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The Importance of Critical Reflection for English Language Practitioners: a discussion based around Stephen Brookfield's four lenses theory

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Several years ago, I was having dinner alongside my son, and I began to see that, far from enjoying his meal, he was instead manoeuvring the food around his plate while simultaneously wearing a poker-face expression that would have made any professional card player proud. Eventually, I downed my knife and fork, and in an exasperated voice addressed my son. 'A- please eat your food, and stop behaving like a two-year old!' At this point, my wife reached across the table and gently touched my forearm. 'Husband,' she said. 'He IS two-years old . . .'

When we teach, we very often find ourselves trapped within our own personal perspective on what constitutes good teaching practice. Think about that for a moment. What makes us so sure that what we do every time we teach, class after class, actually constitutes sound, effective practice that benefits our students? How many times have we witnessed, heard of, or read about, alternatives and dismissed them as being somehow deficient or inappropriate? What makes us so right, and everyone else so wrong?

In the anecdote above, I was looking at the situation from my own perspective only. If I had stopped to consider possible alternatives from my son's perspective, I would no doubt have been able to come up with some valid reasons as to why the food was remaining untouched. For example, the food could have been too hot or too cold for my son. Or perhaps he was feeling a little under the weather. Maybe he was just not hungry or didn't find the food as appetising as I believed it to be.

In teaching, we need to be able to observe and analyse our practice from multiple perspectives if we are to stand any chance of breaking out of our self-imposed, own-perspective-only view of what effective teaching is. This process can be enlightening but how can we go about it?

In his 2017 book, *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* (second edition), Stephen Brookfield discusses his four lenses theory of a multiple-perspective view of teaching designed to liberate practitioners from relying solely on their own individual perspectives when evaluating good pedagogical practice. In doing so, Brookfield's theory also helps us to question our assumptions about 'good' teaching, and ask ourselves relevant questions designed to identify weak areas with a view to improving them.

The four lenses that Brookfield refers to are students' eyes, colleagues' perceptions, theory and personal experience.

Students' eyes

Let us look at students' eyes first, as in Brookfield's view, it is the most important of the four lenses. ' . . . the most important pedagogic knowledge we teachers need to do good work is an awareness, week in, week out, of how our students are experiencing learning. Without this knowledge, we are working largely in the dark.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 62)

The magic word here is awareness. If we, as teachers, are unable to see our own practice from our students' perspective, then we are missing out on some incredibly useful evaluation on our teaching. All we have to do is picture our favoured teaching techniques, content and learning methodologies, then ask ourselves, If I were a student in my own class, what would I make of being asked to, for example, sit and listen to my teacher talk for most of the class, before being given some written work to do towards the end? Or sit through a non-interactive PowerPoint presentation for an hour or two? Or have our needs, views and suggestions consistently parked? Or be given content and practice activities that we don't perceive as relevant? If we could put ourselves into our students' shoes, would we be happy with an approach like this? And if not, why not? Such critical reflection can make for uncomfortable thoughts, as we analyse our practice from another, more unfamiliar perspective, and find it wanting. The good news is that with sound evaluation techniques, and a willingness to engage in critical reflection, we can not only identify our weak areas, but improve them. However, carrying out good evaluation can present a challenge in itself. One thing that Brookfield makes clear, is the importance of the power dynamic between teachers and their students, and how students can be, ' . . . understandably reluctant to be honest with us.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 62) After all, not only as teachers but as gatekeepers, we hold the keys to success as we assess and

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grade our students' efforts and judge them worthy of success or progression, or both. This is a big responsibility, which is all the more reason to get it right, by making sincere efforts to examine our teaching from our students' perspective, interrogate it, and then make any changes necessary in order to improve its effectiveness.

Another point Brookfield highlights when seeking evaluative feedback from students, is the absolute necessity of anonymity. 'Students who are genuinely sure that their responses are anonymous are much more likely to tell the truth. So when you request honest and anonymous feedback from a particular class you must demonstrate you have no idea who is saying what.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 63) Such evaluation, if properly collected and interpreted, represents a huge step forward in enabling teachers to view their practice through their students' eyes, and then act on the evaluation gained with the express aim of improving the effectiveness of their teaching and making it more relevant to their students' needs.

Colleagues' perceptions

The second of the four lenses is that of colleagues' perceptions. These can be considered as an important resource that could be of significant benefit to our efforts in improving our practice through availing of the experience, knowledge and willingness to help of our peers. At one time or another, we have all discussed particular issues with colleagues that we might have with students, management, procedures or resources in our contexts of teaching and learning. If we analyse these interactions though, we may find that many of them are not in fact interactions at all. And, rather than a reasonable discussion on identifying and solving pedagogical-related problems, they may instead often focus on voicing frustration and negative emotions. While this may help relieve stress and gain some empathy from our colleagues, it doesn't help us get to the root of the issues that are making us feel so frustrated in the first place.

'The best teaching colleagues are critical friends. They'll encourage you to describe a problem as you see it, take the time to ask you questions about it, and suggest different ways of thinking it through. (Brookfield, 2017, page 66) Here, Brookfield's view is that, if managed correctly, our peers can represent the second lens of critical reflection, and provide us with a perspective that is not our own but which can nonetheless act as a motor for improvement in our practice. Crucially, genuine critical friends are non-judgemental, and seek only to offer understanding and advice on how to resolve problematic issues. 'To have a colleague who helps you debrief the class you've just taught and who alerts you to things (positive and negative) you've missed is extremely helpful for your own efforts to check your assumptions about what's happening.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 66) Perhaps many teachers may not warm to the idea of being advised or debriefed by colleagues, but this is the whole challenge of the second lens. We need to make ourselves open and receptive to, at the very least, considering the validity and worth of our colleagues' advice, even though it may be at odds with our own assumptions on how we teach, and to what effect.

