

How does practice change?

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When you were a student in school or college, did you have one or more teachers who taught you so mechanically that you wondered how they could drag on and on thus?

I can distinctly remember at least three such teachers from my own student days! One of them carried a sheaf of yellowed notes to class and systematically transferred the content from those frayed pages onto the blackboard in every single class. He did this year in and year out. It made absolutely no difference to him that not a single student was listening to his drone, as he articulated the dead words that he simultaneously transcribed onto the blackboard. [We jokingly declared that he talked more to the blackboard than he did to any one of us!]

Well, if you haven't had a single teacher who taught like teaching was a painful duty to be done away with, you are so very lucky!

Now how do we, as teachers, prevent *ourselves from turning into those crashing bores*? Wouldn't that be a terrifying possibility?

I have always thought that if that teacher had stopped to think, even for an instant, if his approach was benefiting anyone at all, he would have altered his pedagogy. But he remained engaged in blissful ignorance – or was it apathy?

This month, I wish to draw your attention to a rich paper (freely downloadable) that gives a framework for this very process: turning reflective.

Transforming Teaching Practice: becoming the critically reflective teacher

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Downloadable from: http://ed253jcu.pbworks.com/w/page/f/Larrivee_B_2000CriticallyReflectiveTeacher.pdf

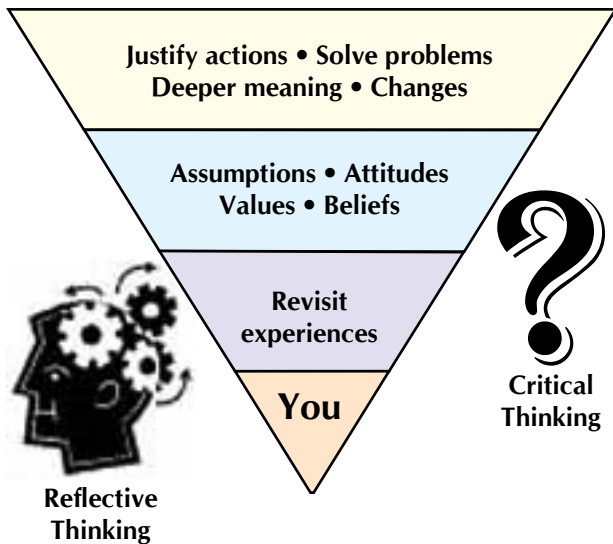
But first, I would like to summarize some very insightful statements that the researcher makes in her paper:

- As teachers, we tend to develop certain beliefs which are hardly ever challenged – by us or any other.
- Unless we pause to revisit these, we can remain imprisoned in a cage of unexamined biases, assumptions, expectations, interpretations and sometimes, even convictions.
- Beliefs are like the cement that holds bricks together, while the teaching practices or decisions that are an *outcome of our beliefs* are the 'bricks'.
- Decisions made by teachers and school managements are inevitably intertwined with certain beliefs. By examining only the decisions and not looking at the underlying beliefs, we are ignoring the cement and focusing only on the bricks.
- So when teachers get obsessed with techniques and forget to examine *the beliefs that underpin these techniques* – and more importantly, whether these are in alignment with their own beliefs - they will simply have a bag of tricks. And tricks which are played without one's heart being in it are instantly experienced as being superficial by those keen observers – children!

The author then goes on to define critical reflection as below:

Critical reflection involves examination of personal and professional belief systems, as well as the deliberate consideration of the ethical implications and impact of practices.

As I said, it seemed unlikely that the teacher who I described at the start of this article had ever asked himself what his belief was, when he adopted the lifelong practice of mechanically transferring words and symbols from his paper to the blackboard. It was evident that he deemed this to be 'teaching'! To us, students, it seemed that he believed teaching and learning simply consisted of stuffing one's mind (or paper or blackboard, whatever the receptacle) with loads of text, so that one could then pour it all out



during the examination (as a student) and on the blackboard (as a teacher)! Since he had probably never articulated this as being his innate belief, there was no chance of his revisiting it or examining its validity!

So the first step, according to the author, is for a teacher to clearly see what his/her beliefs are.

Now that's a tricky one! As the author rightly says:
We frequently are not aware either of our mental models, or their effect on our actions.

I am pretty sure that not a single teacher today will state that it is vital to stuff children's minds with text! It is so obviously not the politically correct thing to say!

But the proof of the pudding is in the eating, isn't it?

