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Learning from Teaching
A Dialogue of Risk and Reflection

Anne Jumonville Graf

Introduction

Librarians have not always included discussions of reflective practice as part of our formal, published literature. In fact, in 2005 John Doherty claimed that librarians are not particularly reflective practitioners in general.[1] However, since then there have been reviews of the status of reflection practice across librarianship,[2] calls for more critical reflective practice,[3] examples of that practice,[4] and a variety of models, examples, and frameworks for reflective strategies in library instruction.[5] In this chapter, my focus is on ways that critical reflection can enhance our ability to learn through teaching, especially when our teaching practice involves valuing the voices and experiences of our students.

What Is Critical Reflection?

The intentions of critical reflection distinguish it from other forms of reflective thought. It puts people and power dynamics at the center of the reflective process. In doing so, critical reflection for teachers calls our attention to the effects of our own assumptions, expectations, and beliefs in our practice. I appreciate Barbara Larrivee's understanding that "becoming a reflective practitioner calls teachers to the task of facing deeply-rooted personal attitudes concerning human nature, human potential, and human learning."[6] Stephen Brookfield, author of the wonderfully readable *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, calls this "hunting assumptions."[7] Though Larrivee speaks primarily in individual

terms—reflection as a "personal awareness discovery process"[8]—Brookfield also links in the way in which social structures and power dynamics are reproduced in the classroom. Teachers who desire just and loving classrooms must engage in critical reflection in order to recognize their own role in these dynamics, especially if they hope to challenge or change existing inequalities.[9] Thus, attention to power is an important component of critical reflection. We learn not only to solve problems but also to question how "the problem" is being framed. Critical reflection asks us to consider the impact of social, political, and cultural contexts and, in educational settings, to deal explicitly with questions of who has power in the classroom and who does not.

Why Practice Critical Reflection?

For librarians whose teaching opportunities are limited and structured by curricula that they may not control or in classes whose timing and content may not be easily altered, I believe there are additional reasons to develop a reflective practice. We simply need another space for our learning-teaching selves to exist. Reflection helps us inhabit a longer moment of learning and to find sources of renewal and interest in a repetitive practice. Char Booth expresses this idea in writing about the importance of a reflective and metacognitive approach even while teaching: "In my experience, incorporating metacognitive elements in…learning interactions can also prevent the boredom that can result from teaching the same concepts over and over again."[10] Reflective practice keeps teaching interesting and meaningful. At the same time, it also reminds us that our learning as teachers is not always marked by success and ease; John Dewey cautions that reflection can be a "troublesome" process.[11]

For many teachers, increasing student voice in the classroom can be a particularly troublesome or risky experience.[12] After all, it involves sharing control or power in the classroom with students, whether through student-led activities, discussion centered around students' experiences, or other strategies. Regardless of the specific approach, these experiences also represent opportunities to practice critical reflection by learning how our beliefs, assumptions, and biases as teachers play out in the ways we respond to students. To illustrate this potentially productive pairing of risk and reflection, I will analyze two examples from my own teaching practice, drawing out the reflective processes that helped me uncover some of my own assumptions about teaching and learning. In particular, I will focus on moments and questions that helped me better understand my own beliefs and practices in regard to encouraging student voices and responding to student experiences in the classroom.

Critical Reflection in Practice, Part 1

Reflection is not always a straightforward path to improvement. In fact, it can be a decidedly "irregular process…often marked by two steps forward and one step backward,"[13] as illustrated by this first example. Several years ago I taught a library session for a first-year seminar course, one in which I had been able to work out some shared objectives with the professor ahead of time. I began by asking the students what they'd learned so far about libraries and college research. A few students supplied similar and dutiful-sounding answers: "The library has resources that are credible, unlike *Wikipedia* and Google." I noticed many students avoiding my gaze, so I pressed a little. Some students tentatively disagreed, explaining several useful ways of employing *Wikipedia* and Google in the research process. The first students, who had given the "correct" answers, now looked uncertain. The conversation deepened and became more animated; it shifted quickly away from the library and into student reflections on their experiences doing research. I was not entirely sure what we were "accomplishing," but it didn't feel right to move on to the other planned activities given how engaged the class was, so I chose to stick with the conversation. Finally, prompted in part by the worried looks I saw on the professor's face as she sat quietly to the side, I looked at the clock—we had been talking for thirty-five of our fifty minutes! There was no way we would have enough time for all the other activities we had both agreed would support the students' work on their research assignment.

