Capturing complexity: a typology of reflective practice for teacher education

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Abstract

Reflection has become an integral part of teacher education, yet its elusive boundaries make it difficult to define and teach. Examining the various facets of reflection with respect to teaching clarifies the concept, making it more accessible to pre-service teachers learning to reflect on their practice. This article explores those facets and provides a typology designed to guide teacher educators in teaching reflection to pre-service teachers. © 2001 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

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1. Introduction

Reflection, the current grand idée in teacher education (Webb, 1999) plays a central role in the preparation of many new teachers (Schön, 1983; Schön, 1987; Valli, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Its value has become generally accepted, for teaching preservice teachers to reflect is in many ways teaching them to “think like a teacher” (Kleinfeld, 1992; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). However, the concept is not clearly defined. If the concept itself seems difficult to characterize, it is even more difficult to teach. In our endeavor to understand and encourage reflective practice, we need to clarify our understanding of reflection.

Yet, this must be done without oversimplifying the concept, for in its complexity lies its worth.

The question of “how to teach reflection” has been the subject of quite a bit of educational research. However, even a brief review of the literature on teaching reflection reveals tremendous variation. Some have studied the content of reflection, or what teachers reflect upon (Brubacher, Case, & Reagan, 1994; Liston & Zeichner, 1987; Valli, 1997; Zeichner, 1994; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Others have studied the process of reflection, or how teachers think about their practice (Richert, 1991). Still others have studied programmatic features of reflection in the context of various programs (Ladson-Billings, 1999; Ross, 1990; Sparks-Langer, 1992). Although each of these strands of research has contributed meaningfully to an understanding of the place of reflection in teacher education, the focus of this
article is a more specific and concrete look at the pedagogy of reflection.

Among the varied approaches to thinking about and teaching reflection, many follow a common theme: the complexity of reflection makes it difficult to teach. A way of responding to this involves the development of typologies. In part of her review of the literature on reflection, McKenna (1999b) writes, “Current theory and research efforts in the development of teachers’ capacities as reflective practitioners attempt to further describe and delineate reflective practice through the development and application of typologies of reflection, outlining the many dimensions and settings which characterize its practice” (p. 9).

Despite the growing body of research on reflection, however, there is still a need to continue building a repertoire of practice for teaching reflection. The reasons for this are twofold. First, “reflection” is an ambiguous term, and its use does not always connotate the same understanding (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). By describing how reflection is understood and taught, a more consistent understanding of the concept may emerge. Second, the complexity of the concept can be difficult to articulate in a way that helps preservice teachers learn the skill. In one anecdote describing a floundering attempt to teach reflection, McKenna (1999a) describes an exchange between an instructor and a student in which the absence of specific language to talk about the skills of reflection resulted in a breakdown of communication and learning. In this case, the instructor kept insisting that the student reflect “deeper,” while the student struggled to figure out what “deeper” meant. There is an understandable tendency in the thinking about reflection to avoid being so specific in describing the process of reflection that it becomes constrained and systematized. In an effort to argue against a technical rationality view of practice, this caution is warranted; it is, however, difficult for novices to learn what their instructors fail to describe.

The goal of this paper is to describe a pedagogy of reflection that addresses some fundamental questions: How do we capture the complexity of reflection in a way that reflects what teachers do in their practice? How can we give students some tools for learning reflection without reducing it to a technique? These questions have guided our attempts to keep reflection authentic while describing it concretely enough to teach reflection to new teachers. The approach we describe is born out of the ongoing work of teacher educators and teaching assistants at the University of Washington’s Teacher Education Program (TEP), in which reflective practice is a central feature (Hess, 1999; McKenna, 1999a, b). First, we situate our conceptual understanding of the definition, process, and content of reflection in a body of theoretical work upon which we have relied heavily in teaching reflection. Second, we present a typology of reflection that serves as a tool in the pedagogy of reflection in the University of Washington TEP. Third, we discuss the use of the typology using an example from our own teaching practice. Although our typology is but one approach, we believe it holds promise for other teacher educators grappling as we are with efforts to teach reflection.

2. A review of reflection: definition, process, and content

2.1. Definition: what is reflection?

One of the most powerful tools in effective teaching is the presence of a well-defined image of what is to be learned. A valuable definition of reflection comes from John Dewey’s (1933) description in How We Think. Dewey originally defined reflection as the “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” (p. 9).

