

# Reflective Teaching and Educational Inquiry

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## Introduction

The challenge of exemplary teaching is the focus of this book. Although this challenge can be met in various ways, one model of exemplary teaching, the inquiring reflective approach, serves as the framework for this text. You may find that you disagree with this particular model. Keep in mind that it is offered not as *the* answer to teaching excellence, but rather as one of many alternatives. You are welcome, indeed invited, to question it. Throughout the remaining chapters you will read about the recommendations and practices of numerous teachers who have adapted this basic model of inquiring, reflective teaching to their own values, goals, and beliefs. In addition, the text will suggest practical activities to help you develop, test, and refine your own interpretation of this model of teaching excellence.

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## The Reflective Teacher

Reflective teachers are expert teachers, and they demonstrate their expertise in myriad ways. The most obvious evidence of expert teaching can be found in the classroom. Certainly we expect good teachers to know their subject matter and be able to teach it well. In addition, good teachers must be experts in time management, discipline, psychology, instruc-

tional methods, interpersonal communication, and learning theory—and they must practice these competencies under the watchful eyes of 20 to 30 demanding customers.

In *The Practice of Teaching* (1986) Jackson observes that expert teachers “can spot an inattentive student a mile off. They can detect signs of incipient difficulty. Their senses are fully tuned to what is going on around them. They are not easily rattled” (p. 87). Research indicates that teachers make up to 200 major and minor decisions every school day!<sup>1</sup> In his now-classic study of teachers, *Life in Classrooms*, (1968), Jackson provides a vivid portrayal of the unrelenting pressure on teachers to respond to problems of all types. Teachers develop confidence and skill in decision making through reflective practice. Reflective teachers willingly embrace their decision-making responsibilities, and they regularly reflect on the consequences of their actions. Maybe they don’t solve all of the problems they confront, and maybe they make mistakes, but they never stop trying. They are sincere and thoughtful professionals who constantly learn from their reflective experiences. They understand that receptiveness to further learning is the key to continued professional development and vitality.

The three key characteristics of reflective practice are an *ethic of caring*, a *constructivist approach to teaching*, and *artistic problem solving*.

## An Ethic of Caring

The first characteristic of reflective teaching is the ethic of caring, which also serves as the value orientation for this text. Teachers express an ethic of caring through caring thoughtfulness. To care as a teacher is to be ethically bound to understand one’s students. Noddings (1984) writes that when a caring “teacher asks a question in class and a student responds, she receives not just the ‘response’ but the student. What he says matters, whether it is right or wrong, and she probes gently for clarification, interpretation, contribution” (p. 176).

Noddings presents three important, interrelated ways to practice an ethic of caring: *confirmation*, *dialogue*, and *cooperative practice*. She writes:

When we attribute the best possible motive consonant with reality to the cared-for, we confirm him; that is, we reveal to him an attainable image of himself that is lovelier than that manifested in his present acts (p. 193).

Confirmation, the loveliest of human functions, depends upon and interacts with dialogue and practice. I cannot confirm a child unless I talk with him and engage in cooperative practice with him (p. 196).

We will explore the values of the ethic of caring by systematically examining the concepts of confirmation, dialogue and cooperative practice.

**CONFIRMATION.** To confirm a student “we must see the cared-for as he is and as he might be—as he envisions his best self” (Noddings, 1984, p. 67). But what is this “best self”? Clearly it is different for each individual. To become sensitive to the best self of each student, a teacher must take time to listen carefully to each student’s innermost yearnings. One student may want to become a mathematician, another an auto mechanic, and a third a writer of Hollywood movie scripts. The caring teacher takes the time to help all students discover their individual inclinations and capitalize on them.

Think of a tracker carefully following an animal’s trail. Every telltale sign is important; overlooking a clue may mean losing the quarry. Teachers must track just as carefully to find a student’s best self. Along the way they may engage in problem solving, but they must not let this distract them from the intuitive connection they are making.

**DIALOGUE.** Dialogue is the second important way to practice an ethic of caring. Dialogue guided by an ethic of caring is open to the interplay between feeling and thinking. Think of the closest conversations you’ve had with a family member or friend. Because you trusted one another, neither of you had to censor what you were saying. You could talk honestly and openly about your innermost concerns. As Noddings notes, the “purpose of dialogue is to come into contact with ideas and to understand, to meet the other and to care” (1984, p. 186).

Caring dialogue between teachers and students is rare in our schools today. Noddings notes that making dialogue a high priority requires two major changes in American schools, one organizational and one cultural. Schools need to reorganize the way they assign pupils to classrooms in order to encourage “extended contact between teachers and students” (p. 186). Of greater significance and difficulty is the need to persuade the American public to accept honest and open communication between students and teachers as an appropriate—and integral—tool of learning.

