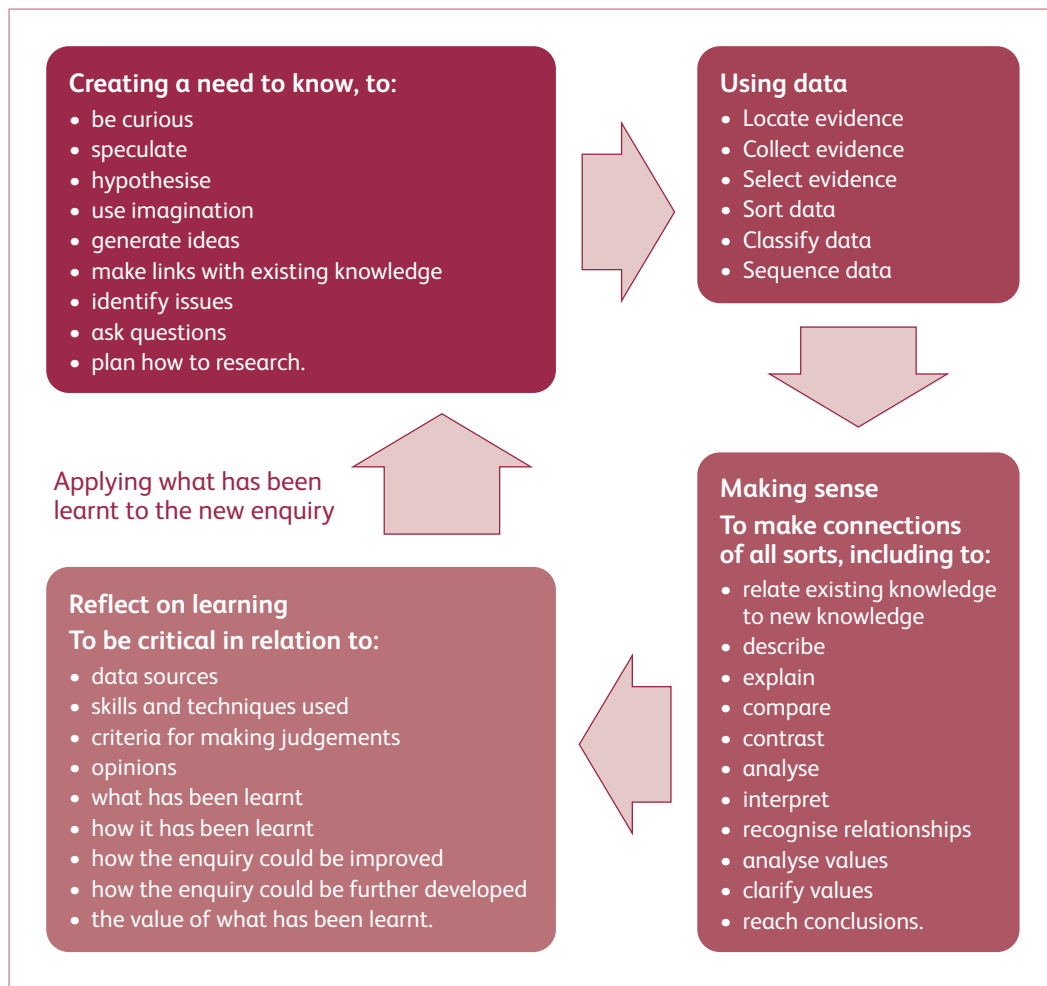


Figure 3: A framework for learning through enquiry.
Source: Roberts (2003), p. 44.

Conclusion

Mentors rarely get time out of school for discussions with colleagues in HE, but it is important for mentors and university tutors to develop a shared understanding and approach to reflective practice in order for student teachers to have greater success (Ofsted, 2020). In this article I have set out what reflective practice looks like to me and some approaches to help mentees in conversation with their mentors to move beyond

‘doing teaching’ and unpack their pedagogical reasoning ‘in order to show others what they know, how and why’ (Loughran, 2019, p. 523). By drawing on theory and classroom practice and making the tacit process of reflective practice more visible, beginning teachers will, as Ofsted (2020) suggests, get a more coherent teacher training experience and develop the pedagogical reasoning skills which will allow them to continue the conversation about teaching and learning throughout their career. | **TG**

References

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