



Pedagogical Reflections on Reflective Practice in Teacher Education¹

Terry Carson

Professor

Department of Secondary Education

University of Alberta

As a native of Western Canada, I returned “home” to the University of Alberta to do doctoral studies with Ted Aoki. I had begun my teaching career in the late 1960s as a secondary school history teacher in the province of Newfoundland. I recall becoming superficially aware of interpretive and critical research paradigms during my brief sojourn back in Alberta to complete a master’s degree in 1973-74. At that time Aoki and his students were searching for alternatives to the dominance of technical curriculum theories.

Leaving the scholarly explorations behind, I became immersed in the curriculum development and implementation tasks in my new supervisory position with the school district back in Newfoundland. It was with these questions of school practice in mind that I returned to encounter a considerably changed academic landscape at the University of Alberta in 1980. With the advice of Ted Aoki, Max van Manen, and Bruce Bain I plunged into the study of the works of Habermas, Gadamer, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur, and Heidegger, all the while being encouraged by them to remain mindful of the world of teachers, children and schools. These explorations shaped my doctoral dissertation which was an attempt to hermeneutically understand the meanings of “curriculum implementation” for teachers and consultants.

*My interest in educators’ experiences with change has gradually led me into action research and teacher education. I have been exploring action research as a radical hermeneutics of practice, being particularly influenced by the postmodern turn in interpretation. Most recently I have been doing action research in collaboration with teacher educators on our own practices. In this connection we have been fixing attention on the play of identity and otherness in the pedagogy of teacher education. My publications include “Remembering forward: action research and educating for peace” and an edited collection of papers for the World Council of Curriculum and Instruction entitled *Toward a Renaissance of Humanity*.*

Those of us involved in teacher education are faced with a complex pedagogical challenge. We are in a pedagogical relationship with our students, but pedagogy is also our subject matter. A student teacher enters a teacher education program asking How can I learn to stand before young people as “teacher”? The teacher educator asks How do I relate to these students in such a way that will allow this learning to happen?

The nature of teacher education subject matter is also in question. This ambiguity is not new. Dating back at least to the writings of Dewey (1903) there have been two perspectives on the subject matter appropriate to teacher education. One is a technician perspective that believes there is a certain body of knowledge and skills to be learned and applied in order to become a proficient teacher. The other holds that teaching is primarily a reflective practice, where the knowledge and skills are cultivated through an ongoing thoughtful experience of the educator as a lifelong student of teaching.²

The current upsurge in interest in reflective practice is, in part, a response to the technician thrust of the neo-conservative education reform agenda of the past decade (Smyth, 1989). We find this debate usually couched in the form of an "either/or" binary argument wherein critically reflective practice is defined in opposition to technician practice. The critically reflective alternative charges the technician approach with excessively focusing on the means of teaching and ignoring the ethical, political, social, and moral ends of the teaching act (Gore, 1987, p. 33). Teaching is then reduced to a narrow instrumentalism that forgets the social-political role of the teacher as a responsible moral actor. Schön (1983) declares this a "crisis of confidence in the professions" (p. 4) as they are asked to solve social crises in which both the problem and solution are defined by someone else. In Schön's words, teachers are "faced with pressures for increased efficiency in the context of contracting budgets, demands that they rigorously teach the basics, exhortations to encourage creativity, build citizenship, [and to] help students examine their values" (p. 17).

Teaching as critical reflection redirects attention to the wider political and social context in which schools exist, arguing that teachers ought to take a central role in interpreting, acting, and reflecting on these questions. Thus teachers will become participants in social change. Failure to make this "crucial linkage between issues of agency and structure will relegate teachers to being cogs in a self-perpetuating machine" (Smyth, 1989, p. 4).

The voluminous literature on critically reflective practice and the relentless technicism of teacher effectiveness both point to the uncertainties of this historical moment in which teachers are now being educated. We live in times when social institutions like the school seem increasingly unable to meet the perplexities of a world in transformation. However, the choice between the language of instrumentalism and the language of politics to meet these challenges is a poor one. Both languages have their place in the discourse on teacher education because teaching is, in some measure, both a technical and a political activity. But do they deserve a central place?