Some exemplary schools, which you will read about later in this text, have established a flexible, multi-age classroom organization that enables teachers to work with students for up to three years. The benefits of extended teacher-student contact are obvious.

Suppose you are a second-grade teacher who has worked 9 months to build a good working relationship with your students and their parents. You’ve identified each student’s strengths and weaknesses, explored a variety of techniques and approaches to foster each child’s best self, and helped them set and accomplish long-term goals. Why pass these children on to a new teacher who will have to build the relationships all over

again? Although most children adjust to a new classroom fairly quickly, what about those who have learning disabilities, lack self-confidence, or have difficulty establishing trusting relationships? If your professional opinion tells you that a child would benefit from continuing to work with you, is your school organization flexible enough to accommodate your decision? The same point can be made about high school organization. Why can't teachers work with students for more than 1 semester or 1 year?

The cultural hurdle that impedes caring dialogue in the schools is the commonly held belief that schools should teach technical skills and general abstract knowledge but refrain from discussing values, beliefs, or controversial opinions. In other words, schools should follow the code of conduct of a nice dinner party: the open exchange of ideas is welcome as long as no one brings up religion or politics! Noddings points out that this cultural belief about schools seriously inhibits teachers' ability to establish close relationships with their students. Schools should be "settings in which values, beliefs, and opinions can be examined both critically and appreciatively" (1984, p. 184). Noddings reasons that teachers are already dealing with difficult topics such as racial, cultural, and social diversity; why shouldn't they also deal with diversity of values and beliefs?

**COOPERATIVE PRACTICE.** Noddings believes that caring teachers must also be "cooperative educators" (p. 186). Teachers guided by an ethic of caring understand that they can't practice personal confirmation and honest dialogue unless they work cooperatively with their students, and perhaps with their students' parents, as well. Caring teachers think of themselves as facilitators of learning; they "act as counselors and advisors in their subject fields and not just as imparters of knowledge" (p. 187).

## The Constructivist Approach to Teaching

The second characteristic of reflective teaching is a constructivist approach to teaching. All teachers concern themselves with subject matter, which includes both basic skills and academic content. Reflective teachers emphasize two additional considerations:

1. What is the relationship between what I am trying to teach and my students' past experiences?
2. What is the relationship between what I am trying to teach and my students' personal purposes?

The constructivist theory of learning<sup>2</sup> provides insight into these two reflective questions. Constructivists believe that students are active partic-

ipants rather than passive recipients during the learning process. In metaphorical terms, students are not just vessels into which the teacher pours knowledge. Instead students are builders of knowledge who actively construct the meaning of their lessons on the foundation of both their past experiences and their personal purposes. For example, a student who is motivated to learn a scientific formula for determining the acceleration of physical bodies actively relates the formal scientific concept of acceleration to her past experiences with how physical objects speed up. An unmotivated student, however, may see no relationship between his own personal interests and experiences and the physics teacher's purposes. This student can be coerced into memorizing the formula, but it may well remain meaningless.<sup>3</sup>

The reflective teacher takes this constructivist perspective and sees learning as a complex interaction among each student's past experiences, personal purposes, and subject matter requirements. This interpretation is diagrammed in Figure 1-1. In putting this theory into practice, reflective teachers strive to relate their subject matter to each student's background, needs and interests. Have you ever experienced teachers who considered your experiences and purposes in teaching their subject? Such teachers didn't ask you to memorize facts and practice rote skills. Instead they found ways to connect the topic to your own life. You will meet two reflective teachers and study their approaches to constructivist teaching in chapter 2.

## Artistic Problem Solving

The third characteristic of reflective teaching is artistic problem solving. Teachers who become skilled problem solvers by following an ethic of caring and the constructivist theory of learning provide a special service in their classrooms. They seek ways to make their students' learning

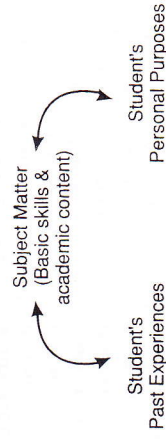


FIGURE 1-1 The Constructivist Theory of Learning.

meaningful by continuously adapting their curriculum to their students' backgrounds, interests, and needs. They understand that quality education involves judgment, imagination, and flexibility. Teaching and learning passivity are not found in the reflective teacher's classroom. Reflective teachers don't ask their students to blindly memorize facts, practice rote skills, and ignore their emotions. Eisner (1985) writes:

Teaching can be done as badly as anything else. It can be wooden, mechanical, mindless, and wholly unimaginative. But when it is sensitive, intelligent, and creative—those qualities that confer upon it the status of an art—it should, in my view, not be regarded, as it so often is by some, as an expression of unfathomable talent or luck but as an example of humans exercising the highest levels of their intelligence. (p. 177)

Reflective teachers are involved professionals, and they constantly seek new ways to get their students involved. Students discover that the challenges of learning can be aesthetically enjoyable, provocative, and interesting. In later chapters you will encounter specific examples of artistic problem solving.

