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Suggesting & Implementing a Reflective Model of Teacher Education

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Abstract

This research study suggests (and tries to implement) a reflective model of teacher education that may repair the teaching-practice experiences at Najran University and foster a deeper understanding of teaching-learning practices than has so far been planned to. Underlying this exercise was the firm belief that:

Teacher growth is less a question of polishing existing teaching skills or of keeping up with the latest teaching developments and more a function of a teacher's changing as a person – of seeing himself or herself, the school, the curriculum and the students differently. (Bamber 1987: 125)

The study aims to open a new dimension in Teacher Education that enables the teacher- trainees to evaluate/observe one another's teaching, think critically, make corrective actions, decisions for planning, do self-inquiry and collaborative-exploration about the presented teaching. Consequently, they would be directed to professional development and growth of the teaching processes.

Statement of the Problem

It is the convention at the college of Sciences and Arts/ Najran University that the teacher-trainees, after having a few courses and some theories that prepare them for teaching, go right away to schools to practise teaching without having the chance –an experience- at the college (a peer/micro teaching) to

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carry out and rehearse what they have learnt and hence they would attempt a critical thinking on their performances before exposing themselves to actual teaching situations. Students need to get trained on the language and the skills they have acquired; to reflect on their teaching performance where they may attempt dialogic exchange, rational discussion, critical thinking, self-inquiry, and exchange one another's perspectives. This way, they may get deep understanding of the teaching processes and consequently get led to professional development. According to Dewey (1933:89)

Education in order to accomplish its ends both for the individual learner and for society, it must be based upon experience – which is always the actual life experience of some individual.

Discussion

The issue raised in this forum relates to the implementation of Reflective Teacher Education in the K.S.A. context.

Traditionally, in the faculty of Sciences and Arts (for girls), Najran University, level 8 students (the trainees) experience teaching in local government schools through one semester (15 weeks) of teaching practice. During this period, the trainees attempt real teaching facing real school students. The aim of this session is to enable the trainees to put into practice the knowledge of methods/ techniques/ skills acquired from their studies in the college.

Therein lies a gap/mismatch of what students have learnt so far and their ability to reflect this knowledge in practical situations without a previous experience. Unless students have an experience, make some reflection/exploration on teaching/learning, some dialogic exchange on intention and interpretation; reveal their perceptions on teaching/learning, professional growth on teaching may not take place.

It is suggested, therefore, that some further training is needed to expose students to an environment where they can reflect critically on classroom actions (peer/micro teaching) which may afterwards show the way to professional growth in teaching.

The current teaching practice programme in Najran University is very traditional. In the first two weeks of the training session, student-teachers observe the actual/real teacher teaching in the English classrooms and record their observations. In the third week, they assume the role of substitute teachers. The trainees' performance is monitored, frequently, by the actual teachers responsible for each class. The college supervisor meets the trainees in the schools for two or maximum three times and observes their teaching and assesses them accordingly.

Break with Tradition

During the current semester, as the researcher was a lecturer teaching a course in English Language Teaching Methods at the college of Sciences and Arts for girl students level 7, a small attempt was

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made to break with tradition and loosen some of the fetters by adopting informal modes of tutoring to foster a deeper understanding of teaching-learning than has so far been planned to.

After students have been introduced to some theories, methods and techniques of teaching, the last three weeks (out of fifteen weeks) of the teaching duration were devoted to practice teaching and to implement a suggested reflective model of teacher education.

The Try-out Group

The try-out group comprised 11 girl students, level 7, and the tutor. To make the break with tradition possible, a few preliminary matters had to be addressed. Three problems were anticipated. They were,

- The students' obsession with marks and grades
- Hesitation and lack of confidence to make the first move in the endeavour
- Their discomfort in using English.

The first matter became less problematic when the students were promised that this attempt was not going to be assessed and rather would prepare them for the next teaching practice semester. The following log-book entry of one of the group shows the general feeling of relief:

You have fitted¹ [satisfied?] me. I think that because of your encouragement and kindness to go ahead, I must be careful about the way that I will use in my teaching, not my marks.

