

# A Process for Personal Theory Building

A workshop on personal theory building shows teachers how to use reflection to further their understanding of, and begin to develop a rationale for, their work.

“**R**eflection has become such a buzzword. Is it the ‘in’ thing to do, or what?” The teacher’s comments sounded like an accusation. She went on, “What’s the deal? Doesn’t everyone do it?”

But, after she had participated in our workshop, “Inside Out: A Process of Personal Theory Building,” this same teacher surprised us when she apologized about her initial comments. She said that, to her, *reflection* had meant a brief mental replay of a series of events and that she did not often reflect deeply. Reflection, she now realized, was a rich source of continued personal and professional growth.

Busy people typically do not engage in reflection. They rarely treat themselves to reflective experiences, unless they are given some time, some structure, and the expectations to do so.

As professionals, we owe ourselves this opportunity for renewal and revival. Reflection is a gift we give ourselves, not passive thought that lolls aimlessly in our minds, but an effort we must approach with rigor, with some purpose in mind, and in some formal

way, so as to reveal the wisdom embedded in our experience. Through reflection, we develop context-specific theories that further our own understanding of our work and generate knowledge

to inform future practice.

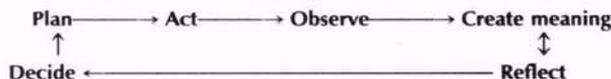
What follows is a description of three types of reflection and the formal process we use to engage workshop participants in reflection.



*Teachers in the “Inside Out” workshop learned to “take pictures” of their work, analyze it through reflection, and use the knowledge they gained through this process to improve their classroom interactions with students.*

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Fig. 1. Elements of Professional Reflection



### Three Types of Reflection

Reflection is the practice or act of analyzing our actions, decisions, or products by focusing on our process of achieving them. In his books, *The Reflective Practitioner* and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*, Donald Schon describes two types of reflection. *Reflection-on-action* is reflection on practice and on one's actions and thoughts, undertaken after the practice is completed. *Reflection-in-action* is reflection on phenomena and on one's spontaneous ways of thinking and acting in the midst of action.

A third type of reflection, *reflection-for-action*, is the desired outcome of both previous types of reflection. We undertake reflection, not so much to revisit the past or to become aware of the metacognitive process one is experiencing (both noble reasons in themselves), but to guide future action (the more practical purpose). Reflection, then, is a process that encompasses all time designations, past, present, and future simultaneously. Education is not a hard science, so we need to engage in continued knowledge development to further our understanding of classroom events (Cogan 1973, Garman 1986). While examining our past actions and our present actions, we generate knowledge that will inform our future actions, as shown in Figure 1.

This model, adapted from Wildman and associates (1987), depicts the steps of knowledge generation for future action. First a teacher plans to act. Then through reflection-in-action, the teacher observes the action as it transpires, almost as if placing herself outside the action itself. From this perspective, the teacher creates meaning, in understanding the dynamics of the cause/effect relationship that occurs between her actions and the students' responses to her behaviors. Engaging

in reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action, the teacher analyzes events and draws conclusions that give her insight into future decision points.

It's like this: picture a tank tread that slowly rolls along. To move the tank forward, the tread that carries it continually reverses itself while at the same time the tank makes slow, steady forward progress. This is how reflection works. In order to tap the rich potential of our past to inform our judgment, we move backward, reflect on our experiences, then face each new encounter with a broader repertoire of context-specific information, skills, and techniques.

### "Photos" of Our Work

In our 6-10 hour workshops, we provide educators with a structured process for reflection-on-action and reflection-for-action. Drawing on the work of David Hunt (1987), we ask

participants to describe their work, develop an understanding of certain patterns in their behaviors, establish cause/effect relationships between their actions and the outcomes they experience, and begin to develop a rationale for their work.

