

**"Are We Teaching and Are We Learning?"  
Encouraging Reflection in the Student Teaching Clinical Experience using  
Community of Philosophical Inquiry**

The practice of Community of Inquiry (CoI) alongside the clinical or apprenticeship experience (student-teaching) positions the pre-service educator to emphasize inquiry and reflection within practice. The (COI) creates opportunities for pre-service educators (PSE) to experience student teaching as that which requires adjustment and change, inviting reflection. The reflective seminar, a common course taken concurrently by the PSE while student teaching is often considered the course to build reflective practice: connecting theory and practice, considering beliefs, values, and priorities, and engaging themselves as ethical, political, and social professionals in the field of education. I look to address the structure of the reflective seminar to build reflective practice. Although I recognize the complexities of reflection, as concept, in this field, I do not purport in this paper to establish what reflection or reflective practice *ought* to be for the field of teacher education over the entire time-line of the (PSE). Rather, I consider one dimension of reflective practice and a promising activity within that dimension. I conclude that looking closely at this one dimension may lead teacher education programs to change other aspects or dimensions.

### **The Aims of Reflection During Student Teaching**

Research shows that building reflective practice in the PSE, despite its variations and complexities seems to be an important aspect of teacher education, securing confident and competent novice teachers, prepared to enter the professional workforce. Overwhelming, teacher education programs have embraced reflection or reflective practice as an important component of learning to teach. (Loughran, 2002). Yet, just what it means to be reflective and to teach reflective practice remains remarkably unclear. Lynn Fendler points out that as a common term in teacher education, reflection contains "generative complexities" (2003, 23), recognizing that its complicated genealogy reflects dynamics of power, privilege, and history in the field. Furthermore, as outlined by Fendler (2003) and others (Etscheidt, Curran, Sayer, 2016) within the timeline of required coursework there are varying degrees, components, and priorities of reflective practice, whereby the model or lens of reflective practice may differ.

Developing reflective practice(s) then is often composed of different structures and models throughout the timeline of teacher education programs. One would not expect the development of reflective practice, by novice teachers, if this component was only prioritized during one aspect of their time in the program! Here then, I am concerned with what it means to build reflective practice at the end of the (PSE) timeline, during the seminar course of the student teaching experience.

The reflective practices of student teaching during this seminar aim to be concerned with ethics, philosophy, identity and pedagogy vs. training and technical methods. Here then, reflection is geared towards understanding what it means to be a teacher in the

classroom responsible, not only for the growth of student learning but also as a novice educator within the professional setting. The aim is for reflection to be habitual, constructive, and critical. In effect, many of the various concerns from different coursework and field experiences come to a head during the student teaching experience. Reflective practice should extend knowledge and ability, it should challenge conventional teaching practice, and it should assist the exploration of thinking deeply about the profession of teaching.

The current climate of standardization in education challenges teacher preparation programs to find ways to engage the (PSE) in this kind of reflective practice. One of the most striking examples is the increasingly adopted performance assessment, edTPA, which was created out of the need to effectively assess reflective practice and the student teacher's ability to connect theory and practice. Although purportedly a more authentic evaluation of a student teacher's ability to teach, concerns regarding standardization and authenticity have been voiced by numerous voices in the field. For example, Wayne Au writes:

The edTPA effectively sanitized much of our students' work by limiting what they thought would be "acceptable" within the confines of the standardized test. In the process, many of my students felt they couldn't demonstrate what they were capable of and who they were as teachers (Au, 2013).

Au continues by posing that too much of his student's seminar time was spent discussing the technical aspects of the edTPA and not on reflecting how they were engaging their identity as teachers in the classroom.

This is not a paper on the merits or shortcoming on the edTPA, it is important however to show that current aspects of teacher education, one example being the edTPA, highlighting just how difficult it is for teacher education programs to weave authentic reflective practice during clinical practice within the current climate of assessment and standardization. Literature on teacher education shows how the technical components of classroom management, curriculum alignment, and professional duties overwhelm the novice (PSE) while student teaching. And, research shows that the (PSE) often sees so much of a gap between theory and practice that it becomes easier to adopt the teaching practices of the mentor teacher as their 'own.' Reflection is left to the wayside, as an unnecessary, confusing, time-consuming problem for a teacher learning to teach.

The challenge then for the teacher educator (TE) is to consider what it means to foster reflective activity in this seminar space, with the PSE engaged in full-time student teaching, creating space for the PSE to go beyond the inherited teaching practices, beliefs, attitudes, and paradigms of their mentor teacher, while incorporating university theory and/or coursework.

