Characteristics of Deep and Surface Learning in Teacher Education Reflection Journals

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Mount Royal University
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Research questions

Winter 2010:
What IS deep learning in reflection journals?

Fall 2010:
How does formative assessment influence the depth of reflection?
10 conditions under which assessment supports student learning

Recommendation

• #10: Feedback is acted upon by the student.

Action

Students are required to respond to peer and instructor feedback to deepen their thinking in school observation reflection journals.

Reflection is the...

- “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions towards which it tends” (Dewey, 1938, p. 9).
Context

- 1st year Education students
- 30 students, 27 participants
- Volunteering in schools 30 hours/semester
- 8 journals including a summary of learning
- Required to respond to instructor feedback/prompts
- Journals assessed according to adapted form of Biggs’ levels of “Deep learning”
Journal 1  
Date Jan 25th

On Friday January 22nd I went to my assigned volunteer experience school. I will be completing my hours at FFCA elementary campus in Highwood. Upon arriving at the school I was immediately impacted by the different nature of the charter school in comparison to a public or separate school. The atmosphere was very different, the students were very different, and there were many parents around. I simply met Nikki Nikon (the teacher I will be assisting) and she printed off a schedule of their year for me. As the bell rang I tried hard to keep up with the extremely fast pace of the principal around the school doing a tour. I learned that the school is built differently than normal schools. It has separate buildings with a fenced in courtyard in the middle to go from building to building. Throughout the tour we got a peak into each classroom and this was when I was really impacted. What impacted me was the structure and discipline enforced at the school. Children sit in a "ready" position with their hands on their desk with a straight back. In most classrooms the students were wearing their phonograms to their teacher. This is something I have never seen before. To me it looked like a military drill. Students sat in their ready position chanting the phonograms cards aloud. If they had memorized since kindergarten, it was an extremely different situation for me, and it was a huge eye opener. Looking into the classrooms on my tour I saw that almost every single class had a smart board. WOW! Also when touring the school I observed that almost all of the teachers were extremely young. They were almost all females who couldn't be much older than I am. I didn't get a chance to ask what is going on with the younger teaching force at the school. Once completing the tour (in a state of shock) I headed back to the principal's office for an orientation. During the orientation I was told about the history of FFCA, an explanation of what exactly charter schools are, and also about the Highwood campus in general. I learned that homework was mandatory every single night of the week including weekends. This impacted me because I think that is something that should be done whether they are charter or not. Maybe...? 

Jodi Nikon 2/15/10 1:25 PM
Also, parents are required to attend 20 volunteer hours at the school and once their hours are completed the principal has a hot lunch with the child of that parent. The children wear uniforms on a daily basis with a casual day on the last Friday of the month. FFCA revives its schools around the idea of all classrooms completing the same thing. They believe that all teachers teaching the same grade should be teaching the same thing, in the same way, at the same time. I believe this is important because when children are in the next grade, they all know the same content and their teacher won't have to figure out who learned what and how did they learn it. What if the way you were expected to teach didn't fit your philosophy? We talk about permitting students some freedom; how much freedom should teachers have to select their teaching methods and content? Jodi Nikon 2/15/10 1:25 PM FFCA puts a lot of emphasis on being a leader for the students. It is important to set a good example to your students. Being a leader is important because it gives the students a positive role model to look up to. Once completing the orientation I was done for the day.

I left the school shocked of what I saw and questioning a few things. I wonder if students with disabilities are able to attend FFCA? Also, the biggest question I have is if the children enjoy going to a school like this. I'm not sure how I would feel about it. It is very evident that the teachers and parents believe in this system and are very dedicated. I also wonder if I would be able to work in a school like this, even if I don't believe in many of the things I saw today. Ultimately, it was a good experience to observe a school that is not separate or public. However, it will be very difficult to adjust to this kind of "operation." Good questions. Sounds like Jodi kids would struggle if the curriculum is all taught in this same way. What impact does FFCA have on the public schools who absorb all the needy kids who can't or don't go there? Jodi Nikon 2/15/10 1:27 PM

Ps. I am actually quite nervous about going back to FFCA. I'm not sure if I am right for this type of school. I am interested to see how the students work and learn in a school like this. I would also like to see the personalities of the kids and try to get a sense of whether they like FFCA or not. When I get back I intend to ask more questions about the school, and try to get more comfortable with it. I also intend on trying to get to know the students.

From this situation I learned that I need to start thinking outside of my own bubble. I am so used to and comfortable with the school system which I have grown up in that I need to start learning about and experiencing schools like FFCA (and Calgary School). This would be a good philosophy and my view as well. You asked what if the way you were expected to teach didn't fit my philosophy. I think that it would be quite difficult to adapt the situation. It's hard to change your philosophy, but it's even harder to teach this way. I think this would ultimately affect the effectiveness and success of my teaching and would be very challenging. The impact that FFCA has on the public schools with more needy students is that it creates a lot more work for the public school teachers. Having more ESL or special needs students is a daily struggle that FFCA barely has to deal with.

