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Choosing The Right Path: My Personal Evolution As A Teacher Developing And Maintaining Reflective Practice

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CHOOSING THE RIGHT PATH:

MY PERSONAL EVOLUTION AS A TEACHER DEVELOPING AND

MAINTAINING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE

MASTER OF ARTS IN TEACHING DEGREE AT THE SCHOOL FOR

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BY

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Abstract

After using self-reflection to learn more about herself as a learner and then as an educator during her first summer of study in the SIT Master of Arts in Teaching program, Nancy Rivera used this knowledge to further look at her teaching. She also used the same reflective process to examine her work during her IYTP (Interim Year Teaching Practicum) experience. In an effort to maintain this reflective practice after finishing her course work, the author examines the meaning of reflective practice, how she came to be a reflective practitioner, and methods she has used to maintain it.

ERIC Descriptors
Reflective Teaching
Self-Evaluation
Teacher Education
Teacher Effectiveness
Teacher Improvement
Teaching Skills

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INTRODUCTION

It was when I began studying for a master's degree in education at SIT that I

learned the term "reflective teaching." For me, this was a new concept that allowed me

to look more closely at my work as a teacher as well as a method to use in order to

improve my skills. Although the concept was new to me, I soon realized that the seeds of

reflective teaching had been planted long before. It started with my experiences as a

student at Guilford College, a Quaker learning institution. Our classes were conducted in

accordance with Quaker ideology: students addressed their teachers by their first names;

teachers and students often sat in a circle; consensus building was utilized; and every

opinion present was valued. These elements contributed to the goal of making the classroom a place in which the teacher and students were equals, and all present were learning from each other. As a student, I thrived in that environment because I was not required to quietly take in information spouted out by an expert teacher and regurgitate it for an exam as in many of my past learning experiences. Instead, I was encouraged to question, to contribute, to form my own opinion, and to express my own understanding and perspective. I was much more attentive and receptive to this approach, and felt like I was truly learning in this environment.

During my time at Guilford College, I took part in one of their study abroad programs in Guadalajara, Mexico. In this program, we worked with a grassroots organization based in low-income communities on the outskirts of the city. To work with the organization, we were required to study the work of Paulo Freire, mainly his ideas about the importance of understanding the social reality of others and the capability of all people to contribute equally to the world around them. The organization's leaders asked us to facilitate the workshops we taught using the Freirian concept that every participant is a teacher and a student, and, thereby, has something of value to contribute. My work in Guadalajara allowed me to further explore the concepts we were using in my classes at Guilford.

A month after graduating from college, I started a job teaching English as a second language to adult immigrants and refugees as part of the Americorps program. I had no specific background knowledge or experience in the field. Instead, I received a lot of help from other teachers and ESL resources. In addition, I drew from the positive learning environment I was a part of at Guilford, my work in Guadalajara, and my own

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experiences learning Spanish in various classroom settings and in Spanish-speaking countries.

Little did I know that I was slowly developing the skills necessary for being a reflective practitioner. I aspired to create a learning environment that acknowledged the opinion and life-experience of my students as well as encourage them to ask questions and offer perspective. I tried to determine what helped me as a language learner and what hindered me to better understand my students' needs. I was forming a belief system as a teacher, soliciting student feedback to best meet their needs, and reaching out to other sources for help.

Two years into teaching, I began my studies in SIT's master's program for ESL/EFL teachers and was introduced to the concept of reflective teaching. My classmates and I were asked to reflect on our experiences as learners and teachers and use this knowledge to look more deeply at our work. We continued to use reflection to further our understanding of concepts and material from our profession. Soon after, Bonnie Mennell, one of my SIT professors, guided me through the process of learning from my own teaching through reflective practice. I continue to work to develop the skill of being a reflective practitioner. In writing this thesis I have sought to clarify how I came to be this type of practitioner, as well as the specific ways in which I have been able to utilize this method and sustain it in order to facilitate further improvement.

I. WHAT IS REFLECTIVE TEACHING?

A man traveling in an unfamiliar region comes to a branching of the roads. Having no sure knowledge to fall back on, he is brought to a standstill of hesitation and suspense. Which road is right? And how shall perplexity be resolved? There are but two alternatives: he must either blindly and arbitrarily take his course, trusting to luck for the outcome, or he must discover grounds for the conclusion that a given road is right.

John Dewey, *How We Think*

There are many times in a teacher's career that she finds herself at a crossroad similar to the situation described above. When teaching a lesson to her students, she

arrives at a point that she had not anticipated. She has to choose the best path, but how does she go about making a decision? Reflection allows her to assess the situation effectively and discover the best path to take to provide her students with what they need at that moment. By engaging in reflective practice, she can think critically about her own teaching, and use that knowledge to improve future practice.

The Roots of Reflective Teaching

Most scholars point to John Dewey as the first educational theorist to suggest that teachers could improve their craft through reflection (Zeichner and Liston 1996). He viewed reflection as a holistic approach to teaching and a way for teachers to solve problems that occur in the classroom (Zeichner and Liston 1996). Dewey espoused three essential components of the reflective process: openmindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness. According to Dewey, openmindedness refers to a teacher's ability to look at every aspect of her teaching critically, to seek out information, and to be willing to accept and incorporate new ideas (Dewey 1933). Responsibility, Dewey said, entails understanding the effect that one's teaching can have on students, and understanding what can be derived from a lesson aside from the intended learning of information (Dewey 1933). Third, Dewey theorized that the wholehearted teachers approach their work with their whole selves and maintain their openmindedness and responsibility while regularly reassessing their teaching and its effects on students (Dewey 1933; Zeichner and Liston 1996).

Building on the foundation laid by Dewey's early work, Donald Schon helped define the modern concept of reflective practice in teaching (Zeichner and Liston 1996). He defined the reflective process as consisting of "reflection-in-action" "reflection-on-

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action" and "reflection-for-action."   "Reflection-in-action" refers to the reflection that

happens while the action occurs (Schon 1983). "Reflection-on-action" encompasses

reflecting upon the experience before it begins and after it is finished (Schon 1983).

