

Reflection for Developing Minds

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Once I attended the Harvard's Summer Teacher's Week. We were taught the same theme at the end of each and every class: reflection. I was asked to reflect on each day... on how positive my relationship with my students were... how I nurtured each child's writing... how participatory were our class meetings... how I instructed whole class lessons... my small group interactions and more. This initiated my daily reflections, a journal for thinking and affirming my goals for tomorrow. As a result my teaching improved and my insights became deeper.

As I recognized the worth of reflecting, I began to teach children how to be more reflective. I started using the hand signal of "Scale of 1-5". This is an efficient evaluation of students opinions. "Scale of 1-5," I asked the class, "How good was your lunch? 5 being excellent. Put your fingers up." One girl put up two fingers, "Emily, why did you give your lunch a two?" She explained that she had to eat school lunch today because her mom was on a trip and she liked what her mom gave her much better.

In my classroom, I continue to use 1-5 to monitor student progress and it is the first thing I teach as I mentor other teachers. I ask groups, "Scale of 1-5, how close are you to being finished?" Before a spelling test, "Scale of 1-5, how much have you studied for this test?" There are a great many opportunities to use this simple, personal but whole group, reflection technique.

At the end of the first week of school I create a half page for a student self-evaluation. "The first days of school have been (1-2-3-4-5) for me. I have made (few) 1-2-3-4-5 (many) friends. I know where to find things in our room 1-2-3-4-5. I am working hard enough but not too hard. (little) 1-2-3-4-5 (definitely)." Then I ask students to write two open-ended questions: I wish.... I would like help on....

Shortly thereafter I introduce "Get Out the Door" reflections. I ask students to write a response to a question before they get their coats. Students hand the small paper to me as they leave the room. Typical questions have been, "What two things did you learn today?" "What are you planning to do for homework today?" "What is the best way for you to study new words for a spelling test?" "How did you help someone today?"

In another form of reflection, "Knowing What You Know," I present a list for students to mark yes or no. "Do you know how to... jump rope? write in cursive? add and subtract negative numbers?"

I introduce journal reflection questions. As students come in from lunch/recess there is soft music and a reflection question on the board. Students write their reflections in

their journals. Then they draw or write in their journals for themselves. At the end of 15 minutes students are calm and re-focuses for the afternoon. Before they put their journals away I ask students to share Some are eager; others more reluctant to contribute.

After introducing Multiple Intelligences I ask reflection questions, “How strong are you in the Interpersonal Intelligence? How do you strengthen your musical intelligence? – Playing an instrument? Singing? Listening to music from other cultures? How strong is your visual-spatial intelligence? Write at least four sentences.”

Another reflection opportunity is Friday’s letter home. First, we make a web of class activities we’ve experienced this week. Then students write a letter to parents or grandparents, or someone they live with. The letter, mistakes and all, is sent home on Friday. People reading it are asked to sign the bottom and send it back. Of course, some families do not send them back but the student reflection is still important. I wander the room as students are writing, gathering ideas of who needs more support.

We begin portfolios. Portfolios are an extremely important aspect of reflection. I write parents that we are saving all work in order to gain a perspective on student learning. I save every, yes every, paper a student has done. I drop papers into a bucket and, at the end of the month they are sorted into individual student piles. Usually the sorting is done in conjunction with journaling and quiet music. Students organize papers in subject areas, with the latest on top. As we get to the end of sorting I ask students to write a few sentences about what they have observed in their papers. I collect these, look at their thinking, and save the papers until the next month’s sorting. At the end of November we begin planning for the Parent Portfolio Sharing Day. Again papers are sorted. Students write three entries for each section. I use a fancy paper and prompts. “Early in the year in _____ (math, writing, etc.) I didn’t know_____. My papers show that I now _____.
I want to improve in _____.”

During the next few weeks I discuss each portfolio with the student, sometimes pushing to enrich the reflection. Parent sharing day is in the last December week as a closure to this part of our year. Sharing time may be before school, during lunch/recess, or after. I usually planned all day to accommodate parents’ schedules. Of course, some parents will not come so I’ve arranged other important school adults to come in the afternoon to discuss, and applaud, these children’s work. We do a similar process is done in the spring along with a total year reflection. Portfolios are an excellent method to reflect and “show what you know.” Reflection is a key to learning and to self understanding.

Howard Gardner’s recent book, *Five Minds for the Future*, provides direction for our teaching. District standards are not sufficient to develop the “**disciplinary mind**” that Gardner describes. The disciplined mind thinks deeply about a content area. It is not

enough to be able to spew out facts or learn skills. We must develop minds that can use information to think deeply. Science students must design their own experiments, not simply replicate the teachers. History students, given just minimal information about a period of time, must create a scenario of life beyond the given information. Writers might read a piece of literature and then project it into the future. The disciplined mind needs information to reflect on, but the task for the minds of the future is to use current information and skills of the discipline to think further. Reflection is crucial in this process, both individual and during group feedback.

