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THE EVOLUTION OF A REFLECTIVE PRACTITIONER:

One Teacher's Story

Anne K. Reagan

B.A. Lake Forest College 1986

**Submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the Master of Arts in Teaching degree
at the School for International Training,
Brattleboro, Vermont.**

April, 2000

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This project by Anne K. Reagan is accepted in its present form.

Date _____

Project Advisor _____

Project Readers

Eva Tarini
Alisa Shapiro-Rosenberg
Jeanne E. Rohen, Ph.D.

ABSTRACT

Becoming a reflective practitioner requires an active, disciplined process as well as support from colleagues according to the experiences of one elementary school Spanish teacher. This paper provides an overview of the learning experiences in a MAT graduate program that shaped this teacher's initial thoughts about reflective teaching. It also reviews several experts' ideas on reflective thought and teaching. Finally, it narrates and analyzes her experience of creating a reflective teachers' group using a text as the impetus for discussion. The conclusion offers ideas for future development of a reflective teachers' group.

1. Teacher Education.
2. Inservice Teacher Education.
3. Teacher Improvement.
4. Second Language.
5. FLES.

CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	iii
CHAPTER	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
2. MY FORMATION AS A REFLECTIVE TEACHER AT S.I.T.....	8
Kolb's Experiential Cycle of Learning	
Working with a Mentor	
Common Characteristics in My Learning Experiences at S.I.T.	
3. REFLECTIVE TEACHING: HOW TO DEFINE IT?.....	22
4. THE REFLECTIVE TEACHERS' GROUP.....	27
Formation and Participation	
The Content of the Discussions	
The Structure of the Discussions	
What Worked?	
What did not Work?	
5. CONCLUSION.....	40
AFTERWARDS.....	45
REFERENCES.....	46

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

What a dangerous activity reading is; teaching is. All this plastering on of foreign stuff. Why plaster on at all when there's so much inside already? So much locked in? If only I could get it out and use it as a working material. And not draw it out either. If I had a light enough touch it would just come out under its own volcanic power.... What an exciting and frightening business it would be.... In the safety of the world behind my eyes...I picture the infant room as one widening crater, loud with the sound of erupting creativity. Every subject somehow in a creative vent. What a wonderful design of movement and mood! 'What lovely behaviour of silksack clouds!' An organic design. A growing living changing design. The normal and healthful design. Unsentimental and merciless and shockingly beautiful. (Ashton-Warner 1958, 40-41)

During the past six years as an elementary school Spanish teacher, I have focused on learning and implementing approaches, methods, techniques and activities known to be developmentally appropriate for children. I have learned to teach foreign language using the Natural Way and the Communicative Approach, to design curriculum using thematic FLES (Foreign Language in the Elementary School) units, to integrate culture in the classroom, and to adapt the newest techniques such as Total Physical Response Storytelling. I have *plastered on* the 'foreign stuff' of technique to my teaching. It has been fun, challenging, and the students have learned a great deal. However, I know that even better teaching and learning can take place if I undergo a different type of professional development that reaches the depths of personal development as well. It is called reflective teaching.

In the above quote, I believe Sylvia Ashton-Warner is referring to unlocking and drawing out what is inside the students and the curriculum. Before I am able to do that, however, I need to shift the focus to me, the teacher. I have had the good fortune to

attend numerous wonderful workshops where I have been momentarily inspired. Time after time, I entered workshops enthusiastically, hoping that I would find answers to some of the many questions I had. After gleaning a couple new techniques and activities, I packed up my handouts and filed them away hoping to make use of them eventually. The workshops were somewhat useful but I felt that I was always trying to stuff their information into my teaching.

I am looking for a new way to grow professionally, one that enables me to unlock and draw out what is inside me and my teaching, and my students and their learning. More useful to me would be a professional development path that allows me to examine who I am and understand how this influences my teaching and ultimately students' learning. I want to take a closer look at my responses to the happenings in the classroom. What can my responses tell me about my underlying beliefs and assumptions about me, my students, and teaching and learning? Have I become robotic in my responses or are they thoughtful and consistent with my beliefs? Raising my self-awareness in the classroom will offer a deeper source of knowledge, something more permanent and specific to my teaching context, than what the average workshop provides.

Who I am and my philosophy of teaching fuel my desire for movement toward this type of professional development. I am a reflective person by nature. Keeping my actions consistent with my beliefs is a preoccupation of mine. One of my favorite parts of being a teacher is that it keeps me honest. In the classroom, my students and I set standards of behavior and, in a sense, every day we have a chance to recreate the world where fairness presides and opportunities are equal. Living according to these standards during the day with the children touches my life beyond the classroom. It would be

difficult for me to remind my students to be patient and wait their turn and then leave school and turn around and jump ahead of someone at the supermarket. Teaching evokes a living with integrity that I have come to depend on. I continue in the teaching profession because I value being with children in a community setting where we can learn about life and the learning process by understanding ourselves individually and in relationship to each other. The precious, desired outcome is that, at the end of our time together in the classroom, we are all better prepared to contribute responsibly to the world around us.

It was during my studies at the School for International Training (S.I.T.), in Brattleboro, Vermont, that I learned how to implement the idea of reflective teaching as valid and necessary for my professional development. Without even stating it explicitly, the Masters of Arts in Teaching Language Program's primary goal was to create reflective practitioners. The philosophy of the program was not to inundate the students solely with research and methodology. Rather, it was to combine learners' experiences as language teachers and language learners with reflection, research, methodology and practice. Discovery of my guiding principles and values through reflection was the primary goal, and the mastery of the techniques through practice was the secondary. Inevitably, I learned a great deal about myself in the process, and consequently, I saw my practice change in ways different from any type of workshop I had taken.

After I finished my course work at S.I.T. and faced the task of deciding on a thesis topic, I read the first chapter in Parker Palmer's, The Courage to Teach (1998). I was struck by his claim that "we teach who we are" (1), Taking this notion one dramatic

step further Palmer (1998) probed, “How does the quality of my selfhood form – or deform – the way I relate to my students, my subject, my colleagues, my world?” (4)

The question of how my selfhood shapes my teaching was central to the professional awakenings I had while studying at S.I.T. I experienced for the first time in my professional history undeniable evidence that the person I am – how I feel, my judgements, my assumptions, my own history and experiences – has an impact on my students’ learning and my success as a professional. Intuitively, I had already known this truth on some level. However, the M.A.T. program offered me ways to actually make the connections between myself as a person and teacher, reflect on how those realizations affect my students’ learning, and change my practice accordingly. This is Palmer’s challenge. We must bring the notion, “we teach who we are,” to the forefront of our professional development. Palmer (1998) insists on focusing on the teacher “because it marks a seldom-taken trail in the quest for educational reform, a trail toward the recovery of the inner resources that good teaching always requires” (7). My experiences at S.I.T. led me to recover some of these inner resources and consequently my practice changed for the better. Knowing the power of the work I did at S.I.T., I asked myself how I could continue to explore and make connections between who I am and its impact on my teaching outside of the S.I.T. environment.

I then discovered Julian Edge’s, Cooperative Development (1992). His analysis of learning helped me sort out in a different way why my S.I.T. experience rejuvenated my commitment to my own professional development. Edge makes the distinction between two different ways of learning: from the experts and from our own experience. Each provides different types of knowledge. Learning from the experts produces

“intellectual comprehension” while one’s experience produces “experiential understanding.” He then makes a case for a third dimension to learning. “We learn by speaking: by trying to put our thoughts together so that someone else can understand them” (6). It is in this attempt to express the *self* through speaking that intellectual knowledge and experiential understanding merge.