Dewey’s description of reflection has undergone much interpretation in its application to teaching, where the idea of reflection has been used to describe what goes on in the minds of teachers who foster effective learning. Valli (1997), in particular, captures the spirit of Dewey’s words in her description of reflective teachers, whom she says “can look back on events, make judgments about
them, and alter their teaching behaviors in light of craft, research, and ethical knowledge” (p. 70).

These definitions are useful for getting a sense of what reflection is, but as Zeichner and Liston (1996) point out, “if we stopped here, we would not have a very detailed understanding of reflection” (p. 12). One way of expanding and specifying notions of reflection is to think about the process embedded within it. We turn now to a discussion of the intellectual processes of reflection.

2.2. Process: how do teachers reflect?

For a better understanding of how teachers reflect, we need to look closely at the processes that comprise reflective thought. Overall, several common processes seem to take place, including describing the situation, surfacing and questioning initial understandings and assumptions, and persisting, with an attitude of open-mindedness, responsibility, and whole-heartedness (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983; Valli, 1997). In short, in a purposeful and deliberate way, one “thinks the problem out” (Dewey, 1933, p. 6).

Schön succinctly summarizes what he found in his studies of professionals’ reflection:

There is some puzzling or troubling or interesting phenomenon with which the individual is trying to deal. As he tries to make sense of it, he also reflects on the understandings which have been implicit in his action, understandings which he surfaces, criticizes, restructures, and embodies in further action (Schön, 1983, p. 50).

Schön refers to this cycle of “appreciation, action, and reappreciation” as a process central to the artistry of practice. In other words although the intellectual actions of reflection can be described and explained, such explanations do not capture the concept of reflection in its entirety. This point of view is presumed by Dewey, as reported by Zeichner and Liston (1996).

According to Dewey, reflection does not consist of a series of steps or procedures to be used by teachers. Rather, it is a holistic way of meeting and responding to problems, a way of being as a teacher. Reflective action is also a process that involves more than logical and rational problem-solving processes. Reflection involves intuition, emotion, and passion and is not something that can be neatly packaged as a set of techniques for teachers to use (p. 9).

However, a holistic view of reflection is difficult to teach. The tension between delineating specifics of reflective thought and preserving its complexity is one with which teacher educators constantly struggle.

Dewey’s (1933) theories about reflection and Schön’s (1983, 1987) detailed descriptions provide a relatively complete vision of what teachers do when they reflect in and on their practice. However, we also agree with Zeichner and Liston (1996) that “reflective teaching entails a recognition, examination, and rumination over the implications of one’s beliefs, experiences, attitudes, knowledge, and values as well as the opportunities and constraints provided by the social conditions in which the teacher works” (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 20). This addition reflects our belief that traditional ways of thinking about practice can be enhanced and strengthened. With their assertion that reflection should take into consideration the social, moral, and political aspects of teaching, Zeichner and Liston expand from what teachers do to what they might (and possibly, should) do when they reflect. With this in mind, we turn now to the content of reflection.

2.3. Content: what do teachers reflect on?

On impulse, the question, “What do teachers reflect on?” can be answered. Indeed, the potential matters for reflection are limitless. Valli (1997) lists some of the many candidates for content upon which teachers might reflect, including student learning, instructional processes, and subject matter, to list a few (p. 70). Such lists, rightfully, encompass important matters of teaching. However, there is value in thinking even more critically about where teachers do focus their attention and where they might.

Zeichner and Liston (1996) have described five “traditions” of reflection that might be seen as
paradigms that guide what teachers think about as they reflect: an academic tradition, a social efficiency tradition, a developmental tradition, a social reconstructionist tradition, and a generic tradition. Essentially, these traditions represent different goals for schooling. By categorizing the traditions as they have, Zeichner and Liston provide a way for teachers to recognize and possibly expand the lenses they bring to teaching. In fact, they quite directly suggest that teachers should reflect not only on how to solve a problem, but also on the frames they have brought to bear on it. In their words, “If a teacher never questions the goals and the values that guide his or her work, the context in which he or she teaches, or never examines his or her assumptions, then it is our belief that this individual is not engaged in reflective teaching” (p. 1).

Regardless of the frame of reference teachers bring to matters for reflection, Zeichner and Liston (1996) have other suggestions for what teachers should reflect upon. They suggest that reflective teachers move beyond simple questions about whether or not their practice is working to understanding how it is working and for whom. They also advocate for teachers to critically examine the inherent values in their practice as well as how their practice will lead to change, a commitment to quality, and respect for differences.