Journal 2  
Date Jan 25th

Today was my second time going to FFCA. Before arriving at the school I was extremely nervous from my last experience. I really wanted to get it over with because I was sure it would be a terrible experience. I arrived at the school, signed in, and went to my classroom to wait for my teacher. She came in from supervision at the same time as the students. As the students came in wearing their uniforms she began telling them to fix their uniforms, and beat in their shirts. Once they were all in their seats I noticed that a student was doing attendance. This impacted me because I was not sure to seeing students of this age hold that much responsibility. However, it was apparent they were capable of doing this. We tend to underestimate what kids are capable of. Jodi Nikon 2/15/10 1:33 PM

The students then were asked to rise and stand on the left side of their desks to sing Oh Canada. The singing of our national anthem impacted me. In a regular school some kids would sing, some would whisper, and some would just march the words. As FFCA everyone participated without being told and sang to their fullest potential. After singing they were asked to sit in their "ready position." Then, the students were about to go to gym class. They were told by Nikki not to have any gaps in their lines on their way to gym. They agreed and orderly made their way to gym. Once Nikki came back from taking them there, she asked me to take some things down
1. **Prestructural**: Misses the point

2. **Unistructural**: focuses on one aspect

3. **Multistructural**: focuses on more than one aspect but not relationship between ideas

4. **Relational**: Link and integrate several ideas into a coherent whole

5. **Extended abstract**: Generalize beyond the info given, produce new hypotheses
1. Retells

2. Retells and judges

3. Retells and gives superficial reason for judgment

4. Gives insightful reasons for judgment, compares to theory, considers alternate views

5.Extracts general theoretical principles, takes a position, shows significance

Adapted from Bain, Ballantyne, Packer & Mills, 1999
Number of students at each level

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level 2</th>
<th>Level 3</th>
<th>Level 4-5</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5 students</td>
<td>17 students</td>
<td>5 students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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I had to count jelly beans for a draw that the class had done. One of the students who was helping the teacher pull names out had noticed he started to change his guess on the paper so when she had caught him he pretty much had nothing to say, so she took all his guesses and throw them away and also made him phone his mom and tell her what he had done. I guess he is usually like this. The teacher said she always has to talk to him and keep an eye on him so he’s some trouble, but I think she handled it really well. I mean she is a really nice teacher and she does let the kids get away with stuff. Basically all that happened….

Jodi’s comment: I'm glad you've been able to get involved with the students. What's the moral learning you observed here? Check out chapter 5.

Response: NONE!
Today before lunch the principal made the announcements for the school. Afterwards he brought up a thing called "Golden Pencil Awards." From what I understood from just listening to the announcement the kids get nominated by their teachers if they are seen doing something well in class or even helping out another kid on the playground, and then the principal would read out the kid’s name and what they were nominated for and they were to come down to the office and receive their golden pencils. I thought it was really neat how they try and recognize their students for being good people in their school community. I think this promotes good interactions between the kids and for them to try their best to be recognized for what they do. Do you think this was a staff decision? How did the kids respond to this recognition? How might kids respond who never get recognition? That's one of the worries with rewards. -Jodi Nickel 2/10/10 9:28 PM
Level 3: Theory Plucking

• Connecting to course concepts that were not particularly meaningful to them:  
  – e.g., Classroom design

• Readings didn’t necessarily relate to critical incidents that animated them so entries lacked energy
Level 3: Plucking example

• This is a very poor school, and most of the children are immigrants. The houses around the school are for rent, and cheap. That is one of the reasons why they move there, and this factor contributes to the society, culture and history of this school and community.

• Cultural capital is also a thing that may hinder Jose’s learning, especially because English is not his first language.
Level 4-5 journals

• Looked critically at issues such as
  – Assessment
  – Memorization vs. understanding
  – Inequity

• Discussed the personal significance of experiences for their own teaching philosophy and future practice.
Level 5: Impact on personal philosophy

This makes me wonder about the idea of **liberating constraints** (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Kapler, 2000) and art. Now the art project I saw in class was more of a 'follow these steps...and get this result' - very structured. However art is generally a freedom of expression and I guess the liberating constraints could be in the medium - like paint, sketch drawings, charcoal, clay, etc....If students have too much freedom their learning might not be **rigorous** enough or focused, whereas if teachers take too much control, it becomes, well, boring - the students might lose interest and not feel **engaged** or responsible for their own learning. I've tried to capture this thought in my educational philosophy in my portfolio.
She (the teacher) mentioned that many concepts are taught through constant repetition. As the students recite what they are learning over and over, they begin to memorize the material. For example, every week they learn a new poem and by the end of the week every student is assessed on how well they can recite it. The teacher mentioned that the students know the poems well before assessment because they go over it so many times in class. I was amazed at how much the students could recite from memory. However, on many occasions I wondered if they actually understood the material and apply it, instead of just reciting it.

