

Unit 8 Response

From my experience as a student and as a teacher, it has become very evident that each classroom and each hourly class, for the matter, is different. Each class comes with its own set of students and the dynamics of their backgrounds, personalities, learning styles, behavior, knowledge, etc, all play a key role in the success of that classroom. After my first year of teaching, I quickly realized that I was very prepared with the knowledge of what to teach and how to teach to a general population, but only through trial and error did I discover what was best for each grade level, each hourly class, and eventually, each student. No matter how much I was equipped with the best practices for teaching in the classroom, the best teacher was that of my successes and failures that came only from experience. From these important revelations in my own teaching, I have come to believe that a *teacher's experience* is one of the most fruitful approaches to studying education. According to Hillary Sperling, "Learning--like evolution--is a changing, developing process that requires an ongoing reconstruction of experience" (2.2 Narrative) and this form of inquiry challenges teachers to be self-reflective in their teaching practices in order to learn and evolve into the best educators they can be for their particular set of students in their particular environmental circumstances.

This approach to inquiry involves extensive self-reflection by the teacher and relies solely upon the personal experiences of that teacher. Vivian Paley describes the act of tapping into our, "own inner support of memories, feelings, and instincts" in order to better understand our role (Paley, Self-Reflective Inquiry, p. 118). The *first step* toward self-reflection is to determine the mode or modes in which you will reflect on your teaching. These modes could include daily journals, discussions with other teachers about your teaching, video or audio recordings, etc.

According to Paley, her personal preference is evaluation and reflection through writing. She stated, “I do not know what I am thinking until I make it clear on a page” and “unless we write it down, analyze it, think about it, discuss it with each other, stretch it out as if it is a piece of academic wisdom that we are trying to interpret” then teachers will never benefit from inquiry (2.6 narrative).

The *second step* in self-reflection, after the mode of reflection is chosen, is to take a step back and evaluate ourselves through our chosen mode. In order to understand ourselves and our students in the classroom, it is essential that teachers question themselves. Self-evaluation is a form of self-reflection and this type of evaluation allows teachers to dig deeper into how they personally teach and what outcomes resulted from the way something was taught. Teachers determine what worked well, what did not work well, and from this information they can determine what could be done in the future to make it better. Because the individual teachers are the only ones in the room every single day, apart from the actual students, and they know the dynamics of the classroom, the personalities and backgrounds of the children and their knowledge, they must be the ones to examine more closely what is best. Paley continues in her advice, stating that, “only when we write down our thoughts and observations may we question and argue with ourselves about the things we do and say” (Paley, *Self-Reflective Inquiry*, p. 118). A book, a lecture, a workshop, etc, may give good advice and a starting point for self-reflection, but until methods and suggestions are applied to personal experience, they will never come full circle.

The *third step* in self-reflection is to get to know yourself and the students you are teaching. What may be a wonderful method for another teacher may not be as effective for your

own teaching. Paley states in her article that, “we all have a desire to learn more about ourselves and the children who call us teacher” (Paley, *Self-Reflective Inquiry*, p. 122) and by doing so, we can develop the methods by which we can effectively teach. Additionally, in *The Girl with the Brown Crayon*, she stressed that, “children are often negatively affected when I discount my own observations and go along with the expectations of others” (p. 46). Teachers and students can easily see when a teacher is not being genuine and true to themselves and that will be reflected in the level of attention and learning of the students.

One of the greatest issues facing education today is the fact that teaching is not a one-size-fits-all act. With new research, the shape of education has drastically changed in the last fifty years. Children, too, no longer fit into the cookie cutter model. Students are coming from more and more different backgrounds, whether economically, culturally, or environmentally. The special aspect of using teacher experience as a form of inquiry is that the focus can be shifted from general problems and issues in education, to a teacher’s particular problems and issues within their setting and to their unique collection of students that comprise their classrooms.

First, America is growing more and more diverse each year and with such multicultural dynamics at work in education today, teachers need to be mindful of the cultural differences between their students and what those expectations mean for them. In addition, students are growing up in drastically diverse environments. Students are coming from households with a great number of new circumstances and environmental factors at play. Teachers who are self-reflective can learn to understand these differences and individual needs within their own

classrooms and work to offset such circumstances and expectations in order to help these students, who may not have fared well under the cookie-cutter teaching practices, succeed.

Second, differentiation of learning abilities and styles is a critical issue that one can address within the framework of their classroom. With the prevalence of special education resources and identification of a greater number of learning and mental disabilities, teachers must be mindful of the resources available and the educational supports needed for students with special needs. As stated in the 2.8 narrative, “even Jane Austen . . . knew there were few answers, only temporary solutions to puzzling behaviors and events”. With the staggering differences between students, teachers more than ever, need to find ways of differentiating instruction for their set of students on an individual basis, and sometimes, on a per-assignment and lesson basis.

It has been noted that, "teachers frequently establish 'proof' of the effectiveness of their methods, not in order to write a dissertation or a book, nor even necessarily to convince others, but simply because once they discover certain truths, they can no longer teach in another way" (2. 4 narrative). This form of inquiry most benefits the teacher who is partaking in it. It is very easy for that teacher to access their findings and put them into practice. While this may be true, authentic reflective inquiry of this kind should offer others some sort of insight into the field of education.

Therefore, documenting your experiences is very useful because it gives other teachers an opportunity to learn from you. It is widely known that teachers learn best from other teachers who are in similar fields and environments. By sharing, teachers can look to your personal successes and learn about what you did that ended with such results and can learn from your

personal struggles and look to what was done to overcome them. According to Karen Gallas, a leading teacher researcher, "the truth is, if you're a teacher and you don't write, when you stop teaching, you leave no physical traces behind that can be incorporated into the body of knowledge about teaching and learning" (2.11 narrative). However, if a teacher keeps a clear record of proven experiences, other teachers can learn from those experiences and apply the knowledge learned to their classrooms for years to come.

In today's educational realm, documentation and data are the supreme forces in educational reform. With this in mind, this form of inquiry can easily come under fire by legislators and governmental officials who do not personally understand the educational process. So although this form of inquiry offers much to the education field, teachers should be cautious because government and research firms may not see as much benefit. Administrators who feel pressured by those at the state level may also be weary of such inquiry and its value. Teachers who look to make this form of inquiry a priority may find it helpful to translate their discoveries into more concrete data showing improvement as a result of changes made during self-reflective periods.

Ultimately, as stated in unit two response, self-reflection relies on a teacher's dedication to, "tending one's own private garden" rather than succumbing to the societal reforms and standards that continue to develop and shape current educational practice. It has been suggested by University of Geneva professor, Michael Huberman, that, "teachers who steered clear of reforms or other multiple-classroom innovations but who invested consistently in classroom-level experiments--what they called 'tinkering' with new materials, different pupil groupings, small changes in grading systems--were more likely to be satisfied later on in their career than

most others, and far more likely to be satisfied than their peers who had been heavily involved in school-wide and district-wide projects” (2.9 narrative). A teacher must always be on a journey of self-discovery, a journey that will lead to rich experiences that will open doors that could not be opened otherwise.