When the argument over subject matter in teacher education is framed as a binary opposition between technicism and critical reflection, other

languages are pushed to the margins of the discourse. What has been pushed to the margins is the language of pedagogy itself. Poststructuralism is helpful in moving beyond this opposition by drawing attention to the submerged knowledge and by deconstructing the language constituting the dominant discourses (Cherryholmes, 1988, p. 159).

The submerged knowledge in the teacher education debate is the knowledge of those who dwell thoughtfully in classrooms. It is the kind of knowledge that issues from reflecting on a pedagogic belonging together of teacher and student. According to Aoki (1990), such a reflecting is neither "merely representational, nor is it merely a critical praxis ... it is a reflective theming more concerned with what we might call a hermeneutic returning to the lived ground of human experience within the stories (of teaching)" (p. 2).³ Aoki goes on to say that such a reflective theming "may allow us to come to know how sufficiently as humans we inhabit where we already are as teachers" (p. 2).

Reflective Theming in Teacher Education.

If we pay heed to our own experience as teacher educators, we may begin to search out the pedagogical language of our own belonging together with student teachers. An occasion for such an investigation was provided by a collaborative action research project in social studies teacher education. The context is the University of Alberta where a task force on teacher education had been critical of the implicit applied science (technicist) approach in the existing program. The alternative recommended was based on reflection-in-action (Faculty of Education, 1989, p. 31).

The course was organized to foster critical reflection by making the commonplaces of teaching secondary school social studies (teacher, students, subject matter, and milieu) problematic. The classes were organized as an "integrated term" consisting of a 14-week session of alternating curriculum and instruction and practicum experiences. The first four weeks of the term were spent in university based classes on social studies curriculum and instruction and in organized field trip observations in schools. This was followed by four weeks of practicum experience, then two weeks back in the university. The term ended by returning to the school for a further four weeks to complete the practicum with a further one-day session at the university.

The two instructors tried consciously to encourage a reflective approach to social studies teacher education. During the first on-campus portion of the course, the student teachers were invited to actively consider alternative ways that teacher, students, subject matter, and milieu might relate. Dialogue journals were kept to record and share reflections with their colleagues and with the instructors. Students also kept teaching logs to record and reflect on the classroom strategies they observed being employed in the university class and in the secondary school classrooms they visited. They continued to use the two journals during their own

student teaching experiences. The instructors also kept dialogue journals which they shared between themselves and, from time to time, with the student teachers. What follows are some themes drawn from the journals of students and instructors.

Theme #1: Techniques Give Experience

As teacher educators interested in developing reflective approaches to teaching, we already live in a tension between our students' expectations and our beliefs about the subject matter. Although they have a long experience of schooling, students lack an experience of schools as teachers. Thus they expect to benefit from the experience of others to learn how to teach. This expectation is well expressed by one student when responding to the importance of critical reflection in his journal:

I do not debate the fact that critical reflection is important to teaching, but if you have no ideas regarding strategies to be utilized in teaching, critical reflection becomes almost useless because you have nothing concrete to elaborate upon. It is essential to balance strategies with reflection lest students become confused about the actual utility of the course for their future teaching careers ... We are desperate for strategies, both in teaching and in behaviour management which we can employ.

As instructors we would like our course to be helpful to each of the students. We are also sensitive to the importance of the course as the only curriculum and instruction classes related to the students' subject area specialization, so it will be crucial to the way they will orient themselves to their beginning teaching. If we are serious about developing critical reflection, then this course is pivotal. Literature on critical reflection counsels allowing the students to discover "trustworthiness and relevance of practitioner-derived knowledge" (Smyth, 1987, p. 4). Where do we find the balance between giving students the strategies they desire and helping them develop the trust to learn from their own practice? This tension is reflected in one of the journal entries shared by my colleague Hans:

I still haven't escaped the trap of "giving" and "telling." ... there is still a certain dependency built into the class (and probably conditioned in all of us). On the one hand students always want more guidance—there is a certain comfort in that. On the other hand there is a frustration (for some) that they are not overcoming their own dependency. I am not sure if those students are aware of that, and if that is one aspect of the feelings of lack of confidence.