Unsettled, I jotted down a few notes immediately after class. They read, "Fun talking with them. Didn't get to nearly as much as I had planned. Everything felt kind of fast and loose and I went with the energy in the room—not the plan or timed out activities. Kind of like how I cook, always veering off the recipe. Not sure what I should have done differently." Looking back, it's interesting that I started to reflect on how my approach to teaching may be related to other practices, like cooking, which may have led to some insights. Instead, I stopped myself. Doing so felt outside the narrow process of reflecting on my teaching activities only in order to improve my teaching methods, which was my main understanding of reflective practice at the time. My notes also suggest ambivalence: the class had gone well from the perspective of student engagement, but not well from the perspective of achieving objectives. I did not know what to do with the tension between my desire to pursue authentic student engagement and to achieve specific goals. As often happens for busy instruction librarians, I just moved on, though I continued to think back on the class frequently.

Fortunately, the beauty of a reflective approach is that even though I did not engage in much reflection at the time, the experience stuck with me, offering me opportunities to learn whenever I was willing to put in the work. Years

later, inspired by a presentation by Anna Marie Johnson and Robert Detmering,[14] I thought about that class again and decided to develop a new introductory activity to elicit students' feelings about research and library experiences. In an effort to evoke student stories as rich as in the original class, I started a new class by asking each student to complete the sentence "Doing research is like ___" and explain their answer. By first writing and then, for those comfortable, sharing a response to this prompt, I created a structured, but still open-ended way to encourage students to voice their experience, either out loud or in writing.

The condensed structure of the activity also allowed me to include other learning goals for the class period, in an acknowledgment of the realities of sharing authority over class content with both the students and another instructor. For me, this example is not only about the act of reflection leading to a specific improvement in teaching method. It's also about the benefit of allowing reflection to extend the learning moment in ways that ultimately allowed me to prioritize student voices within the constraints of a single library session. Even when initial efforts to understand "what happened" in a particular class fall short or are incomplete, learning through reflection is still possible later on.

Suggestion for practice: Are there any teaching experiences that linger in your mind, even if they happened several years ago? Have you felt ambivalent about the success or "failure" of a given teaching experience? Give yourself the chance to return to one such experience and think about what was at stake, what was important to you at the time. Recognize any contradictory beliefs or values that may have pulled your intentions in multiple directions. Which beliefs still feel relevant today?

Critical Reflection in Practice, Part 2

This second example concerns a familiar classroom moment. Like many instructors, I love listening to a room full of students talking to each other, particularly when they are engaging with course content in their own ways. And yet, like most, I still want to remain in control, especially when leading discussion or when it's time to bring students back from group or individual activities into instructor-led activities. On its own, this sounds reasonable, and certainly there are pedagogical strategies for making effective transitions from one type of learning to another. However, over time I've become aware that something about my desire for control in such situations can lead me to make assumptions, such as believing that students who do not easily switch from talking to listening are being disrespectful. In these moments, before I try to solve the problem of classroom transitions or the problem of disrespect-

ful students, I need to understand how I've framed "the problem" in the first place—and why.

I started by asking myself what I believe about how students and teachers "should" be. In answering I learned I hold several conflicting ideas: s*tudent voices should be heard in class, student interests should help direct the direction of the class, the teacher must be in control of the class, students should not talk when the teacher is talking,* and *students talking when the teacher wants their attention means the students are being disrespectful.* Once I saw my assumptions so bluntly laid out, I had the option of approaching them directly from a different angle, from a position of curiosity and criticalness. This is the opportunity for critical reflection. I asked more questions: What, specifically, is valuable about hearing student voices in the classroom? How do I understand my desire to maintain power through voice but also share it? How have I arrived at such contradictory beliefs about wanting student voice and wanting to control it at the same time?

