

The Deep End

Self-Reflection: Easier Said Than Done Gary Poole, Former STLHE President

Anyone who calls him or herself an academic must be a reflective practitioner. Reflection is at the heart of what we are supposed to do. Without it, there would be no value in peer review, for what is the value of that feedback to which we do not give due consideration?

Back in 1933, John Dewey defined reflection as “turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious consecutive consideration. It enables us to act in a deliberate and intentional fashion” (p.3).

The research enterprise demands this type of reflection. With each new inquiry must come the question, “How can I improve upon my last attempt?” What can I learn from the data I have gathered that will improve my research methodology and help me better answer the questions I am asking? Am I asking the right questions?

In our teaching, we receive copious amounts of feedback, the fuel of reflection. This happens every time students write an exam, submit an assignment, give a presentation, or submit evaluation surveys we have data. In some institutions, teaching-related conversations with colleagues have become more common today. We visit each other’s classes, either by invitation or by edict. Our job is to simply take all this data, assess its validity and applicability, determine how our practice should change in light of this, and implement the changes. Easy. Hardly.

The problem is that effective self-reflection requires objectivity and this is just downright impossible to achieve. Indeed, I suspect that psychologists would consider the notion of objective self-reflection to be oxymoronic. (Okay, I confess. I am a psychologist and I do consider objective self-reflection to be oxymoronic.) Objectivity would require an unemotional consideration of what others think about our teaching. If we were capable of objectivity, we could read all those student evaluations with the same calm detachment, regardless of what they might say. We would never give a comment undue weight. We would never read 50 positive comments then dwell upon the one negative one in the pile. We would never engage in simultaneous rationalization while we read through comments.

But we do. There are numerous psychological theories available to help us understand why objective self-reflection is impossible. For example, Self-Discrepancy theory posits that we carry three selves around: an actual self, an ought self, and an ideal self (Higgins, 1987). According to the theory, we regularly make comparisons among these selves, especially between actual and ought, and actual and ideal. These comparisons will always reveal discrepancies, and these discrepancies arouse emotions in us. According to the theory, the greater the discrepancy between our ideal and actual selves, the more likely we are to experience sadness, depression, and disappointment. Discrepancies between the person we think we ought to be and the one we really are result in guilt, anxiety, and anger. Generally unpleasant stuff.

These emotions drown objectivity. Applying all this to self-reflection in teaching, Self-Discrepancy theory would predict that we think about what we ought to be doing in our teaching — how prepared we really should be, how knowledgeable we really should be and so on. But life intervenes, and we are not always fully prepared. There are many things we don’t know that we either ought to know or, ideally, we could know. An acknowledgement of the inevitability of these discrepancies and the emotions that accompany them is an important step toward effective self-reflection. It is also a challenging one.

Another problem is that objective self-awareness might not be entirely healthy. There are those who believe that the healthiest and happiest among us have refined the art of what has been called “positive illusion” (see for example Taylor & Brown, 1988; Taylor et al., 1989). It seems to me a balance needs to be struck here between our professional obligation to continually improve and our personal need to be

happy with who we are as teachers. Achieving this balance is another important step toward effective self-reflection. This is magnified by the fact that teaching is so-often viewed as a self-defining activity (see Palmer, 1998).

This balance is best captured for me by drawing a distinction between reflection and rumination. The former is constructive; the latter is not. Rumination is poorly controlled thinking. By this I mean that we can't turn it on and off at will and we can't rise above obsessive notions of inadequacy or upset. Here is my second confession of the article: Too often, I have caught myself ruminating over feedback rather than reflecting on it.

So, don't take it personally. It's all good. All we can ever do is our best anyway. Press on. The sun will come up tomorrow. These are the homilies I bring forward when I self-reflect. How successful am I? I'm not sure. I'll have to think about that.

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