
Best practices for using critical reflection to improve your teaching

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Good teaching cannot be reduced to technique: good teaching comes from the identity and integrity of the teacher.
~ Parker Palmer

ABSTRACT

Charged with improving students' information literacy skills, librarians are increasingly finding themselves in the classroom largely unprepared for the realities of teaching. Learning how to teach is a lifelong skill. How can librarians harness best practices from the academy in order to continually improve their teaching techniques? According to Stephen Brookfield's *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, critical reflection not only enlivens the classroom, it grounds the teacher emotionally and pedagogically, leading to more positive interactions with students and with ourselves. In order to be intentional about our teaching, librarians can begin by examining our practice through Brookfield's four lenses: theoretical literature, classroom assessment, personal self-reflection, and peer review. It is through the implementation of a variety of practices we are better able to understand what we teach, how we teach, and why we teach.

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Definition of critical reflection:

"Reflection becomes critical when it has two distinct purposes. The first is to understand how considerations of power undergird, frame and distort educational processes and interactions. The second is to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our own long-term best interests." (Brookfield, pg. 8)

Reflection is all about developing your own approach to teaching and learning.

"Reflective practice is a process of understanding and shaping your skills and abilities as you teach, not just assessing your performance at the end of an interaction." (Booth, pg. xvii)

HOW CAN CRITICAL REFLECTION HELP US AS TEACHERS?

- Increases the probability that teachers will take informed actions, ones that can be explained and justified to ourselves as well as others
- Enables teachers to develop a rationale behind their practice which can be crucial to establishing credibility with student
- Helps in avoiding self-laceration behavior - believing that the teacher is to blame if students are not learning
- Grounds teachers emotionally in order to gain control over how we shape our instruction, as opposed to leaving our work to chance
- Enlivens the classroom by making it challenging, interesting and stimulating for students
- Increases democratic trust as a result of the examples and modeling conveyed by the teacher, thereby allowing students to learn democratic behavior and a moral tone (Brookfield, pg. 22-27)

BROOKFIELD'S FOUR CRITICALLY REFLECTIVE LENSES

1. Frequently refer to the ***theoretical literature*** which may provide an alternative interpretive framework for a situation
2. Make an assessment of one's self ***through the students' lens*** by seeking their input and seeing classrooms and learning from their perspectives
3. Create your own unique ***autobiography*** as a teacher and learner, using personal self-reflection and collecting insights and meanings for teaching
4. Engage in ***peer review*** of your teaching from a colleague's experiences, observations and feedback (Brookfield, pg. 29-30)

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THE THREE ASSUMPTIONS

1. **Paradigmatic assumptions** shape our worldview and are the most difficult to change. If they do change, it can be “explosive.” Example: Information literacy empowers students to develop into lifelong successful researchers.

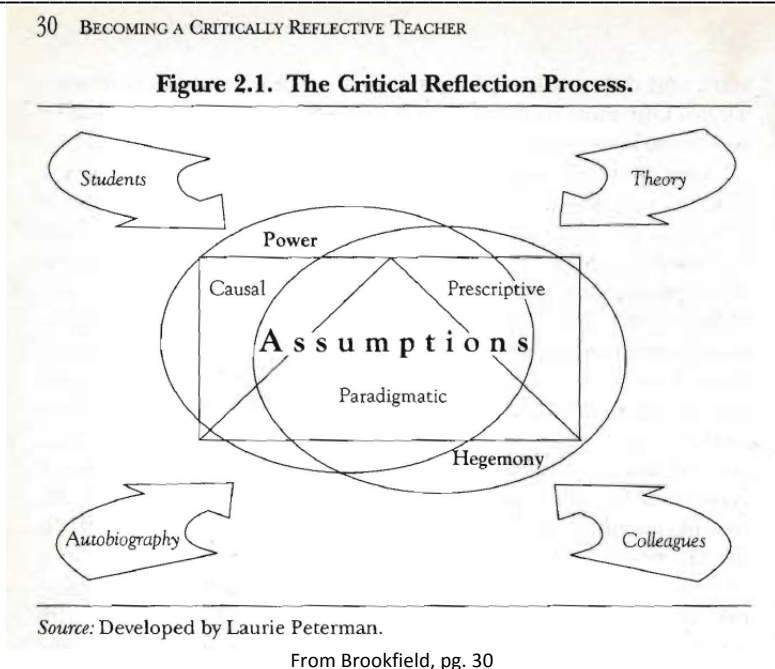
A paradigmatic assumption

2. **Prescriptive assumptions** are the power behind what we think of as good practice. Example: Making sure to address a variety of learning styles in every instruction session.

A prescriptive assumption

3. **Causal assumptions** are our gateway to explaining how things work. These are the assumptions that are easiest to control. Example: Employing active learning based on our beliefs that we need to address a variety of learning styles. (Brookfield, pg. 2-3)

