Activity sheet 1: The Discipline of Noticing

For John Mason of the Open University effective professional development is about engaging in practitioner research. He recommends a particular blend of reflective practice and action research that he calls the “Discipline of Noticing”. He uses a cyclical diagram to give visual expression to his conception of practitioner research:

At the centre of the diagram is a “phenomenon, situation or incident”. It need not be as dramatic as a “critical incident”. It could be a particular regular behaviour exhibited by a student: not disruptive or difficult, just somehow interesting, perhaps significant. It need not be something that happens at all. It might just be a particular way in which a classroom is always arranged.

What matters is that it is noticed. It is only when we notice something that we are able to give it attention.

In the everyday sameness of the classroom experience teachers’ actions naturally become habitual and so we tend only to notice the things that stand out for us from the background “noise” of daily teaching. Of course some days are more significant than others and teaching has a weekly, termly, yearly rhythm. However, it is a familiar rhythm.
Unconscious Competence

For a, ITE student or a new teacher there is a desperate need for the unfamiliar to become familiar; for the new to become the met-before. Indeed, both new and experienced teachers are looking for their working lives to slip into that state of “flow” that we sometimes describe as “unconscious competence.” Indeed, it is worth taking a brief look at the “competence cycle”:

Unconscious competence

Conscious competence

Unconscious incompetence

Conscious incompetence

The word “competence” here is meant to be taken simply to mean doing something well and “incompetence” to mean not doing it as well as we used to – or as well as it might be done. Just about everyone experiences the slide from unconscious competence in some area of their skills into unconscious incompetence. This is why a proportion of the continuing professional development we engage in needs to be about ensuring we can take ourselves around the competence cycle. In a real sense we have to keep running just to stay where we are.

Of course, in order to be able to complete the cycle we need to notice that we have slipped into unconscious incompetence in the first place. But it can take some kind of shock to enable us to notice. Take driving a car, for example. It may not be until we have a “near-miss” that we suddenly realise we have slipped into a bad habit. It then requires a period of noticing what happens and consciously changing that habit until we reach a stage where we can allow it to become part of our repertoire of automatic skills once again.

It can be like this with teaching. The important question is “how can we notice when we have slipped into unconscious incompetence in some area of our teaching?”
Supporting ITE students in becoming reflective teachers
A set of discussion activities for ITE tutors - activity sheet 1

Noticing and marking

John Mason’s Disciple of Noticing is about more than competence, however. It is about constantly developing as a professional. For this reason, Mason introduces a stronger word than “noticing”. He suggests we talk about “marking”, which he describes as follows:

"It requires more energy than ordinary noticing, for even though we may resolve in the moment to ‘remember that’, whatever the ‘that’ was is often quickly overlaid by subsequent events and forgotten. Perhaps something someone says resonates it back for us. Temporarily we have fresh access to that experience, and we can choose to mark it for future reference. Sometimes we not only mark and make a remark but actually make some sort of a note to ourselves so that we can regain access in the future. This is recording. It requires even greater energy, greater commitment, but proves vital when professional development moves into research." (2003, p. 5)

Marking, by Mason’s definition, is a form of self-reflection. It is not just about noticing something “out there” it is also about recognising and reflecting on our personal “internal” response. So, for example, Mason suggests a simple exercise:

“Set yourself to notice when you walk through doorways, and mark it each time by saying something like ‘I am walking through a doorway’ with a stress on the I” (2001, p. 31)

One way of describing Mason’s marking is “intentional noticing” – setting out to look for things, marking their presence and making some kind of record for future reflection.

One teacher, for example, noticed that there were certain comments made by pupils that caused her to feel a particularly unpleasant brief physical sensation that she described as “a pang of guilt”. She began to watch out for this sensation and to record the circumstances in which it occurred. Gradually it became clear that this sensation was associated with pupils complaining that she had failed them in some small way. It was a very specific type of failing that involved forgetting that she had said she would do something. She had a tendency to be forgetful and this was a cause of some distress to her because of the dementia suffered by one of her parents. While she was well aware of this, she had not realised that her pupils had worked out they could derail the lesson by a simple remark such as “Oh Miss, you said you were going to... and you haven’t done it.”

Change

At the heart of professional development is change – noticing the possibility of change in one’s practice, being alert to the consequences of that change and reflecting upon them. Change is difficult and change can be scary.

In his diagram Mason overlays his development cycle with two questions:

• Do I recognise this issue?
• Can I imagine myself doing...?

The goal of first noticing and then marking is to gain a heightened awareness of those things that might otherwise seem ordinary. Once observed, what is the issue that presents itself? What aspect of my practice should I now focus on?

