

ASSESSING STUDENT-TEACHERS' PERCEPTIONS ABOUT THE IMPLEMENTATION OF REFLECTIVE TEACHING TOOLS IN THE PRACTICUM*

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ABSTRACT

This study examined the perceptions student-teachers held about the implementation of Reflective Teaching in the practicum. Six student-teachers took part in a conference for which researchers had designed and given them a conference protocol. This protocol was made of four key questions concerned with student-teachers' theoretical insights into Reflective Teaching, the role their students can play in improving classroom processes, their views about journal-keeping and blog discussion. A ground theory approach enabled researchers to analyze data and establish that student-teachers have made significant progress in

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the conceptualization of Reflective Teaching and in the practical exploration of tools such as journal keeping and blog discussion. Nevertheless, some useful implications for improving the second cycle of the ongoing process were also derived.

RESUMEN

Este estudio examinó las percepciones que profesores practicantes tenían acerca de la implementación de la Enseñanza Reflexiva en la práctica docente. Seis practicantes participaron en una conferencia, de acuerdo con el protocolo que los investigadores habían diseñado para el efecto. Este protocolo estuvo estructurado por cuatro interrogantes que consultaban básicamente los supuestos teóricos que los practicantes tenían acerca de la Enseñanza Reflexiva en general, el papel que sus respectivos estudiantes podrían jugar en el mejoramiento del proceso enseñanza-aprendizaje, sus puntos de vista en torno a los diarios y a las discusiones promovidas a través de los blogs. A partir de los datos recogidos, se logró establecer que los profesores practicantes habían avanzado en la conceptualización de la Enseñanza Reflexiva y en la exploración práctica de herramientas como los diarios y las discusiones realizadas a través de los blogs. Se derivaron también algunas implicaciones para el mejoramiento del segundo ciclo de todo el proceso.

INTRODUCTION

Reflective teaching is an important practice which involves teachers in a process of collecting evidence about their teaching, a search for principles that underlie their teaching, a search for inconsistencies or contradictions in what they think and what they do, in deciding courses of action, and implementing these actions to rearrange their teaching practice (Bartlett, in Nunan and Richards, 1994). Keeping in mind the importance of reflective teaching in the formative process of our students, the practicum regulations document of The Foreign Language Program of Surcolombiana University established, among other objectives,

the promotion of reflective teaching tenets to empower student teachers as reflective practitioners; however, the findings of a diagnostic phase showed that the Program falls short in providing student teachers with meaningful opportunities to reflect about their practicum experience.

Based on this fact, we decided to design and implement a proposal whose main objective was promoting the use of reflective teaching tools such as dialogue journals and blog discussions during the practicum, in order to enhance the quality of the teaching learning process. Six student teachers are taking part in this project. This proposal is being applied during the second semester of 2008. So far it has been implemented for 11 weeks. As part of the first cycle of the proposal, an evaluation of this ongoing process was required. As far as evaluation is concerned, Brown (cited by Quintero, 2003) points out that “evaluation is a systematic collection and analysis of all relevant information necessary to promote the improvement of a curriculum and evaluate its effectiveness within the context of the particular institutions involved” (p.130).

This evaluation process was aimed at identifying and assessing the student teachers’ perceptions about the reflective component of their practicum. They were given a conference protocol (See Appendix A) where they were asked to think over four particular situations related to the Reflective Teaching process. Then, the researchers and student teachers met to hold a conference where they were expected to exchange their perceptions and practical experiences.

The findings pointed to a significant evidence of student teachers’ improvement in their perceptions they had of what reflective teaching is and what it implies for a teacher. Moreover, they provided us with some illuminating insights and suggestions into blog discussions.

JUSTIFICATION

As Quintero (2003) points out we as teachers are called to make important decisions in our daily performance and “the issue of decision-making is a significant aspect of evaluation in school life”

(p. 124-125). And when we are involved in educational research experiences, we are more concerned with making informed decisions that lead us to carry out research studies more objectively. Quintero also claims that we as teachers are in a better position, than external evaluators, to document and evaluate our own experiences. The present small-scale project was aimed at monitoring the development of a research educational proposal about the reflective teaching component of the practicum in our Foreign Language Program.

As part of the first cycle of the study, it was necessary to evaluate the ongoing research process in order to define the student teachers perceptions about the reflective component of their practicum. By assessing and sharing each own's experience during the conference, student teachers helped us to gain a broader and deeper view of the development of the reflective teaching process they are engaged in during their practicum experience. Their insights were very enlightning and let us corroborate what is working well and get suggestions to better the way blog discussions are being held.

