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## Preparing and Supporting the Reflective Practitioner

David M. Donahue



Dear Stern,

Thanks for giving all the supplies that we need. With out you help is nothing like it because we need your help to provide us things that we need. Ms. Cramer + Ms. Tobin are happy that you gave us these things. also I appreciate what you had done for us hope some one would help you with what you want and what you need.

Also once again thanks for what you give to us.

Sincerely,  
Michelle Jones

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AUTHOR'S NOTE: All the names used in this chapter are pseudonyms. Excerpts reprinted with permission.

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Thank you

Dr. Stern

You are the man for giving us supplal to this 8th grade science class with out you this class would not had had no pencils or paper and stuff like that so I really apeat your help with or supplies thank you.

Dear Dr. Stern

I wuld lik to say thank you for auplying all thise net mutirole's that wuld help or clasroom.

By Zack Taylor

Dear Dr. Stern

Thank you for giving us the things we need for our class room. If it wasn't for you we would not have the thengs to luern with. . . . We will all use and appreciate the supplies every day in tell we live the school and the other studens that come will appreciate the suppies and were very happy that we have the things to luren with. and have fun with.

Thank you!

Sincerely,  
Sheila Charles

Stacy was not sure what she should have done with these letters. At the time, she was student teaching in an eighth-grade science class at a middle school in Oakland. The school had recently received a gift from a local philanthropist to buy materials and equipment for science instruction, and Stacy's principal asked for a thank-you letter written by each of the students in the class to their benefactor. Stacy gave little

thought to what seemed like a simple request, thinking the students would write for 10 minutes in class while she wrote her own cover note. After she collected the letters, she planned to put them in an envelope, send them off, and return to her science lesson. When she saw what the students wrote, she reconsidered this “simple” request.

She had sent the letters, unconvinced that she could teach all the grammar that needed revising and the spelling that needed correcting. She also wanted to move on with her science curriculum. Maybe the benefactor wouldn’t really care about the letters. After all, the students were only eighth graders, and he might excuse the mistakes.

On the other hand, Stacy had conflicting feelings about her decision. It seemed more like a rationalization than a careful deliberation. A central tenet of her teacher education—that all teachers, regardless of subject area, are teachers of reading and writing—was starting to influence her thinking. As Stacy thought about writing in the context of her class, she realized that she needed to know more than techniques for teaching writing. As her colleagues pointed out, she also needed to know what her students already knew about writing in different genres, from lab reports to thank-you notes; about their experience with language, including Standard English; and about why they made the mistakes they did. In addition, she realized the letters raised questions of culture and power. Was it OK that a student wrote, “You are the man”? What did her students know about the language used by a retired European-American doctor? What would the benefactor know about the language used by African-American teenagers? Whose language should be used in the letters? When is it appropriate to require Standard English? What role does learning to write Standard English play in helping students gain and use power? How is the language her students use connected to their sense of identity? And why should her students be writing these letters in the first place? Why should they be “grateful” for paper and pencils when students in wealthier, suburban districts never give a thought to the source of money for basic supplies?

These questions and concerns demonstrate how Stacy’s initial question—what should I have done with these letters?—was an opportunity for reflection on a number of topics through a variety of analytical lenses. Reflection, the principle on which we focus in this chapter, is closely connected to this book’s other principles. After all, teachers reflect on something, and the content of their reflection may focus on subject matter or the political and moral contexts of teaching. Stacy’s case illustrates all three: the role of writing in science classrooms, issues

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of power in language use and instruction, and the moral imperative of teachers to respect students' identity and give them access to power. Teachers also reflect on what their students know and should know, an idea related to learning as a constructivist and developmental process. Stacy's questions about her students' writing skills demonstrate this concern. The process of reflection illustrates another principle: collegiality. Whereas one image of reflection is the scholar alone with his or her thoughts, reflection can also be a social activity. In this case, Stacy's colleagues played a key part in helping her see new questions and reframe old ones with new perspectives. In the rest of this chapter, we discuss the nature of reflection, the need for reflection by teachers, its role in teacher learning and development, the tools that support reflection, and obstacles to reflection, including reflection in an environment of increasing regulation and high-stakes testing.

