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Reflective Practice : Utilizing Surveys in Professional Development

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Abstract

Effective teachers should reflect on their own classroom practices in order to achieve keener insight into the quality of education they provide. There exist a variety of tools to assist in this reflective endeavor. This paper illustrates how survey instruments administered to students throughout the academic year can aid the in-service practitioner in developing, modifying or improving learning goals and classroom activities. By allowing students a prominent voice in this process, educators gain a more holistic perspective on the learning environment. The ideas discussed in this paper contribute to the ongoing examination of reflective practice in teacher development and the tools to accomplish this analysis.

Keywords: student evaluation of teaching, reflective practice, experiential learning, teaching effectiveness, surveys

Introduction

In 2012, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) mandated that "autonomous quality assurance activities," such as faculty development opportunities, are necessary on university campuses across Japan "to ensure the quality of higher education." At one Kansai-based university, for example, this lead to the publication of a faculty development newsletter which highlights effective teaching strategies by professors; strengthening of "open class" opportunities whereby instructors observe and comment on a colleague's class; and the creation of an annual internal research forum where instructors can present and receive feedback on their research. Suzuki (2013) claims the first efforts at faculty development on university campuses to come out of earlier MEXT mandates were student evaluation of teaching (SET) forms. He reports their rapid implementation after those

MEXT suggestions, demonstrating how they increased from 38 universities throughout Japan in 1992, to 138 in 1994. These now ubiquitous SETs differ somewhat among institutions, but predominantly ask students to comment on the efforts of their instructors, the difficulty of the coursework, and the degree to which classes and teachers have contributed to their learning objectives.

While Brookfield (2017) concurs that student evaluations are a valid source of pedagogic information, he highlights a shortcoming: teachers are informed of their results after the class ends. This prevents teachers from making adaptations to the population of students who provided the insights (p. 98). Spooren, Brockx, and Mortelmans' (2013) extensive research of the literature reveals that although SETs provide useful information to faculty and administration, there remains doubt about the usefulness and validity of both the items and SETs themselves. Consequently, other instruments should be used to provide additional insight into practice. Questioning students throughout the semester can complement SETs and allow an instructor to more carefully hone in on areas of improvement. The purpose of this paper is to explicate how surveys, used at different times during the semester, can yield additional awareness into a teacher's instruction and illustrate how the student's voice is a necessary element of reflective teaching.

Reflective Teaching

The philosophical field of epistemology has long been interested in the concept of knowledge. It could thus be said that ancient empiricists introduced the idea that knowledge is experience based. Academics in the field of education also often deliberate over the most efficacious ways to acquire knowledge. Where theory has long been advocated to inform practice, the idea that experience can be used in similarly edifying ways continues to gain traction. Kolb and Fry (1975) offered a theory of experiential learning conceptualized of four steps. In the first step, learners have a concrete experience implemented by the instructor. The second step focuses on observation and reflection. In the third and fourth steps, resulting data are then "analyzed and the conclusions of the analysis are fed back to the actors in the experience for their use in the modification of their behavior and choice of new experiences" (pp. 33-34). It is not only students, however, who gain from personal reflection on their education. Instructors are increasingly engaging in activities, such as action research, which asks them to be proactive in the learning processes occurring in their own classrooms, to

analyze collected data, and to react to their findings.

Schön (1983) saw this as "thinking on your feet," or what he refers to as reflection-in-action. His pivotal work, *The Reflective Practioner*, helped illuminate the importance of reflection on one's pedagogy. His book proposed a reevaluation of the process by which professional knowledge is achieved. Augmenting the earlier writings of John Dewey (1933), Schön called into question the (over) reliance of research findings to inform methodology. He claimed that professionals must critically reflect on their practice and proposed the idea of reflection-on-practice by which an individual carefully considers events and situations in order to make improvements for the future. In addition to this, Schön recognized a need to "reframe" one's practice in order to better understand it. He proclaimed, "The practitioners' moves also produce unintended changes which give the situation new meanings. The situation talks back, the practitioner listens, and as he appreciates what he hears, he reframes the situation once again" (Schön, 1983, p. 131-132).

Building on earlier constructs, Farrell (2015) proffered a five-stage framework of reflective practice. The different levels include: philosophy, or an examining of the "teacher-as-person" and the various experiences and value systems which define and influence the choices a teacher makes; principles, which relate to suppositions and beliefs of teaching and learning; theory, or considerations of the types of lessons a teacher wishes to have and the best way to deliver them; practice, which are a contemplation of the explicit behaviors of teachers and what actually occurs in the classroom; and beyond practice, a more critical approach that ponders the sociocultural and moral aspects of teaching. This paper focuses on the principles, theory, and practice levels of this framework although, as Farrell states, "all stages must be considered as a whole to give us a holistic reflective practice experience" (p. 22-23).

