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Establishing Reflective Practice in Preservice Coursework

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Like many of you, I am a parent. Even though my children are growing up and are less dependent on me, I still find myself continuing to dole out advice. I know that children resist the advice parents lovingly bestow upon them. We may convince our children that something is in their best interest or will reap rewards in their future but getting them to act today is not always within our control. I remember many times I warned about eating too many treats, only to find myself soothing a crampy child later. Or cautioning against staying out too late, only to find myself attempting to rouse a late and cranky teen.

Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

One component of AASL's *National School Library Standards* is "Questions for the Reflective Practitioner." The questions prompt practitioners to consider what they read in the text and interrogate their ideas of the standards in relation to research and best practice for effective school libraries. They ask practitioners to be reflective, but reflection is not always easy and it is not intuitive behavior (Applebaum 2014). These questions are easily skipped over, welcomed as a good idea and put aside for a later day. For reflection to be used in everyday practice, it needs to be more than suggested or introduced. It needs to be practiced.

Over time I have come to realize some of the best practice and evidence-based pedagogy I teach in my courses is perceived as well-reasoned advice today but tucked away for future use. Reflection seems to fall into this category. As a school library educator, I realized that like my own children who require more than a sage warning, my students require more than cursory advice about the benefits of reflection. Direct instruction and guided practice on *how* to reflect on practice was needed if reflection was going to be embedded into their daily behavior.

Establishing Practice

Reflection is a skill school library educators hope to foster in their students. This can be achieved by teaching reflection in pre-service coursework. One type of reflective pedagogy is journaling. Reflective journaling easily aligns with the text-based nature of library and information studies coursework, especially as more library schools are available online (Kymes and Ray 2012). To become an established practice for new professionals, reflection must be taught, coached, and scaffolded through development, with point values assigned to ensure pre-service students view the assignment as meaningful. I use dialogic journaling where I read and respond to student reflections to coach and encourage reflective thinking. To highlight the scaffolded process of this journaling pedagogy, I highlight three phases of working with students in a recent study: Awareness, Acceptance, and Adoption. The study chronicled the journey of five school library students as they progressed through their coursework and early field experiences into their first year of practice. It explored the use of structured dialogic journaling as an adopted pedagogical approach that shaped the reflective practice of these new school librarians.

Awareness. Reflecting on practice informs personal growth. Being aware of the benefits of reflection and understanding the key behaviors required to make the reflective process effective are not intuitive. Without guidance students describe observations without connecting their observations to their learning. Studies show that unless instruction occurs on *how* reflection is useful, student journals are "generally disappointing" (Dyment and O'Connell 2011, 95). To be effective in reflection, students must do more than write about their experiences.

Study participants benefitted from journaling as a teaching tool when used to promote more-reflective practice. Students were introduced to journaling in an early course in school library methods. In that course, they were asked to observe experienced school librarians in the field and reflect on those observations in a shared student–faculty journal. These early journaling experiences asked students to observe the teaching of others, provided guided questions and prompts to assist their observations, and connected to course materials. Instructor feedback was essential to guide connections to the ideas expressed. In this first course students were asked to focus on specific areas of observation such as the assessment component of a lesson or how the school librarian engaged learners in a lesson. Journal entries were tied to course content, and instructor feedback helped guide further interrogation.

Acceptance. The students returned to journaling when completing a faculty-supervised practical experience, working as school library interns. During the internship, each student reflected on his or her practice in a journal shared with the faculty member. Feedback and constructive guidance remained benefits of a shared student-teacher journal. These journaling activities bridged the theory of coursework with practice in the field as students actively engaged as school library interns. Using the reflective practitioner model (Schon 1987) in dialogic journaling, the pre-service students were able to explore their emerging beliefs by examining personal decisions in practice while engaging in an open exchange of ideas and dialogue with a mentor. Questions brought to their mentor further contextualized beliefs and understanding about best practice. The reflective process allowed for enhanced development of the attitudes, skills, and values of emerging school librarians working with a mentor faculty member.

Adoption. Students were encouraged to continue their reflective practice as they transitioned to practicing school librarians. Here, reflection became more self-directed without the requirement of a course assignment or the response of a faculty reader. After the benefit of instruction, new practitioners are armed with the tools and habits for reflection and can decide to adopt this as personal practice.

A final reflection was gathered after participants' first year in practice. This document mirrored the journal format used during coursework and was intended to capture participants' reflective practices as school librarians, interrogating the perceived benefits and challenges of reflecting on practice as new practitioners. In these reflections, participants discussed their successes and sustained involvement, continuing the reflective practices introduced in pre-service coursework.

What Are the Findings?

This study demonstrates the benefits of using dialogic journals for school library educators. Reflective journals offer a teaching tool and an opportunity to guide course conversations and instruction. Used this way, school library educators can refine content and address individual concerns or, if needed, address common concerns, similar wonderings, or questions expressed by multiple students. Journals can show instructors what issues are most relevant to a student population. Dialogic journaling provides a space and place for instructors to interact with students and provide an opportunity to respond to student concerns.

As teaching tools used for reflection, reflective dialogic journals helped the pre-service participants become more intentional about their reflection and think more critically about their

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practice. Findings demonstrate that when introduced in coursework and conducted with reciprocal feedback, greater reflective practice was developed. This establishes a practice by which new practitioners are open to examining how they are impacting student learning. When presented with reflective practitioner questions, such as those in the AASL Standards, this task of connecting theory and practice becomes less intimidating. The dialogue style of the journals and sharing their reflective process with a critical friend, mentor, or teaching peer were beneficial and created lasting benefits most participants carried forward. Collaborative relationships that include discussion of strengths and weaknesses after a co-taught lesson are strengthened for those practitioners who engage in reflective practices. Those participants who used reflection in coursework reported continued reflective practices at the end of their first year as a school librarian. School library educators can nurture reflective practices in students by teaching reflective strategies in preservice coursework to establish this behavior.

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