

The Personal Introspective Essay: A Key Tool for Educators

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Educational inquiry presents itself in many different ways, including philosophical themes, teachers' experience, psychology and learning theory, the content and organization of the curriculum, biography and history, international experience, the personal introspective essay, and ethnographic participant observation. Out of all of these forms of inquiry, the personal introspective essay remains the most fruitful approach to studying education. The following description of the approach, as well as how teachers can use it to inform their practice shows that personal introspection leads to growth and can be used to reach true collaboration.

First, it is necessary to take a look at what personal introspection means in the world of education and how the approach actually works. Reflective teaching means that a teacher takes the time out of his or her day to take a look at what they are doing in the classroom and whether or not it is working. Most importantly, it means that teachers think about *why* they do what they do, making teaching a process of self-observation and self-evaluation. Together, the practice of teaching and reflecting leads to introspection, or an understanding of one's own mental and emotional processes as they are engaging in their teaching practice. When reflection is taken one step further, in the form of reflective journaling and writing, it takes the form of a personal introspective essay.

When teachers are engaged in this form of inquiry, they ask themselves questions based on what they perceive to be educational problems. For example, as a

teacher is leading a lesson, they may see that several of the students seem to be missing the same concept. With the help of reflective journaling, the teacher could then begin to pose questions as to why the students are not grasping the concept. It is when this question posing begins that teachers are able to start to analyze the reasons behind what is taking place in front of them, whether the problem stems from the language in the lesson, the learning format being used, or maybe outside factors that are influencing student learning. This reflection and inquiry leads teachers to form understanding, or insight into educational problems, and allows them to move into the decision making process in order to solve those problems.

Personal introspection in the form of reflective journaling is both suitable for teachers, but also extremely accessible for all. Teachers go through at least four, if not more, years in a teacher preparation program, where they feel they are receiving all the information they need in order to educate students successfully. However, despite how much valuable information is gained through these courses, a lot of learning takes place from actual experience, which can only be found once someone is in the classroom. In other words, the learning does not stop when college is over, and neither should efforts to actively engage in learning. Reflective journaling, the strategy that Vivian Paley used when writing her introspective essays, is exactly what teachers need to stay actively engaged in their learning process, no matter what age.

There long has been the misconception that you “can’t teach an old dog new tricks”, and this thought is also applied to people as well. Whether a teacher is new, or has twenty years of experience, reflective journaling is key to personal and professional

growth. Gene D. Cohen's research tells us "wisdom cannot be taught". Rather, it is "a developmental mix of age, knowledge, emotional and practical life experience, and brain function that allows us to integrate those pieces to achieve insight". As adults, then, taking the time to reflect on our practice is extremely beneficial, as adults are at the age where they have the mental tools necessary to be truly insightful. Similarly, Cohen finds that it is "typically easier to define problems and envision multiple strategies to deal with them" as an adult learner. Problems arise multiple times throughout a teacher's day, and reflective journaling the way that Paley did throughout her career, would allow teachers to process each problem and decide which of multiple strategies would work best.

Additionally, Cohen summarizes the human potential phases in adult life, showing that adults (typically from ages 40-50) are on a "quest to make life and work more gratifying and meaningful". It is no wonder then, that Paley writing at age fifty, found reflective journaling to be so impactful in her work and life. Her daily writing made her work with the students more meaningful to them as well as herself, teaching her not only how to be the best teacher she could be, but also valuable information about herself and human nature.

Personal introspection with the help of journaling leads to insight and wisdom. The knowledge gained from this practice can be used in collaboration with other teachers, as well as administrators and all those interested in education to solve bigger picture problems as well. For example, in the current Chicago Public School system, administrators visit individual classrooms four times per school year, on average, to

evaluate teacher performance. During these observations, administrators take note of teacher practice as well as student learning, and discuss what is seen with teachers afterward. The process allows administrators to see learning that is taking place at the time, but does not paint a clear picture of what is actually taking place in the classroom on a daily basis. If teachers were to keep reflective journals where they track and monitor issues with their students regarding academics, behavior, culture, etc. the insight they develop could be used in discussions with administrators and other school staff to monitor patterns that arise school wide.

Likewise, reflective journals would be a great tool to use when teachers are given time to collaborate with each other. After a lesson is taught, it is easy for teachers to make simple generalizations about how it went, and these statements are often shared with each other in passing. It is common to hear teachers say, “my lesson went well”, “they didn’t really get that strategy”, or “Gabe was really misbehaving today” as they are talking with their colleagues. However, these generalizations are lacking insight. If teachers take the time to journal their reflections after a lesson or at the end of the day, they are less likely to only make generalizations and more likely to engage in inquiry. Instead of simply stating whether or not a lesson went well, journaling would help a teacher ask and think about *why* the lesson went well. It would prompt a teacher to think about *why* a child is misbehaving, what the underlying problems are, and perhaps new strategies they could use to help. In this way, journaling allows teachers to become what Karen Gallas refers to as “teacher researchers”, providing an outlet to “describe the points at which teachers’ thoughts, concepts, and beliefs make contact

with the lives of children". Then, teachers can continue the "teacher research" process by sharing their reflections and collaborating to examine "the trajectory and outcomes of that contact". Research done by the Encyclopedia of Curriculum Studies shows that this type of inquiry, known as "descriptive inquiry" results in positive progress in classrooms. The report states that "by being more attentive to their present circumstances, it is assumed that teachers will be better equipped to transform their practice in ways that support the fuller humanity of their students, transform their classrooms toward greater equity and social justice, and foster student understanding of curriculum content". In essence, journaling would help teachers to become personally introspective and reflective and would lead to more in depth conversations with their colleagues, which in turn, would lead to higher student success.

In the end, it is important to remember that what takes place in a classroom can be just as exciting, alarming, and unexpected to an adult as it is to a student. As Paley puts it, "I have lived in classrooms most of my life, yet I am more often as surprised as the children by the events around us". She goes on to say how the more she uses journaling as a way to record what her children are saying and doing, the easier it becomes to explain it. In other words, Paley has found journaling to be a critical tool in her efforts to gain insight. Her commitment to reflection has not only brought her personal growth, but her ability to translate her reflections into personal introspection essays has brought about positive transformations in her teaching practice, and has allowed others to use her insight to inform their practice as well. As she notes, "This process of examining complaints and imagining solutions gives a great surge of power

and communal purpose to us all". This approach, when used in classrooms and schools to discuss teaching, problems of practice, and school wide concerns would not only allow teachers to improve their individual practice, but would also lead to true collaboration and student success.