"Reflection-for-action" happens when knowledge gained from reflection influences

future action (Schon 1983). Schon also coined the term "knowledge-in-action" which

refers to the implicit knowledge that teachers draw from as they do their work in the

classroom(1983). This professional knowledge increases with each reflective teaching

experience, Schon wrote, and allows teachers to continually take action based on this

knowledge (1983).

Approaches to Reflective Teaching

The work of Dewey and Schon has had a profound impact on the field of

education. In fact, over the past two decades their theories on reflective teaching have

greatly influenced a movement in education towards less technical teaching practices

(Zeichner and Liston 1996). Although there is general agreement that reflective teaching

methods should be implemented, there are a variety of interpretations of what the term

means (Zeichner and Liston 1996). In order to understand the variations that exist, it is

necessary to consider the objective behind each one.

Five different traditions of reflective teaching are identified and detailed by

authors Kenneth M. Zeichner and Daniel P. Liston in *Reflective Teaching: an*

Introduction. They are the academic tradition, the social efficiency tradition, the

developmentalist tradition, the social reconstructionist tradition, and the generic tradition.

The academic tradition focuses on reflecting on course content and how it is taught

(Zeichner and Liston 1996). Teachers must thoroughly understand the subject matter and

develop dynamic activities that accurately convey material to students (Zeichner and Liston 1996). The social efficiency tradition refers to using methodology rooted in scientific research as the basis for instruction and the standard by which teachers reflect upon their work (Zeichner and Liston 1996). Teachers need to learn and implement the findings of research that show a positive correlation between specific teaching strategies and students outcomes (Zeichner and Liston 1996). The developmentalist tradition emphasizes reflecting on one's approach based on students' backgrounds and developmental and academic level (Zeichner and Liston 1996). The teacher intently observes and analyzes students in order to make decisions about course content and methodology (Zeichner and Liston 1996). The social reconstructionist tradition stresses that reflection should incorporate the themes of social justice and equality within the classroom (Zeichner and Liston 1996). Teachers need to be aware of the cultural, political and institutional influences present in their work and in the lives of their students (Zeichner and Liston 1996). The generic tradition represents the general reflecting teachers do in their work (Zeichner and Liston 1996). The focus is on the belief that teachers should use purposeful reasoning for their actions (Zeichner and Liston 1996). The authors point out that each of the above traditions has been used separately for various teaching reform efforts and in teacher education (Zeichner and Liston 1996). In practice; however, the majority of teachers use a combination of these traditions (Zeichner and Liston 1996).

The Role of Self Observation

In *Pursuing Professional Development: the Self as Source*, the authors explore how teachers can help themselves improve their craft. The authors emphasize that all of

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the concepts used in the book are based on reflective practice (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001). They further explain that being a reflective practitioner requires self-awareness and self-observation (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001). As teachers learn to observe their own work, they become more conscious of their behavior (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001). They refer to Jack Richard's description of self-observation as "a systematic approach to the observation, evaluation, and management of one's own behavior…for the purposes of achieving a better understanding and control over one's behavior" (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001). The authors go on to explain that self-observation needs to happen for critical reflection to occur, and so that teachers can make connections between their thoughts and actions (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001). Through this process teachers should be able to observe and think about their work with curiosity instead of judgment (Bailey, Curtis and Nunan 2001).

The Role of Reflective Practice in the Classroom

John M. Murphy is an educator and writer in the field of ESL. Reflective teaching, he states, should help teachers learn more about the teaching-learning process, increase the variety of choices in one's teaching approach and improve learning activities for students (Celce-Murcia 2001). Murphy explains that the reflective practitioner works on the following skills: gathering and examining information about what takes place in the classroom, identifying issues and questions, seeking resources and assistance from others to learn from, making informed changes in teaching, and documenting and sharing results and insights with others (Celce-Murcia 2001). Murphy points out that through

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reflection teachers learn from their experience and use that knowledge to take action (Celce-Murcia 2001). He emphasizes that "taking action might involve exploring instructional innovations, trying out alternatives, and modifying-or even breaking-routines in teaching based upon what we learn (Celce-Murcia 2001).

The Importance of Developing a Personal Theory of Reflective Practice

In a workshop entitled "Inside Out: A Process of Personal Theory Building," Joellen Killion and Guy Todnem set out to help teachers learn more about the reflective process and how they could use it in their profession. They emphasize that reflection allows teachers to renew and revive their work and that it is not a passive thought-process (Killion and Todnem 1991). Reflection requires a meticulous, formal approach and has the purpose of revealing "the wisdom embedded in our experience" (Killion and Todnem 1991). As teachers create context-specific theories, their new understanding can be directly applied to their own teaching (Killion and Todnem 1991).

My Personal Theory

As detailed in the work that follows, my personal theory of reflective practice draws heavily from the work of both John Dewey and Donald Schon. The other scholarship reviewed here represents the elements of reflective teaching that furthered my understanding and the concepts that mirror my beliefs.

In my role as a teacher, I think it is imperative that I approach my work with responsibility, openmindedness and wholeheartedness as explained by Dewey. It is important to me to always attempt to see class material and activities from my students' perspective, to be receptive to feedback and new ideas, and to incorporate new

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knowledge I acquire into my approach. As I learned to be a more reflective practitioner, I realized that Schon's concept of "reflection-in-action" offered me great insight into improving my craft. I discovered that it was there in the classroom, with my students as my guides, that I was learning the most about how to be a better teacher. The "reflection-for-action" occurred during blocks of time before and directly after a class as I made changes in my teaching plans based on the knowledge I gained in the classroom. Through each classroom experience I add to this knowledge base and expand my teaching approach.

The work by Zeichner and Liston has provided me with a wealth of information about the history, influence and differing theories of reflection. They have identified five categories of reflection that broadened my awareness about the variations that exist. This helped me clarify my own objectives as a reflective teacher. In alignment with the academic tradition, I consider that being a good teacher requires me to have a comprehensive understanding of course content, so that I can be the best resource to my students. As stated in the developmentalist tradition, it is imperative that I gather information about my students' cultural and educational backgrounds, interests, and reservations so that I can take those things into account for class work. My awareness of social and institutional factors that influence my teaching and my students' learning mirrors the social reconstructionist tradition.

