Reflection Is at the Heart of Practice

SIMON HOLE AND GRACE HALL MCENTEE

Our hearts tell us we must slow down, look carefully at events that comprise our lives in school, and consider the implications for our teaching. Yet our minds are so often focused on the lesson at hand, we leave ourselves no time for reflection.

Two of us—Simon and Grace—felt strongly that we needed to examine more closely and think more deeply about the details of our practice. Each month Grace coached Simon's Critical Friends Group at Narragansett Elementary School. Once a week Simon observed Grace's students at Pilgrim High School, in Warwick, Rhode Island. We shared the stories of our professional lives, both verbally and in writing. We explored the events behind the stories, constantly asking “Why?” and “What does it mean?”

Eventually, as we puzzled out the meanings of what we shared, we thought how others might benefit from knowing our reflective process. Over the course of a year the following chapter was born.

It was not an easy birth. As teachers, we were both used to collaboration. As writers, we found it difficult to settle into a style that would incorporate both our voices.

From our own volumes of written and unwritten stories, we—a fourth-grade teacher and a high school teacher—chose two incidents. As usual, each of us used a protocol to formalize the process of thinking more deeply about what happened in the classroom.

GUIDED REFLECTION

Simon follows the Guided Individual Reflection Protocol shown in Figure 6.1 as he examines an incident from his classroom.

Step 1. Collect Stories

For Simon the first step in guided reflection is to collect possible episodes for reflection. David Tripp (1993) encourages us to think about ordinary events, which often have much to tell us about the underlying trends, motives, and structures of our practice. The story that follows, “The Geese and the Blinds,” exemplifies this use of an ordinary event.

Step 2. What Happened?

Wednesday, September 24, 9:30 a.m. I stand to one side of the classroom, taking the morning attendance. One student glances out the window and sees a dozen Canada geese grazing on the playground. Hopping from his seat, he calls out as he heads to the window for a better view. Within moments, six students cluster around the window. Others start from their seats to join them. I call for attention, ask them to return to their desks. When none of the students respond, I walk to the window and lower the blinds.

Answering the question, “What happened?” is more difficult than it sounds. We all have a tendency to jump into an interpretive or judgmental mode, but it is important to begin by simply telling the story. Writing down what happened—without analysis or judgment—aids in creating a brief narrative. Only then are we ready to move to the third step.

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Figure 6.1
Guided Individual Reflection Protocol

1. Collect Stories. Some find that keeping a set of index cards or a steno book close at hand provides a way to jot down stories as they occur. Others prefer to wait until the end of the day and write in a reflective journal.

2. What Happened? Choose a story that strikes you as particularly interesting. Write it out in as succinct a fashion as possible.

3. Why Did It Happen? Fill in enough of the context to give the story a sense of meaning. It is impossible to include all the background. Answer the question in a way that makes sense to you.

4. What Might it Mean? Recognizing that there is no one answer to this question is an important step. This should be an attempt to explore possible meanings rather than a presentation of what the meaning must be.

5. What Are the Implications for Practice? Again, this step is about exploring the possibilities. Tell how your practice might change given any new understandings that have emerged from the earlier steps.

(Adapted from the Critical Incidents Protocol [see Figure 6.2] by Simon Hole and Grace Hall McEntee)

Step 3. Why Did it Happen?

Attempting to understand why an event happened the way it did is the beginning of reflection. We must search the context within which the event occurred for explanations. Simon reflects:

It's not hard to imagine why the students reacted to the geese as they did. As nine-year-olds, they are incredibly curious about their world. Explaining my reaction is more difficult. Even as I was lowering the blinds, I was kicking myself. Here was a natural opportunity to explore the students' interests. Had I stood at the window with them for five minutes, asking questions to see what they knew about geese, or even just listening to what they might have to say, I'd be telling a story about seizing the moment, or taking advantage of a learning opportunity. I knew that even as I lowered the blinds. So, why?

Searching deeper, we may find that a specific event serves as an example of a more general category of events. We need to consider the underlying structures within the school that may be a part of the event and examine deeply held values and beliefs. As we search, we often find more questions than answers.