RESEARCH QUESTION

The question that prompted the current small-scale project was "What peceptions do student-teachers hold about the Reflective Teaching process they have been enaged in?". It emerged from the necessity to evaluate the insights the six participants of the research study "The development of Reflective Teaching: a way to improve the Practicum" had about the reflective component of their teaching practice.

It was important to take into consideration their viewpoints because they were directly involved in this reflective teaching experience, and they could provide us with personal and critical assessment in order to enhance our research proposal.

OBJECTIVES

1. To determine what kind of perceptions student-teachers hold about an teacher as a reflective practitioner.

2. To define student teachers' opinions on how their students can help them improve their teaching practice.
3. To evaluate the student teachers' experience about journal keeping.
4. To identify student teachers' perceptions about blog discussions.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

In general terms, Reflective Teaching has been approached from different but complementary perspectives.

- A process in which “experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose.” This process is a basis for evaluation, decision making and a source for planning and action. (Richards cited by Farrell 2003).
- A focus on “an educational dilemma” and the consequent analysis, responses, framing, reframing, experimentation, solving, valuating, and implementation to deal with the specific dilemma (Ross 1989)
- A means for improving classroom processes and outcomes, and developing confident, self-motivated teachers and learners (Pennington qtd in Farrell 2003)
- A reflective practice influences the improvement of student achievement through the identification of truly authentic areas of strengths (Wagner 2006)
- Reflection requires a public testing of private assumptions, which happens through a dialogue of words or actions with other participants in the teaching-learning context (Schön cited by Corcoran and Leahy 2003).

Given the wide diversity of concepts about Reflective Teaching, a framework for its practical exploration in the classroom needs to be adopted. In this particular study we have promoted the cyclical process proposed by Bartlett (1994), which is made of five components, namely, mapping, informing, contesting, appraising,

and acting. What is expected with this cycle is that we rearrange our teaching practice after mapping or describing what we do, unearthing the reasons and assumption for these actions, subjecting these reasons to critical scrutiny, appraising alternative courses of action, and then acting.

Murphy in Celce-Murcia (2001) presents a variety of tools for teachers who want to become reflective practitioners, one of them being journal keeping. Jarvis (1976) highlights the importance for pre-service or in.-service teachers of keeping a diary, in the way it can provide them an opportunity to reflect on their teaching experience. She claims that changes in professional awareness come if the awareness is situated in practice, a kind of reflection-in-action; she adds that diaries might provide a space in which there is at least an opportunity for practitioners to move from a real life problem, to reframing the theory which accounts for the problem, to new action. Jiménez, S. et al (1996), on their part, claim that diaries or journals are one of the introspective techniques that teachers, learners, and researchers can use in order to record information and insights on specific aspects of language teaching and learning.

In addition to the theoretical foundations we have just briefly described, this small-scale study has also been informed by other research-derived insights. Muñoz, Quintero and Munevar (2002) carried out a collaborative action research which was aimed at enriching the potential of young educators in the teacher training schools with the concept and practice of pedagogical research. The major finding was that teacher trainees could improve their research abilities while leaning to teach.

Chacón (2006) conducted an investigation with the Practicum student teachers at the University of Los Andes Tachira. One of the goals was to explore the students' conceptions about the Practicum and the reflective learning experiences they had acquired as well as to examine the critical reflective competences they had, and how they applied them in the Practicum. Based on the findings, during the second stage the objectives aimed at designing and implementing an intervention through a Reflective Teaching

Program. Findings showed that intervention helped improve student teachers' competencies to reflect because it fostered reflection-in-practice and on-practice.

METHODOLOGY

In accordance with the nature of the research question, this small-scale research abode by data-collection and data-analysis procedures of the phenomenological research design. According to Van Manen (1990), "phenomenology asks for the very nature of a phenomenon for that which makes a some-'thing' (p.10) what it is. It is understanding individuals' experiences from their own point of view.

Given the qualitative character of data collected, procedures and techniques of grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin 1990) were used for data analysis. We transcribed the audio recording of each participant's turn taking in the conference held by six student-teachers along with their practicum supervisors. Then, we captured emerging concepts from the data by describing and coding direct quotations. Finally, we derived theoretical interpretations from the collected data.

FINDINGS

The analysis of the information gathered for this study produced a real picture of the perceptions student-teachers held about the implementation of Reflective Teaching in their practicum process. These findings arose from the categories found in the information provided by student-teachers in the conference.

- 1) What do you personally think makes a teacher a reflective practitioner?

CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	n	F	ST1	ST2	ST3	ST4	ST5	ST6
Reflective perspectives	Evaluating and analyzing one's teaching experience critically	17		4	0	4	3	2	4
	Doing research	1				1			
	Identifying and solving problems	3		1	1		1		

CATEGORIES	SUBCATEGORIES	n	F	ST1	ST2	ST3	ST4	ST5	ST6
	Gaining insights from discussing one's teaching with others	2				1		1	
	Rearranging teaching	2		1				1	
	Improving classroom process	3				1	1	1	
Non-reflective perspectives	Describing one's own teaching	1			1				
	A belief or conviction about teaching and learning	3			1	2			

Table 1. Perceptions of student-teachers about reflective teaching

Source: Group Conference transcript.

Table 1 shows the most prevailing perceptions student-teachers hold about Reflective Teaching. In most of their references, they link Reflective Teaching with evaluating and analyzing one's teaching experience critically. This goes hand in hand with the way Richards, cited by Farrell (2003), defines critical reflection as a process in which *"experience is recalled, considered, and evaluated, usually in relation to a broader purpose"*. Some of the comments student-teachers made in this respect are as follows:

- ST1 sees the reflective teacher as someone with the capacity to find out what is actually going on with our students in the classroom.
- ST3 says that a reflective teacher is someone who keeps a record of his classes and who visits those records.
- ST5 suggests that a reflective process is needed to establish if what was happening was working or not.
- ST6 defines the reflective teacher as someone who evaluates how he is doing his work.

In another reference, ST3 says that *"a reflective teacher is a researcher teacher"*. Doing research implies exploring one's teaching to see what is worth changing or improving. This conceptualization is connected with identifying and solving problems as ST1 and ST3 agree when they affirm that reflective teaching also implies *"looking for strategies which solve the problems we have discovered."*

There also two references to Reflective Teaching as gaining insights from discussing one's teaching with others. ST3 says that "*as we welcome the suggestions from our practicum peers, we can grow professionally*". ST5 considers that "*a reflective process is a long process that takes stages and guidance of colleagues or supervisors*". Reflection, according to Schon (cited by Corcoran and Leahy 2003), requires a public testing of private assumptions, which happens through a dialogue of words or actions with other participants in the teaching-learning context.

In other two references, Reflective Teaching is seen as rearranging teaching. ST1 states that Reflective Teaching is to *make decisions on the spur of the moment*. ST5 also suggest that Reflective Teaching implies *revising something if it is not being done in the right way*. This particular perception is concerned with acting out new ideas about our teaching. According to Freire (1972), cited by Bartlett, reflection without action is verbalism, and action without reflection is activism. Freire claims that verbalism and activism should go hand-in-hand to guarantee the best possible outcome.

In three more references, student-teachers contend that Reflective Teaching implies improving classroom process. ST3 thinks that a reflective teacher is "*someone who wants to reach improvement in his practicum or in his teaching*". Both ST4 and ST5 consider that a reflective teacher needs to create strategies to improve the class, or to change strategies if justified. Pennington in Farrell (2003, 14) defines reflective teaching "*as a means for improving classroom processes and outcomes, and developing confident, self-motivated teachers and learners*".

Finally, there are four references which do not fall into the range of conceptions of Reflective Teaching. One of them is describing one's teaching. This matches with the stage of *mapping* proposed by Bartlett in his Reflective Teaching Framework, which basically involves observation and the collection of evidence about our own teaching. Ho and Richards (2008) state that this stage is primarily descriptive and procedural which does not necessarily involve the teacher in critical reflection.

The other three have to do with expressing a belief or conviction about teaching and learning without providing a rationale. For example, ST3 suggests that “a reflective teacher is an ideal teacher who cares for his students”. This perception lacks the critical dimension that Reflective Teaching entails.

2) How do you consider your students can help you improve your teaching practice?

SUBCATEGORIES	n	f	ST1	ST2	ST3	ST4	ST5	ST6
Making their expectations and feelings known	1		1					
Expressing their likes and dislikes	1		1					
Giving suggestions	7		1	1	3	1	1	
Assessing learning tasks	1							1
Making the student-teacher aware of their learning styles	1				1			
Helping the teacher make decisions	1				1			

Table 2: Perceptions of student-teachers about the way their students can help in the practicum

Source: Group Conference transcript

Learners can play a crucial role in Reflective Teaching. They can give the teacher a valuable feedback about what goes on in the classroom. Their opinions and perceptions can add a different a valuable perspective to the whole picture the teacher is drawing about the classroom reality. That is why learners should be directly involved in the initiatives the reflective teacher undertakes. In this sense, Wagner (2006) states that reflective practice influences the improvement of student achievement through the identification of truly authentic areas of strengths (p. 31-32).

