

BECOMING A REFLECTIVE LIBRARIAN AND TEACHER

Strategies for Mindful Academic Practice

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Introduction

Reflection as Pedagogy

I would argue very strongly that the self that is writing
the story is changed by the process of writing it.

—LAUREL RICHARDSON

For the whole of my life, I cannot remember a time when I did not reflect by way of writing. While this appears to be a rather bold statement, it is true. For whatever reason, I was born with a reflective nature. While still very young, my parents bought me my first “diary”—a psychedelic print on vinyl, white lined pages inside, and with the requisite little key, which every girl my age that I knew who had similar diaries, lost eventually, if not immediately.

While that was my first “diary,” I have otherwise written in a journal, consistently, since that initial one that I kept in the third grade, before I even had a name for or concept of what I was doing. My writing practice morphed from my young girl’s conception of precious secrets, where everything I wrote was about my favorite subject, myself, to what I called my “journal”—where I continued to write about myself but about others, too, in addition to my immediate environment and the world around me. This progression was a natural by-product of maturity and worldview. The practice has continued, unbroken, in both my personal and professional life. I have often wondered how people function without the practice of keeping a journal. I do not understand things until I have committed them

to paper, until I can look at the words on a page and contemplate a situation, a feeling, and know that eventually I will be able to figure things out. In fact, looking over so many years' worth of journals, I can see how true this statement really is.

We live in a world in which we are increasingly called upon to bifurcate our experiences, and hence reflection as both a personal and pedagogical practice has become more important. Society would have us think that we are two (or maybe even three) separate people all at once. If we have something going on in our lives, perhaps an issue with one of our children, our marriage, our health, we are admonished to "*leave it at home*," with the expectation that our internal lives operate by a switch that can be turned on and off at will. We are encouraged to think that our troubles, the minutiae and tribulations of our daily lives, have no place at work. There is a long-held belief that our thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and experiences during the other sixteen hours of our day should not have any bearing whatsoever on the eight (or more) hours we spend on the job in our professional positions. This is, basically, as preposterous as it sounds. That I am expected to be one person at home and another at work serves to deny the very essence of my integrated self. This book seeks to redress that notion.

The best books that I have read on reflection as practice and pedagogy have not relied on technical rationality—the notion that denies or *invalidates* personal experience in favor of "expert" knowledge or "proven" results or replications, which permeate all aspects of our society. Instead, the best books consider the very factors that make us human: our thoughts, feelings, and ultimately our own experiences, which are all relevant and greatly influence our practice as librarians and educators. Everyone possesses tacit knowledge—things we know that have an ineffable quality, thoughts or experiences we cannot put into words, but that we nevertheless know to be true. This is often revealed more clearly while engaging in reflection, which seeks to make sense of our own experiences using our own words, our own narrative, in a space, time, and situation of our own choosing. It means that as professionals—as *human beings*—we get to describe, understand, and improve upon our own process, our own pedagogy based on knowledge of our practices and ourselves. This is best done

in addition to reading and learning from our own professional literature, and thus learning from others who have engaged in the practice. As professional librarians we are influenced and enriched when we honor our own experiences while learning from others in the field. But to deny our own experiences in deference to the “experts” is a signal that we are out of touch with ourselves—a phenomenon not often experienced by those who engage in reflective practice honestly and consistently.

In a further attempt not to bifurcate professional experience, I begin this book with a focus on reflective practice for professional librarians, particularly those who teach at the college level, and then I segue into the strategies that speak to teaching, and to mediating student reflection in the classroom.

I firmly believe and work from the premise that an educator of any kind should not give reflection assignments or otherwise expect students to use reflection, in any way, in the classroom if they themselves have not used and do not understand the practice. Much has been written about the dangers of reflection and reflective practice as becoming just another “tool” in the ever-increasing size of the pedagogical toolbox.¹ This can happen if reflection simply becomes a buzzword in both educational and professional practice, with educators thinking it is fine to foist on students, but they themselves have no time for it. Or worse, if they simply do not value it. Think of the clinical teacher who teaches his or her own students to be good clinicians—how does that happen unless the teacher, too, has practiced in the clinical setting? There is a reason we both understood and railed against the dictum “Do as I say, not as I do” in our youth.