One of the great opportunities of critical reflection is to understand our own context and assumptions before trying to evaluate others or solve problems. After all, as teachers we exist outside the classroom, just as students do, and we bring our own experiences and perspectives with us, just as students do. In this case, when I thought about the questions above, I remembered a recent conversation that helped me see my own beliefs at work more clearly. I had been talking with my husband about how families talk with each other, since we are in the process of learning each other's family styles. One side of my family tends to engage in a more abstract and formal conversational style, in which taking turns while talking in a group is an important feature. This part of my family—upper-middle class, white, of largely British/Anglo heritage, and Protestant—also represents the dominant cultural background for many American classroom practices, and certainly it is representative of the school culture I encountered as a student myself. I did not see how significant the "turn-taking" mode was in my family until my husband pointed it out to me. Learning to see these factors in a non-teaching context put me in a better position to see that my experience and valuing of "turn taking" influences my teaching style and my perception of student behavior, too.

Of course, it may be that I still choose, in particular contexts, to create an atmosphere in which "turn taking" is important with my students. But without the knowledge of what turn taking means in my experience, which enables me to see it as a particular practice versus a universal practice, I risk ascribing negative qualities to students who speak "out of turn." I am also less able to explore and participate in alternative ways of talking in groups. This means I will not work as effectively with different kinds of students, and I also limit my own ability to feel connected to others who are not like me. To continue on this path of critical reflection, I also need to consider how and when factors like

race and gender may influence my judgments about which students I consider "disrespectful."

Suggestions for practice: What classroom activities, like group conversation, occur in other areas of your life as well—where you may be better able to identify the values and beliefs at work? What beliefs and experiences do you carry into the classroom as a result? Who in your life might have a useful perspective on those beliefs and experiences and be able to help you see them with fresh eyes?

Conclusion

As these examples illustrate, the extent to which critical reflection can help surface assumptions depends on creating a space for that reflection. Fortunately, that space is more inclusive than we often allow. A conversation with a family member can lead to new self-awareness, which can translate to more thoughtful teaching. Reflecting on experiences over time can result in evolving insights. And since critical reflection takes into account structures and dynamics that are formed outside the classroom, asking questions about assumptions, expectations, and beliefs can catalyze the critical reflective process, in this case around issues of increasing student voice in the classroom. Critical reflectors learn to allow experiences to remain complicated and resist the urge to solve problems without first considering the way those problems are framed. It is a challenging practice, but also a generative one.

Notes

1. John J. Doherty, "Towards Self-Reflection in Librarianship: What Is Praxis?" *Progressive Librarian* no. 26 (Winter 2005/2006): 12.
2. Maria J. Grant, "The Role of Reflection in the Library and Information Sector: A Systematic Review," *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 24, no. 3 (2007): 155.
3. Heidi L. M. Jacobs, "Information Literacy and Reflective Pedagogical Praxis," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 34, no. 3 (2008): 256.
4. Michelle Reale, "Critical Pedagogy in the Classroom: Library Instruction That Gives Voice to Students and Builds a Community of Scholars," *Journal of Library Innovation* 3, no. 2 (2012): 80.
5. Char Booth, *Reflective Teaching, Effective Learning* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2011), 17–24; Mandi Goodsett, "Reflective Teaching: Improving Library Instruction through Self-Reflection," *Southeastern Librarian* 62, no. 3 (2014): 12.
6. Barbara Larrivee, "Transforming Teaching Practice: Becoming the Critically Reflective Teacher," *Reflective Practice* 1, no. 3 (2000): 296.
7. Stephen Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995): 2.
8. Larrivee, "Transforming Teaching Practice," 296.
9. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, 6.
10. Booth, *Reflective Teaching, Effective Learning,* 19.

11. John Dewey, *How We Think* (Boston: D. C. Heath and Co., 1910): 13.
12. Dana Le Fevre, "Barriers to Implementing Pedagogical Change: The Role of Teachers' Perceptions of Risk," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 38 (2014): 63.
13. Larrivee, "Transforming Teaching Practice," 304.
14. Anna Marie Johnson and Robert Detmering, "Stories That Tell: Learning and Teaching from Information Literacy Narratives in Library Instruction" (workshop, Georgia International Conference on Information Literacy, Savannah, GA, September 2012).

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