

Magdalena Pietrusiewicz

Akademia Piotrkowska

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6260-3118>

e-mail: magdalena.pietrusiewicz@apt.edu.pl

A reflective university teacher in times which are not conducive to reflexivity

https://doi.org/10.25312/kiw.27_mpi

Abstract: Is it possible to be a successful teacher without being reflective? Does the word reflection fit in with a modern lifestyle? Does it align with a teacher's timetable? Being naturally associated with careful consideration, analysis, contemplation, a longer process, the concept of reflective teaching may sound outmoded. Yet, as studies show, being reflective continues to be one of the key competences in education. The article has a two-fold aim.

First, it intends to show the concept of reflection in teaching with reference to three selected theories. Secondly, it presents a few practical tools and strategies which the author has used over the years in her own practice as a teacher and which have made her teaching more reflective and thereby more effective.

Keywords: reflection, reflective teaching, reflective practices, teaching strategies

About the Author

Magdalena Pietrusiewicz, has a Master's Degree in English Philology and is a graduate of the Faculty of Philology at the University of Lodz. She is a teacher at Akademia Piotrkowska in Piotrkow Trybunalski where she teaches students of English Philology. She delivers courses in Practical English. Her academic interests focus on aspects of Applied Linguistics such as second and foreign language learning and teaching, translation and interpreting, in particular with reference to andragogy, the processes by which adults learn.

Introduction

The word *reflection* derives from the Latin word *reflexio*. According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*¹, *reflection* means *an image that you can see in a mirror, glass or water and also careful thought, or an idea or opinion based on this*. [...] *Macmillan English Dictionary*² defines the word *reflection* as follows: *an image that you see in a mirror or other shiny surface, careful thought about something, something that clearly shows something and also the process of reflecting light, sound, or images*. Synonyms of the word *reflection* include thought, consideration, meditation, contemplation, opinion, criticism and also light, idea. All these definitions imply what concepts, strategies can be associated with the term *reflective teaching*.

However, the rapid pace of life which a lot of professionals experience contemporarily is a phenomenon which does not seem to conduce to consideration, self-analysis and reflection as they are all naturally associated with a long thought process. A reflective teacher, as Joanna Szymczak³ puts it, should be ready to make an effort and spend time to reflect on his/her own professional activity, teaching methods and strategies he/she uses.

Directions

It is not possible to present in one article all theorists who have analysed the concept of reflective thinking in education. In this section, I present three selected theories which have also shaped my views on being a teacher.

John Dewey, an American philosopher, educational reformer and the author of the seminal book *How We Think*⁴, is widely acclaimed as a proponent of the concept of a human as a reflective being. He was the one who indicated directions in education and his concepts are still followed by educators today. Reflective thinking, in his opinion, is an ability that can and should be learned and trained. Yet, as he puts it, it is a process that demands making a lot of intellectual effort, which must be conscious and persistent. Dewey uses a metaphor of a *forked-road situation*⁵ to describe the process of thinking, which I will refer to again in the part on my own teaching experience. A forked-road situation, according to Dewey, presents a dilemma but also proposes alternatives. So, reflective thinking needs an effort but it is an effort

¹ [reflection | meaning of reflection in Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English | LDO-CE](#) [access: 28.03.2025].

² *Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Students*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, Oxford 2002, p. 1185.

³ J. Szymczak, *Bycie (stawianie się) refleksyjnym nauczycielem. Perspektywa socjokulturowa*, "Forum Dydaktyczne", nr 5–6/2009, p. 50.

⁴ J. Dewey, *How We Think*, D.C. Heath & Co. Publishers, Boston 1933.

⁵ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

worth making as it can prevent routine. And that is the reason why I find this concept useful in my teaching practice. Reflective thinking on how I teach helps me change, improve, avoid routine and consequently, I hope, become more effective. John Dewey's theories on reflective thinking became a milestone in the theory of education and they direct us towards another signpost.

