

Reflecting on Reflective Practice: (Re)Visiting Dewey and Schön

THOMAS S. C. FARRELL

Brock University

PREAMBLE

Since I began work in reflective practice, at first informally in the late 1970s and then more formally in the mid-1980s, I have always looked at reflective practice as a compass of sorts to guide teachers when they may be seeking direction (and I was and still am) as to what they are doing in their classrooms. The metaphor of reflection as a compass enables teachers to stop, look, and discover where they are at that moment and then decide where they want to go (professionally) in the future.

My beginnings in reflective practice were very tentative, but I realized early in my second language teaching career in Korea that I was always interested in, and even worried about, the impact my classes were having (or not having) on students' learning. For example, I remember wondering in the middle of one particular class if the group work I was making them do was actually useful for them or just easy for me to monitor and easier than teaching particular grammar items. Yes, I had all the latest readings at that time, especially those suggesting that it is better *not* to teach grammar overtly but to provide opportunities for students to *use* the language in class. I bought into all of this even though I wondered many times if the students in my classes were at times just practicing their mistakes—at that time, too, I had read that it is best not to correct each mistake because it threatens the students' motivation to speak, so I let them practice speaking and only went over common errors at the end of each lesson. I remember thinking at the time that it was fine for me as a teacher

because it was easier for me to set up the groups and let them at it (speak)—my interpretation of the so-called communicative language teaching approach. But as time went by, at the end of the 1970s and into the early 1980s, I decided to try to figure it out myself by thinking about what I was doing in a more systematic manner. Of course, it was not called reflective practice in 1979, and I had not heard of anyone else doing this type of thinking about teaching, and I was in Korea at a time of no Internet or very much communication with the outside world. And so I started in earnest looking at my own practice and have not stopped since. I have now come to a position again in my own work where I need to step back and reflect on where I have been, where I am now, and where I want to go with reflective practice and to redefine what it really means to me. This essay outlines some of my thoughts in reflective practice.

INTRODUCTION

Currently it seems that the terms *reflection* and *reflective practice* are so popular in education that they are nearly mandatory terms used in language teacher education and development programs—reflection is mentioned somewhere in these programs. Yes, many language educators still agree that some form of reflection is a desirable practice among teachers; however, the agreement stops there because there is still almost no consensus as to what reflective practice is and which reflective practices actually promote teacher development (Farrell, 2007). Perhaps this state of indecisiveness about what reflective practice in TESOL really means can be attributed to the many different interpretations of reflection and reflective practice that have surfaced in the past. Indeed, much has been written about reflection and reflective practice in many fields, such as education, medicine, and second language education, but there still remains a sense of lack of clarity about what it is and how it can be achieved.

This essay gives me an opportunity to look back at where reflective practice emerged in the 20th century. Specifically, I look back again at two of the great thinkers in this area to see how they influenced early conceptions of reflective practice so that we can reflect on where we are today. Specifically I (re)examine reflective

inquiry from John Dewey's (1933) original perspective and then look at how Donald Schön (1983, 1987) interpreted Dewey's conceptions of reflection in his work. My main reason for doing this is that interested readers will be able to better critique many of the current manifestations of reflective practice in the sense of how it has been operationalized so that they can see where the concept originated and what its roots really are. This is thus a reflective conversation (Schön, 1983, 1987) about reflective practice that I hope you will join so that you can draw your own conclusions on how it should be operationalized for your own needs.

