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“The Practitioner’s Best Friend”

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Why Should a Busy Teacher Take Time to Reflect?

This is the very question I asked myself within the process of pursuing the competency-based level of my teaching certificate. A teacher’s time is precious and in short supply. How can a time-eating, introspective activity be time well spent? And yet, there I was, being asked to do the very thing that I soundly resisted, when I ran across a quote by T.S. Eliot in *Four Quartets*, “We had the experience but missed the meaning.” Was I missing the meaning of my daily activities, strategies, learning, and choices? The answer, of course, was yes.

In *Teaching, Learning, and Assessment Together: The Reflective Classroom*, Arthur K. Ellis says, “This is the essence of reflective thinking, a search for meaning. Reflection involves stepping back from what you’re doing in order to achieve some measure of perspective. It means thinking, talking, and otherwise expressing your feelings, the things you’ve learned, the growth you’ve achieved, and the sense you have of accomplishing something. I am convinced that this is one of the greatest problems we face in classroom life. The problem is a failure to reflect. The remedy is to take the time to do it in spite of the fact that you and your students won’t be able to *cover* as much. No amount of *fun* activities can make up for the loss that accompanies a failure to search for meaning.” (Ellis, p. 5)

As with most things in life, anything worth doing is worth doing well and deeply. So, I decided to give reflection a quality try and intentionally, regularly asked myself questions like: Why did I choose that activity? Did it work? Did the students learn? What is the evidence of their learning? If I had it to do over again, what would I change, and why? Did this provide opportunities for students to connect to prior learning? Did I give students an opportunity to reflect? Verbally? In writing? With each other? Am I teaching process or content? Is this about students doing activities, or is it about students’ opportunities to attach meta-cognitively to their processes, resources, strengths, and next steps?

At first, I recorded the answers to these questions in writing at the end of each day. As time progressed and I practiced the reflective process, I began to reflect *within* the process of each day – formative assessments of the teacher’s personal performance. My reflective process grew faster and faster, enabling important adjustments within the moment, while creating a unique form of synergy with the processes of my students.

As more and more opportunities were provided for my students to reflect, and they practiced verbally, in writing, and with each other, they also learned to reflect “on the fly.” Learning stuck in new and exciting ways. Connections throughout the curriculum and over time became regular occurrences. This caused a couple of favorite memories for me. Charlotte, a fourth grade student who was frustrated trying to get to the bottom of an issue, finally turned to another student, sighed, and said, “She keeps asking us why all the time, like she expects us to think!” We all laughed, but the point was not missed by anyone. Later that same year, I needed to miss school one day. Upon my return, I debriefed the previous day with the students. The usually forthcoming students hedged answers, purposefully vague, not wanting to speak ill of someone. Finally, Taylor made eye contact and reported, “He just wasn’t a reflective kind of teacher!”

That was the day that I made the final transition into the reflective process. Even students as young as 10 years of age grasped the importance of reflection in their learning processes. They learned the value of making their own meaning. They prized themselves and the on-going sharing of their thinking. When both students and I reflected regularly, the learning was powerful for all of us. My practice of teaching is forever changed and I will never again “have the experience and miss the meaning.”

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