Two key things stand out concerning that morning. First, the schedule. On Wednesdays, students leave the room at 10:00 a.m. and do not return until 15 minutes before lunch. I would be out of the classroom all afternoon attending a meeting, and so this half hour was all the time I would have with my students.

Second, this is the most challenging class I've had in 22 years of teaching. The first 3 weeks of school had been a constant struggle as I tried strategy after strategy to hold their attention long enough to have a discussion, give directions, or conduct a lesson. The hectic schedule and the need to prepare the class for a substitute added to the difficulty I've had "controlling" the class, so I closed the blinds.

There's something satisfying about answering the question, "Why did it happen?" Reflection often stops here. If the goal is to become a reflective practitioner, however, we need to look more deeply. The search for meaning is step four of the process.

Step 4. What Might it Mean?

Assigning meaning to the ordinary episodes that make up our days can feel like overkill. Is there really meaning behind all those events? Wouldn't it be more productive to wait for something extraordinary to happen, an event marked with a sign: "Pay attention! Something important is happening." Guided reflection is a way to find the meaning within the mundane. Split-second decision making is a crucial
aspect of teaching. Given the daily madness of life in a classroom, considering all the options and the consequences is difficult. Often it is only through reflection that we even recognize that we had a choice, that we could have done something differently.

Like a football quarterback, I often make bad decisions because of pressure. Unlike a quarterback, I don’t have an offensive line to blame for letting the pressure get to me. While it would be nice to believe that I could somehow make the pressure go away, the fact is that it will always be with me. Being a teacher means learning to live within that pressure, learning from the decisions I make, and learning to make better decisions.

Our growing awareness of how all events carry some meaning is not a new concept. John Dewey (1938) wrote about experience and its relationship to learning and teaching: “Every experience affects for better or worse the attitudes which help decide the quality of further experiences” (p. 37). He believed that teachers must be aware of the “possibilities inherent in ordinary experience…” (p. 89), that “the business of the educator [is] to see in what direction an experience is heading” (p. 38). Rediscovering this concept through the examination of ordinary events creates a fresh awareness of its meaning.

The search for meaning is an integral part of being human. But understanding by itself doesn’t create changes in classroom practice. The last phase of guided reflection is more action oriented and involves holding our practice to the light of those new understandings.

**Step 5. What Are the Implications for Practice?**

Simon continues:

My reaction to the pressure this year has been to resort to methods of control. Why did I pull down the blinds? The easy answer is that I was trying to control the situation, to get the kids back in their seats so they could listen to directions.

On another level, pulling down the blinds may have been an attempt at self-control. With so much going on in my teaching world, I had no space for even a 10-minute digression into the students’ world. In this sense, the blinds were falling between the students and me.

So, I’m thinking about how I might better deal with the pressure. But there is something else that needs attention. Where is the pressure coming from? I’m sensing from administration and parents that they feel I should be doing things differently. I’ve gotten subtle and overt messages that I need to pay more attention to “covering” the curriculum, that I should be finding a more equal balance between process and product.

Maybe they’re right. What I’ve been doing hasn’t exactly been a spectacular success. But I think that what is causing the lowering of the blinds stems from my not trusting enough in the process. Controlling the class in a fairly traditional sense isn’t going to work in the long run. Establishing a process that allows the class to control itself will help keep the blinds up.

Cultivating deep reflection through the use of a guiding protocol is an entry into rethinking and changing practice. Alone, each of us can proceed step by step through the examination of a particular event. Through the process, we gain new insights into implications of ordinary events, as Simon did when he analyzed the incident of “The Geese and the Blinds.”

**CRITICAL INCIDENTS**

While Guided Individual Reflection is for use by individuals, the Critical Incidents Protocol is used with colleagues. The goal is the same: to get to the heart of our practice, the place that pumps the lifeblood into our teaching, where we reflect, gain insight, and change what we do with our students. In addition, the Critical Incidents Protocol encourages the establishment of collegial relationships.

