

Teaching strategies – 7

Professional development through reflective practice

December 2006

These information sheets have been developed by the AMEP Research Centre to provide AMEP teachers with specific information on issues and strategies currently affecting their students. They provide background information as well as identifying some annotated reference that can be used to broaden knowledge and extend understanding. These references can be obtained through the AMEP Resource Centre at rescentr@nceltr.mq.edu.au

The *AMEP information sheets* have been funded by the Department of Immigration and Multicultural Affairs through the Special Projects Research Program, and have been informed by the Australian-based research that the program has funded. These *AMEP Information sheets* can be accessed through the Professional Connections website: <http://www.nceltr.mq.edu.au/pdamep>

Context

It can be difficult for busy teachers to find the time to reflect on their practice. Yet we know that lifelong learning is essential: a good teacher is also a good learner, and so it is crucial that we build opportunities for reflective professional development into our working lives. This fact sheet looks at how we can run reflective practice professional development projects as a useful way of supporting teachers to find the time and opportunities for reflection on their teaching practices.

The ingredients of successful reflective practice projects

As one teacher on a recent professional development project explained:

‘Reflective practice means “understanding my students better and understanding myself, and making changes in some of the things I took for granted”.’

While many other kinds of professional development are useful, the opportunity, time and encouragement to reflect on practice is an essential ingredient in professional development because it can promote insights that are particularly deep, transformative and lasting.

A reflective practice professional development project can take many different forms. Essentially, it involves supporting teachers to reflect on aspects of their practice in order to understand it better and then to try out improvements.

One popular approach is *Action research*, in which teachers select a focus for research that is of particular importance for them, such as an issue in teaching and learning that they or others in their centre have found to be problematic, or a new challenge that they are facing. The teachers then reflect on the issue they have chosen, and gather information from various sources, including discussion with colleagues, in the process of developing some course of action to address it. As they try out their planned action in practice, they observe the effects

carefully, and then adjust, refine or otherwise change their innovation before trying it out again, and so on in a cycle of action, reflection and refinement. Through this cycle of reflection and action, teachers move towards an improvement in their practice in a way that is relevant to their context and founded on careful reflection and discussion. Teachers are often therefore highly invested in the changes they are making to their practice because they are working on areas that they see as relevant and in ways that support them to experiment within that context. In addition, because they have reflected on the issues as part of the action–reflection cycle, they are also better able to communicate their experiences to others, and thus share what they have discovered.

This cycle of reflection, action, evaluation and improved action can be represented as shown in Figure 1 below.

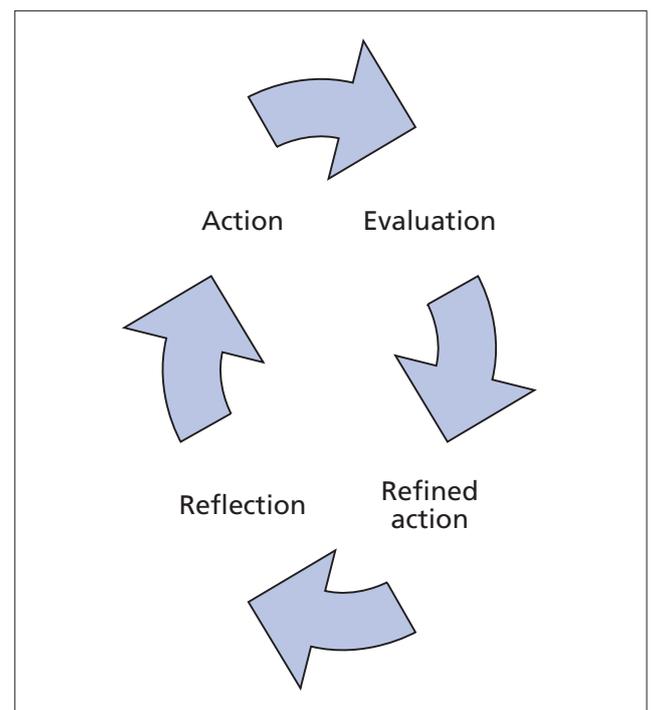


Figure 1: The cycle of reflective practice

For maximum benefit, the teachers involved in such projects should have:

- time to reflect and develop responses to their reflections;
- the support of a group working in a similar way;
- sources of expertise to draw on if and when needed;
- the opportunity to share what they discover more widely;
- the support of curriculum coordinators and managers.

Time

It takes time to reflect on an issue, and progress is not always straightforward, but can occur in fits and starts. A teacher on a recent reflective practice project described the process as follows:

‘You go in, sort of, what you would probably call the spiral of individual development, that you go up and down, and then you go back ... It’s like the spiral stairs – you do two steps up, but then you have to go down to have a look at what you might have left behind ...’