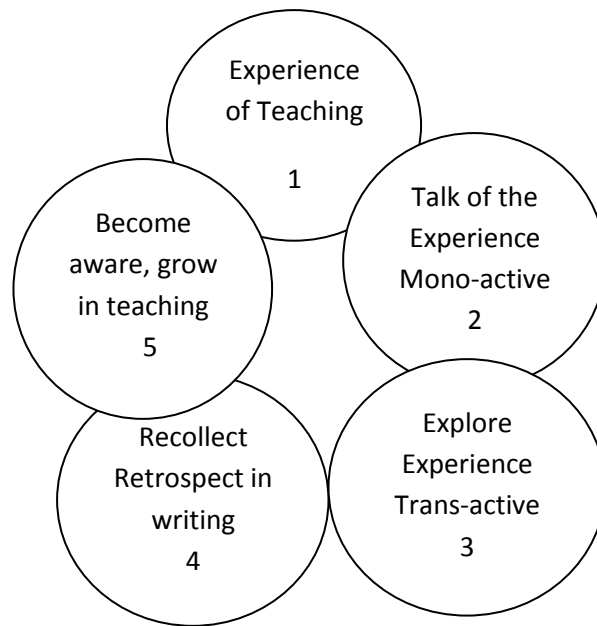
As for the second problem, the tutor provided the students with a chance for teaching demonstration. As modelling teaching, one of the English department teachers had planned a lesson and presented it to the participants. Comments were followed and the written lesson plan was handed to the participants. This aimed at motivating the participants and raising their confidence to go ahead in the endeavour.

For the third problem, the participants were given the option, if you think that you do not have the English words/expressions for something you want to say, no problem, you can use Arabic (Mother Tongue) or code-switch from English to Arabic and back wherever necessary.

The students did not seem to be convinced to code- switch. Their action spoke: only one student wrote her comments in Arabic, the others stuck to English [with sometimes atrocious spellings and grammar]. Later, the lone student who had initially recorded her feelings in Arabic, switched over to English in her subsequent comments.

The Plan of Action

The plan that is suggested for a reflective teacher education is schematised below:



1. In circle 1 the trainees are expected to teach their peers any lessons they choose for 30 minutes.
2. In circle 2, each individual will then “reflect” on her own teaching and talk about its “what” and “why” (talking about teaching mono-active).
3. In circle 3, the group will talk interactively about the teaching they see, experience as learners, and hear about (transactive talking about teaching).
4. The action in circle 4 is retrospective recollections. The participants may record their personal feelings about the whole experience and show their notebooks to one another and to the tutor.
5. Circle 5 represents the goal and the purpose of the whole actions; the understanding and awareness of teacher education reflection.

Circles 1 – 3 represent action of the participants as they differ in the nature of their roles and statuses. They could be teachers or observers.

The time and space for the actions in circles 1 – 3 are contained in one session without any breaks.

There is no fixed time slot or place for action in circle 4. The action here is off-line retrospective recollections. Participants may write their feeling in their free time or at home.

This plan is further characterized by a number of “freedom”; the freedom to choose the date/ time and turn of teaching (The days continued to be Sunday and Tuesday.); the freedom to choose the book (one of the series books prescribed for government school teaching) lesson, topic, item to be taught or skills/ sub-skills to focus on; the freedom to plan teaching without being tied down by the directions in the teacher’s book.

The Researcher’s Role

1. Observing the participants’ teaching performances.

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2. Listening to each individual's comment reflecting in her teaching experience.
3. Sharing the group discussion by posing some questions to draw their attention to crucial aspects in teaching.
4. Collecting the participants' writing notes in which they have recorded their feelings about the entire experience.
5. Analyzing the data collected paying special attention to the participants' awareness of classroom actions and the features of critical teaching reflection that they have exposed.

