

# *Reflection in the Writing Classroom*

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In this text, I've tried to do the same thing: talk about reflection, be reflective, be aware of how such reflection can change classroom practice—by bringing identity formation into the center of class, by assuming agency on the part of students, by seeing learning and texts as negotiated. I've focused on reflection that takes place on multiple occasions for multiple purposes in multiple forms: a reflection that occurs during writing and after, between and among drafts; that occurs cumulatively over time; that we shape for presentational

purposes. Although this reflection assists in the writing (process) of a particular text, it also makes possible a more general, generative understanding of writing. Put differently, working within a single rhetorical situation provides the stuff that writers talk about, and *through that talk we become*. Over time, then, reflection provides the ground where the writer invents, repeatedly and recursively, a composing self. Concurrently, reflection contributes to the writing of texts that themselves are marked by a reflective tenor—multi-contextual, thoughtful, holistic.

My interest in reflection did not spring from an interest in theory. It developed in the ground of practice: as I watched students work, as I began to appreciate how little I knew without asking, to learn from my students when I did ask, to understand ever-so-gradually that the teaching of writing, like the writing of text, is a social process, an interaction, an exchange, and finally, that to learn from these experiences what they had to teach, I needed to structure them, to find several means of framing and ways of aligning them.

To provide the primary frame, I've taken the concepts of reflection-in-action and reflective transfer—the basic premises of Donald Schon's "reflective practice"—and re-theorized them specifically for work in the writing classroom, although they apply, I think, in any space where literacy and text and curriculum are topics of inquiry. At the heart of this practice-based theory are three concepts:

- reflection-in-action*, the process of reviewing and projecting and revising, which takes place within a composing event;
- constructive reflection*, the process of developing a cumulative, multi-voiced, multi-voiced identity, which takes place between and among composing events; and
- reflection-in-presentation*, the process of articulating the relationships between and among the multiple variables of writing and the writer in a specific context for a specific audience.

I've talked here about those concepts in a progressive and yet recursive way—about the reflection-in-action that addresses a single text; about the constructive reflection that works cumulatively toward identity formation; about reflection-in-presentation, with its inward-outwardness; about reflective reading and responding, and how to learn to do both; about writing, identity, and reflection, and

about learning, overlearning, and counterlearning, and about curriculum-for-students; about reflection and its complexities in assessment situations; about using reflection to understand literacy; about reflective texts and reflective human beings and making sense. Though I'm not quite out of breath, *it's a lot*, I know—a new way of seeing the classroom and the students in it, a new way of working with them, a new way of understanding our work. But *it offers a lot*. More than I think we—or I—understand. Coming in part from portfolios, reflection is not unlike portfolios in its potential: it too has the power to change the face of American education.

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In developing this theory, I've made certain arguments. Like reflection itself, they are threads weaving whole cloth. I've argued

- that reflection is a discipline, a habit of mind/spirit/feeling that informs what we do, always tacitly, sometimes explicitly, and that making such understanding explicit is a good
- that regardless of how much our context shapes us, we have agency, and it is in the doubling of that agency, in what Patricia Carini calls "agency and the witnessing of agency," that we learn
- that for reflection to be generative and constructive in a school setting, it must be practiced, must itself be woven not so much throughout the curricula as *into* it
- that reflection is both individual and social; as such, reflection is always rhetorical
- that through reflection, students learn to know their work, to like it, to critique it, to revise it, to start anew
- that through reflection, students reveal a "native language" which we are only now beginning to study, a language that can tell us much about how they and we learn, about the multiple contexts through which and in which we learn
- that through reflection we teach ourselves through metaphor, and that metaphor is the primary mode of students' native languages
- that students should reflect on writings they care about, that they must be allowed to exercise some authority over their material (which is, after all, the product of their minds), that they have

something to share with us, and not just in marginalized or unofficial places but in the assignments that “count,” both in our terms and theirs

that through reflection, students invent identities, and that in general that identity-formation is the always unfolding purpose of the writing classroom and of the classroom where our prospective colleagues learn to teach and to tutor

that classroom reflection-in-presentation is characterized by certain features that we also find in reflective discourse: invocation of multiple contexts, for instance, and synthesis and use of metaphor

that through reflection, we understand curriculum pluralized: as lived, as delivered, as experienced: it is in the intersection of these curricula that identities are formed; students exert the most authority in that intersection since they are the ones who inhabit that place; learning more about that place is a prime goal of reflection used for educational purposes