The authors of *Pursuing Professional Development: the Self as Source* convey the connection between self and the reflective process. I needed to understand that relationship in order to strengthen my abilities as a practitioner. Being aware of my own behavior allows me to observe it more closely. In this way, I can link thought and action

in order to make changes. I have to approach this process objectively and without judgment to make it effective, and understanding that has been key in enabling me to get the most out of reflective practice.

The ability to observe my own teaching is important; however, it is what I do with the results that enriches my teaching. As John Murphy states, I have to analyze what I discover and make changes based on that information. When I need outside help, I have to determine where to turn to for assistance, as well as how to best integrate changes in the classroom. Murphy reminds teachers that they sometimes have to break from comfortable routines when modifying their practices. I have found that being willing to try new methods expands my repertoire and keeps me from getting into teaching ruts.

As a teacher, I foster my own learning through reflection. Every teaching experience brings insight that I can use to improve my craft. Killion and Todnem's advice to reflect "so as to reveal the wisdom embedded in our experience" resonates with me. Reflective practice allows me to create a personal teaching theory tailored to my context. I know I serve my students best when using reflective practice to modify my teaching approach based on their specific needs.

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Understanding what reflective practice means to me has been imperative in order to develop its role in my work. After an in-depth exploration of theories of reflective practice and different perspectives on it, I have learned a great deal that has informed my own personal theory. Still, in my desire to maintain reflective practice and further develop the skill in my teaching, I needed to understand how I came to be this type of teacher and in what ways I have made progress up to this point. The writing that follows

illustrates how this process took shape and where it has taken me and my teaching thus far.

II. THE ROLE OF SELF-REFLECTION IN MY SIT EXPERIENCE

In making progress towards something better you can only start from where you are, and in order to start from where you are you must first see where you are.

Earl Stevick, *What's at Stake*

In the fall of 2001 I began my career as an ESL teacher, working with adult immigrants and refugees in North Carolina. I quickly grew to love my job and worked hard to serve my students' needs. Learning English for them was imperative; the language was a vital tool for them to achieve self-determination in this country. Being a

part of this learning process brought me incredible satisfaction. Occasionally, however, a lesson would fall flat, or a particular student would show little improvement. Knowing how important learning English was to my students, I was frustrated by these sporadic failures. Determined to improve my ability to serve my students, I decided to enroll in the Summer of Master of Arts in Teaching (SMAT) program at the School for International Training.

In one of my first classes in that program, Approaches to Teaching Second Languages, my instructor, Lauren Alderfer, presented the class with the following quote: "[i]n making progress towards something better you can only start from where you are, and in order to start from where you are you must first see where you are" (Stevick 1998) Lauren asked us to write a response to the quote, and I wrote the following: "Stevick is referring to the importance of self-reflection. As teachers it is essential that we learn to start from the beginning. It sounds very simple and yet it's easy to forget. I can't just jump to a new point and try to 'fix it' or 'find something new.' First I must delve deeply and see what needs to be changed, look at the issue from different perspectives, and get feedback from students." This response to the Stevick quote was the first time I defined for myself the meaning and importance of self-reflection. I discovered that I could not address my teaching failures by looking for a simple fix to a broken lesson. Rather, I would have to learn how to step outside myself and look at my teaching performance from a more objective perspective. In other words, I would have to engage in self-reflection. Fortunately, the SMAT program would provide me with a number of opportunities to engage in and develop my understanding of the self-reflection process

Constructing My Teaching Approach through Self-Reflection

During the following weeks in my course on Approaches to Teaching Second Languages, I learned more about how to self-reflect, and how to use the process to help me become a better teacher. We started by reading, discussing and writing about ourselves as learners and then as teachers. We then explored three teaching approaches: Silent Way, Community Language Learning, and Total Physical Response. As part of our study of each approach we were taught a foreign language lesson with them and asked to reflect on those experiences. Then my classmates and I taught our own foreign language lessons based on each approach followed by another reflection. Finally, I had to synthesize all I had learned and reflected upon in class to define my own approach as a teacher. All of the work I did taught me to understand with more depth where I was as a teacher, how I got there, and how I could improve and grow in that role.

During the course I wrote five formal response papers. The first was about myself as a learner. The next three were responses to my experiences with the three teaching methods I explored and how I could integrate them into my current teaching context. In the final paper I defined my own teaching approach and described a typical class lesson and reflection upon it. These five papers show the process I went through in learning the skill of self-reflection as a teacher. In my paper about "Self as Learner" I was able to define how my past learning experiences helped define my beliefs as a teacher. I was able to identify components that I thought were necessary to create a positive learning environment such as a supportive and welcoming classroom, allowing student feedback regularly, creating a sense of trust, and honoring students' needs. In my papers about the three teaching approaches I worked with, I was able to pinpoint how specific principles I was learning about could be integrated into what I was already doing

in the classroom. I explored how these new ideas could change my teaching and enrich my students' learning. In my final paper I integrated my experience and beliefs as a teacher with the knowledge I had gained in the Approaches class to create a lesson that I could actually teach to my students, as well as a reflection on that lesson. This paper represents for me the first step in applying the concept of self-reflection in my work. In defining my own approach and how it came to be, and then explicitly demonstrating its role in every aspect of a lesson, I was beginning to develop the skills I needed to become a better teacher.

Course Design and Assessment through the Lens of Self-Reflection

Another course I took my first summer at SIT was called Curriculum Design, Implementation and Assessment (CDIA). In CDIA I learned how to use self-reflection to develop skills specific to my teaching context. First, our teacher, Anne Katz, asked us to isolate components of classes that worked well for us as learners and teachers. We then had to identify and describe our current teaching contexts, as well as the content and objectives of courses we taught. After completing the above activities, I used the information to recreate syllabi and methods of assessment for my classes. As I worked through these assignments, I developed better techniques for course development and assessment, which in turn helped me to be a more successful reflective practitioner.