Following the procedure we adapted from Hunt, we ask participants to complete a chart that includes three components: characteristics, outcomes, and strategies (see fig. 2). Asking participants to describe their clients' characteristics, the outcomes they bring about for those clients, and the strategies they use to achieve those outcomes creates a photo album of their actions. Teachers focus on their students, principals on their staffs, and staff developers on members of their training sessions.

For example, one teacher identified students whose characteristics were *shyness, reticence to talk in class, and withdrawn behavior*. In describing the outcome for these students, the teacher realized he wanted to *protect* this type of student. His strategies were to allow these students to be passive and withdrawn, not to ask them to answer questions in front of the class, and to allow them to work independently when the rest of the class gathered in small groups.

Fig. 2. "Photo Album" of a Teacher

CHARACTERISTICS	OUTCOMES	STRATEGIES
Shy, reticent to talk	Protect	Permit student to work alone.  Allow student to not participate.
Withdrawn, quiet, loner	Protect	Allow student to work independently.
<b>Common themes:</b> Quiet, nonparticipating students.		
<b>Common goals:</b> Protect, shelter.		
<b>Common tactics:</b> Permit isolation and noninvolvement.		
<b>Redirected plan:</b> Engage student in small groups which are self-selected. Pair student with friend or teacher. Help student develop appropriate social skills.		

In discussing the situation with a colleague, he was able to compare his outcome and strategies with those of the other teacher with a similar student. He discovered that he was actually enabling the shy students *not* to function successfully. Once this picture was developed, the teacher began to ask himself questions about other possible outcomes for these students and other strategies he might try. He then became free to modify, expand, extend, or abandon his actions to achieve a different outcome.

To use another example (see fig. 3), a principal identified the characteristics of *excessive lecturing*, *poor physical atmosphere in the classroom*, and *no evidence of planning* as characteristics to describe her teacher clients. Her desired outcomes for these teachers' classes were *more student participation*, *more displays of student work*, and *complete lesson plans and unit outlines*. The strategies she had used to try to achieve these outcomes had been to show the teachers a *videotape* of an effective class, provide a *resource book on bulletin boards*, and send the teachers to a *workshop on effective teaching strategies*.

This principal discovered that she was impatient with the poor instructional and organizational skills of these teachers and that she wanted to make them use the school district's model of effective instruction. Further, she realized that her strategies were impersonal, focused outside the school, and that they placed the burden for change solely on the teachers, and thus were unlikely to produce any real change in teachers' behavior. After talking with other principals and closely examining these pictures in her photo album, the principal reframed her understanding of the problem, realizing she needed to provide support and assistance to guide the teachers through the needed changes.

#### A Community of Inquirers

The participants in our program usually gain insights that help them individually and that help their students. As one teacher said, "Reflection offers me a phenomenal self-confidence, unity of purpose, and sense of direction in my

teaching role. Now I want my students to become reflective thinkers."

Beyond improving our teaching, reflection can alter our common per-

### Reflection can alter our common perspective of education and elevate our work to the status of a profession.

spective of education and elevate our work to the status of a profession. We can do that only by accepting the challenge to participate in a community of inquirers and scholars who have the responsibility to contribute to

a specialized body of knowledge (Cogan 1953). □

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**Joellen P. Killian** is Staff Development Specialist, Adams 12, Five-Star Schools, Staff Development Training Center, 601 W. 100th Place, Northglenn, CO 80221. **Guy R. Todnem** is Staff Development Specialist, Du-Page-Cane Educational Service Center, 421 North County Farm Road, Wheaton, IL 60187.

Fig. 3. Principal Reflection-for-Action Chart

CHARACTERISTICS	OUTCOMES	STRATEGIES
Excessive lecturing	More student participation	Offer videotape.
Poor physical atmosphere in classroom	More display of student work	Offer book of bulletin board ideas.
No evidence of planning	Complete lesson plans or unit outcomes	Send to workshop on teaching strategies.

**Common themes:** Teacher instructional and organizational skills.  
**Common goals:** Use more of the district's model of effective teaching.  
**Common tactics:** Offer ideas outside the school building, school staff, and district resources.

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