A causal assumption



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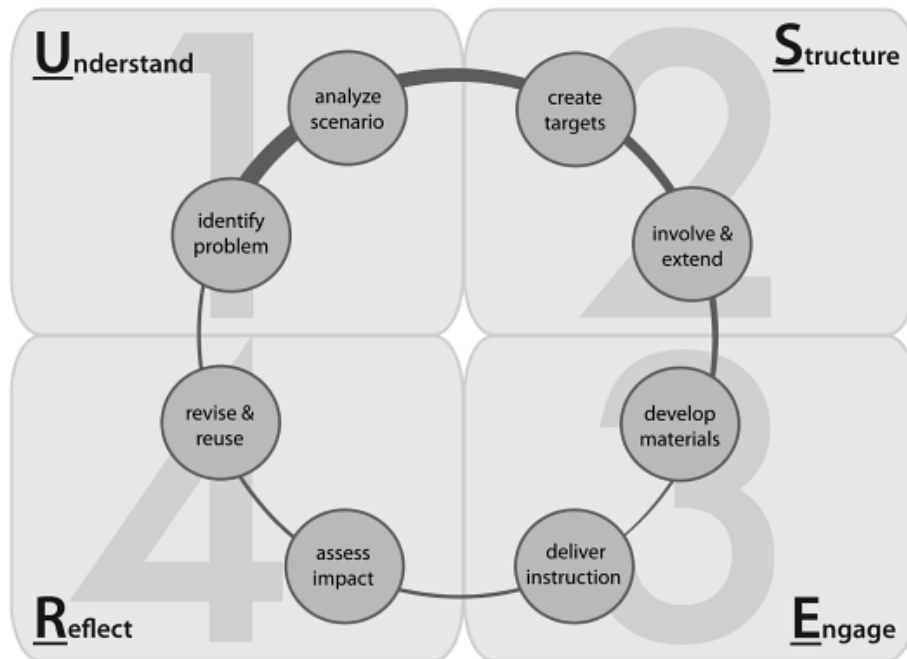


Figure 0.1
USER method

From Booth, pg. XVIII

35 CRITICAL REFLECTION PROMPTS TO BEGIN A PERSONAL TEACHING NARRATIVE

Some of these questions came directly and some were adapted from Booth (2011), Brookfield (1995), Palmer (1998), and Stevens & Cooper (2009). A few are my own ideas. Reflect at regular intervals and look for patterns that emerge.

1. What do I believe about my teaching? Elaborate on the beliefs.
2. What do I feel most proud of in my teaching activities?
3. What was the moment during my teaching when I felt most connected, engaged, or affirmed?
4. What was the moment during my teaching when I felt most disconnected or disengaged.
5. Was there a situation that caused me anxiety or distress? What triggered that feeling?
6. What was the event that took me most by surprise?
7. What would I do differently if I had the chance for a do-over?
8. What do I most need to learn about or improve in my teaching?
9. What do I worry about most in my work as an instructor?
10. How do I know when I have taught well?
11. What do I try to accomplish in my teaching? What do students try to accomplish while I am teaching? Elaborate on the intentions.

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12. Identify the places where I feel anxiety in the classroom. Provide examples.
13. What mistake have I learned the most from as an instructor?
14. Does my instructional design match the outcomes of the course?
15. What clues can I see during my session that demonstrate the impact of my teaching on students?
16. What do I do when instructing or teaching? What do students do while I am teaching? Elaborate on the actions.
17. Did I provide clear objectives for my students today?
18. Can I offer less direction as my students learn more?
19. How do I model research behavior for my students? Are there alternatives?
20. Which students did not have their needs met during my session? How could I have reacted in the moment differently?
21. What survival advice would I offer to myself if I could time travel back to my first day of teaching?
22. Where are the elements of my teaching where I accommodate my own learning style?
23. Do I adapt my knowledge to learners' levels of understanding and ways of thinking?
24. Am I incorporating technology into my teaching in ways that benefit the students?
25. Do I challenge my students to do their best by creating a climate of caring and trust?
26. What is my biggest weakness as a teaching librarian?
27. What is my greatest strength as a teaching librarian?
28. How do I improve the weakest elements of my teaching without compromising my areas of strength?
29. How do I view my past teachers? Discuss positive and negative role models.
30. What people (other than teachers) or events have shaped my assumptions about teaching?
31. Has my view on teaching changed over time?
32. How would I demonstrate the value of this session to someone outside academia?
33. Where is the most recent evidence of professional development in my teaching?
34. What is the strongest asset that I bring to the classroom?
35. Complete a plus/delta exercise for myself. Pluses are the things that went well – deltas are the things that could be improved.

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TOP 5 PROFESSIONAL READINGS THAT WILL KICK START THE CRITICAL REFLECTION PROCESS

Booth, Char. 2011. *Reflective teaching, effective learning: instructional literacy for library educators*. Chicago: American Library Association.

Boud, David. Summer 2001. Using journal writing to enhance reflective practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education* 90: 9-18.

Brookfield, Stephen. 1995. *Becoming a critically reflective teacher*. The Jossey-Bass higher and adult education series. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. Read an excerpt at:
http://www.nl.edu/academics/cas/ace/facultypapers/StephenBrookfield_Wisdom.cfm

Palmer, Parker. J. 1998. *The courage to teach: exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life*. San Francisco, Calif: Jossey-Bass.

Vidmar, Dale J. 2006. Reflective peer coaching: Crafting collaborative self-assessment in teaching. *Research Strategies* 20: 135-148.

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Stevens, Dannelle D. & Joanne E. Cooper. 2009. *Journal keeping: How to use reflective writing for effective learning, teaching, professional insight, and positive change*. Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, LLC.

Dunlap, Joanna C., and Patrick R. Lowenthal. "Situational Qualities Exhibited by Exceptional Presenters" (Research Bulletin 15, 2011). Boulder, CO: EDUCAUSE Center for Applied Research, 2011, available from <http://www.educause.edu/ecar> . <http://lgdata.s3-website-us-east-1.amazonaws.com/docs/190/323185/DunlapLowenthal.pdf>

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The self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action. ~ John Dewey