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MY TEACHING JOURNEY: A Reflective, Reflexive, and Collaborative Practice

by Sandra Dixon

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On September 2016, I joined the University of Lethbridge's Faculty of Education as an Assistant Professor with much excitement about the unforeseen possibilities that laid ahead of me. I also had feelings of trepidation not knowing what to expect in the new culture of academia. Embracing my personal mantra that *I should always have an attitude of gratitude*, I adopted a positive attitude, a spirit of humility, and an open quest for advanced knowledge and collaborative teaching and learning. As I have embarked on this new journey with an open mind, I have been committed to be the best version of myself that I could possibly be; not only for myself and my students, but also for my colleagues who welcomed me with open arms. Within the past two years, I have endured many challenges, experienced some frustrations, shared many laughs, as well as invited and received constructive feedback, all of which have stirred my growth both personally and professionally. I have to admit that time flies when you are in academia. Now that I am no longer a doctoral student, but have moved into the role of an instructor and a researcher at a reputable institution, I have even deeper respect, empathy, and admiration for my past instructors, as well as research and clinical supervisors. These individuals have collectively set very high academic and clinical standards for me to achieve excellence in the areas of theory, research, and practice. It is with great honour and humility that I aim to do the same for my students.

The kindness and support of many individuals within the Faculty of Education as well as the larger university community have helped me to grow my skillset in an enriched environment in my first two years as a new instructor. Now, as I venture into my third year, I have had some time to revisit some of the lessons I have learned along the way. I thought, what better way to grow than to share these lessons with you, hoping that my subjective experiences might resonate especially with those among you who, like me, are as passionate about teaching and learning. Speaking to my growth, this article will present you with the learning edges and vulnerable experiences that have shaped my reflective, reflexive, and collaborative teaching practice so far.

Reflective Practice

To start, I define *reflective practice* as the ability to develop a good understanding of myself and my professional identity in order to become aware of how I engage with others both on a personal and a professional level. As a multicultural

counsellor, I find a parallel between teaching and counselling practices in that reflection invites me to think about both areas of my competencies. Similar to counselling, I see the value in *reflective self-awareness* and *critical reflectivity* in my role as an instructor who draws from the critical pedagogical framework of Paulo Freire (1,2), which is informed by a social constructivist school of thought to guide my teaching practice. I embrace Freire's teaching philosophy that human beings are the co-creators of knowledge (3). Therefore, I argue that a safe space should be created within the educational context to allow both instructors and students to (re)construct and co-create their knowledge and become active agents of their own learning and critical thinking.

Increased self-awareness allows me to re-examine myself on a deeper level and become more cognizant of how my own personal biases, assumptions, and values might impact the interactive process of the students that I teach. Such self-awareness often discloses feelings of vulnerability about my humanness as an instructor to me. Therefore, I have made an effort to engage in self-compassion around my learning edges to enhance my teaching. For me, this means to accept my competencies with the realization that there is always room for growth in our profession. For example, I am careful to remind myself that all of my students are unique in their own way with their own subjective lived realities. I believe that my students' experiences should be respected and honoured irrespective of their salient cultural dimensions like ethnicity, gender, faith, political views, sexual orientation, and learning preferences. In challenging my own biases, I make an intentional effort to generate open dialogues with students in all my learning environments—online, blended, and in the classroom—that invite socially just and culturally responsive thinking and application. In so doing, I have noticed that students are apt to become active participants in their own learning. Further, in my reflection of my interactions with students, I have discovered how much they value and benefit from a bottom-up approach to teaching and learning.