The reflective seminar of student teaching cannot deny the 'how-to' aspect of teaching. But, if teacher education programs do not effectively move the PSE from this technical framework, the PSE will not graduate from technician to reflective practitioner, able to

create their own "how-to's," to affect change in practices, to engage in original ideas that affectively effect their students learning and development. The concern must be, in the reflective seminar to forge, a concern with pedagogy instead of technicality. As David Lusted writes:

Why is pedagogy important? It is important since, as a concept, it draws attention to the process through which knowledge is produced. Pedagogy addresses the 'how' questions not only in the transmission or reproduction of knowledge but also in its production.... How one teaches is therefore of central interest but, through the prism of pedagogy, it becomes inseparable from what is being taught and, crucially how one learns." (Lusted, 1986, 2-3).

It is not that the student teacher leaves behind theory or the work of the university but that the PSE does not see themselves (either for lack of time or encouragement) that *becoming* a teacher is a central component of what the student teaching experience is. Too often, because the expectation is that the student teacher is now, teacher, someone in charge of learning, the time or opportunity for change and becoming is past. The constant modeling of set practices within student teaching makes reflection and change difficult. The challenge is to support the PSE, even within the clinical or apprenticeship experience to recognize that they are still 'in development' (that in effect, to be a teacher, is to always be, becoming a teacher). This might be a way of framing the theory/practice gap as an ethical problem, a question of becoming within the world, problematizing what it means to *be* a teacher. Deborah Britzman effectively portrays this problem:

That student teachers rarely have the space and official encouragement to consistently theorize about their lived experience further distances theory from practice, and diminishes student teachers' capacity to theorize about the sources of their pedagogy." (Britzman, 2003, 64).

### **Becoming and Being a Reflective Teacher: Going beyond imitation and convention and effecting change in practice**

The philosophical frameworks of John Dewey and Donald Schön and its influence on reflective practice in teacher education problems has been traced historically (Fendler, 2003) and challenged by (Zeichner, 1996). While recognizing that there are differences as well as differing interpretations between both Dewey and Schön, I want to frame this discussion on an aspect that seems central to each, the requirement that reflection leads to change, to modification of action or practice.

John Dewey writes in *How We Think*:

In every case of reflective activity, a person finds himself confronted with a given, present situation from which he has to arrive at, or conclude to, something that is not present. This process of arriving at an idea of what is absent on the basis of what is at hand is inference. What is present carries or bears the mind over to the idea and ultimately the acceptance of something else. (Dewey *How We Think*, 190).

To be reflective is what it means to have to move through an experience. Central then to Dewey's formulation of reflective thinking is that it is an activity that carries thinking forward into the new and causes one to bear on something else. Thus, to reflect for Dewey is not to, for instance, name an emotion or articulate a value. It is to be able to use emotion or value, for example, and enact a new understanding or bring new meaning to an experience, or fund new action.

Dewey recognizes that one can cultivate reflection and that reflection itself can move forward. He indicates that reflection within an experience is about getting it better, progressing. To explain this, consider John Dewey's most puzzling lines, his oft-quoted phrase that growing in efficiency as a burglar is not growth. He writes (to his readers)

I shall leave you to answer these questions, saying simply that when and only when development in a particular line conduces to continuing growth does it answer to the criterion of education as growing. For the conception is one that must find universal and not specialized limited application. (Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 36).

It's a problematic line. Dewey doesn't actually state the burglar or the corrupt politician isn't involved in an educative move or activity. Careful readers of *Experience and Education* infer in following lines that Dewey requires positive educative experiences to be continuous and open up other possibilities. Thus, the burglar who learns to burgle better is merely 'burgling' and is not involved in positive education. They cannot be growing towards because it doesn't set them up to inquire into any other experience and it certainly doesn't set them up to do so with others. Dewey points out how to move forward. He writes,

On the other hand, if an experience arouses curiosity, strengthens initiative, and sets up desires and purposes that are sufficiently intense to carry a person over places in the future, continuity works in a very different way. (Dewey, *Experience and Education*, 38).

It is the work of reflective thinking that gives birth to inference that thus moves experiences into the future. Dewey looks to increase possibilities, to better communities through engaging thought and practice within careful inquiry. Thus one practices reflection better with others through systematic method.

The confluence with Dewey and the scientific method often means that readers of history miss Dewey's recognition that reflective thinking is not unique to certain experiences but is both possible and common within *all* human activity and experience.