My learning experiences at S.I.T. included the three types of knowledge that Edge describes. The starting point at S.I.T. was my concrete experience as a learner during a variety of language classes. After each language class we wrote journal entries to collect our thoughts on our learning in classrooms where a specific language teaching approach was used. We then described our personal reflections to each other. Finally, we read about the theory and research of the language teaching approach we were learning about and took a deeper look at it with our classmates. We summarized our understandings of the readings, answered questions to clarify what we read and then analyzed how each teaching approach fits in with our own philosophy of teaching. Our comprehensive understanding of the various approaches to teaching language was constructed by reflecting on our experiences, reading research on different approaches and then discussing all of this with our classmates.

But for my thesis, my learning experiences with S.I.T. have ended. However, I am not ready to end the process of professional development that I began there. I want to continue practices that motivate and force me to understand classroom dynamics at a deeper level between me, my students and the content I teach. I need to draw from my experience, work with others, and learn more about who I am in the classroom. I am in

search of ways to develop as a reflective practitioner. Therefore, I am writing this study as a tool to continue the transformation of my teaching that began at S.I.T.

First, I will explore how my experiences at S.I.T. prompted me to initiate the process of becoming a reflective teacher. I will look at two specific components: Kolb's (1984) four-stage experiential learning cycle, and the experience of working with a mentor. I want to describe these experiences for two reasons. Elaborating on these aspects of my M.A.T. program allows me the opportunity to reflect and analyze the process and the characteristics of these experiences. The insights gleaned will then form a basis for future decisions about recreating similar experiences in my teaching context for me and for my students.

Second, I will explain how other educators characterize reflective practice. Knowing how the experts characterize reflective practice will enhance my intellectual comprehension of this topic. I will then draw parallels to my experiences at S.I.T. and analyze what was missing and what was not.

Third, I will discuss the experiences of a reflective teachers group, which used Palmer's (1998), The Courage to Teach, as a guiding text. Initiating the group was an effort on my part to take all that I learned, from my experiential understanding to my intellectual comprehension, and apply it to my teaching context. I will look at what worked well and what remains to be done, so that I can identify the next steps in my professional development.

Essentially, as I have engaged in the process of writing my thesis, I have worked my way through the four stages of Kolb's model of experiential learning cycle: concrete experiences, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization and active

experimentation. I will explain these stages in more detail in the next chapter but briefly note the organization of the chapters. Chapter One is a combination of explaining my concrete experiences and reflecting on them (Stage 1 and 2). Chapter Two integrates the ideas of others and therefore is abstract conceptualization (Stage 3). Chapter Three illustrates the active experimentation stage in that it describes an initiative that I created based on what I learned from the first three stages of the experiential cycle (Stage 4). I am writing this thesis in order to come to a clearer understanding of the components of being a reflective teacher. From there, I hope to be better informed of how to shape my future experiences in order to continue my evolution as a reflective practitioner.

CHAPTER TWO

My Formation as a Reflective Teacher at S.I.T.

I will describe the two components of the Master's of Arts in Teaching Languages Program at S.I.T. that gave me the most significant knowledge about myself as a teacher, a language learner, and a person. They were Kolb's experiential approach to education and a mentor relationship.

During my discussion, I will refer to David Hawkins' (1967) paradigm for the teaching/learning dynamic that is separated into three parts: I-Thou-It. The "I" is the teacher, the "Thou", the student, and the "It", the subject matter. It is often represented as a triangle with each part at a different point on the triangle (See Figure A). Each component is unique yet bound to the other two. Hawkins' (1967) rationale for adding the impersonal "It" was because "adults and children, like adults with each other, can associate well only in worthy interests and pursuits, only through a community of subject-matter and engagement with extends *beyond* the circle of their intimacy" (49). Using his model will help me discuss the complex scenario of teaching and learning in simpler terms.

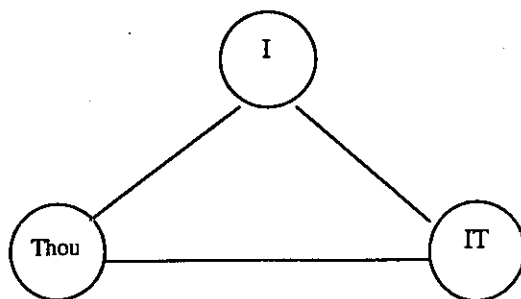


Figure A.

Kolb's Experiential Cycle of Learning

S.I.T.'s philosophy is based on Kolb's (1984) four-stage experiential cycle of learning (See Figure B). The two-year M.A.T curriculum, the individual courses, assignments, and even class periods at S.I.T were structured using the experiential cycle of education. I will explain each stage of the cycle and then will use examples from my educational experiences at S.I.T. to illustrate each stage.

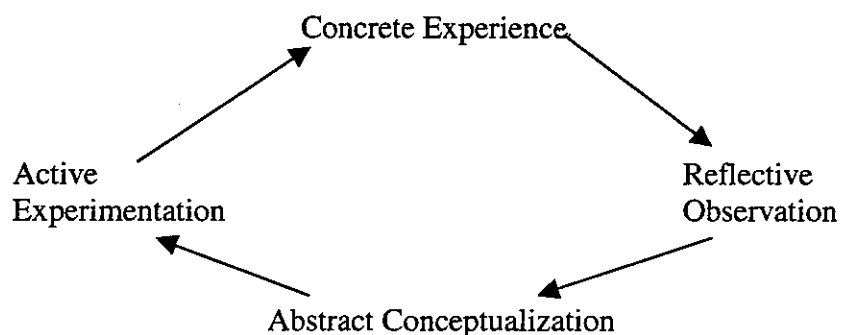


Figure B.

The four-stage experiential cycle begins with recognition that the learners bring concrete experiences to learning situations. These experiences form the learners' ideas about the topic at hand. For example, all of my classmates at S.I.T. were proficient in a second language. When we walked in the classroom door on the first day, we brought with us the concrete experiences of learning a second language in the classroom or through immersion experiences. We also all had a minimum of 2 years experience teaching foreign or second languages. In addition, during the first six weeks of the Master's program, we had daily Swahili classes. Each week, the Swahili teacher used a different approach to teaching second languages: the Audio-Lingual Method, Suggestopedia, the Silent Way, and Community Language Learning. As we studied each

approach, in a course called Approaches to Teaching Second Languages, our past and present experiences as language learners and teachers were the focal point for our reflective observation.

The second stage of Kolb's model is reflective observation. In this stage, data and observations are collected about the experiences. Reflection in the M.A.T. courses took place by journaling, speaking aloud in large and small groups, making analogies, and dramatization. We reflected on our experiences as learners in the class period while teachers and our classmates were listening. What had we discovered about ourselves, our students and the content we teach? What had we discovered about teaching and learning? What was the relationship between our assumptions, goals and values and the interactions we have had with our students? What helped us learn and what hindered our learning? What about this approach fit our own philosophy of teaching? How would this approach fit into our teaching context?

A significant example of my learning at this second stage, reflective observation, happened as a student learning Swahili in the classroom. I did not like Swahili class at first. Not enjoying the learning process was a new feeling for me so I joked about it for a while. However, underneath my humor was the fact that I frequently felt discouraged during class. I felt that I could not keep up with my classmates. Pronunciation was hard, my short term memory felt weak and just as I was finally able to say something, it seemed as though we would move on to something else. I was in awe of my elementary students and their ability to learn Spanish in the classroom, considering how difficult it was for me.

