Chapter 28
On Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

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28.1 Introduction

The notion of experience and reflection as a critical process of an outdoor environmental educator's practice is not new. Outdoor environmental educators commonly point to the lack of experience and reflection in education as motivations for the emergence of modern Outdoor Environmental Education (OEE). For example, in the North American context, the ideas of Dewey (1933) are commonly used to demonstrate the need for both experience and reflection in creating meaningful learning experiences. More recently, Schön (1983) encouraged teachers[1] and other professionals to engage in regular reflective practice that examines their professional lives. However, as Tannebaum et al. (2013) point out, "reflection dates back millennia" (p. 242). Socrates, for example, claimed that an "unexamined life is not a life worth living" (Plato, trans., 2002, Apology 38a), connecting a personal reflective practice to a life well lived. Likewise, we believe that an unexamined practice is not worth practicing. Therefore, in this chapter we invite both emerging and experienced educators to consider their own reflective practice. To facilitate this process, we explain what reflective practice is, provide a rationale for why it is important, and present practical strategies for educators to enhance their reflective practice.

[1] For convenience, we use the terms educator and teacher interchangeably within the paper. We intend these broad terms to include outdoor environmental educators, facilitators, instructors, and guides.

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28.2 What Is Reflective Practice?

Reflective practice is used by scholars and practitioners in many professions (e.g., Education, Nursing, Engineering, Business) to enhance conceptual understanding and practical skills. The origin of the term "reflective practitioner" is credited to Schön (1983), who identifies a gap between professional knowledge (i.e., theory) and real-world practice (i.e., experience). Schön's work is largely influenced by Dewey (1933), an educational philosopher who believed quality reflection is a necessary element of meaningful learning. Both Schön (1983) and Dewey (1933) believe that the goal of reflection is to articulate what we know from experience; to enhance understanding of our actions and experience regardless of whether that knowing is congruent with current theory. For example, the educational theories and practical skills taught in university may not adequately equip a teacher for the experiences they face in the classroom or sufficiently train them to teach effectively in ever-changing outdoor environments. Therefore, one goal of reflective practice is to use theory to inform practice and to use practice to inform theory; or, to bridge the gap between knowledge acquired in university and real-world teaching experience in order to improve a practitioner's professional effectiveness. Put simply, reflective practice is a form of professional development.

Central to Schön's (1983) model of reflective practice are three key phrases: knowing-in-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action. Knowing-in-action describes the tacit knowledge that teachers use every day without much thought, but struggle to describe despite it being publicly observable. For example, an observer may notice a teacher listening carefully to a student's question and responding in a nuanced manner that the teacher may not be aware of or be able to describe. Yet, the teacher knew in the moment what the student needed. Reflection-in-action is thinking about what we are doing while we are doing it. For example, an educator reflects-in-action when they ask themselves during a lesson if their methods are working and how they might adjust or adapt their methods in the moment to be most effective. Reflection-on-action refers to thinking back on our practice and trying to understand, assess, and learn how our knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action contributed to our success or failure. For instance, a teacher reflects-on-action when they contemplate a recent teaching experience. Thompson and Thompson (2018) suggest reflection-for-action as a missing element of Schön's (1983) reflective practice process. Reflection-for-action involves planning and thinking prior to engaging in professional action. By way of illustration, when a teacher identifies learning objectives and plans a teaching strategy, they are reflecting-for-action.

We then have a three-phase reflective practice process: reflection-for-action; reflection-in-action; and reflection-on-action. Reflective practice is a repeating cycle where each phase informs the other. Ideally, as reflective practitioners, we regularly reflect in each of the three phases. However, the process can be entered at any point in the cycle and engaging in one of the phases is better than engaging in none. As you can see from the simple diagram (see Fig. 28.1), knowing-in-action is

Fig. 28.1 The reflective practice process

the tacit knowledge that practitioners bring to their reflective practice and that influences reflection in all the phases.

Reflective practice is about awareness, a mindfulness of sorts. Reflective practice might also be described as an open dialogue with yourself and your situation. Further, reflective practice might be viewed as a means of disrupting our assumptions and practices so that we might challenge our assumptions and improve our practice.

