

Using Reflection

T O P R O M O T E

Instructional Coherence

Why Promote Reflection

Teachers often struggle to make sense of inconsistent and sometimes contradictory messages and directives that come from a wide array of sources. When teachers are unable to make sense of conflicting messages and directives, they cease to be thoughtful about their practice as they try to find time to meet the demands placed upon them. This reaction leads to inconsistent educational experiences for students and can result in low student achievement.

However, administrators can begin to address this situation by changing the school environment from a reactive atmosphere to a reflective one. This type of environment supports the teachers' personal growth by encouraging them to engage in a thoughtful investigation of curriculum, instruction and assessment in relation to the learning that occurs in the classroom. It is through this process of reflection that they can reclaim their vision as teachers.

What You Will See Happen...

1 Shifting focus from what teachers teach to what students learn

Generally, when districts or schools develop methods to improve classroom practice, the focus is on teacher behaviors.

This approach tends to separate the act of teaching from the act of learning.

When the focus is reversed, teachers develop a deeper understanding of how learning occurs and what they can do to increase student achievement. Often, teachers, engaged in reflection, examine the impact of instruction on learning and explore different strategies to help students reach learning goals, but the resulting changes in practice come from an internal source rather than external one. It is the individual's change in perspective that creates a powerful impact on student learning.

To help bring about this shift in teachers' thinking, administrators must create a safe environment where teachers will feel comfortable discussing dilemmas and quandaries about their practice. At first teachers will feel lost in this process. They are more accustomed to meet, decide, and implement, rather than question and investigate. However, as they engage in reflective dialogue about learning, they will begin to internalize new ideas that will necessitate changes in their classrooms.



① **Shifting focus from what teachers teach to what students learn, continued**

The curriculum director at Southway School District asked the principals of the middle school and two elementary schools to select teachers from their campuses to meet in the early fall to begin aligning their science curriculum. She also asked one of the principals to serve as the facilitator for the group's discussions. The principal's role was to engage the teachers in reflective dialogue as they looked at their science curriculum and how to best meet the needs of their students.

To encourage reflective introspection, you might provide:

- **Specific discussion opportunities on your campus for staff to talk honestly about classroom issues of importance. Typical topics of discussion might include: test scores, text books, learning styles, and student motivation. Please note these are not problem-solving sessions.**
- **Invite a guest facilitator to dialogue with teachers on an issue of importance to them. Possible guests might include writers, teachers from a near by district, or university faculty.**

As the group members began their discussion, they first discovered that a dinosaur unit was taught at every grade level between kindergarten and sixth grade. In fact, some teachers found that different levels were using the same pre-packaged materials. It became evident that no one wanted to give up the unit. The group facilitator asked the teachers to state why they felt it was important to teach dinosaurs at their particular grade level.

As the teachers responded, they said:

My students just think dinosaurs are so cute that they behave at their best in order to participate in the activities.

I love dinosaurs myself—it is my favorite unit.

The kids are always asking to study dinosaurs.

I use dinosaurs as a way to introduce a unit on archeology. I even have them “discover” dinosaur tracks in the field behind the school.

As they talked, one of the teachers asked “What do these reasons have to do with the needs of the students?” There was a long pause.

Over the next few weeks, the teachers began to dialogue about the importance of students finding the learning relative and interesting. They began to talk about why they chose topics for study. One teacher stated that her students always did poorly on topics if they found them disinteresting. Another teacher said, “But why are we teaching dinosaurs? Do we want the kids to know about the cycle of life and species extinction or fossils or what? We’re talking about what kids enjoy. What we enjoy. Our decisions have to be based on what they need to learn and how we help them learn it.”

In order to prompt the teachers to delve more deeply into the concept of purposeful learning,

the principal presented a lesson, based on an inquiry learning model. The teachers found themselves so engaged in the activity that they hated for it to end. The principal then said, “You all enjoyed this activity. What would be my purpose in using this lesson? What would I hope my students would learn from this activity?”

As they answered these questions, the group members began to consider the importance of clearly identifying what is important for students to know and be able to do. They found that when students enjoy the learning they participate more fully, but enjoyment is not enough. Each unit that they teach has to fit into the larger picture of the district's goals as well as their own classroom goals.

While this decision could have been made quickly by an administrator, it would not have achieved the same results as using the reflective process. As the teachers began to analyze why they taught the dinosaur unit, they also began to question their approaches to teaching other content. It was the first of many changes in their thinking about curriculum that came from meeting as a reflective group. Teachers came to new understandings about their own teaching needs as well as the needs of their students. They were able to exchange ideas and to look closely at themselves—do they focus their instruction on their needs as teachers or on the needs of their students? This kind of reflection can only occur when educators have a safe environment that allows them to talk about the tensions in the practice of teaching.

② **Examining education issues and ideas with colleagues**

Dialogue with colleagues is critical to establishing an environment that supports long-term school and classroom improvement. As teachers engage in an interchange of ideas, they begin to examine their own practice and their assumptions about teaching, deepen their collective understanding, and develop support systems that encourage continual inquiry. They become more thoughtful about their practice and the strategies that they use to help students learn.

The Eastway Middle School principal noticed that for the last two years the percentage of students failing eighth grade had increased each year. He

asked teacher volunteers to participate in a study group to look at this problem. While he planned to attend meetings periodically, he asked the group members to determine their own leadership responsibilities and come to him when they needed administrative advice. As the teachers began their dialogue about the declining pass rate, they said:

I teach them the material; they just don't care enough to learn it.

I spend so much time reteaching material that they haven't mastered that I just don't have time to teach them all they need to know.

They are more interested in sports and TV than they are in passing.

