

Cultivating Reflection

The art of great teaching



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Paper**

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For teachers, September is always a period of reflection. A time to think back on the school year that's gone and to ponder what you will do differently in the terms ahead.

Reflecting like this is one of the most important ways we can improve our teaching and so help our students learn better.

Reflection should be part of every teacher's routine and yet it's a practice that can easily slip into disuse, unless we're prompted by feedback from lesson observations or training events.

I've often written about how the best professional development is much more than something delivered at the start or end of the year. That it should go beyond mock inspections, where consultants tell you what to do but don't show you how, and lesson observations that provide meaningless or judgemental feedback, and do very little to improve the quality of education that students receive.

Similarly, departmental or school meetings that just go through the motions, ticking boxes, are also of little value. Instead, they should be opportunities for teachers to reflect, learn and share their successes and to discuss new pedagogies or best practice, informed by research, that might actually be applied in the classroom.

Regular dialogues like these create the supportive culture needed for teachers to reflect effectively on what has most impact on student learning, as well as being a means of keeping themselves up-to-date and informed.

So, when critiquing a lesson observation, or looking to learn from walkthroughs or school improvement

reviews, we should be diving into the 'what', 'why' and 'how' of our educational processes. By using these short but all-important words to explore how we teach, and our students learn, we are in a much better position to create outstanding learning environments for our pupils.

By applying a strategy of 'thinking teaching' that asks questions such as:

What should I do differently to ensure they really get this?

Why is it important that I motivate my team this week to be the best it can be?

How can I include ideas from my students in my next lesson?

...you can significantly advance teaching in your school and better experience the joy of inspiring others to transform their lives through learning, the reason I'm sure most of us entered this profession. Aren't you here because you remember that teacher whose lessons captured your imagination and changed you forever?

But, if we are to keep motivating students, we need to find ways to constantly refresh our teaching approach, so it doesn't go stale. To paraphrase Quilan (2015), falling in love is the easy part. Staying in love, especially when you are snowed under with deadlines, lesson observations, meetings with parents and line managers, is the challenge.

So, over the next few weeks, why not:

- Allocate 10 minutes at the end of each week to reflect on your progress. Take time to think deeply about what you have achieved and how you can continue to be the best teacher possible. It's helpful if there's an opportunity during weekly meetings or staff briefings for teachers to share one or two reflection points.
- Bin unrealistic and unachievable targets. When we rarely stick to these, why burden ourselves with them? Performance oversight by our line managers serves a purpose, but it doesn't push us to be the best we can be in the way that becoming a truly reflective practitioner will.
- Invest more in your own CPD. Read about new pedagogies and practice, spend time developing your own skillset, and be ready to share that knowledge with your colleagues. Effective school leaders should ensure teachers have the chance to disseminate up-to-date literature on teaching and learning during staff briefings and after-school training events. Look around for useful resources. For instance, take advantage of the wealth of freely available information you will find at our recently updated Teacher Research Corner, which includes short papers like this, as well as practical classroom suggestions to try.

- As my colleague and author Isabella Wallace suggests, ditch those learning walks for 'treasure hunts'. Teachers really are the greatest resource in a school, so make the most of each other! Take time to observe colleagues. See this as an opportunity to showcase all the great talent you have in your school.
- Be ready to learn and reflect on what you can do to improve as a practitioner to help your student learn. Step out of your comfort zone and don't be afraid to try new things. If it doesn't quite work first time around, try a second, third and even fourth time until it does.

The aim of this short paper is to get you thinking about the power of self-reflection. As you enjoy the experience of settling back into school life, remember how we teachers ask our students hundreds of questions each week to stretch their knowledge and understanding. Let's not forget the power of questions then when it comes to our own personal reflection. As thinking teachers, we should be making sure we ask ourselves the questions that will enable us to improve our own practice.

Thank you for reading.

Costa Constantinou's bio in brief:

Costa is Director of Educational Services at Veema Education. He has many years of experience in the classroom and at leadership level, and has led national and international keynotes and workshops on improving teaching and learning, leadership in schools, evaluating the impact of professional development and implementing and managing effective change.

Costa passionately advocates that professional development is a requisite tool for teachers to engage with pedagogy, offer collaborative working partnerships, challenge and advance existing practice. Taken together these sharpen our ability to focus on how we teach and how pupils learn — a reflective approach that at its core sees learning through the eyes of the learner. This can clearly sharpen our ability to focus on how we teach and how pupils learn — whereby the "why" as well as the 'What' behind what might work is explored.

For more information on this or other Veema consultants please get in touch.

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