



Teaching Concerns

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Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher

by Stephen D. Brookfield. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1995.

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As teachers we hold certain assumptions as to what constitutes "good teaching" and what is in the best interest of our students. But as any experienced teacher will tell you, good intentions and theoretical practices can be misconstrued. Take, for example, the teacher who assembles her class into a circle to facilitate discussion and promote an atmosphere of equality. While some students might interpret this gesture as it was intended-to promote student-teacher solidarity and encourage freedom of expression-others might find it intrusive or as a sign of the instructor's inability or unwillingness to "teach" the class. In *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*, Stephen Brookfield discusses how critical reflection helps teachers understand why they teach in a certain way and to assess the impact and perceptions of these practices. The heart of the reflective process, according to Brookfield, is viewing teaching from four different perspectives or "lenses": our autobiographies as teachers and learners; our students' eyes; colleagues' perceptions; and relevant theoretical literature.

The first lens considers our experiences as teachers and learners. This process unveils the assumptions and reasoning that shape and influence our teaching. Later, these assumptions may be verified through the remaining three lenses. In addition to videotaping and peer observation, Brookfield describes several innovative strategies that can be used with this lens. In the "Survival Advice Memo," teachers imagine that they are vacating their current job and must write a memo to their successor offering advice. The memo reveals those aspects of teaching which a teacher considers most crucial and those assumptions that are most influential. Another exercise, the "Teacher Learning Audit" survey, enables teachers to identify the skills, knowledge, and insights developed during the previous semester or academic year.

The second lens used in Brookfield's process of critical reflection is our students' eyes. Assessment of student perceptions reveals to what extent our assumptions about teaching or classroom management correspond with those of our students. One technique is the "Critical Incident Questionnaire," a single-page form that asks them to focus on those aspects of the course that were meaningful or had an impact on their learning during the week:

1. At what moment did you feel most engaged with what was happening?
2. When did you feel most distanced?
3. What action that anyone (teacher or student) took did you find most affirming and helpful?
4. What was most confusing?
5. What was most surprising?

In addition, Brookfield maintains the importance of dialogue among colleagues. Discussion of pedagogical matters frequently reveals that concerns or problems are shared. Peer discussion not only validates our trials and successes, but it also provides new perspectives and insights into problem-solving.

Lastly, theoretical literature plays a role in critical reflection in helping us to understand our experiences by naming and describing them. According to Brookfield, this can help prevent us from believing that we are responsible for everything (good and bad) that happens in our class.

Brookfield's theory of the four lenses, or perspectives, is a balanced and insightful approach to critical reflection. Both experienced and novice instructors should find *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher* a useful tool in assessing teaching effectiveness.