# The Use of Language in Reflective Teaching: Implications for Self-Understanding

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**ABSTRACT**: Monologic models of reflection do not adequately explain how teachers come to know. Monologic conceptions of reflection use language in individual and isolated ways. This paper critiques these conceptions of reflection and suggests that individual cognitive models of reflection can perpetuate poor pedagogy. I argue that this pedagogical irony is established once reflection is conceived of as a state of cogito where language is subjugated to an objective and rationalistic function within independent pedagogical queries. Alternatively, it is with biases, I argue, that teachers initially frame events to reflect upon. Through language – dialogue – I suggest that teachers can better understand their reflections, their practice, and eventually themselves. I draw largely on three arguments that challenge agent-centered epistemologies that, in turn, implicate the beliefs of teachers and the normalizing discourse of education in teachers' pedagogical decisions. I conclude with aspects of Hans-Georg Gadamer's thoughts towards the development of a richer conception of reflective practice and self-understanding.

**RÉSUMÉ**: Les modèles de réflexion monologiques n'expliquent pas suffisamment comment les enseignants en viennent à se connaître. Ces conceptions monologistes de la réflexion utilisent la langue de façon individuelle et isolée. Cet article est une critique des conceptions de la réflexion et suggère que les modèles cognitifs et individuels de la réflexion peuvent engendrer une piètre pédagogie. Je soutiens que cette ironie pédagogique est instaurée une fois que la réflexion est conçue comme un état de «cogito» (de la pensée), où la langue est assujettie à une fonction objective et rationnelle à l'intérieur de questions pédagogiques.

Comme alternative, c'est avec un préjugé que je prétends que les enseignants forgent a priori les situations sur lesquelles ils réfléchissent. Je suggère que, par le biais du dialogue, les enseignants peuvent mieux comprendre leurs réflexions, leur pratique et éventuellement eux-mêmes. J'avance trois arguments qui mettent en question les épistémologies centrées sur l'agissant qui, à leur tour, impliquent les croyances des enseignants et le discours d'éducation normalisant propres aux décisions pédagogiques des enseignants. Je conclus en me référant à certains aspects de la pensée de Hans-Georg Gadamer qui favorisent le développement d'une plus riche conception de la pratique réflexive et de la compréhension de soi.

*dia*, a prefix occurring in ... the formation of compound words to mean *passing through*

*logue*, denoting a specified kind of discourse, spoken or written.

(*Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, 1983)

## *Introduction*

In his book *The Interpretation of Cultures*, Clifford Geertz described how an idea emerges onto the social science landscape promising new answers to persistent problems (1973). Geertz characterized this phenomenon as a "grande idée," an idea that

> resolves so many fundamental problems at once that they seem to promise that they will...clarify all obscure issues. Everyone snaps them up as the open sesame of some new positive science; the conceptual center-point around which a comprehensive system of analysis can be built. (p. 3)

In teacher education, reflective teaching has emerged as a contemporary grande idée. Advocates of reflective teaching argue that teachers who think deeply about their pedagogy will enhance their practice, improving student achievement as a result. Reflective teaching is not a distinct type of pedagogy; rather, it is

a method teachers use to examine the teaching practices they already use.

This logical line of reasoning has provoked a large discussion about what reflection is and how to foster this kind of thinking with teachers in schools (Hess, 1999). The pursuit of reflective teaching has spawned shifts in teacher education curricula in order to cultivate reflective thinking from student teachers: autobiographies (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995), dialogic journals (Roderick, 1986), case studies (Richert, 1991), action research (Noffke & Brennan, 1991), portfolios (Wolf, 1994), and reflective seminars (Anderson et al., 1995). These activities prepare preservice teachers to think about how pedagogy is continually assessed as it meets the challenges of a diverse and evolving classroom.

Many activities that foster reflection aim to "overcome the apprenticeship of observation,"[1] the prior knowledge and beliefs that preservice teachers enter the profession with that may perpetuate poor pedagogy (Dewey, 1904; Lortie, 1975; Grossman, 1991). Student teachers' own familiarity with the classroom restricts their ability to conceptualize alternate visions of teaching and learning. Reflective activities strive to help preservice teachers interrogate their deeply held beliefs about teaching and learning and frequently replace beginning teachers' prior beliefs with more productive and equitable conceptions of instruction.

