Reflection-in-Action: Insights from High School Writing Classes

Leilani de Vera
Doshisha University

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For educators, reflection is an important element of instruction. Most of the time, though, reflection is done at the end of a course or the academic year. This type of reflection is also usually structured and can have the tendency to reinforce routines instead of searching for new practices. On the other hand, ideas and realizations occurring during instruction that fall outside the structure of reflection after the course are often forgotten or simply consigned as effective teaching practices. In this article, reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983), a type of reflection that is done during instruction, is explored. The theoretical background of reflection-in-action is explained, and insights gained during a writing course using this type of reflection are discussed.

教育者にとって、振り返りは指導の重要な要素である。しかし、ほとんどの場合、振り返りは授業や学年の終わりに行われる。また、このような振り返りは構造化されていることが多く、新しい実践を模索するのではなく、慣例を強化する傾向がある。そのため、授業後の構造化された振り返りから外れた授業中に生じたアイデアや気づきは、忘れ去られたり、効果的な教育実践に委ねられたりする。本稿では、授業中に行われる振り返りの一種である「行為の中の省察」(Schön, 1983) について検討する。そして、「行為の中の省察」の理論的背景と、この振り返りを用いたライティング・コースで得られた知見を考察する。

Reflecting is an essential aspect of education, both for learners and educators. For students, reflection is usually encouraged in all subjects, but is more commonly used in process-oriented subjects like writing. As writing includes different steps, reflecting in between each step is usually deemed effective for producing good compositions. Indeed, reflection tasks are often assigned to students to critically revisit their written work in the hope of them becoming more effective writers. Reflection by the teacher on the writing course usually takes place at the end of the lesson. However, in this practice-oriented article, the role of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983), or thinking on one's feet, during my high school English writing classes is explored and discussed.

Reflection is an important aspect of the teaching and learning process, with many studies connecting reflection to effective teaching and learning to be found in the literature. Yet sometimes, testimonies of students and educators on how reflection impacts their everyday practices for the better are more convincing than such academic accounts. Personal testimonies are more practical and more grounded in everyday experiences and are easy to understand, as they mostly avoid theoretical complications. In some cases, these testimonies are included in academic articles as part of research data, but in other cases, these testimonies are simply passed on to fellow educators and learners as effective teaching and learning strategies.

Reflection, in both the theoretical and practical senses, needs a deeper and more detailed explanation to be understood better. Therefore, a theoretical presentation of reflection in education and views of major supporters of reflective practices are first outlined below. A detailed explanation of reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) is then offered. This is followed by a discussion of insights gained from employing reflection-in-action during my writing classes. Some limitations relating to outcomes of the reflection-in-action in my classes are discussed and ideas for further studies are also suggested.

Reflective Practice in Education

Theoretical Aspects

Reflection is a salient part of education, and several thinkers can be connected to highlighting its importance. One is Emile Durkheim, the French sociologist who considered education as a socialization institution. Although Durkheim is known more for his view on education as a utilitarian tool for socialization, he also discussed

reflection by the educator. He stated that the teacher's practical experience gained together with the pupils can be called the art of the teacher, which is based on practical training, learning of skills, personal experience and education, and theories on teaching and learning (Durkheim, 1956, as cited in Postholm, 2008).

Another thinker that has some connection to reflective practice in education is Jurgen Habermas. Usually associated with thinkers in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, Habermas is known for being a theorist who "sought to challenge the narrowness of traditional forms of rationality that defined the concept of meaning and knowledge in the Western world" (Darder et al., 2017, p.7). Habermas and other critical theorists tried to transform oppressive conditions with awareness (knowledge) and reflection on the present practices. Habermas thought that education was a field where reflection can be practiced (Ewert, 1991). His thinking on reflection remains important to reflective education literature (Ewert, 1991).