Finally, Mann and Walsh (2017) argue that reflective practice needs to be discursive and informed by data in order for professional development to be meaningful. They envision this dialogue to occur primarily between trainers and other professionals. Communication with students, however, should additionally be considered fundamental to this process. Brookfield (2017, p. 99) asserts, "…unless you have information about how students are learning and which activities are helping them learn, you can't make good choices about what you do next in class" and declares that the "students' eyes" contribute to a more student-centered class. Seldin (1993, p. 40, as cited in Spooren et al., 2013) agrees: "… students are considered important stakeholders in the process of gathering insight into the quality of teaching in a

course, as "the opinions of those who eat the dinner should be considered if we want to know how it tastes" (p. 598). Surveys are an ideal instrument to achieve these goals in reflective practice.

Surveys

Utilizing surveys in class to collect students' impressions on learning provides important feedback on the nature of lessons. More importantly, it can uncover deep insights on the various elements that influence and affect the learning environment. It is fairly recent that reflective learning has shifted its focus to the teacher and appeared in teacher training methods for ways to improve practice (see, for example, Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Stanley 1998, 1999; Farrell 2015, 2018). Mann and Walsh (2017) call for "a collaborative process entailing interaction, discussion, and debate with another professional" (p. 189). Where classroom observations by peers are one method to deliver this feedback, one must understand the limitations of hosting a colleague in the class to observe and comment on a process that, in many cases, is taking place over a week, a month, or even an entire semester. As Richards and Lockhart (1996) remark, "Teaching is a complex, multidimensional activity. The teacher who has a more extensive knowledge and deeper awareness about the different components and dimensions of teaching is better prepared to make appropriate judgments and decisions in teaching" (p. 3). Employing surveys at different times of the semester to collect students' opinions promotes learning in the class.

　　Angelo and Cross (1993) endorse Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) as a way to measure the effectiveness of the teacher's pedagogy through examining student learning. They contend, "Classroom Assessment is an approach designed to help teachers find out what students are learning in the classroom and how well they are learning it. This procedure is learner-centered, teacher-directed, mutually beneficial, formative, context-specific, ongoing, and firmly rooted in good practice" (p. 4). Their technique of Classroom Assessment is based on these seven assumptions:

1. By improving one's teaching, students can learn more.
2. Comprehensive feedback illuminates the degree to which explicit goals and objectives are being met.
3. Reporting survey results to students in a timely fashion empowers students to learn more efficiently.
4. The best form of assessment to improve teaching and learning is instigated by the teacher, when

the teacher identifies and questions problems or issues she has noticed.

5. CATs can offer teachers a challenge to critically evaluate their teaching.

6. Dedicated teachers in any discipline can employ these techniques.

7. Pooling resources of teachers, colleagues and students in the assessment process results in greater student learning and teacher fulfillment (pp. 7-11).

Assessments in this manner allow teachers to improve the activities and methodologies for lessons, and better analyze their effectiveness. In addition to collecting student responses, it is essential for teachers to share their findings with the class. Chen and Hoshower (2003) note that students want their teachers to improve their teaching and the course. They suggest in motivating students to prudently complete a survey, students must learn the value of assessment efforts. Students need to see the concrete results and know how their feedback will be used. This can be accomplished through review of written result summaries either distributed to students, or displayed during class lectures (see appendix A).

Furthermore, conducting classroom assessments allows for pragmatic information to be convened effectively. Richards and Lockhart (1996) point out, these instruments "are useful ways of gathering information about affective dimensions of teaching and learning such as beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and preferences, and enable a teacher to collect a large amount of information relatively quickly" (p. 10). Interpreting survey data reveals rich and valuable feedback to answer questions about student satisfaction and learning outcomes. Davis (2010) proposes a nine-step circular diagram system to collect data, evaluate it and improve language programs. Table 1 illustrates an adaptation of these program steps applied to classroom evaluation targets.

TABLE 1

STEPS IN SURVEY CREATION: A COMPARISON OF DAVIS' PROGRAM APPROACH TO AN ADAPTED CLASSROOM VERSION

Davis' Program Evaluation	Class Evaluation
1. identify the program or activities	1. individual classes or activities
2. identify stake-holders & primary intended users	2. individual teachers and their students
3. identify evaluation purposes & uses	3. improvement to class activities/tasks

4. ask evaluation questions

5. choose data collection methods

6. collect, analyze, interpret data

7. report findings

8. use findings

9. plan for the next evaluation

4. develop different surveys

5. use paper-based or on-line survey tools [1]

6. collect emic data and study the results

7. review survey results in class

8. based on student responses make classroom changes

9. survey students twice per semester or as fit for task enhancement

Adopting these steps for classroom practice provides educators with a clear process for envisioning how to make immediate and relevant changes for the benefit of their current students. These same steps can be followed on multiple occasions for evaluation purposes and improvements resulting in more satisfied students and teachers. Yet, survey design and content must be carefully devised to capture honest student feedback.

