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Pursuing the Ability to Transform Oneself Through Reflective Practice:

The Outcomes of Teaching Practice of Two Student Teachers

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Abstract

The role of teachers is to lead individual students to step in their right direction. Thus, teachers need the ability to transform themselves through reflective practices.

I have been observing the reflective practices of two preservice teachers during their student teaching. Data were drawn from students' journals, papers, interviews with their supervisor (the author), their responses in the seminar class, and field notes from observations during their student teaching.

This study has found it was difficult for the two student teachers to establish sufficient reflective practices, although they showed some cognitive growth. The lack of perception of teaching, the lack of skills to study and the strong influence of their early experiences are all linked with their insufficient reflective practices.

Key Words: reflective practice, pre-service teacher education, practicum

1. 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 need ideas, perspectives and skills of individual responsive teaching, as each student is different. This means that teachers may need to “transform” themselves in accordance with the student in front of them. However transformation doesn’t take place automatically. Masterful teachers know the value of asking students, colleagues, supervisors, parents, administrators and teacher educators to observe their practice and critique it. Once this is done, teachers can better reflect on their practice. One way for teachers to acquire the ability to transform themselves is through reflective practice. On the other hand, individual teachers, especially novice teachers, face many difficulties when they try to achieve a state of reflective practice. Clearly, reflective practice is not easy.

Accordingly, the present qualitative longitudinal research aims to reveal how two future teachers reflected on their practice, and attempted to reduce the barriers that stand in the way of reflective practice.

2. REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

The concept of reflective thinking has been examined since the 1970s under the influence of works by 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.” In addition, he pointed out that reflective thought aims at belief (pp.2-3). Stemming from Dewey’s thinking, a variety of ideas on

reflective practice¹ have been developed. I here define reflective practice in the context of teaching as follows:

through the process of problem solving, to structure and restructure oneself and her/his teaching with multiple perspectives, organically connecting between their past experiences, current environment, theories and insights, based on professional identity.

There are two main perspectives of reflective practice. Pultorak (1993) uses Van Manen's concept of reflectivity in a hierarchical manner. He mentions three levels of reflection: Technical rationality, Practical action, and Critical reflection. The first level, technical rationality (= Category 1) "focuses on classroom competency and effectiveness demonstrated by measurable outcomes" (p.290). Educators at this level only consider "the technical application of educational knowledge and of basic curriculum principles for the purpose of attaining a given end" (p.290). The second level, practical action, (=Category 2) is related to subjective assumptions of individual teachers. They analyze "student and teacher behaviors to see if and how goals and objectives are met" (p.290). Their educational decisions are made based on "a value commitment to some brief framework" (p.290). Teachers in the third level, critical reflection, (Category 3), "incorporate moral and ethical criteria such as whether important human needs are being met into the discourse about practical action" (p.290). Without personal biases, they "are concerned with worth of knowledge and the social circumstances useful to students." (p.290)

An alternative concept, explaining the relationship between experiences and learning was

¹ There are several studies of reflective practice. (Schon, 1986; Ciriello, Valli, and Taylor, 1992; Parsons and Stephenson, 2005; Cowan, 2006; Harrison, 2008)

examined by Korthagen (1985) who developed 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) Trial².

In this study, I will use both concepts, reflective practice in a hierarchical, generic and cyclical manner to examine how prospective teachers have performed their reflective practices.

3. METHODOLOGY

At Asahikawa University a seminar for future teachers has been established to give pre-service teachers experiences of reflective thinking through practical training in a real classroom setting. This seminar employs an inquiry-oriented approach: reflective journals, group seminars, reflective interviews and peer observation conferences³. In the 2007 school year, two future teachers were enrolled in the seminar. In the first half year, they prepared themselves for their practice teaching sessions, by recalling their significant school experiences, reading some books and cultivating their perception of teaching. Then, one of the two students (student B) started her practical training in July and ended in the middle of the following March at a local junior high school. The other student (student A) started his practical training in September and ended at the end of the following February at a local high school.

² Korthagen mentioned (1985) sample logbook notations of each phase, some of which are as follows: a mathematics lesson was taught by a student teacher, which is in the phase of action. A notation of looking back on the action is like “This lesson went fine. They are a bit noisier than usual, but I could control them all the same.” A notation of awareness of essential aspects would be “Ronnie was not present; that may have been a cause of the extra noise” (p.12).