In Hans' reflection we can understand that the tension between technicism and reflection is a shared experience of both student and instructor as the students struggle to find autonomy as teachers. Techniques from the instructor's stock of knowledge and from the literature on teaching do provide a vicarious experience. This helps develop the facility with classroom organization and planning that allows the student teach-

ers to attend to the students they teach. But the danger is that this can also create a dependency.

Theme #2: Personally Mediating Theory and Practice

Technicist and critically reflective practice present different views about the relation of theory and practice in the creation and utilization of knowledge for teaching. At the level of “theory about theory and practice” the two are binary opposites. At the level of personal practice these are mediated through the subjectivity of the teacher. In theoretical terms, technicism assumes the existence of a reliable body of knowledge about teaching that will inform practice, while critically reflective practice makes such knowledge problematic, arguing that only by a critical analysis of the present situation and of the place of current practices in maintaining this, appropriate practices can be decided upon. The decision in critically reflective practice is the responsibility of the participants. The technicist decision is based on the authoritative application of the theory.

In terms of the pedagogical experience of teacher education the distinction between theory and practice is more ambiguous. Our subjectivities as teacher educators are structured, in part, by the wider university setting. Expert knowledge on the part of the professor is valued by the institution and anticipated by the student teacher based on their previous university experience. This subjectivity is destabilized as we encourage students to critically reflect and to hold our own experience and expertise in check. It is an unfamiliar pedagogy, not so much to ourselves, but to the students and their images of professors. That their doubts affect us is shown in the following journal exchange between Hans and me:

There is a more troublesome side to critical reflection—feelings of self-doubt. This raises some interesting questions. What is the relationship of critical reflection to self? Can self-doubt be a positive impetus for change? Are we not, in critical reflection, questioning the very being of ourselves as teacher educators?

Student teaching experience also involves a personal mediation of theory and practice for our students. This mediation can be painful as evidenced by one of the student’s journal entries:

The theory taught to us during our four-year degree stresses student success and the necessity for a holistic, caring attitude to achieve this success. Because of these ideas, I was taking on too much responsibility for the students. I was spoon feeding them because they claimed not to have the ability. After my workload became too severe, I changed my strategy, stuck to deadlines, and encouraged individual research more. I also realized that there are some children who cannot be helped by me no matter how much caring is involved.

This student’s understanding of teaching has been formed more by the technicist orientation of the four-year program, rather than by the inten-

tions of our course. His response to the student teaching experience exposed one of the presuppositions of technicist theory—that it is the skilled and caring teacher that produces success in the “universal student.” An uncritical acceptance of this presupposition left him unprepared to encounter the infinite variety of actual junior high students. The student teacher mediated this hitherto unwittingly internalized theory by clamping down on most and giving up on a few others. There is a bitter disappointment with failing to live up to the idealized representations of teaching. The question for ourselves as teacher educators is whether this disappointment is the beginning of wisdom or the precursor of a deepening resignation and cynicism.

The personal mediation of critical reflection also brought disappointment. One of the students acknowledged taking the idea of reflection too seriously:

I was so engrossed in reflection that it nearly drove me bonkers. One of the cooperating teachers told me one day it would be the end of me if I didn't learn to relax and accept my mistakes or what I considered to be “failures.” I constantly felt I was to blame for my shortcomings. My problem was over-analyzing—one should be critically reflective, not critically destructive.

We began to realize that most of the students showed what we regarded, as course instructors, as an excessive focus on personal performance. We noted that even the most self-assured ones seemed unable to remove themselves from the center of reflection. In retrospect, it is difficult to see how their lack of experience and their fragile subjectivity as teachers would allow them to do otherwise. Noticing this, we realized that our own theory and practice of critically reflective teaching needed to be more open to the students' voices. This found expression in our discussion of planning and the need to make more of a place for the students in our plans.

We know how important planning is in teaching. It shows a kind of care to prepare oneself with the students in mind, to give the class a clear direction. We know how important this is to impress on beginning teachers. So how do we make plans that allow a meaningful place for students? How does the plan show care for them rather than an undue preoccupation with our own performance?