Our Swahili teacher did not speak English during class. However, at the end of each week, she reserved some class time to listen to us share our observations and reflections on our learning. She spoke to us in English at this time. It was through these conversations that I learned how teachers can facilitate students' discovery of their own processes of learning by making time merely to ask basic questions and listen. I will never forget my astonishment the first time we were asked to give feedback on our learning after an experience with a new approach. Simply by listening to my classmates describe what helped and what hindered their learning I was enlightened. Much to my disbelief, many people were learning in Swahili class and actually enjoying it. Studying the language in and of itself was challenging and interesting to them. Some could not move forward in their learning until they knew the rules of the language. Others could learn only when the meaning of the language was incredibly clear while others managed with a higher level of ambiguity. I was shocked at how much information I received about the variety of language learning styles solely by listening to my classmates describe what helped and what hindered their learning.

When I thought about how the idea of getting student feedback on learning fit into my current context, I made a discovery. I realized that I had been operating under the assumption that imitating the FLES experts definitions of good practice would be sufficient in helping my students learn. After listening to my classmates reflect on their learning, I wondered, why am I only listening to what adults have to say about how children learn foreign languages? I had not tapped into a wealth of information right before my eyes! Why had I not asked my students? My students could inform me and guide me. Their own voices had certainly been missing from my understanding of how

they learn. Student feedback was an example of how to let learning guide teaching, a cornerstone to the S.I.T philosophy. I decided one goal during the next school year would be to begin to use student feedback to guide my teaching.

Although I did not ask for help during the feedback time, or share thoughts I had about my learning Swahili, or lack thereof, I reflected privately. I thought about my experience learning my second language, Spanish. I learned Spanish while immersed in the Guatemalan culture for two years where my learning was in a real context. Comparing my experience learning Spanish to my experience learning Swahili, I figured out why I was not connecting with Swahili class. I had trouble investing in class because I resigned myself to the fact that the contrived language learning context of the classroom was not the way I learn best. The details of languages were not very interesting to me. I just wanted to be able to create enough meaning to be understood to reach my ultimate goal of crossing barriers and building relationships. This also explained why building a communicative curriculum for elementary school students was easy for me.

The lessons I gleaned from reflecting on Swahili class were more about why I like to learn languages, how I do it best, and how others learn best than on the actual learning of the Swahili language.

The third stage in Kolb's cycle of experiential education is abstract conceptualization. In this stage, outside information is used to inform us about the particular aspect of the learning that we are examining. Resources can be in the form of people or written information. In the Approaches to Teaching Foreign Languages class, we read descriptions of each approach by their creators and interpretations of the

approach by other researchers and teachers. Through discussion with our classmates, we refined our intellectual comprehension of the complex approaches.

I remember grappling to understand Earl Stevick's explanation of teacher control and student initiative in Teaching Languages: A Way and Ways (1980). Before reading his definitions, I took the sum of teacher control and student initiative to be one hundred percent. That is, when the teacher had total control, the students had no initiative. When the teacher gave up control, the students were able to take initiative. Stevick defended that there is a way to define these terms so that the teacher could keep one hundred percent of the "control" while the students exercised one hundred percent of the "initiative." From his viewpoint, teacher control dealt with giving some kind of order or structure to the learning space of the student while encouraging the student to take initiative. This allows the student to work and to grow within that learning space. Initiative "refers to decisions about who says what to whom and when. These decisions consist of choices among a narrow or broad range of possibilities which are provided by whoever is exercising 'control'" (19).

Reading about and discussing Stevick's distinctions between teacher control and student initiative helped me sort out an issue that I had been struggling with in my teaching. I found it difficult to teach using the "Spanish-only" rule combined with the Natural Way and Communicative Approaches because I felt isolated from my students and I was uncertain that these approaches were working for all of my students. It was only through me that the students had access to the language. I made all the decisions about what was to be said, when it was to be said, and to whom. Until they had acquired enough language to be able to put words together without me and create their own

meaning, the “Spanish-only” rule also inhibited me from getting feedback from my students on their learning, an invaluable source of information. As I experimented with and analyzed the various approaches to teaching languages, I continually looked for new ways that I could keep the control and give my students as much room for taking initiative as possible.

In Kolb’s final stage, active experimentation, our teaching and learning is adapted to the insight and lessons gleaned from the first three stages. Then, we return to the classroom and conduct ourselves in a more informed way. At S.I.T., our final weekly experience was to teach a mini-lesson to our classmates using the new approach. We applied our synthesis of experiential understanding and intellectual comprehension to a classroom setting. What did we like/dislike about teaching with the approach? What did the students in our class think or feel? What would we do differently next time? What part of the approach fit with our existing philosophy and what did not? What were the assumptions that guided our teaching? Before? Now?

During the courses at S.I.T., my classmates and I journeyed through the experiential cycle back and forth from learner to teacher. We learned different languages. We learned about our own unique style of language learning and how our classmates learn best. We taught our teacher about our experiences as language learners through feedback after class and we learned what it is like to get feedback as a teacher. We taught our classmates using different approaches and we learned how each approach fit with our teaching style.

Working with a Mentor

The second relevant component of my learning at S.I.T. was that I had the opportunity to work with a mentor. Between my two summers in Vermont doing the class work for my degree, I returned to teach my regularly scheduled elementary school classes. During this interim year, I maintained communication with a mentor, Pat Moran, through weekly email and telephone conversations. My assignments for Pat included writing reflection papers on issues that I was wrestling with as well as on classes I videotaped. I also kept a teaching journal for a several weeks. In addition, Pat came to my school for a week and observed my teaching, gave specific feedback on my lessons and helped me design follow-up lessons.

Working closely with Pat throughout the year surprisingly exposed several pieces of the person I am and how that relates to my teaching. I had not realized how I had begun to take many of my accomplishments for granted. Pat pointed out how my students naturally greeted me in Spanish in the hallways. They seemed to be comfortably immersed in the Spanish of the classroom and possessed a high tolerance for ambiguity. My lessons were systematic and developmentally appropriate for children. The curriculum reflected thematic units that wove together culture, content and language goals. These were the results of five years of hard work. I barely recognized I had reached these goals because I was onto accomplishing the next set. It surprised me that I did not value how much progress I had made until I saw my accomplishments reflected back to me through the eyes of an outside observer. Then I realized that that is my way of living in general. My *modus operandi* was to judge myself not by what I had accomplished but by what I had not accomplished.

I reflected on the impact of this way of thinking on me and on my students. On the positive side, striving for perfection kept me challenged. Rarely, however, did I take the time to look back and appreciate how far I have come. Rather, I just kept pushing on to the next goal trying to become a better teacher. On the negative side, the results were potentially damaging to me and to my students. Fixating on what I was not doing right rather than what I was doing right left me feeling inadequate more often than not. When I talked about what I would like to improve with my colleagues and administrator, I risked sounding incompetent rather than dedicated to excellence. Having high expectations of myself and entering the classroom with a great deal of information to be learned, it was only natural that I would hold my students to the same high standards. Those unfortunate students who were less focused were frustrated when they were not marching through the lesson plan with the expected speed.

Pat affirmed what I was doing already that was working well. He said that it was just a matter of adjusting what I was doing already in order to get the new learning outcomes I desired. In observing how hard I am on myself, he suggested that if I were to keep a tally of what was not going well, I ought to keep a tally of what was going well, too. After a fifth grade student commented that a class activity was “worthless and pathetic,” Pat helped me see that just because the lessons did not meet the students’ needs, it did not mean I was a failure. He pointed out how I need to detach my self-esteem from my students’ comments about their learning. He also mentioned the importance of distinguishing between students’ experiences of the lesson and their learning during the lesson. Asking specific questions to keep the students focused on their learning would make it more likely that their feedback would be useful to guide my

teaching. Pat's comments and suggestions were honest and relevant to my circumstances and for my growth as a professional.