John Dewey is synonymous with reflection in education. His two books on reflective education, *How We Think* (1910) and *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (1933), highlighted the process of reflecting and the aims of this practice. Dewey (1933) defined reflection as an act of careful thinking. For him, this process must be carefully and critically done to achieve the best result, namely growth of the teacher and the learners. As Rodgers (2002) claimed, for Dewey, reflection is a particular way of thinking and cannot be equated with mere haphazard mulling over something. The latter type of thinking, in contrast to reflection, is undisciplined.

Donald Schön and Reflection-in-Action

Although Dewey is considered by many as the founding figure of reflective practice in education, there are people who criticized his reflective model's overreliance on rationalism and adherence to technical rationality (Hébert, 2015). One such person was Donald Schön. For Schön (1983), technical rationality, which was prominent in Dewey's reflective method, is a professional activity consisting of instrumental problem-solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique (Schön, 1983, as cited in Hébert, 2015). To avoid this dependence on technical aspects, Schön introduced the term "'reflection-in-action'". Reflection-in-action was advanced in Schön's books *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983) and *Educating the Reflective Practitioner: Toward a New Design for Teaching and Learning in the Professions* (1987). Schön argued that our society's emphasis upon technical rationality has led to an undervaluing of practical knowledge of action that is central to the work of practitioners (Munby, 1989). As such, Schön proposed a fundamental reorganization of how to think about professional practice and the relationship of theory to practice (Munby, 1989), promoting the idea of reflection-in-action. So, what is reflection-in-action? Schön explained:

> Reflection-in-action…is central to the art through which practitioners sometimes cope with the troublesome "divergent" situations of practice. When the phenomenon at hand eludes the original categories of knowledge-in-practice, presenting itself as unique or unstable, the practitioner may surface and criticize his (sic) initial understanding of the phenomenon, construct a new description by an on-the-spot experiment. (Schön 1983, as cited in Andersen, 2019, p.2)

What sets reflection-in-action apart from other reflective practices is the "in", which must happen during the "action-present: a stretch of time within which it is still possible to make a difference to the outcomes of action" (Schön, 1983, as cited in Anderson, 2019, p.30). It is this principal feature of reflection-in-action that makes it empowering and gives practitioners plenty of opportunities to grow. According to Munby (1989), this feature lies at the heart of Schön's (1983) view of how experience essentially teaches us. It is how practitioners make use of their rational/technical knowledge and apply it to their practice on the spot. It is like thinking on one's feet.

Schön's concept of Reflection-in-action has been embraced particularly by teachers even though it was originally created with an audience of all professional practitioners in mind. In other professions, responses to problems or situations are usually encouraged to be based on rational knowledge. These responses then, because of their technical nature, can become 'routinized' responses. Schön described reflection-in-action as "strategies, understandings of phenomena, and ways of framing a task or problem appropriate to the situation. The knowing-in-action is tacit, spontaneously delivered without conscious deliberation; and it works, yielding intended outcomes so long as the situation falls within the boundaries of what we have learned to treat as normal" (Schön, 1983, as cited in Yancey, 1992, p.28).

However, much of what is happening inside school classrooms falls outside the boundaries of normal and calls for novel responses based on new ways of seeing the situation (Yancey, 1992). Writing class is one of the classroom experiences that has happenings outside the boundaries of normal and calls for novel responses (Yancey, 1992). Although writing can be thought of as a procedural activity, with a clear description of steps for each stage, and is mostly done by students individually, questions and situations inevitably arise from the activity itself and from students' different

schema. Though some student inquiries can be addressed by routinized responses, there are times when critical questions arise and send the teacher into a reflective inquiry about the writing activity and the students. These instances are learning opportunities. These are occasions that highlight that teaching is learning—learning from the students, learning from the circumstances in the classroom. As Judith Newman (1990, as cited in Beck & Kosnik, 2001) who writes about teacher assumptions, explained:

> Our daily involvement with students presents many opportunities for thinking about our beliefs and practices as teachers… [S]tudents are continually commenting on procedures, making connections, questioning decisions, asking for information. These questions and comments have the potential for letting us learn both about ourselves and our students. (p. 16)