In my CDIA coursework I had to examine and articulate my beliefs, and then design course objectives, syllabi, and assessment tools that reflected those beliefs. I used various frameworks for these tasks. Two of them were particularly helpful to me in this class, as well as in other coursework at SIT.   In our CDIA class textbook, *Designing Language Courses: A Guide for Teachers*, we read and discussed a chapter that addresses

how a teacher's beliefs influence the way she designs a course. The text explains how to use the I/Thou/It framework based on the work of educator David Hawkins (Graves 2000). By using this framework, I was able to more easily separate the *I*, which represents who I am as a teacher, from the *Thou*, my students, and the *It*, or course content. I explored each element more extensively and with more clarity, and that in turn made it easier for me to create course outlines, syllabi, and assessment tools that incorporated all three in a more balanced way. I continue to use this framework to help assess how my beliefs influence my teaching, how well my students are represented, and how both relate and balance with course content.

In CDIA we also studied how to use various frameworks to create goals and objectives for courses we teach. For example, we studied the Knowledge, Awareness, Skills and Attitude (KASA) framework (Graves 2000). This framework appealed to me because of the way it separates knowledge, awareness, skills and attitude as different categories of goals. In using this framework, I was able to create knowledge goals that address what students will understand, as well as skills goals that address what students will be able to do. The awareness goals focus on students being aware of themselves as learners and other factors that influence their learning. Attitude goals deal with students' feelings about course material and their learning of it. I liked using this framework to reorganize the courses I teach because it allowed me to account for each category and address the importance of each one in course development. I have since used this framework to organize courses and to reevaluate parts of courses as I discover new goals and objectives that become necessary.

The first summer of coursework at SIT helped me learn how to be a better teacher. I was asked to define who I was as a teacher and to articulate what elements influenced my teaching and in what ways. I was given knowledge and tools so that I could continue to grow professionally. During the following school year I was able to use these new skills and new awareness to become a more reflective practitioner.

Journaling as Reflective Note-Taking

With the first summer of SIT coursework finished, I was excited to get back to the classroom to try out all that I had learned. The school year following the first summer of coursework at SIT is called the Interim Year Teaching Practicum (IYTP). My SIT advisor, Bonnie Mennell, asked me to keep a teaching journal throughout the IYTP. By journaling I learned a concrete way to reflect while teaching. The journaling I did during the IYTP taught me how to truly be a reflective practitioner, and I have continued to use this method for every class I have taught since that time.

Bonnie asked us to answer the following questions in our journals:

1. What went well and why?
2. What didn't go well and why?
3. What did my students learn and how do I know they learned it?
4. What would I do differently next time (in relation to answers given in #2)?
5. What insights, issues, and questions did this class evoke that are related to my goals for the IYTP and/or my overall development as a teacher?

I got into the habit of jotting notes throughout my lesson plans at certain points during class time that answered these questions and captured other ideas I had. If time permitted after class, I would go back over the notes and expand on them. When preparing the next class period's lesson, I always started by reviewing the previous plan and whatever notes I had written. These notes allowed me to remember more clearly what had happened throughout that lesson, and enabled me to better determine how to expand upon or

change activities for upcoming lessons. Reflective note-taking started out as a requirement I was fulfilling for my IYTP advisor and has since become an integral part of my work as a reflective teacher.

Self-Reflection through Analysis of Videotaped Lessons

Another component to my IYTP was to videotape a class session and have my advisor watch a segment of it for us to discuss. The discussion I had with Bonnie about this segment was very fruitful. We talked about our observations and identified what was successful about the lesson as well as what could be improved. By watching and discussing the video, I was able to see that particular class activity from the perspective of the students and I could observe things that I had not noticed while teaching. Through videotaping, I had found a way to be my own observer in the classroom.   I have since videotaped various class sessions to allow for a more thorough observation of how well a new activity works, or to see how a lesson is being perceived from the students' vantage point.

Documenting the Reflective Process

The journaling and videotaping were methods I used during the IYTP to practice my reflective skills as a teacher. In addition to that I wrote three formal reports throughout the year to document my IYTP experience. Writing these reports helped me articulate my thoughts and actions in regard to how my teaching evolved over the course of the year. I sent the first report to my advisor soon after the school year had begun, the second after my advisor had visited my classes, and the third at the end of the school

year. Bonnie asked me to write the first report about what was going on in my classes, how things were developing and changing because of what I had learned at SIT over the summer, and if there was anything I identified as a problem that needed to be dealt with. In the second report I explained how Bonnie's weeklong visit had affected my teaching in general as well as some of the specific changes that had occurred in my classroom. The final report identified who I felt I had become as a teacher in the past months. I described how my beliefs were being utilized in my work and in what ways the information I learned from my SIT coursework and the IYTP experience were now playing a role. After receiving each report, Bonnie responded to various sections with comments, ideas, guiding questions and information about other sources that might be helpful to me. These reports served as an ongoing dialogue about my progress, the purpose that Bonnie had intended them to have, but they also became for me a written record of how I developed into a more self-reflective teacher.

Self-Reflection through Teacher Observation

Of all the components of my IYTP experience, the most rewarding was Bonnie's weeklong visit to my classes. It was during this experience that I learned how to successfully put the skill of self-reflection into practice and witness the vast changes that occurred in my classroom as a result. Bonnie and I began our first meeting discussing a list of problems and issues I wanted to address during her visit.   We began each school day with me explaining my lesson plans and any issues I wanted her to pay particular

attention to. After my classes had ended for the day, I wrote notes about what had

happened that day. Bonnie began our after-class discussions by listening to my own

observations and asking guiding questions to help me think through problems or concerns

I brought up. She helped me figure out the reasons why certain parts of a lesson were

successful while other parts were not, and in doing this I was able to build from what I

identified as successful and develop strategies for fixing what was not working. She only

gave overt suggestions when I explicitly requested them, but I quickly realized that she

was a wonderful resource to me and I could gain a great deal from her advice. She

shared her own teaching experiences, specific activities that she had used that might also

work for my students, and information that she had learned from other educators.

Bonnie's presence, input and guidance during that week had a tremendous effect on my

teaching.

My week with Bonnie had been so productive and gratifying that I dreaded it

coming to an end. I wrote the following about the experience in my second IYTP report:

> The nervous anticipation that I felt just before Bonnie's visit quickly
> dissipated by day two; only to reappear upon her leaving. How could I
> possibly do this on my own? With Bonnie's observations and questions, and
> our incredibly fruitful conversations that took place each day, my skills as a
> reflective teacher improved greatly. I just wasn't sure that I could continue in
> that same work by myself. The following Monday as I was teaching, I felt
> something different. I realized that although Bonnie wasn't there to give me
> great ideas and her perspective on my classes, the spirit of our work together
> was right there with me. It was then that I felt the true power of being a self-
> reflective teacher.