The process of examining one's pedagogical beliefs implicitly asks beginning teachers to investigate other epistemological issues as well. The acquisition of new instructional strategies typically clashes with the kinds of instruction beginning teachers received as students in classrooms. This clash challenges beginning teachers to understand how knowledge is generated from a variety of instructional methods, raising complex issues over the values associated with selecting multiple, and at times different, ways of knowing. This is often an unsettling time for beginning teachers as they become more aware that pedagogy is a conscious decision laden with particular values (Hokanson, 1999). As a result, beginning teachers frequently observe their teacher educators to see if they are modeling the kinds of instruction being advocated and to catch a glimpse of how to

manage such complex decisions. In the end, reflective thinking provides beginning teachers opportunities to align their instructional strategies with the values they hold important.

## *Problem*

The use of reflective activities in teacher education has generated questions about what reflective teaching looks like and, more generally, what reflective thought is. Definitions of reflection proliferate teacher education literature, and just as Geertz's prophetic statement demonstrates, understanding reflection has become a fertile research agenda in teaching and teacher education. Even a cursory read of the literature demonstrates how varied, and enormous, the inquiry has become. However, it is clear that the literature consistently conceptualizes reflection as a cognitive process that is conducted individually.[2]

Individual reflection, what I call *monological reflection*, relies on notions of objectivity and rationality to explain how teachers improve their pedagogy. Monologic definitions assume that teachers are reservoirs of pedagogical knowledge and that careful, systematic thought will generate appropriate solutions to pedagogical queries. As a solitary practice, monologic reflection does not adequately explain how teachers' values are implicated in assessing instruction or adequately explain how teachers construct solutions to pedagogical queries; rather, monologic reflection erroneously suggests that teachers make decisions according to an assumed body of professional knowledge. However, this knowledge is contested (Kennedy, 1987). Monologic conceptions may portray teachers in an empowered professional role; however this conception continues to perpetuate teaching as a solitary profession that privileges the episteme of the individual.

## *Organization of the Paper*

In this paper, I suggest that teachers who reflect alone may, in fact, promote bad practice. If reflection is to improve teachers' pedagogy then reflection must be practiced in dialogue with others. My critique of reflection focuses on *how* teachers reflect with less attention paid to *what* teachers think about. I am

interested in identifying how reflection is conceived and how these conceptions explain the ways teachers investigate their pedagogy. I suggest that when reflection is conceived as a dialogic process, it enhances teachers' understanding of their pedagogy and eventually, themselves. None of this is new; philosophy of science has questioned the objectivity of the observer since the beginning of interpretative research. But the consequences of these critiques have not been sufficiently examined in relation to reflective teaching.

I begin by explaining the rationale supporting reflective teaching. Next, I introduce three philosophical critiques of agent-centered epistemologies that challenge notions of objectivity and rationality embedded in monologic characterizations of reflection. I am particularly interested in how teachers use language to frame experiences and how language constructs knowledge. I end by discussing, broadly, how reflection, characterized as a dialogic process, assists teachers to learn about the values that shape their practice. I liberally apply aspects of Hans Georg Gadamer's thoughts toward this end.

## *Rationale for Reflective Teaching*

Reflective teaching signals an important shift in the conceptualization of teachers. Reflective teaching attempts to move teachers towards greater awareness of the reasons, motives, values, and pressures that direct and influence their pedagogy. It is distinguished from conceptions of teachers as technicians. Teacher technicians generally operate from a number of fixed assumptions about teaching and learning. An example of technical teaching is the Florida Performance Measurement System (FPMS). FPMS is an observation instrument that identifies strengths and weaknesses of teachers' pedagogy according to items coded for specific teacher behaviors. Items such as "begins instruction promptly," "orients/maintains focus," "provides for practice" are easily observable behaviors and when completed by teachers, generate a "successful" teaching episode (Peterson, Kromrey, Micerri, & Smith, 1986).

Critiques levied against technical teaching state that teaching is far more complex than any list of techniques could hope to capture. The reduction of teaching to a set of techniques narrows

the act of learning to acquiring a set of behaviors. Furthermore, generic principles of teaching do not provide sufficient instruction for sophisticated content that needs to be taught to a variety of learners. Perhaps most important, teaching is a moral endeavor where teachers make frequent decisions about complex ethical issues. Teachers who rely on teaching techniques that fail to consider the moral implications of the classroom and the school neglect the public mission of educating competent and caring citizens. The importance of reflective teaching rests on its ability to meet these democratic aspects of teaching and learning that unfortunately fall outside the auspices of traditional technical teaching (McKenna, 1999).

