Reflecting on Literacy Practices: Using Reflective Strategies in Online Discussion and Written Reflective Summaries

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Abstract

Within the context of an undergraduate literacy methods course, preservice teachers received opportunities to read engaging and meaningful text that challenged their thinking (McVee, Baldassarre, & Bailey, 2004) and respond to specific prompts through an online dialogue discussion and written reflective summaries. This article describes the process these preservice teachers engaged in as they discussed and reflected on their experiences in a language arts class. In the online dialogue, the preservice teachers engaged in reflective strategies that included clarifying, enhancing, providing evidence, challenging, and different thinking. As they dialogued and wrote reflective summaries, these students deepened their comprehension of literacy instruction and enhanced their metacognitive awareness of instructional practice as teachers of literacy. (Keywords: reflective practice, online dialogue, literacy practices)

One of the most important ways to encourage reflection is to give students a chance to think critically about their learning experiences, talk about them, listen to and consider others' perspectives, and write about their experiences and perceptions (Beed, Ridgeway, Brownlie, & Kalinina, 2003). Providing opportunities for reflection is essential for deepening learning experiences. This article describes the process that two groups of preservice teachers engaged in as they discussed and reflected on their experiences in a language arts class. Within the context of an undergraduate literacy methods course, preservice teachers received opportunities to read engaging and meaningful text that challenged their thinking (McVee, Baldassarre, & Bailey, 2004) and respond to specific prompts that the instructor constructed through an online dialogue discussion and written reflective summaries.

The discussion board served as an online community that students used to engage in deep thinking about literacy instruction. There is evidence to support online communities as strong forums for student learning that may be even more effective than the traditional talk that can be found in classrooms (Grisham & Wesley, 2006).

As the preservice teachers engaged in the online dialogue, they also engaged in a number of reflective strategies. Through the use of qualitative inductive methodology, the strategies of clarifying, enhancing, providing evidence, challenging, and different thinking emerged as we engaged in a systematic approach to arrive at these conceptual categories from within the data. These concepts were related to each other and provided a theoretical explanation of the actions of the preservice teachers in this study. We discovered that the preservice teachers engaged in these strategies repeatedly, which ultimately served to deepen their comprehension of literacy instruction and enhanced their metacognitive awareness of instructional practice as teachers of literacy.

Literature Review

As far back as 1933, Dewey introduced the concept of reflection; he considered it to be an active and deliberative cognitive process that involves sequences of interconnected ideas that take into account underlying beliefs and knowledge (Hatton & Smith, 1995). Dewey introduced the premise that teachers should be encouraged to become thoughtful and alert students of education, and argued that teachers should continue to grow in reflection (Dewey, 1916). When preservice teachers participate in the actual experience of teaching and reflecting on their experiences, there is likely to be a connection between theory and practice. Learning experiences are structured to follow the learner's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978); responsibility and challenge are added gradually as the learner is ready. Schon (1983, 1987) expanded Dewey's notion of reflection and argued that the truly reflective practitioner must augment technical expertise with personal insights and artistry. He referred to professional artistry as "the kinds of competence that practitioners sometimes display in unique, uncertain, and conflicted situations of practice" (Schon, 1987, p. 22).

Calderhead (1993) and others explored the nature of reflective practice. They found that reflective teaching encourages teachers to analyze, discuss, and evaluate practice, all of which are part of professional development. Teachers, through reflection, can become aware of their intuitive knowledge and engage in problem solving that helps to strengthen teaching ability (Vacca,