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Reflective Primary Teaching



Tony Ewens

**CRITICAL
TEACHING**

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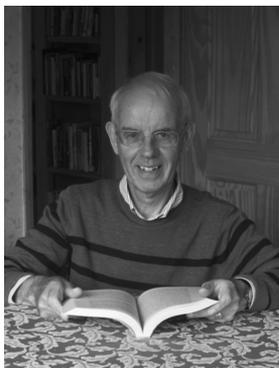
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Meet the author



Tony Ewens worked as a teacher and head teacher in primary and middle schools in Devon, then as the county's advisory teacher for religious and moral education, before moving into Initial Teacher Education (ITE) as a lecturer at St Martin's College, now the University of Cumbria. Specialising in the philosophy of education as well as RE, he became Head of Education and Associate Dean at St Martin's College. Upon the formation of the University of Cumbria, Tony was appointed Head of Education Studies. He retired in 2008 and is now a freelance consultant, an external examiner for ITE courses and an author.

SAMPLE

Introduction: why reflective primary practice?

This book is about becoming, and continuing to be, a successful primary school teacher. It is written in the light of the Teachers' Standards for England (Department for Education, 2011), with reference to Key Stages 1 and 2 of the English system. It is also relevant to the comparable requirements for teachers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

What? Who? How? Why?

Good teachers constantly strive to improve their performance, by developing their knowledge of the subjects that they teach, their understanding of the pupils whom they teach and their mastery of an extended repertoire of professional skills and techniques which they use in the process of teaching. This entails hard work, not least in:

- securing a thorough knowledge of the wide range of subject matter included in the primary curriculum;
- gaining insight into the different characteristics, interests and aptitudes of a sizeable number of children; and
- acquiring a range of teaching methods and approaches, and implementing them judiciously in the context of a well-ordered classroom.

Maintaining, extending and updating each of these will be a constant feature in your work.

The teacher's role has been aptly summarised in the phrase, 'a teacher is a person who teaches someone something, somehow'. The three bulleted points above indicate the significance of each of the three: the someone, the something and the somehow.

To succeed as a teacher, you need a thorough knowledge of all three. A teacher with a good grasp of the curriculum and a sound knowledge of the pupils, but who lacks a command of a range of teaching methods is unlikely to be successful in the classroom. One who has insight into the pupils and a mastery of teaching techniques, but with inadequate subject knowledge,

will teach inaccuracies and misconceptions. And a teacher with thorough knowledge of the subjects and curriculum, together with a wide array of educational approaches, but who lacks an understanding of the class, will not be able to pitch the teaching at the appropriate level for the children. You may well be able to recall teachers in these various categories, who fell short of the ideal, and also practitioners who combined all three attributes in a way that made them good or even excellent teachers.

Even a quick reading of the Teachers' Standards reveals that the trio of 'something, someone and somehow' pervades them, for example in Standard 3: *Demonstrate good subject and curriculum knowledge*, Standard 4: *Plan and teach well-structured lessons* and Standard 5: *Adapt teaching to respond to the strengths and needs of all pupils*.

These are extensive demands, calling for practitioners who can operate to a high standard across a wide range of knowledge and skills and who, by using a thoughtful, systematic approach, can be mindful of their own abilities and aptitudes and take responsibility for their ongoing professional development and progress.

In addition to all this, it is important that teachers can give answers to the question 'why?' Why are you teaching this content to those pupils in that way at this time? To say, 'because it's in the national curriculum and our school's policy requires it to be taught to my class at this time of the school year using these methods' may be true, but it is not an adequate response from a professional teacher. You need to be able to provide a rationale for the work that you do, to demonstrate your own mastery of the art and science of teaching. This requires you to be a reflective teacher, as well as a hard-working one.

Reflection and reflecting

The title of this book, *Reflective Primary Teaching*, highlights the important role that reflection plays in your formation and professional identity as a teacher. Schön (1983) and Eraut (1994) discussed in detail how members of various professions regularly use reflection as a means of analysing and improving their performance. Both wrote some time ago, but their work remains valuable for understanding professional practice. Their ideas offer you ways to build into your own work the regular use of reflective techniques so that you habitually monitor and enhance your teaching.