Expanding on Schön's (1983) seminal work, a number of authors have presented definitions of reflective practice (Dubé & Ducharme, 2015). These include well known educational thinkers such as Boud et al. (1985), Mezirow (1991) and others. Considering these definitions as well as those of Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983), common elements include some form of reflective or contemplative activity that enhances our understanding of our professional practice and facilitates new awareness that shapes future practices. Based on these definitions, the current reflective practice literature, and our own experience as practitioner educators, we propose that central to being a reflective practitioner educator is the intentional, rigorous, and thoughtful "research" into your own practice. It is about contemplating and analyzing your teaching joys and struggles, successes and failures, what you know, what you think you know, and what you know you don't know. In short, becoming a reflective practitioner educator is to embark on a journey of improving our knowledge and teaching practice by blending our theoretical knowledge with our everyday professional experience.

28.3 Why Become a Reflective Practitioner?

Becoming a reflective practitioner is important because it is difficult to see beyond our own experience. Brookfield (1998, p. 197) likens us to prisoners trapped within our minds, able to see only through our own filters, assumptions, beliefs, and values.

These internal and at first imperceptible predilections act like screens haphazardly guiding some decisions while ruling others out (Larrivee, 2000, p. 299). As teachers, this screening process creates inconsistencies and oversights within our instruction, which may lead to problems and dilemmas that need solving (Dewey, 1933). By exercising reflection, we are better able to stand outside ourselves and see how our default preferences, perceptions, and actions positively shape–and sometimes distort or constrain–our teaching practice. For example, I might notice that a lesson I teach is repeatedly ineffective, students just don't get it (e.g., the j-stroke in a canoeing class). This concern sparks me to reflect on my own preferred means of learning technical skills. When I realize that I learn best through detailed auditory description, I begin to see a bias towards this instructional style which isolates my students who prefer other learning modalities.

While the above example illustrates how reflection can address practical challenges, reflection can also serve to illuminate far more consequential insights. Larrivee (2000) associates reflective practice with critical pedagogy, where reflection can unearth unexamined judgements, reveal privileged interpretations, and highlight entitled expectations. A *critically* reflective practice highlights the ethical implications and consequences inherent to teaching. Thus, a willingness to reflect critically on one's practice is then a moral commitment to bring justice and emancipatory thinking to the classroom, whether indoors or out (Goulet et al., 2016, p. 146). For example, how does the equipment necessary for the outdoor activities I choose make assumptions about the socio-economic status of my participants? How do the readings I select affect who is given voice, and thus power, within the field of OEE? Or, to what degree is a place-responsive pedagogy prioritized in my expedition planning?

Fundamentally, a reflective practice places thoughtful and integrity-filled action at the heart of teaching (Gillies, 2017, p. 26). It requires a sustained commitment to humility as the educator searches for ways to learn, grow, and improve their practice (Lawrence, 2011, p. 258). McClintock (2004, p. 393) combines these dual roles of searching and improving in the term "scholar practitioner," summarizing reflective practice as an "ideal of professional excellence grounded in theory and research, informed by experiential knowledge, and motivated by personal values, political commitments, and ethical conduct."

28.4 Challenges and Strategies to Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

Becoming a reflective practitioner isn't easy. There are common challenges that might be encountered, but also strategies that can be employed.

28.4.1 Seek Clarity and Understanding Regarding Reflective Practice

Kinsella (2009) cautions that "reflective practice is in danger of becoming an empty, meaningless phrase, that at once means everything and nothing" (p. 5). Perhaps the greatest obstacle preventing reflective practice is a lack of understanding of what reflective practice is and why it is important. We hope that after reading this chapter, heeding these challenges and strategies, contemplating our reflective questions, and pursuing the suggested readings that you will feel well-informed and ready to begin (or continue) your journey as a reflective practitioner.

28.4.2 Be Attentive to Organizational Culture

It is much easier to engage in reflective practice in an organization and with peers that understand and value reflective practice (Hickman & Collins, 2014). Without this support, becoming a reflective practitioner can become a lonely and uninspiring process. If you face this barrier, we encourage you to gently introduce your organization and peers to the process and value of reflective practice while seeking other strategies outside the organization to deepen your development as a reflective practitioner.