We recognize and value the importance of reflecting on frames, biases, assumptions, or social, moral, and political aspects of schooling, and yet we also realize that reflection can be helpful in more utilitarian, problem-solving situations as well. For this reason, in our typology of reflection, we have tried to capture a way of scaffolding thinking that can be useful no matter what the substance for reflection.

To this point, we have been reviewing some of the essential background that informed our understanding and appreciation of reflection. This research became central to us as we developed a typology. In the next section, we present a typology of reflection that grew out of these ideas (Hess, 1999; McKenna, 1999a, b) and which currently serves as the basis for instruction with students and discussion among the teacher educators who use it.

3. Theory into practice: a typology of reflection

A typology of reflection developed by instructors in TEP at the University of Washington bridges theory and practice in an effort to teach reflective practice to preservice teachers. The typology profiles three dimensions of reflective thought: descriptive, comparative, and critical.

3.1. A definition of our own

One foundation for teaching in a coherent program is a common understanding of key concepts. The Teaching Assistants (TAs) who teach the reflective seminars in which students learn and practice reflection throughout their teacher education program use the following definition of reflection to guide their practice.

Reflection is a process, both individual and collaborative, involving experience and uncertainty. It is comprised of identifying questions and key elements of a matter that has emerged as significant, then taking one’s thoughts into dialogue with oneself and with others. One evaluates insights gained from that process with reference to: (1) additional perspectives, (2) one’s own values, experiences, and beliefs, and (3) the larger context within which the questions are raised. Through reflection, one reaches newfound clarity, on which one bases changes in action or disposition. New questions naturally arise, and the process spirals onward.

Describing the history of this program, McKenna (1999a) reports,

We agreed that any practitioner we would call ‘reflective’ would be able to:

- focus on some dimension of their pedagogy;
- see that dimension from a variety of perspectives using techniques of reframing and reflective listening;

and

- engage in dialogue with their peers in order to illuminate the boundaries and frames of thought which limited their current perspective, with the goal being to take action based on a
thorough and reflective understanding of events, alternatives, and ethics (p. 13).

These criteria reflect the theoretical background discussed earlier in this paper, and they form the basis of the typology described below (see Table 1).

3.2. Descriptive reflection

Descriptive reflection, the first dimension of reflection in our typology, involves the intellectual process of “setting the problem;” that is, determining what it is that will become the matter for reflection. As Schön (1983) describes it, problem setting is

the process by which we define the decision to be made, the ends to be achieved, the means which may be chosen. In real-world practice, problems do not present themselves to the practitioner as given. They must be constructed from the materials of problematic situations, which are puzzling, troubling, and uncertain (p. 40).

Schön discusses setting the problem as a way to put parameters around a situation and define what it is that will be understood.

The word ‘problem’ here is used to encompass any “puzzling, or troubling, or interesting phenomenon with which the individual is trying to deal” (Schön, 1983, p. 50). Such problems may be specific and explicit, as when teachers know that the curriculum isn’t working for their students and find they need to make a change. Or, problems may be vague or implicit, as when teachers sense a resistant tone from a class but don’t know why. A problem may be recognized on an intellectual or emotional level, for “our feelings inform our ways of behaving” (Coldron & Smith, 1995, p. 2).

Munby and Russell (1990) call such problems “puzzles of practice”—a term we have adopted in describing problem-setting to students. Part of the task in descriptive reflection is to describe a puzzle of practice typically drawn from students’ practicum experiences in the field. This process has similarities with the process of writing a case, as it involves noting the salient features of a situation,

Table 1
Typology of reflection: dimensions and guiding questions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Typical questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Descriptive</td>
<td>Describe the matter for reflection</td>
<td>What is happening? Is this working, and for whom? For whom is it not working? How do I know? How am I feeling? What am I pleased and/or concerned about? What do I not understand? Does this relate to any of my stated goals, and to what extent are they being met?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Comparative</td>
<td>Reframe the matter for reflection in light of alternative views, others’ perspectives, research, etc.</td>
<td>What are alternative views of what is happening? How do other people who are directly or indirectly involved describe and explain what’s happening? What does the research contribute to an understanding of this matter? How can I improve what’s not working? If there is a goal, what are some other ways of accomplishing it? How do other people accomplish this goal? For each perspective and alternative, who is served and who is not?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Critical</td>
<td>Having considered the implications of the matter, establish a renewed perspective</td>
<td>What are the implications of the matter when viewed from these alternative perspectives? Given these various alternatives, their implications, and my own morals and ethics, which is best for this particular matter? What is the deeper meaning of what is happening, in terms of public democratic purposes of schooling? What does this matter reveal about the moral and political dimension of schooling? How does this reflective process inform and renew my perspective?</td>
</tr>
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</table>
usually in a written or spoken narrative. Although this is not always as easy a task as it may seem, it is essential, for as Schön (1983) has noted, “professional practice has at least as much to do with finding the problem as with solving the problem found” (p. 18).