All the components of my IYTP helped to make me a better teacher, but the work that

Bonnie and I did during her visit brought all of those pieces together and taught me how

to utilize what I had learned. The impact of our time together was not apparent to me

until after she had left. In the days following her visit I realized that I was able to

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continue in the work that we had carried out, and I felt like I had finally become the reflective teacher I had sought to be.

Teaching the 4 Skills through the Lens of Self-Reflection

By the end of the IYTP experience I felt renewed and accomplished. I was a more confident teacher and felt more successful at serving the needs of my students. In becoming a better reflective practitioner, I was able to recognize my strengths and build from them, but I was also able to pinpoint areas that I needed to improve on. One of my goals for the second summer at SIT was to continue to practice the skill of self-reflection to grow as a practitioner. A related goal I had was to develop what I felt I was lacking as a teacher from my SIT coursework, professors and classmates. I made a lot of progress with both of these goals in the 4 Skills class; a course in which SMAT students study the skills of reading, writing, speaking and listening in great depth.

In 4 Skills we began the exploration into each skill by being taught a short lesson by our teacher, Paul. In my personal reflections as a student of each lesson, I gained insight into my students' needs and perceptions of material. We also read the work of other educators and discussed their approaches and techniques. For each module of the class, I created a sample lesson plan drawing from activities I had already used and modifications based on concepts and practices I had learned about in the 4 Skills class. I then shared the lessons with classmates and got feedback from them. At the end of each module, I posted a written reflection on Blackboard that my classmates responded to. In this course I learned about several teaching approaches, about forms of evaluation and assessment, and about various texts and educators from the field of language teaching as well as how to integrate this newfound knowledge into my teaching context.

The information and tools that I obtained in the 4 Skills class had a tremendous effect on my teaching by helping to expand my repertoire and offer more varied learning opportunities to my students. In addition to that was the experience I gained as a reflective practitioner. With each module of the course I was asked to show how this new knowledge could be applied to my teaching context. I had to further hone my ability to reflect; recognizing how and why I approach certain material the way that I do and figuring out where my newfound knowledge would fit in.

First we focused on reading, and I learned new strategies for teaching and theories about its role in language learning. Most valuable to me was my reevaluation of the purpose of reading in the classroom. By approaching reading as a meaning-making activity my students would be able to process the material through their own lives and experiences. During the writing module I realized that I tended not to focus on this skill with low-level students because I assumed there was little they could do with this medium. However, I discovered that there are many writing activities these students can use to explore vocabulary and grammar, and more importantly to discover their own voices in English. Within the writing module we also looked at how student writing is evaluated and assessed, a matter that I have often struggled with as a teacher. I discovered new techniques for responding to student writing and forms of evaluation I had previously not encountered. In the listening module I learned a lot about differentiating the kinds of listening that exist and about the difficulties of listening to English as a foreign language. This in turn helped me recognize specific needs my students have that I had not been addressing and how to isolate and address various kinds of listening practice. Before starting the speaking module, I knew that I needed to find

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more activities to practice this skill with my students, and I learned several that I could modify for all proficiency levels that I teach. I also learned about how to identify the various components of speaking and how to isolate and focus on specific parts of that skill. By the end of the 4 Skills class I had an increased awareness of my students' needs and had learned several approaches and techniques to address them.

The Sandanona Conference:
Peers Generating and Sharing Practices for Self-Reflection

At the end of my second summer at SIT, I took part in the Sandanona Conference, a weeklong language conference of professional presentations given by SMAT students at the end of their second summer of coursework. I decided to create a workshop that would enable me and my peers to generate ideas and strategies that would allow us to use reflective practice in the coming school year when we no longer had the support and structure of the IYTP experience.

In the first part of the workshop, participants looked at and discussed information about professional reflection from various writers in the field of education. We then shared our personal experiences with reflective practice during the IYTP year and in the SMAT program overall, as well as how this self-reflection had improved our teaching. Finally, as smaller groups and then as a whole, we discussed specific strategies for maintaining reflective practices following our IYTP experiences.

One theme that emerged is that self-reflection will only be fruitful if a teacher is willing to be objective, honest, and open to change. Although reflection is an internal process, involving other people is crucial. To maintain motivation, participants suggested seeking out peer support, either with colleagues on their campuses or through contact with fellow SIT alumni. Also, having observers in the classroom to give feedback or

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using video can offer more perspective. Seeking out student feedback was identified as another critical element to effectively reflecting on one's performance as a teacher. Participants favored journaling as a practical and effective means for regular self-reflection. Planning lessons with observable results, some participants pointed out, would facilitate self-reflection. We agreed that successful self-reflection needs the three components described by Donald Schon as reflection-on-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-for-action. Through the workshop, many of the ideas on self-reflection through SIT coalesced; now I was ready to put them into practice outside the supportive SIT community.

III. REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN MY TEACHING AFTER SIT

Three days after completing my second summer of coursework at SIT I was back home in North Carolina and back in the classroom. Although exhausted after such an intense summer, I was actually very excited about the new school year. I felt invigorated from all that I had learned over the summer months and ready to apply those experiences to my teaching. Adding to that anticipation was the knowledge that this new school year would be a sort of experiment for me. Before leaving SIT I decided that my IPP topic would revolve around a burning question I had: How can I continue in my reflective

practice as a teacher post IYTP? It was a question I asked myself at the end of the IYTP and throughout my second summer of the SMAT program. It then evolved into a workshop I facilitated at the Sandanona Conference. The workshop did give me insight about the question but more than that it peaked my interest even further. Consequently, it made sense to further this inquiry through a professional paper, and use my first year back teaching as my own example of how this reflective practice would take shape.