that through our own reflections, we make knowledge and compose understandings: students about their work, teachers about theirs

that through the concepts of counter-learner and over-learner—separately *and* together—we can begin to explore in yet another way how and why it is that students resist learning to write

that reflection balances a tension between the impulse for coherence and a sense of discontinuity; it brings together the inner life and the outer life; it provides a place where such coherence and fragments and fissures can co-exist

that like rhetoric itself, *reflection is both practice and art*

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This is not to say that we shouldn't mark possible dangers that reflection brings with it. Some will find the term reflection too slippery. Some will claim that reflection turns students inward at the expense of the social and at the neglect of the ideological. Some will claim that it inappropriately awards authority to the student. Some will argue that the only value of having students undertake reflection is to produce “better” primary texts. Some will assert that all we really

need is the reflection-in-presentation, that there isn't time to cover to all the material that has to be covered and do all this as well. Or: that in order to do what is illustrated and theorized here, school will change. Yes.

I want to say that all of these concerns are valid. But even taken together, they do not refute what students and teachers have been doing now—reflectively—for some time. All I've tried to do is to organize and illustrate and theorize what we've been doing so as to offer a coherent, voiced, imaginable world, one where the *de facto* curricula come into contact with the school curricula: where students are the agents of their own learning; where they know and describe and like and critique and revise their own writing, their own learning, where we learn from and with them.

*If it's imaginable, it's doable.*

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A second set of cautions obtains for those who do practice reflection and who use it in their practice. Robert Brookfield summarizes those cogently: “Working solely within the reflective practice tradition can cause us to lose a certain critical ‘edge.’ If we're not careful, our enthusiasm for reflection can be converted exclusively into a concern for technique. The temptation will then be to measure how much reflection we have performed on any given day or how we score on a scale of reflective competence” (216). And “Although it's important to know what reflection looks like, we must be wary of specifying universally applicable criteria that can be converted into standardized competencies” (216). And finally, “Reflection in and of itself is not enough; it must always be linked to how the world can be changed. We reflect on our teaching so that we can create the conditions under which both teachers and students become aware of their own power of agency” (217).

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There are also many complex questions about reflection that we need to ask, to reflect upon. Some of them include:

is reflection a universal? does it vary along class lines, in different cultures, according to gender?

what kinds of questions should we be asking? when? should they always be sequenced? what sequences will work in which contexts? what response should we provide to those sequences?

how hospitable a medium is a computer network for reflection? are there certain conventions that will foster reflection? what is the effect of a public audience on reflection?

what would students tell us about reflection within disciplinary contexts? are the operations similar? different? how can they theorize about this? how can teachers theorize about the teaching in these contexts?

what would students tell us after the fact—2 months, 2 years, 20 years—about their reflective habits? what proved to be most useful and why? how are we defining useful? which habits of mind could they transfer into the world?

what other characteristics might we ascribe to reflective texts and to classroom reflection-in-presentation?

could we develop a corpus of reflective texts? how useful might they be in the classroom?

what would teachers tell us about how their teaching changes once they use reflection? or: does it change?

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In many ways, this is my story, of course, or my stories. Like all the reflective writers we've seen, I am telling you (in the long version, I guess) what I've learned. Like Lara, I have named one topic only to show you much more about many others. One of them concerns the impact of this learning on me: it's not only what I learned, but as Brookfield implies, what the impact of the learning is. I think the evidence of that impact is woven throughout this text. My students have changed me at least as much as I have changed them, sometimes with some resistance on both sides, I acknowledge. Resistance and reflection are symbiotic (but that's a text for another day).

Teaching is a living thing: it changes.

In this text, I've also tried to model reflection both in process and in product. I've understood myself primarily in three roles here: first, always as teacher; later, more tentatively as researcher, studying my

students not empirically, but observationally, descriptively, reflectively; later still, as writer. *Writing is so public*; as text, my story becomes in content and manner in ways I don't always apprehend, don't inevitably control, can't reliably predict. *Teaching is often still private*; I touch more lives directly, but I can keep those stories out of your line of vision. *Research carries more weight*, makes it more official, takes me back to the public sphere. Here, I've made the choice to bring the teacher, the researcher, and the writer into dialogue within the public view, to animate one inside of the others, each in terms of the others. In sum, I've tried to read my students, my classes, my teaching—and our texts—individually, collectively, together, in multiple contexts, so as to learn, to articulate, for both you and me: reflectively.

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Through such reflecting, within the multiplicity of these contexts, I create my truths, for today.