

Appendix G.2 - Themes of Reflection

Rob Boody

The preceding section of the chapter described some of the thoughts and actions of Dave Jensen as a junior high school teacher. Aspects of reflection can be seen throughout the portrayal, but to allow the description to speak for itself I withheld comment. In this section, however, I will explicitly describe six major themes of reflection developed out of the research. The choice of the descriptor “themes” is a conscious one. Other than the fact that it is a term often used in ethnography and naturalistic inquiry, it also implies that I will discuss things I have seen without implying that there is a rigid structure at play. I don’t want to assume that the term “teacher reflection” has only one meaning or even that definitions are primary, or that there is only one kind of reflection. Words have uses; they are part of forms of life (Wittgenstein, 1958). My goal is to pay close attention to what actually goes on, and provide close description and analysis to bring forth better understanding of what reflection is, how it works, what effects it has, and how to help develop it. I want to help delineate the modes and aspects that occur, not define it as one thing. It is not even a “thing”; it is a variety of practices related to each other the way that games are (see Wittgenstein, 1958).

In many qualitative studies, research starts from the actual terms the participants use. It then becomes a matter of teasing out the culturally held ideas about this particular term. Spradley uses this approach very effectively in discussing tramp culture (see *You Owe Yourself a Drunk*, Spradley, 1974).

In the present study, “reflection” is not a term that Dave Jensen used in the way it is used here. However the idea of researching reflection came out of our work together. So, in a sense, I am applying a term from the literature onto Dave’s experience. It is helpful to have some organizing concept to pull together all of the singular occurrences we have experienced in his classroom. But at the same time such a concept can be dangerous to productive thinking and action. Even more than bringing the literature to bear on the classroom I would like Dave Jensen’s experience inform what I have seen in the literature.

There are potentially many other ways to talk about what goes on in Dave’s classroom. I am not creating an interpretation that is clear and distinct from all other characterizations; I do not require convergent and discriminant validity. I welcome reverberations. I am trying to create an interpretation that will be beneficial for teacher educators, teachers, and ultimately, for students, parents, and the communities in which they live. Therefore, if some of what I say seems not to fit, or is wrong, or doesn’t connect, readers should not feel coerced to accept it. On the other hand, if something I say does not neatly fit into a pre-existent scheme I hope readers will consider the possibility of throwing the scheme away and opening themselves up to new experiences and thoughts.

Theme 1: The Four Theoretical Versions of Reflection

I did not go into the study to prove or disprove the major views of reflection, but as I read the literature on reflection at the same time period as I did the fieldwork, I could not help but consider what I was seeing in light of the theories I was reading. I found them all to be helpful in thinking about parts of Dave Jensen’s experience, but too narrow and limited to be useful to me in articulating a wider view. I do not think that any of the received theories account for enough of what I saw going on, nor do I think that their language is as rich as could be. On the other hand, I think there are reasons for

using each of their languages, and each can be used to describe some of what I saw. Let me briefly indicate what I think each of the four views has to offer and what some of the weaknesses of each view are.

Retrospective Analysis: There are certainly times when Dave would, after the fact, think about what had just happened to make sense of it. The problem with describing reflection in this way is that it ignores many other facets of reflection that are not retrospective, neither are they as conscious and deliberate. It ignores the larger context of his life. In addition, nothing is said about how such reflections make a difference in the present or future. That is, even if a teacher looks back on a teaching experience and thinks, for example, "I don't think that the students got very much out of this lesson," it is not clear how this will or will not factor into future teaching experiences.

One issue not well discussed in the literature is what exactly it is that is looked back upon. Dave Jensen, for example, saw things in his classroom that many people would not have seen. But there is always more that could have been seen. And there are different ways of seeing. Thinking of reflection merely as looking back on experience assumes the neutrality and givenness of experience.

Another slighted issue is that for such reflections to make a difference depends on a lot of things that are not discussed. For example, if Dave decides that a class did not go well and reflects on it, how will that affect tomorrow's classes? The class he reflected on is already past, and presumably tomorrow's plan is not identical. And if teaching is not mechanical, but a human activity, then the results of reflection are not mechanical in nature, and their influence not of a causal nature. A third issue is that there is a tendency to lose connection with the other person in thinking of reflection as retrospection. Retrospection is always after the fact, and it can be very introspective.

Dave Jensen does sometimes seem to do something like Cruickshank's (1987) analysis of effectiveness of methods and techniques. But he works with real lessons to real students, not contrived situations, as does Cruickshank. And, like most teachers, Dave usually reflects alone. As part of a larger teacher education approach, Cruickshank's method may well be a useful approach for limited objectives; but it is not a good description of how practicing teachers reflect.

Dewey: Some of Dave's reflection might well be seen as a problem solving process. But again, problem solving alone does not describe the broad range of his reflections, and it ignores the fact that problems and rationality do not drive the process.