Reflective practice is a concept suggested by Donald Schön,⁶ another American philosopher who can be called John Dewey's follower. As Jan Fook puts it:

Donald Schön was one of the first to alert us to the crisis in the professions often represented by the perceived gap between formal theory and actual practice. In Schön's thinking, reflective practice was a way of reducing the gap, by unearthing the actual theory which is embedded in what professionals do, rather than what they say they do⁷.

Reflective practice aims at both students, graduates and experienced professionals. Donald Schön introduced two popular ideas: *reflection-in-action* and *reflection-on-action* where the first one involves reflecting on behaviour as it happens and the other one, after the event, in order to analyse and evaluate the situation. These two practices can make both a teacher and a student more aware of their knowledge and help them learn from that experience. I try to follow these practices myself, which I also refer to in the part on teaching strategies I use.

Guided discovery learning was conceived by Jerome Bruner,⁸ an American psychologist, who matched two key notions: education and reflection. It led him to suggest a new theory called *guided discovery learning*. He redefined the role of a teacher as a facilitator of the learning process, which is very close to how I understand the role of a teacher myself. In Bruner's view, a good teacher designs lessons that help learners discover for themselves, the relationship between bits of information. Such discovery-oriented lessons can also get learners to discuss their ideas with others, reflect on them together and consequently become more active and more aware in the process of learning. Schön's and Bruner's concepts of reflection refer to both teachers and learners. Both these theories have influenced the way I think about my teaching. There is a degree of mutuality between a teacher and a learner where a reflective teacher, through his/her practices, awakes reflection in their students and the way students respond to those practices naturally makes their teacher reflect on that. In other words, following Jim Scrivener⁹, 'we can teach and teach or we can teach and learn', which he calls 'learning teaching'. He understands teaching as a strong need to move

⁶ D. Schön, *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*, Routledge, London 1991.

⁷ J. Lishman, *Handbook for Practice Learning in Social Work and Social Care Knowledge and Theory*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London & Philadelphia 2007, p. 363.

⁸ A. Perkowska-Klejman, *Poszukiwanie refleksyjności w edukacji*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej, Warszawa 2019, p. 133.

⁹ J. Scrivener, *Learning Teaching*, Macmillan Education, Oxford 2009, p. 376.

forward and keep learning from our experience on the way. And this approach is similar to how I understand my role – *being a teacher I am also a learner*. Now let us move forward towards the future.

In 2019 the OECD published a document entitled *Learning Compass 2030*.¹⁰ One of its chapters, *Anticipation-Action-Reflection cycle (AAR)*, clearly shows that being reflective will remain one of the key competences in education. Reflection is described here as:

the thread that makes continuity of learning possible. (...) Reflection is a systematic, rigorous, disciplined way of thinking, with its roots in scientific inquiry. (...) Reflection implies the combined use of self-directed skills and creative-thinking skills, and encompasses motivation, ethics, and social and behavioural components in addition to cognitive components (Canto-Sperber and Dupuy, 2001[18]). Reflection also results in a growing awareness of the self, others and the larger society. The transformative competencies are developed and deepened through reflection.¹¹

Attitudes, strategies and tools

*Thinking begins in what may fairly enough be called a forked-road situation, a situation which is ambiguous, which presents a dilemma, which proposes alternatives.*¹²

Student-teacher relations

John Dewey's metaphor of a fork-road situation, which I briefly commented on in the previous part, can also be interpreted from the perspective of any experienced teacher who undoubtedly encounters many a difficult situation or a dilemma during their professional teaching careers. Yet, by careful consideration and analysis of its causes, we may find a way out. On my personal journey as a teacher I have also been at a real fork in the road. What I learned from that is the fact that no teaching method or strategy can be effective and no teacher successful without a friendly, student-teacher relations. Creating a positive learning atmosphere is the foundation that I am really concerned with at my work. I do believe that certain obvious attitudes such as being patient, approachable, empathetic, also showing respect to my students, are equally valued as being well-organised, well-prepared, fair and honest. John Hatti¹³ presents a few elements which contribute to the successful teaching process and ef-

¹⁰ OECD *Future of Education and Skills 2030. OECD Learning Compass 2030. A series of Concept Notes. Anticipation-Action-Reflection cycle for 2030*, pp. 121–123; <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/future-of-education-and-skills-2030.html> [access: 28.03.2025],

¹¹ Ibidem.