A true critical friend does not need to be a friend at all, not in the conventional meaning of the word. Often, they are a trusted colleague who can be relied upon to give good advice in a supportive and non-judgemental manner, and one at whom we will not take offence, even if some negative aspect of our practice is highlighted and advised upon.

Of course, we are not compelled to act on this advice but we should at least consider its potential worth before we dismiss it. As such, we need to be internally honest when analysing our colleagues' comments, and in comparing it with our own assumptions and practice. As with some students' anonymous evaluative comments, we may not like some of what we hear, but if we can make use of the feedback to advance our practice, then we are successfully applying Brookfield's second lens of critical reflection to our advantage.

Personal experience

The third lens discussed is that of personal experience. 'Of the four lenses or critical reflection, this is the lens that gets least respect.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 69) This might seem slightly odd at first, but what Brookfield means is that, while personal experience can be very helpful to us as individual teachers in informing our own practice, 'One of the most stringent objections to taking personal experience seriously is that it's unique and therefore ungeneralizable.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 69) Or to put it another way, for many teachers and institutions, personal experiences can't be relied upon to the same extent as, say, theory, as they are "merely anecdotal" and '... hopelessly subjective or impressionistic.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 69) Why should this be? Brookfield argues that our own autobiographical experiences are indeed valid, and just because they cannot be neatly collated and pigeon-holed does not mean we cannot rely on them to help justify our pedagogical choices or inform our practice. 'When I think of factors that shape how I teach, it's personal experiences of particular teachers that come to mind rather than theories I've studied or research reports I've read.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 69)

Far from dismissing personal experience as unreliable or too personal or biased to be of use, we should instead embrace our first-hand experiences so long as we can vouch for their integrity and usefulness in the teaching process. Again, internal honesty is a key factor. If a particular classroom technique, activity or exercise falls flat and fails to meet our expectations, we really need to examine the background and causes starting with ourselves as teachers. Was the activity or exercise ill-prepared or poorly

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explained? Was it too difficult or too easy for the students, leading to a lack of interest? Was it a good idea to do this on a hot Friday afternoon when students may not be operating at optimal levels of efficiency? Did we allow enough time or was the activity or exercise too rushed?

'When it comes to investigating student disengagement or student hostility and resistance to learning, personal experience has provided one of the most fruitful sources of data for me.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 71) This factor alone makes the lens of personal experience a useful tool in critical reflection.

Personal experiences, in the form of anecdotes, are also a necessary ingredient in those casual conversations all teachers have from time to time with colleagues, the ones that often lead to smiles and mirth, and act as a trigger for the stress relief that we all need to avail of from time to time.

Theory

The fourth and final lens is theory. Brookfield calls this, 'the hardest sell.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 72) And with good reason. Theory is often seen as distant, aloof and not terribly useful for practising teachers who may have a heavy workload of both teaching hours and associated administration. Where can the time be found to read theory? And what use would it be anyway, in the real world of day-to-day teaching, nose-to-the-grindstone, at-the-coal face, shoulder-to-the-wheel, up-to-your-tonsils routine that many English language teachers are engaged in on a daily basis?

'Time and again I hear teachers say they don't have time to read or that educational theory and research doesn't really have anything to do with the peculiarities of their classrooms. It's strange to hear a mistrust of theory voiced by educators, but I also understand why they feel that way.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 73) In ELT/TESOL environments, certainly from my own experience, theory plays little or no role in day-to-day teaching. After all, how much theory can be squeezed into a four or five-week training programme at certificate level, especially considering that mandatory teaching practice and its preparation will take up so much of the student teacher's time and effort? The answer is very little-the certificate programmes are simply too short. Instead, teachers tend to follow the textbook's lead (and there are some excellent books available) and pick up some techniques or activities that are then applied to their teaching.

And yet, theory can be of help. 'Finding a theorist who makes explicit something you've been sensing or who states publicly what you've suspected privately but felt unable to express is wonderfully reaffirming.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 73) As such, theory can play an important role in backing up our assumptions on what constitutes good teaching practice, which in turn instils confidence that what we are doing is correct and of benefit to our students. Of course, there is absolutely nothing to stop teachers from exploring new theory for themselves, post critical reflection. For example, It's become clear that I need to know how my students experience my practice, which means I need to conduct some kind of effective evaluation-how can I do this?

This does not mean that teachers need to read entire books, or volumes of academic journals, to find the answers to their questions. In the age of the internet search engine, locating helpful, appropriate-to-your-needs theory is easier than ever before. Additionally, critical friends may also be an avenue worth exploring. Once we become familiar with the relevant theory that underpins our beliefs and practice, it is also a wonderful boost to our self-confidence, allowing us to justify why we do what we do, and how it can benefit our students. In short, theory can help justify our whole approach to teaching and learning, acting as a complimentary lens to that of personal experience.

One final note on Brookfield's four lenses of critical reflection is that Brookfield himself is, 'suspicious of its mandatory measurement.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 76) That is to say, good critical reflection should not be imposed upon teachers by institutions as yet another compulsory administrative duty, as this runs the risk of reducing genuine critical reflection to a mere box-ticking exercise, robbing it of any pedagogical value. If this happens, 'the collaborative and collective dimension of reflection is entirely lost.' (Brookfield, 2017, page 76)

The four lenses theory is one of my personal favourites, and one of the reasons I like it so much is that it is useful, but in a very practical manner, and really does do what it says on the tin. So why not take it for a spin, and allow your practice to be informed by multiple perspectives-chances are, you will see the difference soon enough. After all, nothing ventured, nothing gained . . .

Reference

Brookfield, S.D. (2017) *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* second edition, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

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