Survey Construction

Brown (2001) claims the initial step in creating a survey is to determine what is to be gleaned from it. In other words, prior to tackling the design of the questionnaire, practitioners must first ascertain what they hope to discover, as well as how to best administer the assessment, how much time it will take students to answer the questions, and whether the survey will be given in class, for a higher response rate, or outside of class. It is also necessary to decide whether the students have high enough language ability to answer questions in their second or even third language, or if it is best to use their L1. Likewise, professors must account for time necessary to spend sifting through comments and tallying survey results. Mann and Walsh (2017) note that teacher reflection is not as widespread as possible since it is often seen by many professionals as an additional duty amongst the multitude they already have. Many teachers already feel overburdened by teaching and administrative duties. Consequently, they declare reflective practice "needs to be integrated in teachers' professional practice in such a way that it does not feel like a burden or an additional chore" (pp. 100-101). With this in mind, there are several points to consider before undertaking survey development.

Survey questions need to be answerable, relevant and clear, and several types and formats exist to design appropriate questionnaires. Open-ended questions include short-answer items such as "Is there anything else you want to tell me?" and fill-in questions such as "What reading activities in this class do you like best?" These kinds of questions are easily constructed, will elicit a variety of responses, and are chosen for "their ability to capture answers unanticipated by questionnaire designers" (Martin, 2006, p. 6). Rich feedback is collected with such inquiries, but can be time consuming to consolidate and typically requires axial coding to draw applicable conclusions. A timesaving alternative to coding would simply be to share the salient comments with the class to help them better understand the perspectives of their peers (see appendix A). Dörnyei (2010) cautions against using open-ended questions in research because of the time it takes for respondents to answer them and the difficulty of coding responses, but he admits they "can yield graphic examples, illustrative quotes, and can also lead us to identify issues previously unanticipated" (p. 36). He also recommends these inquiry types be placed at the end of an instrument because respondents tend to become fatigued from completing the survey and their focus can be distracted away from other informative questions.

The most recurrent category of survey items are closed-response questions. Although these come in a variety of forms, they customarily provide pre-set answers to be selected. Among their benefits, Brown (2001) elucidates how they are easily and quickly answered making them less likely to be skipped. They yield straightforward and objective responses, which are simple to analyze and interpret.

These researchers utilize and recommend four types of closed questions: alternative answer questions, ranking questions, checklist questions, and Likert scales. Alternative answer questions such as "Did you read short easy English novels in high school?" in which the student circles YES or NO can offer an instructor information about the students' prior experiences and explain different levels of language or motivation. Ranking questions (see example below), can assist in determining which activities students find more beneficial than others. Furnished with this information, teachers can decide whether they want to bolster the weaker polled activities, or choose another task to accomplish similar objectives.

Directions: Rate the following in order with 4 being most useful and 1 being least useful.

How useful are these activities for improving your English skills?

___ speed reading

___ explicit grammar practice

___ free talking

___ book reports

Checklist questions also fall into the category of closed response and yield similar insights as ranked items. A sample question used to discern the effectiveness of each reading comprehension activity can be asked as follows:

Directions: For the following questions, check all that apply:

Which items helped you understand the book?

___ peer discussions

___ watching the movie

___ teacher's lectures

___ reading guides

___ vocabulary discussions

___ identifying literary elements

After a teacher tallies the results of this question type, a more poignant use of classroom activities and timelines is ascertained. When presenting these results to students, the teacher can also inquire more deeply about why some items were superior to others.

Finally, another utilitarian item type is a Likert-scale question. These can be employed to garner information about numerous lesson aspects and are widely used because "they are simple, versatile, and reliable" (Dörnyei, 2010, p. 27). Table 2 shows a representative four-point sample, though Likert scales from two- to seven- response options are regularly used. The question "How helpful are the following classroom activities?" gives the students a choice of four ratings. Brown (2001) explains, "… given a neutral non-opinion option (students) will tend to take that option." He suggests students are forced to choose a definite opinion

if an even number of response options are given (p. 41). Moreover, Dörnyei urges caution against including too many scale selections. Students may be unable to clearly distinguish level differences (2010, p. 28).

In constructing surveys for class purposes, there are many choices, styles and formats to choose from. A useful option is to mix different question types, delivering a more concise questionnaire and simultaneously receiving general information and associated follow-up details (Brown, 2001, p. 43). Surveys offer teaching professionals power to create and design their own feedback systems and gather illuminating remarks from students.