¹² J. Dewey, *How We Think*, D.C. Heath & Co. Publishers, Boston 1933, p. 11.

¹³ J. Hatti, *Visible Learning*, Routledge, London & New York 2008, p. 34.

fective learning. They include teacher openness to new situations, where a teacher allows himself/herself to be surprised. Another element is the need to create a warm socio-emotional climate in the classroom where errors are tolerated and even welcomed.

This belief has been enhanced over the years by analysing my students' opinions on my classes. Those opinions are given anonymously in official students' questionnaires submitted every term. They provide me with great feedback on my students' needs. I could read such reflections as: *a very helpful teacher, classes have been run in a friendly atmosphere*. So trying to create a positive and friendly learning – teaching environment is always the first goal I set on, entering a new group of students. How do I do it?

First things first

Firstly, I usually try to engage my students in the process of planning what topics will be discussed. For example, before I start a course called Listening and Speaking, at the beginning of an academic term, I ask my students to share what they are interested in, what topics they would like to and need to discuss and then I try to include them in the list of recommended topics for a particular course. Similarly, while presenting my students with the syllabus designed for a particular course, I always discuss its content with the students and we decide which topics are mainly in the focus of their interest and needs. Such an attitude makes students more active, conscious, and more responsible for what they learn. Additionally, it may help us establish the germ of teacher-student cooperation, which can develop with time.

The power of small talk

In my first class with a new group of adult learners, I always do some activities called *getting to know you* or sometimes called *icebreakers*. So, for example, after I have introduced myself briefly, I ask the students to stand up and shake hands with others in the group and while doing it, they should have a short conversation in which they give their names, say where they are from, what their interests are, etc. A variation on this task is when I ask the students to make a few short sentences to present themselves and try to say something that makes them special. I ask the rest to listen attentively and then, at the end, I do a quiz – I ask them questions: *What's the name of the student who* (e.g. *has five cats*, etc.) or *How many students in the group* (e.g. *like skateboarding*, etc.) and *what are their names?* Such simple activities help both me and the students remember the names and also can help them relieve stress which naturally occurs when they are in a new situation.

Teaching strategies I use

Trying to follow John Dewey's motto that *reflective teaching requires attitudes of open-mindedness, responsibility and wholeheartedness*¹⁴, I believe that the topics

¹⁴ A. Perkowska-Klejman, *Poszukiwanie refleksyjności w edukacji*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej, Warszawa 2019, p.69.

which are tackled in class should be relevant to the environment and the situation we are in at a particular moment. It is, in a way, a *reflection-in-action* or *thinking on your feet* attitude. I often ask students to listen to or read the latest news before coming to class, look up any new lexical items and prepare for a discussion. Then when they come into the classroom, we use that material as a warm-up. The fact that it is up to them which piece of news they want to bring up and share, makes them feel more focused on the whole activity. Besides, it can also engage weaker or usually quiet students.

Such a simple warming-up activity is tightly connected with the strategy I have used for long – the one of a *flipped classroom*. Anna Perkowska-Klejman describes this strategy in such words:

The flipped classroom method is a teaching model oriented towards a reflective student who produces learning opportunities themselves, is active and engaged, and has developed higher order skills such as inquiry, construction, design, collaboration, problem solving, assessment.¹⁵