In most of the references, student-teachers admit the fact that their students can make valuable contributions to improve the practicum by making suggestions of all sorts. Some of these are concerned with classroom management. This is what ST3 reveals “*The suggestions they have given me is that I should be a little bit tougher with them*”. Some other suggestions can be made in terms

of which activities or types of exercises should be done in class. Moreover, the shared feeling among student-teachers is they should be more sensitive to their students' suggestions.

In the other five references, student-teachers enhance other ways whereby their students can help them achieve better results in the practicum. For example, ST1 says that it is through making their expectations and feelings known that their students can be helpful. She also states that the same expected with students' likes and dislikes. ST3 admits to having had a meaningful experience at assessing his students' learning styles. Being aware that most of his students were visual learners helped ST3 decide to use video beam as a resource. ST6 points out that learners can help the teacher assess whether what is being done is right or not, as long as they are directly involved.

3) How would you assess the role journal keeping has played in your practicum experience?

	SUBCATEGORIES			ST1	ST2	ST3	ST4	ST5	ST6
Favorable views	Usefulness	6		1	2	1	1		1
	Promotion of Reflective Teaching as a process	2		1					1
	Meaningful interaction between the student-teacher and supervisor	3		1	2				
	Self awareness	2				1	1		
	Opportunity to find out contradictions	1				1			
Unfavorable	Time consuming	2				1		1	

Table 3 Student-teachers' views of journal keeping

Source: Group Conference transcript

From the information in Table 3 about student teachers' views of dialogue journal keeping, we can see that there are more favorable opinions which reflect a positive attitude towards the use of this reflective tool. Five out of the six student teachers (ST) point out that dialogue journals are very important for their practicum.

Their response is framed into the insights some scholars like Jarvis (1976) have given about the usefulness of this tool.

Another valuable viewpoint student teachers have about journal keeping is that they are useful to register every single experience that takes place in the classroom, and they can make a follow-up of those experiences to see how they have improved. As regards journal keeping, student teacher 3 sets out that “*The dialogue journal helps her make sense of what she does in the classroom*”.

On the other hand, three student teachers contend that journal keeping (which involves a description of the lesson, an interpretation of what actually happened, a search for inconsistencies or problems, the design of an action plan and a follow-up of this plan) led them to see reflective teaching as a process that pushes them not only to identify the problems that arise in the classroom and to unearth the reasons that underlie their teaching, but also to analyze this particular situation and to look for strategies and implement them to better their teaching practice. This experience finds support in the reflective teaching cycle proposed by Leo Bartlett in Nunan and Richards (1994).

Another positive view ST express is that through dialogue journal they can take advantage of their supervisors’ feedback because they usually provide them with strategies that may help enrich their teaching practice. About the matter, Bartlett (1994) suggests that “the element of sharing or collaboration with colleagues offers the possibility of extending one’s insights about oneself as teacher to oneself as an individual member of a larger community”(p. 210).

The only non- favorable argument student teachers present against journal keeping is that it is demanding in terms of time. This is somehow justifiable and understandable out of their academic workload in the University and at the institutions where their practicum is taking place.

- 4) What suggestions would you make in order for everyone to make the most of this interact ional tool?

SUBCATEGORIES			ST1	ST2	ST3	ST4	ST5	ST6
To contextualize the posted problematic situation	1					1		
To give prompt feedback	2					1		1
To make it more personal	1				1			
To engaged supervisors' active participation	1						1	
Not to make it compulsory	1						1	
To draw conclusions from given comment	1						1	

Table 4 Student Teachers' Perceptions about blog discussions

Source: Group Conference transcript

Through blog discussion student teachers are intended to share their own practicum experiences and exchange opinions with their partners. They were asked to post a problematic situation and invite their partners to make comments or give suggestions. When they were asked about the use of this tool as an opportunity to reflect upon their teaching practice, most of them stated that it is a useful tool because they can share ideas or strategies that may help them enrich their teaching practice. ST 6 points out that “Through this tool we can interact with our partners and find some other sources of solutions to the problems that arise in the practicum.” Despite these positive comments, ST presented the following suggestions: ST4 stated that when they posted a problem or any other classroom issue, they should describe it carefully, because every context is different; ST4 and ST6 claim that they should react as soon as possible to the comments of their partners, and they also affirmed that the more constructive feedback they receive the better equipped they would feel to find solutions to their own problems; ST3 suggests that each blog should be given the author's personal trade mark; ST5 recommends supervisors to participate more actively by giving prompt feedback; He also comments that blog discussion should be promoted as a more autonomous task, that is, they should be allowed to take the initiative to participate. Finally, ST 5 advised participants to draw general conclusions from all the posted comments.

