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## No Novice Teacher Left Behind: Guiding Novice Teachers to Improve Decision-Making Through Structured Questioning

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For many novice teachers, the first solo effort in the classroom is a “sink or swim” experience. With good pre-service preparation that includes extensive field experience, the beginning teacher may feel more confident, but even those with the most confidence still find the complexities of decision-making bewildering. For those novices who are less confident, frustration and depression may ultimately drive them from the classroom. In fact, nearly half of all new teachers leave teaching within the first five years (Boles & Troen, 2002).

Although a teacher’s work may never have been simple, it is more complex now than ever before. Teachers must make a variety of decisions, which include: clarifying outcomes, determining content, designing curriculum, devising learning activities, creating meaningful assessments, accounting for students’ different learning styles and needs, and fashioning a climate conducive to learning. Decision-making takes place before, during, and after the lesson. In theory, novice teachers are prepared how to make good instructional decisions through methods courses and extensive field experience. However, as teacher educators, we do not teach them how to interrogate their teaching practice systematically. Without such a structure, fledgling teachers hope for the best, frequently viewing results as either total success or complete failure. In reality, neither emotion supports the development of a new teacher into a more reflective practitioner – the central practice of a professional educator. Although providing new teachers with information about curriculum design, instructional strategies, assessment techniques, classroom management, content, and professional strategies are all important components of a quality pre-service teacher education program, in this article, I argue that teacher educators need to focus more on helping novices to ask themselves the right questions as they think about teaching.

Fuller and Brown (1975) noted that novices proceed through three stages: survival concerns, teaching situation concerns, and pupil concerns. In our current era of professional and content standards, state-mandated high-stakes testing and school improvement processes, however, novice teachers can no longer mature leisurely over time. Novices need to become reflective practitioners much faster than new teachers who entered the field even ten years ago. Ideally, novice teachers are in an enviable position of having just completed a pre-service preparation program that encouraged them to integrate the theory of education courses with the reality of field experience.

During this time, new teachers also likely had the opportunity to reflect with their professors, mentor teachers, and other novice teachers. Although this is a strong model for preparing teachers, a key element is missing: a structured way to engage in professional discourse, either with or without a mentor. It is essential for teachers to explore elements of their teaching practice while at the same time recognizing on how those elements work together. They need a structure through which to reflect on their professional practice.

## Reflection

The concept of reflection is central to being a teacher. As such, the teacher education literature has produced a number of models of teacher reflective decision-making (Zeichner & Liston, 1996; Zeichner, 1996; Schulman, 1987; Schön, 1991, 1997). Researchers have also studied the different aspects of teacher decision-making. These aspects range from an emphasis on the technical to the moral aspects of teaching (Valli, 1997; Colton & Sparks-Langer, 1993; Grimmitt & Erickson, 1988). A reflective emphasis on decision-making includes a conscious, systematic, deliberate process of framing and re-framing classroom practice, in light of the consequences of our actions, democratic principles, educational beliefs, values and preferred visions teachers bring to the teaching-learning experience (Serafini, 2001).

Encouraging teachers to frame and reframe their classroom practice is challenging for all teachers -- even veterans. Experienced teachers tend to make decisions without much thought. For them, reflection is seen as "thinking about" the decisions and structured opportunities for reflection. Programs such as Cognitive Coaching (Costa & Garmston, 2002), encourage teachers to elevate the decision-making process to a more conscious level, thus allowing them to clarify and modify their practice. This structure of professional development has been seen as more productive than merely "thinking about" professional practice (Killion & Harrison, 1988), but for novice teachers, this kind of sophisticated reflection on decision-making is difficult because of their limited repertoire of experience, as well as the lack of trained or available coaches who can model this reflective practice.

A structured format that novice teachers can use on their own to reflect on their teaching from more than one perspective (teacher, student, professional standards) and at more than one moment (before the teaching occurs, during the teaching, and after the teaching) could allow novices to recognize the complexity of teaching, while affording them a structured way to think about each element. By using three points of view and three pivotal opportunities for reflection, novice teachers are able talk systematically about their thinking and decision-making during planning, implementation, and evaluation phases of teaching. They can gain insight into the complexity that is teaching and begin to take the guesswork and so-called "luck" out of their practice.

The Centric Reflection Model, developed in 1994 by Saban, Killion, and Green, utilizes a matrix of related factors, displayed in figure 1 below. Three kinds of reflection interact with three points of view in order to provide a framework for interrogating professional practice (Killion & Todnem, 1991; Schön, 1983).

Table 1: The Centric Reflection Model Adapted to Aid Novice Teachers' Decision-Making

	Type of Perspective		
	<b>EGOCENTRIC</b> (View of Self)	<b>ALLOCENTRIC</b> (View of Student)	<b>MACROCENTRIC</b> (View of Professional and Content Standards)

Reflection – For – Action			
Reflection – In – Action			
Reflection – On – Action			

If the novice is fortunate enough to have a mentor, the mentor could find the model structure helpful in working with her protégé; however, should the novice be on her own, the structure provides a “self-help” structure. There are three kinds of reflection as they apply to novice teachers: reflection-for-action, reflection in action, and reflection-on-action.