#### ❖ THE NATURE OF REFLECTION

As you read the literature on learning to teach, you will find widespread support for the notion of teacher reflection. You will also find that educators mean different things when they refer to reflection. The collection of definitions can seem confusing and even contradictory. Some teachers conceive reflection as any thinking by a teacher, arguing that it is impossible to teach without thinking, and, therefore, it is impossible to be an unreflective teacher. At the other end of a spectrum of definitions, some teachers equate reflection with research, whether positivist, university-based investigations or teacher-action research. Our definition of reflection avoids these two poles. Instead, like many educators concerned with teacher learning and development, we base our definition of reflection on Dewey. In *How We Think* (1910), he called reflection the "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 6). In the case that opens this chapter, Stacy was demonstrating persistent and careful consideration by bringing her questions about the letters to her colleagues and by continuing to examine her belief that teaching writing was beyond the scope of her science class. She and her colleagues brought multiple perspectives to bear on what role writing plays in the instruction of all teachers and the implications of these ideas for their practice, another prerequisite for reflection according to Dewey. When

you reflect on your own teaching, ask whether the thinking you call reflection is active, persistent, and careful. Are you challenging your core beliefs and questioning what you know? Are you willing to examine the assumptions on which your beliefs rest, and are you willing to change those beliefs and the teaching practices based on them if those assumptions turn out to be unwarranted? When you are open to such questions and change in your practice, then your thinking can be called reflection.

In defining reflection, theorists have wrestled with questions of why teachers reflect, what they reflect about, and how they reflect. According to Dewey (1910), teachers reflect because they face a surprise, problem, dilemma, or puzzle that calls into question something they thought they already knew. More recently, Schön (1983, 1987) has also underscored the role of dilemmas in spurring reflection, in what he calls “reflection *in* action” at the time the dilemma is raised and “reflection *on* action” later, when the teacher revisits the dilemma. With its many unknowns, teaching is full of puzzling situations that promote reflection. In some cases, teachers recognize these puzzles on their own. In other cases, administrators, supervisors, mentors, or colleagues point out the dilemmas that prompt reflection. Stacy, for example, was taken aback by her students’ thank-you letters, expecting them to be able to write in Standard English and finding out otherwise. Her colleagues also helped to identify other ways of framing her dilemmas.

Dewey (1910) locates the reason for reflection in puzzles and predicaments, and so those problems become not only the motivation but also the content for reflection. The problems may be located in a teacher’s current practice (What do I do with these letters?), in past experience (What have students learned about writing?), or in future concerns (How will I create a science curriculum that integrates instruction in reading and writing?). Not only do problems differ in time orientation, they differ in type. Van Manen (1977) categorizes these problems into three different levels: practical/technical, social/political, and moral/ethical. For many teachers, reflection begins at the practical level, choosing from different means to achieve a known end. Consider Stacy’s original question about what to do with the thank-you letters. Her concern also involved technical questions about how to teach Standard English. Reflecting with colleagues, however, Stacy also came to examine social and political questions as well as moral and ethical ones.

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All teachers face a number of puzzles or dilemmas that call for reflection. Trying to make sense of the enormous content of reflection as part of a teacher's education, Zeichner and Liston (1996) identify five "traditions" of reflection—academic, social efficiency, developmentalist, social reconstructionist, and generic—each with a different purpose and focus. The academic tradition stresses teacher thinking about subject matter and is concerned with student learning. The social efficiency tradition emphasizes reflection on the extent to which one's teaching is in line with research findings and ways in which those findings can be put to use in the classroom. The developmentalist tradition focuses teachers' reflection on students' thinking and understanding. The social reconstructionist tradition assumes teaching is a political act, and reflection focuses on social conditions and teaching that lead to a more just society. Unlike these other traditions, the generic tradition, the most recent one to emerge, argues for the benefits of teacher reflection without specific concern for the topic of teachers' reflection.

When teacher reflection is based on the six principles described in this book, it cuts across the first four traditions. Stacy's case prompted reflection on academic questions about the place of writing in science classrooms and how students learn Standard English. It also connected to the social efficiency tradition, as Stacy and her colleagues discussed how different theorists and researchers would have responded to the problem. As she and her colleagues considered appropriate expectations for eighth graders, they engaged in reflection in the developmentalist tradition. Questions about the connections between language and power illustrated reflection in the social reconstructionist tradition. As you reflect on your practice, do not worry about categorizing your questions. Indeed, as Stacy's dilemma illustrates, reflection resists neat categories. Do think about these traditions, however, to avoid one simple way of reflecting on puzzles in your practice.