The flipped classroom method is close to Jerome Bruner's concept of guided discovery learning, which I try to follow in my teaching practices. The basic idea is that students collect educational information on their own, read a text, watch a video, listen to a podcast, etc. outside the classroom, and then in the classroom we work on that together. First, I often ask them to reflect on what they read, watched or listened to by sharing what they found most surprising or most useful to know or weird there. And students are usually happy to share their individual opinions. I also encourage them to ask and then answer questions based on that new material, such as: What is the difference between...?; How can you translate...?; Why...?, etc. This task can be set as pair work. Why I like the strategy of a flipped classroom is that it helps me awake reflection in my students, which is one of my goals as a teacher. I believe that a reflective teacher makes their students more reflective too and that is the element of mutuality that I have already referred to. Moreover, the strategy of a flipped classroom makes students more focused and more active, which, consequently, makes learning more effective and the teacher can feel more fulfilled.

However, in practice, it is sometimes easier said than done. In the previous part of my article I admitted having experienced, not once, a forked-road situation as a teacher. I constantly reflect on how I run a class and look for solutions to problems if they appear. One of the problems I come across is *time-management*. When the number of students sometimes exceeds 25 in a class designed to hone students' speaking skills, I need to be very careful about time-management. In large classes students often work in pairs and groups, discuss a problem and then share the results with the rest. However, it often happens that groups work at different pace so a topic may not be analysed and discussed as thoroughly as I would like to. Besides, there is

¹⁵ Ibidem, p. 175; author's own translation from Polish.

always a risk that some weaker students get outstripped by stronger or more eloquent ones in their group. So what I try to do as a solution is I arrange groups with stronger and weaker students each. And before I set a group activity, I tell the students that after they have discussed a topic in their group, each member of the group will be asked to present their part in front of the whole group. So they have to decide in the group, who presents what, and consequently everybody is engaged.

My favourite 'reflective' tools

The tools that help me reflect on my work include first and foremost *questionnaires*. I have already referred to that in the previous part of the article. They are thorough, anonymous questionnaires with a lot of categories which students need to think about or reflect on and submit every term. They include questions like: *the contact with the teacher and their willingness to give extra explanations, the teacher's attitude towards the students, whether the teacher is well-prepared and punctual, whether the teacher successfully links theory with practice*. Students give grades from 5 to 2 per each question. The last part is designed for students' opinions and that is the one I always read very carefully and then try to introduce some suggested changes to my classes. For example, once, a student shared his/her opinion that there is not enough time for free discussions. Now, I always assign about 6 – 10 minutes at the beginning of each class for the students to discuss in pairs anything they want to: share what they have watched, listened to, share some emotions, impressions on anything that they feel like talking about. That is the time for them, I never impose topics, never ask for conclusions and never eavesdrop. It really works, students eagerly spend time on that and they speak English!

Apart from these official questionnaires, designed by the academy, I sometimes use my own ones in order to get feedback from students on one particular course. I ask students to complete them anonymously. What I want to get feedback on is, for example:

- 1) the pace of the classes,
- 2) to what extent the knowledge they have gained is useful to them,
- 3) whether I present the new knowledge in a clear way,
- 4) whether the requirements are just enough/ too high or too low,
- 5) whether the students feel that they have achieved what they hoped they would.

I analyse the answers and if there are any suggestions I try to change the aspects which need changing. Agnieszka Szplit¹⁶ puts it in these words: *Here, then, one can mention the accompanying 'searching' reflection, the aim of which is to find clues about self-efficacy.*

¹⁶ A. Szplit, *Refleksja nad refleksją w pracy nauczyciela*, „Rok Relacji” 2021, p. 9; author's own translation from Polish.

Another tool that I use are *questions*. Inspired by the book *Myślenie Pytajne. Teoria i Kształcenie*¹⁷ I believe that the one who asks is the one who creates. I ask myself questions when I plan a lesson. They include, for instance: *What is the aim of the lesson? Why do I want to teach that? How can I teach that particular structure?* They help me get a broader picture of the whole class.

