Building a Critical Perspective

Reflective practices have been on the forefront of my thoughts lately. As I continue to think more about the challenges I face as an instructor, I keep coming back to the same strategy as a possible solution. Reflective practices seem to hold an avenue for allowing students to examine course content through a process that promotes an awareness of assumptions, recognition of strengths, but most importantly, supports the development of a critical perspective. Many times I found myself leaving class wondering if my students really took away an understanding and a way of thinking that will allow them to retain the information covered and use it in their professional roles. At this point however, I am not convinced this is always happening. Students many times seem to take what I say, what they read, and what they have experienced for face value, rather then really considering what they have learned, why we spent time focusing on the topic, and how this information will benefit them in the future. Including reflection based activities into my course was one way I thought I could support students’ process of critical thinking more consistently; at times this was not always the case. Perhaps there is another way to support such a perspective in my students beyond reflection, and I am not unwilling to look at that possibility, however reflective practices holds the potential to support students’ ability to be effective educators and leaders in the future. Reflective practices allows students to think more critically about what they are learning in their pre-service programs, but also allows a process for developing a critical perspective about what they are seeing and achieving in their practice.

Beginning the Journey of Understanding
An interest in the topic of reflection arose from the experiences I was having with students while facilitating a practicum seminar. On several occasions, I noticed during our discussions, students were not examining their experiences in-depth. Most of what they shared and were able to discuss entailed simple descriptions of what they were observing or doing in the classrooms. Their discussion would reveal positive aspects of their experiences, rarely outlined what was unsuccessful, and more importantly, did not highlight what they would do differently. A true analysis of their experiences was not taking place. For some of my students, I found that they did not have a clear understanding of how to even approach an analytical way of thinking. Considering what I needed to support students’ development of a critical thinking process, I discovered strategies for supporting reflective practitioners.

For the rest of the practicum seminar, I provided students with a framework for reflection to use while engaging in their choice of either online discussions, journaling, or peer supported reflections. While they completed these activities, I noticed a clear growth in their thought process, entailing a deeper analysis of their experiences. In the end, however, I was still left with several questions as to why the growth in critical thinking was taking. First, I was not convinced that the framework was supporting the change I was observing. Now, I understand that the framework did not outline several essential components of a critical thinking process. Until I developed a better understanding of the components, I believe that I am not going to be able to support my students’ development of reflective practices that support critical thinking. In developing an understanding, I reflected on several questions to gather my thoughts and identify the gaps in my consideration of the topic.
How are reflection, critical thinking, and a critical perspective linked?

In my first months of teaching in a higher education setting, and to some extent what I experienced as a student, the term reflection was continuously used and hardly ever defined. As a student, I found myself having to complete course requirements and assignments that required me to be “reflective”. At the time, I never questioned what the term meant or what I was supposed to do to achieve a reflective state. No one had ever shared with me what it meant to be reflective, what the process entailed, or even the purpose of reflection. The confusion I felt is not uncommon from most students. In a study conducted by Pedro (2005), students revealed that after a year of engagement in reflection activities, many participants were unable to define the meaning of the process. As an instructor, I found that in my first semester of teaching, I was only perpetuating the cycle of uncertainty. Requiring my students to complete a reflection within each of their assignments, I had done so without providing guidance beyond a simple definition of what the process required.

Confusion and a lack of understanding of reflection and critical thinking is understandable when you consider the literature on the topic. Investigating the topic further revealed the continued use of terms such as reflective practices, critical reflection, and critical thinking; many times interchangeable. Personally, I find difficulty considering the meaning of reflection synonymous with critical thinking. The key to moving reflection into a critical thinking process, I believe, lies in the ability of one to derive new meaning from an analysis of experience; therefore, prompting the development of a critical perspective. A critical perspective is an outcome of an ongoing
process of critical reflection; a process that is apart of one’s continued, conscious thinking.