### **The Need for Reflection by Teachers**

While some policymakers, textbook publishers, parents, and perhaps even teachers think of teaching as merely a technical activity of implementing curriculum according to established criteria, most teachers appreciate that teaching is intellectual work and reflection is a vital means of nurturing the intellectual dimension of teaching. Giroux (1988) describes the centrality of reflection in teachers' intellectual and political work, writing, "Teachers combine reflection and action in the

interest of empowering students with the skills and knowledge needed to address injustices and to be critical actors committed to developing a world free of oppression and exploitation" (p. xxxiv). Thinking about students—what they already know, what they need to know, how they learn—is at the core of teachers' practice. It is not something teachers do only when problems present themselves in classrooms. Rather, it is a disposition toward thoughtfulness and inquiry that characterizes the relationship of teachers to students. When teachers believe their work requires thoughtfulness, they are more likely to create opportunities for student learning that require thoughtfulness. In such classrooms, teaching is based on student learning. Too often, people mistakenly believe that learning follows from teaching. As anyone who has been a teacher for any length of time knows, however, teaching a body of content or specific facts does not mean that students have learned that body of content or specific facts.

For those of us who believe that teaching is a political act, reflection changes the nature of relationships between teachers and students, leveling the playing field between the two. Reflective teachers do not remain in sole control of knowledge. In reflective teachers' classrooms, students are not the only ones gaining knowledge. Instead, students and teachers together create new knowledge about what, how, and why students learn. The classroom becomes more democratic, what Moll and Greenberg (1990) describe as a "fund of knowledge" in which no one member of a community knows everything, each member needs what others know, and each member contributes to the development of others' new knowledge.

Reflection allows teachers to become theory builders. Perhaps you have already heard about the split between theory and practice in teacher education. You may have even experienced this split: when a teacher tells you to forget everything you learn in your education courses because really learning how to teach happens in the field or when a professor intimates that the ideas of teachers who have not read the latest in critical theory or cognitive development should not be trusted. This split results from the persistent and mistaken belief that knowledge about teaching is created solely by "experts"; that is, researchers who devote their full time to conducting experiments to determine empirically "what works." In such a world, the role of teachers is reduced to implementing the findings of such experts.

We believe that knowledge about teaching is not created only by such experts and that teachers' roles extend well beyond implementing what

others tell them works best “on average” in experimental situations. We believe that in addition to implementing the ideas from others’ theories, teachers create their own theories. Such theory building happens through reflection. When teachers reflect on their practice, they are asking questions, forming hypotheses, and collecting data to answer their questions through a variety of means, from observing their students in class to examining their written work. They examine data to look for patterns: Do students complete more work during a certain unit compared to another?, for example. Teachers then use this analysis to develop findings, which may be additional questions for reflection. For example, if students complete more work during the unit on the Civil Rights Movement than on the Vietnam war, is that because they connected differently to the content because the units were taught differently, or because one unit was taught at the end of a marking period when students were concerned about their grade?

Ultimately, teaching is also hopeful work, and reflection plays a vital role in maintaining a hopeful stance toward teaching. When teachers ask questions, when they inquire into their own practice and into their students’ learning, they are demonstrating their faith in their own learning. They refuse to give in to despair. In effect, reflective teachers are saying that what they do really matters, which is why they ask questions rather than teach in rote and formulaic ways. Annette, a teacher of several years, found reflection and inquiry gave her “an approach to dealing with all that I do with optimism and possibility—rather than bitching in the lunchroom, I ask questions, I wonder. I’m often frustrated but I do love that there are questions rather than stereotypes and rancor.” For teachers like Annette, reflection provides a means to avoid the cynicism and despair that characterize teachers who have burned out. Developing a reflective, inquiring stance at the outset of your career is perhaps one of the best ways to retain the optimism and sense of hope that brought all of us to the profession in the first place.

### **Good Questions and Strategies for Teacher Reflection**

Although reflection is important to sustaining thoughtful teachers, it is no panacea. For reflection to nurture the intellectual side of teaching, foster a sense of democracy in the classroom, and provide a sense of hope, teachers’ inquiry must be based on important questions, questions



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where knowing the answer would make a real difference in what, how, or why you teach. We have all heard a teacher say at one time or another in our lives that “there are no bad questions”; still, some questions are better than others in terms of promoting useful teacher reflection.

