



1-1-1990

## The Emerging Voice" Toward Reflective Practice

Susan Ditchburn

David Jardine

Cynthia Prasow

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-journal>

---

### Recommended Citation

Ditchburn, Susan; Jardine, David; and Prasow, Cynthia (1990) "The Emerging Voice" Toward Reflective Practice," *Journal of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 2 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-journal/vol4/iss2/4>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UND Scholarly Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Teaching and Learning* by an authorized editor of UND Scholarly Commons. For more information, please contact [und.common@library.und.edu](mailto:und.common@library.und.edu).

# The Emerging Voice: Toward Reflective Practice

by  
Susan Ditchburn  
David Jardine  
Cynthia Prasow

Every time we understand the world or some object in the world, our past experiences, assumptions, prejudices, and prior understandings are brought to bear. We always understand children, aspects of the curriculum, and teaching practices in light of our own presuppositions. One of the peculiar characteristics of such presuppositions is that they naturally tend to remain implicit. We tend to understand the world on the basis of our presuppositions while those presuppositions themselves remain hidden. But to say that these presuppositions remain hidden is not precisely to say that they are not visible at all. Rather, "once a concept is constructed, it is immediately externalized so that it appears to the subject as a . . . given property of the object and independent of the subjects' own . . . activity" (Elkind, 1968, pp. xii). What remains hidden in such externalization is the subject's voice, the subject's own involvement in the act of making sense of features of the practice of teaching. The consequence of such externalization is that beginning teachers face the arduous task of re-appropriating their understanding of teaching as their own, as an expression of their own emerging voice as a professional.

It is here that the concept of reflective teaching emerges. The process of being and becoming a teacher involves bringing forth one's presuppositions, one's pre-understandings. Becoming a teacher is therefore not just a matter of collecting new information about various features of the practice of teaching, but of re-collecting and giving a voice to the presuppositions which we have already adopted, in which we already live and act.

As teachers, we understand this notion of "bringing forth" or "bringing to the fore" as a process in which we naturally involve children. We provide children with many classroom experiences and are involved in helping children bring to the fore the underlying nature of these experiences. But in the act of providing these experiences, the pre-understanding of the teacher is already present. The teacher's understanding of such experiences and their curricular and instructional relevance provides the implicit or explicit impetus for the pedagogical act. Effective teaching requires that this impetus and the understandings which inform it must themselves be brought to the fore. This process is the root of the term "education" - educare, to educe, to bring out or bring forth. A fundamental part of being and becoming a teacher is educare, bringing forth our own presuppositions or pre-understandings in the process of educating children. The process of coming to understand the children we educate is at the same time a process of coming to understand ourselves, a reflective process of "self-education." Education is thus ideally a mutual bringing forth of teacher and child.

In the act of reflective teaching, our implicit presuppositions are brought forth and questioned, examined, confirmed, denied, modified, solidified, and so on. We do not conceive of reflection in teaching as simply a corrective measure which we can bring to bear when things “go wrong,” and then ignore until remedial work is needed again. Such a conception of reflective teaching casts reflection as an instrumental technique which is accidental to the nature of teaching. It also casts the nature of the practice of teaching as some sort of atheoretical or unreflective set of practices which proceed on their own course until some sort of disruption occasions reflection. As opposed to this technical understanding of reflectiveness (and the correlative image of education as unreflective practice which uses reflection as an instrument), we propose that, as a process of “bringing forth,” reflection is not only essential to, but is the centerpiece of educare, of education.

There are two complementary processes involved in reflective teaching: the process of “stepping back” and the phenomena of “being taken aback.” “Stepping back” entails intentionality, a recognition of the need for critical thought in the midst of practice, and an active engagement of the process of recollection and critical reflection. We attempt to “suspend” our embeddedness in a particular situation and see it anew. Such a suspension of embeddedness does not place reflection “outside” of practice, making it a spectator and not a participant. Rather than being seen as a form of “withdrawal,” stepping back should be conceived as a form of drawing out from within. That is, it is precisely our embeddedness in the practice of teaching that makes reflection, as a feature of that practice, both possible and worthwhile. “Being taken aback” is a similar but distinct process. In the midst of the ordinary course of experience, events occur—a child’s response, a colleague’s comment, a supervisor’s suggestion—which provoke or occasion the need for reflection. Often this is a disorienting experience which forces us to reconsider what we are doing, what we have assumed. It is a powerful experience, since it occasions a breakdown of the prejudice of our experience of the world, often accompanied by feelings of accusation and culpability. These feelings are especially predominant in beginning teachers, for in the midst of being taken aback, a paradoxical phenomenon can emerge. We can suddenly hear our own voice, and we can suddenly hear, in some instances, that that voice is not authentically our own. We have had occasion to hear student teachers say things like “when I re-direct children’s behaviour, I find that I sound like my mother,” or “my lesson organization is just an imitation of my cooperating teacher.”

