

An Invitation to Reflective Teaching and Learning: A conceptual framework for creating an inclusive classroom culture



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Defining reflective teaching and learning

Unreflective teaching is teacher-centered instruction that pays little attention to individual learner needs. Characterized by a lack of direct engagement, unreflective teaching and learning perspectives do not readily submit to critical self-analysis, which leaves all the forces that frame the learning environment veiled and unexamined. To weaken the strong hold of unreflective teaching and learning on higher education, some researchers and instructors have experimented with various student-centered and community-centered approaches. One such method is reflective teaching and learning.

Defined partly as willingness to recognize that the degree of learning that takes place in the classroom is predetermined, to a certain extent, by the individual histories of instructors and learners, reflective teaching and learning offers an alternative teaching and learning method that seeks to open communication between instructors and students. Both learners and instructors bring different learning histories to the classroom. These histories coalesce to form the teaching or learning

lenses, which may predispose the bearer to only see certain interpretations. Previous informal and formal education makes up the most fundamental aspect of the learner and instructor lenses. For example, my teaching lens is made up of knowledge that arises out of an interdisciplinary framework. I believe that integrating different modes of thinking provides a rich perspective for understanding a given subject matter. Consequently, my teaching preparation has included the combination of concepts from a wide range of disciplines to appeal to different learners. For learners who are not familiar with this approach, reflective learning would provide an avenue by which students could explore interdisciplinary work with the support and encouragement of the instructor.

Applying reflective teaching and learning methods

The first step in building a reflective teaching and learning frame of mind is developing the ability to critically look at the present through a historical lens. Objectivising both the learner and instructor lenses allow for both instructors and learners to begin to understand how previous learning experiences shape the present.

A good example that captures this is my evolution as a social scientist. With most contemporary

migration research focusing primarily on economic variables, I quickly realized that, if I were going to be able to contribute to the expansion of our knowledge on migration related issues, I had to first develop a broader research lens. Objectivising my predominantly socio-economic research lens allowed me to come to the realization that disciplines like psychology, history, anthropology and linguistics all offer strong concepts that can improve my understanding of migration. According to Malcolm Knowles (1980), this “self induced dissatisfaction with the present inadequacies, [which is generated by self-diagnosis], coupled with a clear sense of direction for self improvement is in fact a good definition of ‘motivation to learn’.” (p.48) The locus of control in this case becomes intrinsically anchored instead of extrinsically situated. The idea of self-diagnosis can also be implemented in the classroom setting, via small groups.

Self-diagnosis is beneficial

for several reasons. Because it is based on the principles of life long learning, new competency models can always be created to

address evolving learner needs. The process of self-diagnosis is an effective tool for helping students develop as self-directed learners. Self-diagnosis allows instructors

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to match students to knowledge instead of knowledge to students.

Knowles (1980) states, “one of the strongest impulses that students have is to show how good they are. So the notion of engaging in a self-diagnostic process for the purpose of revealing one’s weaknesses—one’s needs for additional learning—is both strange and threatening.” (p.229) Overcoming this barrier is crucial to self-directed learning. To accomplish this, students must adopt a reflective approach to learning. To help students develop this perspective, instructors must offer presentations on the benefits of self-reflective learning and self-diagnosis. Learning assessments within this student-centered and reflective framework is seen as an opportunity to not only measure current competency levels, but also as a way to generate future learning objectives.

Building a reflective teaching and learning framework

In his essay “How we think” written in 1933, Dewey states that persons do not just think at large, nor do ideas arise out of nothingness—even ideas have histories. Questioning the applied impact and role of both the results and conditions of previous learning experiences is crucial to reflective teaching and learning. Consequently, the process of making meaning in the classroom has a history as well. The past experiences of both students and instructors help determine the amount of learning that happens within a given learning environment.

Take, for example, my first teaching experience during the first year of my PhD. I was solely

responsible for preparing lectures, teaching and marking student papers. In all, I taught the same class in two consecutive semesters. The two classes presented very different challenges. My first experience teaching the class was more straight-forward than the second. I found that the students in the daytime class were, on average, more focused and prepared for class on than students in the nighttime class. Given my student-centered approach to teaching, it was more difficult to have the kind of robust discussion I wanted for students during the nighttime class. Arriving at this realization has helped me personalize my teaching practices and tailor my teaching methods to reflect the fact that students’ lives outside the classroom affect their lives inside the classroom.