The best questions focus on student learning, not teacher practice. For example, “how do students read instructions for chemistry lab?” is a better question than “how do I write instructions for chemistry labs?” or “how do I get students to read instructions for chemistry labs?” The last two questions put implications before findings. In other words, to know how to write instructions or to assist students in reading them you first must know what goes on in students’ minds, what they know, how they learn, and what is confusing for them. The latter two questions focus on teachers as people who only act, rather than people who reflect and then base their actions on what they deduce from their reflection. The latter two questions about teaching practice also imply that one best way exists to teach all students and that the goal of teacher learning is to find that strategy. By contrast, questions about student learning are more likely to honor students’ different ways of acquiring knowledge. As you develop your own agenda of questions about student learning, think about the students who will be the focus of your reflection. Are they the entire third-period science class? girls in advanced science courses? the students who sit silently in class and never say a word or hand in a paper?

As you formulate your questions to focus on specific students and their thinking, learning, experiences, and beliefs, you will find yourself moving from a teacher-centered way of thinking about a classroom to a student-centered one. As a consequence, students will seem less likely to have problems needing fixing and more likely to have valuable knowledge that will make a difference in your teaching. Viewing students this way will require you to collaborate with them as you collect data from them to answer your questions.

Tara, a student teacher in an urban public high school, provides a case of how to frame reflection as a new teacher. An English teacher who cares about helping students improve their writing, she asked how students interpret teacher feedback on final drafts of papers. Not only did the question matter to her because of her overarching goals as an English teacher, it was especially relevant as she found herself faced with stacks of papers to read and grade. Describing her inquiry, she wrote,

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I found myself questioning the purpose and usefulness of my comments. On the one hand, I wanted my students to be aware of the mistakes they had made, but on the other hand, I didn't want to spend hours making corrections that would not be used for future writing.

Essentially, I wanted to know what types of comments were the most helpful for students to learn from. Also, if a multitude of comments are written, which ones do students read and why?

In a way similar to how Stacy framed her dilemma at the opening of this chapter, Tara is questioning her beliefs and knowledge. She is also leaving herself open to change in her practice as a result of her reflection.

To answer these questions, Tara engaged in a small action-research project. She asked her students to complete a short questionnaire asking:

- What are your first impressions of the teacher's comments on your papers?
- Do you read all the comments? In what order?
- Which comments are most helpful?
- Which are not helpful?
- What do you do with your paper when you get it back?
- How would you complete the following, "From the comments on my paper, I learned . . ."

By taking action to answer her questions, Tara learned that "most students *did* read all the comments," although she found their motivation for doing so varied. "Some read the comments because they were searching for explanations for their 'low' grades, and some because they wanted to know what they 'did wrong.'" She found that it was not the length of a comment "but how I phrase it that matters" to students, with short, explicit comments being the most helpful, according to students. She found that no students offered any comment on the extensive summary comments she wrote at the end of their essays, nor did any students remark on the positive comments she made. "What stood out was that students wanted to know when they made a mechanical error by having me mark it *every time*." Tara concluded her analysis and implications of the findings by writing:

I originally questioned [marking all errors] because I thought I would be bombarding students with negative feedback. However,

their responses showed me they did care about being corrected, and doing so must be done in a way that is brief and explicit. And although no students cited the positive comments as being helpful, a few students wrote “thank you,” and one wrote, “I like how you criticize my comments as to where it doesn’t sound like my parents talking to me.” I have learned that it is OK to mark every single mistake, as long as those mistakes are treated as learning events and coupled with thoughtful feedback about content as well.

Tara’s inquiry resembles the type of reflection seen in experienced teachers. While many new teachers focus on their performance and their actions in front of a classroom, teachers with more experience typically ask questions about student learning. Good reflection requires more than anecdotal evidence, although such evidence may be the beginning of reflection. Thoughtful, purposeful data collection is more in line with our conception of reflection. In this case, Tara went beyond wondering what the looks on students’ faces meant when she handed back papers. She asked students directly. Surveys and questionnaires are a useful and efficient way to collect information from a number of students. Sometimes, your questions for reflection have to do with the meaning students make or attach to various resources, events, or practices in the classroom. In such cases, providing students with a text provides richer data for your inquiry. For example, rather than asking students how their minds work when they read a history book, try asking them to “think aloud” as they read a selection from the book you use in class. A “think aloud” asks students to describe what is going on in their mind as they read. Another form of text might be a video. Instead of asking students what they think about participating in cooperative groups, ask them to join you in watching a video of them during cooperative group work during class. As you watch the video together, you can ask them why they did or did not talk or contribute to the group.

