

Nurturing Reflection and Networking: The Reflective Teaching Journal

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Abstract

Teaching is said to be “the profession that eats its young” (Halford, 1998, p. 34). Unfortunately, this is often the reality and norm associated with many performance-based careers today. Experienced teachers would agree that performance in the classroom begins the very moment you step in front of a classroom full of students. Those teachers, who are ill-equipped for the task or not ready to perform and respond to student needs in an efficient and satisfactory manner, will be faced with many obstacles. This article considers the needs of teachers and how they can learn to cope with the issues related to teaching, in order to better prepare for and respond to the various challenges, while building resilience and striving to enjoy long and fruitful careers in education.

Teaching is said to be “the profession that eats its young” (Halford, 1998, p. 34). What a terrifying image to contemplate! Unfortunately, this is often the reality and norm associated with many performance-based careers today. Ask any experienced teacher and they will agree; the performance begins the moment you are in front of any classroom full of students. Turbulent moments and challenging times await those who are ill-equipped or not ready to perform and respond to student needs in an efficient and satisfactory manner.



An Evolving Profession

Over the last century, the teaching profession has radically changed. In the face of unstable economies and financial strain, institutions are cutting back, while expecting more of their teachers who are sometimes inadequately prepared. They are given fuller classes and fewer resources to properly prepare their learning environments. Furthermore, today's teachers are expected to adapt to their teaching to evolving student needs, while integrating innovative tools to encourage student investment and learning. While it is true that technology has given us ample opportunity for innovation, it has forever changed the way we teach. In addition, it has had a direct impact by placing new and additional demands on teachers themselves. Whether you are a technophobe or technophile, keeping up to date requires making time for on-going training or personal investment, for instance, in learning how to use new programs, software, or hardware.

At the higher education level, many traditional classroom settings have been replaced with distance education or Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) to respond to rising competition, limited mobility, and demand for access to university studies. This has placed extra responsibilities on educators to adapt and modify their syllabus to accommodate larger cohorts of students, who work at a distance. Alongside the teaching responsibilities, this has likely resulted in accrued administrative responsibilities and the coordination of educational assistants and correctors.

And we have not seen the end of technological developments. Artificial intelligence is part of the next wave of change, and it has already begun to filter into the classrooms on many levels (from the teaching of programming and algorithmic studies to the building or use of robots in class). Faced with all of these changes and new demands, institutions are left wondering how to best prepare in-service teachers, so as to better respond to the constantly shifting needs of students that are a direct result of the evolving needs in the professional domain and society, as a whole. Yet, recent studies have revealed that when these institutions fail to properly respond to in-service teacher needs, they indeed have a negative impact on the profession as a whole.

Teacher Exodus: An Alarming Trend

In the American public school context, Joiner & Edwards (2008, p. 44) explain that neophytes to the teaching profession are at the highest risk of leaving the profession, since “24% drop out of teaching within the first year, 33% leave after three years and between 40% and 50% leave within the first five years”. This exodus is often attributed to the level and quality of training and mentoring they receive as they transition from in-service teachers to the world of work. As young teaching professionals, many express fear, over-regulation, and lack of trust from an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability due to their unprepared status



as a newcomer. These statistics are particularly frightening when we consider that some of these aspiring colleagues originally dreamed of teaching as a vocation in which they could invest whilst hoping to give back in return for all they were given as students or pupils. These teachers are the rare and extraordinary ones, who for altruistic reasons, come to the teaching profession with a passion and unparalleled energy.

Teachers in the American system are not alone. A recent study (Weale, 2019) from the United Kingdom revealed that one in five teachers (18%) expect to leave the classroom in less than two years, while more than a quarter (26%) of teachers, school leaders, and support staff with less than five years' experience plan to quit by 2024. When asked for the reasons why they planned to leave, respondents blamed the heavy workload (62%) and the accountability regime (40%), amid complaints about the pressures of inspections and school performance tables.

Improved In-Service Programs

In the face of financial constraints and numerous cuts in education budgets across the world, it is difficult to imagine improved induction and in-service programs to respond to the needs of novice teachers. It is no longer possible to conceive a one-size-fits-all model, since the teaching profession is vast and fully dependent on a variety of constantly changing learner needs. It is necessary to envisage an in-service program that can better prepare in-service teachers to reflect and respond to the rapidly evolving needs of learners in highly mobile and very globalized societies which are built on highly competitive professional spheres. While there are some successful attempts to improve novice teachers' induction experience at the local level (Maciejewski, 2007; Kelley, 2004), one of the most obvious solutions is enhanced socialization practices at the local level, as an imperative component to the retention of high quality teachers (Joiner & Edwards, 2008, p. 44). Logically, communication with colleagues or administration is the key to success when novice teachers are unable to overcome the challenges they encounter as new teachers to the teaching profession. However, as "the new kid on the block", it is not always easy to confide in a colleague and share one's feelings of frustration, distress, or hopelessness. This is particularly true when the new teacher feels guilty or weak, and they feel that in doing so, they may in fact believe that they are admitting defeat. As many small issues snowball into bigger problems or many more dilemmas and issues, the easiest route is to either stick it out for as long as possible, while internalizing the problems or simply get out quickly when the whole situation becomes unmanageable. Either solution is a very unhealthy vicious circle in terms of one's psychological, emotional, physical, and social health and well-being. We all have different personalities and coping strategies; however, if left unchecked those complex challenges may breed to generate emotional and physical stress. It is at this critical moment that one must open the 'SOS cupboard' and resort to efficient



coping mechanisms, survival strategies, and stress management solutions. And yet, many novice teachers are not informed of these types of solutions, nor equipped in this way.