But reflective teaching is, in a sense, an unnatural act. We naturally tend to live in our presuppositions and turn our attention to the world pictured in light of them. The teacher’s voice tends to remain silent, or to be banished to a sort of “personal” adjunct or appendage to what is known about the practice of teaching. As opposed to this sort of objectivistic notion of the practice of teaching as a collection of anonymous knowledge to which the individual teacher’s voice is an appendage, we take the reflective emergence of the teacher’s voice as the centre of pedagogical activity. As teachers, we are in the enviable (and, admittedly, occasionally painful) position of never taking our experience of the world for granted, since it is precisely what we take for granted that we will educate in the children we teach. As persons responsible for what children might become, we must not simply live unreflectively in our understandings. We cannot proceed as if there is no need for a voice to emerge which will speak of the practice of teaching as one’s own, and not simply as an anonymous body of knowledge which is anyone’s and no one’s. We have the excuse and the obligation to wonder anew about the world, and to pose anew the reflective question of what teaching is and what it can and should become. Reflective teaching, therefore, centers on the notion of the

emerging voice, and speaks on behalf of the belief that “all knowledge is nothing more than what we have learned to live with” (Misgeld, Jardine & Grahame, 1985, p. 203).

As teacher educators, we are concerned with the induction of future colleagues into a reflective mode. In attempting to engage student teachers in reflection, we are forced to make explicit our own presuppositions about the nature of the teaching/learning process. The following section of the paper presents several presuppositions, and documents the bringing forth of these through the emerging voice of one of our students.

Our first presupposition is that the quality of lived experience in schools for children, for student teachers, for practicing teachers, is enhanced when teaching and learning are seen as essentially reflective, as essentially intelligent and moral acts. The learning environment, as a community of learners, is shaped by the quality of relationships within that community. Practitioners must ask what relationships enhance the quality of living and then examine practical conditions in light of this prior question. An examination of the quality of the lived environment embodies conceptions of power and authority and addresses the relationship between work and self-esteem.

This basic presupposition about teaching and learning guides our practice with student teachers. Students are required to maintain journal entries during the practicum in which they reflect on all aspects of classroom life. The journal entries which follow document one student’s personal explication of the learning community as it is enacted moment by moment. Early in her final practicum, in a kindergarten classroom, Jane writes:

I had a problem in the evaluation of this centre today. There were two things that needed to be done. The children’s work needed to be validated and a clarification needed to be made on how to use the materials in the centre. I attempted to do this at the same time—WRONG MOVE! I should have validated the children’s work and then moved over to the centre and discussed the problem of material usage. I belaboured the point of the children’s work too long in the discussion because I recognized that the children weren’t certain if their work was okay and I didn’t want them feeling that it wasn’t.

Jane’s reflections reveal her awareness of the tenuousness of the children’s self-esteem and of the intimate connection between self-esteem and one’s work. In moving immediately to a discussion of problems associated with the use of materials she inadvertently casts doubt in the children’s minds about her acceptance of their efforts. Realizing the emergent concerns, Jane overcompensates by “belabouring . . . the children’s work too long.” Nevertheless, her comments reveal her sensitivity to the quality of the lived environment and the ability to rectify a potential breakdown in her rapport with the children.

Jane’s perceptiveness about those attributes which influence the quality of the achieved sense of community is demonstrated in a second example, also taken from the final practicum:

Jeremy was working in this centre today. When I spoke to the boys about sharing I asked them to choose how they would like to share. They set it up as a display on the floor. The boys took over the evaluation including showing and telling the children how they made their tessellations. Jeremy in particular seemed to have really benefitted from having the power to choose. He very responsibly followed through.