In a second grade classroom I visited recently, the teacher was teaching students to think about their behavior and its consequence. The “discipline” for these little ones was developing their personal intelligence. They needed to develop the skills of cooperative and respect. The teacher said, “After we check in media books you will be able to work on the computers. Raise your hand if you think you will have less computer time if we are slow checking in books. OK, how do you have to behave in order to get the most computer time?” Helping students reflect on their behavior teaches personal intelligences and develops minds that can evaluate the future. When a teacher reads a story to young students, she might stop and have students generate many endings. When the story is finished, alternative endings are discussed in order to understand the thinking behind endings and reflect on the author’s purpose.

Gardner provides four steps to achieve a disciplined mind. First, the essential concepts within a discipline must be identified. This is uncovering the essence rather than covering all topics. In the second step, significant time and energy should be spent on the essentials concepts, using a variety of examples. For instance, instead of studying one war after another, the challenge is to focus on “Why wars?” Sixth graders and older students can work in cooperative groups, studying different wars, to develop a thesis. Reflection is necessary to develop disciplined minds.

Gardner’s third point is the necessity of approaching any topic from a variety of ways. The use of stories in history, personal accounts, and video reenactments are all important ways to deepen an understanding of an issue. When I taught American history I used *The Clay Marble* to deepen understanding of the Vietnam War. Students read *The Journal of Ben Uchida* about living in an U.S. internment camp during WWII. We listened to community members who had experienced war. We accessed the website from Mankato, MN. eighth graders did an excellent history project on the hanging of Native Americans in their village square. Diverse resources are necessary to develop the disciplined reflective mind.

Gardner’s last point is public performances of understanding. Written reports are only one way to “show what you know.” An elaborate poem may give the facts and feelings better than a narrative. A play or a radio dialogue may serve the content. An artful collage may provide the insights. The disciplined mind reflects on a depth of content and presents information in new ways. When students are given respect, encouraged to

think deeply without teacher mandates, they experience a new sense of self and a desire to achieve more.

In the process of thinking deeply about a topic our students learn to **synthesize**, the second kind of mind we need for the future. Synthesizing is the ability to integrate ideas from different disciplines and communicate it to others. Gardner states, "The ability to knit together information from disparate sources into a coherent whole is vital today." Gathering information from diverse sources then creating a public performance necessitates synthesizing. Preschool children are constantly comparing information to make sense of their world. The past tense of *swim* must be *swimmed* They may connect a Sousa march to an exciting ride at an amusement park. Comparisons are children's natural way of learning. Standards are achieved while nurturing more complex thinking. Teachers need to directly teach synthesizing. There are some beginning testing of synthesizing. In France a secondary test taker is given four passages on a topic and is asked to write points of agreement and disagreement. In the U.S. the Educational Testing Service is developing prototypes that provide data from various sources asking students to make summarizing statements. Bill Clinton reflected, "I think intellect is a good thing unless it paralyzes your ability to make decisions because you see too much complexity. Presidents need to have what I call a synthesizing intelligence."

The next level is nurturing the **creating mind**. Students can begin by brainstorming a list of new products in our world. A disciplined mind can synthesize ideas from different sources and create anew. In our last newsletter I wrote extensively on the creative mind and how to nurture it in our classrooms. (If you want another copy of those two articles email me.)

The next two minds that Howard Gardner identifies are linked to the personal intelligences: the respectful mind and the ethical mind. The **respectful mind** appreciates the differences among people. To nurture the creative mind you encourage certain activities. To nurture the respectful mind you model and discuss. You demonstrate respect when you help students understand multiple intelligence and the contributions of individuals around the world. You model respect as you discuss human needs, life experiences, religions and points of view. You show respect by valuing all contributions in cooperative groups and by encouraging both sides of a debate.

The ethical mind builds on respect. The ethical mind contributes to the good of the community. "Teachers are crucial role models," Gardner states. Students learn from what we do and how we react. Very young children can discuss the importance of including everyone at recess. All ages work to help their class and school. Teens are especially concerned about ethical issues and are quick to point out adults who have been unethical. The ethical mind may stand up for unpopular views as Lincoln did with slavery. Unfortunately, there are plenty of current ethical issues that may be discussed with older students. What ethical choices are companies making when they sell

cigarettes to teens, or in third world countries? What is Coca-Cola doing in India? How can we, as citizens, react to unethical situations in our lives and in our community?

Gardner concludes, “these five minds are likely to be crucial in a world marked by the hegemony of science and technology, global transmission of huge amounts of information, handling of routine tasks by computers and robots, and ever increasing contacts of all sorts between diverse populations.”

Reflection is the key to learning. Begin with the standard knowledge curriculum and deepen it. The five minds will become the background as you plan. Encourage synthesis and creativity while modeling and discussing respect and ethical issues. Integrate these into the reflective questions you ask. As you do, reflect on ways to expand your own understanding of teaching.