Recognizing the historical component of the learner and instructor lenses is a fundamental notion within the reflective teaching and learning framework.

Because of this historical component, both learners and instructors share the responsibility of reflecting on past learning for the purpose of improving respective teaching and learning abilities. Without this, differences in the level of preparedness and unreflective teaching approaches are likely to combine forces to

successfully sabotage the learning process.

Building a reflective teaching perspective includes helping students to develop the essential tools for challenging distorted beliefs about learning capabilities that may either reduce their level of commitment or threaten to completely derail their commitment to learning. One technique that has worked for me is the introduction of learning journals to my students. I have encouraged my students to keep learning journals to document in-class and out-of class comments, questions and reactions. When read in retrospect, the learning journal tracks the growth of students and can motivate continued critical thinking.

I learned this journaling technique from my undergraduate advisor. We met weekly on Friday afternoons for a creative hour of reading each other’s poetry. She encouraged me to keep a journal for grappling with some of the issues

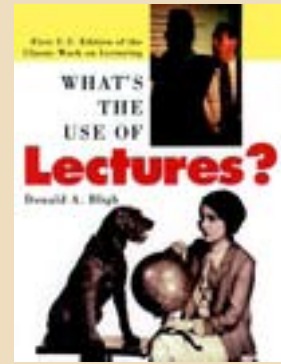


raised in the poems. Our time together was instrumental in the development of my critical thinking skills, which directly correlated to an increased self-efficacy in my learning capabilities. This example illuminates how learning diaries can not only be used as a tool for building self-efficacy but also ultimately for

finding one's academic voice.

Building a reflective teaching and learning perspective also includes becoming aware of the demands students have to meet with their education and adopting a problem based approach to offer students the best chance at meeting the identified need. It also includes the development of a teaching self-awareness that seeks to bridge the gap that divides instructors and students. It includes the development of a community of learners wherein both students and teachers construct knowledge together. It includes the recognition that self-efficacy

and social efficacy play a part in the learning process, and also, the recognition that attribution, which is what students attribute their failures and successes to, is important. Finally, it means breaking with conservative teaching methods that seek to maintain a distance between teachers and students. Ultimately, the building of an inclusive classroom and development of self-reflectivity within a classroom setting is only possible with a strong commitment to the principles of life-long learning and self-directed learning.



[What's the Use of Lectures?](#)
by Donald A. Bligh

Donald Bligh draws from decades of research and hands-on experience to help college and university teachers develop and use lectures effectively. *What's the Use of Lectures?* is an indispensable guide for anyone who aspires to be a skilled lecturer and teacher. It examines the nature of teaching and learning in a classroom lecture—describing how students learn, how much knowledge they retain, and how to enhance their attention and motivation. Bligh builds on this information to share strategies for creating organized, thoughtful, and effective lectures. Topics include taking notes, using handouts, practicing different formats and styles, obtaining feedback, overcoming difficulties, evaluating the lecture, and testing alternative methods when lecturing is not adequate.



[Engaging the Online Learner: Activities and Resources for Creative Instruction](#)
Rita-Marie Conrad, J. Ana Donaldson

Includes an innovative framework—the Phases of Engagement—that helps instructors become more involved as knowledge generators and cofacilitators of a course. The book also provides specific ideas for tested activities (collected from experienced online instructors across the nation) that can go a long way to improving online learning.

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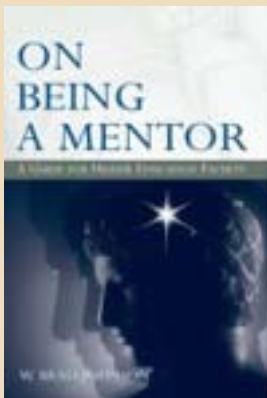
Further Reading

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Available at the CLT Resource Library



[On Being a Mentor: A Guide for Higher Education Faculty](#)
by W. Brad Johnson

The definitive guide for faculty in higher education who wish to mentor both students and junior faculty. It features strategies, guidelines, best practices, and recommendations for professors who wish to excel in this area. Written in a pithy style, this no-nonsense guide offers straightforward advice about managing problem mentorships and measuring mentorship outcomes.