

## Reflection – a key to professional growth

In a recent TED broadcast ([http://www.ted.com/talks/dan\\_pink\\_on\\_motivation.html](http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation.html)) Dan Pink, Al Gore's former speechwriter, describes the three traits that drive human beings in the 21st century: autonomy, mastery and purpose. Research in the social sciences and business have confirmed that people want to be able to do what interests them (autonomy), be able to do it well (mastery) and feel that what they are doing is of benefit to others (purpose). This is as true of teaching as of being a physician, nurse, musician, author, film director, engineer or athlete. And it is also true that in all professions achieving these goals or states of being takes time: time to be in a place of total autonomy, time to develop or master skills, knowledge and their interconnection, and time to be recognized or to be able to see what one's contribution might be. In teaching a heritage language (HL), for example, it is not until a young student becomes a young adult that s/he will recognize the value of having learned the HL, of having given up Saturday morning swimming lessons or having had to do homework on Friday nights when unilingual friends were at parties or sleepovers. But that day will arrive and most HL students do make their way back to their community school instructors to express gratitude and acknowledgement.

To become a master teacher also takes the ability to learn. Teachers learn much about teaching by doing, watching, experimenting and thinking. They constantly think about what was successful about their lessons and what needed to be improved. They think about their students – the ones who are learning well and the ones who seem to be having difficulty and how they can better help them learn. They think about the issues in society and how they will convey them to their students so that they can live peacefully in an ever changing globalized world. They think about the values, beliefs and traditions that they want to pass on to their students. This type of thinking is called REFLECTION. Like looking into a mirror, a reflection is something that allows teachers to look at their own selves, teaching practice and personal context and decide to accept what they have done and continue doing it or change it in the future .

### Two types of reflection

Donald Schon (1930-1997), an influential American thinker of the 20th century, captured how professionals (especially in health, education and architecture) make decisions and improve their practice. In his seminal work *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) he coined the terms *reflection in action* and *reflection on action* to describe the two kinds of reflection that professionals do in the act of their work and how they improve as a result.

#### *Reflection in action*

Because teachers face so many unpredictable moments in a day and cannot control many of the variables that influence them (e.g. who will be ill and not present, will the photocopier work, will the students have done their homework. . . ), they must learn to solve problems **while they are taking place**. Some people call this thinking on your feet or improvising. Schon describes this phenomenon as Reflection IN action and

elaborates on how teachers draw upon their previous experiences to find solutions to the problems they face. The more experience they have the quicker they can often resolve situations. Put another way, “Good judgment comes from experience, and experience comes from poor judgment.” (John Whiston) An experienced teacher is sometimes said to be able to do things instinctively, but really the teacher is drawing on a wealth of knowledge and experience in both knowing and doing, in having made poor judgements and having learned not to make similar ones again. For Schon this also reveals the artistry in professions like teaching.

### *Reflection on action*

The more Schon studied teachers and read research about others who studied teaching and teachers, the more convinced he was that teachers can learn a lot about teaching from themselves (autonomously). Over time researchers have confirmed that teachers can learn a lot about themselves personally and professionally through teaching, but that they also benefit from a catalyst of experience and guidance to trigger that potential. Many things can act as a trigger to help a teacher improve his/her practice: private and shared oral or written reflections or journals, reading about second language acquisition (SLA), observing other trained teachers, observing other untrained teachers (if only to see what they aren't doing correctly), discussing one's classes with other teachers, trying out new methodologies, learning about the students' expectations in a classroom. . .

While many moments in a teacher's day to day life require reflection in action as a response to spontaneous surprises, good teaching requires ample planning and preparation. The more plans a teacher has made, along with the materials to help each plan become a scaffolded reality for students, the better a teacher can respond to the needs and interests of students. Such well scaffolded plans and resources take time to develop and accumulate, so beginner teachers need to work long hard hours before they will have the repertoire of experience and resources to be able to plan in their heads the morning before class and find the materials they need in a drawer of clearly labeled files!