Acknowledging the importance of bottom-up student involvement, I reject the idea to position myself as the primary expert for the learning of my students with little or no regards for their own knowledge base. Instead, I rather want to focus on clarifying my role, which helps them understand that I am there to work *with* them and not *for* them. In this role as an accountability partner with my students, I am able to set firm boundaries that are necessary for us to work together to the best possible outcome. I find that students who are gaining independent learning and critical thinking skills tend to appreciate the opportunity to increase the depth and breadth of their own learning out of their own initiative, but with my guidance. As an instructor who continuously reflects on her teaching practice,

I endeavour to draw from the repertoire of teaching strategies that stimulate students to take responsibility for and enhance their own learning instead of enabling them to be passive consumers. An example of an activity I employ that enables students' independence in learning is a group discussion in which they build their leadership and collaboration skills, in addition to gaining subject matter knowledge.

Reflexive Practice

For the purpose of this paper, I use the term *reflexivity* to mean the ability to take a critical stance that involves analyzing one's teaching practice and asking if knowledge is being fully used, if actions are consistent with values, and if any learning and development are generated in the teaching and learning process (4). As an instructor, I take pride in the quality of my teaching and often draw from the expertise of other seasoned instructors to augment my own personal development and knowledge-base. I find truth in Freire's words that "I cannot be a[n] [instructor] without exposing who I am" (2: p.87). So, at this juncture, I take the time to make transparent the discomfort I have felt in relation to students' course evaluations. Maybe it's the word *evaluation* that invites this feeling of discomfort for me, because, in my mind, I perceive the word to be an evaluation of myself more than my teaching. Being mindful of my humanness as an instructor puts me in a very vulnerable place where I sometimes cannot help but equate student evaluations with personal judgement or scrutiny. There have been moments when I had to consciously reframe my thinking after students had picked apart a course, or even ripped to shreds specific aspects of it. When reframing, I now ask myself what motivated students' criticisms knowing that it could stem from dissatisfaction with the course grade or an inability to provide constructive feedback.

Objectively, I am aware that this is not the intent, but subjectively, I had constructed a reality for student evaluations to represent a period of doom in my teaching practice instead of a time of bloom. I must admit that compared to when I just started a few years ago, my attitude about those evaluations has now shifted. Taking a reflexive stance as well as engaging in honest exchange with my colleagues, who shared their evaluation experiences with me, has helped me to see through the negativity I formerly associated with student evaluations. In addition, I have started to construct a new reality for myself, in which I can be proactive in finding and implementing ways to probe student satisfaction at more frequent intervals without having to rely on end-of-term student evaluations as the only source of student input for the courses that I teach. As part of my reflexive teaching practice, I now also use informal surveys that assess the impact of my instruction on the learning of my students at specific points throughout my

courses to allow for adjustments and changes if needed. The pairing of the informal formative assessment with the final student evaluation helps me develop a strong professional teaching portfolio and be the best instructor I can be for myself as well as my students. Having gone through two years of anxiety of reading my course evaluations, I am pleased to say that my discomfort has lessened at this stage of my professional development. Now, I am mindful not to take the course evaluations at mere face value but to think about what lies beneath the surface of these comments and how they fit into the bigger picture assembled with student feedback that I align with current research findings.

Owing to the fact that research findings on student evaluations have been so debatable and mixed over the years, I have learned to reframe my perception of them. Spurgeon (5), for instance, has made the valid argument that student evaluations are “becoming more and more important as American universities veer toward private-enterprise models of educational management” (5: para.1). However, there has also been great controversy as to how they would need to be designed to provide valid and reliable results for faculty and university management to work with. In contrast, student evaluations in Europe are generally given less weight “where universities are mostly free (though increasingly less so) and very difficult to get into, students are regarded not as consumers but as subjects needing either training or enlightenment” (5: para.8). Further, in many North American universities, grades tend to be grossly inflated by instructors who appease students, avoid appeals, obtain an ego-boosting evaluation, or give cookie rewards (5,6).

More so, within the North American context, research (6-9) shows that quite often anonymous student evaluations of instructors may serve as vehicles for transmitting popular misconceptions and prejudices to the disadvantage of women and visible minorities (6). In many cases, white males are given better overall ratings than their white female counterparts (6). Not surprisingly, visible minorities are rated less favourably than their white male and female counterparts (7). Such skewed findings make one wonder about the reliability and validity of student evaluation measures. Also, strong consideration needs to be given to the influence of other salient variables like accent, race, ethnicity, and gender in the student evaluation process and outcomes (8).