Surprisingly, too, I learned to liberate myself from outside forces dictating how I should define "good practice." Prior to my educational experiences at S.I.T., I strictly followed a prescribed set of directions on how to create a FLES program that focused more on language acquisition and less on language learning. However, I did not feel as though my students were learning to their potential. The learners were relatively passive and the lessons were very teacher-centered, which did not fit my philosophy of teaching. Productive language lagged as receptive language developed so it was hard to construct activities in which they could be independent of me and work together. I had one hundred percent of control and the students had little initiative. The only way the "Thous" could get to the "It" was through me, the "I". By insisting on a "Spanish only" rule in the classroom, I felt very isolated from my students and I wondered if they felt isolated from me.

Yet, I plowed ahead thinking that eventually my students would acquire the language and all would be well. I thought that there was something in the current FLES methodology that I did not understand. I was sure that if I could only do a better teaching the way I was "supposed" to, then my students would be learning more and feeling successful. Pat noticed this and challenged me to let go of others' definitions of state-of-the-art foreign language programs and explore my own. Encouraged to trust my own instincts and experience, I felt freer to experiment with new approaches I had learned at S.I.T. that focused more on language learning than acquisition. I decided to integrate into my teaching other approaches besides the Natural Way and Communicative Approach.

As I mentioned before, learning using the experiential cycle during my summer coursework helped me identify approaches with which I wanted to experiment. However, it was actually with the help of my mentor that I found the courage to take what I had learned and apply it to my own context. My classes began to include activities for increased language production, student initiative in the learning process and student feedback on learning. My students were challenged in a different way and were responding positively. Most importantly, I was asking for feedback and getting important information about their learning during Spanish class.

As obvious as it may seem, understanding the difference between my thoughts and my actions was a powerful step in my growth. Pat asked me to videotape a class, reflect on what I thought about it before I watched the video and then reflect on it after I watched the video. In my initial reflection, I wrote about how unfocused I felt while teaching. I was distracted by several happenings. Some students were on the verge of disrupting the class, I was uncertain about whether the sequence of activities was working, and I did not feel as though the directions were clear. In addition, the classroom teacher made an announcement that took up a few minutes of my class time so I was not sure I could complete the lesson in the time left over. When I watched the video, I was shocked at how I appeared to be focused. Internally, there was chaos but externally, I exuded a positive calm. I found comfort in that little, secret deception of the separation between internal and external behavior.

The relationship I had with my mentor affected my professional life because it touched the depths of who I am. I gleaned important insights that came from the

interactions we had. It was through collaboration with another person that I saw see how certain assumptions I possess influenced my teaching persona.

Before I attended the S.I.T. Masters' program, I went through the day with endless questions about teaching methods, appropriate activities, classroom management, individual students and maximizing student learning. It was rare that I spoke of these questions with colleagues. Time for this type of discussion during the frenetic school day was hard to find. To make matters more complicated, I was afraid of sounding incompetent when sharing such doubts and questions. I was being paid to know about teaching foreign language, not to wonder how to do it!

I found that when I did disclose my concerns to some people, I was not really listened to the way I needed to be. The listening I needed did not include problem solving by the listener or affirmation from the listener of what I do well already or how much better I fared compared to others. While problem solving, advice and affirmation showed me that the listeners cared about me and wanted to help, responses such as these dismissed my questions and shifted the focus. This was not the fault of the listeners. I did not make my needs clear. I needed a different kind of listening that allowed a space for deeper examination of my questions and allowed me to come to some answers on my own. I did find a few people with whom to share, but after a while, I felt as though I was just repeating myself and not moving through my concerns to some sort of resolution. In contrast, due to the reflective nature of the assignments and the discussions I had with Pat, "who I am" came into our conversations about what was happening in the classroom. I believe that this is what helped me feel that I finally was making progress in my professional development.

Common Characteristics in My Learning Experiences at S.I.T.

How did the experiences I encountered at S.I.T influence my teaching so profoundly? There are several common characteristics. One is that my questions, concerns, values and goals came from my experience as a learner and a teacher, not only from books and from publications. The way I constructed my practice teaching lessons during my summer coursework at S.I.T. was formed by my time spent in the classroom learning Swahili with the various approaches. The papers I wrote for my mentor about my teaching were based on my own classes that I videotaped. The starting point was never outside of my experience. It was always rooted within it.

The second characteristic common to my experiences at S.I.T. was that my learning happened with others. My community of learners included my teachers, my classmates, my students and my mentor. My teachers at S.I.T. structured special time during and after our classes for us to share our insights on our learning processes. As my classmates shared their learning processes, I saw how different or similar they were to mine. Pat offered suggestions on how I could balance out the critical view I had of myself and how to separate students' comments into either their experience of the lesson or their learning during the lesson.

The third characteristic is that there was some sort of structure in place that provided a springboard for reflection. My assignments for Pat offered a framework for discussion of my experience within a backdrop of abstract issues, using concrete evidence to refer to such as videotapes, journal entries, comments from my students, and research on state of the art FLES programs. The structure for the courses offered me different venues to observe past experiences that then served to alter my future

experiences based on the learning I gleaned. My insights did not just come from random thought. It was an active, disciplined process. I did something, I observed what happened, I reflected with others and then I tried it again.

A fourth characteristic, and perhaps the most profound, is that due to the reflection inherent in the program, who I am as a person, not just as a teacher or a learner, was brought into question and factored into the equation to find solutions. I knew these truths about who I am on some level, but I just carried on without completely realizing the extent to which they influenced my perceptions of who I am as a teacher. It was through discussions that I acknowledged the reality of who I am in a different way. After examining these rediscovered truths I was left with a greater understanding of myself, my students, and the subject area taught.

CHAPTER THREE

Reflective Teaching: How to define it?

The definition of reflective teaching is somewhat elusive. It is almost easier to describe what its characteristics are and what reflective teaching is not than to come up with an exact definition about what it is.

John Dewey's definition of reflective thought is a good place to start. Dewey (1910) argues that "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought" (6). As opposed to random thought, he states that reflective thought is a conscious effort to examine beliefs based upon concrete evidence. The subprocesses Dewey outlines which are involved in every reflective operation are "(a) a state of perplexity, hesitation, doubt; and (b) an act of search or investigation directed toward bringing to light further facts which serve to corroborate or to nullify the suggested belief" (9). Dewey's says that part of the complete cycle of reflective thought includes obtaining concrete evidence to prove or disprove the belief. He warns of the overemphasis upon activity that could lead to impulsive behavior rather than "intelligent activity." Intelligent activity is a direct result of observation of the surrounding conditions, knowledge based on the past situations and from others, and judgement which is based on both what is observed and the knowledge collected (1938, 69).

Donald Schön's (1983) description of reflective activity is akin to Dewey's in terms of how the process begins. Schön dubs it "reflection-in-action":

There is some puzzling, or troubling, or interesting phenomenon with which the individual is trying to deal. As he tries to make sense of it, he also reflects on the understandings which have been implicit in his action, understandings which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action. (50)

Schön (1983) also makes a distinction between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (276-278). Reflection-in-action is a result of practitioners' intuitive judgements and intuitive knowing that lead to reflection. Digging up problematic situations is when reflection-in-action begins. It can happen within moments or over a period of time.