Schön identified a variety of ways in which professionals use reflection, including sophisticated variations such as the ability to build it into ongoing professional tasks. Eraut describes a process of 'routinisation' (Eraut, 1994) to explain why teachers and other professionals often seem to operate on 'autopilot', when aspects of their practice, on which they once reflected carefully, are subsequently repeated regularly and seemingly automatically in their daily routines. He suggests that developing a repertoire of routinised practices is a key factor in enabling professionals to deal with the multiple demands made upon them, as it reduces the number of issues requiring their conscious attention at any one time. It is, however, important that each of the routinised tasks should periodically be reviewed, by reflecting attentively on them, to check that they continue to be appropriate and effective.

In one sense, Schön and Eraut are describing a process that everyone uses regularly. Consider a conversation in which you have been involved recently. You may have reflected upon some

information given to you by the person with whom you were talking and asked yourself, 'was it accurate? What is its significance? Do I need to do anything about it?' Perhaps you thought about the person's mood or motivation. Why did they say what they said? Were they worried or upset about something and did that affect their remarks? Did they have a particular agenda? Or you may have wondered about the impact that you had upon them. Did you give a positive and friendly impression or did you appear puzzled or offhand? Did you confuse or mislead them? All these are examples of an everyday situation in which we typically use reflection. You may have had these thoughts when the conversation had ended or while it was still in progress, thus highlighting Schön's distinction between 'reflection on action' and 'reflection in action'.

Apparent in this example of reflection is an approach usually described as critical analysis. When thinking about your conversation, you considered who the person was, what they said to you and why they said it. In other words, you isolated different details about the incident (analysis), then made judgements about each of the various aspects (critiquing). Notice that 'critical' is used here in the sense of making dispassionate judgements, rather than in its everyday sense of making negative comments. It is this rigorous and systematic approach to reflecting that Schön and Eraut describe in their writings, and which is commended in this book as a cornerstone of professional development and improvement.

Since reflection is a fundamental feature of our everyday life, it follows that we should be able to harness it to good effect in our professional practice as teachers. Consider these four different types of reflection that teachers commonly use:

1. Reflecting on your own schooldays

Since you probably attended primary school for six or seven years, and secondary school for the same length of time, it is hardly surprising that your experiences as a school pupil play a major role in structuring your views about schools and education. It could hardly be otherwise. The years spent as a pupil shape your understanding of the purposes of education and your expectations of what school classrooms should be like. The same holds true for everyone else who ever attended school, including the parents of the children you teach and the politicians who frame the policies that drive the national education system. It is no wonder that we all think of ourselves as experts about schooling, since we have all – well, nearly all – undergone formal education for a long period of time.

Given the lengthy duration of your schooldays, experienced at a particularly formative time in your life, it can be difficult to conceive of any other approaches to teaching and learning than those that you encountered yourself. For that reason it is important to give some serious consideration to your experience as a school pupil. In doing so, it can be helpful to frame questions to prompt your thinking. How typical were you of the pupils in your class? What do you think were the aims that underpinned your teachers' endeavours? What did the curriculum consist of? What methods of teaching and learning were employed? Did you think that some teachers were better than others? If so, would other pupils have agreed with you? These, and many other questions, can be fruitful starting points for the practice of reflecting about your schooldays.

2. Reflecting on episodes of teaching in which you have been involved as teacher or observer

Teachers invariably think about the lesson that they have just taught, at least at the level of deciding whether it went well or badly. Reflecting analytically and critically on the lesson can help you to delve far further into what happened and why, and has the capacity to promote deep learning about your professional practice. Several considerations need to be borne in mind.