³ According to Collier (1999), these approaches become the basis for student reflections (p.174).

In addition, the two student teachers, who are senior students this school year, accomplished their three-week mandatory teaching practice in June 2008. Both students completed their mandatory student teaching at different schools from those they experienced student teaching of the seminar.

4. REFLECTIVE PRACTICE OF TWO STUDENT TEACHERS

(1) Reflective Practice in Hierarchical Manner

In his journal, student A mentioned 64 units of reflection, 27 of which were categorized⁴ as technical rationality (Category 1) and the rest were categorized in practical action (=Category 2). Student B's total number of reflective practices in her journal was 71, among which 26 units were categorized⁵ as technical rationale, 45 units were categorized as practical action. Significantly, neither student A nor B had reflective practice categorized in critical reflection (Category 3).

Category 1 reflective practice of student A, for instance, was "I couldn't use the textbook and material book well, so I should have prepared for the class more" (Reflective journal: June 10th 2008). Student B wrote, "Similar to last time, the timing of writing on the blackboard and explanation wasn't good. I should practice this many times and get more experience than before" (Reflective journal: Feb. 28th 2008). These reflective practices were very shallow, as they neither described why their practices hadn't gone well nor how they would improve their practices next time. Also, their perception of teaching was not seen. Examples of category 2 reflection, on the other hand, include their perception of teaching. Student A wrote, "I feel

⁴ I isolated all of the accounts of his reflective practices in his journal. Then, referring the transcript of group seminars and reflective interviews, I categorized the accounts into category 1 to 3.

⁵ As same as the footnote 4.

that I taught too many things for students to understand. Regarding environmental problems, they should have had more time to think of it and gotten some time to present their opinions” (Reflective journal: June 13th 2008). This reflection included his perception of teaching that students should consider social problems. Student B wrote, “My teaching was very shallow because I only showed some knowledge described in the textbook. Moreover, my lesson goes on my pace, not my students’ pace” (Final report of the seminar for future teachers: April 1st 2008). This comment came from her perception of teaching that the teacher should give something to their students to feel, think about and apply.

(2) Generic and Cyclical Reflective Practice

Neither student showed all five phases in the cycle of reflective practice as Korthagen suggests. In all of their reflective practices, there were some phases. For example, student A was assigned to explain Hinduism and the lives of Indian people in his 10-minute lecture. He showed his students two pictures, one of people bathing in the Ganges and a farmer taking care of his cattle. This was the phase of action. After the class, in the group seminar, he said to us, “I distributed two pictures and explained them. But, the students only looked at the pictures and showed no interest.” This was his “looking back.” Then, he said “I shouldn’t have given some comments about these pictures. Instead, I should have asked students something like ‘What picture is this?’” He found a method to draw students’ interest, which meant creating an alternative method of action. But, he didn’t mention his awareness of essential aspects and trial of the alternative method.

After this practical training, he didn’t attend the practical training for two months because he wrote his journal and reflected on my practical training equivocatingly during the first two months of his practical training. He felt as if he had been forced to do it. When he came back to his student teaching, he changed his teaching style a little. He prepared his own printed material and distributed it to the students and called on some students to answer the questions.

He became more aware of the communication with the students in the lesson than before. His teaching style gained in breadth.

Student B also showed some reflective practice. During the first week of the mandatory teaching practice, she struggled to communicate with students. A cooperating teacher told her on the last day of the week, “You haven’t done anything with your students. Teaching in the real classroom is not lenient.” Student B created a solution which was to say “hello” to students on the weekend and tried it from the following Monday.

She only said “Because I was afraid of students, I couldn’t speak to them.” However, she didn’t consider why she was afraid of students. Somehow, she found an alternative method and tried it, saying “hello” to the students every morning. This act was, in her words, “the switch to become a teacher every morning.”

On another occasion, some students didn’t write any comment on her questionnaire sheet after her lesson. Up to then, she would have kept herself away from such students. However, she changed herself and came to consider how she opened up such students. She wrote a comment on the sheet that “I wanted to be a good teacher, so please write anything I should correct in my lessons” and gave it back to them.

It looked like she had overcome her difficulty in her mandatory teaching practice. However, she should have found the reasons she was afraid of students, because this activity could have taught her weak points as a teaching professional. Skipping the phase of the awareness of essential aspects, and directly reaching the phase of creating an alternative method, she missed the opportunity.