Literature Review

Let us begin looking at the notion of “reflection” in the context of Teacher Education, and the means of effecting “reflection” suggested in the literature.

❖ “Reflection” leading on to Reflective Teacher Education

Reflective Teacher Education is projected as a non-(ego) threatening and collaborative way of effecting professional expertise. Dewey (1970) observed that preparing teachers to be critically reflective about their practice may be more important in the long term than focusing on mastery of the techniques and skills that form the mainstay of educational practice. A critically reflective approach is one in which inquiry and reflection are seen as central to the process of teacher development. The skills needed are self-inquiry and critical thinking.

What does “reflection” involve in the dominant tradition of ELT education? Fanselow, Wallace, Richards and other modern masters look on reflection or “critical reflection” as an activity or process in which an experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose (verbalization- offline). It is a response to a past experience and involves conscious recall and examination as a basis for evaluation and decision making and as a source for planning and corrective action. As Bartlett (1990) suggests,

Becoming critical means that as teachers we have to transcend the technicalities of teaching and think beyond the need to improve our instructional techniques. This effectively means we have to move away from the “how” questions, which have a limited utilitarian value to the “what” and “why” [of how] questions, which regard instructional and managerial techniques not as ends in themselves, but as a part of broader educational purposes.

Traditionally, the “means” available for enabling learners to reflect critically on their classroom actions include the following:

- Experiencing teaching and talking about it;
- Observing others' teaching "to gain experiential knowledge";
- Reflecting on teaching-learning (teacher journals, written activities on classroom experience, portfolios, diaries); (Can recorded retrospections be considered reflections?)
- Investigating teaching-learning (analyzing classroom processes, establishing databases);
- Focusing on critical events in teaching (role-play, case studies);
- Action research (projects addressed to practical problems in the teacher's own context).

(Source: Wallace, 1991; Richards, 1998; Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999)

❖ **Critical Reflection in Context: Conceptual flaws and loopholes in practice**

It is generally believed that how teachers/ students-teachers accept expressed opinions /observations/ suggestions of "others" regarding teaching, and how they look back on their own teaching, have an effect on their classroom actions. But one must remember that despite the emphasis on building up non-judgmental and collaborative explorations, a certain amount of threat is inevitable. As Fanselow (1984:2) remarked:

While supervisors that describe rather than judge may be a refreshing change from supervisors that judge, a supervisor is still a supervisor.

It has also been pointed out that many aspects of teaching are not observable and also that what we can observe is dependent on our point of view. Sense datum differs from person to person. Thus, as Richards (1998: 142) citing Fanselow (1977) observes:

When different people discuss the same lesson (e.g., a teacher, a supervisor, and a student teacher) they often give contradictory accounts of the same event.

Further, when exposed to the ideas of classroom dynamics, some teachers/ student-teachers may feel threatened. No amount of sugar-coating can mask the insecurity of exposing one-self to the other's view. The threat may increase when the individual is a novice in teaching and has inadequate understanding and knowledge of English. In fact, thinking-rethinking and verbalizing reflections may well be beyond the capacity of learners whose socio-educational backgrounds may act as barriers to reflection. This brings us to the question of context.

Reflective practitioners have often tended to "Vaseline" the context of reflection and focus on reflection as an isolative practice. This had led to the hypostatization of knowledge – the trainee – reflector's thinking against a zero/ neutral/ sterile background. There seems to be a tacit assumption that the training environment is "constant". However, as Srinivasan and Roy (2001) stated:

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In a reflective situation, trainee-identity and trainee-will are not constant; neither are they isolative. Trainee environment is never sterile or neutral; it comprises a culturally inherited legacy of “rules” and personal theory-laden goals.