Thus, the TEP typology’s dimension of descriptive reflection involves describing a matter, such as a classroom concern, a recognized bias, an interesting theory, or a feeling. Fundamentally, description involves answering the question, “What’s happening?” The simplicity of this is misleading, though, for descriptive reflection entails more than just reporting the facts. It involves finding significance in a matter so as to recognize salient features, extract and study causes and consequences, recontextualize them, and envision a change.

Discerning salient details is a critical step in the process of reflecting, for oversimplifying can lead to a misinterpretation of the case. For example, a teacher’s description of a disruptive child may perpetuate a negative impression, but a description of a child who consistently disrupts during reading may signify an instructional need. Fairly, carefully, and persistently describing significant details can help avoid the mistake of jumping to conclusions or seeing only what one wants to see.

Once the problem has been defined, or “set,” a teacher can often make sense of it by reflecting on, or thinking about, the situation (Schön, 1983, p. 18). In the typology, this marks the transition point from descriptive to comparative reflection.

3.3. Comparative reflection

Comparative reflection, the second dimension of reflection in our typology, is analogous to what Schön (1983) calls a “frame experiment.” It involves thinking about the matter for reflection from a number of different frames or perspectives. As compared to a technical approach to teaching, in which a teacher accepts a problem immediately and sets about trying to solve it, a reflective practitioner looks for “distinct ways to pose a problem and attempt to get a different purchase on the students and the issues involved. She also questions her own beliefs and orientations” (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 4–5). Certainly, some problems seem readily solvable, but most entail more issues than a quick fix solution can address. Other problems are not so easily solved, and thus require new insights. In either case, teachers benefit from bringing multiple perspectives to bear on “puzzles of practice.” Schön calls this a “frame experiment” because it involves imposing other frames on a situation to gain new insights or better understandings. This process requires the kind of open-mindedness and wholeheartedness that Dewey (1933) described, for frame analysis necessarily means that “the inquirer remains open to the discovery of phenomena, incongruent with the initial problem setting, on the basis of which he reframes the problem” (Schön, 1983, p. 268). Comparative reflection involves seeking to understand others’ points of view, which may be incongruent with one’s own.

Thus, in the TEP typology’s second dimension, comparative reflection, different interpretations of the same matter are compared. Within any given situation, different perspectives yield different results. Culture, race, gender, developmental level, and personal history give all people different perspectives, but reflective practitioners are sensitive to various perspectives. So a given classroom scenario might be considered from the perspective of another teacher, a student, a counselor, a parent, and so on. When we consider alternative perspectives or varying ways to approach a problem, we discover meaning we might otherwise miss. McKenna (1999a) describes comparative reflection in this way:

Any frame, by definition, causes a focus on certain information and excludes the rest. When the excluded portion includes critical information, we lose an accurate picture of the context and consequences of our decisions. Thus, when we strive to consider how a situation looks from the point of view of someone very different from ourselves, we gain far more than just the benefits of understanding others. It is a chance to explore and illuminate the limitations of our own frame (p. 13).
Although comparative reflection expands and enriches one’s understanding of a situation based on multiple perspectives, it still typically assumes a rather narrow view of the situation itself, calling for the third dimension of reflection in the typology—critical reflection.

3.4. Critical reflection

Critical reflection, the third dimension of reflection in our typology, describes the result of carefully considering a problem that has been set in light of multiple perspectives. Each perspective will lend itself to different consequences; each may imply a different reaction to the problem. By no means a “last step,” critical reflection is rather the constant returning to one’s own understanding of the problem at hand. This is the process in which, as Schön (1983) describes it, one “may then find a way of integrating, or choosing among, the values at stake in the situation” (p. 63). In other words, having viewed the matter for reflection in several different ways, one makes a judgement or a choice among actions, or simply integrates what one has discovered into a new and better understanding of the problem. Schön explains this non-linear process as being the ability to find new meaning in a situation, use that new meaning to reframe the question, and then further inquire into a situation to be able to understand better and possibly move to action. The “further inquiry” may be seen as the process spiraling onward through the processes of descriptive, comparative, or critical reflection. Reflection rarely ends with a simple solution, but rather ends with material for further reflection, new questions, and improved understanding (Schön, 1983).

