

Critical Thinking Skills for the 21st Century

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Abstract: Professional development is understood as a means to maintain and enhance the quality of teachers in any discipline. Not only can the learned information improve the teaching process, but it also contributes to career advancement. A reflective journal is part of this extraordinarily simple practice. They have been utilized in different fields of study such as literature, health care, and mathematics. Focusing on the contribution of reflective practice to teaching, this article is an attempt to understand the use of reflective journals in the personal growth and professional development of teachers of English as a foreign language, drawn from a wider perspective of the vast research done in the field of reflective journaling and to increase the effectiveness of reflective journaling

Keywords: professional development, career advancement, reflective journal, personal growth, foreign language.

Introduction

In the competitive and every changing 21st century landscape, it is important to continuously look for ways to develop professionally. This helps individuals thrive in their careers, build on their confidence and on their skillset. Because of the important role they play in society, it is integral for educators and teachers to engage in continuous professional development. Doing so helps teachers better meet the needs of their students but also become more confident in the way they impart knowledge and engage with colleagues.

Contextualisation

In the educational field, professional development can take many forms from workshops to online courses. A dedication to professional development not only helps teachers improve their practice and student outcome, but also improves teachers standing in society - parents and communities appreciate it when teachers focus on improving their pedagogical practice (Gil-Garcia and Cintron, 2002) Evidence of professional development and improving practice can lead to changes at a policy level in terms of teacher recognition, awards and incentives.. An easily accessible form of professional development is the use of reflective practice. This involves teachers or educators taking the time to reflect on their practice and their teaching experience. They would then use these reflections to change their practice. One easy way to engage in reflective practice is journaling - or writing down or drawing reflections of experiences, thoughts and opinions. As an avid journaler and an educator, I found it interesting to consider literature and evidence that examines how reflective journals can help an educator develop professionally. Through this exploration, I can improve my understanding of reflective practice and use my findings to build on my development as an educator.

Before examining how reflective journals help an educator's professional development, it is worth considering what reflective practice means. As early as in 1933, Dewey (1933) defined reflective inquiry as the active and careful consideration of a form of knowledge or belief. More recently, Black, Sileo and Prater (2000) suggested that reflection in the context of teachers is when teachers examine different facets of their personality including attitudes, thoughts and beliefs and their experiences both within and outside the classroom.

From these definitions, one can conclude that reflective practice is the process of considering a range of experiences and actions that make up an individual. Reflective journals involve an additional step of outlining these considerations through writings or drawings.

Literature Review

A literature review in the field of reflective journaling has highlighted that it can help enhance professional development, especially in the educational field. As well as helping teachers consider how well lessons or activities have done in a classroom, they can also help teachers better understand their students and their relationships with them. In addition, reflective journaling can also build on wider professional skills like leadership and critical thinking. Building on these skills will eventually help teachers build on their pedagogy but also their overall professional identity.

How do reflective journals improve practice?

There is a large body of research and literature that suggests that reflective practice and journals improve teacher practice in a variety of ways. Lindroth (2015) refers to a finding by Beeth and Adadan (2006) which focused on analyzing the impact of keeping reflective journals on preservice teachers. They found that reflective journals helped shift teacher's attention from their own concerns and struggles to students' concerns and struggles. This helps teachers understand their students better which fosters better relationships with them. As an educator, I have noted that having an understanding and respectful relationship with my students builds on the knowledge that I am able to impart and absorb. As reflective journaling can help to shift teachers' attention to their students, it will go a long way in fostering deeper relationships with students.

Meanwhile, Bullough (1991) found that when preservice maintained a reflective journal, they were able to explore and question their teacher identities. This exploration helped them understand the type of school, subject and grade levels that they worked best in. This is a finding that can be extrapolated to current teachers as well - it is important to continuously reflect on happenings within a classroom and a school environment to decipher areas that they can perform best and best serve their students.

While teachers typically specialize in a subject because they have a strong knowledge of their focus area, it is important to acknowledge that subject knowledge can always be deepened. Francis (1995) found that when teachers engage in reflective journaling, they can build on their understanding of theories they are teaching and reflect on the best way to position these theories to students.

My time and experience as an educator has shown me that each teaching context is unique, informed by a range of factors from the particular students to the syllabus that has to be taught. While we are provided with teaching theories and frameworks when training to be an educator, actual teaching practice also calls upon us to be innovative and attentive to the needs of our students and curriculum. Akbari (2007) argues that reflective teaching can help teachers do just this - it helps teachers carefully consider the frameworks about pedagogy they have been taught and challenge them when necessary.

Reflective journals can enhance non-teaching skills

The literature review shows that reflective journals can help build on teachers' understanding of pedagogy and theory, thus aiding professional development. However, reflective journals can also help build on a wide range of non-educational professional skills. While these may not directly help teachers impart subject specific knowledge in the classroom they build on teachers' overall professional identities, allowing them to work more collaboratively with colleagues and also advance professionally.

For instance, Göker (2016) found that reflective journaling can help teachers build on their leadership skills. Quirke (2021) recognises the importance of developing teachers as leaders especially in an online and blended learning model. Quirke further argues that reflective writing can foster teachers' strengths and encourage collaborative teaching and practice which then builds on leadership. Leadership skills can greatly assist teachers as they allow them to position themselves as leaders within their classroom space.