28.4.3 Work with (or as) Coaches, Mentors and Co-teachers

Receiving (or giving) coaching, mentoring, and supervision are effective means to mature your reflective practice (Mann et al., 2009). There are many advantages to working with a trusted coach, mentor, or supervisor including someone: to help you develop a systematic and structured reflective practice plan; to assist you in seeing your experience from multiple points-of-view; and to support and encourage you in your reflective journey. Co-teaching is another form of reflective practice mentoring that can be very valuable. When co-teaching with someone you trust, you have a partner who you can collaborate with as you reflect-for-action, reflect-in-action, and reflect-on-action. Furthermore, you have two sources of knowing-in-action which brings multiple perspectives to one situation. In such situations, you open each other to new perspectives and new opportunities for disrupting your assumptions and practices. While the above examples of coaching, mentoring, and co-teaching assume others' contribution to your reflective practice, as an outdoor and environmental educator, you can similarly encourage reflective practice within your participants and learners.

28.4.4 Accept That Becoming a Reflective Practitioner Is a Learned Skill

Even with the support of others, your progress as a reflective practitioner may feel slow. Be patient with yourself and remember that it is a new and learned skill. Not all people are naturally reflective and not all professions embrace reflection. Therefore, just as learning to play a new sport or musical instrument requires practice, so does becoming a reflective practitioner. Reflective practice is a conscious, deliberate process that may or may not be intuitive (Goulet et al., 2016). Therefore, we encourage you to accept the role of learner as you develop your reflective practice and embrace the uncomfortable and awkward moments that are a natural part of developing any new skill; it will take time and patience. Mann et al. (2009) note that the more effort we commit to reflection, the greater our learning will be.

28.4.5 Commit to the Craft of Reflective Practice

Reflective practice requires significant effort! For, "effective teaching is much more than a compilation of skills and strategies. It is a deliberate philosophical and ethical code of conduct" (Larrivee, 2000,p. 294). Reflective practitioners, then, often see their work as an extension of their values, and understand their role as teacher to be one infused with meaning, purpose and responsibility. This dedication might better be described as a vocation (literally, a calling) than a job. Without this deeper commitment to our practices, it is less likely that we will practice them reflectively. However, it is a good reminder that we "can't be mindful or reflective about everything all the time" (Rogers, 2001, p. 52). Nevertheless, becoming a reflective practitioner requires the teacher's full readiness and willingness to commit to the craft of teaching.

28.4.6 Devote Regular Time

A commitment to becoming a reflective practitioner will require significant time. An effective reflective practice is one that is intentionally structured and systematic, deliberate and guided, and requires internal motivation to maintain (Goulet et al., 2016). Much like becoming physically fit, we get in shape by setting aside regular time for exercise and following a structured and systematic workout plan. Similarly, in order to develop your reflective practice, you must set aside regular time to engage in intentional, rigorous, and thoughtful reflection before, during, and after your professional practice. Although this can be particularly challenging in outdoor settings where an outdoor environmental educator is responsible for students

24 hours a day, even short periods during these busy spells, when coupled with devoted time before and after, can enable meaningful reflective practice. With that said, if you routinely struggle to find reflective space in the field, then you can assume your participants are struggling too. If this is the case, we suggest examining your course itinerary and curricular priorities in order to ensure a contemplative pace that affords the reflection that time spent in natural environments so often inspires.

28.4.7 Be Alert to Selective Inattention

Your time commitment will pay off as you identify areas of selective inattention within your practice. Schön (1983, p. 61) reminds us of the danger here: "if a practitioner becomes selectively inattentive to that which doesn't fit their knowing-in-action, their work may become routine, causing disengagement, which could lead to boredom or burnout." Schön goes on to say that it is the engagement in the reflective process that breathes life back into our practice. Therefore, becoming a reflective practitioner requires being willing to take risks and embrace the surprising and disruptive experience of teaching. For example, perhaps we hold personal beliefs about our own abilities or the efficacy of specific pedagogies that we are not willing to examine. By ignoring, or being selectively inattentive to difficult and challenging questions and situations, we risk limiting our growth and effectiveness as teachers.

28.4.8 Seek Challenging and Novel Experiences

As noted above, reflective practitioners must sometimes embrace risk. A number of scholars and researchers (Mann et al., 2009; Rogers, 2001) have identified new and differently challenging situations as occasions ripe for learning through reflective practice. For example, Rogers's (2001) claims that "an event or situation beyond the individual's typical experience" (p. 42) can be a trigger for reflection. Some suggestions for seeking challenging and novel experiences include moving to a new teaching location, teaching new groups of students (i.e., different ages; culturally different; economically different), teaching new topics, intentionally trying a new teaching method, observing other teachers in action, and participating in a teaching exchange with another country. There are many more possibilities. In short, taking risks in your teaching practice can be a rich source of new learning.