Reflective teaching initiates a type of thinking that weighs teachers' values in relation to the reasons which support pedagogical decision-making. This kind of explanatory thinking is different from routine thinking that is guided by impulse, tradition, or authority (Dewey, 1904). Karen Evans (1995) exemplified explanatory thinking as she attempts to improve her writing curriculum. Evans dismissed certain principles of the writer's workshop that she believed are not culturally congruent with the students in her classroom. As a result, Evans concluded that, "I allowed my beliefs in what I thought I *should* be doing to result in tunnel vision. Having to face such a situation [pedagogical doubts] allowed me to explore other instructional possibilities and different ways of utilizing process writing" (p. 270). Evans supported reflective thinking because she believed it assists teachers to avoid becoming trapped in routine thinking.

Reflection has also been characterized as a temporal event. Schön (1983) distinguished between reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, indicating that reflection monitors our actions during and after teaching. Schön's distinction emphasized the epistemic importance of practice and experience. He believed that technical models of epistemology, such as the FPMS, are seriously flawed because they maintain artificial boundaries between theory and practice. Schön argued that epistemic models that distinguish between theory and practice do not help practitioners answer the thorny ethical problems in the field. His definition of reflection appreciated the episteme of the practitioner – during work and in the thinking that takes place

after work. As important as is Schön's distinction, most descriptions of reflection emphasized the time after teaching.

Valli (1997) reminded educators that reflection is derived from the Latin *reflectere*, meaning *to bend back*. In this regard, the reflective teacher is someone "who contemplates, who is a deliberative thinker" (p. 68). Valli's definition of reflection focused on the thinking that occurs after teaching as means to prepare for future action. By implication, Valli suggested, "reflective teaching is teaching with careful thought and judgement" (p. 68).

Perhaps Calderhead (1992) effectively summarized the above descriptions of reflection and reflective teaching when he stated,

the reflective teacher is one who is able to analyze their own practice and the context in which it occurs; the reflective teacher is expected to be able to stand back from their own teaching, evaluate their situation and take responsibility for their own future action. (p. 141)

Calderhead similarly conceptualized reflection as a process that initially bends back. With the exception of Schön's "reflection-in-action," characterizations of reflection tend to isolate the thinking that occurs after, and upon, a teaching episode that has already taken place.

I believe that when reflection is conceived as a process of bending/standing back alone, it may not improve pedagogy. Definitions that describe reflection as an individual cognitive process do not explain how personal biases generate the framing of situations. Monologic reflection assumes that teachers possess an omniscient eye in their classrooms and that answers to pedagogical predicaments lie in careful, systematic thinking. The assumption that reflection is an objective and rational act is misleading and maintains teachers in isolated roles in schools. This assumption also neglects how language constitutes knowledge, and is constituted, through social interaction. In the next two sections, I argue that this view of language is not sufficient for understanding the personal biases that constitute perception.

The study of reflection might be enhanced by asking questions generally left out of the research agenda – for example, What methods do teachers use to frame teaching episodes? How do the

methods that reflective teachers employ compare when reflecting alone or in dialogue? To what extent do these differences in reflection affect perception of a classroom event? And, do these differences impact subsequent action? Questions concerned with *how reflection is practiced* illuminate what teachers reflect on and provide additional information about the reasons why they alter pedagogy.

## *Critiques of Agent-Centered Epistemologies*

### *The Myth of Objectivity*

Recent critiques in epistemology suggested that the process of stepping back and evaluating oneself and one's practice is very complex. David Bohm (1996) is dubious whether or not it is possible to be objective at all. Bohm stated that if

> I say I am going to look into my mind but I don't consider my assumptions, then the picture is wrong because the assumptions are looking. That is a common problem of introspection. You say, "I am going to look at myself inwardly," but the assumptions are not looked at – the assumptions are looking. (p. 70)

Understanding is filtered through assumptions. If teachers are not aware of their assumptions, then the situation they frame for reflection may be construed as an objective account of the event rather than a retelling constructed from their biases. Of course, reflective teachers must begin reflecting from personal vantages; however, acting solely upon personal vantages may perpetuate bad practice. For instance, if teachers believe that female students will not do as well as male students in mathematics courses, adjustments to pedagogy will be filtered through sexist perceptions, probably enacting, and reifying, teachers' expectations. In this example, gender may have nothing to do with mathematical ability, but rather, gender may have everything to do with the amount and quality of instruction students receive (Kahle & Meece, 1994).