Reflection-on-action comes after the action and can be a review of the action. Maxine Greene (1986) describes what it takes to implement Schön's idea of reflection-in-action, "To reflect in the course of situated teaching is consciously to attend to what is happening and to those who are present with the teacher in a shared moment of life" (81).

Schön (1983) contrasts reflection-in-action with the model of technical rationality. He explains that the model of technical rationality is a view of professional knowledge that has powerfully shaped our thinking about the professions and the institutional relations of research, education, and practice (21). According to this model, "professional activity consists in instrumental problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and knowledge (21). Schön argues that professional activity must move from the model of technical rationality to reflection-in-action because problems in the real world do not come in the form of "givens." They come in the form of uncertainties. Scientific theory and knowledge help solve real world problems but practitioners also must rely on intuitive judgement and knowledge.

Zeichner and Liston (1996) make a distinction between a teacher as a reflective practitioner and a teacher as a technician (1-4). A concrete example will help demonstrate the difference between these two ways of operating. The teacher-as-technician would view a classroom problem through her own assumptions that are fixed and not subject to question. The root of the problem would be with the students and the teacher would focus on altering student behavior. The teacher-as-technician would apply theory and knowledge to understand or solve the problem. Mastery of teaching techniques constitutes successful classroom practice over students' mastery of content area taught. A teacher-as-reflective practitioner, on the other hand, would wonder at the source of the problem before determining where it lay. She might look at her own motivations and beliefs, the context of the classroom, and/or the structure of the lesson. The problem might be with the students but she would not automatically jump to that conclusion. She would use her intuitive judgement and intuitive knowledge as she searched for the solution.

The premise of Palmer's book, The Courage to Teach (1998), challenges the idea of teacher as technician and calls for teachers to become reflective practitioners.

"Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique; good teaching comes from the identity and the integrity of the teacher. ...in every class I teach, my ability to connect with my students, and to connect them with the subject, depends less on the methods I use than in the degree to which I know and trust my selfhood-and am willing to make it available and vulnerable in the service of learning. (10)

Reflective practice, or teacher-as-reflective practitioner, includes the teacher-as-technician as one of its parts but it is much more than that. Zeichner and Liston (1996) explain that:

...teachers' practical theories, their assumptions and beliefs about students, learning, schools and the communities that their schools serve, are continually

formulated and reexamined when teachers engage in a process of action and reflection in and on that action. (24)

Edge (1992) suggests a way to take the idea of reflective teaching practice a step further. He offers a specific structure for how to work with colleagues and refers to his model as "Cooperative Development." However, the basis of his model is similar to those mentioned above as it includes the practitioner as a potential subject for change.

The purpose of cooperative development is to help us act in our own working lives, and to help us have those actions as close as we can to what we want them to be. The extent to which this will mean that we must change what we do is exactly the question that we are trying to answer. We will answer this question by developing our awareness of our situations, by organizing new experience in those situations, and by trying to express what we have learned. (80)

Palmer's (1998) definition of good teaching is not complete without talking specifically about what is at the heart of teachers' experiences (11). Good teaching is a combination of wisdom derived from others and from one's own experience and, as a result, each teacher comes up with a style of teaching that is uniquely her own. Palmer (1998) confesses, "if good teaching cannot be reduced to technique, I no longer need to suffer the pain of having my peculiar gift as a teacher crammed into the Procrustean bed of someone else's methods and the standards prescribed by it" (11-12). Teachers bringing their own experience and identity to the discussion of their teaching are obviously going to question their self-knowledge in the process. We need to understand our own beliefs, assumptions, values and theories in order to figure out how they affect our practice. A practitioner who "never questions the goals and the values that guide his or her work, the context in which he or she teaches, or never examines his or her assumptions ... is not engaged in reflective teaching" (Zeichner & Liston 1996,1).

In conclusion, some of the characteristics of a reflective teacher are as follows. Being a reflective teacher involves a reflective, "intelligent" thought process versus random, impulsive activity. The process begins when a practitioner comes across a doubt, or a puzzling, interesting or troubling phenomenon. The time frame of the process of reflection occurs while teaching or after teaching takes place. It is more than just applying educational techniques or theories to solve problems. It actually calls the practitioner to examine her own beliefs and assumptions and see how they may be related to the doubt or phenomenon in question. It also blends emotions and cognition, intuitive awareness and imagination, and passion (Greene 1986, 80-81) as well as the technical aspects of teaching.

Three characteristics common to definitions of reflective teaching are that it is experienced-based, the teacher is part of the equation and there is a process for inquiry. Most professional development for teachers is centered on learning what other people know. Workshop leaders are primarily researchers and experts in the field. Our process of understanding and improving our teaching must begin with our own experiences and then we may blend in knowledge from others.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Reflective Teachers' Group

Reflective teachers examine the dilemmas of classroom practice while keeping in mind the institutional and cultural contexts as well as the teacher's role in the situation. A reflective teacher also extends herself outside the classroom and becomes involved in curriculum development, school change efforts and her own professional development (Zeichner & Liston 1996, 6). The only feature of reflective teaching that was not overtly present in the S.I.T. curriculum was involvement in school change efforts. My experience has been that after all the reflection and subsequent changes in my practice, it became second nature to question what is working and what is not. Empowered to do some active experimentation, I was ultimately led to add a new component to my school environment in a small, simple way.

I decided I needed to create a space in my teaching environment where I could continue exploring the practices of reflective teaching. I understood that in order to reflect on the teaching and learning in the classroom, I needed to have humility, honesty and courage to see that which was working, and that which was not. The ability to stay connected to these relevant questions required discipline and practice. Reflection did not just happen when I sat down and thought about the day. It needed to be an active part of my routine and it needed to have some structure. Most importantly, I could not do it alone.

I had read the first chapter of Palmer's, The Courage to Teach (1998), and was struck by the observation and question posed in his first chapter: "...seldom, if ever, do we ask the "who" question – who is the self that teaches?" (4). My study at S.I.T. revolved around this question. Not willing to stop pondering Palmer's critical thought, I initiated a study group to read and reflect on Palmer's book.

Formation and Participation

I informally collected voluntary participants for the study group. I mentioned the idea of reading and discussing Palmer's book to some of my colleagues whom I trusted and then I made an open invitation at a faculty meeting. Five people expressed interest. The group included two fourth grade teachers, a first grade teacher, a reading specialist and another Spanish teacher. Five of us worked in the same building and the other Spanish teacher came from another elementary school in the district.

We did not begin with a formal title for our group but somewhere along the line, it was dubbed the "Palmer group." I believe it was called the Palmer group only to represent what the original intention of the group was – to read the book and respond to it. During this discussion, however, I will refer to the group as a reflective teachers' group.

The group met every three to four weeks for an hour and fifteen minutes after school. There were four meetings in the fall and five in the winter and spring. In the fall, no matter how busy our schedules got, everyone managed to make it to our discussions. As schedules got more hectic later in the year, participation became a bit more irregular. However, generally five of the six participants attended. There were a couple of times

when a group member was unable to attend but was still in the building. Often that person would drop by to say hello and see how we were doing. Other times when people missed a meeting, they asked what we discussed or if they could listen to the audiotape I made of the discussion. It seemed as though no one really wanted to miss and there was a sense of connectedness that continued even if someone was absent. A feeling of community and dependence on the group developed.

The Content of the Discussions

Each time we met, we began by discussing a different chapter of the book. The subject matter in Palmer's book begins with the teacher and his/her inner life and then moves outward toward the students, the content area and the community in which we teach. The nature of Palmer's material inevitably led to discussions about our own experiences as teachers. Consequently, we agreed that what was said in the group would remain confidential.