When considering the numerous reasons for departure, teachers cite the following issues: lack of instructional support, lack of emotional support, feeling of being isolated from colleagues, unrealistic expectations of what classroom environment includes, inadequate and poorly timed professional development, no support or induction program, no formative observations and feedback, and ineffective school climate and culture which leads to animosity among faculty members when trying to implement new ideas (Angelle, 2006; Curtner-Smith, Hastie, & Kinchin, 2008; Ingersoll & Smith, 2004; Maciejewski, 2007; Mandel, 2006). These studies reveal an alarming trend that has persisted for far too long.

Socialization and Communication

If enhanced socialization with colleagues is a key to finding solutions for novice teachers, communicating with colleagues at the local level may prove, as we have seen, to be at the onset of a vicious circle of stress and anxiety for novice teachers. The risk of unveiling one's professional shortcomings can prove to be a source of uncertainty and create a dilemma in the psyche of the novice teacher, who can choose to remain isolated and closed to socialization. This is not the solution if the novice teacher wishes to have a long career in the teaching profession.

The benefits of communication, socialization, and simply brainstorming solutions with non-judgmental colleagues far outweigh the disadvantages, since many individuals socialize and support one another in order to work together in finding resolutions to issues. Nurturing reflection and networking is thus the key to improve and accentuate the pedagogy of novice teachers, through direct contact with other novice and experienced language instructors. And this networking and socialization need not be limited to merely colleagues at the local level. In fact, novice and experienced teachers stand to gain greatly in extending and opening up their professional circle to include national and international colleagues who may have differing perspectives and innovative methods or approaches to pedagogy. In this very wide and unlimited sphere of communication, the novice teacher is freed from the constraints of being judged locally. They can safely put aside their fears, hesitation, and reluctance to talk about their professional, personal, classroom-related or colleague-related issues, setbacks and challenges.

In reflecting on their teaching methods, strategies, and conditions, both novice and experienced teachers stand to gain, as well as share knowledge and insight into the underlying principles and foundations of teaching. Today, we are fortunate to be living in a world where the Internet provides us with a universe of research, forums, and thus potential solutions at the click of a mouse. Modern technology facilitates



and encourages global networking. A reflective teaching network could bridge the gap and serve as a viable solution for problem solving. It may serve as a database and gather valuable worldwide insights into pedagogy, theories, methods, and practices. If an open source journal format were to be adopted and exchanges were to be fostered through an international network, it would be possible for novice teachers to actively engage in socialization practices with their fellow novice teachers, but also experienced and retired teachers, who wish to give back to the vocation that has provided them with years of memorable experiences and insights. As Uptis (1999) points out, novice teachers sometimes lack the appropriate field-based experience and experience-based learning. An international forum would fill a void whereby novice teachers could gain knowledge and insight through the exchange of professional experience from international colleagues across the globe.

A Complex Profession Based on Needs

The teaching profession is a complex profession on so many levels. Even before setting foot in the classroom, teachers are faced with many obstacles and questions. Consider for instance, the basic fundamental interrogations we sometimes encounter, such as what motivates a teacher to teach, or continue teaching? Will students be invested and motivated to learn from said teacher? Will the teacher be accepted and respected by the students? In consideration of these timeless questions, it is perfectly normal for novice teachers to experience a few sleepless nights as they discover the ins and outs of the teaching profession. However prolonged sleeplessness could prove to have very detrimental effects on their health. Teachers must understand that just like their students, they also have needs which motivate them. There is logic to the way humans function, and it could be useful here to shed some light on why teachers sometimes have off days and why students are periodically indifferent or unwilling to learn. Understanding the logic behind basic human motivation may help to clarify some of those fundamental and recurring questions.

From a psychological perspective, Maslow (1943; 1954) illustrates the complexity behind motivational theory while focusing on how humans can fulfill their potential through personal growth. Often depicted as hierarchical levels within a pyramid, the five-tier model of human needs (Maslow, 1943) was further expanded to include cognitive and aesthetic needs (Maslow, 1970a) and transcendence needs (Maslow, 1970b). According to his theory, most behaviour is multi-motivated, that is, simultaneously determined by more than one basic need. These needs can include (presented from the most basic to the highest most complex category of intellectual and existential growth):

- **Basic needs**, such as physiological (food, water, rest); safety and security;
- **Psychological needs**, such as love and belonging (relationships and friends);



- **Cognitive needs**, such as esteem (feeling of accomplishment), and aesthetic (search for beauty, balance and form), and finally,
- **Self-fulfillment needs**: self-actualization (achieving one's full potential), and self-transcendence (a sense of meaning).