I really believe that much of our attitude to learning comes from how much power we feel we can have over our learning, how free we are to direct that learning. I am becoming more convinced that the more choices children perceive they have (even though those choices are within a structured environment) the more committed they become to their learning. I guess I have always known this as it pertained to adults but I am now realizing more and more that it also pertains to children. I guess this isn't to say that children always have choices but rather when justified and "real," children can and do take charge.

Jane draws upon an image of learning as empowerment. She exhibits an understanding of teaching as establishing the conditions whereby learners can direct their own development and reveals her stand in relation to the learner's rights and responsibilities. Essentially, Jane probes moral questions about freedom and liberation as these relate to teaching practice. In these two journal entries Jane explores the nature of the learning environment. She brings to the fore her understanding of those attributes which contribute to the learning environment she wishes to create. The reader is given a sense of her emerging philosophy of education.

\* \* \*

Jane's entries foreshadow a second presupposition which drives our work with student teachers—our belief about the nature of teaching. We see teaching as an art given form by an inquiring mind and shaped with creativity and sensitivity such that the act of teaching engenders a sense of wonder about life itself. Joy in teaching is engendered through facilitating the growth of learners, through the engenderment of such wonder, both in oneself and in the children one teaches. Each teacher, then, is essentially a learner—to teach is to learn continually. Early in her first practicum experience, a grade one classroom, Jane confronts the "thrill" of a child's expanding horizons:

Well, I've had the greatest thrill. The children are working through individual graphing lessons today and one young child classified and graphed her objects five different ways. This child did not understand graphing at all the first time. I included her in another lesson and felt after this lesson she understood what we were doing but today was the real test. I was so pleased. I guess all my hard work in helping her to understand the lesson worked. I am so delighted!

However, teaching is more than the "thrill" of seeing a child accomplish teacher-determined goals, as Jane notes in her second practicum.

As I sit and reflect on the chalkboard activity I am amazed at the assumptions I've made about the children. The pattern I put on the board was  $\square \triangle \square \triangle \square \triangle$ . One child helped me realize this when he said, "How do pies make a triangle?" This lesson assumed that children knew shapes and could reproduce them. Well as it turned out, only Jeremy had problems making a triangle initially (he really knew how, he only needed to be encouraged). Even those children I thought would have difficulty didn't have problems. Something very spontaneous began to happen. Children began to count how many elements

they had in their pattern. As children compared and talked about their patterns to each other they became motivated to continue their pattern. I thought this was quite exciting. I really enjoyed the spontaneity of the children and feel free to capitalize on this in the classroom.

Jane is literally "taken aback" as she confronts the prejudice of her own experience. What resembles a pie for one child has been labelled a triangle by Jane in the mistaken assumption that the children could attach the verbal label "triangle" to the appropriate shape. Perhaps the experience of being taken aback allows the spontaneity which follows as the children explore the essential nature of patterns as a reiterated sequence of elements. Paley's (1986) astute observation that we cannot teach children what they do not already know is exemplified. Jane's ability to follow the children's lead, to lead from behind, is evident as she reflects on a subsequent experience in the final practicum, a kindergarten classroom:

I began the day with the goldfish. I had the fish in their bowl inside a box with a cover over it. I told the morning children that I had brought a sharing item and wanted them to guess what it was by asking me questions . . . The children were very excited and intensely interested in the fish. I found it fascinating to watch the children as they sparked with enthusiasm. It was also interesting to hear of some of their experiences with fish (mostly about fish dying). I also found it interesting that the children noticed the refraction of the glass. I really went into this lesson with the objective of introducing two pet goldfish into the classroom and that was accomplished but also so much more. This was perhaps the most intense and successful science lesson I have ever led.