Sufficient time must be allowed for this process to take its course.

Support from other teachers

Collaboration with colleagues plays an important role in the success of reflective practice projects for a number of reasons:

- It can be lonely and difficult for a teacher to work on an issue on their own. When things are not falling into place, the support of colleagues having similar experiences is very helpful.
- A teacher can understand issues and ideas better when they have to explain them clearly to others.
- Other teachers are an invaluable source of ideas and information, even if they are not ‘expert’ on a particular topic. Sometimes, the very fact that they are more distanced from a particular topic can help them see things that others more well-versed in the area cannot.
- It is difficult to make lasting changes in one class alone. The involvement of more teachers is needed in order to make lasting changes in a centre.

Sources of expertise

Teachers who are working on a particular issue need to have access to various kinds of expertise as they need it. They may therefore need access to:

- various kinds of publications – the Resource Centre at the AMEP Research Centre can be particularly helpful [here](#);
- texts – in hard copy and online;

- workshops and courses on relevant topics;
- targeted discussions or consultations.

The opportunity to share findings

What teachers discover as a result of their efforts and the excitement they experience as they go through this process of action and reflection can be extremely valuable to others in the workplace. The opportunity to share what they have found through presentations to their colleagues at curriculum sessions, national conferences and so on is not only likely to be beneficial to others, but also motivating for them.

The support of curriculum coordinators and managers

Teachers’ lives are very busy, and so unless there is support from curriculum coordinators and managers it can be extremely difficult to find the time, intellectual space or even the physical room in which to work. Although participation in a reflective practice project is exceptionally valuable for the teacher involved, and, potentially, for the other teachers in the centre as well, it is also very time-consuming. Where possible, teachers should be given extra time to devote to their projects. They may also need special consideration in matters such as teaching the same sort of class in successive terms so that they can try out and evaluate their innovations adequately. The timetable may need to be structured in particular ways that allow teachers working together in the same group to meet, and so on. Of course, access to the information they need to complete their work, and the opportunity to share what they have found with others, can also be made much easier through inclusion of a reflective practice project into the professional development program of a centre.

Importance of reflective practice

In reflective practice projects, teachers are active participants in their professional development, and have opportunities for learning in a wide variety of ways involving not only ‘inside out’ learning – that is, learning through their own reflections and actions – but also ‘outside in’ learning through what others can bring to their topic.

Benefits for teachers

Reflective practice projects offer teachers opportunities to:

- focus on issues of real current relevance to them;
- make an immediate impact on practice;
- make the time to reflect;
- make their current understandings more explicit;
- probe, rethink and focus on these understandings;
- explore issues in greater depth;

- manage their time better – teachers report this as an additional outcome;
- broaden their aspirations, skills and resources;
- adopt an ongoing habit of reflection;
- engage more intensively with students.

One of the most important reasons for conducting reflective practice projects, however, is the fact that teachers continue to find them not only beneficial, but also *enjoyable!*

Benefits for students and the workplace

Students can also really benefit through:

- improved and extended learning experiences;
- promotion of their own reflection;
- opportunities to express their preferences;
- opportunities for student participation.

Colleagues and the organisation overall can also derive great benefit both indirectly, through the improved practice of one teacher, and directly through professional development sessions, workshops and other ways of sharing the insights that have been gained. Professional practice projects not only can provide the basis for professional development sessions, but also can stimulate interest in what other professional development may be needed in a centre.

Issues

However, because reflective practice projects do not involve quick and simple ‘fix’ activities, there can be some challenges to overcome if they are to be managed effectively.

Time

It can be difficult to find and appropriately manage the time needed for reflection that action cycles require in order to be truly effective, and there is a danger that this will be underestimated by teachers and managers alike. Since such projects are likely to have to run for periods of one year or more, there may be complications around organising for teachers to have time release and providing appropriate cover for their normal duties.

Participants

Teachers have competing priorities in their professional lives. Given the time period and the workload involved in a reflective practice project, some teachers may find it difficult to maintain the necessary commitment. Although teachers who drop out after a certain period will certainly have benefited for the period in which they were actively involved, they will nevertheless benefit less than those who are able to complete the cycles of reflection and action needed to successfully address their chosen issue. In a rapidly changing work environment, a teacher’s duties or circumstances may change, and this may affect their ability to continue pursuing their topic in their own practice.

Project topics and outcomes

There are pros and cons in deciding whether or not teachers should choose their own topics for a reflective practice project.