Reflective Practices in Second Language Acquisition

Before I present the insights from my own writing class, I would like to briefly discuss recent literature on reflective practices in the field of education, specifically in Second Language Acquisition (SLA). Reflective practice within the general field of education has been popular due to the consensus that teachers who engage in this practice gain new insights of their teaching. There have been similar developments in the field of SLA, where the allure of reflective practice seems to have also been embraced as an important educational paradigm (Farrell, 2016). For example, Thomas Farrell, a language teacher and teacher educator, has a longstanding interest in this concept and has produced several articles and books about reflective practices (e.g., Farrell, 2001, 2004, 2006, 2007, 2019). In one of his works, Farrell (2016) tried to systematically review 116 studies of reflective practice from 2009 to 2014. One finding from this review states that research tends to adopt various approaches to the study of reflection in second language learning. Two other systemic reviews of reflective practice studies (Alemi & Tajeddin, 2020; Anani Sarab & Mardian, 2022) share the same finding. One approach that has received a great deal of attention in the surveyed studies is reflection-on-action. However, since reflection-on-action is done after the actual teaching, this reflective practice relies heavily on the use of written forms, which can lead to inauthentic or feigned reflection (Hobbs, 2007). Because of this, Anani Sarab and Mardian (2022) suggest that further research can be undertaken to use spoken, collaborative and dialogic types of reflection tools.

In this article, spoken, collaborative and dialogic methods are explored and discussed as reflection tools. In particular, the approach being focused on is reflection-in-action. This article, although done in practice-to-theory style, addresses some of the gaps in reflective practices in second language acquisition.

Reflection-in-action in My High School Writing Course

In this section, I now present and discuss some of the learning insights I gained from reflecting-in-action on the comments and inquiries of high school students during my writing courses. I will highlight eight factors that I experienced. The first three sections address the planning stage. Then the next two sections are reflections on peer review. These are followed by discussion of interactions among students and teachers. I hope these reflections will be beneficial to other teachers who teach high school students or academic writing courses with first-year university students.

(i) The Process of Writing Is Indeed not Linear

Recent theories about writing have pointed out that writing is not a linear activity. For example, Flower and Hayes (1981) considered writing as a process that "does not move in a straight line from planning to writing to revising; all planning is not done when ideas are written on paper; all writing is not finished before writers review and revise" (Flower & Hayes, 1981, p. 369). Although there are different variations of this way of thinking, there is a general acceptance that writing is not a linear activity. However, in actual classroom instruction, writing is still taught and done in a linear way most of the time. Why? I think it is because the linear way provides structure. The steps provide a visual representation of what needs to be done for each class session. However, more mature and discerning students, like high school students, feel restricted by the sequential nature of the steps in writing. They want the freedom to go back and forth from one step to another. Writing is fluid and has recursive steps, and my senior high school students' requests to move back and forth made me realize that students prefer fluidity in the writing process.

(ii) Ideas May Come to Students Anytime

During the writing process, high school students can develop ideas not just when they are brainstorming during the pre-writing stage. This insight is related to the concept of writing as a recursive process. When newer or better ideas came to my students in the middle of their writing, they asked if they were allowed to go back to the planning or the initial writing stage. In the beginning of my writing courses, some students would only do this secretly, perhaps afraid to be told to follow the order of the steps. However, some brave students finally asked me if they could go back to planning or drafting. When I gave

them permission to do so, I saw how most of the students felt relieved to be able to do that. They started to jot down new ideas even when they were already in the middle of the drafting process. I think this made them more relaxed and more open to generating newer and better ideas throughout the writing process.

(iii) Starting Over Is Fine

This reflection-in-action insight was a tough call. I did not expect any student to request permission to start all over again during the last week of a writing task. Several complications became apparent when they did this. First, there was the dilemma of making sure that all students could submit their work in time for grading. Second, I also started to doubt the intent of a student who made such a request. Was it really to make her work better or was she planning to get other people's ideas and pass them off as her own? I felt hesitant to allow her to do so, but in the end, I opted to trust my student. I explained to her that I would let her do as she requested but that she would still need to finish her essay on time. On the last day of the task, she was able to finish her work and her writing was much improved.