Schools are social places. Although too often educators think and act alone, in most schools colleagues do share daily events. Stories told in teachers’ lounges are a potential source of rich insight into issues of teaching and learning and can open doors to professional dialogue.

Telling stories has the potential for changing individual practice and the culture of our schools. The Critical Incidents Protocol allows practitioners to share stories in a way that is useful to their own
thinking and to that of the group. Figure 6.2 provides a summary of the steps involved in this protocol.

The steps in the process of reflection as a group are almost identical to those for reflecting alone. Reviewing the process that Simon describes will be helpful in preparing for the one that follows.

The purpose for this process is to learn together by using an incident as the catalyst for group reflection. For this protocol three to five colleagues agree to meet for the purpose of exploring a critical incident, which Tripp (1993) defines as an event that is "commonplace" and that is "rendered critical through analysis" (p. 13).

**Step 1. Getting Started**

Each participant will have a copy of the protocol. An appointed facilitator from the group will keep the process flowing. Specific times are allotted for each step of the process. Strict adherence to these times reins in individuals who are unaccustomed to thinking about their own airtime and assures those gathered of completing the task within a given period of precious time.

**Step 2. Write Stories**

For 10 minutes, each participant writes a brief account of an incident that has occurred within the school or classroom. Colleagues should know that the sharing of their writing will be for the purpose of getting feedback on what happened rather than on the quality of the writing itself.

**Step 3. Choose a Story**

The group decides which story to use with the protocol for this particular session. The facilitator may ask for a quick go-round of summaries (2 minutes each, for example) to create a pool of possibilities. It is important to remember that each story is worthy, even though it emerges from an ordinary incident that shows barely a ripple in the everyday life at school.

Once the group decides which story to use for this session, the presenter reads the story aloud. The other participants listen carefully to understand what happened. If the group is ready to fly on its own, following the steps in the Critical Incidents Protocol will provide a guide to the process. If not, someone in the group will become "Grace" and the group will work with the following story.

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**Figure 6.2**

Critical Incidents Protocol for Shared Reflection

1. **Getting Started.** The group assigns roles: facilitator, time-keeper, etc.
2. **Write Stories.** Each member of the group writes briefly in response to the question: What happened? (10 minutes)
3. **Choose a Story.** The group decides which story to use.
4. **What Happened?** Presenter reads the written account of what happened and sets it within the context of professional goals or outcomes on which he or she is working. (10 minutes)
5. **Why Did it Happen?** Colleagues ask clarifying questions about what happened or about why the incident occurred. (5 minutes)
6. **What Might it Mean?** The group raises questions about what the incident might mean in the context of the presenter's work. They discuss as professional, caring colleagues. Presenter listens. (15 minutes)
7. **What Are the Implications for Practice?** Presenter responds, then the group engages in general conversation about what the implications might be for the presenter's practice and for their own. A useful question at this stage might be, "What new insights occurred?" (15 minutes)
8. **Debrief the Process.** The group talks about what just happened. How did the process work? (10 minutes)

(Derived from the work of David Tripp by Grace Hall McEntee during her work with Annenberg Institute for School Reform.)
Step 4. What Happened?

Grace’s story:

We went into the computer lab to work on essay drafts. TJ, Neptune, Ronny, and Mick sat as a foursome. Their sitting together had not worked last time. On their single printer an obscene message had appeared. All four had denied writing it.

The next day Ronny, Neptune, and Mick had already sat down. Just as TJ was about to take his seat, I asked him if he would mind sitting over at the next bay of computers. He exploded. "You think I’m the cause of the problem, don’t you?"

Actually I did think he might be, but I wasn’t at all certain. "No," I said, "but I do want you to sit over here for today." He got red in the face, plunked down in the chair near the three other boys, and refused to move.

I motioned for him to come with me. Out in the hall, I said to him quietly, "The bottom line is that all of you need to get your work done."

Out of control, body shaking, TJ angrily spewed out, "You always pick on me. Those guys ... You ... " I could hardly hear his words, so fascinated was I with his intense emotion and his whole body animation.