*What are the components of critical thinking that lead to a critical perspective?*

Not having a clear and agreed upon definition of reflection and critical thinking presents many challenges when you consider how you might teach or even guide students towards a critical perspective. My interest in the topic lies in the use of reflective practices to support a link between content covered in higher education course and application in the field. Much of the literature available on reflective practices focuses on what David Schon (1983) termed reflection in action and reflection on action. Schon’s theory outlines the use of reflection to support professionals’ ability to examine their practice, rather than considering the use of a reflective process to gain a critical perspective on what they have learned, what one was told, or what has been read.

Schon (1987) identified that for reflection to lead to critical thinking individuals need to a) identify a focus, b) engage in problem solving, and c) identify an effective method to support the problem solving process. Several contributors to the topic have gone beyond Schon’s original ideas and identified that reflection must also lead to analysis of personal beliefs and assumptions (Martin, 2005), conscious determination of the impact of one’s experiences (Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993), guided by personal motivation (Ashton & Webb, 1986), take into consideration the perspective of others (Resnick & Klopfer, 1989), and supported by a respondent schema to indicate a need for reflection (Elmer, 2003) to support a critical thinking process. In addition Clegg, Tan, and Saeidi (2002), also identified the need to distinguish the difference between acting on experience and the actual engagement of reflection.
My plan this semester, was to better understand the above mentioned components through examinations my students’ reflective journaling process. I assumed as they engaged in reflection and critical thinking tasks, I would develop a better understanding of how these components supported their process. The components, however, were never clearly revealed. Students had very different perspectives and methods for approaching these tasks and I have had a difficult time identifying a clear process from reflection to reflection; let alone the individual components used.

Components of reflection became apparent as I began to engage in critical thinking tasks. While I do find myself on a daily basis engaging in reflective thought, I had not previously put my reflections and critical thinking into writing. Organizing my critical thinking process in this format allowed me to better analysis and consider the components of my reflection. What has been revealed has been very telling of the challenges I have encountered in capturing my students’ reflective process on paper. The following elements outline my developing understanding of the critical thinking process:

- A reflective process is ongoing, therefore following a student’s entire cycle may prove difficult
- When I switch topics in my reflections, I began a new process and many times never revisit previous ideas to work through the critical thinking process further. If I am having my students complete a reflective journal each night of class on a new topic, how is this benefiting their learning? How can I effectively support a more in-depth critical thinking cycle?
- Essential Components of the Process
Main focus (when there are too many ideas presented in one critical reflection, the process does not allow a in-depth analysis)

Personal perspective must be identified

Biases and assumptions must be considered

Descriptions are important for setting the focus of the reflection and useful when revisiting previous entries

Action steps to support a continued cycle

- Possible Process: Topic Identified-----Describe the Topic----Analysis of Topic----Transformation of New Understanding

- A process of critical thinking can be defined, but may not always measurable

Can reflection be taught?

While once skeptical, I have begun to see a possibility of teaching a process of reflection to lead to critical thinking. I do, however, still hold reservations about being able to foster this process for everyone student. Especially since a key element of meaningful and effective reflection is linked to how motivated one is to engage in the process (Brookfield, 1995). Instructors can only do such much to motivate students. Motivation is directly linked to a cognitive process that is promoted by emotional ties to a situation, topic, or experience (Zull, 2002). As we move towards better defining a process of reflection, teaching the process may be possible and measurement of growth feasible. In the end, however, for students to take the initiative to continue the process and move towards a critical perspective is dependent on how beneficial they see reflection.
Next Steps and Future Directions

While I have a better handle on the components of critical reflection, I still am unclear if there is a measurable way to identify students’ critical thinking process. Continuing the development of my understanding will entail moving my learning process to the next level and researching the tools I have began to create to understand if the framework I have identified will support a process of reflection that guides the development of a critical perspective. After introducing students to the critical thinking framework, I will consider to what extent can I identify the components outlined in my framework in the my students’ process and consider if a change in their reflection structure from a basic description to a critical analysis of understanding is measurable.
References