When we can teach, mediate, and *support* reflection in the classroom, when reflection is used as a pedagogical practice, we are implementing a foundation that students will use in the present and hopefully draw from in the future. This is because reflection, at its very least and quite possibly at its very best, helps us know how to be in the world, how to look at ourselves and our practices, examine our assumptions, and form a plan to move forward in our personal lives, our professional lives, and the inevitable conflation of the two.

While at times it may seem as though I paint with a broad brush, this is intentional. Inasmuch as we can read to learn about

reflection (if we didn't, this book would not be necessary), we need to do reflection in order to learn—in essence, we need to create our path by walking it. While some prescriptive elements are good and necessary, at other times one must trust that inner voice, that tacit knowing, and heed the call by simply beginning wherever we are. Manjusvara writes:²

Whenever we put pen to paper, each idea will have its subsequent effect—upon us, certainly, as we learn who we are by noting our response to what we have written, but also upon the people and things around us, inasmuch as it shifts to some degree the way in which we respond to them. In this sense, a piece of writing is always the beginning of a new journey: one that not only maps our current experience, but also helps us determine the state of mind we are about to move into.

I simply wrote the book that I would want to read if I was new to reflection practice and pedagogy. My conversational style is intentional: there are a plethora of books explaining the varied intricacies of reflection in considerable depth. Mine will hopefully serve as a friendly and informative guide, which is not intended to be exhaustive but instead to start the journey toward reflection.

It is my sincere hope that this book is informative, prescriptive in all the right places, and ultimately supportive of a more conscious, intentional, and active professional practice for librarian educators.

NOTES

1. Gary Rolfe, "Reflective Practice: Where Now?" *Nurse Education in Practice* 2, no. 1 (2002): 21–29.
2. Manjusvara, *Writing Your Way* (Cambridge, UK: Windhorse, 2005), 5.

1

Becoming Reflective

We do not learn from experience.
We learn from reflecting on experience.

—JOHN DEWEY

There is no end to the debate on the nature, usefulness, ethics, and the ever-present standards and rigor of “measurable outcomes” that surrounds the discussion of reflection as both a subject and a practice. This book, I suppose, adds to the debate, though I don’t care to get caught up in the controversy. Reflection as a practice and a pedagogical tool is one that I believe in, and have seen the results of, as well.

I am not certain that I particularly sought to write about reflection, but rather, at the risk of sounding clichéd, I feel as though the subject chose me. I have been a reflective practitioner for as long as I can remember, and it is something that I have tried to share over the years with many friends and colleagues at the risk of sounding too “New Age” or “precious.” But the idea of reflection is not “new” in the strict sense of the word.

Many professionals, at first blush, may misunderstand reflection as a tool, either because in our over-mechanized and rote practices we rely heavily on theories as prescriptions to follow, negating our own experiences, or because we simply do not think that our own reflections hold any value for our overall learning and teaching experience. I reject these notions outright. And while I have immersed myself for a long time in a plethora of books and articles on every aspect of reflection, I have learned to be an insightful reflective practitioner by just practicing, by *doing* reflection. I did not wait for permission, I did not wait for a proclamation by whoever in academia deems a practice wholesome and worthwhile, and I did not wait until I was told to do it. I certainly did not believe the naysayers who persist in viewing the act of deep reflection on our professional practice as, at best, self-indulgent navel-gazing and, at worst, a process that metrics or other validations cannot legitimize as a practice.

WHAT IS REFLECTION?

