Reflective Practice and North Carolina's Developmental Reading and English Redesign Efforts

Lori Dees and Emily Moore, Wake Technical Community College
Chad Hoggan, North Carolina State University

Abstract
As developmental education practitioners in the midst of North Carolina's Developmental Reading and English Redesign, we are interested in researching best practices for instructional design and application. We discovered that the principles of reflective practice pervade much of the literature on program planning and practice, so we began to question whether those principles were guiding our redesign efforts. We intentionally incorporated reflective practices to discover whether our experience mirrored this contemplative theory. In this article, we present an overview of our experiences incorporating reflective practice into our redesign efforts.

In recent years, the phrase *reflective practice* has been increasingly used in teaching and learning literature. The notion of reflection in teaching practice was introduced in 1910 when John Dewey published *How We Think*, a book that centered on reflection as the predominant mode of reason. It is widely accepted that effective teaching skills are learned over time and are honed by applying effective techniques, often involving thoughtful collaboration with fellow practitioners. Thus, reflection in itself may lead to enhanced skills in practice. Brookfield (2002) proposed that improvement happens as a result of intentional collaborative reflection. He suggested intentional collaboration would help teachers overcome a sense of isolation and, therefore, improve their instructional practice (Brookfield, 2002).

In North Carolina, redesign efforts in developmental education are presenting community college instructors with new opportunities to engage in collaborative reflection. In 2010, the North Carolina State Board of Community Colleges began the SuccessNC initiative, which called for a redesign of the state's community college developmental education programs, claiming that in the best interest of students the existing format was in need of an overhaul. In an effort to improve student persistence and reduce dropout rates, North Carolina commissioned a task force to determine how to best combine and accelerate developmental education courses in reading and English. This task force outlined basic parameters for institutions across the state to follow in their reading and English courses. The task force also developed a list of Student Learning Outcomes for community colleges to use statewide.

The parameters notwithstanding, planning in North Carolina's developmental education programs has been widely varied as colleges redesigned their developmental courses. Over the past year, we employed intentional reflective practice while engaging in our course redesign work. As part of these efforts, we participated in and documented our reflections through a collaborative online journal. Following our collaborative efforts, we invited our department to participate in our own reflective activities.

Theory of Reflective Practice
As part of our ongoing planning and reflection during our redesign efforts, we have explored many aspects of reflective planning and practice. In doing so, the theoretical works of Stephen Brookfield informed what we did, as we considered him a leader in examining learning through reflective practice in educational contexts. Through this lens, we endeavored to operate in a reflective atmosphere while resisting the natural barriers of time constraints and exposure that present themselves over time. We felt that, with the right intention and meaningful reflection, program planning could result in better teaching practices fostered by committed instructors.

Brookfield (2002) contends that community college teachers can capitalize on critical reflection through the use of four lenses: the autobiographical lens, the perspective of one's students, the perspective of one's colleagues, and the lens of educational scholarship itself. In using the autobiographical lens, the teacher reflects on his or herself as a learner and explores the ways in which learning increases subject knowledge and skills and influences teaching. Through the student's perspective, the teacher gathers feedback and gauges progress on a regular basis, enabling the instructor to get a snapshot of where the learners are in the process and thus make any adjustments. Brookfield (2002) views the third lens, colleague experience, as one in which "teachers use one another as critical mirrors and sounding boards" (p. 34). It is through the development of interpersonal relationships and the discussion and sharing of ideas with colleagues that teachers can view their own practice as one not in isolation but in the context of community. In the fourth lens of educational scholarship, Brookfield (2002) contends that by turning to the literature and developing a research/teaching nexus, teachers can find sources that address challenges they face. At the heart of Brookfield's (2002) assertion is the belief that reflection occurs contextually, critically, and with intent to examine the assumptions that frame one's teaching practice.

What We Coordinated
Brookfield's theory informed our efforts as we began the yearlong process of redesigning our developmental reading and English courses. Each stage of our development progressed through two of Brookfield's four lenses, including an online collaborative journal that promoted subject knowledge and skills, and departmental work that encouraged interpersonal relationships. We were not able to utilize the student lens at this point, as we had not implemented the redesign yet. We also did not formally utilize the theoretical lens because many instructors in our department were working on a master's degree and thus were exposed to the theory and research in our field. For us, we felt the autobiographical lens and colleague lens were the two areas that needed the most attention.