Critical reflection often involves making a judgment. In this dimension of reflection, we consider the matter in light of different perspectives with an eye towards moving ahead, asking, “What is the best way of understanding, changing, or doing this?” Determining a definition of ‘best’ implies considering implications of practice and weighing them against relevant goals, values, and ethics. Perhaps what we have formerly considered best practice may not meet the needs of a student; what’s natural in one culture may be inappropriate for another. Thus, critical reflection implies making a decision through careful deliberation, whether that decision is to act or to continue the cycle of reflection.

Moreover, critical reflection involves taking in the broader historical, socio-political, and moral context of schooling (Valli, 1990). For example, teachers reflecting on a matter of student performance are wise to not only consider the perspectives of, let’s say, the student and the parent (as well as their own), but to consider a history of inequity in schools that may influence the direction they take. By taking in the broader context of schooling, reflective practitioners come to see themselves as agents of change, capable of understanding not only what is, but also working to create what should be.

In the descriptions above of the three dimensions of reflection included in our typology, we have relied heavily on Schön’s (1983, 1987) findings in his study of reflective practitioners. However, as noted earlier, our understanding of reflection encompasses a view that the typology should highlight not only what teachers do, but what they might (and some would argue, should) do. Thus, the guiding questions in each section of the typology are designed to be inclusive of many different perspectives. Some questions are general, whereas others speak to various traditions (academic, social, developmental, critical); some highlight the contextual (social, moral and political) factors, whereas others direct attention toward personal values and self. In a sense, the three dimensions represent a widening of the lens, from the situation at hand to multiple perspectives on a situation to an appreciation of the bigger picture of implications surrounding the problem at hand. To some, this approach may seem somewhat eclectic; we see it rather as far-reaching. By including a broad range of questions, we hope to highlight the many different ways a single situation can be set, framed, and reflected upon.

3.5. A holistic view of reflection

Finally, although looking at the different dimensions or intellectual processes of reflection from different angles momentarily simplifies the
concept for purposes of description, it is important to remember that these dimensions of reflection are not mutually exclusive. In fact, they become intimately intertwined to compose a composite concept. For a complete picture of reflection, we turn to a surprising source: Tolstoy, from *On Teaching the Rudiments*.

The best teacher will be he who has at his tongue’s end the explanation of what it is that is bothering the pupil. These explanations give the teacher the knowledge of the greatest possible number of methods, the ability of inventing new methods and, above all, not a blind adherence to one method but the conviction that all methods are one-sided, and that the best method would be the one which would answer best to all the possible difficulties incurred by a pupil, that is, not a method but an art and talent (cited in Schön, 1983, p. 66).

Without using the term “reflection,” Tolstoy exemplifies the process of what good teachers do. The metaphor of reflection as art evokes a graceful image of complexity and wholeness. But examining and describing reflection alone may not show a novice how to reflect any more than understanding and appreciating artistic masterpieces teach a beginner how to create one. Thus, even though reflection can be viewed as a ‘way of being’ that transcends strategy and practicality, it is nevertheless a complex process to teach. A typology serves as a tool for demystifying and rendering accessible one of the most powerful aspects of teaching.

The types of reflective thought presented in the TEP typology can be used to teach purposeful thinking for better understanding. Table 1 shows a version of the typology containing a series of questions that might be used in descriptive, comparative, and critical thought. The typology serves several purposes in teaching reflection. First, it helps students look at a situation thoroughly by presenting a broad range of questions. Second, it helps students consider issues deeply by presenting the three dimensions of thought. Taught as a process, reflection can result in powerful understanding, for when students’ ideas are thorough and complex, they discover deeper levels of meaning. However, the process is not as linear as the typology might suggest; rather, it involves contemplation, inspiration, and experience. Reflection should not be constrained to a formula, but allowed to evolve in its own loops and leaps over time.

4. The teaching of reflection

In the University of Washington’s TEP program, reflective practice and its development are integral pieces to the puzzle of learning to teach. Reflective practice and strategies are modeled within coursework by the instructional staff. The students also meet in a weekly seminar with a TEP Teaching Assistant (TA) to engage in the development of reflective practice. These seminars are a credited class for the students and are the opportunity to work on understanding reflective practice and its implications for teaching. The process is a recursive one in which the learning takes place in a community of discourse that embraces the growth of all involved. The reflective seminar is meant to both learn and model what reflective practice is, and provide the opportunity to engage in a community of learners where teaching and its inherent complexities may be examined. The use of dialogue within the seminars brings multiple perspectives and hidden points of view into the conversation as central features of the reflective process (Zeichner, 1994).