Reflective Journaling through Lesson Plan Notes and Calendaring

Lesson Plan Notes

During the IYTP experience, journaling had become an ingrained part of my teaching in two main ways: note-taking in my lesson plans, and the keeping of course calendars. As I began teaching classes again, I continued the practice of making notes alongside my step-by-step lesson plans. I recorded specific changes made during class, observations of individual students, ideas for future lessons, and personal thoughts about the effectiveness of certain activities. In addition, I noted the informal feedback I received from students. After class, I would reflect on these notes and jot down anything that came to mind while I reviewed them. These notes served as a springboard for planning the next day's lessons, enabling me to ensure that I created activities tailored to students' current needs. I was also able to quickly determine when I needed help from an outside source to improve any particular component of the course. Cumulative review of the notes on a weekly basis allowed me to take a holistic view of how a course was taking shape and how well I was meeting course objectives.

A Closer Look: Lesson Plan Notes

The process of note-taking has been particularly helpful when teaching a new course or in using new material. In the spring of 2006 I taught a course called Reading and Writing 5 for the first time to international students in an EAP program As part of the class, I had to choose a nonfiction book for us to use to practice college-level reading and critical thinking skills. Because it was my first time teaching the course and using the book I chose, I used journaling to help guide the process throughout the term. In my journal I wrote out a timeline for which chapters students needed to have read for each weekly discussion of the book. The first assignment required them to read the first chapter, and for the class discussion that followed the reading I asked students to tell me how long it took them to read, the level of difficulty in regard to vocabulary and comprehension, and their initial reactions. I then jotted notes during the discussion next to my original timeline. Students said that some of the vocabulary was difficult but did not affect overall comprehension. They said that overall concepts were difficult to grasp and often required a second and sometimes third reading of a paragraph or section. Some students said that certain topics in the book were uninteresting or unfamiliar and thus harder to understand. I also asked comprehension questions during class and jotted down how much I felt students understood of what they read.

I later used all of these notes to reevaluate my timeline and make other changes. I determined that my original timeline would not work because students needed more time and shorter sections in order to understand the concepts in the book clearly before using critical thinking skills to further explore those concepts. I asked another teacher to look at my timeline and help me figure out how to work the whole book into the 9-week term. He suggested doing less in-class work with the final sections because students would

probably need less guidance towards the end of the term. I agreed and reworked the timeline based on the information I collected from my students and my colleague. I realized from my in-class notes that my students needed more concrete guidance and direction from me during our class discussions of the book, so I wrote in my journal short comprehension questions we could begin with. Journaling allowed me to use the reflective process to help me determine the best way to teach my students the material for the class.

Calendaring

In addition to journaling, I also created a calendar for each class that I kept in my notebook. For each day there was a small blank box, and after each class I wrote a quick note about what had been accomplished that day. These notes helped me when analyzing the class as a whole because a quick scan of the calendar allowed me to determine if certain topics or activities were being neglected or taking up too much focus. The journal and calendar both had an additional advantage of documenting an entire course from start to finish. They have served as an excellent resource for teaching the same course in a subsequent semester; I know exactly where to begin, and can ensure that I maintain an appropriate pace.

A Closer Look: Calendaring

Although journaling allows me to thoroughly document a course, the calendars I create are helpful in getting a quick visual sense when planning and reflecting. In a writing course I taught, students learned how to peer edit each other's work in order to become more aware of their own mistakes and to learn how to help each other instead of just relying on the teacher. A few weeks into the course I looked at my calendar and

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realized that we had spent a significant portion of class time during those weeks peer editing, but looking at their subsequent drafts of writing, there was little improvement. During our next class I asked students to tell me their thoughts about our peer editing process. We concluded that this process would be more effective and time efficient if we had a class created checklist of what was to be looked for and commented on. Students also suggested that editors of each other's papers should meet for five minutes to discuss their findings. Because I was able to pinpoint that the previous peer editing process was not working, I was able to address the issue early on in the course, and my students and I rectified the problem. Calendaring offers me another perspective on a course's development as I reflect on how the pieces of a course are coming together.

Gaining Perspective: Videotaping

Another form of self-reflection I have integrated into my post-IYTP teaching is videotaping. Through this medium I capture lessons for analysis from my students' perspective. In addition to being able to discern how my teaching is perceived, I can observe the pacing of an activity, and watch how small groups of students work together on their own. By viewing videotapes, I find that not only do I obtain a particular piece of information I am looking for, but also gain other unexpected insight. And whenever a colleague is available to assist me, I have him or her watch video segments to gain additional advice.

A Closer Look: Videotaping

I often teach part-time in an ESL program at a community college that offers free classes to adults. Unfortunately, it is rare that I can find an opportunity to have a colleague or other observer in the classroom, so I occasionally use videotaping as a

substitute. For one class I decided to videotape a session just for practice, thinking it would help my students get used to the idea of having a camera there. After watching the segment, I discovered that the taping had served a more significant purpose. The lesson it recorded showed a typical activity from our class that I had previously thought was very effective. The lesson involved students telling me vocabulary they knew that fell under each of the categories listed on the board. The categories for that day were fruit, vegetables, meat, and dairy products. I put their answers on the board under the categories and had them describe each word to their classmates. From my perspective at the front of the classroom, the lesson seemed to be going well. Students were engaged, they were speaking as they described items, listening to each other's examples, reading what I put on the board and writing it all down.

That afternoon as I watched the video, I saw something very different from what I had experienced during class time. While it was true that students were involved in the lesson, there was not as much learning going on as I had thought. First of all, only a handful of students were actually contributing answers. Many others were barely paying attention to what was being said, instead they were scurrying to get every word copied into their notebooks correctly. And I was mostly facing the board, running back and forth to write answers in the correct categories; paying little attention to my students. As I watched the video and identified these problems, I was able to pinpoint all of the shortcomings in this type of activity. I brainstormed some more effective ways of accomplishing the objectives such as focusing on only one category as an activity and writing student answers for that category as the first step. They could then describe their words after everyone is finished writing. Another idea was to let students work on this

activity in small groups so that I could observe more effectively, and then have them report their findings to the whole class. The videotape acted as an impartial observer that showed me what I had not been able to see at the front of the classroom. I was able to use this new perspective to improve and expand upon an activity that I realized was not effective in its existing form.