Reflection is a natural process that most people engage in on a regular basis. At its very base it is *thinking*, plain and simple. In the course of our everyday lives we reflect on any number of things, such as the impatient response we may have given to a student, the cold pizza we had for breakfast that is not sitting well in our stomachs, whether to meet friends for dinner when it might be best to stay in and get some work done, and so on. The list goes on and on. We think about the past and worry about the future—a lot. This is a cognitive process that helps us to make sense of the world and our place in it. So if thinking is something that everyone does, without being wholly conscious of it, then how is reflection different? Reflection is deliberate and intentional. It is a process that we consciously undertake, in the professional sense, in order to take stock of our practice by interpreting, analyzing, and questioning the way we work. It is the first step in the process of looking at ourselves critically, questioning all of the assumptions that we have been operating on, and refashioning, reformulating, and reinventing the way we do things.

Many of us can think of instances in our lives when we were jolted from our reverie by someone who confronted us with advice, constructive or otherwise, on how to do something better. Do you

remember the shock and indignation you might have felt because all along you'd been going through the paces of your practice, no one ever seemed to complain, and whatever you were doing seemed to be working? It can be a startling experience that, before it can galvanize us, usually seriously undermines our confidence first. When we initiate reflection of our own volition, we take the first step to act in concert with ourselves. We begin in the place where we are. What propels us into what should, ideally, be a daily practice is the deep desire to unite our potential with the increasing imperative to enact our best selves. Reflection requires honesty, a letting down of defenses, and a willingness to remain open to whatever the practice of reflection may bring to light. I would venture to say that if reflection does not make you squirm, you might not be doing it right.

The discomfort that is often felt upon embarking on the practice of reflection is very much rooted in our own selective thinking: what we allow ourselves to see and believe about our practice, to the exclusion of other aspects that are lacking. Many of us may delude ourselves out of habit, mental fatigue, or lack of time—keeping us in patterns that no longer work, have never worked, and may have been detrimental both to ourselves and to our students all along. Argyris called this the “reflexive loop,” which is a roughly circular process that is based on how we both choose our focus while justifying this focus, all the while avoiding others.¹ We become self-selective in what and how we focus on some things over others. But one interesting aspect of reflective practice is the process itself, so that, at least in the short term, the goal is not for the rock-solid solution of a particular problem or way of being, but the slow and circumspect examination of a problem or a belief system. Reflection is a highly conceptualized practice, something many librarians may feel uncomfortable with, since it appears to inhabit a realm of practice that does not seem very “down to earth.” But without it, the way in which we teach, do reference, and collaborate with colleagues suffers from remaining unexamined.

MY EXPERIENCE

When I became a librarian, I considered my colleagues to be some of my best teachers. While in library school, I felt very intuitively

that most of what I could reasonably expect to learn was, paradoxically, not in the classroom, but instead on the job. I engaged in a fair amount of observation. I would make a list of where and when my colleagues were teaching information literacy sessions and I would go and make copious notes. On the one hand, it helped me immeasurably to witness how a librarian enacts practice in the classroom and how information literacy material is handled. On the other hand, I found it quite intimidating. I despaired of ever having the lighthearted humor of one colleague who seemed to “liven up” relatively dry material, or the colleague who could dig into a database and make it seem sexy. I found, not surprisingly, that each librarian had his or her own style and points of interest that they focused on to the exclusion of others. I thought that a composite of all of them would have made the perfect professor librarian.

The first session I ever taught was rough. I was nervous and the students seemed to sense this. I found myself nearly mimicking the lessons I’d seen others do. I began to feel as though my voice was not even really my voice. I persisted in the imitation, because I had yet to find my “sea legs” in the classroom. I was (and still am) passionate about librarianship and information literacy, but it took me some time to express myself in the classroom. Still, I would teach a variety of information sessions to classes of students who seemed to look right through me. I reasoned to myself that it couldn’t be me—not at all. I had an entire list of reasons why what I was doing was precisely what students needed—in retrospect, I realize that I put up those defenses in order to get by, otherwise I might have questioned myself to a point where I would have become entirely immobilized by self-doubt and fear.

