

The Promise of Reflective Practice

Reflective practice, like a tenacious wildflower in the city, vibrates with vitality, raising our awareness and calling us from passivity to action.



I live in the city. It is a world of human design and construction, where concrete and glass predominate. Yet nature pushes through. Wildflowers bloom in the cracks of technology. They delight me. They surprise me. They empower me.

Like the delightful city wildflower, reflective practice celebrates the organic above the artificial. It emphasizes the primacy of experience (Eisner 1988) above linguistic represen-

tation. This is not to say there is no literature of reflective practice. Indeed, the literature is substantial; several authors present a variety of reviews and analyses of it (Grimmet et al. 1990, Richardson 1990, Tom 1985). Reflective practice—or inquiry-oriented teaching, as it is some-

times called—engages the teacher in a cycle of thought and action based on professional experience. It generally portrays the teacher more as creative artist/designer than as engineer/technician.

Thus, reflective practice typically embraces the methodology of narrative inquiry (Connelly and Clandinin 1990) and rejects the methodology of logical positivism. While reports of traditional educational research direct

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our attention to clearly defined, quantitatively phrased questions, reports of reflective practice warn us up front about the inherent bias in the methodology. In recognizing that the representational schemata embedded in language constrain, shape, and direct our perception (Eisner 1988), it is a somewhat self-conscious literature that asks us not to mistake it for reality or to value it above experience. The point is vital, and we must hold it in our minds as we read and research. Information about reflective practice is not to be confused with the experience of reflective practice. The map is not the territory (Korzybski 1958).

Like the surprising city wildflower, the meaning of reflective practice is embedded in context. Consider the status quo of educational practice in America. As teachers increasingly come under the pressure of quality control via standardized tests, they narrow their scope of human response; they cease to share the full range of their knowledge and experience with students; and they reduce their teaching to the lowest common denominator (McNeil 1986). Silberman's (1970) indictment of the schools as "grim, joyless places" with an "intellectually sterile and barren atmosphere" remains true today. America continues to treat teachers as factory workers and children as raw material. The moribund industrial image of schools prevails. Like the empowering city wildflower, reflective practice resonates with life. Consid-

ered against the dark background of current policy, reflective practice is rightfully active. It calls for personal and professional transformation. Smyth (1989) proposes a practice, for example, that comprises four aspects that are both sequential and cyclical: describing, informing, confronting, and reconstructing. Together, they create a spiral of empowerment.

At each phase, Smyth (1989) poses questions that demand active answers. First, *What do I do?* attempts to elicit a simple observational description of practice. Second, *What does this mean?* seeks to discover the principles of theories-in-use (Argyris and Schon 1974), which underlie and drive the described practice. Building further, the third question, *How did I come to be this way?*, forces our awareness beyond the classroom. It appropriately situates educational practice within a broader cultural milieu, and it correctly reveals educational practice as essentially political. The final question, *How might I do things differently?* gives us the call to action.

Clearly, these are not intended as rhetorical questions for casual consideration over tea. Rather, they are intended to raise consciousness, to challenge complacency, and to engender a higher order of professional practice. Like Schon's (1987) reflection in action and like Freire's (1985) "conscientization," this kind of reflective practice engages professionals in the redesign and reconstruction of their world. Like any city

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wildflower, reflective practice is defiant. To emerge in the hostile environment of an educational arena dominated by what Smyth (1989) calls "ensconced technicist views," it stands as testament to the tenacity of life. Most important, I believe, reflective practice reminds us that the roots of our profession lie in service to people rather than to systems. It heralds renewal, reclamation, and change. It invites our participation. □

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