It could be as simple as the realisation that I stand habitually in just one spot in a particular classroom when speaking to the class. How is it that I have established this habit? What would I feel like if I stood in a different spot, or even walked about settling in different places at different times? Before the action comes the reflection. We need to imagine ourselves acting differently and examine what that might feel like.
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A set of discussion activities for ITE tutors - activity sheet 1

The cycle in Mason’s model is about intentional change. It can be entered at any point, but if we start at the top we are at the point where having reflected on the possibility of change we look for a way of acting differently. Mason describes it like this:

"To make a change, to become more consistent and hence more effective, I need to become aware in the moment just before a habitual posture, gesture, voice-tone etc. takes over, so that I can exercise a choice. I need to notice an opportunity to act differently to an established habit, and I need an alternative to the habit to choose to activate." (2003, p. 2)

Having found the opportunity we can choose a different behaviour – a fresh way of acting. We can try it out and see how it works in practice. We will probably need help with this – perhaps in the form of the presence of a colleague in the classroom.

If we really feel nervous we could use one of Geoff Petty’s “Supported Experiments” (petty, 2002). Alternatively, we could frame the change as a piece of action research and engage one or more of our colleagues in the process.

A teacher in a sixth form college had received some very negative feedback from an Ofsted inspector about the way in which his lesson consisted almost entirely of him talking with little or no interaction with the students. The teacher realised that this was his preferred model, especially when he felt under pressure. After discussion with the Head of Department it was agreed that he would try some small-group discussion activities. The teacher was very nervous about the way in which he might “lose control” of the class and feared he would get complaints. The Head of Department supported him simply by giving him permission to experiment. Students were told in advance that the teacher would be experimenting with particular methods of organising group work in order to see which worked best. The teacher then tried a number of different models over three or four lessons. Feedback from the students was very positive and the teacher felt able to incorporate these methods into his regular repertoire.

Reflection

In order to make sense of the experience we need some tools for the kind of reflection that will inform future action.

Tom Bourner (2003) makes a clear distinction between critical thinking and reflection. It is important to keep reflection positive and focussed on the experience rather than critical-analytical, which can be dispiriting and lead to fear of further experimentation. He lists twelve questions as tools for reflective thinking:

• What happened that most surprised you?
• What patterns can you recognise in your experience?
• What was the most fulfilling part of it? And the least fulfilling part of it? What does that suggest to you about your values?
• What happened that contradicted your prior beliefs? What happened that confirmed your prior beliefs?
• How do you feel about the experience compared with how you felt about it at the time?
• What does the experience suggest to you about your strengths?
• What does the experience suggest to you about your weaknesses and opportunities for development?
• How else could you view the experience?
Supporting ITE students in becoming reflective teachers
A set of discussion activities for ITE tutors- activity sheet 1

- What did you learn from the experience about how you react?
- What other options did you have at the time?
- Is there anything else about the experience that was familiar to you?
- What might you do differently as a result of that experience and your reflections on it? What actions do your reflections lead to?

(Bourner, 2003, p. 269)

This is an exhaustive and possibly exhausting list. Rather than feel the need to answer all the questions, the list can be used as a source of stimulus in seeking to account for the experience.

Mason makes a distinction between accounting-of an incident and accounting-for it. When we give an account of our observations we try to give a brief-but-vivid description that minimises explanation, justification, emotional commitment and theoretical interpretation. However, when we account for an incident we put forward some explanation, some theorising about what has been observed. This is the point, according to Mason, at which we begin to work on the issue and increase our understanding.

A pupil complains loudly and bitterly that he just cannot do these kinds of mathematical problems and that it simply is not fair that the teacher should ask him to do them. This is a brief account of something that happened in a mathematics class. It did not last very long although it caused something of a stir in a class that was normally conducted in a quiet and well-ordered way. In seeking to account for why this event happened, the teacher might explore the context of the event, the pupil’s history as a learner of mathematics, what other teachers know of this pupil and gradually develop a theory for the causes of the outburst. This would then inform future dealings with that pupil.

Theory-into-action

Kurt Lewin, who is usually credited with inventing the concept of action research, emphasised the value of having a theory to inform our actions. Indeed, it could be argued that the desire to integrate theory with practice was one of the major themes of his work, summarised in his famous quotation:

“There is nothing so practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1951, p. 169)

Armed with a good theory, we can e-enter the classroom with a fresh understanding of the particular phenomenon, situation or incident that set us off on this particular trip around Mason’s cycle. Of course we need to sit light to our theories, always prepared to expand, modify or even abandon them as fresh insights present themselves.

Mason claims that it is possible to develop a habit of noticing that gradually increases our sensitisation to the professional world we inhabit. What starts out as a discipline, a consciously-developed competence can, with enough practice, become an unconscious competence.
References


Lewin, K. (1951) Field theory in social science; selected theoretical papers. D. Cartwright (ed.).