Bohm's argument insisted that reflective teaching include teachers' beliefs, values, and biases. This helps distinguish reflection as a methodology, although a slippery one, from notions of *cogito* where answers are discovered through objective

reflective thinking.[3] Ball (1990) powerfully contributed to this idea with her case-study that suggested that teachers may believe their pedagogy is grounded on certain principles when in fact their practice may contradict those very principles. The teacher in Ball's study only reified her beliefs through individual thinking, contradicting the new improvements in curriculum and instruction. The power of Ball's study stemmed from the fact that the teacher believed she was engaged in new practices when in fact she was not. Here, Ball demonstrated that teachers' beliefs and values powerfully influenced how they envision and practice teaching.

### *Language as Filters – Selecting and Deflecting*

Kenneth Burke (1966) believed that people's assumptions, beliefs, and values function as "terministic screens" and through these screens people come to understand. Like Bohm, Burke believed that assumptions direct attention and the re-constructions of "'reality' may be but the spinning out of possibilities implicit in our particular choice of terms" (p. 46). Burke was concerned with how language directs our assumptions. For Burke, language cannot be separated from beliefs, values, and assumptions – these are our "terministic screens" (p. 46). In fact, it is through language that we identify our assumptions, state our intentions, and come to know our world. Therefore, language powerfully identifies our assumptions and "directs the attention into some channels rather than others" (p. 45).

For example, Ryan (1976) showed how language directs attention in one way and deflects attention from equally compelling areas of inquiry. Ryan suggested that the sentence

Poor children come to school culturally deprived and disadvantaged for learning.

could be written

We are dealing, it would seem, not so much with culturally deprived children as with culturally depriving schools (p. 37).

Ryan showed that by rewriting, or inverting, sentences, other arenas for inquiry appear. The first sentence stressed students' preparation for school and the second sentence illustrates school

effects. Teachers less inclined to think and talk about the social conditions of schooling may consistently see pedagogical problems stemming from student inadequacies (and vice versa). Teachers' reflections are a product of the language they use to describe situations. If teachers are not aware of multiple ways to assess and describe situations, they may consistently misrepresent events.

When teachers frame an event to reflect upon, they do so with the terministic screens they have developed over time and not with an all-knowing objectivity. In fact, teachers reflectively frame events with their available terms and language. This process necessarily focuses teachers' attention in some directions, deflecting their attention from other directions. What is useful for the purpose of this paper is to explore how teachers use terministic screens. How do assumptions, beliefs, and values about teaching affect teachers' reflections? How does language function in framing teachers' reflections? And, what is privileged and/or excluded when framing reflections?

### *Normalizing Discourse*

Renato Rosaldo (1987) argued that the act of framing is entirely rhetorical and claims to objectivity are situated within the dominant patterns of disciplinary discourse. Rosaldo, an anthropologist, was concerned that the pervasive style of writing in ethnography tended to objectify and dehumanize cultures being investigated. Rosaldo claimed that situations are frequently misrepresented because inquiries seek the normalizing discourse of the discipline.

For instance, a teacher reflecting on how to help a group of students improve their reading skills can situate the problem from a variety of disciplinary perspectives – pedagogy, materials, motivation, classroom management, and so on. The teacher framed the situation depending on her or his beliefs *and* the prevailing norms of teaching. As a result, the teacher might believe that the students' poor reading skills mandate a crash course in the basics. However, student difficulty in reading at school may be the result of using a different kind of discourse at home, and remedial teaching will only exacerbate poor test

scores. This is often the unfortunate case when school and home are culturally incongruent settings (Heath, 1982).

The disciplinary trend to bolster children's basic skills in response to poor achievement is a solution that can perpetuate students' poor performances because the normalizing discourse often neglects important cultural considerations involved in teaching and learning. Furthermore, there is no guarantee that reflection will improve teaching. In fact, reflecting alone can obfuscate understanding of teaching episodes because language seeks a normalizing discourse and isolated teaching dissuades teachers from challenging the pervasive norms of teaching (Lortie, 1975). Reflective teaching, intended to challenge pervasive conceptions of teachers as technicians, only preserves the privileged position of technical teaching when conducted individually.

## *Summary*

Reflective teaching is bound by language. As such, reflection must be distinguished from notions of cogito that suggest that deliberative thinking will discover answers to pedagogical problems. Definitions of reflection that rely on arguments of cogito assume that pedagogical solutions are within teachers rather than among teachers. This assumption displaces the dialogic use of language by relying on notions of objectivity.