As you think about your own questions for reflection, try following some of the same steps Tara followed with her questions. Is your question about your practice or about student learning? If it is about practice, can you reformulate it so you’re reflecting on student learning and its consequent implications for your practice? Can you describe why this question is important, why answering it really matters for how you teach? Can you think of active, persistent, and careful ways to

collect information that sheds light on your question? As you engage in steps like these, you will move from merely wondering about something (always a good place to start reflection) to more sophisticated thinking.

### Conversation and Writing Support Reflection

What does reflection look like? Reflection is an active process, but capturing an internal mental process is no easy task. Certain external conditions, however, can foster and display that internal process; namely, conversation and writing. In this section, we illustrate what reflection in conversation and writing does—and does not—look like. Not all teacher talk or writing is reflection. Consider the following conversation in a seminar class where new teachers are talking about their practice. As you read, think about what does or does not make this conversation reflective.

Abby: Today was my first week of teaching 10th-grade English, and I already have a situation that's made me unsure about what to do. I wrote a letter introducing myself to the students, telling them about how I came to California, what my experiences in school had been like, what my dreams for the future were, and what I like to do when I'm not teaching or taking classes. It was an honest letter, and I shared some of my pleasant memories of childhood and my hopes as a teacher with discouraging memories of being a high school student and struggling with prejudice against immigrants to the United States. I asked them to write a letter back to me, saying they could tell me anything and that if they weren't sure what to write about, they could look at my letter for ideas of topics. One student, Armand, a quiet young African-American man, wrote, "I hate school. I hate everything about it. All I want to do is burn it down." And he included a drawing of the front of the school going up in flames. Honestly, I don't know what to do, now. I said I would respond to each of their letters, but I don't know what I'm going to say.

Nora: You need to report this to the school administration. Schools are taking threats of violence very seriously these days. Who knows, he might really burn the school down, and someone

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could get hurt. Whether we like it or not, we have to take these threats seriously.

Kaitlyn: I'm wondering where his anger comes from. I think you should find out if there are any resources at the school or in the district for anger management or conflict resolution.

Sally: I would talk to him and tell him that you're concerned about his feelings about school. I'd tell him that we all get frustrated in our lives over various things at different times, but we have to control our feelings and find a way to keep going with our lives and not let anger or hate take over.

Carol: You know, this reminds me of a student I had several years ago. He was on medication to deal with a mental illness, but he stopped taking the medicine. I knew about the medication because I had seen a note in his cumulative file. When he started talking more and more about violence, I reported it to his counselor and we found out that he wasn't taking the meds.

Paul: That's interesting because this boy reminds me of one of my students. He's really into Goth, and he's always talking about death, destruction, and all kinds of depressing topics. I think it's really about the music and popular culture. We really need to help kids deconstruct that, take a critical lens to popular culture. I also think we can give them other, more positive images.

Tom: Sometimes, I think we make too big a deal about this kind of thing. I mean, when I was in high school, I was fascinated by video games, movies, and music with pretty violent themes. I'm kind of embarrassed about it now when I look back. But, I outgrew that fascination, and I think Armand probably could, too. I did all kinds of things, from drugs to fighting, as a teenager that I could have gotten in trouble for, but I've left that behind. I think we have to be careful not to make too much of what teenagers do and say.

Thinking about this conversation, would you say it was a reflective one? On the one hand, the teachers were talking about a real dilemma, and they had no shortage of ideas about what to do. Armand's letter

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definitely sparked a wide variety of responses from a group of concerned teachers. On the other hand, the teachers in this seminar tried to solve the problem before they talked about what that problem might be. Interestingly, Abby started the conversation in this direction by asking her colleagues about what she should do, rather than what they thought might be going on. Asked what she should do, they were more than able to come up with a list of actions. Abby's request about what to do is a common one among teachers. We are expected to act and to act quickly. Taking the time to reflect on how to frame a dilemma can feel like a luxury when decisions need to be made quickly, as was Abby's case, with its potential for violence. We have no illusions about the imperative for teachers to act, and we would not label these teachers' ideas as bad. What we would caution against is jumping to solutions to a problem before framing a problem. Even in a conversation like this where no single solution is offered, Abby is left with nothing but a smorgasbord of possible solutions, none explicitly tied to a theory about what was happening with Armand and what teachers should do. At the very least, however, this example illustrates one of the benefits of reflection through conversation: gaining many different perspectives. While it is not clear any of the individual teachers contributing to their conversation considered more than one perspective, Abby comes away from this discussion with a number of different ways to look at the dilemma she shared.

