

# [Critical reflection on professional practice | education](https://assignbuster.com/critical-reflection-on-professional-practice-education/)

In thisessay I will critically review the literature on the role of themodern educator . To this end I will consider the history of teaching and the impact of modern educational theory before defining “ reflective teaching”. I will then go on to consider the ramifications of critical reflectivity at different granularities.

The concept of a “ teacher” in the modern sense mayhave originated with the ancient Greeks. The Socratic Method set out byPlato and Xenophon encourages the learner to become an independentthinker through a process of elimination of working hypotheses. Throughout the European “ dark ages” scholarly pursuits were largely thedomain of the clergy, who developed the school system and theprofessional school educator came into being. By Victorian times, however, therole of the educator was that of an instructorwho, in the spirit of John Locke, perceived children as “ blank slatesonto which knowledge can be written” .

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Educational theory in the 20thCentury was influenced by, amongst others, Piaget, Vygotsky and Dewey. It will be worth briefly reviewing their ideas.

Jean Piaget developed the notion of constructivism in which learnersare considered to construct their own “ theories” of the world. Constructivism acknowledges the need to build upon and modify existingknowledge rather than simply to fill learners’ heads with knowledge.

Lev Vygotsky emphasised the importance of scaffolding for children’scognitive development in which the sociocultural environment isinternalised as knowledge is constructed.  As such learning was nolonger situated exclusively in the head but became an interactionbetween the child, peers and educators.

John Dewey endorsed Vygotsky’s sociocultural approach and highlightedthe subjective nature of communal learning.  He is credited withpopularising socioconstructivist ideas into what became known asprogressive education.

Another important influence came from cultural theory in the form ofwhat is known as postmodernism. Postmodernism is not a theory butrather a rejection of the “ certain”. Instead, “ meaning is always inprocess”,  and that which seems to be external reality is a culturalconstruct. Postmodernism demands a shift in perspective. Derrida  wrote:

“ The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the centerdoes not belong to the totality (is not part of the totality), thetotality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center.”

Perhaps the most important contribution of postmodernism to education, then, is the identification and questioning of underlying assumptionsand a blurring of focus from naïve clarity to reflective holism.

As thinking human beings it isnear-on impossible to not be reflective in an everyday sense of theword. However the term “ reflective teaching” refers to something moreprofound – something systematically undertaken by practitioners that“ implies flexibility, rigorous analysis and social awareness.”  I willnow consider how a teacher might be critically reflective at threegranularities: (i) the fine-grain which occurs whilst teaching; (ii)the medium-grain which occurs retrospectively; (iii) the large-grainwhich considers teaching in the context of wider society.

Fine-grain reflection relates to whatSchön calls “ reflection-in-action” . I interpret reflection-in-actionto be a sociocultural process that is not located solely in theteacher’s head. Indeed it is a process of which the (experienced)teacher is not consciously aware. Rather, it relates to concepts suchas routines, attention and making judgments. It is a subtle teachingskill that is often at odds with the fashionable notion of“ well-planned lessons”.

The long-term refinement of fine-grain reflection over time is perhapswhat distinguishes the “ expert” from the “ novice” practitioner. Luntley  investigated the nature of expertise which he defines as“ attention-based knowledge”. He reports on an experienced teacher in amathematics lesson who drew shapes on the board and asked the classwhich ones were similar. She received answers that made no sense (toher) and reflected afterwards:

“ I was beginning to think: Oh God! There is something I am missinghere. [Laughter] Something that is obvious to them but not obvious tome.”

The teacher then took action to resolve the issue because she:

“ recognised a mismatch between the pupils’ focus of attention and herown, and was able to interrogate this in order to respond in a waywhich changed the direction of the lesson, but enabled her to re-focusthe pupils’ ideas.”

It is difficult to imagine how a trainee teacher might instantlyimprove their “ expertise” and reflect instinctively at the chalk facelike this. Sheer experience seems necessary but it may be that thisexperience can be enhanced through systematic medium-grain reflection.

Medium-grain reflection has profoundimplications. Postmodernism suggests the need to be mercilesslyself-critical.  A consequence of this is the lack of a yard-stickagainst which to measure progress. For example, one cannot simplyreflect on how to improve test scores without reflecting that anenvironment engineered for passing tests may actually damage children’slearning by other standards.  Similarly, one cannot simply reflect onhow to reduce classroom noise levels as a way to “ improve” behaviour. Rather we must identify and reflect on the complex power relations atplay in the classroom.

Given these shifting-sands and the opaque nature of presuppositions, itis clear that reflective teaching at the medium grain size is no simpletask. There is no formula or recipe to follow – rather it is therejection of such. Practitioners’ retrospective reflection is in factan attitude that encompasses many areas. Here I will attempt to listjust a few of them.

The teacher must consider his or her own “ wholeness”  in thesociocultural context of the classroom. Age, gender, ethnicity, class-background, culture, religion, political views are relevant. Similar holistic consideration must be given to the pupils. Furthermorethe classroom itself is a complex sociocultural environment demanding aholistic reflection.

The teacher must also consider the nature of the curriculum : how it isto be implemented and what is meant by learning and how we assess it. Policies and models and recipes and formulas abound, both voluntary andcompulsory (such as the 1988 Education Reform act which introduced aNational Curriculum). Reflective practice can be valuable in helpingteachers remain cool-headed amidst passing frenzies such as the currentunsubstantiated craze for “ Accelerated Learning”.

However it is no good the teacher merely being aware of thesociocultural nature of the environment, or the possible flaws in thecurriculum, as though this might vaccinate her from problems. Theentire purpose of reflective teaching is to inform practice through“ evidence-informed professional practice”  such as reflective markingof pupils’ work, discussion with colleagues, classroom observations, journal keeping and so on.

Another aspect is how critical reflective practice might inform ateacher’s professional development, such as the acquisition offine-grained “ knowledge-based attention” mentioned above. Professionaldevelopment should be considered holistically in a wider socioculturalcontext as a “ process of enlightenment” that is “ a reflective andcommunal process”.

The next step up after school and career focused critical reflection isteachers reflecting on their role in wider society which I discuss inthe following section.

Large-grain reflection refers tocritically considering one’s role as a teacher within wider society. Itcan involve quite pragmatic issues such as joining a union, decidinghow to vote and keeping an eye on political developments such as thecurrent “ dominant managerialist ideology”  in the work place.

It can also involve philosophical and ideological considerations aboutthe future of education. During the ‘ cultural revolution’ of 1960sAmerica many teachers (e. g. Herbert Kohl ) came to reject the ideal ofschool altogether, imagining a future utopia in which society educatesits young without institutionalisation. Other educationalists havevisions of how the nature of learning might be revolutionised in anincreasingly complex and technological society (e. g. Seymour Papert ).

Considering that the teaching profession does not offer the greatestfinancial returns, working conditions or status the higher ideals areessential to me personally. Teaching must be seen as a holisticlifestyle – an attempt to “ save the world” even – to be enjoyable.

For me reflectiveteaching contains an inherent paradox -yet this is its strength. It is a ‘ formula for thinking’ that teachesus to reject formulae for thinking. It is an ongoing questioning andanalysis at all granularities in which our attitude should be aholistic, dynamic process rather than a static set of commandments. Although critical reflection should be painful to adegree , the returns are enriching and invaluable.