## The Inquiring Educator

Reflective teaching is enhanced by an inquiring attitude toward education. The essence of educational inquiry involves taking a questioning, pondering, democratic perspective on the personal and public virtues of teaching and learning.

### Inquiry in the Educational Environment

John Dewey, one of the foremost philosophers in American education, devoted his life to the study of inquiry. He envisioned a highly participative, democratic, educational environment in which people freely raise questions and doubts. In this atmosphere of trust, people may try to persuade but never to manipulate or control one another. They enjoy the process of ethical dialogue, playful exploration, and mutual discovery. Their guiding purpose is to learn from one another through dialogue. Dewey believed that people who experienced an inquiring environment during their formal education would seek ways to establish a democracy based on a "free and enriching communion . . . [in which] social inquiry is indissolubly wedded to the art of free and moving communication" (Dewey, 1927, p. 184).

## A Contrast Between Two Educators

A comparison of two teachers' unit plans illustrates the effect of an inquiring approach on reflective teaching. Jack Dusett is a sixth-grade teacher who is teaching a social studies unit on Christopher Columbus' discovery of America. Mr. Dusett is a reflective teacher who wants his students to actively construct their knowledge of Columbus' discovery. To help the students relate the unit to their own experiences and interests, Mr. Dusett asks questions such as these:

- If Christopher Columbus hadn't discovered America in 1492, how might the history of the United States have been different?
- Have you ever discovered something in your neighborhood, such as a new playground, a new movie theater, or a new restaurant? How did this discovery make you feel? How do you think Christopher Columbus felt when he discovered America?

These discussion questions link the subject matter to students' own experiences and make it easier for them to construct their knowledge.

Karen Smiley is also a reflective sixth-grade teacher committed to constructivist learning. But unlike Mr. Dusett, Ms. Smiley is also an inquiring educator. As she plans her unit on Columbus, she looks for materials that help her critically examine the topic. She reads Kirkpatrick Sale's *The Conquest of Paradise: Christopher Columbus and the Columbian Legacy* (1990), which questions Columbus' motives and ecological values. Based on this examination, she decides to include activities that will broaden her students' multicultural perspectives. She shows students a segment of an old cowboy movie in which Native Americans are portrayed as savages. Then she asks students to list adjectives that express how they feel about Native Americans. While teaching the unit, Ms. Smiley will present information from the Native American as well as the European point of view. When the students have completed the unit, she will ask them to make another list of adjectives expressing how they feel about Native Americans. She will analyze and discuss any differences between the two lists with her students.

Ms. Smiley's inquiries aren't limited to the context of her classroom. She has developed an inquiring relationship with several colleagues who enjoy exchanging ideas and evaluating one another's teaching practices. Once or twice a week they gather after school to discuss their experiences. Together they ponder the quality of the classroom leadership and educational service they provide in their respective classrooms. At one of these meetings Ms. Smiley discusses her unit on Columbus. Together they examine the virtues of her curriculum decisions. One colleague arranges

to observe several of Ms. Smiley's lessons and shares constructive feedback with the group. All of the teachers look forward to learning new ideas and approaches from these group inquiry experiences.

As you can see, there is a qualitative difference between Jack Dusett and Karen Smiley's reflective teaching. Both teachers are guided by an ethic of caring and the constructivist theory of learning. Ms. Smiley, however, is also deeply committed to educational inquiry, and this commitment influences all of her teaching activities. She constantly seeks opportunities for mutual questioning and discovery—both among her students and among her peers. In fact, she hopes that in time her entire school will become an inquiring community in the spirit of Dewey's vision of a democratic society.

## Summary

In this chapter you have been introduced to a model of inquiring, reflective teaching. The key elements of a reflective teacher are an ethic of caring, a constructivist approach to teaching, and artistic problem solving. An inquiring attitude can enhance reflective teaching. Inquiring teachers are eager to question, challenge, and imagine. They seek out opportunities for dialogue with their students, their colleagues, and their society.

## Endnotes

1. For a good overview of research on teachers' problem solving, see Clark, C. M., & Peterson, P. L. (1986). Teachers' thought processes. In M. C. Wittrock (Ed.), *Handbook of research on teaching* (3rd ed., pp. 255–296). New York: Macmillan.
2. For a useful overview of constructivist learning research, see Magoon, A. J. (1977). Constructivist approaches to educational research. *Review of Educational Research*, 47, 651–693. For a readable synthesis of constructivist teaching and learning principles, see Fosnot, C. T. (1989). *Enquiring teachers, enquiring learners: A constructivist approach for teaching*. New York: Teachers College Press.
3. For more on constructivist investigations of science learning, see Driver, R., & Bell, B. (1986). Students' thinking and the learning of science: A constructivist view. *School Science Review*, 67, 443–456.

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