And as a form of self-evaluation I take *notes* after some classes, typically after the more difficult ones and when I have introduced a new, designed by myself, activity. At first sight it may seem very time-consuming. In fact they are just short notes which I take the moment my students start to leave the room after the class. The notes help me remember a particular class so that I can rearrange some of its elements later. So, I note down, for example:

- 1) whether the students were willing to do a particular activity,
- 2) what the main challenges for the students were,
- 3) whether time was used effectively.

Apart from all that, what also helps me reflect on how I teach are *peer-observation classes*. They can be of two types:

- 1) observations that result from certain procedures - every teacher must be observed during his/her classes at least once a year,
- 2) observations where teachers-colleagues observe each other's classes and then share their opinions, impressions with each other.

Both types of observations are helpful in my job and they both help me realise someone else's perspective on my classes. For example, once, a teacher who visited my class, paid attention to how tasks are assigned for groupwork. For me, everything was clear, but from the perspective of the students it was different. The observing teacher made me realise that the instructions could have been given in a more detailed way.

Work placements, which are compulsory for students in both first- and second-cycle programmes, also provide a tool to foster reflection. Through keeping of placement diaries, students have the opportunity to reflect on their actions, to relate the theoretical knowledge they have learnt in class to the practical tasks to be carried out during the placement. And for me, as a supervisor, the placements are an opportunity to reflect on both the students' activities and my own practice in the professional field. As Agnieszka Jankowska puts it, being a supervisor of students' work placements is one of a few ways of awakening reflection on your work as a teacher.¹⁸

And last but definitely not least, what has always inspired me and helped me avoid venturing well-travelled roads are *teacher training sessions, courses* and *workshops* that I have participated in. Having the opportunity to observe other professionals, com-

¹⁷ K. Szmidt. E. Płóciennik, *Myślenie pytajne. Teoria i kształcenie*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2020, p. 12.

¹⁸ A. Jankowska, *Jak można stawiać się refleksyjnym nauczycielem*, „Okóło Pedagogiki”, nr 1/2019, p. 59; author's own translation from Polish.

pare and reflect on my own practices and share my views with others, provides the best learning environment for a teacher. I fully agree with Joanna Szymczak's opinion:

A reflective teacher is constantly concerned about his or her own professional development. He or she develops competences and improves qualifications. He or she reads professional books, participates in consultations, training. The decisions he or she makes result from a systematic thought process.¹⁹

For example, *IATEFL conferences* for English teachers as well as *PASE conferences* for teachers of foreign languages, have always been very inspirational for me. Training courses in Poland such as *Educational Leader Academy*, have helped me grow both professionally and personally. Those abroad, done in Scotland, helped me include more cultural elements in my classes and be ready to run some workshops on the British culture for my students.

I do believe in the concept of lifelong learning where as a teacher I am still a learner. During any course I take with my students, we both experience something new, discover something together, come to conclusions, learn from each other. So teaching, being a teacher, is a never-ending and ever-discovering journey for me.

Conclusion

Learning and teaching are complex and diverse processes, dependent on many factors, including personal characteristics. The call for the development of reflexivity, with the aim of educating reflective people, capable of reflecting on life, who are aware of their capabilities, should become a source of inspiration for teachers, regardless of the subjects they teach and types of school in which they work. A reflective attitude of the university teacher seems to be very effective in assisting students to develop their own reflexivity. I agree with Agnieszka Jankowska's opinion that a reflective lecturer is:

a lecturer who not only knows 'everything' about reflection, who is able to reflect, who is also able to teach this skill to others, but who also displays a reflexive attitude to life in their daily activities.²⁰

It is important for a teacher to be able to find and adapt his or her practices to the current educational situation and to cultivate attentiveness to the needs of learners. Reflective thinking, characterised by systematic, rigorous and disciplined thinking, also has a social dimension, as it takes place in interaction with others.

¹⁹ J. Szymczak, *Bycie (stawanie się) refleksyjnym nauczycielem. Perspektywa socjokulturowa*, „Forum Dydaktyczne”, nr 5-6/2009, p. 51; author's own translation from Polish.