❖ The Self and the “Other”

Reflection / explorations do not occur in a vacuum. This is recognized in current tradition (Gebhard and Oprandy: 1999:5, 6). The ‘other’ is projected as a mirror, a source, a ‘perceptual’ filter, or an enabler of alternatives. But the self /other concept is problematic. We need the other to define ourselves (Donne- no man is an island, etc.). But with the continued presence of the other in us we evolve a new identity as a continual; we have to reject the other to preserve ourselves. Again in any social transactions, we plan/act on the premises which have been/are being taken into consideration by the other(s). The degree of confidence we feel that ours have been/are taken into account decides the depth/level of our relationship with the other/others. Further, the self’s processing approach and method changes as the self’s perception of external conditions (the other-world) keeps changing; as the self changes, it attempts to bring about changes in the other/ others, changes which the self desires. This in essence is a metonymy for the self/ other problematic.

There is an underlying assumption in this tradition that a “reflector” can reflect, like a mirror, reconstructively and faithfully on his “cognitive experience”. For instance, Fanselow (1987: 476) affirms: “Any lens reveals.” Again, there are seeds for a problem here. Do observation and self-reflection automatically lead to informed practice? What about “blindness” involved in observing self and others. It is not only in fairy tales that a mirror says “You are the fairest of them all.”

Tutor-trainee collaborative exploration is the crucial element in a reflection-based model. Unless there is a basic trust, true communication cannot occur. We often encounter the world with a mask , appropriate to the purpose, agent/audience and context, to minimize social frictions, to lubricate social interactions, or to even hide our intentions’, fears, anxieties and weaknesses. We doff the mask when we are in the company of others only if we are confident of being understood, accepted for what we are or when we are sure the others have seen through the mask. In other words, intentions manifest themselves faithfully only when ‘intersubjectivity’ has been ensured.

The questions then are: ‘How to enable the trainees to lower their masks?’ ‘How to make them reflect on their intentions and actions, to validate actions against intentions and to evaluate intentions in terms of “feasible” actions?’ Ensuring the creation of an inter-subjective zone suggests itself as an immediate answer. The creation of a rational, non-coercive discourse among trainees and trainer (teachers and supervisors) will be possible only when the former are convinced that their premises will not only be something admitted prima facie but also something on which the others will act---- when the trainees are free and equal

Without such a rational, non-coercive discourse can reflection be possible in any real teacher education context?

Under the pragmatic presuppositions of an inclusive and non-coercive rational discourse among free and equal participants, everyone is required to take the perspective of everyone else, and thus projects himself into the understandings of self and world of all others (Habermas 1995:117).

Deep respect for the tutor and basic lack of confidence in the tutees are explicit in the following quotations:

“I want to be like you [referring to the tutor]. But at the same time I feel I cannot be as you, because you have efficiency to change your techniques and ways to teach very good and make the students understand you clearly...”

“I can’t organize my thoughts like you. I want to be as fluent as you.”

“I wish to be as student X² because you praised her lesson. Everyone liked her lesson. She is always the top in the class...”

The learners’ insecurity and dependence on the other as a role model lessened in the ensuing days, but they did not disappear despite positive feeling like:

“On returning home, I thought a lot. I saw it was a good idea for us to develop by ourselves”

“I feel like a real teacher, because I *planned* (planned?) my lesson by myself.”

“I feel that I’m a real teacher. When they praised my techniques in teaching this gave me confidence”

Conclusion

The days for the endeavour sketched in this study came to an end. A small beginning had been made to bring in an air of freedom that is crucial to professional growth. Efforts made to create rational, non-coercive discourse among student-teachers and supervisors. The trainees could expose the skills needed for critical reflection in their retrospective recollection. The following points were observed as the training session progressed; critical thinking, self-inquiry, evaluating others, building new identity, raising confidence, realizing mistakes, accepting others’ opinions, doing corrective actions, making decisions for planning, and getting self-satisfaction. These points are again stated below with some quotations from the trainees’ log-books for the sake of illustration.

➤ Critical thinking

“I think my friend X was supposed to explain the meaning of some words when first introduced the exercise because they seemed new to students”

“In my opinion, the teacher has to raise the level of teaching so that students will push themselves up to reach it”

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“I think that one of my classmate’s shortcomings is that she didn’t verify that students have really understood. She just asked “Have you understood?” students said “Yes” then she immediately moved to the next point and that led her to end the class soon. She could check students’ understanding by posing many questions not only saying (Have you understood?)”

