

Reflective Practice

The Fourth "R" in Education

An article by Jane Hawkes

So many teachers have asked me the question: Why is reflection so crucial to Values-based education (VbE)? I hope this short article will answer the question and inspire you to use reflective practice in your own life as well as professionally.

Why Reflect?

A key goal of VbE is to nourish well being of self, others and the wider world, and through this process develop what Dr. Neil Hawkes calls personal holistic competence (PHC); the ability to work with complexity using a stable, positive and altruistic mind set. Neil and I have been developing ways of supporting well being through what we have termed The Inner Curriculum: the deliberate nourishing of the internal processes of the mind that fosters "happiness".

If your experience is like mine, so much of our daily living involves being on a roller coaster of events and challenges leaving us so often with a feeling of not being in control. We have no control of external events; we do however have control over how we respond to them.

Unconscious processes govern most of our responses to life's events; we sail through the day on automatic pilot. How much of your day can you recall right now? Are there some aspects of today that you would have liked to have responded to differently? How spontaneous have you been?

Through pausing regularly for moments of reflection, you have the opportunity to take charge of your life, and be aware of the multitude of options of responses available to you.

What are Reflective Practices?

I think reflection is the ability to access our internal world of thoughts and feelings, and to regulate them, which helps us to sustain mental health and increases our capacity for self-determination. I think that this is a key skill for children to learn - the fourth "R" of education.

Reflective practices encompass a spectrum of activities including:

- thinking about your work
- reflecting on our behaviour and the impact it has on other people
- reflecting on a story and then maybe having an opportunity to discuss your thoughts with others and hear differing perspectives. Philosophy for children (P4C) encourages this open non-judgemental discussion process
- mindfulness and meditative practices.

The first 3 are familiar practices to many schools, and the last one is being pioneered in more and more schools. Mindfulness is becoming a household term, and courses offered to introduce the concept and techniques.

Neuroscience is supporting a phenomenal understanding of how our brains function and how our minds interact with each other and ourselves. The research (e.g. Dr. Dan Siegel) provides evidence about how by taking time

Reflective Practice

The Fourth "R" in Education

daily to focus on your breathing , new neuronal paths are made in our brains and our response flexibility is increased.

How can Reflective Practice be integrated in daily life?

A few years ago, I decided to bring a reflective practice into every day of my life. I had been influenced by Jon Kabat-Zinn's book, *Wherever you go there you are*. The title had intrigued me and the content supported my beginning practice. I decided that I would start every day with half an hour of sitting and focusing on my breathing. Every time I noticed that my mind was wandering, taking my focus away from experiencing my breath, I would gently re-focus my attention on my breathing. I committed to doing this for a month, as once we have introduced a new behaviour in to our lives for at least one month it is more likely to become a habit.

After a few months of this practice some of my colleagues commented on my calmness and that there was something different about me, something they too wanted. I too felt more alive and in control of my responses.

As I continued my daily practice, I also started to read the fascinating material about our brains that neuroscientists were discovering. I realised that my practice was allowing my brain to restructure, and I was benefiting in so many ways.

One evening during a recent values presentation I was talking about reflective practices and at the end a woman came to talk to me. She told me that her husband had recently had major heart surgery and that the consultant who had operated on him invited them both to sit quietly for half an hour every evening listening to calming music. Having heard me talk she told me that she was now going to include this practice in to their busy lives.

If half an hour seems too long to set aside for reflective practice, then begin with 1 minute pauses throughout your day, just pausing to be. Maybe pause between events, so that you are constantly checking in with you. Gradually bring longer pauses, either at the beginning of the day, or when it's convenient to you. If you take the time to clean your teeth everyday, then please take the time to clean your brain too!