- Firstly, you do not need to adopt a deficit model of reflection. In other words, try to avoid a mindset that always looks for weaknesses and seeks ways to remedy them. While it is true that we can learn a great deal from mistakes that we make, it is also the case that we can benefit from analysing aspects of our teaching that went well. Reflecting critically on an episode in a lesson that you judged successful – the children were engaged, your explanations were understood, most pupils achieved the intended learning outcomes – may enable you to identify ways of transferring the same methods to other areas of the curriculum, or at least to plan to repeat the same approach in a future lesson. Successes can lead to further improvements. Of course, it is also true that you can learn much from analysing a disastrous lesson, particularly if you can identify what caused the problems and plan to avoid repeating the errors. But try to adopt a balanced approach, by reflecting on a mix of positive and negative features in your teaching.
- Secondly, it is not necessary always to evaluate an entire lesson when you reflect on your teaching. Reflecting in detail on just one aspect of your work may yield greater benefits. For example, you might decide to focus on how you introduced and explained to the class the main task in a science lesson. Introductions can easily become so long that the earlier instructions have been forgotten by the time the class sets to work. But too brief an instruction can skate over important points. Do you take questions from children during the explanation, with the risk that you – and they – lose the drift, or do you ask them to wait until you have finished speaking, in which case they may have forgotten what they wanted to ask? A sharply focused consideration of this part of your lesson could well have implications for your future teaching, not only in science but across the curriculum.
- Thirdly, there is much to be gained from studying your class at times when a colleague is responsible for the lesson. You may occasionally enjoy the luxury of being a neutral observer; more often you will be involved as a participant observer. For instance, you may be a trainee teacher responsible for one group of pupils in a lesson taught by the regular class teacher. You will notice things about a class under these circumstances that you would not typically observe while you are running a lesson yourself. For example, you might look closely at what is happening around one table in the room. Are all the members of the group working purposefully? Are one or two pupils doing most of the work and, if so, does it matter? Is anyone completely disengaged from the task in hand? Reflecting on your observations as an observer can prompt you to design subsequent lessons of your own in ways that address your findings. For example, when designing group work, you might build in tasks for each

group member, and you might arrange for you, or a supporting adult, to ensure that a disengaged pupil participates productively.

3. Reflecting on alternative viewpoints, for example the outcomes of other people's work, and their observations or judgements

Conversation in the staffroom sometimes involves colleagues talking about the lessons that they have just taught, reporting on triumphs and disasters, and discussing them with each other. A wealth of material is available, in books, articles and magazines, which provides case studies of other people's teaching, coupled with evaluative comment by either the practitioner or someone reporting on their work. Reflecting on reports of other people's teaching can provide you with ideas to try for yourself or warn you of pitfalls to be avoided.

Just as you see things differently when observing a class being taught by a colleague, rather than by you, so you can also obtain food for thought from the comments of others who observe lessons when you are teaching. Senior fellow-teachers, such as mentors, subject leaders or head teachers, deploy their own extensive experience of teaching when watching your lesson, then offering you feedback. Because their observer status enables them to see things of which you as the teacher may be unaware, they can provide you with different perspectives. By reflecting on their input, you will often gain a broader outlook on the class, your teaching methods and the pupils' attainment than you could get solely from your own evaluations.

Feedback from inspectors and other professionals external to the school helps you to view your performance against a backdrop of a wide range of primary practice, since these colleagues have the advantage of observing teaching in a large number of schools. Although their role may principally entail giving you a grade, they will nevertheless offer some formative comments about your strengths and areas for improvement, and give advice about the next stage of your professional development. Whether their judgements delight or depress you, there is always much to be gained from reflecting on their remarks, ideally in conversation with a trusted senior colleague.

Consider, too, the value of seeking the views of other adults who know the children in your class from perspectives other than those of a teacher. Meetings with parents and carers, whether at a formal parents' evening or during an informal conversation, can be really helpful to teachers. While parents understandably want to know about their children's progress, teachers often gain insights into children's likes and dislikes, the effect upon them of particular circumstances at home and about interests they pursue outside of school. Reflecting on this information, some of which is shared with you in strict confidence, can change your understanding of some children and alter the way in which you work with them. Teaching assistants, who often work closely with small groups of children under your direction, are often in a position to offer detailed feedback about pupils' progress, misconceptions or circumstances.

Finally, but very importantly, the children themselves constantly give feedback worth noting and reflecting upon. The child who looks puzzled during your explanation, the one who sighs

when you announce a maths lesson, the pupil who always seems withdrawn on Monday mornings, the one who cannot get the hang of telling the time, children who never seem to have their PE kit on the right day – all these are telling you something. If you are repeatedly looking at your lesson plan and worrying about getting through everything in time, you may well not notice these important signs, any of which might cause you to reflect and reconsider how to address an aspect of your practice.

4. Reflecting on material that you have read

Teachers and trainee teachers have a very wide range of literature at their disposal, in web-based and printed form. Books and journals abound to support degree-level study at undergraduate, Masters and research levels and for use when seeking professional qualifications from Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) to headship. Weekly publications, such as the *Times Educational Supplement*, provide a valuable means of keeping yourself briefed on current developments and debates, and official documents from the Department for Education and other statutory bodies describe in detail the curriculum demands, assessment points and legal requirements that affect your ongoing teaching. Professional journals and magazines overflow with ideas for new approaches to a curriculum area or fresh ways of working with children. Each school also has a range of policy documents outlining agreed procedures for matters as diverse as behaviour management, reporting to parents and the conduct of educational visits.