Teachers must plan for instruction based on what students know (background knowledge), what they need to learn (program of studies, syllabi or curriculum), how quickly they can learn (sequencing, pacing, chunking, scaffolding), and how they learn (learning styles and multiple intelligences) while **simultaneously** being ready for the unexpected. The more detail in a lesson plan the better the teacher can prepare for some of the anticipated or possible unexpected events that might occur (e.g. what will you do if a student's homework is not done, what is your back up plan if the photocopier does not work) because the teacher is less concerned with what s/he will do next. Appendix A offers a very detailed lesson plan format for a beginning teacher. It reveals the many things that a teacher must **learn** to master: what you will teach, in what order, how long each step will take, what the teacher will say (in the HL, without using English, at the level that the students will understand), what the teacher will do while talking (e.g. point to a visual, circulate, write on the board or underline a word), what the students will do and say at the same time (e.g. listen, watch, work with a partner, read silently or aloud) and most importantly, **WHY** you are doing each thing that you are planning (e.g. to

explain, to model, to give examples, to provide humour, to appeal to the multiple intelligences, to foreshadow something that will be taught later). While this plan may take a long time to develop it is an exercise that will sharpen a teacher's thinking skills and train a teacher to make good plans in the future (just like a musician must practice scales to improve his or her performance or an athlete must lift weights to develop strength, a teacher's lesson plans and prepared materials will help improve the quality of his or her future lessons).

The completion of a plan is called *lesson as planned (LAP)*. Once the teacher teaches the plan s/he has completed a *lesson as taught (LAT)*. LAP is an important tool for reflection as well because by comparing it to LAT, a teacher can see why things went well or not so well. Thinking back on LAP and LAT is akin to what Schon calls *reflection on action*.

Schön believes that both types of reflection are necessary to becoming an effective practitioner. Reflecting on one's strengths and weaknesses helps in teacher development throughout a career.

### **Learning to reflect**

Reflection is looking at one's self and the best way to improve one's teaching practice is to look at one's self. This article will offer you four tools to help you reflect on your teaching and set goals for its improvement: by thinking and writing about your lesson and its strengths and weaknesses in a journal; by videotaping your lesson and watching it later; by discussing any of your written reflections or questions with colleagues; or by watching someone else teach and using their style as a tool to reflect on your own style

#### *Writing a journal*

There are three types of written daily journal reflections: open ended, guided and research focused. All require systematic attention. An open ended reflection invites the teacher to freely think about his or her lesson and teaching and write whatever comes to mind. Sometimes when one's emotions are very strong – positively because of a great class or negatively because of a disappointing incident in class - an open reflection is an appropriate approach. Just writing about one's feelings can be therapeutic and at the same time informative when read later.

A guided reflection helps draw our attention to something so that we can learn it or learn to become more aware of it. It is valuable to have a balance of both guided and open-ended reflections. A research focused reflection was discussed in an article about action research in a previous IHLA newsletter (Bilash, 2009).

To get you started on writing your reflections (in English or even better in your HL) you might want to begin with one of the following starter sentences. By completing it you will gain insight and understanding about yourself as an instructor and what you consider important:

*When the lesson began, I felt...*  
*I wondered...*  
*During the lesson I realized...*  
*I noticed something about each student today....*  
*My overall impression is...*  
*In my lesson, I liked...*  
*I noticed....*  
*Next time, I would...*

Or, you might prefer to begin your written reflection by answering some questions. The following questions can help a teacher to reflect on different aspects of his or her teaching and improve them.

*First impression*

What did you like about today's lesson?  
What went well and why?  
What didn't go so well and why?  
If you could change something about the class, what would you change and why?

*Self critique*

What did the students learn in today's lesson?  
What did you learn?  
How could the lesson be improved?  
Did the lesson prepare students for the next lesson?  
What were your strengths/weaknesses?  
How have you improved?  
What can you continue to work on?  
How effective was the pacing of your lesson?  
Did you prepare enough supports for students to learn with support?  
How much did you circulate during the lesson? What did you notice in the class?  
What can you remember about each student?  
Did you invite students to give you feedback about how the lesson could be better? Are you afraid of their feedback and why?