²⁰ A. Jankowska, *Jak można stawać się refleksyjnym nauczycielem*, „Okóło Pedagogiki”, nr 1/2019, p. 59; author's own translation from Polish.

A variety of reflective practices, some of which are described in this article, regardless of which ones and to what extent applied, can increase teaching effectiveness and, as Agnieszka Szplit points out, they *undeniably contribute to a teacher's personal development*.²¹

References

- Dewey J., *How We Think*, D.C. Health & Co. Publishers, Boston 1933.
- Hattie J., *Visible Learning*, Routledge, London & New York 2008.
- Jankowska A., *Jak można stawać się refleksyjnym nauczycielem*, „Okóło Pedagogiki”, nr 1/2019, pp. 53–61.
- Lishman J., *Handbook for Practice Learning in Social Work and Social Care Knowledge and Theory*, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, London & Philadelphia 2007.
- Macmillan English Dictionary for Advanced Students*, Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London 2002.
- OECD *Future of Education and Skills 2030. OECD Learning Compass 2030. A series of Concept Notes. Anticipation-Action-Reflection cycle for 2030*, <https://www.oecd.org/en/about/projects/future-of-education-and-skills-2030.html> [accessed: 28.03.2025].
- Perkowska-Klejman A., *Poszukiwanie refleksyjności w edukacji*, Wydawnictwo Akademii Pedagogiki Specjalnej, Warszawa 2019.
- Scrivener J., *Learning Teaching*, Macmillan, 2009.
- Szmidt K., Płóciennik E., *Myślenie pytań. Teoria i kształcenie*. Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, Łódź 2020.
- Szplit A., *Refleksja nad refleksją w pracy nauczyciela*, „Rok Relacji”, 2021.
- Szymczak J., *Bycie (stawanie się) refleksyjnym nauczycielem. Perspektywa socjokulturowa*, „Forum Dydaktyczne”, nr 5–6/2009, pp. 50–59.

²¹ A. Szplit, *Refleksja nad refleksją w pracy nauczyciela*, „Rok Relacji”, 2021, p.11; author's own translation from Polish.

Refleksyjny nauczyciel akademicki w czasach niesprzyjających refleksyjności

Abstrakt: Czy jest możliwe, aby odnosić sukcesy w pracy nauczyciela bez refleksji? Czy słowo refleksja pasuje do współczesnego stylu życia? Czy można pogodzić chęć bycia refleksyjnym nauczycielem ze zwykle napiętym zawodowo harmonogramem? Refleksyjność, refleksja naturalnie kojarzą się z uważnym namysłem, analizą, kontemplacją, dłuższym procesem. Zatem koncepcja refleksyjnego nauczania może wydawać się przestarzała. Jednak, jak pokazują badania, refleksja jest zaliczana do kompetencji kluczowych w edukacji. Celem artykułu jest przedstawienie koncepcji refleksji w nauczaniu z punktu widzenia kilku teorii i badań, a w drugiej jego części zaprezentowanie praktycznych narzędzi i strategii, które mogą sprzyjać budzeniu refleksyjności, a które autorka stosuje od wielu lat w swojej pracy dydaktycznej i które sprawiły, że jej nauczanie stało się bardziej refleksyjne i tym samym, zgodnie z przekonaniem autorki, skuteczniejsze.

Słowa kluczowe: refleksja, nauczanie refleksyjne, refleksyjne praktyki, strategie nauczania

Nota autorska

Magdalena Pietrusiewicz, magister filologii angielskiej, absolwentka Wydziału Filologicznego Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego. Nauczycielka w Akademii Piotrkowskiej w Piotrkowie Trybunalskim, gdzie uczy studentów filologii angielskiej; są to głównie kursy z języka angielskiego praktycznego. Jej zainteresowania naukowe koncentrują się na aspektach lingwistyki stosowanej, takich jak uczenie się i nauczanie drugiego i obcego języka, tłumaczenia i interpretacje, w szczególności w odniesieniu do andragogiki, procesów, w których uczą się dorośli.