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Take a closer look

Reflection gives educators the chance to tap into what they've learned

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

Watch yourself the next time you rush past a full-length mirror. What do you see? Perhaps you get a quick impression of the color of your clothes or your hair and whether you're carrying something in your arms.

Now, stand close to the mirror. What do you see? What is reflected back to you is a fairly clear image of yourself. You can see exactly which outfit you've chosen to wear that day, whether hairs are out of place, and whether that bundle in your arms is a load of books or a small child.

Step forward. Look again. Do you see yourself more clearly? Can you see the thread that is dangling from the end of your sleeve or the titles of some of those books in your arms?

Such is the process and the value of reflection: the closer you look, the more you can learn about yourself.

In the rush-rush of everyday life, most educators are like the person who moves too quickly past the mirror. There is barely enough time to ascertain the large details of the image. But, with each effort to move in closer, the picture becomes more detailed.

At the heart of reflection is the belief that, given opportunities to carefully consider their work, educators possess the necessary knowledge to improve their practice. Reflection is the process through which educators tap into that knowledge.

"It's the ability to look back and make sense of what happened and what you learned. But it's

also the ability to look forward, to anticipate what's coming up and what you need to do to prepare for that," said Bill Sommers, executive director of teacher and instructional services for the Minneapolis Public Schools. Sommers is also one of the co-authors of *Reflective Practice to Improve Schools: An Action Guide for Educators* (Corwin Press, 2001).

Sommers and his co-authors say reflection requires:

- A deliberate pause, a purposeful slowing down to find time for a close look;
- A willingness to be open to other points of view;
- Consciously processing your thoughts;
- Examining beliefs, goals, and practices; and
- Gaining new insights and understanding.

To say that you have engaged in "reflective practice," however, requires the additional step of taking action with what you have learned through the process of reflection, say the authors.

Reflection is an element in all inquiry-focused professional learning, such as action research, examining student work, classroom observation and feedback, and lesson study. Without reflection, few of those activities would generate the intended learning.

Continued on Page 2

Reflection



Take a closer look

Continued from Page One

REFLECTION'S MANY FORMS

Reflection can take many forms and involve almost any number of people. Reflection can be personal, done in small groups, schoolwide, districtwide and even throughout the community that supports a school district. After the Sept. 11 events, for example, there seemed to be an almost spontaneous nationwide reflection about values and ideals.

PERSONAL REFLECTION

Even without the support of others, educators can engage in individual reflection.

Personal reflection can be as simple as clearing your head of distracting details and focusing on a single topic for a short period of time. Or it can be as formal as keeping a reflective journal. Such a journal can be kept in a traditional notebook or you can create a personal electronic journal. One of the values of the written journal is that educators can return to those reflections later to learn not only what they were thinking at the time but how they've changed over time.

Creating a time-out for reflection is essential, Sommers said. "To do this effectively, you have to literally schedule reflection into your daily schedule," he said.

Sommers said it is especially important that principals model this aspect of reflective behavior for their staffs. As difficult as this might be, Sommers said there are numerous ways that principals can find time for personal reflection. A principal can go into his or her office and turn off the lights for the time needed for private reflection. He recalled one principal who left the building each day to go to a nearby coffee shop and write in his journal. "He just got out of the fire for 15 minutes every day," Sommers said.

Educators who are embarking on personal reflection may need a set of prompts to get them going. The Structured Response tool on Page 3 provides one op-

tion for reflecting on a book or presentation. The Four-Way Reflection tool on Page 4 can be used by educators to think through their responses to a particular situation. The Action Research tool on Page 5 can be used to think about a school improvement issue.

SMALL GROUP REFLECTION

Because educators spend a great deal of time in meetings, Sommers and his co-authors recommend that groups spend time reflecting on the meeting process itself. Setting group norms, for example, is one way groups can reflect upon the expectations that participants have about meeting together.

In *Reflective Practice*, the authors recommend numerous reflective questions intended to improve the quality of meeting time.