JOHN DEWEY

Early in the 20th century the great American educator John Dewey (I take most of the following ideas from his wonderful book *How We Think*, published in 1933) suggested that one main aim of education is to help people acquire habits of reflection so they can engage in intelligent thought and action rather than routine thought and action. Dewey's work was situated in the post–Great Depression U.S. society, and he felt the need for a thinking citizenry in a democratic society. For him, this was the larger purpose of reflective inquiry. Dewey (1933) first outlined what reflective inquiry was *not* (and this is useful given today's lack of clarity and definitional problems associated with the concept of reflective practice): it is not just mulling things over that interests us, which unfortunately seems to be a wide interpretation of reflective thinking today. Dewey viewed reflective inquiry as “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends [that] constitutes reflective thought” (p. 16). Dewey was concerned about routine thinking whereby actions are guided by impulse, tradition, or authority. I wonder today, too, about how people in so-called democratic countries are trapped by their own routine thinking within political debates (see the record lows in voter turnout, for example, or the polarization of cable television stations that side with one group over the other while stating they are reporting the news objectively).

Within education, Dewey (1933) observed that teachers who do not bother to think intelligently about their work become slaves to routine, and he noted that one of the main challenges of learning was learning how to think intelligently: “While we cannot learn or be taught to think, we do have to learn how to think well, especially how to acquire the general habits of reflecting” (p. 35). Some may say that routine is necessary, but when I was asked recently how I teach the same classes each year, I answered that I do not teach “classes,” I teach students, and there is no routine for me; it all depends how each student reacts or does not react. So Dewey is correct to suggest that teachers should be on guard against blindly following routine, because if we do that then we will certainly be teaching classes rather than students. This to me is a form of reflective thinking.

For Dewey, the cause of reflective thinking comes out of the feeling of doubt or conflict connected to teaching. He mapped out five main phases of reflective thought that he considered not in a particular order but rather as fluid:

1. *Suggestion*: A doubtful situation is understood to be problematic, and some vague suggestions are considered as possible solutions.
2. *Intellectualization*: The difficulty or perplexity of the problem that has been felt (directly experienced) is intellectualized into a problem to be solved.
3. *Guiding Idea*: One suggestion after another is used as a leading idea, or hypothesis; the initial suggestion can be used as a working hypothesis to initiate and guide observation and other operations in the collection of factual material.
4. *Reasoning*: Reasoning links present and past ideas and helps elaborate the supposition that reflective inquiry has reached, or the mental elaboration of the idea or supposition as an idea or supposition.
5. *Hypothesis Testing*: The refined idea is reached, and the testing of this refined hypothesis takes place; the testing can be by overt action or in thought (imaginative action).

This to me was the first real systematization of reflective inquiry into teaching that I can remember seeing in the literature. It is structured to suggest that teachers look at their experiences, review and examine these in light of what evidence they can collect from their practice, and then plan what action they want to take as a result. Interested readers may want to note that Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) have since built on the work of Dewey

and suggested a cyclical model with three broader categories of reflective thought (experience, reflection, and outcome) that emphasize emotion as an element of reflective practice. In addition, Zeichner and Liston (1996, p. 24) also returned to Dewey's original ideas when they distinguished between routine action and reflective action and suggested that, for teachers, "routine action is guided primarily by tradition, external authority and circumstance" whereas reflective action "entails the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge."

Above all, Dewey (1933) considered reflection a form of freedom from routine behavior:

Reflection emancipates us from merely impulsive and merely routine activity, it enables us to direct our activities with foresight and to plan according to ends-in-view or purposes of which we are aware, to act in deliberate and intentional fashion, to know what we are about when we act. (p. 17)

In this sense he encouraged teachers (and all citizens really) to make informed decisions about their teaching, and that these decisions be based on systematic and conscious reflections rather than fleeting thoughts about teaching. Dewey maintained that when teachers combined these systematic reflections with their actual teaching experiences, then they could become more aware, and this would lead to professional development and growth as a teacher. Thus Dewey was advocating early for a form of evidence-based teaching.