➤ **Self-inquiry**

“When I was planning my lesson, I was wondering whether the activities I prepared would be useful or not. Though I have read in one book about its efficiency in teaching pronunciation, but the application of it I was not sure about”

➤ **Evaluate others**

“Student X is one of the kinds of teachers who can help the students to get to the intended message easily”

“My friend X has a deficiency in explaining grammar to students. She keeps speaking a lot without making the rules clear to students”

➤ **Build new identity**

“I thought that it would be too hard for me to teach English, but after I tried I felt it isn’t. Teaching English is very interesting but you only need to develop useful techniques”

“Before now, I wasn’t (didn’t?) know exactly the way and the order of teaching a lesson, but now I have a good way of teaching and explaining.”

“Before I introduce the lesson in front of my friends I was worried about several things like how to start the class, how to present an interesting introduction and how many questions I should ask to make a successful class, but later everything becomes clear to me and I am now able to modify my teaching ways according to the needs of the class.”

“Before now I wasn’t sure about the ways of teaching, but after the practice I knew many ways and good techniques in teaching English. I understood how to deal with teaching and make it better”

➤ **Raise confidence**

“After I taught my first lesson, all my worries have gone. I’m confident now.”

“I feel like a real teacher. When my friends agreed on my idea, I became more confident.”

➤ **Realize mistakes/ accept others’ opinions**

“My introduction wasn’t good. As my friends suggested I could introduce the new lesson by asking simple questions that opens students’ minds to receive the new lesson.”

“All the comments my friends said were valuable and helped me correct my mistakes.”

“I do value my friends’ observations and consider them in my next lesson.”

“It is not a shame if we apply others’ ideas in teaching if they are useful.”

“I felt happy when my friends accepted my views and tried to follow. I feel like a true teacher.”

“My friends’ comments helped me notice my mistakes in teaching.”

“I think we all are good in teaching. Everyone is able to observe the other and see her fault and repair it.”

➤ **Do corrective action**

“After my attempt I knew that teaching reading doesn’t only mean explaining meaning and reading aloud. It should rather involve developing students’ comprehension of the text.”

➤ **Make decisions for planning**

“In my next lesson I will be more careful about students’ understanding by asking them many questions.”

“In future, when I become a real teacher, I will help my students to speak English frequently and communicate with me only in English.”

➤ **Get self-satisfaction**

“All the points I mentioned are my perspectives as a student without any real teaching experiences. I thank you teacher that you provided us this chance to think critically on our teaching.”

“Before now I was really asking myself ‘how can I teach English in schools without training?’ I know that I’m studying something about teaching but practice is different from theory. So this training experience is very important for us.”

“After I taught my first lesson I got that teaching isn’t hard as I was thinking, but it needs good preparation or practice. Indeed, I’m very thankful to you teacher for this training.”

“Practising teaching this way is good for us. It helps us to exchange our ideas and see our mistakes. Once a mistake occurred it gets corrected and will not occur anymore.”

“This training is useful, because it helps us to see others’ teaching and listen to everyone’s point of view.”

“We are used that the teachers always points our mistakes. She knows what is going well and what is bad. But this time it is different. We have to realize by ourselves what is good and what is bad. It is a challenge and that what we really need to develop ourselves.”

Final Remarks

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The ultimate aim of the current study is evidently manifested in the above points that show the critical reflection features and the participants' understanding and awareness of teacher education reflection. So what trainees need to develop their skills in teaching is conscious understanding, self-inquiry and critical thinking/reflection on classroom actions in which an experience is recalled, considered and evaluated. This way, professional growth in the teaching processes may take place.

Notes

1. Spelling, syntax and vocabulary of the trainees' writing are unaltered.
2. The trainees' names are not mentioned; instead they are symbolized by the cross mark X.

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