- What is this purpose of this group? What is the focus for learning? What are the desired outcomes? Which students are likely to benefit from the learning that occurs within this group?
- How structured will the group process need to be to address the given purpose? Is there a specific time frame that must be honored? What kind of design will best promote participation, learning, and accomplishment?
- Do group members know one another well? If not, how can we explicitly focus on developing relationships and trust?
- What experience do members have with reflection and learning? How intentional do we need to be about developing individual and group capacities for reflecting, learning, and working together?
- How will we determine the effectiveness of the group process? What content and process reflection strategies might we use?

WHOLE SCHOOL REFLECTION

Principals are the key to ensuring that an entire staff regularly engages in reflection.

"I know this may sound corny and

maybe it's kind of overused, but in this case, it's really true: You have to be the change that you want to see. If principals want their staffs to become more reflective, then principals have to become more reflective first," said Sommers, who was a middle and high school principal before moving to district administration.

Besides attending to their own personal reflection, Sommers said principals can model reflective behavior in daily exchanges with teachers. "Principals are in motion in a school. But they can still model this in the drive-by conversations that they have with teachers," Sommers said. That means thinking carefully about the questions they pose and ensuring that they take time to listen carefully to the responses.

Principals also can set aside time during staff meetings to teach teachers how to reflect alone, in pairs, with mentors, and in small groups (such as grade-level or teachers who teach similar subjects). This staff development time could include many lessons, such as how to maintain a reflective journal, how to write a case study, how to assemble a portfolio about their practice, how to collect and reflect upon data, or how to design an action research project.

Principals also can buy bound journals for each teacher as a concrete expression of their interest in having teachers spend more time reflecting and writing about their practice.

Principals can begin staff meetings by posting a question that they want each teacher to address briefly in their journals. They can ask teachers to share those reflections aloud, either with a partner or the entire group.

For Sommers, reflection is the crucial element that's often missing in school change efforts. "The bottom line is we're not going to get better at our craft if we don't figure out some way to spend time in reflection. It has the potential to change schools. I know it can because I've seen it happen," Sommers said.

Structured Response

Use these questions to guide your personal reflection after reading a book, viewing a videotape, or listening to a presentation. This is best used when you collect your responses in a bound journal that you can keep and refer to as needed.

Date:

Title:

Author/presenters:

Content

- What does this author/presenter say about content? About what I teach?
- What knowledge, skills, and processes in this focus area need to be included in the daily/yearly curriculum that I teach?

Instruction

- What does this author/presenter say about instruction? About how I teach?
- What recommendations does s/he make directly or can be inferred about the design of instruction or presentation of content?

Assessing

- What does this author say about assessing student learning?
- Are there suggestions about how to diagnose students' knowledge, skill, or transfer of knowledge/skill? What are those suggestions?

What changes do I want to make in my practice as a result of what I have learned from this author/presenter?

How do I need to modify the recommendations from the author/presenter in order to implement these ideas in my school?

Do I need additional information in order to make this decision? If so, what information do I need to obtain?

*Adapted from "The singular power of one goal: An interview with Emily Calhoun," by Dennis Sparks, **Journal of Staff Development**, Winter 1999.*

Four-Step Reflection Process

This tool can be used to guide reflection on action and reflection for action.

Think about a significant event, interaction, or lesson that occurred in your classroom or school—with students or adults—that you feel is worth further reflection. You might choose to examine a positive and encouraging experience, or you might choose a more unsettling and challenging experience.

Now consider the following series of questions to prompt your thinking about the experience. You may wish to write down your thoughts. You may even want to share your thoughts aloud with another person.

1	<p>What happened? (Description)</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ What did I do? What did others (such as students, adults) do? ■ What was my affect at the time? What was their affect? ■ What was going on around us? Where were we? When during the day did it occur? Was there anything unusual happening?
2	<p>Why? (Analysis, interpretation)</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Why do I think things happened in this way? ■ Why did I choose to act the way I did? What can I surmise about why the other person acted as she or he did? What was going on for each of us? ■ What was I thinking and feeling? Or was I thinking at the time? How might this have affected my choice of behavior? ■ How might the context have influenced the experience? Was there something about the activities? Something about the timing or location of events? ■ Are there other potential contributing factors? Something about what was said or done by others that triggered my response? Are there past experiences — mine or the school's — that may have contributed to the response? ■ What are my hunches about why things happened in the way they did?
3	<p>So what? (Overall meaning and application)</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Why did this seem like a significant event to reflect on? ■ What have I learned from this? How could I improve? ■ How might this change my future thinking, behaving, interactions? ■ What questions remain?
4	<p>Now what? (Implications for action)</p> <hr/> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Are there other people I should actively include in reflecting on this event? If so, who and what would we interact about? ■ Next time a situation like this presents itself, what do I want to remember to think about? How do I want to behave? ■ How could I set up conditions to increase the likelihood of productive interactions and learning?