The UW TEP typology of reflection is the tool that guides the pedagogy during the reflective seminars. It is used both to encourage reflection and to model reflective practice. It is not meant to be a rigid hierarchy in which all its dimensions of reflection (descriptive, comparative, and critical) must be met, but is meant to be an instrument that encourages reflection on multiple levels and from multiple points of view. The discourse generated around the typology represents thoughts, feeling, and ideas that the students have about teaching and their roles as teachers. It is the opportunity to think about and practice perspectives and ideas without fear of failure or recrimination; it is the opportunity to make “moves that would be costly.
in the built world (that) can be tried at little or no risk” (Schön, 1983, p. 157).

Reflective seminar provides the time in which a context, feeling, or idea that the students find either perplexing or worth celebrating can be taken apart in order to better understand it. The context becomes a “virtual world” as Schön (1983) describes it, in which the actual world of teaching and learning that the students experience during their field experiences, and the theoretical knowledge the students gain in the TEP program coursework, can be constructed, connected, and possibly reconstructed. This virtual world provides the opportunity for experimentation through which the TEP students can take a moment in time, define and describe it, and submit it to vigorous reflection in an attempt to understand it and make personal meaning of it (Schön, 1983). The virtual world created by reflective dialogue during the seminar time provides the opportunity for the students to begin to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

The TEP students’ preservice teaching program culminates with the creation of a portfolio that is representative of the individual student’s knowledge of effective teaching, assessment, and evaluation, the ability to meet the needs of diverse learners, their ability to create a positive learning environment, and their professional commitment (UW TEP Program Goals and Targets). The portfolio is created during the academic quarter following student teaching. Reflection combining educational theory and teaching practice is realized through the creation of this portfolio. In order to complete the portfolio, the students choose artifacts that are representative of the four goals. The student must then complete an entry slip that corresponds with each artifact. The entry slip provides the reader of the portfolio with an understanding of the context of the artifact, and the student’s reflective thinking on that artifact. The entry slip is framed around the TEP typology of reflection and may include written representation of descriptive, comparative, and critical reflection about the artifact to which it is attached. The culminating portfolio provides the TEP student with the opportunity to reflect on and come to understand his or her role as a teacher.

The timing of its creation, immediately following student teaching, is intentional to allow students the opportunity to reflect on their field experience and to make sense of their teaching practice. It provides an avenue for the students to tell the story of their identity as a teacher, to understand the path they have taken to become a teacher, and to realize how their practice fits in with the larger aims of education. Schön (1983) states that “some stories can be ignored or reduced to mere outlines, while others are expanded and elaborated. By attending to a few features which he considers central, the (practitioner) can isolate the main thread of the story from the surrounding factors which he chooses to consider as noise” (p. 160). The goal of the portfolio is then to provide students with an opportunity to distinguish their personal practice and theoretical viewpoints from those of others. They can write their teaching story in isolation from the stories of others, while at the same time acknowledging the impact that others have had on their becoming a teacher.

5. Example of the typology in action

The reflective seminars and the completion of the portfolio are the explicit teaching opportunities in which the typology of reflection is put into practice. The typology provides a framework through which a structure for reflection can be created. It is not meant to be rigid in that all modes of reflection must be present at all times, but it is meant to provide an outline in which the discourse of individuals or groups may be articulated and examined.

When students are confronting their assumptions and beliefs about teaching and students, they are often uncomfortable discussing their thoughts and feelings. Responses that they have to particular situations or concepts may be surprising or distressing to them, and may not be something they want to share with others. Structuring their responses, ideas, and feelings around the UW TEP typology of reflection provides opportunity for deconstructing them in ways that may provide insight or encourage further thinking. In these situations descriptive reflection is used to under-
stand the context of the situation. Comparative reflection is used to recognize and attempt to understand the multiple feelings and perspectives of those involved. Critical reflection naturally arises as the TEP students struggle to understand the situation in terms of broader educational issues and also in terms of action they could take to change the situation. The typology of reflection may not be explicitly referred to during the reflective or portfolio sessions, but through TA participation and facilitation it serves to provide a framework within which to reflect.

The typology of reflection also serves another purpose during reflective and portfolio sessions. Often discussion can wander or have difficulty staying to a topic or context. While this type of “getting ideas out on the table” has merit, it can be frustrating when attempting to untangle practical and theoretical dilemmas or practices. The UW TEP typology of reflection provides a framework for discussion and action that enables deep levels of reflection, and that provides opportunities for deconstructing a dilemma, feeling, or teaching practice. With the typology as a basis for discussion in reflective and portfolio sessions, parameters are provided for discussion and action, and the end goal of making sense of one’s actions, thoughts, and feelings is kept in view.