In addition, Spalding and Wilson (2002) argue that reflective journaling can help teachers improve their critical thinking capacity. Soodmand-Afshara & Farahanib (2017) as cited in Dumlao and Pinatcan (2019) analyzed the journals of pre-service teachers and found that the content of journals showed that teachers were critically investigating their own practice and also shaping their own identities as teachers. Meanwhile, a study conducted by Dumlao and Pinatcan (2019) found that through reflective journaling, teachers were able to recognise that they are not communicators of knowledge, but rather facilitators of

knowledge. Reflective journaling therefore shows teachers how to shift their practice to be informed by social constructivism.

If teachers keep their reflective journaling a regular practice, they can map the progression of their professional development, identifying areas they have improved and patterns of behavior that they can address or change.

As well as enhancing individual skills and development, reflective journals can also inform professional development at a wider level. Dumlao and Pinatcan (2019) argue that, when they are shared with the wider academic community, reflective journals can be a rich source of information. More experienced teachers or even policy developers may use teachers journals as a source to understand the knowledge that teachers have and the challenges they face. They can process this information to build training programs and policies that will support professional development in specific areas.

Drawbacks to reflective journaling

Dumlaog and Pinatcan (2019) identify some of the challenges that both pre-service teachers and teachers face with using reflective journals to aid professional development. One challenge is that reflective journaling takes time which may eat into educators' personal time and lives. In addition, reflections that happen some time after a nativity or lesson may be colored by biases, poor memory and other educators' opinions. They also note that it is important to recognise when external analyses of teachers' reflective journals may be misconstrued.

In addition, it should be noted that an extensive literature review has shown that most of the research on reflective journaling in the educational field has been on pre-service teachers with a limited amount of live teaching experience. Gallego (2014) recognises this by noting that a limitation of studies on preservice teachers is that they have very little teaching experience. However, as an experienced educator, I have recognised that much of the research conclusions parallel my experiences in the classrooms.

Evidence of Raised Awareness

Despite the drawbacks, a thorough literature review has shown that reflective journals can greatly enhance professional development in a variety of ways. As a reflective practitioner, I thus recognized the importance of building on my knowledge and capacity to use reflective journals to my advantage. It is important to consider a framework under which reflective journaling may occur.

Farrell (1999) suggests that when engaging in reflective journaling, teachers need to move past instructional considerations, such as 'how to teach' a particular subject into deeper questioning such as 'what' to teach in a particular subject and 'why' that subject is being taught.

Sanders (2017) suggests some practical strategies to incorporate reflective journaling as a regular activity into their practice. This includes taking the time to note down reflections after every activity or lesson, suggesting that they focus on emotions, reactions and feedback. Meanwhile, Göker (2016) recognizes that there are a wide range of different types of journals from narrative to descriptive. He finds that dialogue journals and diaries work best to enhance reflective practice.

Indeed, Göker (2016) provides specific considerations for teachers to use when they are reflective journaling. This includes evaluating activities used, considering changes that should be made to a lesson plan, evaluating the teaching tools and methods used and evaluating the relationships and communication between teachers and students and students with each other. Göker (2016) argues that by using questions like these as a framework, teachers build on their capacity to critically evaluate their own lessons. In doing so, they pave the way for critical reflection and analytical learning.

Meanwhile, Gil-Garcia and Cintron (2002) propose a framework for reflective journaling called the Learning and Professional Development Model (LPD Model). The LPD model includes three phases of journaling - Teaching and Learning (what we teach, ways we teach, where we teach), Instructional Partners (who we teach, who teachers) and Reflective Educator (why we teach). The Teaching and Learning phase focuses on reflecting on what the best practices in teaching are and on what learning is and how it is applicable within the context of a curriculum, but also in a wider school context. The Instructional Partnership considers how competent a school's structure and the educator's practices are. Meanwhile, the Reflective Educator phase focuses on understanding administrative responsibilities, how students' lives impacts the school curriculum and explores academic strategies and purposes. This model is rooted in critical thinking, thereby improving a teacher's critical thinking skills as well as impacting their overall practice.

Possible Interventions

The literature review has clearly shown that reflective journaling can be a positive professional development tool. Researchers have outlined a variety of ways for teachers to engage in reflective journaling to improve their practice. While some of these focus on critical reflections, such as Gil-Garcia and Cintron (2002) other researchers, such as Göker (2016) recommend lesson based reflections.

While it is my eventual goal to progress into the critical analysis and depth proposed by Gil-Garcia and Cintron (2002), as a new practitioner in professional journaling, I will start with using Göker's recommendations. Engaging in lesson based reflections will allow me to focus on a specific activity and consider how I can improve it. By asking primary questions, I can deconstruct my lessons and begin to engage in critical reflection around them. In considering how my students reacted to a particular lesson, I can then begin to consider deeper questions such as how the curriculum may be relevant to their whole lives. This will help me build on my teaching practice and my students' learning.

After I make journaling a regular practice, I will then use it as a pathway to deeper critical reflection and build on a wider range of professional skills. The literature review has found that when teachers begin to regularly reflect, they are able to develop their leadership skills and their overall identity as teachers. Reflective journaling will allow me to begin to shape my teaching practice and use analyses of activities to identify theories that my teaching styles align with.

Conclusion

As a teacher, it is my duty to ensure that I am continuously looking at ways to improve my practice and enhance my students' knowledge acquisition. This literature review has shown that reflective journaling is an excellent way to engage in professional development and build on pedagogical and professional skills. As an educator, I recognise the importance of reflective journaling and will begin to use it in my day to day teacher routine. As I build on a regular journaling practice, I will analyze patterns that I may notice in my reflections of teaching activities and use this to inform changes in practice and pursue personal development in areas that I identify.

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