Returning to Dewey's (1910) definition of reflection as "active, persistent, and careful," we offer some suggestions about how this conversation might have been more reflective. Although reflection is active, it does not mean rushing to act or jumping to conclusions. Thoughtful, reflective action requires careful consideration of how to frame a problem. As the conversation above unfolded, we could assume that the teachers had implicitly framed the problem; for example, suggesting that Abby talk to the administration because they framed this as a case of potential school violence. We would suggest, however, that teachers ask themselves not only what is going on but also why; not only what they should do, but also why they should do it. In this sense, active means not merely taking action but taking the extra steps to interrogate one's thinking, to challenge one's assumptions.

Reflection is persistent or long-term in terms of scope of thinking and continually re-evaluating new information. Although persistent reflection occurs over the course of what we hope will be a career lasting years, persistence applies to situations that require quick decision

making, as well. In such cases, teachers demonstrate persistence by grappling with different facets to vexing dilemmas and by turning over and over for several times an emerging idea as it evolves. Such persistence requires stamina in reflection. In reflective conversation, teachers can demonstrate reflection by thinking about responding not only to immediate dilemmas but also to other dilemmas or problems that may be created down the road as a result of making a change. None of the teachers in the conversation above took a long-term view. For example, what would be the outcome for Armand if the teacher went directly to the administration? What would be his future at school? What would be the outcome for other students in school who see students referred to an administrator as a result of their response to a school assignment? In the long run, how would you as a teacher reconcile allowing students free rein of expression with being concerned for school safety in an increasingly violent world? Reflective teachers demonstrate persistence when they consider several responses to dilemmas rather than clinging to one option. They continue to think about their response after implementing it rather than seeing their problem as solved. As time passes, reflective teachers continue to attend to new information that helps them re-examine their initial thinking and decisions about a problem. They realize that conclusions that “work” now for some may not work in the future or for all. Reflecting on such concerns, you may find yourself raising questions that will lead to a teacher research agenda over the course of years.

Finally, as Dewey (1910) points out, reflection is careful. Teachers who reflect with care recognize the complex nature of problems and bring various perspectives to problems. The conversation described above included a number of perspectives, but there is no evidence that the teacher incorporated them in thinking about a response to the dilemma. A good facilitator would help teachers think about where their perspectives on the dilemma come from, would challenge assumptions about the framing of the dilemma, and would ask for evidence that supports one framing over another. A good facilitator would also ask teachers to consider what perspectives are missing or what the limitations of their own perspectives are. For example, no one asked Tom to think about whether his own experience is a good basis for thinking about Armand. As a white man, Tom probably would not have been treated the same way by the school or justice system as Armand, an African-American man, for using drugs or talking about violence. How should a student’s race influence how teachers talk to

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students about issues such as drugs? No one raised this aspect of the dilemma, whether because they were afraid of introducing race as a factor in the conversation or because they did not see it as relevant. As you engage in reflective conversation with colleagues, we encourage you to do so carefully, considering multiple points of view and explicitly considering how race, class, and other aspects of who you and your students are shape how you frame your reflection.

Just as talking can capture and nurture reflection, so can writing. The following excerpts from Ruby's student-teaching journal, to which her cooperating teacher, Sheila, responded, illustrate several aspects of what makes teacher writing reflective, including good questions rooted in practice and dialogue provided by a colleague's response. In one entry, Ruby wrote:

Planning for the *To Kill a Mockingbird* unit is coming along . . . You showed me how you plan units (with the "into," "through," etc.), but how do you plan day by day? I find myself trying to stay aligned with the students' nightly reading (more or less), but then I realized that we didn't really do that for *Romeo and Juliet*. Is it more important to get through the major themes, or should class time relate in some noticeable way to the material that the students have just read? What's your opinion about this?