Source: *Reflective practice to improve schools* by Jennifer York-Barr, William Sommers, Gail S. Ghore, and Jo Montie (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2001). See Page 7 for ordering information.

Action Research Reflection Tool

GUIDELINES FOR DEVELOPING A QUESTION

- A group of action researchers in Madison, Wis., generated this list of suggestions. A good action research question:
1. Hasn't already been answered.
 2. Get at explanations, reasons, relationships. "How does...?" "What happens when....?"
 3. Is not a yes-no question.
 4. Uses everyday language. Avoids jargon.
 5. Is concise. Doesn't include everything you're thinking.
 6. Is manageable and can be completed.
 7. Is do-able (in the context of your work).
 8. Is a question about which you feel commitment and passion. "Follow your bliss."
 9. Is close to your own practice.
 10. Has tension. Provides you with an opportunity to stretch.
 11. Provides a deeper understanding of the topic and is meaningful to you.
 12. Leads to other questions.

Source: Madison (Wis.) Metropolitan School District Action Research Group as it appears in *Action research facilitator's handbook* by Cathy Caro-Bruce (Oxford, Ohio: NSDC, 2000).

Directions

This exercise will aid participants in thinking about a question that will guide their research. Prepare enough copies of this page to distribute to each participant. Participants should privately respond to each open-ended question. The facilitator then leads a discussion about ideas generated through this exercise.

Time: 15 minutes for initial writing, up to an hour for sharing the responses.

I would like to improve:

I am perplexed by:

Some people are unhappy about:

I'm really curious about:

I want to learn more about:

An idea I would like to try in my class is:

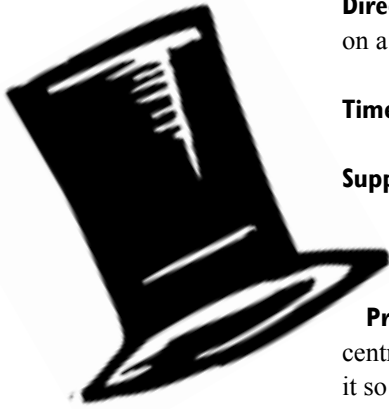
Something I think would really make a difference is:

Something I would like to do to change _____ is:

Right now, some areas I'm particularly interested in are:

Source: *Action research facilitator's handbook* by Cathy Caro-Bruce (Oxford, Ohio: NSDC, 2000). See Page 7 for ordering information.

Six Hats



Directions to the facilitator: This activity is especially helpful to groups that want to reflect on a future event or proposed change.

Time: 50 minutes.

Supplies: To dramatize the different role that each person has in this activity, consider buying inexpensive plastic hats in six different colors or creating simple home-made hats from colored construction paper.

Preparation: The facilitator should ensure that participants in this process understand the central question, preferably by writing the question on a large sheet of poster paper and posting it so that it is visible to all participants. Select a recorder who will take notes of ideas that are recommended by the various “hats.”

Directions

Adults do not

learn from

experience, they

learn from

processing

experience.

— *Judi Arin-Krupp*

1. Assign one color hat to six different individuals or sub-groups of the larger group. If the group is large enough that sub-groups are necessary, each sub-group should work independently and select one person to report their findings to the larger group. *Time: 5 minutes.*
2. Each color hat will focus on looking at the question through the lens of their particular hat. *Time: 10 minutes.*
 - **WHITE HAT = DATA.** What does research say? How effective has this activity been in and under what specific circumstances? How much would it cost to implement?
 - **YELLOW HAT = SUNSHINE.** What are the positive aspects of this idea? What good will come out of it? Who will benefit as a result of this?
 - **BLACK HAT = CAUTION.** What are the downsides to this idea? Who will be hurt as a result of implementing this?
 - **RED HAT = EMOTION.** How will people react to this idea? Who will be upset by this?
 - **GREEN HAT = GROWTH.** What will we learn as a result of this? What are some of the new ways of thinking that we might learn? How will we change and grow as a staff as a result of this?
 - **BLUE HAT = PROCESS.** What information will the staff, the board, and the community need in order to understand this? Who could put the process together? How will we introduce this idea to the staff and other stakeholders?
3. After each individual or group has had time to reflect upon the questions, each “hat” should report their findings to the entire group. The recorder should make notes of the findings. *Time: 30 minutes.*

