INSTRUCTOR REFLECTION

PURPOSE
This tool introduces the purposes, principles and practices of reflection in improving the artistry of college instruction.

DESCRIPTION
Unique to the professions is that they require a person bridging the theory/practice gap in real-time. Doctors draw on a vast theoretical knowledge to diagnose and treat specific cases. Lawyers interpret legal precedent and apply it to individual cases.

Professionals are therefore what William James referred to as “an intermediate inventive mind” that must make the real-time decisions connecting the theory to its application.

By this definition, educators are nothing if not professionals. The art of teaching consists largely in taking content expertise, an understanding of best instructional practices and student psychology, and applying this knowledge real-time, to the ever-changing realities of the learning process.

To improve our artistry as the “intermediate inventive mind” requires a constant reflection on our instructional choices and a commitment to understand their impetus and consequence.

For educators, this reflection is of three types:
1) reflection on instruction
2) reflection in instruction and
3) reflection for instruction

While educators often reflect informally, John Dewey, the educational philosopher, clarified that reflection for professionals also needs to be:
1. Systematic, disciplined and rigorous
2. Intent on close observation of experiences
3. About making meaning from experiences
4. Within the context of a community

Reflection on instruction
For most instructors, this kind of reflection is the most intuitive. It’s natural to think about how a class went, but just as natural to do so unsystematically and without follow-up.

Formal reflection usually follows several steps:

Awareness: The instructor faces a sense of unease or confusion resulting from a specific experience upon which they want to ponder.

Return to the Experience: While avoiding judgments or interpretations, the instructor recalls in detail, the experience, interactions and their reaction. This is often done by journaling. Remaining descriptive helps the instructor gain emotional distance from the experience.

Discuss and Re-think: The instructor works with others to re-evaluate the experience from multiple perspectives and interpretations.

Decision and Follow-up: Based on the reflection, the instructor makes decisions about how to proceed or how to act in a similar situation. Ideas are written down for future reference.

Beyond journaling, there are several practices that can help in this process. They include:
1) Writing and re-writing 2) problem solving 3) role plays 4) group analysis 5) case study analysis

Reflection in instruction
Reflection in instruction refers to the instructor’s real-time analysis of the learning process. During class, the instructor constantly looks for clues as to how students are interacting with the material.

Is someone confused, bored or in disagreement? Is the pace of the activity right? What can be gleaned from body language? Is there an out-of-class context to explain student behavior or reaction?

The difference between these reflective questions and the do-I-have-something-in-my-teeth kind is that reflective questions are focused solely on the student learning process.

Most of this kind of reflection is about individual students, so instructors often keep a ‘student log.’ Immediately after class, they write down their observations and impressions about specific students. They can then look for patterns, or develop interventions or modifications to their instruction as necessary.

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Reflection for instruction

Reflection for instruction takes many forms.

**Peer Observation:** Nothing helps instructors to reflect on their instruction quite like watching someone else teach. Observing peers on a regular basis is the fast track to improved instruction.

**Syllabus Review:** Reflective instructors study their syllabus carefully, not only from the perspective of content and sequencing, but from the perspective of improving the student learning experience.

**Instructional Planning:** Reflective instructors are careful planners. They have a written instructional plan for each class where they capture what worked and what didn’t along with ideas for improvements.

**Learning Communities:** Reflection, by its very nature, is both a solitary and a shared activity. Until decisions and conclusions are articulated and shared with a community, a colleague or a calendar, the reflection remains informal and incomplete.

Learning communities provide a structured way for professional educators to gather and reflect on their shared experience. They are an official but informal forum for pursuing research, asking question, problem solving, sharing ideas and reporting on learning and ongoing reflective activities.

**Teaching Teams:** Teaching teams are a more formal gathering where all the instructors that teach sections of a particular course meet regularly to discuss, revise, brainstorm, and problem-solve issues relating to the effectiveness of student learning in the course they share. In teaching teams, instructors reflect on how to best structure the student experience around course content to maximize their learning.

**EXAMPLE**

Jack, after deciding to add more reflection to his professional life, reviewed his options. He knew that he had little time, so he decided to engage in only one reflection activity per semester. He quickly drew up a schedule for the next several semesters and pinned it above his desk:

1st Semester: Write instructional plans for one course and begin to track what actually happens in each class and how well it worked.

2nd Semester: Review syllabus based on the student learning experience. Revise as necessary.

3rd Semester: Coordinate with several friends to visit each other’s classrooms twice during the course of the semester.

4th Semester: Join a campus learning community

**TIPS**

- Reflection doesn’t happen well on the go. Schedule a few minutes daily or weekly for reflecting on your instructional skills as a professional educator.
- Make a point of engaging colleagues with anecdotes from your classroom that spark reflection. Bounce your ideas off them.
- Set aside a bit of time after every class to capture thoughts on students and instructional plans.

**PITFALLS**

- It’s sometimes difficult to distinguish between “Is this good instruction?” and “Am I a good instructor?” True reflection, like any powerful learning, requires ego disengagement.
- It’s often tempting to let our reflections reinforce our initial assumptions or interpretations. Reflective professionals are a bit skeptical about believing what they desire to believe, as opposed to believing what the evidence shows.

**KEY ARTICLES**


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