I would like to use Rodger's diagram of "Teacher's Subject Matter for Reflection" (Figure C) to name, and attempt to categorize, the content of our discussions.

We talked about the teacher's (the I's inner actions) relationship to herself. In discussing the first chapter, we touched on some important sharing about why we chose teaching as a career and ways in which we have lost heart along the way. I remember one colleague, who had taught for eight years, asked another colleague, who had taught for sixteen years, if she experienced times of disinterest in teaching and if so, what did she do to keep invested during those moments. I discussed the relief I felt when I read Palmer's statement that bad days at school "bring the suffering that comes only from

something one loves” (1). I realized my assumption was that bad days came from not doing things right in the classroom, from not planning good lessons, from not being in touch with the needs of the learners. Palmer’s words offered the perspective that bad days are just part of the big picture and the reason I had them is because I cared about my students, their learning and my teaching. If I did not care, it would not bother me and I would not feel the heartache of the bad days.

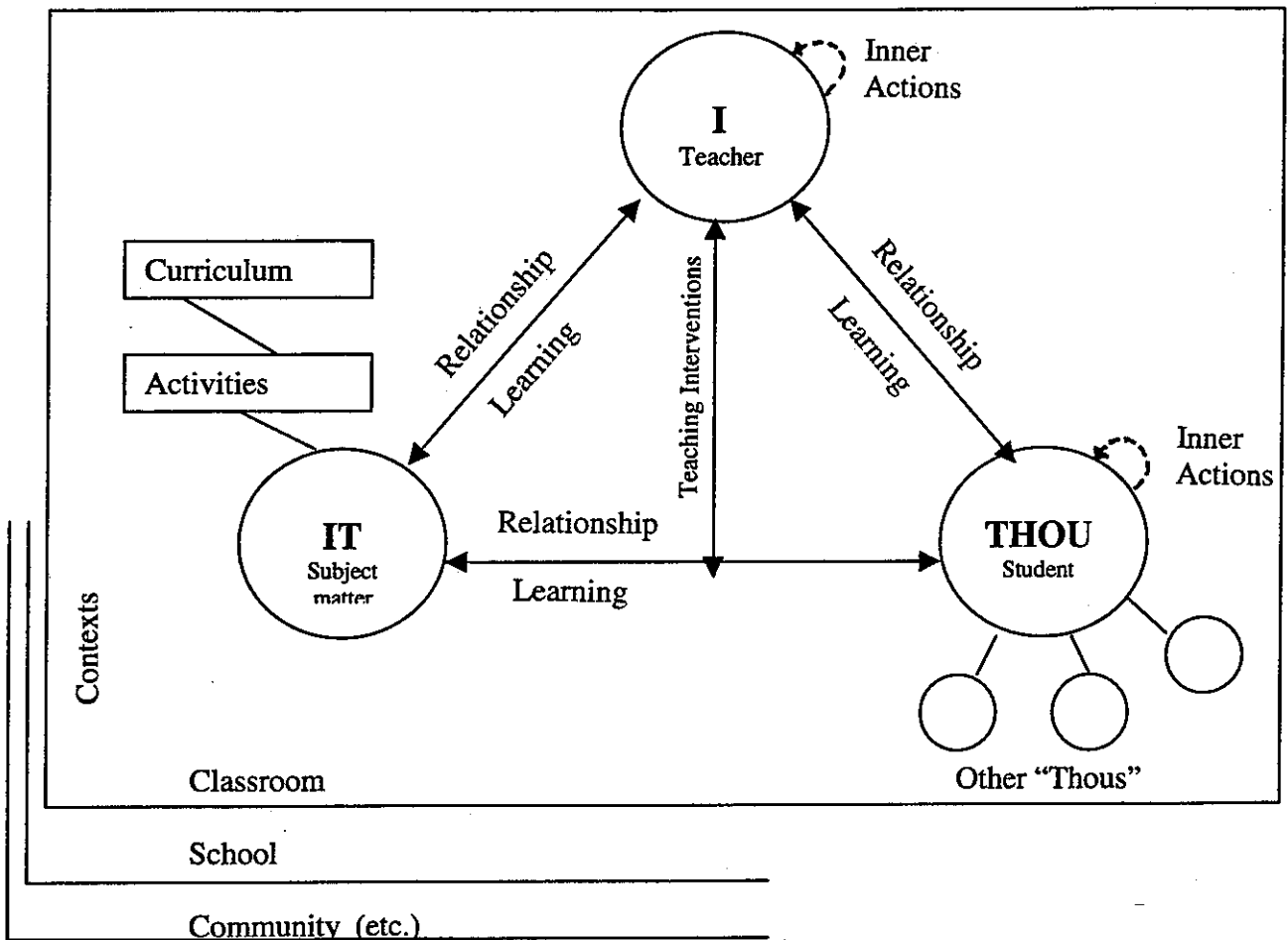


Figure C. (Based on David Hawkins', "I, Thou and It," The Informed Vision 1974, 48)

We discussed the teacher's relationship to the content to be taught (the I's relationship to the It), as well as how standardized testing influences the curriculum. We all agreed that the increasing amount of material we were expected to cover had a huge impact on the amount of time we have for reflective teaching and learning. We looked at the existing structures in place and thought about whether or not we were using them to their potential. One idea stemming from that discussion was that faculty meetings could be a time for reflecting on teaching and learning. The comment was made during a period when the administration was driving the agenda for faculty meetings. The chosen topics, while important and interesting, were not deeply connected to our daily interactions in the classroom or were not given enough time to discuss completely. We thought that if the teachers had say in the agenda as well, we could create time to discuss the issues most relevant to our daily experiences.

The other Spanish teacher and I reflected on the challenges of being Spanish teachers. Both of us were non-native speakers to the Spanish language and culture (the I's relationship to the It). We talked about the occasional struggle of feeling false and inadequate as we taught information on Hispanic and Latino cultures we had learned second-hand in addition to a language we were still mastering. We also reflected on how seeing between one hundred and one hundred and fifty students a day and speaking to them primarily in Spanish limits our personal relationships with them (the I's relationship to the Thou).

The group also discussed the benefits and challenges of the specific community in which we teach and how it affects our teaching lives (the impact of the Community on the I-Thou-It). The benefits we talked about were the significant amount of autonomy

and parental support we have. One specific challenge mentioned was the strong emphasis that is placed on competition. We discussed how this impacted activities and relationships in the classroom and made cooperation seem impossible at times.

Mentioned above are just a few examples of the main categories we discussed in our reflective teachers' group. According to Rodgers', "Subject Matter for Teacher Reflection," the areas we did not discuss in depth or at length were the students' relationships to each other (the Thou's to the other Thou's), or the teacher's intervention in the students learning (the I intervening with the Thou's relationship to the It).

The Structure of the Discussions

As we read Palmer's book, we did not use a specific discussion structure to guide our group discussions. We did not have a leader directing the discussion or providing questions for reflection. The process took on an organic form as we spontaneously shared our general reactions to the topics and ideas raised in the book. When someone shared a reaction to a passage, another participant generally asked a follow-up question, shared his/her own interpretation or experience, or went off on a tangent.