DONALD SCHÖN

There was a lull for many years after Dewey's revolutionary thoughts on reflective practice, until the 1980s and the work of Donald Schön (1983, 1987). Some scholars say that imprints of Dewey's work are ever present in the work of Schön. In fact, Schön focused his dissertation on Dewey's theory of inquiry, and many say that this focus gave him a pragmatic framework that was present in most of his later work. Although Schön was interested in many aspects of organizational behavior, it is probably safe to say that for educators his work centered on the

notion of practitioner-generated intuitive practice. Schön (1983) made this clear in his early influential book *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*:

We are in need of inquiry into the epistemology of practice. What is the kind of knowing in which competent practitioners engage? How is professional knowing like and unlike the kinds of knowing in academic textbooks, scientific papers and journals? (p. vii)

In the 1970s Schön teamed up with Chris Argyris and developed the notion of single-loop and double-loop learning (Argyris & Schön, 1974). Single-loop learning is defined as planning, teaching, and testing, but as they noted this remains at the tacit level of learning; in double-loop learning, thinking, practice, and problems between the two are raised to an explicit level where they can be accessed.

Schön was interested in how professionals “know” through their practice because he was convinced they know more than they articulate in language. This he called *reflection-in-action*, or how teachers think on their feet. Reflection-in-action involves examining our beliefs and experiences and how they connect to our theories-in-use. However, in order to engage in reflection-in-action we must become aware of our knowing-in-action, and this process moves beyond the usual established ideas as practitioners build up and draw on a collection of images, ideas, and actions.

Applying Schön’s work to teaching (although he did not write directly about teachers), knowing-in-action would be crucial because teachers cannot possibly question every action or reaction while they are teaching; they would not be able to get through a class. So a teacher’s knowing-in-action works similar to when we recognize a face in a crowd but we do not list or try to consciously piece together each separate facial feature that makes a person recognizable to us. We do not consciously think, “Could that be . . .?”—we just know. In addition, if you were asked to describe the features that prompted this recognition, it might be difficult because, as Schön (1983) has pointed out, that type of information usually remains at the subconscious level of our thoughts. However, when a new situation or event occurs and teachers’

established routines do not work for them, then, according to Schön (1983), teachers use reflection-in-action to cope. Reflection-in-action involves a reflective conversation in which the practitioner is listening to the *situations' backtalk*. Thus there is a sequence of moments in a process of reflection-in-action in which the practitioner attempts to solve a problem as follows:

- A situation develops that triggers spontaneous, routine responses (such as in knowing-in-action): For example, a student cannot answer an easy grammar question, such as identifying a grammar structure, that he or she was able to answer during the previous class.
- Routine responses by the teacher (i.e., what the teacher has always done) do not produce a routine response and instead produce a surprise for the teacher: The teacher starts to explain how the student had already explained this grammar structure in the previous class and so the teacher wonders why this is the case. The teacher asks the student if anything is the matter, and the student says that he or she forgets the answer.
- This surprise response gets the teacher's attention and leads to reflection within an action: The teacher reacts quickly to try to find out why the student suddenly "forgets" a grammar structure the teacher knows the student has no trouble understanding. The teacher can ask the student directly to explain what is happening.
- Reflection now gives rise to on-the-spot experimentation by the teacher: The student may or may not explain why he or she is crying. The teacher will take some measures (depending on the reaction or nonreaction) to help solve the problem: ignore the situation, empathize with the student, help the student answer the question by modeling answers, and so forth.

According to Schön these sequences of moments are all present and lead to reflection-in-action. In this case Schön says that practitioners engage in a process of problem setting rather than problem solving. As Clarke (1995) explains, "this conversation between the practitioner and the setting provides the data which may then lead to new meanings, further reframing, and plans for further action" (p. 245).

DEWEY'S AND SCHÖN'S IMPACT ON REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Dewey (1933) considered reflective practice as intentional, systematic inquiry that is disciplined and that will ultimately lead to change and professional growth for teachers (reflection-*on*-action). Schön added to this the idea of a practitioner being able to

reflect on his or her intuitive knowledge while engaged in the action of teaching (reflection-*in*-action). We can also add the idea that both types of reflection, *in* and *on* action, can encourage teachers to reflect *for* action. Dewey's and Schön's legacy is important because they moved the concept of reflection far beyond everyday simple wonderings about a situation to a more rigorous form of thinking whereby a teacher systematically investigates a perceived problem in order to discover a solution. That said, Dewey (1933) did not consider a problem as an error or a mistake but rather a puzzling, curious, inviting, and engaging issue for a teacher to investigate. Like Dewey, I consider reflective practice as a form of systematic inquiry that is rigorous and disciplined. And like Schön, I am interested in how teachers "think on their feet," or how they reflect in action, on action, and for action.