Lifelong learning and personal development are fundamental themes for Maslow (1962) who explains that the expansion of and enhancing of self-actualization refers to the need for personal growth and discovery that is present throughout a person's life. In this way, an individual is always developing and changing throughout their lifetime. Self-actualization is therefore akin to an intrinsic motivational process of finding and attaching meaning to one's life. Since we are all unique individuals, our motivation levels (and interests) are just as different and unique. Self-actualization for one individual may involve getting past the glass ceiling in a corporate setting, while for someone else; it may involve winning a gold medal at the Olympics. Maslow (1943: 382–383) explains that for one individual it may take the form of the yearning to be an ideal mother, and for another it may be artistically expressed through paintings.

In the context of the classroom, it may be achieved as a result of a successful connection between the student's learning strategies and the course material or the teacher's methods. For the teacher, it may be crystallized by that invigorating feeling we feel after a successful lesson and a real sense of connection between the teacher and the students. As Maslow (1962) theorizes, self-actualization could be measured through the notion of peak experiences. Peaks occur when an individual encounters a very positive experience and as a result, they feel a surplus of emotion in the form of exhilaration, joy, or surprise. In the classroom, this can take many different forms for both the teacher (success with an approach or method) and the students (understanding the teacher or successfully passing a test). Both the peaks and positive experiences are manifested explicitly and implicitly by means of verbal and non-verbal communication. In either case, as a teacher or a student, these exhilarating moments can be viewed as motors, which help to propel our motivation levels when we encounter hardships or setbacks.

Why do teachers stay?

In an article entitled "Why Great Teachers Stay", Williams (2003) cites the interview results of 12 experienced, exemplary teachers in western North Carolina and examines why they have stayed with the teaching profession. The findings reveal that the teachers share several common characteristics, including a need for intellectual stimulation, positive feedback from students, deep sense of purpose, and strong needs for autonomy (Williams, 2003, pp. 71–74). With reference to Maslow (1943; 1962; 1970a; 1970b) and his motivational theory, these findings (Williams, 2003) give lucid insights into the self-actualization process



that the teaching profession can offer to those who dedicate their lives to the teaching profession. In fact, the findings disclose that for the most part, the teaching profession can offer individuals the opportunity to fulfill the needs found at the highest part of the pyramid, that is the cognitive and self-fulfillment levels. In order to achieve those highest levels of motivation, educators must persist when things go wrong, as they sometimes will.

Quickly finding solutions to burgeoning problems is thus a high priority in this profession. It is the best way to encourage teachers to stay with the profession. As a novice teacher, it helps to keep track of your trials, tribulations, and successes in the classroom. Documenting your approach to pedagogy by means of a teaching journal is both a viable solution and very personal approach to professional development. It is a means to preparing the aforementioned socialization process at the local, national, or international level. When doing so, it is important to note down the peak experiences which are sources of pride and self-confidence. In general terms, these peak experiences can serve as the impetus to renewed motivation since they are proof that your methods are working. They can serve as a real boost to your self-esteem level. The challenges (those most trying moments) associated with teaching must also be noted for the simple reason that organizing your thoughts and rationalizing them may assist you in better defining solutions. In this way, the facts can be separated from the emotion that sometimes blurs our ideas. This is the key to unraveling the work-related obstacle, which is problem-centered and not self-centered.

Teaching journals have been used for decades, and they have greatly evolved in their form and content over the years. However, to our knowledge, they have never been regrouped in the same place for the purpose of inspiration, exchange, and research. This is the primary objective of www.reflectiveteachingjournal.com which was launched in February 2020. The website will be developed to include forums and support groups for novice as well as experienced teachers. If integrated into reflective teaching strategies, a teaching journal could for instance serve as a useful method to express anger or frustration, without obliging the author to divulge sensitive information to a colleague, or worse, suppress fears, develop deep-rooted anxieties, and literally render them ill due to work-induced stress.

The difference between a great teacher, who stays for the long haul, and a teacher who gives up and throws in the towel is likely a difference in personality (Maslow, 1987), but above all, coping strategies and survival skills. The manner of coping “will be an important determinant of the novices’ ultimate success or failure” (Eldar et al., 2003, p. 32). Furthermore, a strong personality exhibiting determination, motivation, and a drive to overcome, reflect, and learn from one’s own mistakes and achievements will more likely lead to success as a teacher. On the contrary, a personality filled with self-doubt and poor coping mechanisms faces much higher odds in a successful teaching career (Eldar et al., 2003; Attard & Armour, 2005). Perhaps



the solution lies in creating an international reflective teaching journal, network, and forum where strong, determined, and resilient teachers can share their valuable insights, pedagogy, and experience with other teachers (novice or not) in need of support, advice, and guidance. Together, through socialization, we may successfully encourage more teachers to achieve their full potential, while giving true meaning not only to their existence, but also the existence of those mentors, who dedicate a part of their life to providing support and assistance to those who are in need.

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