Contrary to my ordinary response to students who yell, I felt perfectly calm. I knew I needed to wait. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw two male teachers rise out of their chairs in the hallway about 25 feet away. They obviously thought that I, a woman of small stature, needed protection. But I did not look at them; I looked at TJ and waited.

When he had expended his wrathful energy, I said softly, "You know, TJ, you are a natural-born leader." I waited.

Breathed in and out. "You did not choose to be a leader; it was thrust upon you. But there you are. People follow you. So you have a tremendous responsibility, to lead in a positive and productive way. Do you understand what I am saying?"

Like an exhalation after a long in-breath, his body visibly relaxed. He looked down at me and nodded his head. Then, he held out his hand to me and said, "I’m sorry."

Back in the room, he picked up his stuff and, without a word, moved to the next bay of computers.

Step 5. Why Did It Happen?

Colleagues ask clarifying questions about what happened or why the incident occurred. These are the same kinds of questions that Simon asked himself during his guided reflection. Now, however, the group has the opportunity to think collaboratively. Every question that emerges from the activity is a question not only about “Grace’s” practice, but about that of each member of the group. If left unexamined, these events sometimes lead to an erosion of hopes and ideals upon which individuals and faculties build educational practice. Staying with the "why," asking it over and over, leads to the uncovering of layers.

At first you’ll think you need more information than this, but we think you have enough here. Your “Grace” can answer clarifying questions about what happened or why it happened in whatever way he or she sees fit.

Step 6. What Might It Mean?

After the “why’s” have been exhausted, group members discuss what the incident might mean in terms of “Grace’s” or another presenter’s practice. During this phase of the protocol, the presenter listens and takes notes. The taking of notes has a calming effect. It removes the need for the presenter to feel defensive.

Step 7. What Are the Implications for Practice?

During this phase of the process, the presenter responds to participants’ comments about what the incident might mean in terms of a particular individual practice. The facilitator assists in the transition from this individual response to a group dialogue around this kind of incident and the implications it might have for any practice.

Step 8. Debrief the Process

The debriefing is an essential part of the Critical Incidents Protocol, as it provides members with an opportunity to critique the process. The facilitator or another member of the group leads a conversation about what happened during the session, how well the process worked, and how the group might change the process for the next round.

Using the Critical Incidents Protocol becomes a different experience when the group consists of members who are not colleagues—
parents and/or teachers and administrators from across the district or from out of state. With groups whose members live and work outside a particular school culture, the process often reveals stunning insights into school culture and professional practice.

THE HEART OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

Whether you use the “Guided Individual Reflection Protocol” for individual reflection or the “Critical Incidents Protocol” for group reflection, whether you use an incident by yourself or with a group, we believe that building reflective practice is a sure way to get to the heart of teaching and learning.

REFERENCES


Linking Student Learning to Teacher Practice through Critical Friends Groups

PEGGY SILVA

You name the buzz words—this unit was solid gold. When asked to bring a piece of curriculum to examine with several colleagues, I knew exactly which unit to bring—interdisciplinary, heterogeneous, full inclusion, authentic assessment. I knew my colleagues would affirm my effort and my intent with this piece of curriculum. I needed that affirmation for the first time I shared my work with others.

Twelve colleagues who taught art, social studies, math, science, and English provided warm feedback and posed questions aimed at helping me see my work. Nobody told me what I should change. Nobody criticized my work or me. They all focused on my needs. Their thoughtful questions helped me to see concrete ways to improve student learning in this already strong unit. I wondered if this same group could help me with work that I was not at all sure about.

The following chapter describes the process of reflective practice through the lens of one teacher at one high school in Amherst, New Hampshire.

As teachers, we ask questions of ourselves everyday as we prepare our work with our students. We wonder why something works with one group yet not another; we devise different ways of introducing content; we explore new ideas gained at workshops and in graduate courses; we revise and refine our tests and quizzes. Often, this work is done in isolation. And although our questions are constant, we seldom have sustained time to reflect and focus on our work, let alone...