Discussion

Recently collected data reveals the benefits and implications of survey instruments used during class. A limited sample of 75 first year students in two different English classes was surveyed after completing a literature discussion two weeks apart. The first group was surveyed twice; the second group was surveyed once. The surveys were administered in October, 2018, and the results were shared with the students the following week. The survey was prepared by the instructor and administered during class time. There were two types of questions on the survey: open-ended questions to elicit a wide range of replies from the students, and ranking questions to see how students self-rated their preparation and participation during the activity.

Highlighted here are some of the questions and results of the survey. The teacher asked the students if they contributed positively to the group discussion that day. As the researcher expected, a few students identified speaking in their L1 as a weak point of their meeting. One student wrote "I think we keep conversation, but sometimes we said Japanese a lot," and a second student said "I use Japanese a little, so I want to use English only next time." This confirmed the instructor's observation of some groups using their L1 for group discussion. The teacher can address the use of Japanese on the next literature discussion day by reminding students that the next 45 minutes of group work should take place in English.

An alternative would be to offer the students tools to advocate for the group. If the group members speak too much in their L1, the leader can remind them by saying "let's speak English" or "English please." Another student answered the same question and stated that "sometimes I can't say in English because I don't know how native speak." This instructor could address this issue immediately and tell the class that if they are unsure

how to say something in English, they should signal the teacher who can help the students formulate their ideas in English. In line with Chen and Hoshower's findings (2003), the immediacy of sharing such conclusions allows students to see the value of offering feedback.

Another result of the survey indicated that the group discussion was too long for some students. Per the teacher's instructions, each group member presented her homework assignment to the group for five minutes. This included: discussing the product, making connections to the story's theme, asking and answering comprehension questions based on the reading, and checking the grammar of the product before submitting it for a grade. Although this seemed like a lot to accomplish in a mere five minutes, a few students commented that the five-minute rule was excessive. One student reported "sometimes we discuss enough time, we felt 5 minutes presentation is long" and another said "I try to take many time to present my presentation." As a solution, the teacher can work with groups in such situations to help them complete their tasks thoroughly or additional comprehension questions may be given for those groups who need more scaffolding.

The survey results also indicated that students realized their shortcomings and expressed motivation to improve participation in the next session. One student replied, "I'll do more active next discussion" and another learner said, "I'll try to speak English more!!" The teacher identified that some students spoke more on behalf of the group and others did not contribute enough. These types of questions prompted students to consider their individual accountability to group work.

Conclusion

Surveying students offers a better understanding of classroom dynamics, learning and pragmatics. As Brookefield (2015) explains, "When we start to see our classrooms and our teaching through the students' eyes we become aware of the complex and sometimes contradictory perceptions students have of the same event" (p. 97). This allows teachers to conceptualize the diversity of learner perspectives and tailor lesson plans and teaching methods accordingly. Ultimately, well-constructed surveys improve one's efficacy.

Farrell (2018), in his thorough analysis of research on reflective practice in TESOL, elaborates on numerous instruments to aid a professional in this pursuit. Among them, he lists: discussion, which takes place in a teacher development or study group; writing, done primarily through journals or diaries by pre-service and in-service educators; classroom

observations; action research; and narrative studies. It is our hope that in future research associated with reflexive practice, surveys, which accent the student's voice, would be showcased as both a viable and valuable source of reflection.

Notes

1) These researchers primarily used Survey Monkey, which offers 10 free questions, multiple question types, filters for the surveys, and a variety of graphs and charts in which to easily interpret and share the data. It is beyond the scope of this paper to review the many free and paid survey services, but a list of some may be found at https://www.pcmag.com/article2/0,2817,2494737,00.asp

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Appendix A

Post-survey comments shared with the class.

Things students have learned	I usually like to work alone, but working with others and sharing ideas help me have broader mind and knowledge. Thinking and reading in English without dictionary. It's very useful. To discuss and say my opinions is very important. I learned some phrases when we discuss. I learned it's important to say my own idea in English. I learned that we don't need to read everything when we read. We shouldn't be afraid of making mistake when we talk.
Complaints	Some students don't say anything. I am still nervous to say during class. Sometimes I can't understand what you are saying. I would like to improve my writing skills more. Quantity of homework is not enough for me.
Questions	Do we have a test at the end of this semester? Do we have a final exam? What is it like? When I will be absent, what should I do?
General comments	I like this class because it's very fun for me. I love your stories!

TABLE 2

FOUR POINT LIKERT QUESTION

How helpful are the following classroom activities?	Not helpful	A little helpful	Helpful	Very helpful
A. Timed Reading	0	1	2	3
B. Finish the paragraph	0	1	2	3
C. Free talking	0	1	2	3
D. Grammar practice	0	1	2	3

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