Very recently, I spoke to a wonderful woman, who has just turned ninety. She told me that ten years ago she had attended a meditation workshop. It was a turning point in her life, and from that day she has begun every day with a half hour breathing practice. I asked her what difference it was making to her life and she told me that firstly she now accepts people for who they are and stops wishing they'd be how she wanted them to be; secondly she noticed so many details of her daily life, which before had gone unnoticed; and thirdly she told me that it was helping her with the ageing process. Her greatest disappointment was that no one had introduced this practice to her earlier in her life.

Once you are familiar with reflective techniques and have integrated them into each day, then you will feel confident to introduce the practice to young people. Reflection is a key element of VbE and is being practiced in schools throughout the world. Chapter 10 of Dr. Neil Hawkes's book, *From my Heart, transforming lives through values*, is full of reflective practice examples from mainly primary schools, which I think would help you get started with children and young people. However, I think you will gain a practical understanding of the benefits of reflection by reading the words of a great secondary school teacher in Australia - Mike Downey.

Reflective Practice

The Fourth "R" in Education

Mike Downey's story about Reflection

I first met Mike in Australia and visited his school. He is the Director of Formation of a large Secondary school in Brisbane. Mike has been working with reflection for many years and I thought you would like to read about his experience in his own words.

To be honest, one of the main reasons I originally started doing reflection with my students was that I needed some space myself. I had a full, demanding teaching load, a young family, no spare time and an unscripted, chaotic life. Stopping regularly in my classroom, meant that I could get a few moments of breathing space. Amidst the chaos and constant business, I could find a moment or two of peace. These moments of respite were like oases in the desert. Looking back, I have no doubt that these moments have been crucial in keeping my passion for my work alive when I have seen so very many of my colleagues, burn out along the way. I do not think I am any better, stronger or smarter than the many talented individuals I have watched lose their vocation to teach but I am convinced that developing contemplative, or mindfulness, practices has made all the difference in both remaining effective, and growing to love my calling more and more.

From the vantage point of being in the twilight of my career, I have a perspective provided by experience, and as a result, I can see some things that I find are worth sharing with both beginning teachers and my peers.

How to Reflect

Mike has shared his paradoxical insights into how to reflect. They continue to fascinate me.

He says:

- To really involve my class, I must focus on myself;
- Not thinking is intellectually significant and invaluable;
- Doing nothing is good for building classroom relationships;
- When things get really busy, slow down and stop a while.

Most of my students have lives as frenetically busy as my own. In order to thrive, they need the skills to negotiate their inner lives. These skills remain largely undervalued and unappreciated in wider society obsessed with measuring outputs.

While my instructions are clear, and I speak firmly when giving instructions, my intention is to let go of control and lead by doing. After the first couple of experiences, the instructions subtly shift from being directions, to being a pathway into contemplation e.g.

- Put everything out of your hands;
- Sit with your backs as straight as possible;
- Feet, flat on the floor. Do not cross your ankles;
- Place your hands on your laps;
- Close your eyes;
- Gently follow your breath as you breathe all the way in, hold it, and let it out.



Reflective Practice

The Fourth "R" in Education

The consistency of that simple routine ushers in a change of mindset with an ease that continues to surprise me. With every new class, I find that once we have practised this a few times by the time I have said, "Sit with your backs...", I notice that their eyes are already closing and they are focusing on their breathing. What is crucial to this success is that from the beginning, I am modelling the routine to them. I am not just showing them what to do: I am doing it myself. Understanding what we know now about 'wiring and rewiring the brain', I now understand how simply beginning this activity gets both my students and me into 'the zone'.

Every class will have a range of students on the continuum from cooperative to uncooperative and often younger teachers fear that, meditation will not work unless everyone is on board. I have found that in leading by doing, the majority of students will join in, even if slowly at first. Once this happens, I find that even the most resistant are reluctant to miss out, especially if I can get a couple of their classmates to admit that they enjoy the experience.