*Focus on the student*

How much opportunity did the students have to speak? Read? Write? Listen?  
Did they do pair work?  
What did they learn? How can I be certain that they learned? (assessment)  
Were they motivated? If not, what could I do to increase their motivation?  
Is the layout of the classroom conducive to their learning?  
Did they participate with enthusiasm? Did they have fun?  
Did they complete their homework or did their parents do it for them?  
What support did they need to complete each activity in class, and did I provide it? (templates, encouragement, use of a dictionary)  
What joyful moments do you remember about the lesson?

What did students do or say that was unexpected? (Cute? Memorable? Worrisome?)

### *At the end of the reflection*

How do you feel about your lesson now? Why?

An important part of all teaching is the reflection that takes place after a class. After each class, it is helpful to take down some notes about what happened even if you do not have time to write a detailed reflection. And, if even that is difficult for your time schedule, at least think about finishing the sentences or answering the questions above orally. The checklist in Appendix B might help you.

Remember that students are a great source of feedback about one's teaching and can offer one much to reflect upon. Refer to IHLA's newsletter to learn more about collecting feedback from students (Bilash, 2004).

### *Videotaping*

With the permission of your school principal and parents of your students you may wish to videotape your lesson and watch and listen to it later. This experience may be a bit like walking through the Hall of Mirrors exhibit found at many theme parks. You will see yourself thin, thick, small, large and out of shape. There may be no better truth than such a videotape. After watching and listening to your tape be sure to answer some of the questions in the previous section . . . and end on a positive note: what was positive about your lesson?

A videotaped lesson is an excellent opportunity to experience LAP and LAT in action. Sometimes we spend a lot of time planning and preparing for a lesson and then learn that it is too difficult or too simple for the learners or that learners respond in ways that were not anticipated. Since the class must continue, we must then *ad lib* our teaching. If this happens to you during your videotaping do not worry; these changes may offer you the most insight about WHY you made a decision and what you should consider more consciously in future lessons. Always do your best and be honest, AND you can never fail!!

### *Discussing with colleagues*

Discussions with colleagues offer teachers at least three important benefits. First, by discussing anything with anyone, one gains clarity. By discussing something with someone who knows a lot about the same subject one also gains new ideas. In fact, a more experienced colleague can act as a capable peer (Vygotsky, 1967) and give tips or offer more experienced ways to look at the challenges one is facing. In addition to clarity and learning new ways to look at issues, discussions with colleagues can also build a group of like-minded practitioners. With time, such a group can form a core that is willing to make changes together and support one another through change.

Research has long established that we are social-cultural beings who learn through interaction with one another. If you have a colleague who is willing and able to talk with you about his/her teaching and listen to you talk about yours on a regular basis you will both benefit. The ideal situation might be for you to agree to stay for 30-45 minutes after each HL class to debrief your day (or evening). Together, you may be able to offer each other ideas about how to help individual students or better motivate your class, for example. If you do not have colleagues with whom you can share then your written journal will be of particular importance to you. As you reread it you will be able to see how your own thoughts and practices are changing.

### *Watching someone else teach*

Another great way to reflect on one's own teaching is by watching another teacher teach. As one observes what and how another teacher moves through a lesson one is usually also thinking about one's own style and practice. Any of the previously mentioned tools can be used during an observation: you might follow the lesson plan structure using the BSLIM lesson plan model; you might reflect on the lesson using some of the guiding questions, or you might refer to the observation checklist in Appendix C.

### **It's a new year!**

A recent Hollywood hit movie, *Julie and Julia* tells two true stories about the history of two books: Julia Child's French cookbook and Julie Powell's one year memoir in blog form about learning French cooking. Julia Child's story reminds us of the importance of diligence and following your heart. With the support of friends and colleagues she eventually convinced American editors that there was a market for her cookbook. Her success came after a relentless effort to explain to others the value of her idea. The story of the younger Julie Powell reminds the viewer that one needs commitment to reach any dream, that sharing one's joys and successes with others is not only personally helpful but of interest to others, and that the hard work of any good idea will eventually pay off, and likely in unexpected ways. Why not make the same one year commitment as Julie and agree to write a journal about your teaching for the next year? You might even turn it into a blog!