28.4.9 Find Your Preferred Forms of Reflection

Reflection can take many forms. We suggest you try a variety of forms of reflection to discover your preferences. Perhaps the most common form of reflective practice is the reflective journal (Moon, 2006). Without doubt, a reflective journal can be a very effective tool for developing your reflective practice. However, journaling is not for everyone. You might also try semi-structured small group discussion, facilitator lead discussion, pre and post experience role plays, critical incident reviews, case studies, peer support groups, computer simulations, mind-mapping and many more (Dubé & Ducharme, 2015; Mann et al., 2009; Thompson & Thompson, 2018). A mode of reflection that we have found helpful is reading contemplative and thought-provoking literature, such as those mentioned in the suggested readings below. All in all, we encourage you to use whatever form of reflection that works best for you and your situation. If one form is not working for you, try another until you find one that generates insight.

This section identified a number of strategies to aid you in your journey to becoming a reflective practitioner. The next section provides several specific methods you might use along the way.

28.5 "Model" Methods for Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

For fear of implying that reflective practice involves a fixed or linear progression, we're reticent to suggest a model for becoming a reflective practitioner beyond our simplified diagram (see Fig. 28.1). Rather, in this section we present two methods, or frameworks, that you can use as you develop your reflective practice. When reflecting-for-action, we might wish to obtain greater awareness of the preferences and biases we bring to our teaching either globally or with regard to a particular lesson. Thus, Larrivee's (2000) four-level reflection on challenging beliefs and limiting assumptions and expectations may prove useful. Within each level, the practitioner explores the content relative to themselves. Level One examines philosophical topics like: our core beliefs about human nature, personal values, and ethical convictions. Level Two explores the dominant educational frameworks and principles that inform our teaching: for example, human developmental theory, learning theory, and sources of student motivation. Level Three connects the first two levels with daily practice: how might my reflective insights from Level One and Two enlighten how I approach today's lesson? Given the reflection that transpired in the previous three levels, Level Four makes informed decisions about how to strategically structure a learning experience. Larrivee (2000), p. 303) provides the following example from this process: Level 1: For the most part, each student is doing the best they can, given the complexity of their lives; Level 2: most human dysfunction stems from unmet childhood needs or traumatic life experience; Level

3: I will therefore refrain from judging and offer kindness should I meet with disappointments or inexplicable behavior in class today; Level 4: I will actively look for opportunities to offer trust and understanding within today's class.

Brookfield (1998) suggests another practice method using four different lenses. The first lens is Autobiography as a Learner of Practice, and it can be used in the reflection-for-action period: "analyzing our autobiographies as learners often helps explain to us those parts of our practice to which we feel strongly committed, but that seem unconnected to any particular pedagogic model or approach we have learned" (Brookfield, 1998, p. 198). By exploring our journey as a learner, we often discover that our convictions or instincts are unreflectively rooted in experiences where we were affirmed or demeaned as students. Autobiographical reflection helps us become more intentional teachers.

Brookfield's (1998) second lens, Our Learners' Eyes, straddles the reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action periods. Here, we attempt to learn what our students' learning experiences were like. Near the end of class, Brookfield (1998) recommends administering a Critical Incident Questionnaire (CIQ) to students. The CIG contains five questions: i) At what moment were you most engaged as a learner this week? ii) Similarly, when were you most distanced as a learner? iii) What action, that anyone took this week, did you find most affirming or helpful? iv) Similarly, what action left you most confused or puzzled? v) What surprised you most about our classes this week? By reflecting on the students' answers after class, reflection-on-action, the CIQ alerts a teacher to potential problems, oversights, and misperceptions, while grounding future action in accurate information.

Brookfield's third lens, Our Colleagues' Experiences, may occur in the reflection-on-action period where we share our educational challenges, fears, and confusion with colleagues. By listening to our struggles, our colleagues act as "critical mirrors reflecting back to us images of our actions that often take us by surprise" (1998, p. 200). Brookfield's fourth and final lens, Theoretical Literature, could occur in either the reflection-for-action or reflection-on-action periods. Here, we read intentionally to address obstacles we presently face.