We cannot make strong claims that her present response has been shaped by her prior experience of being "taken aback"; however, there does seem to be a natural progression in the ease with which she flows into the children's experience. Evident is her sensitivity to their interests and her awareness of the children's observations about refraction and implicitly, a teachable moment for direct teaching of the science concept. As Zukav (1979, p. 8) notes, "When the child stands in awe and mystery of a falling rose petal, then it's time to teach the law of gravity." This is not only an affirmation of the experiential base of learning, it is an affirmation of the belief that teaching must avail itself of the moments of wonder about the world, not in order to dispell such wonder, but in order to sustain and engender it. In order to sustain and engender the child's wonder about the world, the teacher must be able to reflect on the nature of the pedagogical act. This requires both the ability to "step back" and bring forth one's own presuppositions about a certain classroom experience (Jane's emerging ability to "step back" from her own presupposed objectives for the lesson and see these objectives in the wider context of the child's experience) and an openness to being "taken aback" by individual children's ways of experiencing this activity which go beyond the teacher's presuppositions.

\* \* \*

Jane's entries demonstrate her growing understanding of intentionality, an introduction to a third presupposition which gives shape and purpose to our work with students. We believe that

reflection “enables us to know what we are about when we act” (Dewey, 1933, p. 177). Much of teaching is habitual. We work at making our world ordinary, familiar, a matter of course; moreover, the hectic world of teaching necessitates an ordinariness. Nevertheless, habitual action can dull reflectiveness. Sensitive teaching entails a delicate balance of the habitual and the reflective where the habitual may be suspended at any point in time as hypotheses are formulated and tested. In this way, the commonplace is rendered strange, prompting a critical analysis of action and of the consequences of such action, either as an intended act or one which is ongoing or complete. Dewey (1933) notes that reflectiveness embodies openmindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness, qualities which echo through Jane’s voice.

Early in her first practicum experience, Jane is consciously making sense of theory in practice:

I am really learning something about six-year old children and colour. If there is a way to centre on colour they will find it . . . (one child has done a sorting activity). When I asked her how she had sorted them she proceeded to point to each naming the colour. I asked her again, “Can you see another way you sorted the two groups?” She said one is in a straight line and one is in a horseshoe. I asked the rest of the group if they could still see another way. One boy said “shape” (squares and triangles). I am sure Piaget is right because most of the children I have had tend to centre on colour. When I only used one colour they could pick out shape but when I again introduced a colour variable, they again centered on colour.

In this observation, Jane is re-collecting and re-viewing her experience, making connections with Piaget’s discussion of class inclusion. Shortly after, an entry reveals her developing reflective ability, an integral attribute of her teaching:

The lesson went fairly well. Point 7 in the body of the lesson, however, did not fit and when I did this during the lesson it became quickly and painfully evident that it did not fit. I didn’t pursue it once I realized it wasn’t working but quickly moved on to the next point. The cooperating teacher later explained that jumping and landing was a lesson in itself and I should take it up in another lesson. I find managing 44 children in a gym difficult. Controls must be a lot tighter than I like them to be. I always seem to have two children (the same two children) off task during the lesson. I have been discussing it with the teachers and we are trying to come up with ideas for bringing these two on task more often.

Jane is thinking “on her feet,” reflecting in the midst of action on the inappropriateness of a certain part of her lesson. She was compelled by the children’s reactions to be open to changing and modifying her lesson, despite the painfulness of such openmindedness. The contribution of the cooperating teacher helped Jane interpret her experience—it helped bring to the fore and formulate her experience in a way that could help her understand what she had unintentionally presupposed in this lesson. Such reflection therefore gives rise to intentionality and critical analysis.

Again, in a journal entry in the second practicum, Jane confronts the tension between her “objectives and the children’s learning”:

I feel I integrated the activities to my theme fairly well. However, my lesson appropriateness was out of whack. I put too much in too fast. All is not lost. I feel I can backwards chain from where I am. Perhaps I needed to present a total overview for my own benefit and to show the children where they are going. It is now my responsibility to break this down into smaller sequenced lessons so the children develop an understanding of where I have taken them. It was after Thursday's lesson that I did much reflecting on where I was in relation to my objectives and the children's learning. I don't think I've ever had a lower feeling or analyzed myself more fully but I really don't feel I've failed, only I need to go back and re-sequence some of the learning steps.