I remember feeling nervous during the first few discussions. The openness of the discussion made me wonder when to share my reactions to the readings and when to listen to others. I also wondered how I should listen to my colleagues. Once a topic was brought up, I was unsure of how long to listen quietly, when to ask a question or when to be an active listener reflecting back what I heard the speaker trying to say. I questioned when I should insert my thoughts, feelings or experiences on the topic or change the topic. I observed the others doing all types of listening and sharing so I figured any type

of participation was acceptable. My initial reluctance to contribute based on uncertainty about appropriate behavior eventually gave way to my deep desire to share my own thoughts and feelings about the readings. After about the fourth meeting, I started to feel more secure about participating as I needed to, and less concerned about doing what I perceived to be the “right” thing for the members.

It was during the sixth meeting that we began to consider changing the structure of the discussions based on Palmer’s sixth chapter. The title of the chapter was “Learning in Community: The Conversation of Colleagues.” Palmer proposed a way of dialogue based on a Quaker model in which the speaker brings up an issue and is asked questions by the listeners (1998, 152-154). Group members saw this model as a possible way to proceed during future discussions. Although we did not implement Palmer’s suggested model completely, our awareness was raised and it changed the way we listened, responded and interacted with each other. We efforts to meet the speaker’s needs were more conscious. At times, we questioned the speaker as to what type of listening he or she needed.

After we finished reading the book, we met for two more sessions. At the first meeting, we discussed our overall impressions of the book and then brainstormed possible formats for our final meeting. We decided to choose a theme to discuss. The theme selected was a Palmer inspired question: How are we “known” to our students and how are our students “known” to us? One participant reflected about how at different points in her life, she allowed herself to be known to her students in different ways and to different depths. For instance, during difficult periods in her personal life she was more

guarded with the children. After an experience abroad in a more openly affectionate culture, she returned and was naturally more affectionate with her students.

Focusing on the relationships with our students was a great way to end the school year and our final meeting. It allowed some of us to redefine the reasons why we chose to be teachers in the first place. We reiterated how certain logistics of our jobs, such as class time available and quantity of students serviced, limit our relationships with our students. In addition, we brainstormed for future possibilities of ways to know and be known to our students.

As our final meeting ended, all members expressed interest in continuing to meet the following school year. We talked about pursuing some of the formats we came up with in the second to last meeting. However, nothing was decided for certain. There was no formal evaluation of how the group worked. We did not analyze the process, form or content of the group. Members just seemed satisfied overall and commented about how much they enjoyed working together.

What Worked?

Initiating the reflective teachers' group was an effort on my part to recreate a professional development experience with characteristics similar to those I found in my graduate work at S.I.T. In retrospect, the group offered me several invaluable opportunities for growth that paralleled my growth at S.I.T.

The meetings offered a forum in which the members could be in a state of perplexity or doubt about issues relevant to our daily experience. For example, I explored the struggles specific to being a specials subject teacher and seeing so many

students each day. I also talked about how I had not yet discovered a way to teach foreign language that it is in harmony with my philosophy of teaching.

My learning happened as a result of working with others. I could hear myself think aloud. Having people listen encouraged me to stop and explore concerns that I might have just passed over in the frenetic pace of a regular day. In addition, there were moments when I learned simply by listening. Often, hearing others as they probed deeply into their thoughts and feelings, prompted me to come to a clearer understanding of what I thought and felt without even saying a word. Although I might have spent most of the session listening, I still grappled internally to make sense of the topic discussed.

At times, my subconscious assumptions were also revealed. I remember at one point during a discussion, I realized that I was operating under the assumption that professional development in the teaching field was linear. My thought was that a teacher just keeps getting better and better and then one day she is the best. Therefore, when I had a bad day I felt like I was failing because I felt I should know how to have a good day; the bad day must have been a result of not doing what I was supposed to. I felt relieved once I realized how I was judging myself. When I discussed my assumption aloud, it seemed irrational, however, it was truly controlling some feelings I had about my performance.

Because the content of the discussions was completely relevant to our experiences as teachers, I was always able to learn something new about the nature of teaching and learning. For example, my finding exact answers to the internal struggles of how to build relationships with my students and how to teach foreign language was not imperative. It was more important that I find clarity throughout the process than clarity from the

answers. As I spoke of my concerns, I came to see the complexity of my questions and their answers. A deeper understanding of the questions was what I needed. Being heard and understood was enough to calm my critical, analytical mind and be easier on myself. In addition, my colleagues brought up a variety of interpretations of the concerns I raised as well as a variety of resolutions. Keeping in mind that there was not just one right way but various possible ways broadened my perspective and allowed me to look at my questions in alternative ways. I had a greater sense of peace among the chaos and the uncertainty that were inevitably present in the puzzles of the teaching practice. Consequently, a space was created for wonder and curiosity.

An example of this occurred when I discussed how the combination of the short class periods and the "Spanish only" rule limit the relationships I can have with my students. Influencing students' lives through relationship is one of the main reasons I became a teacher so this was frustrating. I hashed out the pros and the cons of my position and heard from others who had experiences like mine. After a certain point, I saw that I must accept certain aspects of my job as unchangeable and determine that which is within my control. There were other ways that I could be known to my students than the obvious, speaking to them in English. I just needed to be creative about how to do that. It was evident that the time spent in discussion with my colleagues helped me learn how to manage a part of my affective domain and reconnect what was most essential to me as an educator.

What did not work?

Several things did not work so well. Some of them were due to logistics. Others were due to the structure and the content of the discussions. A few of the things that did not work so well were a result of the natural evolution of the group; we just were not ready for them yet.

The fact that in the winter and the spring we scheduled meetings month to month made it difficult to find a time when all could attend. Consequently, someone was missing at almost every meeting during that period. A little momentum was lost as the group attendance varied, and establishing a schedule with notes back and forth was a challenge.

We did not specifically define the type of listening that should occur. Many times a topic was brought up, the group members listened, reflected back what was being said and asked questions to help the speaker dig deeper. Occasionally, there was advice-giving, questioning of the "elders" in the group, and taking the speaker's story and applying it to one of the listener's. All of these responses were appropriate and helpful much of the time. However, there were moments when I wondered how a comment that followed mine related to what I was saying. If I could not see the relationship, I did not feel as though I was heard. I did not feel able or entitled to reclaim the conversation because we had not established any norms that allowed me to say that I did not feel heard. There were also moments when I felt that if the focus could have stayed on me a little longer I might have discovered something new or developed my thoughts further. Other times, I felt embarrassed that I was the focus for so long. I was conscious of taking up too much time at what I felt was the expense of others. The problem was that we had

not established norms for interaction such as how to listen, how to give feedback and how to move through a discussion.

The use of Palmer's book as a guide for discussion influenced the depth and content of our discussions. There were issues brought up that could have covered two sessions but we felt compelled to move on to the next chapter. It did not really occur to us to stop. In addition, being married to the book's content did not give us an opportunity to take the conversations one step further and do some reflection on the impact of the group process on the learning of our students. We did not probe deeper to understand how the benefits of group work we were experiencing, such as increasing overall job satisfaction, building community among colleagues, and rethinking our questions about teaching and learning, directly or indirectly influenced our students' learning. Nor did we spend time examining specific scenarios that involved teaching and learning moments in the classroom. Had we established regular questions which focused on the evaluation of the group process and its impact in the classroom, we could have felt freer to guide the discussion to be more relevant to our needs as individuals and as a group.

In sum, the process embarked upon in our reflective teachers' group touched on three points of the experiential cycle of learning. We brought our concerns and questions based on our experiences (Concrete Experience) and reflected on them (Reflective Observation) through a discussion of Palmer's ideas (Abstract Conceptualization) to make it a reflective teachers' group. Had we just spoken of Palmer's ideas it would have been a study group that stayed in the realm of abstract conceptualization. However, prompted by Palmer's inspiration, we went back and reflected on our experiences.