Predictably, before a year was up, I became very dissatisfied with what I perceived as very bleak results from the sessions I was teaching. I had built up enough confidence to take my hands off of my eyes and take a good, hard look at my sessions. While I was still engaged in reflection mostly related to other aspects of my new career, I’d not been reflecting on my sessions. When I began, I will admit to having a bit of a crisis. I began to think that at its very base, what I had been trying to do was meaningless—that traditionally students disliked any kind of library instruction and to be honest,

most professors did not seem too keen on it either. I often felt like a placeholder—doing sessions for professors who would be out for conferences (resulting in very poor attendance of students) or new professors feeling as though whatever information I could give them was important, though they honestly could not articulate why.

In my work journal, what began as whining and complaining turned into a very constructive look at myself. Ouch! It was not easy. I began to slowly question everything about my practice in the classroom, which, up until then, contained precious little of the real me. I'd been teaching what other librarians were teaching, which suited their liaison departments, but not mine. Also, like so many librarians before me, I realized that I felt I was short-changing students by agreeing to teach just one hour-long session—in fact, often I was limited to a 45-minute session—which in and of itself is not bad, except that it was the only time in the semester when I would be seeing that particular class. I also found that I tried to focus on too many things at once, assuming that a one-shot session with any given class would have to contain a lot in order to be helpful. In fact, it was counterproductive to student learning. Writing about a particular session shortly after it was over was revealing, to say the least:

I am feeling a disturbing lack of agency and I am not even sure if I am entitled to feel that way. Feeling very uncomfortable. Embarrassed, even. I felt as though I was a waste of time today. The professor, an adjunct, had me come to her class—actually insisted upon it, despite my protestations that I felt uncomfortable doing so because there was not yet an assignment attached to the session. She told me to just come in and show them “Databases and stuff,” which, against my better judgment, I did. In the lab the students talked to each other, trolled Facebook, looked bored and zoned out while I stuttered and sputtered a bit, trying to go through the library web page and other info. I had nothing to teach to, though. It was a “lesson” with no discernible reason for it, except that the adjunct thought doing so would be helpful. Or not. I'm really not even sure. True, down the line students will have assignments,

but I don't think I will be asked back, because she clearly does not understand the potential of such a session. If I am asked to demonstrate my expertise to a class of students, I would think that I could have enough agency to say, "No, that won't work. Let's wait until you give them their first assignment." I mean, I am not even sure that I can say that at this point. That one class just isn't going to cut it. Somehow, I feel as though the students could sense that. (Michelle Reale, personal reflective journal, September 23, 2009)

I have a vivid memory of how I felt after that particular class, which was a freshman English composition class. I was feeling a lot of things that I would go on to explore in great depth. I had to face things about myself, in particular the lack of agency I felt. Feeling this lack of agency was, in retrospect, less about me and more about how it affected the students in the class whom I would not be able to "reach" in the way that I felt then (and still feel now) they needed me to. I felt disappointed in myself, particularly the way in which I both consciously and subconsciously justified my practice. In my mind it "worked" simply because I *convinced* myself that it did. I had a lot of fear of looking too closely, a fear of what that look would reveal. In this way, I understood that this type of reflection takes a true commitment in time. It can be, in many ways, time-consuming, and time is something most librarians seem to have less and less of. But this type of reflection is so essential that I almost cannot conceive of functioning as a professional without its many benefits.