Jane's ability to step back and critically analyze the teaching-learning process is clearly displayed in this passage. Her intense soul-searching initially provokes a sense of inadequacy and culpability—"I don't think I've ever had a lower feeling." The personal impact of reflective action suggests that cooperating teachers and practicum advisors must provide support and nurturance during the practicum. In the end, Jane was able to "turn around" such feelings, and place the incidents that occurred in the whole context of her actions as a teacher. She no longer saw them as reflecting her own inadequacies, but as reflecting a context of concerted action in which "I only need to go back and re-sequence some of the learning steps." This is a clear indication of what could be called a transition from "introspection" (where incidents bring to the fore only one's own culpability in such incidents—feelings of guilt, culpability, failure, etc.) and "reflection" (where incidents bring to the fore the whole context within which one is acting, leading to the possibility of seeking alternatives to such action).

Despite this experience, Jane is clearly a competent practitioner. In fact, the move from introspection to reflection is an indication of such competence. With some of our student teachers, we have found them getting "caught up" in their own introspection, leading to feelings of incompetence and endangerment in the teaching situation. And, of course, such feelings can all too easily simply reproduce themselves—feeling endangered and incompetent leads to precisely the sort of withdrawal which multiplies the possibilities of a "failed lesson."

An example taken from Jane's final practicum, a kindergarten class, demonstrates her ability to anticipate as she examines the consequences of a proposed action and then evaluates that action:

I asked Ryan K. to go to the house/store centre this afternoon. R. (the cooperating teacher) and I had discussed earlier that we would have to be careful to pair him with strongly focussed children or he wouldn't be able to cope with the structure imposed by the centre. As it turned out our assessment was correct. Ryan was in the house/store with three strongly focussed children and he coped very well with the structure. He made one attempt to come out and get attention from others but I quickly re-routed him back to the centre.

Jane demonstrates her ability to make a small intervention as she "re-routes" Ryan back to his task and thereby promotes the success of her intended consequences. But these intended consequences are clearly in line with a sensitivity to the learner and his needs. As Jane is encouraged to engage her reflective abilities, her teaching becomes purposive, while, at the same time, not being blinded by such purposiveness to both the situation and the individual child.



\* \* \*

The presuppositions discussed to this point contain implicit beliefs about the nature and practice of educating teachers. Teacher education must be conceptualized as preparation for teaching, as opposed to a narrow concern with preparation for the practicum. Issues continually arise with our students about “surviving the practicum” and this need cannot be ignored. However, teacher development is a lifelong continuum and must be largely self-directed. Thus, the framework for ongoing self direction must be established in the preservice phase of teacher development. Preparation for teaching, therefore, involves more than the compiling of information, tricks, and techniques that will help the student “survive.” It requires provoking students into clarifying their own beliefs and values and reflecting on their practice. It requires that students begin the process of deciding what picture of teaching they can live with as their own and deciding what picture of education they wish children to live with. In the face of the situation in which they find themselves in their practicum, they must begin to pose the moral/ethical question of what education ought to be.

In a number of journal entries Jane clarifies and affirms her beliefs about teaching and learning as she confronts those values in the act of practice. These are powerful moments in a teacher’s development. An example from the second practicum conveys a sense of revelation:

Today I taught all day. I am finding I have a vested interest in these children’s learning and lives. It is really neat that this can arise in only three weeks. I know it will be difficult to leave the children after three weeks and now can imagine some of the feelings that a teacher must experience at the end of the year.

Her statement that she has a vested interest in these children’s lives is all the more powerful when the occasion of this realization is known. This practicum experience was personally difficult for Jane as her values were in sharp opposition to those of the cooperating teacher. In an entry made early in the final practicum Jane is essentially clarifying and affirming beliefs:

I was concerned about how sculpture would go today. I felt that some of the children had left it until last because they were reluctant to go there. The only child who wasn’t sure if he wanted to make a sculpture was David but once he started in on the activity he was fine. He really enjoyed experimenting with the clay. All the children doing sculpting today seem to really enjoy the material. My uneasiness was quite unfounded. I am learning to trust myself and the children (good thing!).

As I continue to observe children learning, I am learning that it is very important to move in at times and facilitate that learning. I am also learning when and how to intervene in order to facilitate their learning. Other than J., I am also concerned about B. and C. and R. I am learning how to meet these children’s needs by learning what their needs are. I am more convinced than ever that the variety of children’s needs can be met best when children work at their own rate in the company of their peers.