First, **reflection-for-action** is planning for the teaching experience. For veteran teachers, this reflection occurs as a result of teaching the lesson, reviewing it, and planning for the next time the lesson will be taught. For novice teachers, however, the slate is clean. This is the first time the lesson has been planned; therefore, “for action” takes on a different meaning. Although they lack the previous experience of teaching the lesson, most novice teachers are very familiar with lesson planning. They know how to craft objectives, list needed materials, choose instructional strategies, design how learning will be assessed, and perhaps even anticipate special needs of students. These considerations would likely be what most novice teachers would consider adequate reflection for action.

Next, **reflection-in-action** is the simultaneous awareness of metacognitive process and actions as they occur (Saban, et al., 1994). Some highly skilled veteran teachers have described this as an “out of body” experience where they can see themselves teaching from a perch high above the classroom. From their perch, they take in the entirety of the classroom and its students. They are able to make mental notes about what they see and hear for use when they formally reflect on the lesson. This is the practice Valli (1992) described as “the capacity to ‘notice oneself noticing,’ that is to step back and see one’s mind working in relation to its projects” (p. 99). This kind of reflection takes experience and practice, but it also takes awareness. While novices lack experience, they can be aware and can become practiced in asking themselves to pay attention while teaching. With practice, they can begin to develop the skill needed to reflect in action.

Finally, **reflection-on-action** is the most familiar kind of reflection that asks for a replay of the experience in our minds. Veteran teachers use this video tape-like experience to evaluate “how did it go?” Did the lesson achieve the objectives; were learners successful; what adjustments need to be made before the next time the lesson is taught? Novice teachers do experience this kind of reflection in some situation; however, they tend to think more holistically. For novice teachers, the lesson was “great” or the lesson was “awful.” Even more frequently, the novice doesn’t think at all because a supervisor gives an appraisal of the lesson, short-circuiting any thinking on the protégé’s part.

### Centricism

By recognizing opportunities for reflection, the novice teacher can begin to systematically reflect on her professional practice. Because the novice often lacks a certain level of experience and confidence, she also tends to look only from one perspective—her own. If the novice is encouraged to look at teaching from other perspectives beyond her own egocentric view, it may be possible to become a more reflective practitioner. These alternate perspectives include the students’ (allocentric) and the school or profession’s

(macrocentric) perspective. What do these perspectives look like when applied to a novice teacher’s decision-making?

**Egocentricism** is the perspective that is easiest to understand, because it is one’s own perspective. In terms of reflecting on practice, an egocentric teacher looks at lesson development from her own perspective. Some concerns of a novice teacher might be: Did I allow enough time for the project presentations? Am I solid in my knowledge of the content? Will the assessment strategy I’ve chosen adequately reflect student understanding? How does my own racial/ethnic/class background influence my thinking? All questions, regardless of the kind of reflection, come from the point of view of the teacher.

**Allocentrism** is considering experiences from the students’ points of view, an often-neglected perspective. Multiple intelligences, learning styles, and special needs present in the class are the most important issues from this perspective. Beyond those cognitive concerns, research has shown that “moral issues” of teaching greatly also impact the experiences of teaching and learning (Seidel, 2000; Sockett, 1987; Noddings, 1995, 1992; Reilly, 1989; Feiman-Nemser & Floden, 1986). Questions a novice teacher might ask to explore this perspective may include: How will the kinesthetic learners experience this activity? Will the hearing impaired student be able to adequately negotiate this material? Is this material too challenging or not challenging enough for students B, J, and S? How will African-American students respond to this author? How will my language learners experience this material?

**Macrocentrism** is reflecting on the lesson and the teacher from the perspective of the school’s needs, state-level content requirements, and professional standards, such as the standards for beginning teachers (INTASC, 1992). Using this perspective for reflection allows novice teachers to see themselves as integral to the teaching profession by helping them internalize professional standards and regularly use them in planning, delivery, and evaluation, regardless of the form their reflection takes—reflection for action, in action, or on action. This facet also helps break the isolation many teachers feel – veterans and novices alike – by helping the reflective teacher recognize her role in the larger efforts of both her school and her profession.

### Putting It All Together

When a novice teacher uses the Centric Reflection Model to help guide thinking about professional practice, the combination of kinds of reflection and perspectives creates a powerful tool for professional insight.

Table 2: The Centric Reflection Model Adapted to Aid Novice Teachers’ Decision-Making In Planning, Delivering, and Evaluating Teaching: Questions Novice Teachers Can Ask Themselves

Type of Perspective		<b>EGOCENTRIC</b> (View of Self)	<b>ALLOCENTRIC</b> (View of Student)	<b>MACROCENTRIC</b> (View of Professional and Content Standards)
<b>Reflection-In-Action</b>	Planning	How cohesive do I feel my lesson/unit design is?	What awareness of students’ prior knowledge am I incorporating?	What understanding about professional and content standards are in this lesson/unit?