I was satisfied the meetings because I wanted to experience an organic group process that evolved according to the members' needs. In fact, it was not until our last two meetings that I felt that there was something more I wanted from the experience in the reflective teacher group. However, I could not name it. Then as I analyzed my experience at S.I.T. in this paper and identified what most impacted my growth, I realized what was missing. It was the fact that the reflective teachers' group did not move into the realm of active experimentation. I think this was because we did not have the initial goal of acquiring new skills. I believe that initially we wanted to further our thinking and understanding of our practice and did not necessarily think of furthering our skills and responses in the classroom. This original goal was reflected in the name that we called ourselves, the Palmer group.

I think that eventually the reflective teachers' group would have reached the stage of active experimentation. Our first steps in our evolution were to establish trust, to get to know each other and to uncover some of the puzzles of our practice that were perhaps dormant. What I have learned is that I am now ready to be part of a group that will actually work through the experiential cycle to the active experimentation stage. In doing so, I believe that not only my affective domain will be enlightened, but my practice will change also.

CHAPTER FIVE

Conclusion

I am somewhere on the path to becoming an increasingly more reflective practitioner and I feel compelled to continue ahead. The process has been challenging and exciting. S.I.T. initiated my exploration by using Kolb's model for experiential education as a philosophical framework, providing me with a fantastic mentoring experience, and constantly putting the onus of professional development back on me. My colleagues in Winnetka have contributed to my course by being open and honest enough to investigate together the question of who we are in the classroom. Ideas from Palmer, Edge, Zeichner & Liston, Hawkins and Rodgers have amplified my intellectual understanding of the depth and breath of reflective practice and consequently have helped me organize and name my experiential understanding accordingly. The next steps in my evolution of becoming a reflective teacher are clearer now. I will elaborate on the implications for further study.

There is interest in continuing the reflective teachers' group. Provided members would agree, I would like to see our group move toward becoming a peer-mentoring group. This would include the stage of active experimentation. The content of the group would change to be more focused on the teacher's relationship to the student and more specifically, the teacher's relationship to the students' learning.

Not only would the content of the conversations change, but also a different format would be necessary. The format would need to allow for a different kind of

listening and speaking to each other. What I experienced in the reflective teachers' group was discussion and conversation. We would need to focus on questions such as, "How does this idea manifest itself in the classroom? To what extent does it apply to my experiences in the classroom? Is this useful to my students' learning?" With discussions such as this, we could then go back into the classroom and experiment based on our reflections. Then, we could come back to the group, report the results, and discuss the new experience. Essentially, we would then begin the experiential cycle all over again.

I would adapt ideas from Palmer (1998) and Edge (1992) on how to focus a group towards a more active process with a different type of listening. The listening techniques they suggest allow the speaker a good amount of time to delve deep into discovery about his/her concern at hand. The discussion must be focused and driven only by the speaker. The listener's job varies according to Palmer and Edge. Palmer suggests that the listener only ask questions of the speaker. Edge, however, names the listener "the active understander." The understander's role is to actively listen to the speaker by reflecting back or paraphrasing what the speaker is saying using the speaker's own terms, and to be empathetic by naming the feelings behind the speaker's ideas. Both Palmer and Edge make it clear that the listener/understander is not to interpret or explain what the speaker is trying to say. Edge also adds another person to the process, the observer, whose job it is to give feedback to the speaker and the understander on what has transpired from an outsider's viewpoint.

I feel that this process would be uncomfortable initially. Unnatural behaviors are necessary to reach this level of listening, so specific rules must be followed. It would be easy to revert to old ways of listening. It is also rare in our everyday experience for one

person to be the focus for such a long period. Edge's book is a good tool because it offers many concrete examples and exercises to practice with first.

Finally, I would like to document the group process with narrative descriptions and assess its impact on my responses in the classroom. I would focus on a question about student learning, and then articulate the interesting or troubling phenomenon to the group. With questioning and feedback, the group could help me focus. I would then move outside the group to conduct classroom-based research. Edge notes that "classroom research is teacher development made explicit" (81). Finally, I would bring my observations back to the group and not only analyze the phenomenon further but also document how teachers' collaboration in a reflective way impacts student learning.

Benefits of collaboration between teachers in this way are great. The process builds community among faculty, which adds to greater job satisfaction and reduces isolation. Learning from each other's experiences, we come to see how valuable and resourceful we can be to each other. Articulating our beliefs and assumptions about teaching and learning honors our personal experience as a relevant place to begin new growth. In addition, dialogue focused on our beliefs and assumptions liberates us from responding in a robotic fashion as it creates more informed responses in the classroom. Time spent with colleagues observing and reflecting on moments of interaction in the classroom allows us to expand our knowledge base of the dynamic between teaching and learning. It is important not to see reflective teaching practices as working from a deficit model, as if something should be there but is not, or something is bad so make it better. Rather, as Palmer (1998) says, consider it a "trail toward the recovery of the inner resources that good teaching always requires" (7).

Ultimately, when and if more faculty members become involved in this type of professional development, it is easy to see how all these advantages could end up creating school change or reform. Based on what I know to be true for me, the results of the model of professional development described above would inevitably shift our communal focus back to what is essential for teaching and learning. Perhaps school schedules would change to accommodate less frenetic days. We would problem solve differently by taking into consideration how our own assumptions consciously or unconsciously shape our behavior. Maybe the time we spend collaborating would be structured differently to allow for deeper conversations about specific interactions in the classroom. In turn, taking apart the small moments of teaching and learning to determine the larger pieces of curriculum and instruction, rather than vice-versa, would then influence curriculum development.

The new school year has begun and already I can see how the reflective work from last year has affected my teaching. I am listening to my students in a new way. When several fourth graders complained on the first day of Spanish class that they did not really like their Spanish names that I had assigned, I took it seriously. My initial instinct was to brush it off as overly self-conscious behavior by several pre-pubescent boys. However, I decided that although it would be more work on my part to learn forty new names and it would take an entire class period to select new names, it was worth it. More important than the work or the class time missed, was the fact that the students needed to be heard. It turned out to be a wonderful idea that gave the class an unexpected surge of positive energy. The students felt a sense of empowerment that renewed their investment in Spanish class.

Moreover, in the beginning of the academic year, our principal gave the faculty an opportunity to have input into the form and content of our faculty meetings. She informed us that this would be the topic at our first faculty meeting. Our reflective teachers' group met to talk about how we would like the meetings to be so that we were prepared for our first faculty discussion. We proposed a format for how to organize the faculty discussion and our principal listened graciously and used some of our ideas. I thought the faculty meeting went well and felt there was a reinvestment, not unlike what happened with my fourth graders and Spanish.

Perhaps it is difficult to make a case that reflective teaching groups are valid sources of professional development. It could be even harder to convince school administrators that time spent implementing and experimenting with these practices is a good use of time and will ultimately have a positive impact on student learning. I only know it to be true in my own professional life. The outcomes are relevant, unprecedented and original. They assist in uncovering a different level of understanding of myself, my students and my subject matter and teaching context that is inaccessible any other way. "Why plaster on at all when there's so much inside already?" (Aston-Warner 1958, 40)

AFTERWARDS

In the fall following the year of work in the reflective teachers' group, the members applied for professional credit from the district. I am extremely grateful and happy to report that the Professional Development Committee, comprised of teachers and the superintendent, chose to recognize the hours we spent in dialogue as valid professional development. The group members were granted credits toward their salaries equal to those granted for workshop attendance. I thank our Professional Development Committee for their vision and trust.

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