Schön's recognizes and prioritizes this aspect by illuminating that it is the teacher's self who reflects. Dewey looks to increase possibilities in society through engaging thought and practice within careful inquiry – modeling the experimental nature of the hard

sciences. Thus one practices reflection better with others through a systematic method of inquiry. Thus, he writes:

"The practitioner allows himself to experience surprise, puzzlement, or confusion in a situation which he finds uncertain or unique. He reflects on the phenomenon before him, and on the prior understandings which have been implicit in his behavior. He carries out an experiment which serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. (Schön 1983: 68).

Yet, note that Schön does not discount and also prioritizes the same concern as Dewey, which is that reflective practice is that which moves one forward. Reflective practice leads to furthering new meaning as well as change in situation.

It is this that Matthew Lipman sees as a possibility for truly engaging classrooms of young children in learning. As Lipman writes of Dewey's realization:

It [education] confused the refined, finished end products of inquiry with the raw, crude initial subject matter of inquiry and tried to get student to learn the solutions rather than investigate the problems and engage in inquiry for themselves" (Lipman, 1991, 20).

Rather than children being taught or given solutions to problems (that they for the most part did not see as problems) Lipman sees that by engaging in inquiry, children themselves, can uncover assumptions, implications, reasons, and evidence. That children are capable of thinking such that they move themselves into future experience. In short, that children can be reflective thinkers.

Lipman's reading of Dewey gives rise to the use of the community of inquiry (COI) in multiple settings across the globe, from philosophical cafes in communities to online learning communities and classrooms. Yet, though (COI) practice is widely discussed in the literature framing science education, online pedagogy, and professional development, it is less discussed in literature about the student teaching experience. One reason has been the over-reliance on Schön's reading of the reflective turn, having to do with self-introspection, or self-analysis. Thus, what we hear in the reflective seminar often are questions such as "How does it feel?" or "What are the ways in which / manifest in my classroom?" The language of inquiry, process, and logic are so strong in both Dewey and Lipman's writing that reflection seems cold or uncommon. Yet it is possible that by acknowledging Schön's commitment to the self in connection that it is reflection that initiates change, I think we can return to the COI as a form of reflective inquiry.

This might be best addressed by building on the work of Ann Sharp. Sharp's overarching contribution to the Philosophy for Children movement is to recognize the deep ethical demands inherent in the COI. That, to inquire with others is not only, or merely, an intellectual exercise but must be a practice of the self with others. She writes, "Finding a path through the duality of private and public is a challenge to every person who takes the time to reflect on the fundamental question of their own place in

the world." (Splitter and Sharp, 1995, 65). For Sharp, the (COI) situates all persons (children and adults) in a way so that the public and private dimensions are tested within a sphere of equality, safety, and respect. Thus, tensions and contradictions are not flattened but accepted as pieces of necessary information that assists the community in moving forward new ways of thinking and being in the world. She often argued with her students, that it was far too easy to be intelligent and unethical but it is very hard to be ethical without the acknowledgement of another's knowledge –and thus, to make new understanding of the world, in community, was far less problematic than attempts to do so on one's own. In a beautiful sentence Sharp (1987) articulates this: "in speaking to others the implicit is made explicit, and it is in this way that we come to know better what we have only known in a fuzzy kind of way" (40). The knowledge that becomes clear is both ethical and rational –it is knowing better with others.

Sharp's understanding is that the personal surprise Schön recognizes or the aroused curiosity of Dewey –the reflective inward glance- is best understood and shared within a community of members ready to receive and making meaning from that surprise and curiosity. Rather than be tied to relativism or mere subjectivism, Sharp sees that conflicting theories or views of the world can be adjudicated, discussed, and re-constructed. It is the ethical commitment of this practice that Sharp highlights.

Sharp (1987) writes, that it means that "[T]he dialogue always remains open" (39). Instead of relying on only the self to consider possible changes the community can take apart and test multiple strategies. In a sense, rather than having a mirror that reflects back only the one experience we might think the community is like a kaleidoscope of multiple strategies and values.

### **Procedures of the COI in a Reflective Seminar**

Each Col is locally guided by the members of that community; however, there are core tenants: a group of persons engaged in inquiry, a flattening of the authority between community members, and a purposeful or directed purpose to the inquiry. The Col is not a narrative of what happened during student teaching, a dissection of discrete procedures or content, nor a psychoanalytic practice of self-awareness; however, these kinds of dialogic moves are often organic and dynamic aspects of the Col.