Student Feedback

The SIT experience affirmed a belief I had always had about my teaching: student feedback is an excellent fuel for reflection. Because gathering students' opinions is a crucial part of the reflective process, I have created a classroom environment in which my students know that their opinions are important to me. Throughout a class meeting period, I regularly ask my students for informal feedback following certain activities, and provide times for informal check-in in which students have the opportunity to comment on homework assignments, group work, or other issues. These comments I document in my lesson plan books alongside other notes. I also solicit specific feedback about our class work through questionnaires and one-on-one conferences at the beginning, middle, and end of the term. By soliciting some feedback on a daily basis and in-depth feedback periodically, I am able to best adapt a course to meet students' needs throughout a semester. Also, when my students witness first-hand how their feedback influences and shapes the class, they realize that their teacher really does appreciate and respect their opinions. The ultimate goal of a class is that students are learning material, so it is imperative that they play an active role in determining how well that goal is being met.

A Closer Look: Student Feedback

In a writing course I taught for an EAP program, students were required to learn how to write five-paragraph essays with references from outside sources. For one of their assignments, I asked them to write an essay using the theme of religion and public school in the US. I sent them links to online news articles as a starting point, thinking that this would help them get some background information before starting their research (our class session that day was in the computer lab). I gave them an hour of class time to read the articles, start looking for their own sources and then develop a thesis statement for their writing; it was the same amount of time I had allotted for similar writing activities. A half hour into the activity I could see looks of frustration on my students' faces and heard lots of frantic conversation between them. I could not imagine what was wrong. I had given specific, detailed instructions for a type of assignment they had done before. They told me that they understood the task and had received the links. What was I missing?

I asked the students if we could take a short break and check-in with each other. I heard several sighs of relief; they knew I had sensed their frustration. I asked the group how things were going so far. "It's too hard." "I don't understand." "This topic is impossible." I asked for specifics and students explained that they did not understand the topic even after reading the articles. Therefore, it was impossible to do any more research or attempt to create a thesis statement. I asked them to share what they did understand from the articles and what was challenging about them. Eventually we determined the crux of the problem, not one of my students was from a country that forbade religion in the public school system. They were struggling to understand what exactly was being debated in the articles; for example, one article was about a boy whose

family was suing the school system for requiring him to say "one nation under God" during the Pledge of Allegiance. We discussed this article specifically, and through the discussion developed a single thesis statement for the whole class comparing this debate with how the issue would be viewed in their cultures.

I walked into the classroom that day thinking I had developed a clear, effective lesson plan, but my students' reactions showed that was not the case. The preparation I had done beforehand did not factor in a cultural difference that impeded my students' ability to complete the task. Because we were able to have a frank discussion and pinpoint the problem, we could rework the activity together to make it more beneficial. By giving students the space to offer feedback, I serve their needs best and often learn something that aids future lesson planning.

Integrating Reflection: Course Binders

For every class I teach I always keep a binder containing my journal, syllabus and course outline, student feedback I have given, feedback I have received, course materials used, my calendar of short notes and anything else pertinent to the class. The binder is helpful over the course of the term because I can easily refer back to these materials when deciding what the next step is for the class. During class time, when I refer to a past activity, I can often show students exactly what material I am talking about. When I teach a course for a second time, I have the binder as a reference point and materials I can recycle or build from for the next class. As I look through the binder I am able to further reflect on the course from a holistic perspective and see more clearly which components of the course could be reused and which should be changed.

I regularly share these materials with instructors who will teach the same course for the following term. As I discuss the course with another teacher I explain what was taught, materials used, what worked well and what did not, and answer any questions about the class. Explaining the purpose behind materials I used and my reasons for parts of the course actually expands my understanding and helps me give advice about changes the next teacher might try. These conversations and sharing of materials create a sense of camaraderie between me and other teachers, and courses we teach become shared experiences.

A Closer Look: Course Binders

Teaching a course for a second time offers me a chance to further improve and expand on the work my students and I accomplished previously. As I develop a course there is a great deal of reflection, learning and growth that occurs, so it is especially rewarding to build from that hard work with a new group of students. In the fall of 2005 I taught a course for the first time called Communication Skills Level 4 to international students in an EAP program. One of the requirements of the course was that students put on a mock trial. Throughout the term, I created activities for students to learn about the U.S. judicial system and mock trials. We attended a real trial at the local courthouse, students watched a video of a high school mock trial, and we all attended a mock trial workshop at the university. At the end of the term, students created a mock trial based on a real case and performed it for other students and teachers.

Everything related to the mock trial was kept in a section of my class binder. There were articles about court cases, court and trial vocabulary games, a mock trial workshop booklet, my journal notes about lessons with reflections and student feedback,

and all the materials from my class's mock trial. As the term progressed, it was extremely helpful to have all of these components organized and available. We often had to refer back to these materials at different times, especially as students prepared for their own mock trial. Plus, as I planned class work, I could easily see what we had already studied and what we had not worked on. At the end of the term, I asked students to write about their mock trial experience; what they learned, how it helped them, and any suggestions for improvement or complaints. The following term I taught the same course and was able to use the binder as a starting point. As I planned the mock trial component of the course, I started with my students' comments about their overall experience with it. The majority of them had found the workshop, the court room visit and the vocabulary games the most helpful, but they felt that preparations for their own mock trial needed more structure and took up too much class time. I developed a plan and timeline based on their information, and transferred the helpful materials to my new class's binder. I decided to add two movies with the theme of a court trial as homework assignments because the previous students had enjoyed examples. I made mock trial team worksheets and a dated outline of steps to create more structure and so that students could do more preparation with their teams outside of class. Using some of the material from the previous class's binder allowed me to save time that I then used to develop a few new components that would be beneficial. The second time I taught the course was particularly gratifying because I was able to use the reflective process on a deeper level by building upon the reflective work of the previous class.

Reaching Out to Colleagues and Others—Help with the Reflective Process

Though it was my advisor Bonnie who served as a professional colleague to support and guide me throughout the IYTP experience, I have found that my fellow teachers can fill the same role. During weekly meetings, we discuss activities that work well in class and why, present problems we need feedback about, and share resources from the ESL field. My colleagues have also helped me explore classroom issues through informal conversations between classes. Consulting with my colleagues is beneficial to me because they know the particular program well and are often familiar with my students. They thus listen and provide feedback in an empathetic and knowledgeable way. They are often the best professional resource I have and the first ones I turn to when I need advice.

