

The Habit of Reflection

Ideally, in life we would be granted a few minutes after each thing we did to take inventory of what worked and what didn't, and to plan adjustments for next time. This is the optimal learning cycle for excellence—for both teachers and students. In school, however, we have no luxury of time: our next group enters on the heels of the one leaving, and we make adjustments on the fly. The challenge is to make the best ones for the results we are seeking. For that we need to cultivate the skill of habitual reflection.

One group of researchers notes, “High levels of student learning require high levels of staff competence.” They list a number of ways that reflection brings increased competence to teaching practice, including opportunities to continuously learn, avoid repeating aspects of your practice that aren't working, and generate a greater variety of perspectives when facing challenges. (York-Barr et al. 2001, 8)

A menu of standard reflection questions

Ideally, reflection occurs both individually and with colleagues. What help make it habitual are familiar structures that provide the containers for our thoughts. For example, a set of general reflection questions can guide us as we think about the progress we're making with students:

How can I better meet my students' needs for autonomy, competence, relationship, and fun?

What's working well? What's not?

What should I change?

What behavior routines and expectations do I need to revisit?

Where can I turn for help?

How specific and descriptive is my language when I reinforce my students?

What can I do to help a student who's having trouble?

How well do I share power in my classroom?

Am I remaining objective, even clinical, in the face of disruptions?

Imagine using the few minutes between classes, while you are gathering what you need to teach, to have a brief internal reflective dialogue with one of these questions (perhaps your “question for today”) to help you better learn from your experience:

I had to redirect Stephen four times in class. He did finally get to work for the last 15 minutes of class. What was the last redirection that I used—the one that stuck? Oh, yes, I asked him to move away from the group and work on his own. Maybe his struggle is social. Write a note to myself to observe next time.

Reflection on the effectiveness of discipline practices practices are found throughout this book (for example, see reflection questions for the Social Contract on page 78, and about choosing the right redirection on page 183-86). We use the abbreviation *PWR* as shorthand for the cycle of:

P: Thinking about how best to do what you will do (plan)

W: Doing it (work)

R: Thinking about what you did so you can do better next time (review)

This is the cycle of learning that all successful people use. We call it the Reflective Loop. It gives us insight into who we are, how we are, and how we can better become the teachers we dream of being. Learn more about the Reflective Loop on page 101.

[K]nowing my students and my subject depends heavily on self-knowledge. When I do not know myself, I cannot know who my students are. I will see them through a glass darkly, in the shadows of my unexamined life—and when I cannot see them clearly, I cannot teach them well. (Palmer 1998, 2)