For me the implications of both Dewey's and Schön's work is that reflective teaching is evidence based; teachers collect data or evidence about their work and then reflect on this evidence to make informed decisions about their practice. Engaging in evidence-based reflective practice enables teachers to articulate to themselves (and others) what they do, how they do it, why they do it, and what the impact of one's teaching is on student learning. The results of engaging in such reflective practice may mean an affirmation of current practices or making changes, but these changes will not be based on impulse, tradition, or the like; they will emerge as a result of analysis of concrete evidence.

In addition, both Dewey's and Schön's work suggests that teachers can look at what is actual and occurring (theories-in-use) in their practice and compare this to their beliefs (espoused theories) about learning and teaching. This productive tension (Freeman, personal communication) between espoused theories and theories-in-use provides teachers with the opportunity to systematically look at their practice so that they can deepen their understanding of what they do and thus come to new insights about their students, their teaching, and themselves. As Dewey (1933, p. 87) noted, growth comes from a "reconstruction of experience," and by reflecting on these experiences we can reconstruct our own approaches to teaching.

I end this essay as I began, by going back to Dewey's (1933) work on reflective inquiry, when he noted that in order to engage in reflective practice, teachers need to have at least three attributes of reflective individuals that remain important today: open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. Open-mindedness is a desire to listen to more than one side of an issue and to give attention to alternative views. Responsibility means careful consideration of the consequences to which an action leads; in other words, what is the impact of reflection on the learners? Wholeheartedness implies that teachers can overcome fears and uncertainties to critically evaluate their practice in order to make meaningful change. Dewey added a fourth attitude that needed to be cultivated in order to engage in reflective practice: directness. Directness implies a belief that something is worth doing, which I think nicely sums up why teachers should engage in reflective practice: because it is worth doing. The main idea of what we do is that we teach students rather than lessons.

CONCLUSION

I have clearly attempted to avoid discussing the tools associated with reflective practice in this essay because I wanted to get back to basics as to what reflective practice is and where it came from. A reexamination of both Dewey's and Schön's work has reinforced the idea that reflective practice is not isolated introspection; rather, it is evidence based, in that teachers need to systematically collect evidence (or data) about their work and then make decisions (instructional and otherwise) based on this information. Reflective practice, then, is a compass that allows us to stop for a moment or two and consider how we can create more learning opportunities for students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank Professor Donald Freeman for his insightful comments on an earlier draft of this essay. I am also grateful for funding from the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada in support of this work.

THE AUTHOR

Thomas S. C. Farrell is professor of applied linguistics at Brock University, in St. Catharines, Ontario, Canada. His professional interests include reflective practice and language teacher education and development. He is the author of several books and numerous scholarly articles.

REFERENCES

- Argyris, C., & Schön, D. (1974). *Theory in practice: Increasing professional effectiveness*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Boud, D., Keogh, R., & Walker, D. (1985). *Reflection: Turning experience into learning*. London, England: Kogan Page.
- Clarke, A. (1995). Professional development in practicum settings: Reflective practice under scrutiny. *Teaching and Teacher Education*, 11(13), 243–261.
- Dewey, J. (1933). *How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process*. Boston, MA: Houghton Mifflin.
- Farrell, T. S. C. (2007). *Reflective language teaching: From research to practice*. London, England: Continuum Press.
- Schön, D. A. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Schön, D. A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Towards a new design for teaching and learning in the profession*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Zeichner, K., & Liston, O. (1996). *Reflective teaching*. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.