The Experience of Reflective Practice

While uncluttering and stilling the mind is good for the thinking that comes later, the benefits from simple reflective practices got me interested in reading contemplatives like Thomas Merton (then Tich Nhat Hahn) and a whole rich world of contemplative wisdom figures. This reading in turn affected all my classroom practices, not simply my reflection practices. I have grown with an in-depth intellectual understanding, together with an experiential understanding, that the positive psychologists are now convincingly supporting with empirical data based research. The paradox of how not thinking encourages the development of intellectual thought continues to fascinate me.

From the very first time, and all through my career, I noticed that I saw my students differently during these exercises. Once they begin reflecting, their faces change. We often do not appreciate how much we see of another is constructed by a complex of contextual factors including our own assumptions. Scanning the room, making sure everyone is okay as we take part in a contemplative exercise, I see their faces differently. I start to see them. This affects our classroom relationship. It helps me connect with the 'them' that is behind all the facades. It took me the longest time to understand this. I cannot overemphasise how this affects the dynamic of my classroom and my teaching for the better. It would take forever to explain it in detail. Trust me and try it – patiently.

Far too often there is far too much to do, both for me and for my students. As I look back year after year, it seems that we always got done everything that needed to get done. It is counterintuitive in our results-driven culture to think that simply stopping and breathing is perhaps one of the most productive things we can do in a busy day. I find that when I enter a room with a class that is particularly rowdy and boisterous, beginning with a few moments of reflection calms and harmonises us, so that we can begin at a more human pace. I have found that reflection is a great pre-emptive behaviour management tool.

When we feel overloaded with all the things that have to be done, stopping and breathing unclutters, and helps prioritise, and then focus on one thing at a time. Often by focusing on what matters we can discard that which does not matter, which in turn, gives us more time and space. Most importantly uncluttering encourages real learning. When the tendency is to obsess about 'covering all the work', uncluttering not only helps us focus on what is most important, it opens up opportunities to 'uncover' and 'discover' engaging and delightful surprises along the way. I have learnt that these are the moments which hold great possibility.

Reflective Practice

The Fourth “R” in Education

After our regular weekly 10 minute reflections, I told my Year 9 students, I was writing down a few thoughts on our practice and asked them if they thought that there was any benefit in us stopping regularly to reflect. Their responses were relatively consistent, which made me think, because I cannot remember ever giving them a reason for doing what we do. They said:

- Reflection puts everything in perspective, what you are worrying about isn't that important
- Slow down and take a breath and focus on the good stuff in your life and shift focus from the negative
- Helps to realise what is important to you – you can be happy
- Appreciate what you take for granted
- We think about things when we relax, when we are busy we don't think about much, we consider a lot more.
- You think about the quality of life and not what you are stressing about

Recently I had a student teacher assigned to me for 12 weeks. She takes my Year 11 Ethics class in second to last lesson on Mondays. A beautiful class, but they can be restless and distracted on Monday afternoons. I came down with a bad case of the flu and was off work for a couple of weeks. My student teacher said that she was struggling to get their cooperation on Mondays and thought she had a couple of bad lessons with them. I gave her a book of guided reflections and told her to always start Mondays with a 5-10 minute reflection. The following Monday the students came in quite boisterous and scattered. My student teacher asked them to close their eyes and she read a guided reflection. They settled and she had a very thoughtful lesson with them. They engaged well in a calm and mindful way. At the end of the lesson, I asked my student teacher, if this was better. “Yes”, she said and smiled with delight. I told her not to forget how easy this can be.

On reflection, Sophia, my student teacher has seen me do this but I did not give her guidance on how to guide them. I was tempted to give her some pointers on technique but stopped myself from doing so. I figured that through trial and error she will find her own rhythm and that will be more effective for her than trying to imitate me.

To sum up

I hope you have enjoyed hearing from Mike and that his, and my words, have inspired you to explore the potency of reflective practice for yourself and, if you teach to introduce it, or continue to develop it, with your pupils. I am convinced that through reflective practice you will open up a fresh, more positive way of seeing yourself and the world.

Jane Hawkes BSc, MSc, CTA, PTSTA. UKCP
Registered Psychotherapist