In the above journal excerpt, I mention two aspects of my teaching practice that I would focus greatly on in the future to the extent that they would change my practice in very distinct and fundamental ways: my personal agency as a professional who knows how to best deliver lessons in her own field, and my conclusion about the severe limits of one-shot instruction sessions. I was clearly entrenched in what Brookfield called the "stance and dance."² In the stance, librarians as teachers have a sort of beginner's mind that is open to a spirit of inquiry—a constant and persistent questioning, in which one realizes that this questioning is perpetual, that one is always, in one way

or another, an “apprentice.” This does not mean to imply that we are forever “amateurs” in our professions, that we will never truly progress—but rather that we will experience the depth and breadth of our immense capabilities because our practice, like ourselves, will be in constant evolution, improving all the time. The “dance” is the proverbial “going out on a limb.” The dance entails risk, taking chances, and being willing to change things, sometimes in a radical way. When I wrote in my journal that I felt as though I had no agency as a professional, it was not enough to simply state the fact and then move on. Once you know, once you understand, the old way no longer works. I had to move forward, to take the chance of saying, the next time I was asked to do a one-shot instruction session, “Can we talk about this? In my experience, one session does not seem to work . . .” Taking this kind of action helps us to act in concert with the new information that is revealed to us, and act on what we believe to be a better and more enlightened practice. This entails, among other things, examining our core beliefs. Is this an intimidating process? To be sure, it is. But recognizing that the old way no longer works is half the battle.

THREE PROCESSES OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

Larrivee describes the three practices that she deems essential for reflective practice.³ While reflection is a highly individualized and personal process in addition to being cyclical rather than linear, these three practices form a basis for solid and sound practice: *making the time for reflection, becoming a perpetual problem-solver, and questioning the status quo.*

As with anything we want to become good at, we must give reflection time, and we must *practice*. Making and *committing time* to reflective practice is essential. If it is true that we make the path by walking, then *living* the life of a reflective practitioner cannot be divorced from the practice itself. Being able to reflect in a quiet place, alone and with a notebook, is invaluable and certainly the right approach. Solitude is the ideal climate for reflecting on our practice. In the space that we provide for ourselves, we are best able

to understand how our practice affects our students in the classroom. Because our work is inextricably tied to the impact we have on minds in formation, reflection is not a luxury. Keeping a reflective journal is a great way to be able to write down our experiences in the classroom. The very act of moving pen across paper (I am biased in favor of the use of a paper journal) is meditative in and of itself. One line begets another until we are in a state of mind where we are ready to not only record details of our teaching and our students, but we become open to truly reflecting on these experiences. Reflection is not the mere recording of details by themselves, and it is not descriptive, although it often starts that way. Reflecting in the journal requires not only fresh eyes but seeing through the eyes of others. For instance, how might a practice that you feel particularly fond of be affecting students in your classes? What kind of feedback have you gotten? What have you dismissed? What might your assessment of your sessions reveal? Are you honoring your instincts or working against them? The process of writing in the journal is a recursive process in that you may (and perhaps should) go back and forth between your entries as you begin to understand and gain new meaning through your experiences.

One of the reasons the journal becomes so important to our practice is that while we are teaching, whether it occurs at the reference desk, among colleagues, or in the classroom, we are in fact reflecting, but the journal further allows us to reflect on our reflecting. Even if we have prepared a lesson plan or any other preparation that we go through in our daily professional lives, we are thinking on our feet, acting in the moment. Because while we can be reasonably certain of what we think we will teach, say, and so on, what we cannot possibly predict is the reaction of those with whom we are interacting. Reflecting is a stepping outside of ourselves enough to see whether our teaching lands “soft” or “hard,” in a manner of speaking.