The Col situates pre-service educators from consumers of information to reflective actors of practice. As a community, the pre-service educators are able to assist one another in making sense of the clinical experience while practicing and testing those meanings within a clinical setting. Community members are committed to following a line of inquiry from its inception to a testable or actionable end.

The inquiry positions student teaching to be examined, questioned, analyzed and then submitted for review, testing, and reconsideration. Rather than accepting the field experience for its superficial and surface face values, the community engaged in philosophical inquiry considers the beliefs and values that underlie the practices, the

environments, and the strategies engaged within the clinical setting. As Ann Sharp and Lawrence Splitter (1995) note that this change happens in the Col by "... attending to those mundane and familiar aspects of experience which might otherwise be taken for granted."

It is this move to inquire into their everyday experience with others that allows student teachers opportunities to challenge their own beliefs as well as the beliefs, values, and structures of the classroom or school they are leaning to teach in. The pre-service educator is then better positioned to define, create, use, change, and most importantly, defend particular strategies within the clinical setting. Moreover, the questions of the group must move from a localized 'how-to' question (for then the group is only dealing with one person's problems or questions in the classrooms) and must learn to generalize the problem, as Britzman 2003 points out, they move from the technical to the pedagogical, actually looking from the particular to a philosophical line of inquiry. For instance, such specific questions and concerns as: "What motivates students in a biology class? What does authentic assessment look like in an English classroom? How can I engage my students' families?" are unpacked by the community to look more broadly at how motivation, agency, authenticity, and family values are often both competing and complementary aspects of teaching and learning. This inquiry enables the 'how' of teaching to be supported by an intentional 'why,' making space for the development of a teaching practice to go beyond an inherited practice from the mentor teacher and engaging theory with practice.

### **Are we teaching and learning?**

Here I think it best to turn to a narrative description of what this COI might look like in the reflective seminar.

At a large state university cohorts of student teachers were split into smaller groups and assigned to a field supervisor. Field supervisors did not teach coursework but were solely responsible for designing what small group seminars would look like. As the field supervisor of one group of junior PSE's student teaching in an early childhood classroom I used COI to encourage reflective practice.

As is common in a philosophy of children exercise, I begin by having the community ask questions and placing them on the board, publicly for all to scrutinize. This is a central component of this exercise, for it sets up the student teacher to a) feel comfortable with the thought that what happens in the classroom each day can be problematized without being a problem and b) it sets up the inquiry so that the experience is immediately related to actual, authentic experience. I look at their self-generated concerns as a positive aspect of the COI. For then, not only is the community responsible for generation of concern but also managing the inquiry so that it does inquiry into a focus of inquiry that can motivate reflective and critical practices. Here rather than a text of philosophy as the source of problem, it is the student-teaching experience itself.

On this particular evening, everyone had a question about what to do with a 'problem' child. Questions and concerns such as, "I don't know what to do with her, she doesn't respect me, how can I make her listen to me?" "He doesn't seem to ever listen and is always getting in trouble, what can I do?" "Is there a technique I can use with a three-year-old that makes all of the them listen?"

With novice community of inquiry groups these first questions are often not philosophical or substantive, they are all 'how-to' questions, or questions about a plotline. As with any community of inquiry it has to be acknowledged that these first questions will, as they often are in children's philosophy, questions of content or 'how-to' questions, rather than substantive question about pedagogy.

As with young children or any novice community, the role of the facilitator is not to give them a new, seemingly better question but rather to provide ways to move towards inquiry of substance. In this instance, having spent some time in the previous two weeks prior to the session observing in the classroom, I had some inkling that behavior was going to be a pressing concern for this group of student teachers. I asked them to think about what the underlying concern was behind the questions. I motivated this by reminding them about our focus question: "Are we teaching and learning?" As usual, as soon as I asked this question, reminding them of our focus, they began to argue about what the real concern was. A few argued that no, they were not teaching and learning that in fact, what was happening is that they were spending so much time on behavior management that nothing was happening in their classrooms. A few argued that they were beginning to see that maybe what they were truly teaching in their classrooms was behavior.

After a few moments I asked them to write down what they thought their real question about behavior was in the classroom. Though a few still posed the question as a 'how-to' question; i.e.: How do I get students to respect me? I had two questions that moved from what Ann Sharp calls an ordinary question to questions of inquiry (Sharp and Splitter, 50). *Who should be in control of student's behavior in a classroom? And Can a student who is three be 'bad'?*

The discussion that followed quickly moved to a question from 'how-to's' to a discussion that created the opportunity for each PSE to share beliefs and values about control, respect and the place of the teacher in the early childhood classroom. For, what had happened when I asked us, as a community, to consider teaching and learning is that the students were forced to consider the link between what their concerns were and the overall focus of what they were doing in the classroom. It moved them back into both the theoretical underpinnings of their course content and it allowed them to pose to themselves and others questions about the role of behavior and control in teaching and learning.