In summary, both students commonly failed to follow every stage of reflective practice as Korthagen suggests. As a result of this failure, they had missed their opportunity to increase their teaching skills more, although they did show some progress.

5. CURRENT FINDINGS

Through their reflective practice in the seminar for future teachers and the mandatory teaching practice, neither student teacher mentioned the category 3 reflective practice (critical reflection) and didn't go through every phase in the spiral process of reflective practice. Therefore, their reflective practices were too shallow. It appears that the student teachers didn't understand why reflective practice was crucial and therefore, many of their reflective practices were not spontaneous.

First, they hadn't learned how to think about teaching. Student A, for example, mentioned his perception of teaching was "To teach subject matter knowledge and foster logical thinking ability". I asked him the reasons why, and he replied, "Because, they have to take exams," "they are living as Japanese," and "without knowing this world we can't live on." He admitted that he hadn't considered his own perception of teaching at all. Student B also failed to mention her perception of teaching, which should include giving students the ability to tackle reality.

Since they hadn't thought of their own perception of teaching, they put too much focus on teaching methods practiced by their cooperating teachers in the classroom. Both students were interested in interactive teaching and they believed it might develop students' interest in the subject. Student A often used interactive methods in his lessons. However, he couldn't say why developing students' interest is crucial. They didn't make a creative connection between

their thinking of teaching and their teaching pedagogy.

Additionally, the two student teachers didn't know how to prepare for the class. As their own method of study was simply cramming, all the preparation for their lessons entailed memorizing facts from textbooks, while checking some websites and putting them in order for the lesson. Thus, their lessons were not fully developed. For example, they couldn't clearly show the theme of every lesson, which is the most important point when organizing lessons. Student B, when she taught the territories of Japan in geography class, didn't refer to territorial disputes because, according to her, it was difficult for her to teach students about it plainly and the textbook used in the junior high school didn't mention it. Their lack of subject matter knowledge might be part of the reason why the reflective practice of their lessons was shallow. Last, as is often the case with student teachers, they are also under the strong influence of their early life experiences (Trotman, & Kerr, 2001, p.159). Student A believed that teaching was to give students subject matter knowledge. He often talked about a teacher who had taught him earth science in high school. The teacher had deep subject matter knowledge and through his lessons, student A became interested in earth science. His perception of teaching, i.e., to teach subject matter knowledge, is closely linked with this early experience. The perception of education developed by student B was to give students the ability to tackle the realities. She had hoped to be a teacher for about ten years, but she wasn't confident that she was going to be a teacher. Two main reasons for this were the extremely competitive environment for attaining a teaching position of social studies in secondary school level⁶ plus she felt difficulty even to speak to her students. Moreover, she had come to know that she herself lacked subject matter knowledge.

⁶ For example, the hurdle of an acceptance ratio was 1 in 20.8 for junior high school social studies teacher and 1 in 83.8 for high school social studies teacher of Hokkaido public schools in 2008.[The Board of Education of Hokkaido Public Schools web site: access date August 1st 2008]

6. CONCLUSION

Although the two student teachers showed their professional growth as novice teachers, it was difficult for them to establish sufficient reflective practices. The lack of perception of teaching, the lack of skills to study, the strong influence of their early experiences are all linked with the lack of connection between past and present experiences, subject matter knowledge and educational foundations taught in college classrooms. In other words, they looked at themselves, without transforming their existing beliefs and perspectives. Their early experiences are, of course, important foundations of their professional career. But this is just the starting point. Reflective practice, as Admiraal and Wubbel (2005), claim “initially needs a clear focus that is later broadened to capture a new theme which in turn initially has a clear focus, but is later broadened into an endless succession of focusing on a critical issue of classroom life only to widen out to include other complexities of classroom and their contexts.” (p.323)

Although I used the frameworks of reflective practices developed by Pultorak and Korthagen as leads to assess the two student teachers’ reflective practices, it is possible to undervalue or overlook their spontaneous reflective practice. Such attitudes of teacher educators might undermine the autonomy of novice teachers and result in damaging their sense of being a future professional. Important questions emerge from this study. How should teacher educators be when providing guidance of reflective practice for novice teachers? Relevant to this question, how can guidance from teacher educators improve the ability of student teachers to reflect their practices and teaching performance? These questions should be answered as many studies suggest that facilitation of teacher reflectivity is vital.

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