Theme #3: The Emerging Voices of Teaching

By opening ourselves to the students' talk about their becoming teachers we began to hear them speak of the difficult process of destabilizing and reconstituting who one is. One of the students, Linda, spoke of the experience at the end of the 14-week term:

My view of teaching is much less glamorized now than I thought it would be. I mark for hours, plan in my sleep and in the shower, with creative ideas refining themselves as I consider the angles ... I really do not think

50th Anniversary of the Faculty of Education

you can be a social studies teacher without reading the newspapers, listening to the news and following special reports.

She seems to be taken up with what she is going to do, but she is taken up in such a way that teaching comes to inhabit her. In the process she has begun to let go of “glamorized” images of teaching, with an unfolding awareness that it is the responsibility of the teacher to organize classes for learning to happen. The creative ideas are not enough; neither is performing or being the center of attention. There is hard work required to prepare oneself.

I ask myself how the hard work she speaks of includes the students. Is there a pedagogical relationship? There is still a lot of focus on self as teacher if for no other reason than she lacks experience. But in the sense of responsibility behind her words I read the pedagogical belonging together with her students, even if Linda does not explicitly speak of such things. Linda’s capacity for feeling this sense of responsibility for doing what is required to be a teacher prefigures a pedagogic sensibility.

This journey from being a student of education to being a teacher is not an easy one. Kari speaks vividly about this as she recalls the pain of encountering her personal and received theories of teaching at the end of her first four week round of student teaching. In her journal she wrote:

I feel I am beginning to locate myself realistically [as a teacher]. I build on a few positive points and have a little more patience with my “weaknesses.” I try not allow them to overwhelm me and to erode my self-confidence and self-respect.

More and more I am becoming attuned to the kids and their real needs versus my idea of what their needs ought to be. I am beginning to let go of this compulsion to feel responsible for everyone and everything and to do all the work. I am perhaps feeling out a role and an understanding of the structure of roles set out in a school for the teacher, students, administrator, counsellor and how each functions best within their parameters. I have a better realization of the limits and potentials of myself, my students and the whole institution’s ability to accomplish what it sets out to do.

In Kari’s comments on locating herself I gain some insight into an unfolding self-identity that has begun to open itself to others and not feel so responsible for doing everything. The kind of responsibility she has put aside is the opposite of pedagogical responsibility. It is a feeling that one has to do it all because teaching requires the performance of a set of competencies. She tells of how, over the course of the term, she becomes able to “let go of this compulsion” and become “attuned” to the students. Attunement hears the voices of young people, not the universal child of the developmental theorist or the methods class. To be attuned to young people signals a pedagogic responsibility for the way they are and for the way we are too. This is not the abstracted critical reflection based on universal ideals of justice and emancipation, but of seeing our values and the conditions of our culture as they are embodied in the children in our

classrooms. It is this that allows her to put aside the preconceived notions and plans about what is good for them.

Kari and Linda would probably claim that they have become more modest and "realistic" about what they can do as teachers. But in this very modesty lies the possibility for their pedagogical belonging together with their students. In Kari's final journal entry she speaks of this glimmering as only a beginning:

In no way does this realization translate into a sort of lid to cap education. Rather it has opened the roof to the open sky and made me realize these ideals may be achieved, but not continually, not without effort. And achieving these ideals will be as frequent and exhilarating as a glimpse of pure sunlight when one glances up through and past this roof and into the open sky.

And for neither has the road to becoming a teacher been easy. Kari talks about the risks and the tensions of venturing forth as a student teacher. In her comments we can understand something of the struggle:

Anyhow I hope to survive and learn from this experience. I feel battered and exhausted from constant self-bereavement and self-doubt and from this exhaustive focus on "self." I can't wait (no I can wait, let's not rush things) until I emerge from this intense worry and fear of failure/future perfection and appreciate the experience for the present. And know how each experience is a learning one, and to make that connection with at least some of the special people I am working with that we call students and staff.