CONCLUSIONS

Student-teachers demonstrated they gained significant insights into Reflective Teaching in their practicum as they enhanced features such as evaluating and analyzing one's teaching experience critically, doing research, identifying and solving problems, gaining insights from discussing one's teaching with others, rearranging teaching and improving classroom process.

Student-teachers also enhanced the ways whereby their students can help them improve their classroom processes. These ways, as conceived by participants, are mainly concerned with making their expectations and feelings known, expressing their likes and dislikes, giving suggestions, assessing learning tasks, making the student-teacher aware of their learning styles and helping the teacher make decisions.

Concerning the role student-teachers think journal-keeping has played in their practicum, they pinpointed five favorable views in terms of usefulness, promotion of Reflective Teaching as a process, meaningful interaction between the student-teacher and supervisor, self awareness and as an opportunity to find out contradictions. Some of them, however, feel journal keeping is time consuming.

Student-teachers offered likewise some suggestions which can be useful for strengthening blog discussions. They suggested contextualizing the posted problematic situation, giving each other prompt feedback, making the poster more personal, engaging supervisors' active participation, making it more autonomous and drawing conclusions from given comments.

Finally, the implementation of this small-scale project has enabled researchers and student-teachers to make some crucial decisions for a second cycle in the exploration of Reflective Teaching in the practicum. Participants will be encouraged to keep getting further theoretical insights into Reflective Teaching. To the effect, some relevant web links will be posted in the practicum supervisors' blogs. Each student-teacher will also be provided with personalized feedback as to making journal keeping a more reflective experience,

according to the components of the reflective cycle proposed by Bartlett (1994). As the last but not least determination, student-teachers will be encouraged to implement the different suggestions they exchanged in the conference about blog discussions.

IMPLICATIONS

The pedagogical implications of this small-scale project are relevant for student teachers, research participants, and the Foreign Language Program. Student teachers were given the opportunity to work with their peers and share their opinions and experiences about the reflective component of their practicum; they gained important ideas that might help broaden their current concepts of reflective teaching, and get new strategies that they could implement in their own educational contexts.

It was an enriching experience for us as research participants because on the one hand, the student teachers' provided us with constructive and useful feedback which led to implement new strategies to better the use of blogs as a reflective teaching tool. On the other hand, we became aware of the importance of assessment as a frequent and ongoing process in order to monitor any educational practice we carry out to optimize our educational work.

As for the Foreign Language Program, these partial findings suggest that the staff, teachers and practicum supervisors should start working on new reforms to make the practicum an actual reflective teaching experience.

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APPENDIX

GROUP CONFERENCE PROTOCOL

UNIVERSIDAD SURCOLOMBIANA
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION
FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAM

THE DEVELOPMENT OF REFLECTIVE TEACHING: A WAY TO IMPROVE THE PRACTICUM

PURPOSE: To provide student-teachers with an opportunity to assess the development of Reflective Teaching in their practicum by exchanging perceptions and practical experiences.

DIRECTIONS:

- On this occasion, you are being invited to a conference (a conversation or discussion among participants) about the reflective component of the teaching practicum.
- As preparation for this conference, you are expected to think over each one of the questions you are given below and adopt a standpoint to be shared with your practicum peers.
- Based on the insights you have gained from your bibliographical explorations and your teaching practice, you are also expected to challenge your partners' ideas.

QUESTIONS TO BE CONSIDERED:

- Throughout this semester you have been provided with insights into Reflective Teaching, different notions from different authors, the phases of a reflective cycle proposed by Leo Bartlett, and some useful tools to gather information about your classes. Since you are expected to adopt your own critical standpoint, based on your own experience, what do you personally think makes a teacher a reflective practitioner?

- So far you have two sources of information about what is happening in your Practicum lessons, namely, your diary entries and supervisors' observations. Students' opinions and perceptions can also add a different and valuable perspective about what goes on in the classroom. How do you consider your students can help you improve your teaching practice?
- The dialogue journal has been aimed at empowering you as critical reflective student-teachers as long as you collect evidence about your own teaching, search for reasons which underlie your teaching, search for inconsistencies and contradictions in what you do and how you think, look for alternative plans of action and implement them to rearrange your teaching practice. How would you assess the role journal keeping has played in your practicum experience?
- The Reflective Teaching Blog is intended as an opportunity for student-teachers to discuss their teaching experiences and their underlying beliefs. What suggestions would you make in order for everyone to make the most of this interactive tool?