This excerpt highlights one important aspect of reflection: It raises questions. In this case, Ruby raises what might at first seem like a technical question: to align instruction with the students' nightly reading or to build from the nightly reading in different ways. But such a question raises larger issues about the purpose of curriculum, as Sheila's reply indicates:

Balancing the day to day is interesting. I try to keep it tied to the essential question as best I can and other essential enduring ideas. Sometimes I'm right with the reading schedule; sometimes I'm not. You need to decide—what is important to me and the learning of these kids? . . . They don't need to understand every last little plot twist . . . , they need to grasp big ideas and important skills. Just say, what will they have with them in 20 to 30 years? It's not the plot! It is critical thinking. The literature is an inroad to awakening their analytic skills.



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Sheila's response shows that few questions in teaching are purely technical, meaning that there is no single right answer for all situations at all times. Sheila's thinking illustrates the importance of purpose. What do you, as a teacher, want students to learn? Thinking about the answer to that question makes answering questions about how to align instruction with nightly reading a lot easier and makes clear that there is no single answer. For example, a teacher preparing her students for a test on the plot of canonical works might decide that, in fact, she does want students to remember plot and that her daily instruction should reinforce what students have most recently read. A teacher more in line with Sheila's thinking would align instruction differently. In any case, Sheila's reply makes us see the importance of raising the question, "why am I asking that," about all dilemmas for reflection.

On another occasion, Ruby wrote about her dependence on a limited repertoire of teaching strategies during her unit on *Romeo and Juliet*, raising questions with which many new teachers can identify.

I'm worried that my approach is too discussion-heavy and too teacher-dependent. For instance . . . , Did I really need to go over the balcony scene in the way I did? We talked about it a lot, but they hardly took any notes. How could I have approached my planning differently? I usually keep the goal in mind—and get there—but is my route effective, and how do I know it is?

Sheila responded, "You've got me thinking because sometimes it's so automatic, and automaticity at some level can be dangerous because it can lead to complacency. Why do we do things the way we do them?" Again, Ruby might be starting with a technical question about how to teach something in her classroom, but these questions almost always beg the question, why are we teaching something? With her years of experience, Sheila realizes that it's easy to fall into a trap of acting automatically. Although many new teachers might long for the day when much of their work seems automatic, Sheila sees the continued need to reflect, so she never falls into the trap of teaching something in a certain way because she's always taught that content in that way. To avoid that trap, she frames her questions for reflection not so much around how she will do something but around why she is doing something.

Both of the examples from Ruby's student-teaching journal reveal the social aspects of reflection and how it is situated in concrete contexts. Too often, we think of reflection as a solo activity, something that

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teachers do when they find time alone and when they tune out all the distractions of their classroom and the world. In fact, the best reflection often occurs when we have a colleague with whom we can frame our questions, consider other points of view on dilemmas, and examine possible responses. Again, the best reflection most often happens when we refer to a concrete situation. When we think about teaching in the abstract, we develop ideas that may only work in the abstract. Although such thinking can have value, the real world of teachers' practice is too full of particularities—about students, schools, goals, and prior situations, to name a few—to ignore in reflection.

**Reflection in an Era of Regulation and High-Stakes Testing**

Increasingly, teachers work under regulation and high-stakes testing of students and teachers. When teachers' work becomes more regulated, it also becomes "de-skilled," meaning teachers are not expected to draw on their own skills and ability to think. Rather, they are expected to follow guidelines and implement curriculum and policies made by others. In such an environment, reflection becomes much harder but just as necessary.

Of course, teachers have never operated with complete independence, and, despite the isolation of teachers in schools, they have never made decisions entirely on their own. We do not want to pretend that teachers ever enjoyed golden days of complete autonomy or that teachers should act without any oversight. After all, public school teachers work for the public and follow policies made by those working for the public. As a consequence, teachers have used district-approved textbooks, taught toward state and district expectations for subject matter at various grade levels, and followed government rules on everything from reporting suspected child abuse to including students with disabilities in the classroom. In the past, and in some places in the present, teachers have also been responsible for teaching values such as respect for the U.S. Constitution and appreciation of free-market capitalism.

What makes past practices of regulation different from the present? We believe the level of control and the attachment of high-stakes tests to those controls separate current regulation from the past. Although past efforts at regulation told teachers what to do, they left how to do it to teachers' determination, believing that teachers would know their individual students best. Also, previous regulations rarely spelled out in such lengthy detail what teachers were to teach. In the last 10 years,

we have seen state frameworks in California in subjects like English and math nearly double in size.