*Adapted from **Reflective practice to improve schools** by Jennifer York-Barr, William Sommers, Gail S. Ghore, and Jo Montie (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2001). See Page 7 for ordering information. Note: This idea was originally proposed in **Lateral Thinking** by Edward deBono (New York: Harper & Row, 1970).*

Reflection

Resources to help you learn more about it

Action research facilitator's handbook by Cathy Caro-Bruce (Oxford, Ohio: NSDC, 2000). Includes numerous tools that can be used to guide an educator's reflection about their practice. Available through NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm or by calling the NSDC Business Office at (800) 727-7288. Item B87. Price: \$100, non-members; \$80, members.

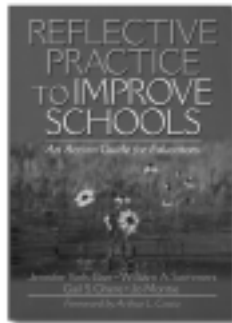
Becoming a reflective educator: How to build a culture of inquiry in the schools (2d edition) by Timothy Reagan, Charles Case, and John Brubacher (Thousand Oaks, Calif: Corwin Press, 2000). This seminal work on reflective practice has been updated to help teachers become creative and innovative "agents of inquiry" in their schools and classrooms. Available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, www.nsd.org/bookstore.htm or by calling the NSDC Business Office at (800) 727-7288. Item B112. Price: \$31.25, non-member; \$25, member.

Educating the reflective practitioner (2d edition) by Donald Schon (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987). Recommends using reflection as a way to handle complex and unpredictable problems of actual practice. Available at www.josseybass.com. Price: \$33.

Promoting reflective thinking in teachers: 44 action strategies by Germaine Taggart and Alfred Wilson (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 1998). Offers dozens of activities that staff developers can use to develop the reflective thinking capacity of educators. Available from Corwin Press at www.sagepub.com. Price: \$34.95.

"Putting their heads together" by Linda Schaak Distad, et al, *Journal of Staff Development* (Vol. 21, No. 4), Fall 2000. Describes the use of Reflective Practice Groups in a Minnesota school district. Available online at www.nsd.org/library/jsd/distad214.html.

"Reflective decision making: The cornerstone of school reform" by Georgea Langer and Amy Colton, *Journal of Staff Development* (Vol. 15, No. 1), Winter 1994. Describes framework for developing reflective thinking and describes a series of activities that can be used in staff development initiatives to promote reflection.



Reflective practice to improve schools: An action guide for educators by Jennifer York-Barr, William Sommers, Gail Ghere, and Jo Montie (Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Corwin Press, 2001). Addresses reflection at all levels of the school organization and provides practical tools for making the transition from theory to practice. Available from Corwin Press at www.sagepub.com. Price: \$29.95.

"Using reflective questions to promote collaborative dialogue" by Ginny Lee and Bruce Barnett, *Journal of Staff Development* (Vol. 13, No. 1), Winter 1994. Background article that can be used for jigsaw reading activity. Entire issue was devoted to reflective practice.

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What topics would you like to read more about?

This is the final *Tools For Schools* for the 2001-02 school year. We hope the topics we've chosen to write about this year have proven helpful to you in your work. As we plan for the next school year, we want to know which topics would be most helpful to you next year.

We're offering 25 of our ideas here. Please add your own topics if we haven't included your choices.



**Dr. Developer will
return in the fall.**

CHECK THE 3 TOPICS THAT YOU WOULD MOST LIKE TO READ ABOUT NEXT YEAR.

- | | |
|---|---|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Listening to student voices | <input type="checkbox"/> Developing effective peer coaching |
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