In something of the same way, the reflections of Hans and myself as the course instructors were often about becoming aware of ourselves as teacher educators. It was not exactly the same experience because we both had previous experience as teachers and as teacher educators. But because we were doing action research on reflective practice, it was like becoming aware of ourselves as teacher educators for the first time. Our journals speak of our thoughts and our struggles to understand the pedagogy of teacher education. The tension between providing the certainty of techniques and confronting the ambiguity of teaching is one example of this struggle, as is making room for the students' voices in our planning. And as our students left us I reflected on the difficulty of "letting go" as a teacher.

It is hard not to regard the performance of my students as either a vindication or a condemnation of my teaching. It's hard to know what one has done. So much of how they turn out will depend upon the students they will face, the milieu of the school, and how they choose to become a teacher in their own right.

Aoki (1990) speaks of how the teacher comes to understand the necessity for pedagogic leavetaking. The pedagogue knows that, at times, he or she must take leave ... because in the silence of the pedagogue's absence an opening (appears) where in the student truly learns to stand.

Revisiting the Themes of Teacher Education

The collaborative action research inquiry into reflection began with the intention of implementing critical reflection in a teacher education program. The mode of implementation was itself critically reflective, as action research involves the participants informing themselves through cycles of action and reflection. We also felt that action research was appropriate because ours was a perplexing question of practice that could be best illuminated through an inquiry into our practice. Although we can agree with the critically reflective position against the reified knowledge and skills in the technicist vision of effective teaching, the oppositional program carries with it its own "epistemic grammar" (Bowers, 1987, p. 8). We remain caught in the web of two alternative discourses, both of which speak in some sense to teacher education, but neither of which hears the voice of teaching.

One way that we might break out of the binary opposition of technicism and critical reflection is by privileging the ear over the eye. In her essay "Derrida and the Ethics of the Ear" (1989), Michelfelder calls this giving priority to "saying" over the "said" (p. 51). By allowing our students and ourselves as teacher educators to speak about critical reflection and technique in teaching, we better understand our teaching.

So what is our position now on reflective practice in teacher education? Are we able to offer a third way? The answer to this must be No. Something has broken through in the breakdown of the binary opposition. But what has broken through "is the illusion that we somehow or other have managed to close our conceptual fists around the nerve of things, that we have grasped the world round about [and have] circumscribed and encompassed it" (Caputo, 1987, p. 270). We realize that teaching is not something we have grasped in our conceptual fists; rather, teaching is something that we "are" and "do." Teaching means, in the words of Huebner, to be "inherently open to the Other and [to] the newness in the world" (1987, p. 24).

With these thoughts in mind I return again to what the saying of teaching has said about teacher education. What we hear in the narratives is a tension between making oneself vulnerable and being skilled and competent as a teacher. Competence covers a wide range of skills, background knowledge, and organizational abilities necessary to be an effective teacher. Students legitimately expect that in a curriculum and instruction course such as ours they will become familiar with techniques for planning, classroom organization and management, student evaluation, and will be introduced to specific teaching ideas. These are regarded as practical tools because they hold possibilities for themselves in their classrooms. Such practicalities are also important surrogate experiences, and experience is what the student teachers chiefly lack. Becoming competent in the skills and the knowledge of teaching means more than simply having technical effectiveness. Showing skill is an important

aspect to building self-identity as a teacher. As well a certain level of skill is necessary for an openness to one's students.

Openness to the Other signifies the other part of the tension. It means accepting one's vulnerability. To encounter the face of the Other is to face the ambiguity and the responsibility of teaching. This is the continuing source of vulnerability in teaching. Whatever the organizational ability, background knowledge, or teaching skills that one might have, these are secondary when meeting the children in the classroom. As Levinas (Peperzak, 1988) notes, "finding myself facing another awakens me to the infinite responsibility for the other who is in need of everything that is necessary for human life" (p. 18). To be committed to teaching really means to take responsibility for children in this way. Even the most knowledgeable and experienced teacher knows the insecurity that comes when first facing a class. The children, our students, come to us as strangers. And even after one gets to know them better, they can still surprise, delight, and puzzle the experienced teacher.

Teaching means to live in the flux of the newness of the world and in the play of competence and vulnerability. Part of our objection to teacher effectiveness programs is that they deny the flux. They see methods as a protective armour to ward off the unexpected and to control the engagement with students. If being so armed is student teachers' idea of good preparation, then it is probably a good thing that our students are never prepared well enough to meet classroom realities. It is in the places where the armor wears thin and in the naked places that the openness to the Other and an openness to the relationship that is teaching enters in.