She is “learning to trust [herself] and the children,” that teaching demands great sensitivity to the children’s needs such that intervention may be appropriately placed. Such a sensitivity requires

that she allow situations in which she finds herself to reflect back to her what is needed. And this requires an openness to what might go beyond her own assumptions and presuppositions. The trust she is developing is a matter of understanding herself as able to deal effectively and professionally with the occasion of the breakdown of these assumptions. They are no longer formulated as a threat to her as a teacher, but as the very occasion in which appropriate action and intervention become visible. She is also revealing her understanding of the uniqueness of each learner in her observation that "children's needs can be met best when children work at their own rate in the company of their peers." Such an understanding of uniqueness requires a reflective understanding of her own assumptions about teaching.

During this practicum Jane requested that she be videotaped. This was done and the tape given to her for her own use. As she uses the tape to promote self-knowledge, her increasing ability to focus on the children's individual needs is evident:

This reflection is based on the video of my morning lesson. It took me back a bit to observe myself teaching. Once I got used to the sound of my voice I was able to focus on the children, myself and the lesson. I was impressed with how calm I appeared when I really know how I felt while the lesson was in progress. Some of this uneasiness is visible as I observe my actions in this sharing time . . . . I found in watching the video that David does not make eye contact when he speaks. He also does not verbalize but rather demonstrates what he is trying to communicate. As I observe the children listening to my trying to pull language from David I marvel at how attentive they are. I find that children in R.'s class have great respect for one another.

Jane's values are evident in her reverence for the children's "respect for one another" and, implicitly, the implications for the lived environment which generates and supports such respect. Finally, in a reflection at the conclusion of the second practicum, Jane muses about teaching as a profession:

This practicum session was the most valuable in cementing why I believe what I do about teaching and children. I also see now why teaching should be a profession in the strictest sense where the clientele have rights that must be honoured and where the teacher must be accountable for the teaching method and learning that occurs in the classroom.

The moral consequences of her insights have powerful ramifications. In her first year teaching contract, Jane has strengthened her commitment to this early realization about the nature of her chosen profession. What is sobering, however, is that the path ahead is not without rough terrain and uncertain paradoxes. Jane has implicitly linked teaching with the ability to hear and respect the voice of her "clientele" and the ability to give a voice to her own beliefs about teaching and learning, to be accountable. She sees teaching as a profession, which literally means to be able to give a voice or pronounce the "vows" that indicate that she has been inducted into teaching. Implications are apparent for the organization of teacher education and suggest the need for a serious review of the sharp distinction between preparation and certification. The emerging voice of the student teacher can only be heard once we, as teacher educators, recognize the centrality of this voice to the profession.

## Concluding Remarks

Our use of journals during the student teachers' practicum experience is an attempt to offer students the opportunity to reflect on their experiences, to bring to the fore their assumptions and give them a voice. We require of them that they not only voice these opinions, but that they stand for them by engaging them in dialogue with others. It is also the occasion in which our assumptions as teacher educators are made visible—we can see students struggling to make sense of what we have assumed in our education of them. Becoming a teacher is therefore essentially a social act. The emerging voice of the teacher must emerge as a voice that can be heard, that can participate in the “community of conversation” (Gadamer, 1983, p. 108) that constitutes education. We feel that bringing forth such an emerging voice is essential to teaching understood as a profession.

## References

- Dewey, J. (1933). How we think: A restatement of the relation of reflective thinking to the educative process. Boston: D. C. Heath.
- Elkind, D. (1968). “Introduction” to Jean Piaget, Six psychological studies. New York: Vintage Books, V-XV.
- Gadamer, H. G. (1983). Reason in the age of science. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Misgeld, D., Jardine, D. W., & Grahame, P. (1985). Communicative competence, practical reasoning and the understanding of culture. Phenomenology + Pedagogy, 3, 201-204.
- Paley, V. (1986). On listening to what children say. Harvard Educational Review, 56, 122-131.
- Zukav, G. (1979). The dancing Wu-Li Masters: An overview of the new physics. Toronto: Bantam Books.

## Authors' Notes

We wish to acknowledge the significant contribution which “Jane” has made in helping us to conceptualize our work and to engage in a critical review of our practices. Given the personal nature of the journal extracts we have used a pseudonym.