Since teaching is bound by language, it is tied to the biases, beliefs, and values teachers have about teaching. Teachers who reflect alone may not visualize options beyond the scope of their assumptions and therefore reflection can be a method that reinforces bad practice.[4] Finally, reflection is a method for describing and reconstituting events and as such, it is linked to the organizational structures that define the field. Therefore, reflection describes teaching episodes from teachers' perspectives and from disciplinary perspectives. The powerful dynamic between the individual and the system perpetuates technical teaching because of the isolating features this dynamic produces. As such, I believe monological reflection can neglect the social, moral, and complex subject-matter concerns involved in teaching a diverse student body.

Reflective teaching is worthwhile practice. However, I have argued that this practice must be aware of some limitations. Reflection might enforce bad practice because reflection cannot, by itself, transcend language. Here, reflection may become a valuable tool in the arsenal of technical teaching because of its ability to assess through normalizing discourses. However, reflection that uses language in dialogue can help teachers talk through issues with colleagues. Dialogue reveals the assumptions that inevitably direct inquiry in reflection.[5] Teachers who understand their own assumptions can make better-informed judgements about their teaching and their students. There follows a list, in very broad strokes, some principles of self-understanding associated with reflecting dialogically.

### *Gadamerian Implications for Self-Understanding*

Hans-Georg Gadamer (1997) insisted that monologic reflection moves us away from important self-characterizations and self-knowledge. For Gadamer, "the self" mediates understanding through history and tradition. Language is how we "come to understand" ourselves and each other, because words are situated in history and tradition (p. 446). Language is full of ourselves – our assumptions, beliefs, and values. Dialogue is the process that identifies our beliefs and values. Gadamer is concerned that removing social context disables our ability to understand ourselves. It is, Gadamer argued, only through social context, through social interaction, that we understand:

> A person who does not admit that he is dominated by prejudices will fail to see what manifests itself by their light. It is like the relation between I and Thou. A person who reflects himself out of the mutuality of such a relation changes this relationship and destroys its moral bond. A person who reflects himself out of a living relationship to tradition destroys the true meaning of this tradition in exactly the same way. In seeking to understand tradition, historical consciousness must not rely on the critical method with which it approaches its sources, as if this preserved it from mixing in its own judgments and prejudices. It must, in fact, think within its own historicity. To be situated within a tradition does not limit

the freedom of knowledge but makes it possible. (pp. 360-361)
Gadamer argued that meetings between people develop self-understandings, further claiming that all understanding is ultimately, self-understanding (p. 260). He suggested that monologic reflection destroys the moral bond between individuals. Gadamer's moral bond was predicated on conceptualizations of language as communicative, dialogic. It is the sharing of assumptions to self and other, not the analytic objectification of assumptions, which reveal who we are and what we believe. It is with our assumptions that we come to understand our assumptions, but only in contact with others – the familiar with the strange (Kerdeman, 1999). Thus, the moral bond between individuals would be the trusting interactions among people within safe communities that increase and promote talk.

Dialogic reflection allows teachers to understand their beliefs by interacting with other teachers and other beliefs. The interactions among and between teachers, the "fusion of horizons," illuminate the tradition and history teachers participate in and help teachers understand these perspectives (pp. 306-307). Gadamer's idea *fusion of horizons* establishes the theoretical groundwork needed to broaden how reflection contributes to self-knowledge. Dialogic reflection helps teachers come to understand, and improve, their practice through sharing, revealing, and discussing the values that are either explicit or implicit in practice.

As such, questions are raised about what should be the nature of professional interactions among teachers during, and after, the school day. Additional questions should be raised about the additional leadership skills beginning teachers need in order to enter organizations that do not support dialogue or dialogic reflection. And finally, curricular questions aimed at educating dialogic teachers may raise fruitful deliberations in teacher education. Gadamer's thoughts help expand how reflection can improve teaching.

## NOTES
1. An adaptation of Grossman's (1991) title.
2. See Zeichner and Liston (1996) for an extended analysis of this point and for additional references, pp. 18-22.

3. Descartes (1641/1985) questioned himself into what he believed to be the quintessential human quality, cogito. Cogito represents the uniquely human capacity to think and, Descartes contends, this quality is essentially rational. There are numerous critiques of these claims – for instance, the use of language is what characterizes human beings, not thought, and rationality is just one of many ways to construct knowledge.

4. I am indebted to Linda Valli for suggesting that individuals can be dialogic while groups can be monologic. See Bohm (1996), Code (1991) and Taylor (1991) for extended discussions of these points.

5. Buckley (1999) acutely states that such communication is culturally bound as well.

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