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CCT 688: Reflective Practice Plan for Practice

Reflective Practice in Church and Beyond

Reflecting upon how this CCT 688 class can be creatively incorporated into my workplace has been a slow process. In the church we technically already use some forms of very traditional reflective practice in which we consider our words, actions and thoughts, decide how to change them, do so and then begin that “upward spiral” again. As part of a religious setting though, it is also a systematic and ironic acknowledgement that we can’t do this without divine help and can’t ever achieve the perfection we strive for even if we are encouraged to persist. In this instance, reflective practice is always a grateful response to grace, not the attempt to earn it. United Methodists in particular try to adhere to a “methodical” approach to faith and living it since improvement is not for merely ourselves, but for and with God.

One aspect that doesn’t often seem to be part of the reflective practice in the models I’ve seen is an outside accountability built into the assessment in addition to the personal. The idea here is that reflective practice can be a collaborative activity in which individuals work together on their individual and collective change and they actually report and discuss this in settings other than classrooms. This is similar to the church’s idea of “covenant” or “disciple” groups that require not only a great deal of commitment, but honesty as well. To do this kind of accounting in my church without actually joining the one women’s group that best practices this (meeting are on Mondays which conflict with CCT classes), I’ve created some opportunities for my own experimentation. In the one Disciple Bible study that I lead, I’ve required them to make sure that I don’t ask any questions I can’t or won’t answer myself. Sometimes the sharing can be personal, so this challenge has been one which my peers have called me on —not so that I would avoid the tough questions, but that I would model the courage to keep asking and answering them. I’ve also had a “prayer partner” to make sure that I’ve done better in my life and then have tried to bring more accountability back into my classes of CCT.

For CCT itself, I’ve deliberately sent emails with deadlines within them to others to ensure I’d meet these obligations. I’ve also tried to put this class first, treating it like three credits despite the one. Whenever I’ve received them, I’ve done this course’s assignments even over the others from CCT to submit by the next day or sooner. Because each writing response was to be reflective I’ve tried not to rush to finish, yet this attempt to put more accountability in as a learning element has been useful. While there is always a danger that the completion of the task would become more important than the actual lesson learned, any assignment is a balance between the required and the given, between any content communicated and successful understanding anyway.

Most recently in my workplace we’ve also started an experimental new class that requires weekly reflective practice. I think this is my attempt to have collaborative or group reflective practice for deeper thinking and more active participant involvement. Since it began on Easter, this activity based class requires that the ending of each lesson to be a discussion of the next week’s topic with the completion of a modified plus/delta index card review. On a card, each one of these group of adults (plus two teens) lists what he/she liked about the class that day, what needs improved and what each personally would like as far as a type of activity for the next week. This gives me both a ready-made collection of ideas that I know they are interested in trying out as well as a creative structure to pick and choose. I am relying on them to provide some input and this student driven process has been exciting on both sides. They are curious what I’m going to do with their suggestions and how I interpret them while I am interested in seeing how my adaptations are received.

My own reflective practice in teaching for change has been to treat this class as informally as possible and to model the simplest possible multiple intelligence activities to show how they can be done by others. Some drawbacks to date have been implementing activities when the originator isn’t there to see his/her idea in action and the feedback that merely says “keep doing what you’re doing.” The positives though are the great creative response and the deeper discussions as we’ve been meeting and growing closer.

This class is about to face an interesting transition—the turning point or next change in its “life.” Because all of the faith development classes under my ministry “umbrella” are self-sustained and I act as a servant leader more than an overseeing manager, this one must soon have collaborative leadership set up as I step back. I can come back in and teach them every once in a while, but have to begin to allow them their own full identity and evolution. To do this, I made the most recent class time as basic as possible with almost a discussion only structure, focusing on the same relaxed sharing and even an actual reflective freewrite so that those attending and soon leading would not feel obligated to keep the activity based style. This Sunday I will be asking them to decide the format for the following week since I’ll be coming to Boston then. They have been presented the “each take ten minutes” multiple facilitator idea, “one leader or two” for the dialogue or any other idea they’d like to try. This wonderfully radical and unique class is hard for me to let go. It started as a pioneering concept (Sunday school for those who hate or have never been to Sunday school) so the founding members are less resistant to new processes and are adventurous enough to not even really see any idea as failure. One of the activities I tried for example was a tactile one in which to connect and help define an abstract word. It really wasn’t the best activity, yet they trusted enough to try it and even made it work better than it really should have. They’ll be fine as long as I show the confidence in them that they’ve given me.

