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Learning from reflective practices of two student teachers

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Abstract

Reflective practices are not easy for student teachers. This longitudinal qualitative research focuses on the reflective practices of two pre-service teachers and found that their sense of efficacy is crucial in their learning process. But the two student teachers were strongly influenced by their early experiences and were overindulgent. This study concludes by providing them with an experience of failure and external support, and finds that establishing a rapport with student teachers is vital and should be the foundation of instruction for the two student teachers.

INTRODUCTION

John Dewey (1997a) once claimed that a “teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities” (p. 59). In order to be a leader, teachers may need to “transform” themselves in accordance with the student in front of them. However, this transformation does not take place automatically. As LaBoskey (1994) mentioned, teacher educators have a particular problem because prior to enrolment, prospective teachers have personal experiences of education, and based on those experiences, they tend to have bias and can make snap judgments. These may be thought of as sensibly derived, but often they are not and are a significant barrier to their growth as a future professional. One way for teachers to acquire the ability to transform themselves is through reflective practice. However, from my personal experiences as a teacher educator, student teachers have been unable to do this, and have shown their reluctance and lacked words to confront their reflective practices. Clearly, reflective practice is not easy (LaBoskey, 1994). Therefore, I have a question: How should teacher educators support their reflective practices?

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Since the 1970s, the concept of reflective thinking has been examined under the influence of Dewey. Dewey (1997b) argues that reflection involves a consequence, which means “a consecutive ordering in such a way that each determines the next as its proper outcome, while each in turn leans back on its predecessors” (pp. 2-3). In addition, he pointed out that reflective thought aims at belief, “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, constitutes reflective thought” (p. 6).

The contributions made by Schön (1986), the notions of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, have been influential in this area. The reflection-in-action is “the thinking what they are doing while they are doing it” (p.xi). Smith (2008) described it as

“thinking on our feet” (p. 9). On the contrary, the reflection-on-action is done after the encounter. It “enables us to spend time exploring why we acted as we did, what was happening in a group and so on” (Smith, p. 9). In addition, Smith suggested that the notion of repertoire be the key aspect in this approach. Smith explained,

When looking at a situation we are influenced by, and use, what has gone before, what might come, our repertoire, and our frame of reference. We are able to draw upon certain routines. As we work we can bring fragments of memories into play and begin to build theories and responses that fit the new situation (p. 10).

Korthagen (1985) claimed a generic and cyclical process of reflection, termed “ALACT,” named after the first letter of its five stages, (a) Action, (b) Looking back, (c) Awareness of essential aspects, (d) Creating alternative methods of action, and (e) Trial. In addition, he mentioned the sensory perception of human beings working in accordance with two sides of the brain. He wrote a tentative framework of two modes of reflection: “non-rational” and “rational” or “right-hemisphere” and “left-hemisphere” (Korthagen, 1993). The difference between rational and non-rational reflective practice is in the right hemisphere “the principle of the integration of experience is dominant over the principle of logical ordering, while in the left hemisphere the reverse is the case” (p. 319).

METHODOLOGY

A seminar for future teachers provides an inquiry-oriented approach: reflective journals, group seminars, reflective interviews, and peer observation conferences, which become the basis for student reflections. In the first half of the year, they prepare themselves for their field experiences, mainly cultivating their perception of teaching. In the second half, they are put into the real school setting, where they observe the lessons and practice their own 5 to 20 minutes of teaching. In accordance with their practical training, reflective seminars were held. What follows is a schedule of reflective practices during the term.

STUDENT A'S LEARNING FROM REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

Student A had 135 reflective practices in her journal. But she did not show full generic and cyclical reflective practices.

Overcoming her fear of the students

Student A's biggest problem was that she was too afraid to speak to the students. Before she started her lesson observation in a high school when she was a sophomore, she thought it was easy to become familiar with the students simply because she was close in age to them. However, when she entered the classroom for her first practical training, some students quickly glanced at her, and then apparently started to chat about her looks. Her mind went blank, and she became afraid of the students. At this time, she thought she would quit her practical training and give up her dream to be a teacher.

However, the next school year, she came back to the path to become a teacher. By then, over one year had passed and the opportunity to overcome her fear of students suddenly came. During the first week of the mandatory teaching practice, she still struggled to communicate with students. On the last day of the first week, a cooperating teacher told her, "You haven't done anything with your students. Teaching in the real classroom is not easy." Student A created a solution, which was to say "hello" to students and tried it from the following Monday (the phase of creating alternative methods of action). On another occasion, some students did not write any comments on her questionnaire sheet after her lesson. She felt they had shut their hearts to her (the phase of looking back) and considered how she should open up such students. She wrote a comment on the sheet that said, "I want to be a good teacher, so please write anything I should correct in my lessons" and gave it back to them (the phase of creating alternative methods of action). During two years of practical training, she recognized that she could not speak to the students, knew she was afraid of them, and that she had to overcome that fear. She found and tried her alternatives.