Before reflecting on an article or a chapter that you have read, it is important to identify and appreciate the type of publication in which you have found it. For example, there are different kinds of article. Academic journals, such as the *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, contain articles submitted to an editorial board, then peer-reviewed (in other words, scrutinised by others with expertise as teachers, lecturers and researchers) before being accepted for publication. Each article will contain references to other relevant literature, demonstrate a research methodology in relation to the issue about which the author is writing and put forward an argument to support the conclusions reached by the writer. On the other hand, professional magazines, such as *Teach Primary*, contain articles offering practical advice and resources related to aspects of classroom teaching. Authors are often fellow-teachers who wish to share with a wider audience the details of a successful piece of teaching that they undertook with their class. Both types of article can be of real value to you in your work, but you probably need to read the former for your essay or dissertation and the latter when planning next week's teaching.

Critical analysis is once again the key to purposeful reflection on your reading, and as before it is best stimulated by asking questions. For example, when you read an article in an academic journal you might ask yourself whether the writer is suitably qualified and experienced to be regarded as an authority on the subject. To what extent has the author investigated the topic by reading and summarising the available literature? What methods have been used to investigate the issues? Do they appear to have been used rigorously? Do the conclusions follow logically from the evidence? Have alternative interpretations been considered? Reflecting in that way on what you read is an invaluable way to develop a judicious approach to your studying, and helps to inject balance and perspective into your essay or dissertation.

It also helps you by fostering a questioning disposition to what you read. A similar approach, used when reading professional magazines and newspapers, also helps you to increase your understanding of what happens in your classroom and to think about different approaches that can enhance your teaching.

Getting the most out of this book

Throughout the book, the four types of reflection identified above will be harnessed systematically. There is a separate chapter for each of the standards listed in Part One of the Teachers' Standards, and another for Part Two, which deals with teachers' personal and professional conduct. Since the topics covered by the chapters are not self-contained, there will be frequent cross-referencing among the chapters, to illustrate the interconnectedness of the practice of teaching.

Each chapter starts with a set of intended learning outcomes, and ends with activities labelled 'Performance of Understanding', designed to enable you to review your own achievement against the learning outcomes. Teaching is always both a practical and an intellectual activity. It is not sufficient to show that you understand how to teach reading (or whatever). You also need to demonstrate that you can do it successfully. The 'Performance of Understanding' activities are designed to prompt you to identify evidence that you both understand and can demonstrate in practice the key components of teaching set out in the Standards.

The chapters also contain reflective tasks of each of the four kinds identified above: *reflecting on your schooldays*, *reflecting on your teaching*, *reflecting on alternative viewpoints* and *reflecting on your reading*. Some of these will be stimulated by case studies drawn from typical classroom practice, some by extracts from interviews with a range of primary practitioners, and others will offer a research focus by referring you to suggested readings.

Suggestions for further reading will be made at the end of each chapter. Many of these will be from recent publications, and you are advised to keep abreast of new publications, for example by reading reviews in the educational press. Other readings are identified as 'classic texts'. These are items that date from some time ago, in some cases a very long time ago. Their purpose is twofold. On one hand they serve to show that many of the central debates in education have been in progress for ages. On the other, they offer a broader and deeper perspective than can sometimes be portrayed in a current or recent text. The politicisation of education in England, especially since the mid-1980s, means that reforms often happen in a very short period of time, to fit in with the five-year political cycle between elections. Contemporary texts are consequently at risk of being reactive to short-term events, and lose sight of broader issues and underpinning aims and theories. An acquaintance with some classic texts can help you to set your daily work and reflection against a wide backdrop, so that you can root your professional identity in firm ground.

Although written in a way which addresses the English Teachers' Standards, this book also questions their scope. Education has always been about far more than the formal curriculum, and teachers have always seen themselves as contributing to pupils' general development

as persons, as well as helping them to learn subjects. As you reflect upon the Standards, you will do well to consider them in the light of your own philosophy, asking yourself, 'is there more to teaching than can be described in a set of professional standards?'

A section at the very end of this book has been left blank for your own notes and reflections.

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