	Delivering	What adaptations can I use as I see my students' responses?	How are students responding to the pace?	How does this lesson/unit align with content and professional standards?
	Evaluating	What expectations do I have for each student's learning?	How were students responding as the lesson/unit was progressing?	What evidence indicates this lesson/unit represents professional and content standards?
<b>Reflection-On-Action</b>	Planning	What elements of the lesson/unit plan caused me difficulty?	What learning will students be expected to demonstrate?	What standards have been incorporated in the unit?
	Delivering	From my perspective, was my delivery clear, cohesive, and coherent?	What did I learn about students' reactions to my instructional strategies that will help improve their learning?	How did the design of the unit demonstrate adherence to professional and content standards?
	Evaluating	How effective is this lesson/unit from my perspective?	What evidence is there that students learned what I wanted them to learn?	What evidence indicates this unit/lesson represents professional and content standards?
<b>Reflection-For-Action</b>	Planning	What have I discovered about my planning that will help me in the future?	What changes will students make if they understand?	What additional resources could make alignment with standards better?
	Delivering	Based on what I've learned, what different strategies could I use in the future?	What did I learn about students' reactions to new strategies?	How could the standards be used to improve next time?
	Evaluating	What will I begin, continue, or stop?	What should students begin, continue, or stop?	How might standards change to improve student learning?

***Planning a lesson or unit -- Reflection-for-action***

The novice teacher using the centric reflection model will look at the act of planning from her own perspective as teacher, from the perspectives of her students, from the perspective of the professional standards for beginning teachers, and from the needs of the school. Figure 2 shows some typical questions that a teacher might use as they reflect for action, in action, and on action as they plan a lesson or unit. For novice teachers, this is an opportunity to raise expectations for student learning to a conscious level, to discuss them, and to decide how to meet them. Planning is perhaps one of the most familiar elements of teaching, but it often is given short shrift once the novice is in the thick of teaching. Yet, for the novice to consciously voice issues of student prior knowledge, cultural influences, or how to include particular content standards allows the novice to more consciously plan. Here is an opportunity to accurately align curriculum

and instruction with the best way to assess student learning, while consciously addressing specific teacher dispositions that may be of concern, particularly those dealing with race, class, and gender.

### ***Delivering a lesson or a unit -- Reflection-in-action***

How the planned lesson or unit is delivered often spells success or failure for any teacher, but no more so than for the novice teacher. These questions invite close scrutiny of the teacher's presentational skills as well as how the activities work. When a novice teacher uses structured questioning to guide her reflection, the "all-or-nothing" observations of success or failure are replaced by a more authentic reflection on how the planned instructional strategy did or did not accomplish the intended objective. As the novice looks at her teaching from the students' perspective of the experience, teachers gain empathy and can use that insight to further build relationship with their students. The novice also begins to see how to further become a part of the school as a whole when thinking from the macrocentric perspective.

### ***Evaluating a lesson or unit – Reflection-on-action***

The questions a novice teacher asks in order to evaluate the success of a lesson are important ones. They need to be more specific than to ask themselves "how did it go?" For novice teachers to develop the ability to self-assess, just as they are asking their students to learn to self-assess, there must be some criteria to consider, and there must be the opportunity to do that assessment away from the evaluation of a department chair or principal. Once the novice teacher has completed her self-evaluation, a coaching conversation with the department chair or principal using the novice teacher's self-evaluation provides a rich opportunity for professional reflection and growth. Through structured questioning, the novice teacher begins to look for evidence, specific indicators, of effectiveness or a need to improve. The novice also grows in her ability to use professional and content standards to guide current curriculum and instruction. The evaluation process also expects that novice teachers specifically link instruction and assessment results.

### **Conclusions**

In summary, novice teachers need structures with which to make sense of the complicated act of teaching. Without a framework to guide their thinking, they "sense" and "feel" their way through their initial teaching experience, and are at risk for losing their way and quitting. As pointed out by Cruickshank (1987) and reinforced by Serafini (2001), there is a link between reflection and action, and problems should be framed, not discovered. By considering the opportunities for reflection and by accounting for different points of view, novice teachers can use reflective questions in order to: (1) appreciate the complexities of decision-making during the teaching act; (2) see the power of reflection in decision-making that can help them plan, deliver, and evaluate; and (3) use reflection to make themselves more confident and competent as teacher decision-makers.

When a novice teacher can envision teaching and learning from multiple perspectives, that teacher is empowered to make decisions confidently and reflectively. When a teacher believes in her ability to make good instructional decisions, she can be an autonomous, effective professional who can weather the vagaries of education, confident in her vision and professional practice. According to Loughran (2002), "reflection is effective when it leads the teacher to make meaning from the situation in ways that enhance understanding that s/he comes to see and understand the practice setting from a variety of viewpoints" (p. 36). Through use of the Centric Reflection Model, novice teachers – with or without a mentor – have a better opportunity to meet the demands of

teaching and to gain insight into the complexity of their chosen career.

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