5.1. Reflection and portfolio creation

The UW typology of reflection provides the framework in which students complete their culminating portfolio. Each artifact contained in the portfolio is accompanied by an entry slip that is modeled after the typology, explaining the context of the artifact and the student’s personal reflection on that artifact. Again, in our situation, the typology has provided the necessary structure to help students and the instructional staff understand what reflection is and how it can be organized. The following excerpts are from an entry slip that Elaine, a secondary TEP student, wrote. They represent two points in time. The first excerpt is a draft of an entry slip that Elaine shared with the TA assigned to be her portfolio mentor. Following it are comments the TA made to Elaine encouraging her to use the dimensions of reflection (descriptive, comparative, and evaluative) to provide the reader of the portfolio a deeper understanding of why this situation was meaningful to Elaine. The second excerpt represents Elaine’s final draft and response to the questions proposed to her by the TA. The final draft is also representative of how Elaine uses descriptive, comparative, and evaluative reflection to discuss the importance of student voice to her. This entry slip serves to highlight that the typology is not a hierarchy nor meant to be rigid in its application. The typology is a tool that is recursive and fluid responding to the needs and helping to frame the particular context being examined.

5.2. Entry slip first draft

Elaine’s first draft was turned in as follows:

This discussion occurred during the second quarter of study in the TEP program at the University of Washington. It was a response to an incident that occurred during a class. After meeting to discuss the incident one on one, [the professor] and I decided that this could be an important learning opportunity for all the students of the TEP program. We set up a time and invited anyone that was interested. The discussion was centered around how women are taught to be quiet. We talked about how we could include more voices in classrooms. We started with the experience in our class and then talked about other gender roles in classrooms and society.

The TA received this entry slip and used the typology (see Table 1) to guide her responses and elicitation for deeper reflection from Elaine. The TA sensed that this event was very important to Elaine and her thinking about teaching and learning, but she had not included comparative or evaluative dimensions of reflection in her first draft. The TA worked to provide feedback that would encourage elaboration in the descriptive dimension, as well as the addition of the comparative and evaluative dimensions. Specifically, in terms of descriptive reflection she asked Elaine to think about what she was concerned about in this
situation and to examine what she was feeling. Elaine was also asked how the event presented itself to her and what her and the professor’s goals were for inviting others to participate in the conversation.

In terms of comparative reflection, Elaine was asked to consider the perspective of students in her future classes, and how this incident influenced her thinking about them. She was also asked to consider how gender roles are developed and what she knew of research in this area. Finally, in terms of critical reflection Elaine was asked to consider the implications of the matter at hand and how her own experience helped to shape her thoughts and actions when dealing with gender issues.

In this case, the typology of reflection provided the TA and Elaine a common language within which to think about reflection and frame the expectations of the TEP program for the portfolio entry slip. Instead of asking Elaine to “reflect deeper” the TA was able to use the typology that both she and Elaine knew and with which they were familiar. In this way Elaine was able to meet the expectations of the TA and the TEP program, while at the same time expanding her own thinking about this event that held great meaning and value for her and her emerging ideas about teaching and learning.

5.3. Elaine’s final draft

The following is Elaine’s final draft of her entry slip in its entirety. The entry now provides documentation of Elaine’s thoughts in all three dimensions of reflection: descriptive, comparative, and critical.

This discussion occurred during the second quarter of study in the TEP program at the University of Washington. It was a response to an incident that occurred during a class in which the professor and I felt gender equity had not been practiced. After meeting and discussing the incident one-on-one, [the professor] and I decided that this could be an important learning opportunity for all students of the TEP program. We set up a time for the open discussion and invited anyone that was interested. We were happy to see that many of our fellow classmates, faculty, and administration attended. It was a very honest and open discussion. Together we discussed what happened, the feeling involved and how to follow through with what we have learned.

The discussion focused mainly on how women are often taught and reinforced to be quiet and submissive. The behaviors are taught through societal norms, family values, and commonly accepted gender roles. We discussed how this can make women feel and how to encourage the voices of both women and men in classroom settings. We began with the situation in our educational classroom and then branched out into thoughts of our future classrooms and society as a whole. It was our goal to simply shed light on an experience and openly discuss some ideas involved. We hope that everyone walked away with some new thoughts and ideas about themselves and their future profession.