(iv) Peer-revision Is Important.

As much as writing is a cognitive activity, it is also a social activity. From a social perspective, writing is seen as a communicative act involving the production and use of linguistic codes in a culturally defined communicative context (Yao, 1997). This social view of writing stresses that writers participate in a social interaction with a community of readers and responders in a situation for which written discourse has particularly socially defined functions (Bazerman, 1988; Nystrand, 1989). Indeed, peer-revision is a very important stage in the classroom writing process and should not be avoided. When teaching writing, I find this peer-revision to be one of the most helpful steps in my class. I find most students are excited to show their work to their friends. Peer-revision also allows students to give feedback to their friends. Since senior high students are usually more mature and sophisticated than younger peers in the way they think, they can give thoughtful comments and feedback. Their common experiences make them understand the context of their friends' writing, but their individual experiences and beliefs also enable them to give insightful comments and suggestions. Even though peer-revision is part of the writing process, I initially had not intended to spend longer than one session on it. However, when my students asked for more time to do peer-revision, I had to reconsider my plan. Time constraint was a major consideration for me, but reflecting-in-action and seeing how my students were giving and receiving insightful comments, I realized that timings could be relaxed.

(v) Students Inspired Ideas During Peer-revision.

Since peer-revision enables students to be exposed to the ideas of their peers, it can also be an opportunity for students to get inspiration from their peers' work. However, as teachers, we encourage students to be original and avoid copying or plagiarizing. This makes students hesitant to use ideas that have been inspired by others during peer-revision sessions. But if we continue this line of thinking, then it limits the gains students can have from peer-revision. Aside from feedback, students can also be inspired by the writing of their peers. So, when some students asked me if they could write about similar topics to their friends, I did not say, "No". I made clear to them that one of the goals of peer-revision is to be inspired by their peers' writing. I emphasized that writing is a social activity and there is no "original" idea. Ideas come from other people, from other cultures, from other times, and are made original by the person owning the idea. Words, ideas, opinions, and beliefs have always had a social context and are never absolute or distinct by themselves.

I have come to believe that students should be allowed to adapt ideas gained from reading and discussing their peers' writing. This reflection-in-action insight is special as this also shows me how I have matured as an educator.

(vi) Interaction Is Important for Students

I learned from my high school writing classes that writing does not have to be a quiet or solitary activity. Just like conversation, writing can be done with the contribution or help of others. This realization came to me when some of my students who were struggling with English would ask me if they could seek the help of their more English-proficient classmates. I gave them permission and I observed that during their conversations about translations, ideas were also being exchanged. Such exchanges often are helpful within the context of the writing activity. So, after I realized how my students' discussions were helping them, I began telling my classes that they do not have to remain quiet all throughout the writing class time. I informed my students that they can politely ask for clarifications both from me and their classmates, and they can also contribute ideas to their friends' writing. This freedom made them happy, and more responsible too, as they made sure that they were not distracting other students who prefer to work quietly by themselves.

(vii) Teachers Should not Provide Too Many Examples for Students

As teachers, when we give a writing task, we usually present some samples to help guide our students. However, by providing them with explicit examples of text types, we may also influence them on what topics or ideas they should write about. I saw this happening when I asked my class to write an argumentative essay and I presented them with samples about environmental problems. After examining those sample essays, I saw my students' brainstorming ideas were also mostly related to the environment. Based on this observation, I learned that offering selected samples on a range of topics is more helpful. It provides some guidance but allows students enough room to be imaginative. It also accords them agency to explore topics they really are interested in.