Online Collaborative Journal
The primary means of reflection during this time was a journal [name withheld] and [name withheld] shared using Google Docs that we based on Brookfield's first lens of "autobiographical experience." The journal originated during an online independent study course we were taking together. We both committed to commenting in the journal twice a week during our semester-long course. We took turns beginning the conversation and responding to one another. Our conversation followed the content of the textbook we were reading together on program planning and the questions and concerns that surfaced during the development of our new reading and English curriculum. We began to feel free to question one another on what we were doing with the redesign. The question and answer dialogue proved to be the most useful because it prompted us to address topics and issues on the redesign, such as what textbook we would use and how our lab time should be designated. Our subject knowledge and skills in the redesign began to develop and helped us take a more critical look at our planning.

Departmental Reflective Work
Our secondary step was to involve our colleagues in our department with emphasis on Brookfield's third lens, encompassing collaborative reflective work. To do so, we planned and incorporated reflective activities in our department meetings and began to explore reflection as a tool to open doors for improvement.
In one activity, we created a brief questionnaire to prompt reflective thought. Each instructor spent fifteen minutes answering the reflective questions alone. After we recorded our thoughts, we shared our answers through a guided discussion. Conversation grew and crossed avenues we did not imagine when

developing the activity. After an hour, the large group discussion transformed into smaller group discussions amongst colleagues with similar concerns. Important aspects of the redesign were questioned during this forum. As a department, we delved into the areas of vocabulary and grammar instruction and the refinement of our grading schema for the new pass/retake aspect of Developmental Reading and English. Because we specifically set up time to focus on reflection and to foster interpersonal relationships, we were able to clarify important aspects of the redesign before implementing it.

What We Discovered: Experiences with the Online Collaborative Journal
Utilizing an electronic journal to reflect during the planning process was both useful and practical. Because of our commitment to the journal, we were able to communicate several times a week when our otherwise busy schedules may not have allowed us to have face-to-face conversations. Collaborative journaling has been an important tool in our quest to build our knowledge and skills while incorporating reflection and action. Lupinski et al (2012) supported our choice, explaining, "The literature clearly states that reflective journal writing for teachers/students undertaking their field work experiences is a key component to becoming a skillful reflective practitioner" (p. 84). Our journaling informed choices we made in our group planning and helped us develop goals and stay focused on reflection.

Using our online journal in Google Docs, we discussed ways we could integrate new methods in our redesigned classes. Because there are so many elements involved in integrating traditional Developmental Reading and English, such as how to fit in all required SLO's, reduce two sixteen-week courses to one eight-week course, and choose a textbook and create curriculum, instructors can easily overlook important elements like how to teach grammar in planning. Following is an example of a journal exchange that led to a discussion of incorporating experiential learning into the redesigned courses.

> *Emily: p. 53, Experiential Learning: The idea of doing a formal needs assessment or target audience analysis intrigues me, and I guess those are covered in chapters five and thirteen. I do a very informal assessment of my students' experiential learning with an open-ended prompt I use to assess prior knowledge and experience at the beginning of the semester, and I do this at my clickers workshops by polling the audience about their experience with clickers at the beginning of the workshop, but I am not sure if or how we are doing this with the redesigned courses. Lori: I really connect with the idea of experiential learning. In writing, I ask my students to complete journal entries based on experience several times during the semester. The way our current essay prompts are also allow for experiential learning reflection. I think we could easily incorporate experiential reflection into our planning. We have time planned for in-class writing, so we could use some reflective writing for this assignment.*

Taking the time to journal about innovative ideas and how these might improve our courses led us to a deeper level of understanding about specific topics like experiential learning, summary writing, reading comprehension, essay grading, and grammar instruction that are key to our overall comprehension of how to teach integrated courses effectively.

In our collaborative journaling exercise, we recognized that our experiences as instructors, and our perceptions of those experiences, were exposed. Coming from different disciplines, we approached teaching and learning from slightly different vantage points. Reading instruction focuses on elements like vocabulary and annotating, while writing instruction focuses on elements like essay organization and grammar. In our journaling, we had to build a safe space to bare our true

reactions to our discipline-specific materials and assessments, reading and English colleagues, and redesign planning.