Good question. Memorization is low level thinking; important for some things like times tables but not for tasks that require flexible thinking. Reading (and understanding) the English language is a complex task; decoding is part of that but comprehension and inferences are more difficult aspects of reading that come with the ability to make meaning as you read, not just decode. -Jodi Nickel 2/10/10 9:31 PM
Phonograms has allowed this students to have a great understanding of the spelling of words, and how to decode them. However, I have noticed that the class never reads story books as a class or individuals. This further shows me that they focus on memory and not necessarily applying it. Reading books may make the students’ knowledge of words and phonograms more concrete. I remember as a student enjoying the new challenges that came with reading new books. By putting that focus on reading, my teacher gave me a love for reading that still exists today. Today I also witnessed a time where I saw memorization isn't always the best way to teach. Every week the class learns a poem, which they are expected to have memorized by the end of the week. I am constantly amazed at the students abilities to memorize these poems. However, today I asked a student what one of the lines meant in the poem, and she couldn't answer. The class focuses on the content (words), but not what it means. My hope is that when I'm a teacher I will incorporate memory work into lessons, because I have seen what a powerful tool it can be. What is the point of memorizing a poem when students do not understand what they are saying? I hope that I will not only focus on teaching material, but doing all I can so that students understanding goes deeper than just memorizing.
“Reflective thinking generally addresses practical problems, allowing for doubt and perplexity before possible solutions are reached”

(Hatton & Smith, 1994, p. 34)
Assignment instructions (condensed)

- **Retell** *(I saw…)* Retell something you saw at your school.
- **Relate** *(This reminds me of…)* Relate the episode/lesson observed to something you have been reading. *(included list of key concepts from readings)*
- **Reflect** *(This makes me wonder…)* importance for education, wondering, questions, next steps
- **Post-script/Self-analysis** *(Now I think…)*: Write a commentary on previous journal entries *(new thinking, other views, response to feedback, reconsideration of experiences)*
Assignment: Before and After

“Relate to readings”
= course expectation

…but not necessarily used to enrich reflection

Exploring alternative views of the situation
(readings may be helpful in the exploration of alternative views)
Jay and Johnson’s Typology (2002)
Similar to Hatton & Smith (1994)

- **Descriptive**: Describe the matter for reflection (What’s happening? Is it working? What do I not understand?)
- **Comparative**: Reframe the matter in light of alternate views, research, etc. (How do others explain this?)
- **Critical**: Consider the implications and establish a renewed perspective (deeper meaning in terms of the democratic purpose of school, moral dimensions of school, etc.)
“The three dimensions represent a widening of the lens, from the situation at hand to multiple perspectives on a situation to an appreciation of the bigger picture of implications surrounding the problem at hand” (Jay & Johnson, 2002, p. 79).
Explore scenario from the perspective of all the commonplaces.

- Culture, Society and History
- Curriculum and Subject Matter
- Schools and Classrooms
- Teachers and Teaching
- Learners and Learning

Naested, et al. 2004
Jelly bean episode

- **Learners**: How did the student see this?
- **Teachers**: Why did the teacher have him call his mom?
- **Classroom**: What impact did this have on the classroom?
- **Curriculum**: Was there some hidden (or not so hidden) curriculum message?
- **Society**: What are the social issues?
Pedagogical challenge…

To set “liberating constraints”…
(Davis, Sumara, Luce-Kapler, 2000)

… enough constraint to frame their reflections but enough liberty to engage in self-authorship (Baxter Magolda., 2007) … discerning who they are and what they value
Baxter Magolda’s Self-Authorship
(2009)

External meaning making orientation
- Reliance on external authorities and expectations

Internal meaning making orientation
- More open and understanding of differences
- Learned to think for themselves
- Took responsibility for their own learning
Fall 2010

• Focus each journal on a question or issue

• Consider other perspectives (and use readings to inform wondering where appropriate)

• Critical friend to provide feedback in writing and in meetings with me

• Meetings to scaffold written reflection

• Fewer journals 4 + summary

• Call the assignment a dialogue journal
Anecdotal feedback so far

- “Your comments made me think. I never really thought of it that way.”
- “I like reading what others think.”
- “Sometimes it’s easy to see the course concepts but sometimes it’s a force fit.”
- “I think I could connect to course readings more.”
Fall 2010: Synthesis guidelines
(tentative)

• Identify 3 key ideas you’ve explored in your journal (motivation, student needs, etc.). Quote your journal.

• How did the dialogue/feedback influence your thoughts about these ideas?

• How did readings influence your thoughts on these ideas?

• In what ways has the journal changed your thinking about those key ideas?
References

- Naested, I., Potvin, B., & Waldron, P. *Understanding the landscape of teaching*. Toronto, ON: Pearson Prentice Hall.