Step Forward, Looking Back

Given the countless constraints most North American teachers encounter on what they teach, how they teach, when they teach, how much time they have to teach a specific concept, and how they go about evaluating the learning, they may think that the only way they can become true professionals is by moving to Finland.

Certainly it's soul-destroying to spend a career following the false trail of improved scores, teaching to the test, living in fear if test results are sub par, and watching impotently as students struggle with a dysfunctional curriculum based on rote learning. On the other hand, everyone has some aspect of their teaching assignment and their professional responsibilities that possesses the potential for growth.

Metacognition is a term that refers to the ability to consciously reflect on and talk about thinking. Specifically, learners begin to focus on their patterns of thought and become aware of how and, eventually, why they process experiences in the distinct way they do.

The ultimate goal of any classroom program in any subject area is to help students ultimately become independent, confident, and resourceful learners, individuals who can identify, articulate, explore, and solve their own problems. The key to this kind of development is metacognition.

This ability is enhanced by developmental factors, such as puberty, and encouraged by reflective practices, such as personal response. Although students can engage in higher-level thinking skills without it, independent, self-motivated learners require metacognitive ability to reach their goals. The most straightforward type of metacognitive reflection involves taking stock of where you are now and where you've come from, and analyzing what you need to do to produce growth or change in your performance. Since children and adolescents are inherently egocentric, developing this kind of objectivity can be difficult. The process may be tentative and recursive, but awareness gradually takes shape.

Rediscovering Learning through Personal Response

Learning is an active, creative process. Most definitions of ideal learners emphasize that they are independent self-motivated individuals who have the ability to find and solve their own problems. By definition, such learners are profoundly aware of their own learning processes.

Learning can, at any one time, incorporate some or all aspects of language. By the same token, the act of processing language involves more than the communicating or recording of our experience. Through language, we construct our sense of reality by revealing, clarifying, discovering, assessing, reflecting on, and refining what we think and feel about experiences.

The learning process combines elements of reading, writing, listening, speaking, observing, doing, and thinking. Through the use of response journals (Parsons, 2001), students can reflect not only on what they've been learning, but also on how and why they learn the way they do. Through a personal-response program in any subject area, they are able to develop the awareness of and, eventually, the commitment to the kind of processes necessary to facilitate and maximize learning. As students become aware of and committed to their own emotional, social, and intellectual growth, the goals of the three laws of teaching are intrinsically satisfied.

In this program, students record, in a variety of formats, their personal reactions to, questions about, and reflections on the following:

- what they read, write, represent, observe, listen to, discuss, do, and think (doing includes such activities as making, performing, calculating, experimenting, manipulating, or creating)
- how they actually go about reading, writing, representing, observing, listening, discussing, or doing

The journal might be a notebook, a folder, a section in a notebook, or an electronic file in a particular subject area. In a rotary timetable, a group of teachers could share a notebook or a personal-response section of a binder, in effect creating an independent study theme across a number of subject areas. On the other hand, a science notebook could have a separate personal-response section devoted solely to that subject. Whatever the arrangement, the only restriction is that students must be aware of the personal-response process and must have some kind of recording routine to accommodate both the process and the evaluation of that process.

Unfortunately, personal response has often been confused with an enforced kind of diary keeping in which students detail what they did the night before, what they had for breakfast, or what rock groups they like best. For further clarification and guidance on this issue, please see the terms *personal diary*, *writer's journal*, *learning logs/work diaries*, or *subject-specific journals* in the glossary (page 87) or read *Response* ***Journals Revisited*****, listed in the bibliography.**

In some cases, a journal entry might comprise the entire follow-up to a lesson; in others, the teacher might allot a few minutes at the end of a period to check on students' reactions and make suggestions for other possible reading or projects. Either way, response journal entries provide an invaluable barometer of students' feelings and learning.

Most students remain dependent on the teacher for direction and guidance. They tend to see the function of a reading experience as matching a prescribed set of answers someone else knows to a prescribed set of questions some else devises. They look to the teacher to tell them what to do.

If you ask independent readers to respond to a text in a personally significant way, on the other hand, they possess the confidence, skills, and understanding of the reading process to follow their own idiosyncratic routes through material. Such students require a few model or sample questions to cue their initial efforts. As they gradually develop a better understanding of the different ways in which they can respond in a personally significant manner, they can accept more responsibility for the nature and direction of their responses.

See pages 81 Making a Personal Response and 82 More Cueing Questions for sample questions to cue student responses.

Cueing questions, such as those found in the student guidelines on pages 81 and 82, demonstrate to students how to use their own lives and experiences as springboards into an exploration of material. By self-selecting the question or questions most applicable to their own material and personal leanings, students gain a greater appreciation of what a personal response is all about. The cueing questions act as models on which students will eventually base the formulation of their own questions as they assume their own autonomy in the reading process.

The first guideline, Making a Personal Response (page 81), focuses on a few selected open-ended questions designed to get students started. After their initial efforts, students will be ready for the second, more wide-ranging set of options on page 82.

A Guide to Teacher Reflection

Teachers follow a similar process of personal response as they attempt to inject change into their classroom environments. If they know where they are and where they would like to be, a simple gap analysis will reveal what they need to do to achieve their goals. A wholesale upheaval in their teaching methodology is usually impossible, especially given the many restraints under which they work. But a gradual step-by-step approach to change can be effective and stimulating.

The first step could be a simple exercise in personal reflection based on the three laws of teaching:

1. What did I do today to keep one of my students physically and emotionally safe? How can I do even more tomorrow?
2. What learning activities did I offer my students to do today that they found interesting and stimulating? What can I do tomorrow?
3. What did I do today to keep my students feeling good about how they're learning? What can I do tomorrow?

See page 83 A Checklist of Classroom Possibles for tool for teacher reflections.

This kind of reflection can transform how teachers feel about themselves as professionals and reenergize their approach to their students and their students' learning. A small step can make a significant difference. See page 83 for A Checklist of Classroom Possibles. Using it, teachers can determine which steps they can and want to take; which ones they can take immediately; and which ones they'll have to reserve for some time in the future. This checklist has relevance for a range of subject areas.

For teachers trying to expand their classroom programs, however, the critical component is the one they often have little control over and that affects all aspects of their professional lives: evaluation.