Transforming her perspective of lessons

At first, in her view teaching social studies was just to lead students to memorize subject matter knowledge and pass exams. However, through attending lessons of a cooperating teacher when she was a junior, she came to recognize that through interacting in lessons, teachers could encourage the students. In observing his teaching, she felt he was very good at asking the students questions, and many students vividly answered and actively participated in the lesson. In addition, he used some materials or tools, for example, PowerPoint and videos, to get the students interested in the subject. Then, her biggest concern became how to organize a lesson in which she could lead students to participate actively in it.

She came to pay attention, not only to whether the students enjoyed her lessons, but also to whether her teaching was meaningful to her students. Her definition of “meaningful teaching” was “teaching through which students develop themselves.” This idea came from her student teaching experience. One day, during her teaching, she knew the content she had prepared for was too shallow for the junior high school students to study, although she thought she had gained more subject matter knowledge than ever. She felt very sorry for the students when she saw they looked exhausted after the lesson (the phase of looking back). She admitted that she did not know how to teach (the phase of the awareness of essential aspects). She wrote, “It is my obligation for the students to deepen their understanding while they enjoy my lessons” (Reflective journals, February 28, 2008).

Nine months later, her best reflective practice came. Student A mentioned her lesson about the fast-growing developing economies of Brazil, Russia, India and China (BRICs). She was not familiar with BRICs, but her preparation only involved checking some websites. She thought she could teach in accordance with responses of the students (the phase of trial) and took lesson preparation too easy. But she failed. She was afraid of questions from the students, as she recognized that she did not have enough subject matter knowledge of BRICs.

She kept teaching and did not take any questions from them. As a result, few students could understand the subject (the phase of looking back). In her reflective journal, she was hard on her own teaching and wrote “no learning for the students” (Reflective Journal, December 12, 2008). First, she simply thought it was a mistake to teach in a one-sided manner without considering the students. Her thoughts then became more comprehensive. She recognized that she had not organically connected the subject matter knowledge of geography and the history of the BRIC’s countries (the phase of awareness of essentials). Then she gave an assignment to herself: to improve the skill to prepare for lessons (Final paper of the seminar for future teachers, February 6, 2009)¹.

Student A had transformed her perception about social studies lessons through student teaching. It was apparent that her reflective practices brought her a firm belief that she had not fulfilled her task as a teacher if her lessons did not give the students some learning.

Gaining the confidence in herself

The hardest conflict was that many of those around student A, including her parents and elder sister were cynical about her being a teacher. Her former academic advisor and seminar classmates once tried to block her because, according to her, they believed she did not have enough academic foundation or could stand studying for years. In fact, she was weak-hearted. When she was a sophomore, she wrote, “I am short and look unreliable. When I have to be hard on others, I can’t. As I am such a person, I considered that I am not suited for a teacher” (Final report of the seminar for future teachers in the school year of 2006). This was her biggest transition shock on campus, which drove her into the corner. With encouragement from her university teacher and a cooperating teacher from the junior high school, she thought she had to prove that she had capabilities to become a teacher. She had been so hard on herself that after the employment examination of the Hokkaido Public Schools, she burnt

¹ Since, how Student A should prepare for the next lesson was not mentioned in detail, I do not agree that it could be regarded as finding an alternative.

out.

As a result, she spontaneously came back again, and reflective practices improved her mental situation. When she got the sense that she was developing, she became confident with herself. Through her student teaching and reflective practices, she came to feel that she had been putting in more effort than anyone else on campus had. At last, she wrote, “I changed my view and think even if it is very small progress, praising myself could bring me some development” (Final report of the seminar for future teachers, February 27, 2009). When she was in a difficult situation, her reflective practices helped her to look back on the situation and to examine herself and allow her some achievements. Through repeating this process, she overcame the transition shock on campus and became confident with herself.

STUDENT B’S LEARNING FROM REFLECTIVE PRACTICES

There were 18² reflective practices in Student B³’s journal but she did not show generic and cyclical reflective practices. She looked back on the scene but her reflective practices did not go beyond that stage.

Her reluctance and resistance to reflective practices

It was obvious that student B had done her reflective practices much less than student A. The reason was the gap of readiness, even with other student teachers, especially with student A, to prepare herself as a student teacher. At first, student B thought student teaching was easy. But her university teacher seemed more demanding than she expected. She gradually came to complain about his instruction. When she had an opportunity to introduce herself to high school students, she enjoyed chatting with them. This experience strengthened her impression of what she was doing in the seminar course was meaningless. One day, she gave a geography lesson, which was her first time teaching this subject matter. Whatever she

² This study is still ongoing. While student A finished the student teaching section of the seminar for future teachers three times and her mandatory student teaching, student B completed her first time student teaching of the seminar. She is going to have a three-week mandatory student teaching next year.

³ Student B is an international student.

asked, she felt the students gave her no response. She became scared of them. She even felt reluctant to look back at her teaching.

