

Brookfield's Four Lenses: Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher

Is your teaching worthy? Stephen Brookfield suggests that the path to discovering the worth of your teaching is through a process of critical reflection. In fact, critically reflective teachers, for Brookfield, are excellent teachers who continually hone their personalised "authentic voice", a "pedagogic rectitude" that reveals the "value and dignity" of the teacher's work "because now we know what its worth" (46-7). Vigilant critical reflection delivers several boons: inspirational self-assuredness, the regular achievement of teaching goals, and motivated, critically reflective students.

The goal of the critically reflective teacher, for Brookfield, is to garner an increased awareness of his or her teaching from as many different vantage points as possible. To this end, Brookfield proposes four lenses that can be engaged by teachers in a process of critical reflection: (1) the autobiographical, (2) the students' eyes, (3) our colleagues' experiences, and (4) theoretical literature. These lenses correlate to processes of self-reflection, student feedback, peer assessment, and engagements with scholarly literature. Cogitating upon these processes provides the foundation for good teaching and the means to become an excellent teacher.

The autobiographical lens, or self-reflection, is the foundation of critical reflection. Teachers may focus on their previous experiences as a learner, or on their experiences as a teacher in order to "become aware of the paradigmatic assumptions and instinctive reasonings that frame how we work" (30). By interrogating, for example, teaching journals, evaluations, student/peer feedback, personal goals/outcomes, and/or role model profiles, teachers can reveal aspects of their pedagogy that may need adjustment or strengthening.

Self-reflection is the foundation for reflective teaching. Going further than self reflection to understand student experiences is, for Brookfield, "of utmost importance" to good teaching (35). Teachers can reflect upon, for example, student evaluations, assessment answers and results, student journals, and/or student focus groups or interview responses in order to "teach more responsively" (35). More importantly, for Brookfield, the student lens reveals "those actions and assumptions that either confirm or challenge existing power relationships in the classroom" (30). In short, both self-reflection and engaging with student feedback reveals teaching habits that may need adjustment in the name of student equity or that can be harnessed for greater impact.

While good teachers may engage with the first two lenses, excellent teachers will deeply engage in those processes and may also look to peers for mentoring, advice and feedback. For Brookfield, peers can highlight hidden habits in teaching practice, and also provide innovative solutions to teaching problems. Further, teachers can gain confidence through engagements with other teachers, as they realise perceived "idiosyncratic failings are shared by many others who work in situations like ours" (36). Informal conversations with peers, as much as team teaching experiences, seminar/workshop participation, peer review (of course outlines, student work, teaching philosophies), and/or applying for teaching awards, can contribute to improved teacher motivation, increased collegiality and excellent teaching and learning outcomes.

The fourth lens that fosters critically reflective teaching is contained in scholarly literature on higher education. Teachers who research, present or publish scholarly literature display an advanced vocabulary for teaching practice, which can become a "psychological and political survival necessity, through which teachers come to understand the link between their private [teaching] struggles and broader political processes" (37-8). An engagement with both colleagues and scholarly literature supports teachers and also clarifies the contexts in which they teach.

The most important aspect to excellent critical practice involves going beyond the collection of feedback (from self, student, peer or scholarly lenses) by altering teaching methods and goals, documenting those changes and any progress toward goals, and becoming a student-centred, flexible and innovative teacher. Overall, Brookfield argues that excellent teachers, "[i]n a deliberate and sustained way", continually attempt to shape teaching and learning environments into democratic spaces of knowledge exchange (44). While this may seem idealistic, the constant and ongoing search for ways to improve their own teaching and learning environments is, nonetheless, the worthy occupation of excellent teachers.

Reference:

Brookfield, Stephen. *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*. San-Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 1995.