

Theory to Practice

Practice Makes Perfect—Or Does It? The 3 R's of Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

Gary J. Dean

An effective practitioner is a reflective practitioner. We have all met people who are revered for their experience, professionalism, and indeed, their wisdom on the job. We have all also met those who are held up as negative examples—those with a narrow focus and limited gifts to give to others. What are the differences between the people with 10 years experience and the people with one year of experience 10 times? It just may be the ability to learn from that experience and to grow from it.

The Theory of Reflective Practice

Schon (1983) describes the concept of reflective practice. He explains that a reflective practitioner “does not keep means and ends separate, but defines them interactively as he frames a problematic situation” (p. 68). Peters (1991) states that “the reflective practitioner is a student of his or her own actions and that the study of these actions is conducted in a systematic, analytical manner” (p. 90). Courtney (1992) discusses the problem of separating theory from practice: “Our field has become increasingly split around a false theory/practice dichotomy. And yet this need not be. For all of us engage in both theory and practice” (p. 21). The difference is between “espoused theory” and “theory-in-use”. Espoused theory is the accepted, text-book, explanation we give for our behavior. Theories-in-use are those we actually use to guide our actions on a daily basis; our skills are based on theories which we use to direct our behavior. We decide which skills to use, when and how to use them, what works and what does not. When there are difference between an espoused theory and our theory-in-use, we need to engage in systematic reflections to evaluate both our assumptions and our practice.

The Practice of Reflective Practice

Becoming a reflective practitioner takes effort but, fortunately, not the kind of effort that impinges on our ability to do our jobs. The effort can be put into our jobs—with immediate and long-term pay offs. This process is the 3 R's of becoming an effective reflective practitioner: read, reach out, and reflect.

Read

The word *read* represents getting to know your field; the first step is to ground your actions in a solid knowledge and skill base. There are a variety of ways in which we can engage in professional development: enrolling in formal education such as graduate programs in adult education, attending conferences and workshops, taking advantage of in-service training, engaging in self study, and observing the experts around us.

Acquiring knowledge and skills means dedication and commitment to professional development. Yet it is not possible in today's demanding world to approach so important a task as adult education with anything less than a solid knowledge and skill base.

Reach Out

As we engage in our professional development, we are anxious to try out our new found knowledge and skills. In order to do this, we get involved in a variety of activities—on the job, in our communities, with our families, and elsewhere. The idea is to get involved, to reach out. Try to find new ways to get involved, new projects, new people to help, new areas to serve. Getting involved serves as the opportunity to test and hone new skills, apply new knowledge, and develop problem-solving and critical-thinking skills.

Reflect

The key to successful practice as described under *Reach Out* is to learn from that practice. We can learn from our experiences when we engage in systematic thought about what we did and why. In effect, we must make explicit our theories-in-use and scrutinize them for their effectiveness. How can we do this? There are a number of techniques which will help us develop critical reflection:

Keeping notes, a diary, or a log of activities. We can review this literature in order to find common threads in our behavior and to find what works and what does not.

- Talking with colleagues, either informally or formally, and comparing notes on what we are doing and how well it is working.
- Trying new ideas systematically. When we learn something new, we should not just try it uncritically the first chance we get, but plan when we are going to use it and keep notes on how well it works.
- Instituting staff meetings to review cases, clients, learners, and new ideas. Using the staff meetings to generate and critique new ideas as well as current practices.

Conclusions

Of course, reflection must lead to renewed action, to reaching out in new and better ways. Such purposeful practice creates a continual cycle of reading, reaching out, and reflecting. In fact, there are not three discrete steps to this process; we are continually engaging in all three processes at once. What is important to remember is that we must be conscious that there are three different, if interrelated, processes going on simultaneously. Keeping their functions separate will enable us to be aware of when we are preparing to do (reading), when we are doing (reaching out), and when we are reflecting on what we have done.

Adult learning has been described as “systematic and sustained learning activities for the purpose of bringing about changes in knowledge, attitudes, values, or skills” (Darkenwald and Merriam, 1982, p. 9). This definition also describes reflective practice. Reflective practice is a commitment to continual learning—learning about oneself in order to improve what we do so that we can become more effective in helping others.

References

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