By the end of the discussion we were discussing different methods that we could use to encourage young students to be responsible for their own behavior in the classroom. Thus, in a sense we returned to the how or the technical but we did so through a



reflective inquiry made possible by extending and deepening the initial and overtly technical concerns. Rather than a problem posing session where I tossed out possible strategies, I was not the locus of creation, the community was responsible for this and had created a set of criteria through which to test and evaluate certain kinds of behavioral methods practices.

By encouraging the community to ask themselves to reflect on practice through a focus question: Are we teaching and are we learning? To ask such a question is not an orthodox practice of either Philosophy for Children or Community of Inquiry. Practitioners wedded to a belief in traditional practices of either might be tempted to accuse me of focusing the inquiry too much, holding too much locus of control as a facilitator. However, the question, as frame serves to indicate to the community that this is an inquiry that must consider what it means to teach from a reflective lens. The 'we' in the question immediately sets up the inquiry to be that which the community must take on. Thus, it is not about 'fixing' someone's classroom or tweaking a practice. Rather, it is about how a community can foster inquiry through a question. Moreover, because the 'we' is connected both to teaching and learning, the community must ask itself over and over again, who is learning? Who is teaching? Immediately the community is set to understand the multiple relationships at work in the educative space: between teacher and student, between student and content, between teacher and pedagogy, between student and student. It is a philosophical question as it sets the community to pose whether or not what is happening in the educative space is teaching and/or learning. So often, if it happens in a classroom it is teaching and/or learning but if we ask this as a question –then what we have is the option to change practices and activities, to say, no that wasn't teaching but this could be, or that teaching requires this or for there to be learning it means we should see this. Instead of accepting all practices in the classroom as either good or bad we can evaluate them at their ontological level of what it means to teach and learn. What I find is that asking this question means that communities start to evaluate what the good, the beautiful, and the true is in the educative space – in short, they do philosophical inquiry with each other, about their student teaching experiences, and together build a reflective practice and strategies.

Together we paid attention to what it meant to figure out solutions and practices as a community. Instead of concerning ourselves with our finished 'work' we began, to see that learning to teach was not about a product, but about constantly revising and re-imagining ourselves in the educative context. It was, I think, to recognize that teachers are not made in an instant, that we are 'becoming' (Britzman, 2003, 69) and that this becoming does not end at the university door but is always within competing chronologies and spaces of teaching and learning (Britzman, 2007).

An illustrative example is then how our conversation that night manifested the next week in one of my student teacher's classrooms. I walked in and noticed that the block corner had been reopened. I asked, "I thought that your mentor teacher had put the blocks away because the children could not use them properly?" The student teacher replied, "Yes, but yesterday I convinced her that learning to play with the blocks was something I was interested in teaching the children, I realized that if we didn't make this

a component of our classroom, we may in fact be missing something important in our classroom." In this instant the student teacher was able to communicate a clear reason for a change in the classroom and she was able to communicate this to a veteran in the field in a professional and reasonable way. I have not discussed whether or not reflective practices learned during student teaching continue into the first years of novice teaching in the field, however my hope would be to follow teachers to track this progress.

Ann Sharp writes of philosophy and community of inquiry with young children, that:

The role of philosophy within the elementary classroom is to form a bridge between the old and the new, to bring to consciousness the fundamental ideas of the culture in the child's own words, and to help the students through inquiry not only to make the tradition their own, but to imaginatively re-enact it and reconstruct it into a more coherent and meaningful version - a version that makes sense to them (Sharp, 1987, 43)

In teacher education our aim is also to bridge a gap between what is established, the old and what will come, the new. As we usher in each year, novice teachers who find themselves, always-and-forever, developing themselves as educators –as teachers and learners, we hope that they do so reflectively, imaginatively re-enacting and reconstructing education into more coherence. This is not merely a pedagogical focus; it is an ethical commitment to what it means to bring novice teachers into the professional field.

If we are clear about our aim to include reflective practice across the timeline of pre-service and novice educators, then our own practices must be just as reflective, refining and reimagining what it means to engage the PSE. One possibility is situating the student teaching seminar as a community of inquiry concerned with the question: are we teaching and are we learning?

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