As you begin a new school year take time to decide how you will reflect and why. Remember that the more writing you do the longer you will be the record of your own thinking about teaching. A journal can:

- act as a record or diary of things that were done during each class or week;
- help you to develop and increase metacognitive awareness (your awareness of how you learn will in turn help you better assist students in learning) ;
- give you an opportunity to express your joys, frustrations, concerns, worries and successes; and
- give you a memory to think back on and see how you have improved and grown.

Remember also to be gentle with yourself: think about all of the positive things you are doing and do not become overwhelmed with the aspects that you want to change and improve. As Charles Dickens said, “Reflect upon your present blessings, of which every man has many; not on past misfortunes, of which all men have some.”

Good luck and have a great school year!

Visit the Best of Bilash website for more information and tips about teaching heritage languages: [www.education.ualberta.ca/staff/olenka.bilash/](http://www.education.ualberta.ca/staff/olenka.bilash/)

## References

Schön, D. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner. How professionals think in action*, London: Temple Smith.

High Tech Reflection Strategies Make Learning Stick by Suzie Boss <http://www.edutopia.org/student-reflection-blogs-journals-technology>

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner [http://www.education.umd.edu/teacher\\_education/sthandbook/reflection.html](http://www.education.umd.edu/teacher_education/sthandbook/reflection.html)

Bilash, O (2009). Improve your classroom practice through action research - Become a researcher of your own instruction. *IHLA Newsletter*, 6 (3), 8-22. Edmonton, Canada: International and Heritage Languages Association.

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Appendix A

## Practice making detailed lessons using the BSLIM lesson plan model

Scaffolding

	Time	What the TEACHER does	What the Teacher says	What the STUDENTS do	What the STUDENTS say	WHY?
A						To get to know students To help students feel relaxed To assess their abilities
						To model
						To give structure
						To give support
						??
						??

## Appendix B

The following checklist about self reflection may help you to improve your writing or give you something to discuss with a more capable or experienced teacher.

My reflections:			
	All of the time	Most of the time	I need to improve
Are detailed			
Reveal awareness of what goes on in my mind while planning			
Reveal awareness of what goes on in my mind while teaching			
Reveal the ability to self critique			
Show that I can accept constructive feedback and act upon it through goal setting			
Show that I make connections between today's lesson and previous ones			
Show that I am comfortable identifying and acknowledging personal strengths and weaknesses			
Reveal metacognitive awareness of my process of learning			
Reveal that I am aware of <i>how students learn by participating and observing</i>			
Reveal that I am aware of evidence of learning in my students: through conversations, observations and products			
Reveal that I am aware of the consequences of my decisions, values and attitudes on my students and co-workers			
Reveal that I talk about student learning and see how the activities, strategies and approaches I use help them to learn			
Reveal my curiosity about many things – how a language is learned, how my students learn, what they like or don't like and why. ..			
Reveal that I take initiative to find answers to my questions (I look at the internet, I take courses, I read books or articles, I subscribe to journals or newsletters, I talk to colleagues. . . )			
Show that I am aware that sometimes <i>you recognize how something that has a positive outcome for one person may have a more negative impact on others</i>			

## Appendix C – Things to watch for when observing the lesson of a colleague

1. How did the teacher make students feel comfortable? Or not?
2. What was the ‘giving it’ part of this lesson? Please specify the content and what was done.
3. What was the ‘getting it’ part of this lesson? Please specify the content and what was done by the teacher and the students.
4. What was the ‘using it’ part of this lesson? Please specify the content and what was done by the teacher and the students.
5. How was the teacher modeling?
6. How did the teacher help students know that it’s OK to make mistakes?
7. How and when did the teacher assess?
8. How did the teacher provide support for the students to learn and feel successful?
9. Did the teacher use Conversations, Observations or Products to assess? If so, when?
10. When did the teacher use English and why? Was it needed? Why?
11. List the ways in which the teacher seemed to plan the lesson based on what students knew.
12. How did the teacher use constraints-based planning?
13. What did you like about the lesson?
14. What do you think the students liked about the lesson? Why do you think so?
15. What do you think the students found challenging in the lesson? Why do you think so?
16. How could the lesson be improved?