(viii) Extra-curricular Activities Are an Important Source of Writing Ideas for Students

This insight may be specific to my classes, yet I feel that high school students in general have great fondness for their social activities. Many high school students become enthusiastic when they talk about their clubs, their music classes, or activities they do with close friends. So, we teachers should devise ways to transfer that enthusiasm into writing and plan writing lessons that would relate to activities that our students love to do. In one of my writing class tasks last year, more than half of the essays were about club activities, so I was tempted to tell my class to change their topics, hoping to increase the variety. However, when I saw that most students wrote in their essays that they learned a lot of life lessons from their clubs and other social activities at school, I realized that my students really get writing inspirations from their daily activities, especially from the ones that they enjoy and that make them feel alive and excited. So, I gave in and let them write about what they like the most -- their social life.

Key Points to Remember in Practicing Reflection-in-action

As reflection-in-action is not as structured as the other types of reflection and can happen anytime during the class, incorporating this type of reflective practice in the teachers' daily instruction can be a little bit challenging. So, here are some tips that can help us teachers practice reflection-in-action.

1. Make an effort to be present in the nature of the classroom experiences and have an openness to their potential meanings. Pay attention to the details and dynamics of the classroom situation, such as student interactions and behavior, as well as your own thoughts and feelings.
2. Try to be as flexible as possible. Classroom rules and lesson plans are helpful, but they are not written in stone. Based on feedback and information in the class, be open to changing plans and actions. As Farrell (2015) explained, a reflective practice is a cognitive process accompanied by a set of attitudes in which teachers systematically collect data about their practice and while engaging in dialogue with others, use the data to make informed decisions about their practice both inside and outside the classroom. If we stick to our plans and routines and keep a rigid attitude, it would be difficult to do reflection-in-action.
3. Find your inner creativity. Be creative in finding solutions and alternatives to challenges or opportunities you encounter. Creativity fuels us to address the classroom problems and situations swiftly. To help with this, ask yourself questions, use self-talk, seek feedback, and experiment with new methods, perspectives, and resources.
4. Move deliberately from the data of experience to formulating a theory, and then to testing the theory about the experience. Time is of the essence in practicing reflection-in-action. Practicing reflection-in-action truly happens when the interval between thought and action is shorter. If the outcome is not as effective as we want them to be, then we can always make some modifications in the future.

Ideas for Further Studies

The goal of reflective education, be it in-action or after the teaching has taken place, is to improve the facilitation of learning inside and outside the classroom. However, the spontaneous nature of reflection-in-action can complicate prospective research on it. The spontaneity of reflection-in-action and its unpredictability can put constraints on research design. But, as explained in this article, insights gained from reflection-in-action are no less meaningful than those from more structured reflection research. Practical realizations gained in-action during class instruction are as salient as realizations gained from structured reflection after teaching. However, this does not mean that studies on reflection-in-action have no room for improvement. For example, in my writing class, the insights I acquired from my reflection-in-action would have had more weight and have measurable validity if I had been able to measure the improvements of the attitude of my students towards writing and their written work after I had implemented in-action these new writing class rules. This is one limitation of this article. The improvements I perceived are all based on the gratitude from my students when I agreed to their requests. I felt their enthusiasm in reworking their essays because they were able to get

new inspirations. I took all of these as signs that the modifications I made, brought about by the students' comments and my reflection-in-action, made my writing classes more effective. However, even though I am convinced this is true, I have no data to support it. Therefore, for further research using this method, reflection-in-action studies would benefit from employing a structured analysis tool to measure effectivity or improvement. It would be very helpful for teachers to have ready-made tools that they can easily use to record and measure improvements brought about by spontaneous teaching discovery made during reflection-in-action.

Conclusion

Reflection-in-action is a useful process that educators, and even students, can benefit from. Practical in-action insights are valuable sources of new knowledge and information, but due to different constraints like time and routinized use of reflection at the end of the educators' practice, they usually tend to be forgotten. This article tries to explain that as much as insights gained in-action are examples of good teaching practices, they are valuable insights because they are supported by a theoretical framework and have theoretical grounding. Writing classes offer a lot of opportunities to do reflection-in-action and the insights from these critical considerations provide useful data to be shared, explored, and discussed.

Bio Data

Leilani de Vera has over 10 years of experience teaching elementary, high school, and university students in Japan and the Philippines. Her research interests are education, gender studies, and children's literature.

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