If teaching means to live in the tension of vulnerability and competence, what are our responsibilities as teacher educators? We understand first that teacher education is not discontinuous with teaching itself. It too is exposed to the same flux of vulnerability and competence. We must be prepared, at times, to set aside our own answers and solutions to listen to the stories the student teachers tell about their journey to becoming teachers.

With exceptional eloquence, Kari tells of her journey from an excessive focus on herself to becoming attuned to her own students. The journey has been a painful one. She reports that it left her "battered and exhausted from constant self-bereavement." She has had to fight to retain self-confidence and self-respect. This excessive focus on the self seems unavoidable while the self is still inexperienced and untested as a teacher. Testing and gathering experience will mean to suffer as one encounters the inevitable limits and disappointments of what is possible. As she emerges from the exhaustive (and exhausting) focus on herself and "the intense worry about future success or failure," she becomes better able to appreciate the students for themselves.

Reflectivity in teacher education means that we hope that students will become aware of themselves becoming teachers. As they record and recall the difficulty of becoming teachers, they come to accept that there are many roads the journey might take and that the journey is never over. As teacher educators we have a responsibility to help sustain students in their difficulty by encouraging their conversations and by helping to build in our classrooms the contexts that will support them.

Note.

1. I am grateful to Siebren Miedema for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper.
2. Reflective practice covers a broad range of interpretations from the rather narrow reflection on performing specific skills (Cruickshank & Applegate, 1981), to moral reflection (Tom, 1987), and critical social reflection (Smyth, 1989).
3. Despite the rhetorical acknowledgement of the importance of teacher narratives in the critically reflective literature (Smyth, 1989), little of the authentic voice of teaching is heard in this writing.

References

- Aoki, T. (1990). *Voices of teaching*. Vancouver, BC: British Columbia Teachers' Federation.
- Bowers, C. (1987). *Elements of a post-liberal theory of education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Caputo, J. (1987). *Radical hermeneutics: Repetition, deconstruction and the hermeneutic project*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.
- Cherryholmes, C. (1988). *Power and criticism: Poststructural investigations in education*. New York: Teachers College Press.
- Cruickshank, D., & Applegate, J. (1981). Reflective teaching as a strategy for teacher growth. *Educational Leadership*, 38(7), 553-554.
- Dewey, J. (1903). The relation of theory to practice. In J.A. Boyston (Ed.), *John Dewey the Middle Works 1899-1924, Vol. 3: 1903-1906* (pp. 249-272). Carbondale, IL: University of Southern Illinois Press.
- Faculty of Education Strategic Planning Project. (1989). *Exploring and mapping the future: A focus on priority issues*. Edmonton, AB: Faculty of Education, University of Alberta.
- Gore, J. (1987). Reflecting on reflective teaching. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 38(2), 33-39.
- Huebner, D. (1987). Teaching as a vocation. In F.S. Bolin & J.M. Falk (Ed.), *Teacher renewal: Professional issues, personal choices* (pp. 17-29). New York: Teachers College Press.
- Michelfelder, D. (1989). Derrida and the ethics of the ear. In A. Dallery & C. Scott (Eds.), *The question of the other: Essays in contemporary continental philosophy* (pp. 47-54). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Peperzak, A. (1989). From intentionality to responsibility: On Levinas's philosophy of language. In A. Dallery & C. Scott (Eds.), *The question of the other: Essays in contemporary continental philosophy* (pp. 3-22). Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Schön, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. New York: Basic Books.
- Smyth, J. (1987). *Editor's Introduction: Educating teachers: Changing the nature of pedagogical knowledge* (pp. 1-6). London: Falmer Press.
- Smyth, J. (1989). Developing and sustaining critical reflection in teacher education. *Journal of Teacher Education*, 40(2), 2-9.
- Tom, A. (1987). Replacing pedagogical knowledge with pedagogical questions. In J. Smyth (Ed.), *Educating teachers: Changing the nature of pedagogical knowledge*. London: Falmer Press.