We accomplished establishing a feeling of a safe space by setting goals and agreeing on expectations each week (Parkes & Kajder, 2010). We committed to specific weekly readings and journal entries that included reactions, questions, and responses. These expectations encouraged us to share our reactions from our own perspectives as a reading and English instructor and to question one another in the process. This fine-tuning helped build our safe space. Consequently, our goals grew from these expectations. We developed specific plans to incorporate our findings into our program planning with our colleagues and strove to become leaders in creating a safe space for them. Having a plan at the start of every week allowed for a focused and shared understanding of what we were expecting of one another. Thus, we overcame fears of incompetence through a shared understanding of goals and agreed upon mutual respect and patience.

Experience with Departmental Reflective Activities

Because of our research and reflective journaling, we realized we needed to be more deliberative about our reflective planning in our department and that we needed to focus on our interpersonal relationships and involve our colleagues. As part of this effort, we proposed we each take an online survey to determine our individual teaching philosophies (Zinn, 2001). The survey asks instructors to read a sentence and rate how they feel about each option on a scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 7 (strongly agree). Survey results indicate which philosophical tradition (liberal, progressive, behaviorist, humanist, radical) most strongly informs the work of the instructor. Identifying our own philosophies was a key step in reflecting on the past choices we made in our own classrooms and in understanding how we relate to each other while planning the redesign when we have different viewpoints.

Action and Collaboration Support Reflection

In hindsight, a key realization for us was that when we did not intentionally plan for reflective practice, we often did not realize that we had missed reflective opportunities. While reflection on planning for our redesigned program should arguably be at the top of our list of responsibilities, it typically takes second place to our normal daily duties. Most instructors juggle several different obligations, such as teaching, completing yearly objectives, and serving on committees; thus little time for reflecting exists. In many instances, we have so many commitments that we have to sacrifice reflection.

To overcome these barriers, we found it helpful to think of reflection as a collaborative way to put our best ideas into action. If we approach reflective practice as a two-step process, the first step is reflection, and the second equally important step is action. The acts of reflection and action are often performed collaboratively, with groups of practitioners working together to improve practice and devise solutions to problems. In our group of practitioners, we reflected together on our daily classroom experiences and identified elements of the redesigned courses that did not reinforce our objectives. Because we shared our reflections with one another, we could brainstorm solutions and act on our ideas to improve materials like reading guides or tests or activities like literary circles or in-class drafting. Brookfield (2002) argued this is the best way to reflect. Forming collaborative groups enables teachers to overcome feelings of isolation and to improve practice. Continuously reflecting is a necessary component to raise the standards in planning and teaching. Kane et al (2004) noted, "the term *excellence* [signals] an on-going process of self-improvement, rather than a measurable end-point" (p. 287). Thus, reflection is a continuous process and must occur repetitively, so instructors continue to evolve as the teaching climate changes.

Instructors who want to make a difference in the lives of their students know they must be excellent in both their teaching and their planning, and reflection can help set this change into motion. Purcell (2012) explained the benefits he gained from a reflective practice, which included improvement as an educator, improved course preparation, and improvement as a sociologist. We believe all educators have the potential to experience similar benefits with increased focus on intentionally reflective practice.

Right now, reflection is informally occurring on campuses. This method of teaching and planning would be much more effective if teachers formally included it as part of their practice. Five to fifteen minutes intended for reflection at the end of the day can build a reflective habit without costing instructors time from other responsibilities. Intention leads to more successful reflection and planning coming to fruition. What the teaching community needs are potential strategies on how to integrate a reflective community and make it work. Brookfield (2002) stated, "A critically reflective stance toward the practice of community college teaching can help teachers feel more confident that their judgments are informed and leave them with energy and intent to do good work" (p. 31). We need to break past our barriers in order to understand what reflective practices will work best.

At our community college, we have begun to explore the electronic forum. Blackboard also seems to be a viable learning management system for us to create a reflective forum for our instructors going forward. With the proper intentions set at the beginning, with leadership, and with a community whose members are familiar with each other, we believe an electronic medium could work to build knowledge and skills and enrich interpersonal relationships. Lupinski et al. (2012) said it best when they stated, "Reflection is a gift professionals can use to grow from experiences" (p. 82). This gift allows us to work together to create the soundest programs to best serve our community.

Lori Dees is an instructor of Integrated Reading and Writing, Wake Technical Community College; Emily Moore is associate professor and lead instructor of Integrated Reading and Writing, also at Wake Technical Community College. Dr. Chad Hoggan is assistant professor of the Adult, Workforce, and Continuing Professional Education; program coordinator for the Graduate Certificate in Teaching, Training & Educational Technology; and program coordinator, M.Ed. in the Training & Development (online) program, North Carolina State University.

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