And so, what if we were to adopt the reverse route: examine our actions/teaching practice and *then reflect on what the underlying beliefs could be?* A teacher who spends 35 of 40 minutes talking to the class cannot profess to believe greatly in students' participation, now, can she? Another teacher who does 90% of the questioning in class can hardly claim to believe in drawing out enquiry from students!

Do you see what I mean?

So it is only when such a misalignment is seen that a teacher comes face to face with questions like: should I alter my practices or revisit my beliefs? How can my practices sustain a shift unless I change my beliefs? How will I change my beliefs without feeling like the rug has been pulled from under my feet?

And now we come to the heart of the matter. No one would like to just alter their beliefs until *they feel compelled to do so*. And when is this likely to happen? Some situation that propels them to revisit their dearly held values or convictions has to unfold. The author quotes Dewey (1933,1938) when she reminds us that reflection is usually triggered by a *dilemma or problem*. A teacher who faces no problem at all is unlikely to feel the need to reflect. (My teacher had no problem at all, you see!)

The author then goes on to assert that there is no prescription for a teacher to turn into a reflective practitioner: it is a journey. However, she does suggest three practices that can be very useful in this journey:

- making time for solitary reflection, becoming a perpetual problem-solver and questioning the status quo

In today's fast paced world, even the first of these three practices seems to be impossible, doesn't it? But I am not so sure about that: how hard is it to audio record one's thoughts and feelings about the day that went by, into one's phone? An audio journal, as it were? Now, do you think that is very time consuming? Of course, it would be ideal if one could keep a journal, but that is left to those who like diary writing. For most of us, who are in no frame of mind to write our reflections, I am suggesting using technology for this highly valuable practice.

And a great indicator of one's assumptions is the *surprises or shocks* that one receives each day: for you are surprised only when your expectations are not met! By simply recording *what or who surprised one* over a period of a few months, one can very diligently put one's finger on the underlying assumptions that govern one's expectations!

The second practice (becoming a perpetual problem solver) is feasible only when we see the problem as needing a solution. Too often, we learn to live with so many problems that we get numbed and drop all intent to set things right. We are then well on our way to turning totally mechanical!

And the last is what characterizes a lively mind: questioning the status quo. The author agrees that this can be risky, but as always, *HOW* one questions the status quo (confrontational or invitational) is what determines the impact of this practice. I still recall a staff meeting that was held more than 30 years ago, in a school that I taught. Usually, they were chaired by the elderly Principal, who belonged to the old

Now bring it into the classroom!

1. Ask a trusted peer to observe your class (or audio record it, if you can't find such a peer) and note different aspects of your teaching practice like:
 - a. How long you talk, and how much time you give for students to talk.
 - b. How often you smile, and how often you snap
 - c. Whether you focus only on the students who 'get it' or 'don't get it'
 - d. How palpable your enjoyment of engaging with students is
 - e. And so on
2. Now ask your peer to look at the oft-repeated practices and write down likely beliefs that they could be stemming from.
3. Independently, list out what you think your own beliefs could be about each of the above practices.
4. Now **examine the contrast**: how do you come through? And what do you profess to believe?
5. Notice the discomfort that this triggers in you: reflection is seldom a pleasant process! It is precisely because it takes you out of your comfort zone that it prevents you from trundling along mechanically!
6. See what you wish to drop/change/tweak: your practice or your belief?

Send in your findings to thinkingteacher22@gmail.com.

school and tended to dominate the conversation. A new and young teacher boldly suggested one day that teachers rotate this responsibility. And it was only because of her suggestion that we then had a staff meeting anchored by one of our colleagues. I remember being struck by the utter poise and aplomb of that day's chair. Only then did I realize that all along, I had assumed her capabilities to be less!

There is far more that you will gain by reading this rich paper. So I am going to leave you with just so much! As always, there are a few suggestions for you to bring this into your classroom! And if you are online, then bring it into your virtual classroom!

The author is Founder Director of Thinking Teacher (www.thinkingteacher.in), an organization that networks with teachers across the country. Thinking Teacher aims to awaken and nurture the reflective practitioner within each teacher. By taking (action) research out of the classroom, Thinking Teacher develops the (action) researcher in the teacher. And then, by bringing research into the classroom – as in this series – Thinking Teacher's goal is to help build deep inquiry and rich learning into the teaching process. The author can be reached at [<neeraja@thinkingteacher.in>](mailto:neeraja@thinkingteacher.in).