The *problem-solving* aspect of reflection just makes good sense. When we are solving problems, that means that we are open to the change and resistance around us and act fluidly to find solutions. The reflective practitioner is challenged by problems, but not done in by them because they are not total surprises if one has been paying attention. This attentiveness to details, situations, reactions,

feedback, and so on gives us the information we need to not be blind-sided when a problem arises. And because we have been in tune with our teaching, we can solve problems more readily, more consciously, and more deliberately. The reflective practitioner becomes a natural problem-solver because issues that arise no longer intimidate him or her. He or she also has the presence of mind to be honest about the issue and honest in the response. First, one must be able to both *perceive* and *accept* a problem before it can be solved. In fact, Dewey wrote about the recognition of a problem or particular dilemma as being the true condition in which reflection can be initiated and practiced.⁴ While I believe there may be some exceptions to Dewey's assertion, I do believe that a problem or dilemma itself is most often the inciting factor in beginning reflective practice. The problem often creates the necessity to drill down and examine it closely, and then to reflect deeply. Working to solve a problem also helps us to realize that while sometimes situations can become worrisome or out of control, *we* are not out of control. Problems or challenges will most definitely arise in classrooms and other teaching situations in which experimentation is encouraged and mistakes are tolerated. We have the power to effect change in our day-to-day teaching by becoming more aware of *ourselves*.

Questioning the status quo is extremely important in the kind of reflection that forms the basis of critical pedagogy. In fact, when the reflective practitioner questions the status quo, it sets an example for students to do the same. We can recognize that the way in which we teach and the policies that we create, enforce, or follow are created as a response to a political and cultural environment at both the micro and macro levels, and can therefore be quite challenging. Challenging the status quo puts us on the level with our own beliefs and helps to validate our own tacit knowledge. Mezirow describes critical reflection as the first step toward transformative learning.⁵ This learning is experienced both by the librarian and the student, which can lead to dramatic changes in the way we think, what we believe, and how we act to instigate and implement these changes. Reflection is integral to being able to fully understand and integrate these changes in thinking and attitude, and knowing how to best implement them in our day-to-day work.

NOT A PASSIVE PRACTICE

I've made the point that reflection takes practice. I would further assert that reflection in and of itself *is* practice. The way we learn and the way in which we pattern learning for our students is to experience our experiences while they are happening, and then reflect upon those experiences. We give voice to an idea or a situation, we act, and then we reflect on the process—not just the outcome. In this way, reflection is far from the “navel-gazing” that those who misunderstand the practice perceive it to be. *Thinking is inextricable from the act of doing.* Dewey, though, was astute in his observation that “mere activity does not constitute activity.”⁶ Dewey goes on to further explain the cause and effect of what it means to reflect on experience:

To “learn from experience” is to make a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence. Under such conditions, doing becomes a trying; an experiment with the world to find out what it is like; undergoing becomes instruction—discovery of the connection of things. (Ibid.)

It is both activity and reflection that shape experience. Dewey believed that knowledge was not a thing or an entity in and of itself, but rather a relationship that an individual or a group has with an experience. The ancient model of apprenticeship was based on the idea of learning how a craft was done by doing—not by passively listening to lengthy lectures in which theory is separate from practice. Today we can (and should) acknowledge that both knowledge and acumen come from a combination of both listening attentively and practicing intentionally. Librarians know this combination very well.

FINAL THOUGHTS

While much of the literature on reflective practice has come from other fields, most particularly from education and nursing, it is slowly catching on across the board. Librarians, in particular, can benefit by learning to incorporate reflection into their own daily practice,

as a way of rejecting the myth that technical rationality is the only model that can legitimize our practice. While reflective practice is perceived as passive, as I have attempted to show, it is anything but passive. It is a catalyst for more *conscious*, and therefore more effective practice personally, professionally, and educationally. What is sound practice for us as professionals is passed directly on to our students. It becomes a win/win situation all around.

NOTES

1. Chris Argyris, *Overcoming Organizational Defenses* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1990).
2. Stephen D. Brookfield, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995).
3. Barbara Larrivee, *Authentic Classroom Management: Creating a Community of Learners* (Boston: Allyn & Bacon, 1999).
4. John Dewey, *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process* (Lexington, MA: Heath, 1933).
5. Jack Mezirow, "How Critical Reflection Triggers Transformative Learning," in *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990), 1–20.
6. John Dewey, *Democracy and Education* (public domain, various editions, 1916).

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