Another outstanding way in which my colleagues have helped me become a reflective practitioner has been through occasional team teaching experiences. For example, another teacher and I have collaborated on a lesson plan taught together to groups of students of similar levels. Team teaching has given us a convenient way to observe each other's teaching and gain feedback on our performance. Also, I have found that when another teacher's approach has been well-received by my students, I have been able incorporate aspects of that practice into my own teaching. On other occasions, teachers have brought their classes to observe my students' presentations, or vice-versa. This has provided the teachers with the chance to share our perspectives about how a task benefits the students and how the activity can maximize student learning. In giving and receiving feedback in these ways, my colleagues and I reflect more fully on our own teaching, and foster an environment that encourages honest, constructive dialogue that helps us all serve our students better.

The weeklong visit to my classes by my IYTP advisor provided the crucial link to putting my reflective work into action, and because of that experience I think it is essential to welcome outside observers into the classroom. For example, my program director occasionally visits my classes and provides me the chance to meet informally to share his feedback from the observation. My IYTP experience reduced my intimidation level about these meetings and taught me to see them as a chance to clarify my beliefs and benefit from a different perspective on my teaching. On other occasions, students from other university programs have observed my classes for various assignments. Through conversations after their visits, I have gained useful insights, such as skills my students will need in university classes and skills the observers noticed they have already mastered. In addition, I have had individuals interested in teaching in the field of ESOL come to observe my classes. Their reactions and questions have built my awareness of elements in the classroom that I had not paid attention to previously, and sometimes these individuals' observations about a particular student have brought to light something I had not noticed.

Finally, I have tapped into my SMAT alumni network, and consulted with teachers I have worked with in the past, to further my reflective practice. For example, one fellow SMAT alumna taught me how to use games she created to teach pronunciation after I explained to her that I was unable to meet those particular needs for my students. And a teacher from a different ESOL program I worked in gave me ideas about how to use the program's textbook in a more student-centered way. A friend who formerly taught at the EAP program I work in has given me countless ideas about how to evaluate and give feedback on my students' assignments in a more time-effective way. In sum, I

have found that reaching out to others has played a critical role in my growth as a reflective practitioner.

Connecting With Resources- New Knowledge for Reflection

Reflection alone, I realized, would not help me become a better teacher unless I actively sought out resources to address any issues I became aware of. My colleagues at Interlink have played an invaluable role in guiding me to resources within our institution or in our community. I have also learned to tap into other professional resources within the field of Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL). For example, I joined the Carolina TESOL organization, through which I have been able to learn about local conferences and seminars. Their newsletters contain articles written by teachers from the region that help me keep abreast of issues in our ESL community. I signed up with textbook companies to receive catalogues of up-to-date resource materials and textbook samples specific to courses I teach. These companies keep me informed about new tools available to my students. Websites that focus on ESOL/EFL content have helped me stay connected to the global TESOL community. Other teachers' contributions to these websites have taught me about activities they have created and resources they use, and ideas about how to solve problems we have both experienced in our classrooms. Message boards have provided a forum for soliciting help from, and contributing advice to, teachers in my field all over the world. In the future, I plan to write articles for publication in my field. This will give me a chance to hone in on a particular aspect of my teaching and clarify my beliefs and practices. Through becoming a more reflective practitioner, I have developed a better understanding of the importance of playing an active role in exchanging knowledge with other educators in a rapidly evolving field.

Conclusion

Through my experience at SIT, I learned how to use the tool of self-reflection in my quest to become a better teacher. The journey began for me by looking inward and articulating how I came to be the teacher I am now. In the process of defining my beliefs, I was able to express what I find to be of value in a learning environment. This exercise

became the impetus for self-reflection. I had to determine where these ideals started and how they played out in the classroom. I had to identify my strengths as a teacher and areas in which I was lacking knowledge and experience. The work of reflection was difficult at first; it was hard for me to delve so deeply and try to make sense of past learning and previous teaching experiences. Although it was a challenge, the process also proved to be empowering. It was the first time it occurred to me to look to myself for the answers, to be my own guide when seeking knowledge.

I first had to trust in my own strengths. Next, I had to recognize areas for improvement. My SIT professors and classmates provided me with the support, advice and information I needed to enrich my teaching. I also learned more effective ways of observing my students' learning and soliciting feedback from them, as well as how to incorporate that crucial information into my work. I had previously thought that after finishing my SIT coursework I would become a different teacher, more qualified and knowledgeable. By the end of the experience, I acknowledged that I had actually arrived at SIT with the makings of a better teacher. I needed to identify those skills and build from them with the help of my SIT teachers, classmates, and my own students.

The following school year provided a new challenge for me. I knew that I had the necessary tools to improve as a practitioner. The difference was that the previous school year I had worked within the structure and support of the IYTP experience. I was not sure I would be able to continue this growth on my own. As the year progressed, I grew confident in my ability to develop my craft. I built upon methods I used during the IYTP and found new techniques and resources to enhance the reflective process. I expanded upon the journaling techniques I had used before, videotaped more class sessions, and

kept course binders that were more comprehensive. Additionally, I found more ways to solicit help from colleagues and others, and expanded my use of resources available beyond the learning institutions I worked for. All of the above coincided with the overall goal of cultivating my reflective skills. In addition, by exploring this topic through the medium of my master's thesis paper, I was able to learn more about reflective teaching and solidify my own beliefs as well. I gained knowledge from research I studied in the field of reflective practice, and then used that to help me articulate my own understanding. Here, I have documented my own journey through writing about it, which has helped me see how the process has unfolded and where I am now.

It has been two years since I completed my coursework at SIT and began the current phase in my teaching career. In looking at what I have achieved in that time, I feel a great sense of accomplishment. I have successfully incorporated a number of reflective practices into my teaching and feel confident that I will be able to continue in this work in the future. As my teaching evolved and I incorporated new knowledge into my work, I realized that the reflective process is not just a single component of my teaching, but the thread that holds all of the other components together. Self-reflection heightens my awareness of my teaching practice, enables me to identify areas for growth, and motivates me to make constructive changes. As an ingrained part of my approach, reflection will allow me to progress and transform my teaching throughout my career.

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