Advantages of teachers choosing own topic:

- Direct relevance to own context.
- Feelings of ownership and participation.
- Commitment to finding a solution.
- Falls within area of competence, and therefore is doable.

Disadvantages of teachers choosing own topic:

- Difficulty of focusing topic sufficiently.
- Selection of what is already within area of competence, and therefore no real learning occurs.
- Difficulty in finding appropriate resources to inform reflection.
- Lack of fit with issues facing others in the workplace, therefore exciting less interest from colleagues and others.

Strategies for setting up a successful reflective practice project

Organisation

Although it is perfectly possible for teachers to conduct a reflective practice project on their own, the stresses and strains of working solo can be mitigated to a great extent by organising the project so that groups of teachers meet regularly, perhaps monthly, to offer mutual support. Such meetings provide a forum in which participants can talk about and thus come to understand more fully what they have experienced and what they think about those experiences. No matter whether other group members offer insights and suggestions or simply commiserations, this kind of interaction is invaluable in increasing the benefits to individual teachers and in helping them to stay on course. A schedule for meetings should be agreed at the very first meeting because regular dates give teachers deadlines and therefore something to aim for.

The first meeting should cover the basics of how to conduct a reflective practice project. It may be useful to use the diagram presented in Figure 1 to illustrate the cycle of reflection, action and evaluation that characterise this approach so that teachers do not feel that they need to find perfect and immediate answers to their issues. This and other early meetings should also be used to refine topics and goals for teachers, to share information on how they can get access to the expertise and information that they may need during the course of the project, and to clarify ways of keeping accurate track of what they are doing and why. At this point it may also be useful to set

a date to work towards when the fruits of each project will be shared in some way beyond the group, through professional development presentations or a 'show and tell' curriculum session for the centre.

There is no ideal size for a group, but there should be a sufficient number of members so that absences do not interfere unduly, and the group should be small enough to allow everyone to have their say at regular intervals. Although it can be helpful if members are all working on a similar topic, particularly if this is a specialist interest such as IT or pronunciation, it can also be very useful if teachers are working on different topics. This is because the act of explaining an issue to someone who is less familiar with a topic can be particularly beneficial as a way of clarifying thinking, and the insights that they offer may also illuminate the topic in a way that is fresh and creative.

One option is to set up virtual groups that can communicate via the Internet. Although this may not offer the face-to-face contact that many teachers appreciate, it does offer a community for those in rural and remote areas or whose circumstances make extra meetings difficult. Virtual communities also offer the potential for projects to be organised statewide or nationally around a topic of special interest. In this way, members with a particular expertise not shared by others in their centre can find more targeted advice and support from others who share their interest. This can be particularly useful if centres are experimenting or moving forward with a new initiative.

Coordination

Although reflective practice projects are essentially teacher-owned and run, they benefit enormously from strong and clear coordination. Coordinators can play a valuable role in the following aspects:

- *Recruiting participants*

Not every teacher is willing or able to make the commitment that is needed to participate in a reflective practice project. The coordinator should provide clear information for prospective participants ahead of time to help teachers understand what they are putting their hand up for and whether this is the right kind of project for them.

- *Assisting in the choice of topics*

Teaching and learning are extremely complex, and so it can be difficult for teachers to identify a topic for particular attention. In addition, once a topic has been selected, they may need help to focus it sufficiently so that it does not 'blow out'. Teachers should be guided to focus on something that is clearly defined for them and achievable in their context. If the coordinator can provide clear guidelines, this can save a lot of effort and heartache down the track. This can sometimes be one of the most challenging parts of setting up a reflective practice project.

- *Making expectations clear*

The coordinator can play an important role in making sure that everyone understands what a reflective practice project is and how it will be run in this instance. Teachers need to be clear about what topic they are tackling; what the action-reflection cycles involve; how they can gain access to relevant expertise; how often, when and where they meet with fellow project participants; what is the purpose of these meetings and so on. Because the overall goal of 'improvement' is rather general, it can be useful to help each individual teacher to set some specific goals or end-points for their project.

- *Setting interim goals*

In such a long-term undertaking, it is also important that the teachers are assisted to set interim goals for themselves, including deadlines. As they are essentially working on their own topics by themselves, the certainty of regular deadlines and meetings with colleagues can help to bring structure to a process that may otherwise run out of control. Teachers often find that if they have to report something to someone at a specific time, this helps them to keep focused and on task.

- *Organising time release*

The amount of time that teachers can be given for participating in the project needs to be clear, and the coordinator needs to ensure that it can (and is!) being taken. This is not always administratively straightforward and may have to be negotiated carefully within the organisation before the project starts.