This juxtaposition of individual and partnering reflective practice still needs more though, so I looked for examples to bring in outside of CCT in order to elaborate upon and enhance my definition and application of this course. In Ghaye’s *Teaching and Learning through Reflective Practice*, he “advocates” some new ideas that I’ve been considering how to use next. He states the obvious--“reflection needs to have consequence (p. 126).” But then he offers something a little different, even if we have indirectly done this throughout the semester without naming it. He says that reflective practices also “should be strength based,” “that not only solve problems but also seek to enhance human flourishing (p. 13).” His model of “positivity” is “appreciate, imagine, design and act.” He defines this kind of reflection in action with “seeing the best of a situation and the change to make things even better (p. 66).”

 I also interviewed Harrison Owen to explore his idea of reflective practice and how to do it. He responded as follows: “Reflective *response* is a natural process. Everyone does it, but you surely recognize those who don’t do it well. They are in lock-step and don’t think about what they are doing or where they are going. They blame others when things go wrong, saying ‘they did this to me when they don’t realize that the “they is me.’” He went on to add “awareness” of reflecting is good, “yet sometimes the harder you think about it, the less likely you are to do it (change). God knows it’s like breathing, we don’t usually notice how it comes out. We can be aware of our breathing, step up our experience…But when we are nervous or anxious, the first response is to ‘fix it,’ do something, but that's the worst thing to do. Stop. Take a deep breath. Then take two or three." He compared reflective response to going to a good sporting event or seeing another’s mind at work on physics. “I don’t have to know how to do it well to enjoy it (personal communication, April 17, 2013).”

Trying to incorporate a more natural, positive reflective practice so that I’m not so “down on myself” is a work in progress. The fact that this “you need to improve” use of reflection for change is so prevalent at church makes this a continuing challenge. Some of the ways to do reflective practice in this less judgmental and more exploratory fashion actually comes from another resource that is in opposition to “positivity” by sponsoring “critical creativity.” The author in *Action Research and Reflective Practice* advocates seeing “how imagination relates to truth,” “how imagination relates to being” and “how imagination relates to others-ethics (Kearney as quoted by McIntosh, p. 90).” The ideas I really took away though were a “coding (p. 136)” and “scaffolding through metaphor (p. 114)” and through visual symbolism. This expansion beyond words affirmed some of my ideas of using nonverbal cues in reflective communications, yet doesn’t quite let go to allow others’ interpretation by including “narrative” and “critical commentary” and “the descriptive stage (pp. 146-147)” components instead of trusting someone with unwritten response in return.

In order to have some resource in which to try out my “unproven, not ready for prime time ideas,” I chose to “publish” another Weebly site like the one done in CCT 670. Originally I was going to make reflective practice exercises for preschool to senior citizens since I’ve taught these age ranges at different times. But in order to pursue the “visual” reflective communication methods as suggested in the one book, I thought the online forum could be very simple and not so “teacher-like.” It doesn’t include research and definitions, but offers a link to a Prezi for collective and open participation, several pictures and videos to view on this practice and then a way I’ve played around and created math from reflection. Instead of “writing to learn” or “writing to communicate,” I am experimenting with how to use “art or music to learn” and “art or music to communicate” when these are not the strongest domains/multiple intelligences in my personal learning styles. The following is the link to the site: <http://creativereflectivepractice.weebly.com>

Some other ways I hope to use reflective practice include fiction writing and drama. Although monologues and thinking “asides” are natural fits for displaying this cycle, I am curious if I can also include the collaborative aspect or even make a story’s “mind map” or structure of “epicycles” (Action Research language) that could be visuals to a story’s underlying plot. It reminds me of whole music notes and would be an interesting pictorial inclusion if more than one character was “reflective” so that the symbolic “music” of their reflective practices might possibly be played.

In my plan for future practice, I will teach reflective practice using some symbolism, some writing and more collaborative dialogue to have some accountability in the “change” portion of the cycle. But perhaps the most important part of reflective practice is the application to my personal life. It is not just a means of “self-control;” I am also drawn to the idea of learning more about myself.

Since graduation brings a change in status, time available and learning venues, it is important to consider establishing this habit into daily routine. Although I have rarely done journaling as part of my writing, I think it would be a good way to record future plans and results. One of the ideas I’ll take away from this class is the idea of using personal “open houses” or my “windows” definition for reflective practice. If I paid attention to other gatherings where there are presentations or even what might remind me of “dialogue processes,” I can reflect on the learning beyond the meeting itself. I could still be the student and note the quotes that “spoke” to me to keep and build upon and then share them as we did on the Google site. I don’t want to really go back to blogging to do this, so when I’m ready I’ll need to share journal entries in other yet to be discovered or created ways.

Bibliography

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