For example, when teachers used district-approved textbooks, they made decisions about how to use them. If history textbooks provided one perspective on the past, teachers might supplement those with texts providing other perspectives and ask students to put the different perspectives in conversation with each other. A science teacher might use a textbook's description of the solar system to pose open-ended questions beyond the facts recounted in the narrative. An elementary school teacher might choose to start somewhere other than in the beginning of a basal reader, depending on the skills and readiness of her students. Much of the current regulation harkens to an earlier era of "teacher-proofing" curriculum in the mid-20th century. As they do today, policymakers of that time believed the nation was in crisis—a Cold War at home and abroad then, struggling for position in a global marketplace today—and that schools were part of the solution. Professors from leading universities developed curricula in science, math, social studies, and foreign language that supposedly would not rely on teachers' skills for success. Yet, teachers still made decisions about how to implement this curriculum, picking and choosing certain lessons, blending new curriculum with old.

Today, teachers are expected to teach toward tests, many of which assess knowledge at the factual level and many of which are norm-referenced, meaning a student's performance is compared to that of other students taking the test rather than to criteria for satisfactory achievement. Norm-referenced tests ensure that 50% of all students will always be at the "bottom" in terms of achievement. Attached to these tests are high stakes for students—graduation from high school and placement in mainstream classes—and high stakes for schools—extra money for improvement, reconstitution for failure. To prepare students to do well on tests, school districts have invested in curriculum packages geared toward tested subject-matter content and skills. Teachers are judged by how well they implement the curriculum according to directions, leaving less room for teachers to make decisions about modifications for individual students and classes.

At first, regulation and testing might seem to reduce the need for reflection. After all, what is there to think about when teachers are told what to teach and how to teach it? As you may know from considering questions about managing to teach all that is considered important in various standards documents, grading students according to

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standards, or maintaining a sense of professional identity when being so closely regulated, the need for reflection has not disappeared. The only things to have changed are the questions for our reflection. Given the dilemmas of standards and testing, what are some the questions that come to your mind for reflection? What follows are three sets of questions for reflection that we see arising from such dilemmas.

The first set comes out of the desire all teachers have to see their students do well, to make sure that no doors to opportunity are closed to them. These include questions such as:

- How do I teach all the standards that are deemed important when I have less than enough time?
- How do I engage students in learning standards-based content and skills?
- How do I prepare students for tests that will have a large impact on their lives?

These questions reflect our wish to succeed as teachers and to have our students succeed in the public school system as it currently exists. They focus on how to teach rather than on what students know or why something is important because many of the standards handed down to teachers and the tests tied to those standards obviate the need for teachers to think about what students know or why content is important. Content is important because it is tested. What students already know is not necessarily the beginning place for building curriculum in such an environment; rather, the standards documents themselves are the starting place. Notice how these questions stand in contrast to our description earlier of good questions for reflection, questions that focus first on student learning rather than on teaching.

A second set of questions reflects the desire of teachers to reimagine schools, to interrogate the assumptions underlying standards tied to high-stakes testing. These include:

- Why is the content of high-stakes tests valued?
- How do high-stakes tests affect my students' learning and their opportunities after school?
- Who benefits and who loses in a world of schools shaped by high-stakes testing?
- In what ways, if any, are standards and tests fair measures of students' learning?

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These questions come from teachers' attention to reconstructionist traditions in reflection, from their understanding that teaching is inherently a moral and political endeavor. They come from a belief that schools routinely and predictably fail some students and that schools do not always have to be the way they are now.

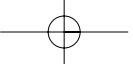
The third set of questions results when teachers necessarily try to balance two worlds: the world of schools as they are, with their high-stakes tests, and the world of schools as they might be, with learning measured in a variety of ways and with no punishment attached to assessment. These questions are:

- How do high-stakes tests affect my students' learning?
- What do my students value and know about the content set forth in standards documents?
- Based on the answer to the previous question, how do I design a curriculum to help my students meet those standards?
- How do I work in a way that meets the obligations set out for me by the state while still remaining true to the values I hold?
- How does my role as a teacher concerned about students' learning extend beyond the classroom level to policies at the school, district, state, and federal level?
- How do I prepare students to gain broad literacy skills, participate in democratic life, engage in productive work, and lead a meaningful and fulfilling life?

Like the productive questions for reflection described earlier in this chapter, the answers to these questions really matter. They are complex and without easy answers. They call for multiple perspectives. Also, they are too big for any teacher to face alone. We hope you will engage your colleagues in reflective writing and conversation to examine these questions and to develop new questions in response to the particular context where you teach.

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