- *Record keeping and reporting*

Observations and the fruits of evaluation need to be clearly documented so that the processes of reflection and action are as rigorous as possible. Expectations in this regard, and techniques for keeping records of what has been done and why during the project, need to be clear from the very beginning. The coordinator can provide examples of how these can be kept, and can help to set deadlines for sharing these with others.

- *Running group sessions*

It can be useful to have a plan of what will happen at group meetings, and to have someone who can make sure that it does. Although the primary intent of group meetings is to discuss what each member has done since the previous meeting, participation in the session may need to be subtly orchestrated by a leader who can make sure that everyone keeps on task and gets their turn to speak, and that no particular personality or topic dominates.

- *Disseminating the fruits of the projects*

After so much hard work, it would be a pity if the teachers did not share what they have found and experienced with others, but they may need some encouragement to present to their peers. The coordinator can also provide some assistance with suggestions on how to present their reflective experiences in a focused and concise form that is accessible to others.

Example of a reflective practice project

1. Coordinator explains what is involved in a reflective practice project and calls for expressions of interest from teachers.
2. Teachers find out more at a meeting in which they are introduced to reflection–action cycles and the expectations of the project. Teachers decide if they want to participate, agree on a schedule of regular meetings and start reflecting on what topic they would like to work on.
3. Teachers meet regularly with the group and the coordinator over the next 10 months. During this time they:
 - focus on their issue/topic;
 - gather data on it;
 - supplement these reflections with insights from discussions in the group, with the coordinator and from outside resources such as publications, workshops, etc;
 - draw up a plan for action to address the topic they have chosen;
 - implement this plan and observe the effects;
 - evaluate the plan and make adjustments;
 - implement a revised plan;
 - observe and evaluate;
 - repeat the last two stages as often as is practical and useful, incorporating insights from colleagues and other sources;
 - evaluate what they have learned overall from their reflective practice project;
 - craft what they have learned into a form that will be useful for colleagues – for example, as a presentation at a professional development session, some materials that others can use, a set of guidelines that can be available in the centre, etc.

Annotated bibliography

Burns, A. (1999). *Collaborative action research for English language teachers*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

This is a very useful and accessible account of why and how action research can be conducted in collaboration with colleagues. It is based on years of experience in conducting such projects with AMEP teachers in Australia.

Crookes, G. (2003). *A practicum in TESOL: Professional development through teaching practice*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

This is a scholarly but accessible general work on teaching

practice. In chapters 11 and 12, Crookes traces the origins of different concepts of reflective teaching in TESOL, distinguishing a narrow from a broad form of reflection that includes social context. He advances a conceptual framework for professional development that draws on a reflective cycle in action research, and discusses the elements of successful reflective professional development.

Crookes, G. (2005). Resources for incorporating action research as critique into applied linguistics graduate education. *Modern Language Journal*, 89 (3): 467–475.

A brief history of action research and a good overview of some books on the topic that teachers may find useful.

Edge, J. (1992). *Cooperative development*. Essex, UK: Longman.

A useful and accessible introduction to action research that clearly lays out in a digestible form the benefits of reflecting with colleagues.

Edge, J. (Ed.) (2001). *Action research*. Virginia, USA: TESOL, Inc.

This is a very readable and interesting collection of the kinds of projects that teachers in a wide range of settings and circumstances can do when they start to really reflect and act on their teaching situations.

Freeman, D. (1998). *Doing teacher-research: From inquiry to understanding*. Boston, USA: Heinle & Heinle.

This an accessible introduction to different kinds of teacher research, including action research.

Hoban, G. (2002). *Teacher learning for educational change*. Philadelphia, USA: Open University Press.

This volume brings together chapters from members of a team working on a joint project in primary schools. Although it is not specifically related to the TESOL field, it has some useful discussion of the role of reflection in professional development and how this can be supported as part of system design approach to educational change.

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (Eds.) (1988). *The action research planner* (3rd ed.). Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.

Kemmis, S., & McTaggart, R. (Eds.) (1988). *The action research reader* (3rd ed.). Geelong, Australia: Deakin University Press.

These are two of the early seminal works on action research in education and would be useful for those who would like to gain a deeper understanding of action research and its origins.

Schön, D. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner*. San Francisco & London: Josey-Bass.

This is one of the early works on the importance of reflection in professional development and would be useful for those who would like to gain a wider historical perspective.

Compiled by
Lynda Yates
Senior researcher
AMEP Research Centre
La Trobe University
Reflective practice in changing circumstances 2005/2007