I believe it is important for every child to know that what they think and how they feel is important. I want to teach them how to let their voice be heard. This is a skill for social justice. Conversely, I also want to teach student leaders and the more vocal students in class how to encourage others to speak aloud. A safe and encouraging classroom of many voices would be a small start to a powerful group of young people.

While student teaching I was very aware of the different voices in my classroom. I encouraged everyone to share thoughts. This is very difficult for some students and I am still struggling with developing ways of teaching them self-expression. I have a deep respect and understanding for the nice quiet students for I was one. I was rewarded throughout school for this behavior and now realize how much I missed by not having a voice.

Elaine begins her final portfolio entry with descriptive reflection providing a sense of the context and what parts of that context held meaning for her. She then discusses feminine voice
and the perceived lack of voice that was the topic of the discussion she had with her peers. She uses comparative reflection to fit this idea in with the ideas of others and how it is different from her own. Elaine concludes by thinking about how she will encourage the voices of all her students in her class, and while this is difficult it is an important part of the educational experience. These conclusions are an example of critical reflection in that she is thinking of action that she will take based upon her present beliefs and acknowledges how difficult those actions will be especially for the students that were like her.

The excerpt represents Elaine’s final draft of written reflection. Her first draft, as noted earlier, did not include comparative or critical reflection and was limited in its scope of descriptive reflection. Through oral and written feedback, Elaine’s portfolio mentor was able to use the typology of reflection as a tool to ask clarifying questions and challenge Elaine to truly think about why this situation was important to her. The TA was able to move beyond comments like “needs to reflect deeper” to specific comments and questions based upon the typology. In this way the end goal of “deep reflection” became obvious to both Elaine and her mentor. This example represents the use of the typology as a tool in the UW TEP program “to untangle a problem or to make more sense of a puzzling situation; reflection involves working toward a better understanding of the problem and the ways of solving it” (Loughran, 1995, p. 4).

6. Important reminders in the teaching of reflection

We believe our success with this tool has implications for other teacher educators struggling to teach reflective practice. However, we qualify our own use of the typology with several important reminders.

First, we must continue struggling with the tension between providing supportive scaffolding for learning the process of reflecting without reducing it to a series of steps. Our typology merely categorizes dimensions of reflection for the purpose of instruction. This does not reduce the complexity of reflection, for although reflection may be seen as a strategy, it is also a way of being, an art (Tremmel, 1993).

Second, we must remember that teaching preservice teachers to reflect involves much more than the reflective seminar and portfolio creation highlighted here. Reflective practice is the cornerstone of a University of Washington TEP that involves preparing a team of mentors, the creation of a programmatic course sequence, and various reflective assignments in a range of instructional contexts—all of which require a culture of trust and support.

Finally, we must recognize that reflection is an evolving concept, and the typology is a flexible pedagogy (McKenna, 1999b). As we learn new ideas about the concept of reflection, however, we accommodate them in our teaching. For example, we must consider the difference between individual and collaborative reflection. When we reflect alone, we risk reconstructing ideas with our bias (Webb, 1999). Yet when we reflect with others, we may be bound to the value-laden nature of language, although communication may also involve silence, listening, and quiet deliberation (Buckley, 1999). As our understanding of the process of reflection grows and changes, so also must our teaching.

The use of a typology is always accompanied by the limits of language; typologies in general can be critiqued on the grounds that they are too constraining or prescriptive. But they are also useful in scaffolding the development of a habit of mind—in this case, a reflective stance toward the puzzles of practice and one way of thinking them through. Such a scaffold provides us the language to talk about reflection with teachers and a description of how to “think like a teacher.” Importantly, it is a scaffold that must be gradually removed if teachers are to become more flexible in their reflection and to achieve what Tremmel describes as the “Zen” of reflection (1993).

7. Conclusion

This review of the content and process of reflection was designed to clarify the concept of
reflection without oversimplifying it; our typology and the example of its use is offered to contribute some ideas about teaching reflection to new teachers. While our understanding of reflection continues to grow and change, our efforts are powerfully motivated by the potential of reflective practice to create effective teaching. To this end we recommend further study into the practices that are the pedagogy of teaching reflective practice. As we work to understand this habit of mind and how we teach it, we also become acutely aware of the tensions of the use of a typology, and wonder about its usefulness in the evaluation of preservice teachers. We also recommend further study into the evaluation of reflective practice in terms of understanding how preservice teachers use reflection as a part of their emerging teaching practice, and how a typology can be used in the evaluation of final portfolios.

References