It appears that many of her reflective practices were not spontaneous. First, she did not understand why reflective practice was crucial, and after her teaching started, it became a source of pain. The university teacher felt that she avoided her studies as a student teacher. He mentioned the fact that, in her reflective journals, student B repeated the same spelling and grammatical errors while being told by both him and other student peers every time. His sense was totally right. In the last reflective seminar, student B said honestly, “I have thought why I am doing this. (4 seconds) (I wondered) if it would bring me some benefits” (Transcript of reflective seminar, February 27, 2009).

In the view of other student teachers, student B had treated herself overindulgently. According to student A, student B often asked her to call the cooperating teacher to set the schedule for her practical training. Moreover Student B often excused herself for not doing her best to prepare for her lesson because she could not teach perfectly anyway. Student A added that when student B asked the high school cooperating teacher to have team teaching with her, she turned it down as she felt student B was going to depend on her again and again. In her journal, she wondered why student B was participating in the student teaching (Reflective journal of student A, December 19, 2008).

Learning of student B

Student B’s learning was not directly related to her reflective practices. Her reflective practices were mostly done under pressure from the university teacher and student peers. However, she encountered “another world,” which influenced her to reflect upon her rigid perspectives. Whenever she met a different perspective, especially an opposite one from hers, she often thought she was right and the other person was wrong. For instance, when many grammatical errors and misspellings in her journals were pointed out, she thought her Japanese was perfect, so she felt offended. She encountered a transition shock, even in the

seminar class. Her resistance continued until the end of school year. However, in the final report, there were no misspellings. She recalled “I thought why the (university) teacher had pointed out (my errors and misspelling) while those around me praise my Japanese fluency. That time, I felt hardship” (Transcript of the seminar, February 27, 2009).

While confused and losing her motivation to be a teacher, she became interested in economics. She took the Economic Record Examination (ERE) and had received a B grade, regarded as a good result for a college sophomore student in general. From this experience, she wrote, “Students have unlimited possibility. So, if (a student) having no more than 1% (to achieve something), (teachers) should support them” (Her final report submitted February, 26, 2009). I concluded that she was writing about herself. While she was again motivated by the professor who led her to study for the ERE exam, in the seminar for future teachers, she felt that her possibilities had been oppressed. Then she transformed her perception of teaching. She wrote, “Students follow a teacher because of their humanity” (Her report submitted January 12, 2009). In my conclusion, her perception of teaching was complicated from outside her reflective practices from her student teaching.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

The common experience of students A and B was that they faced transition shocks both in the secondary and university classrooms. Both student teachers have common patterns. They first thought that teaching was easy, as early experiences had influenced their views. They did not have a lack of study skills or teaching perception. They both felt very uneasy about whether they were on the “right” track. Then, they both had transition shocks in the classroom and on campus. On the other hand, there was the significant difference in the depth and breadth of the reflective practices of the two student teachers, which came from their readiness to become a teacher.

It was the task of the university teacher to maximize their learning no matter whether they were ready or not. Since reflective practices helped the two student teachers to develop

themselves, how to support their reflective thinking was crucial. There was a hint from an essay test of student B. She wrote, “A professor said, ‘You can do anything you want’. Not only saying ‘do your best efforts’” (Final exam of another subject, conducted in January 26, 2009). “Do your best” was the phrase the university teacher responsible for the seminar often used. She had been at a loss and needed compliments from him, which in turn, might have given her a sense of efficacy.

In considering how to provide a sense of efficacy for the two student teachers, it is meaningful to see Korthagen’s (1985) idea – the strategy of gradualness. The strategy of gradualness has two aspects: “structure” and “safety” (p. 13). When the university teacher gives an assignment, it should be vital that he should not tell his students in advance what to do. He should let them fail. This might bring transitions shocks, so he should help them start “with reflection on simple and short experiences” (p. 13). Then, possible choices should be shown. He should lead them to pick up their choice and carry it out. At last, self-evaluation should be done. In the case of the two student teachers, the university teacher should have paid close attention to student B and been available when the transition shock took place and she needed external support.

The aspect of safety consists of acceptance, empathy, and encouraging. In addition, “safety” depends on the personal relationship between student teachers and university teachers. In the case of student B, she had a feeling of reluctance toward his instruction because of his demanding attitudes. No student teacher has self-confidence from the beginning. Thus, if student teachers feel that their actions and trials are always criticized, they will not learn to take responsibilities and grow their passive attitudes. On the other hand, facing transition shock, but never giving up her dream, student A spontaneously asked for external support and gained it from the university teacher, which became the foundation of their rapport.

Thinking of the outcome of this study, for student teachers to engage in reflective practices, experiencing failures and having external support provided, both of which could be the

foundation of the rapport, is necessary. However, the biggest disadvantage of this strategy is that it is extremely time-consuming, and therefore, very difficult to meet the needs of individual student teachers and the cooperating schools which accept student teachers. Student teachers, like students A and B, take a long time to prepare for their student teaching. In Japan, many teachers in elementary and secondary level are so exhausted that they are often reluctant to accept student teachers. The less developed a student teacher is, the less opportunity of student teaching they get. University teachers cannot easily get the cooperation from schools.

In the field of teacher education, teaching strategies and approaches, including how to establish bilateral relationships with elementary and secondary schools, should be further researched and discussed.

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