28.6 Reflective Practice in Action

As a final section to our chapter, we share a personal example of being reflective practitioners. Recently, the two of us were leading a 7-day snowshoe expedition in Canada. Morten had led this trip many times, but it was Paul's first time on this trip. On the third morning, we were outside the tent discussing plans for the present and remaining days of the expedition. The morning was very cold (-43C) and we engaged in a combination of reflecting-in-action (discussing what was presently happening) and reflecting-for-action (looking ahead to the next four days). Paul's fresh perspective on the trip prompted him to ask Morten why he had planned a 7-day outing? Further, the extreme cold pushed both of us to ask how the challenging conditions might impact our planned expedition and the achievement of our learning

objectives. While we didn't come to a final answer on whether 7-days was the ideal length for this trip, we had a thoughtful discussion, which examined the assumptions that Morten had used when designing the experience. This discussion naturally led to a conversation about the values of risk and challenge in education. The discussion also led us to explore our knowing-in-action (that tacit knowledge we both hold based on years of OEE experience), which led to a decision to use that third day as a layover day, rather than to pack-up camp for a third straight day in such cold temperatures. The day's plans we developed that morning resulted in meaningful and purposeful learning for students and shaped how we used the remaining 4 days. After finishing the trip, we devoted time to sitting with the expedition map and reviewing the route and daily activities (reflection-on-action) and thinking ahead to the next offering of this course (reflection-for-action). In the end, we decided to continue with the 7-day format.

28.7 Summary

In this chapter we set out to explain what reflective practice is, provide a rationale for why it is important, and present practical strategies for outdoor environmental educators to enhance their reflective practices. Reflective practice is a form of professional development that requires engaging in the three phased process of reflection-for-action, reflection-in-action, and reflection-on-action while being attentive to our knowing-in-action. By becoming a reflective practitioner, we are able to bridge the gap between theory and practice and to see beyond our own experience, knowledge, and assumptions which shape our teaching. In order to develop as reflective practitioners, we must be aware of common challenges and strategies in order to develop an intentional and structured method for reflection. Just as Socrates claimed the "unexamined life is not a life worth living" (Plato, trans., 2002, Apology 38a), so we believe that an unexamined practice is not worth practicing. Becoming a reflective practitioner can be a powerful means of examining our teaching practice, which in turn can lead to increased student learning and a great deal of personal and professional satisfaction. Finally, reflective practice "is not only a way of approaching teaching–it is a way of life" (Larrivee, 2000, p. 306).

Reflective Questions

1. Imagine you are having dinner with friends. One of them, knowing your interest to OEE, mentions an interview they recently heard about an outdoor educator becoming a reflective practitioner. Someone else at the dinner table asks, "What's a reflective practitioner?" How would you answer?
2. As an outdoor environmental educator, how do you believe that students learn best? What experience or philosophy of learning has shaped this belief? When was the last time that you challenged and examined those beliefs?

3. Do you have a systematic and structured process for becoming a reflective practitioner? If so, describe it. If not, begin to develop a process that you believe will get you started on your journey towards becoming a reflective practitioner.
4. Can you identify a peer or colleague who, through patient listening and thoughtful questions, might serve as a "critical mirror" (see Brookfield, 1998) and thereby assist you in reflecting on your role as an educator? If so, what questions or activities might you prepare for your first meeting with them? If not, how can you find such a peer or colleague?
5. We recommend you consider creating a reflective practice post-trip/teaching journal. Making entries could become a ritual that helps you transition from the field to conventional rhythms. Once the gear is neatly stowed and you've had a chance to shower, find some time to reflect-on-action. What questions might you want to ask yourself and respond to in your post-trip journal?

Recommended Further Reading

- Aurelius, M. (2003). *Meditations* (G. Hays, Trans.). New York: Modern Library. (Emperor Aurelius is often considered a model reflective practitioner. See: http://seinfeld.co/library/meditations.pdf for a free digital copy).
- Goulet, M., Larue, C., & Alderson, M. (2016). Reflective practice: A comparative dimensional analysis of the concept in nursing and education studies. *Nursing Forum 51*(2), 139–150. (A clear and comprehensive survey of the Reflective Practice literature).
- Heider, J. (1986). *The Tao of leadership: Lao Tzu's Tao teaching adapted for a new age*. New York, NY: Bantam Books. (This is a great source of thoughtful and challenging short readings to inspire reflection).
- Thompson, S. & Thompson, N. (2018). *The critically reflective practitioner* (2nd. ed.). London, UK: Palgrave. (A practical guide to developing reflective practice).

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