According to Stroebe (9), who commented on most recent findings in *The National Student Survey*, instructors who require their students to engage in active learning, critical thinking and do a lot of demanding coursework are at risk of receiving poor ratings. To mitigate poor ratings, many instructors might decide to lower their course requirements and grade expectations as a subtle and passive way to accommodate students

(9). Arguably, the aforementioned concerns can result in grave disservice to some students who might garner an A grade that they don't deserve. My thorough scope of the literature has made me realize that instead of relying on final student evaluations, I need ongoing reflexivity to ensure that the quality of my teaching has the highest possible impact on the learning of my students. I now understand that reflexivity in my practice is critical to being an ethical, responsive, and responsible instructor (10) whose unique experiences have been shaped through collaborative practice

Collaborative Practice

Within the context of teaching, I view the concept of collaboration as my capability and efficacy to work in tandem with other educators and teaching support staff to instruct, facilitate, and stimulate students' learning across various socio-cultural and educational contexts. At this stage of my professional development, I can humbly say that I would not have made it this far in academia had it not been for the ongoing support, empathy, and compassion that I have received from my colleagues within as well as outside of the Faculty of Education. With the gentle reminder from my former practicum supervisor at the Calgary Family Centre, Karl Thomm, that I should always be ‘grounded in groundedness,’ I am always eager to seek out the expertise, advice, and feedback from others in order to enhance my teaching competencies and hone my skillset as an instructor. For instance, on many occasions, I have invited other instructors to assess my face-to-face teaching practice. I strongly believe in the power of peer feedback and think that, similarly to students, colleagues should observe each other in order to create a collaborative environment in which trust, humanity, honesty, intellectual growth, and improved institutional values” are fostered (5). I would also add that collaborative practice is beneficial to the critical and constructive learning strategies of both instructors and students.

In addition to requesting peer feedback from my colleagues, I make an intentional effort to visit other instructors' classrooms whenever possible. I also invite colleagues to my courses as guest lecturers because this form of collaboration allows me to observe various teaching styles and incorporate them into my own teaching practice. Classroom visits are especially useful if combined with debriefing sessions with the other instructors, as this allow me to explore their strategies for using certain teaching approaches and techniques. By so doing, I get a clearer understanding of my colleagues' rationales and can thus reflect on whether or not these strategies might be a good fit for the courses that I teach.

In addition to the inspiring exchange with my colleagues, I have worked closely with the

Teaching Centre since the commencement of my position at the University of Lethbridge. Among other services, the Teaching Centre offers pedagogical assistance in all matters related to teaching. Requesting feedback on my course planning and teaching has enabled me to quickly diversify my teaching repertoire to now include a greater number of appropriate instruction and assessment methods for all of the modalities that I teach in. Personally, I find my interaction with the Teaching Centre very meaningful. I will continue to request constructive feedback and look forward to more discussions relating to my teaching practice in the authentic and non-judgemental environment that the Teaching Centre provides.

Concluding Thoughts

In conclusion, I am extremely grateful that my journey as an instructor has given me the opportunity to impact the lives of my students and peers in compassionate and meaningful ways. I now feel that I have an ethical responsibility to continuously engage in reflective and reflexive practices to ensure that my biases, values, and assumptions are kept in check to avoid any form of misunderstanding or misinterpretation with my students and colleagues. Equipped with the outlined tools of reflexivity, reflexivity, and collaborative practice, I trust that I can take on future challenges in my teaching with enthusiasm and openness. Without the support network that I have established within the last three years, I wouldn't feel as confident, comfortable, and competent to answer the call for cultural consciousness, social change, inclusive language, and cultural sensitivity in the teaching profession and beyond.

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