There is so much to teach them. I am supposed to follow the textbook, prepare them for the state test and follow our local curriculum. There just isn't time.

As they continued to talk about these concerns, they found that they shared common frustrations, and they also felt they “had tried everything.” One of the teachers began to talk about why she had become a teacher in the first place. She thought she would be helping students to

learn, to be successful in their futures.

As the conversation continued over the next few weeks, the teachers began to realize that in their rush to “do the right things” their students’ needs had been left out of the process. As teachers, they were more focused on following guidelines and mandates than they were on ensuring that students were learning. They had become so focused on the chores of teaching that they had lost the joy of teaching. Their students also seemed to have lost the joy of learning.

They invited the principal to their next meeting to share their first major discovery—to recapture their passion for teaching, they had to refocus their attention on their students’ needs.

While this discovery does not solve the school’s failure problem, it is a first step in the process of seeking solutions. These teachers realized that they had to look at their actions and attitudes, not just what was wrong with the students. When educators are able to do this, they experience a personal renewal that motivates them to probe deeper into the conflicts and tensions in their education practice. Through this process, teachers are

able to make sense of the situations by building a common language and understanding of the nature of the problem. The teaching passion, renewed conviction, and new understandings developed by the group make the reflective process a powerful strategy for improving classroom practice.

3 Making thoughtful choices to improve student learning

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A group of three teachers at Northway Elementary School brought a concern about the achievement level of their students to their principal. They felt that more could be done to help students do well on assessments. The principal suggested that they solicit other teachers to form a committee to study this issue. She also suggested that the school counselor facilitate their discussion.

The original three teachers were joined by four other teachers and the counselor. As they talked, they found themselves reflecting on their practice—what they did as teachers and the students’ reactions to those actions. Soon, they found themselves discussing multiple intelligences, learning styles, cognitive processes, and other theories about how students learn.

The counselor modeled a lesson for the group and then asked them, “What strategies in this lesson helped you learn this material? What could I have done to increase the learning that took place?” This led to an intense discussion that revealed both their knowledge about learning theory as well as their gaps.

They decided to divide into pairs and investigate their knowledge gaps. Each pair would then come back to the group and share their findings. Some of the members brought back educational articles or videos, while others engaged the committee in interactive discovery about learning theory.

As an administrator, you can create and encourage opportunities for teachers to talk reflectively.

- Ask department and grade level lead teachers to conduct dialogue events once a month on topics of interest to the teachers.
- Create mentoring or peer coaching teams for all teachers, not just new teachers, and establish regular meeting times to talk about issues of instructional concern. Bring multiple teams together occasionally to dialogue across teams.

Ⓢ Making thoughtful choices to improve student learning,
continued

Once they had completed their investigations, they discovered that it wasn't just assessment that needed to be addressed but instruction and curriculum as well. The three elements could not be distinctly separated when working to improve classroom practice.

With this new knowledge in mind, they began a dialogue about their students' needs and what they could do to create learning opportunities that would improve student learning. They implemented these ideas in their classrooms and then came back to the group to discuss what happened with their students. As they talked about their experiences, they identified new concerns or shared successes. They also began to talk with teachers who had not served on the committee. These teachers tried some of the same strategies

in their classrooms and began to discuss their results with other teachers. The process of reflection and dialogue created an environment that allowed these teachers to gain an understanding of the integral relationship of curriculum, instruction, and assessment and to break the isolation of the classroom and share their new understandings with others.

While each of the teachers in this group might have gained some of these insights through workshops or trainings, learning a technique or theory from a presentation is not the same as creating understanding through reflective dialogue and classroom application. These teachers determined their own knowledge base through dialogue, devised a mechanism for learning more on selected topics, shared their new knowledge, and then restructured their own classrooms based on their new understandings and the needs of their students. More importantly, they shared their approach with other teachers, so that it became a more inclusive initiative.

To promote this process,

- **Provide time in faculty meetings for teachers to share successful strategies that they are using in their classroom. Engage the whole group in a discussion of why these strategies are successful and how they could be used in other venues.**
- **Provide short scenarios for staff to discuss in small groups. Using a scenario that is not from your campus creates a less fearful situation and allows participants to be honest in their discussion.**
- **Ask teachers who have attended conferences to choose an issue of importance from the conference and engage in dialogue with other staff on this issue at a designated time.**

Administrators, Too!

Administrators can:

- **Join with other educators on a regular basis to talk about issues of importance. Again, these are not problem-solving sessions or administrative meetings, but opportunities to delve deeply into issues of importance.**
- **Join informal and formal reflective sessions with the staff. Approach these sessions as an equal partner in the dialogue, not the boss and decision-maker.**

Recent studies have shown that successful administrators move beyond the day-to-day role of running a school or district and into a role of leadership that emphasizes shared leadership. They understand that the culture of change is as important in achieving desired goals as the structure of change. In order to do this, administrators also need opportunities to participate in reflective activities with colleagues as well.

Before You Begin the Reflective Process

As you begin implementing a reflective process, keep in mind that noticeable impact is slow at first. Before teachers can begin deep reflection, there will be a period of venting. It is a natural part of the process of change. Teachers have seldom had opportunities to contemplate this deeply about their own practice. It is a painful process at times, but ultimately a rewarding one. It is also important to convey that this process is also important to you. You are, in essence, giving them permission to be inventive in responding to the needs of their students.



Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) seeks to improve and facilitate the process of constructing a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning through a project, Promoting Instructional Coherence. This project concentrates on coherence issues raised by the development, alignment, coordination, and implementation of standards, curriculum frameworks, guides, and materials, and the impact these have on instruction, assessment, and professional development. For further information about this program, or products created to facilitate instructional coherence, contact the

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