Consider the story above of his development as a teacher of reading fueled by the students' cry of "I hate to read." This could be seen as a case of problem-solving; he felt discomfort with what was going on, he worked out some things to do, he found a way to talk about it, and he could tell that some of what he was changing to was working. But as my analysis of the situation from the perspective of Dewey's seven-step model shows, this model is not a good description of the situation. (The italicized parts are quoted from p. 25 above, the rest of the text is my analysis.) **Pre-reflection.** Starts with a problematic situation, "perplexed, troubled, or confused" (Dewey, 1933, p. 199). This was certainly the case in our example. But this formulation tends to ignore the possibility that one could investigate something problematic in theory although not yet in practice or that one felt led to investigate without feeling any essential sense of anxiety. It also assumes that the natural position of humans is to be happy and satisfied, and not perplexed or troubled.

1. Direct action temporarily inhibited, so that thinking may take place. Suggestions of what to do occur; if more than one option exists, inquiry proceeds. Dave Jensen did not stop teaching the students so he could reflect; he did his sit-down thinking after teaching hours. But why do we assume that no ideas can come while action is taking place (see, for example, Schon, 1983; also pp. 43-46 above). This model says nothing about where the suggestions come from. Is it always necessary to have competing suggestions for inquiry to proceed?
2. Felt uneasiness transformed through identification and articulation into an intellectual problem to be solved. There certainly was some sense of this happening, although Dave taught for years before the major breakthrough occurred in 1984. It was much more than an intellectual problem. The knowledge required was not something he could get entirely from books or talk. He had to feel his way into it, and develop practical knowledge to guide him in carrying out what needed to be done.
3. Working hypothesis developed to guide data collection. His original data was gathered probably without hypothesis, as is most ethnographic data. Gathering data to support or refute a particular hypothesis has the tendency to cast everything in terms of that particular hypothesis and ignores much else that may be going on. Too often an hypothesis becomes a straight jacket.
4. Proposed solution elaborated and connected with other things through a reasoning process. This certainly occurred in the case I am discussing, but Dave's "solution" is not in essence a methodological or technical solution. It involved a different way of relating with students and of seeing the process and pedagogy of reading; it was a different form of life.
5. Attempt made to verify the hypothesis through empirical testing. Further refinement of the hypothesis and further testing can occur if the initial test does not verify the hypothesis. What kind of evidence would confirm or disconfirm the hypothesis? Dave Jensen continually tests his activities, but on the grounds of what specific hypothesis? This is not to say that he does not employ verbal formulations that sound like hypotheses, for that he does not test these. I am simply pointing out that the process of hypothesis testing is not as straightforward as the model suggests. For example, if we take a verificationist approach, making a hypothesis and looking to see if the predicted results occur, we are unable to certify our hypothesis due to the logical fallacy of affirming the Consequent. More than predicate calculus is required.

Post-reflection. In post-reflective period, a feeling of "a direct experience of mastery, satisfaction, enjoyment (Dewey, 1933). This is not Dave's usual state at all. He continues to be troubled by his teaching and the needs of his students. He does often feel satisfaction when students he works with do well and break out of bad habits. But he still worries about the others. Van Manen: One could always, of course, spread Dave Jensen's actions out along van Manen's hierarchy. Following Noffke and Brennan's critique, however, to do so tends to ignore the connections between the levels in the hierarchy, and the idea that all of the levels are needed. In addition it takes as the ideal state something that does not reflect Dave's situations. Take, for example, his moving from book reports to his version of written book sharing, "For Our Reading Pleasure." Perhaps there is not really that much difference. Perhaps it is only a difference "in technique." Or is it? Could the change in technique be seen as a way to promote free speech community, not as an impediment to it? "For Our Reading Pleasure" is intended to be a way to let students talk more about what they got out of a book, and in a way that might invite other students to want to read it. Several students who disliked many aspects of the class nevertheless took this social aspect of the class very seriously and spent much time preparing their submissions.

Schon: Sometimes Dave Jensen does what could be labeled as reflection-in-action. Indeed, I find Schon's (1983) notion very powerful, as it gives a way to see mindful work going on even in "on the fly" action. To me, this is an important advance for the status of teacher knowledge (see Boody, 1992). Schon provides a way to talk about teachers as problem solvers, as Dewey attempted, but without some of the baggage left over from nineteenth century science (see the following chapter) that Dewey's approach carried with it. But once again, there are other ways of reflecting as well, and reflection-in-action misses the personal and ethical nature of reflection. For example, when I see Dave talking with a student about something, and reframing the situation for them, what I see happening is more than a description of mental processing; I see obligation. Why does Dave bother to try to reframe something at all? Is reframing an intellectual game or an act of service? Particular students trouble him over extended periods of time, sometimes well past when anything concrete could have been done for them.

Each of the four ideas of reflection from the literature can be seen in the data. Each is a perspective from which to see the data, each revealing and concealing different things. But I find none of them individually, or collectively, enough to account for what I see going on.



This content is provided to you freely by EdTech Books.

Access it online or download it at <https://edtechbooks.org/qualitativeinquiry/appendixg2>.