Reflective Friday
Time Out to Think

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My students have shown me that reflection is not just for adults, not just for university students, or pre-service teachers. Even in grades one to three, they can benefit from reflective activities during the school day.

“I learned about bones,” I hear Kendall announce from a cluster of students sitting on the classroom floor.

“What did you learn about bones?” I ask.

Kendall replies, “I learned that the funny bone is really called the humerus.”

“Did anyone else learn something about bones?” I ask.

Rebecca answers, “I learned that the femur is the biggest bone in your body.”

Julian pipes in, “And the three bones in your ear are the smallest.”

On Friday mornings students enter the classroom thinking about what they have learned during the week. I call this Reflective Friday, a day set aside for reflective thinking, talking, and writing. My students have come to see reflection as a part of the curriculum. Lucy, a third grade student who recently moved to another school, sent us an email that said, “I like my new school only they don’t have PE or reflection.”

Reflection, as I define it in our classroom, is thinking about the ways new learning fits into what we already know. It allows us to make connections between new learning and previous experiences. Reflection helps students not only to remember but also to actively participate in the learning experience. They must interact with new information: making observations, asking questions, and comparing their understandings with those posed by others. Reflective activities in the classroom help to make thinking visible, enabling students to learn from one another and to gain greater insights into their own thinking and learning processes.

I teach in a small coastal community in San Diego County in Southern California, one with an eclectic population including migrant workers, many who work in the nearby flower fields and greenhouses, young professionals with beachfront property, and families that have lived in the community for generations. I coteach a multiage class of forty students with my teaching partner, Jan Hamilton. Students join our class in first grade and stay with us through third grade.

Before Reflective Fridays most of our reflective thinking was confined to debriefing after a field trip or class project, often squeezed into the few minutes at the end of the day or before lunch. Reflection was not high on our agenda. Yet, as an adult, I appreciate time to think about my learning, time to talk with friends and colleagues about my understanding, and time to write to clarify and record my thoughts. Without time to reflect, I forget details and take away only a broad picture that often fades with time.

I became interested in the idea of using reflective thinking as a learning tool for my young students when, thanks to an Eisenhower grant, I met with a group of elementary teachers to work toward the goal of improving our science instruction. Reflection is a process emphasized in science instruction, yet young children—those in grades one through three—are not
expected by many researchers or educational theorists to be able to reflect. Reflection, according to these experts, should begin in the fourth grade. Yet the limited experience I had with reflection led me to believe that young children were more reflective than educational theory suggested. Theories about the role of language, thought, and social interaction proposed by Vygotsky (1978), along with strategies used by Bodrova and Leong (1996), informed my thinking about how I might approach reflection with young children. Bodrova and Leong, who implemented Vygotsky’s theories in their research, showed the importance of the teacher as a support for the learner and learners as support for one another. Their research suggested that young children could develop sophisticated thinking processes through collaboration with their peers and with adults.

A comment I heard at a conference propelled me to action. A teacher-researcher from Alaska talked about the volume of information that teachers are supposed to impart to students and about the lack of time in the school schedule for thinking. A typical elementary school schedule includes math, science, social studies, reading, writing, spelling, handwriting, art, music, and PE instruction, all in a six-hour school day with time out of the classroom for recess and lunch. She described her school’s Reflective Friday, a day with time set aside to think. I never did get all the details, but that nudge was all I needed to take the plunge. My challenge was to develop a structure for Reflective Fridays that allowed students time to think and reflect, but also included variety and movement, quiet time and interaction.

I decided to break our day into several different kinds of reflective activities. I created a schedule for the day that began with focused reflection about classroom learning for the week and ended with time for students to have an opportunity for unstructured thinking about topics of their choice. I came up with the following schedule to guide us.

**How the Day Unfolds**

8:25-9:00 All-School Assembly

9:00-9:40 Brainstorming: time to reflect on the learning that has occurred in the classroom during the week as a group, generating ideas and building from the ideas of other students.

9:40-10:00 PE: time for students to let their subconscious minds reflect while their bodies are busy moving.

10:00-10:15 Recess

10:15-10:45 Reflective Writing: time for students to use writing as a tool to record and clarify their thinking about the week’s learning.

10:45-11:15 Free Read: time for students to share their reflective writing with the whole group, then follow this sharing with questions and discussion about important ideas brought up in the sharing.

11:15-12:15 Portfolio Work/Goal Setting: time for students to reflect on their progress in learning, set goals for future learning, and evaluate the results.

12:15-1:00 Lunch

1:00-1:15 Thinking Time: time for students to quietly and independently think, dream, imagine, and ponder anything they want.

1:15-1:30 Dialogue Journal: time for students to carry on an individual written conversation with the teacher. This conversation does not have to be reflective, but often results in reflective thinking because of the teacher’s response.

1:30-1:40 Recess

1:40-2:10 Writing Time/Silent Reading: time for students to choose either to read or write, allowing time for additional reflection or allowing students to switch their thinking processes as they create a piece of writing or engage with a text.

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*Figure 1. Drawn Reflection with Labels: "Work (Walker) of time"; "Nature (Natch) mase"; "Roll a Penne (Penny)"; "WorD wall"*
2:10-2:25 Read Aloud: time for students to listen and think as the teacher reads.

2:25-2:30 Clean-up/dismissal

In this article I focus on two of the day's activities: reflective writing and goal setting.

Nudging Students Forward

A teacher aspiring to cultivate reflectiveness in students needs patience. The results we achieved were not dramatic and sudden. Instead, subtle changes began to occur. One of our dilemmas at the beginning of the school year was how to get beginning writers to reflect in written form, since their writing skills are still emerging. After much discussion, Jan and I decided that we would ask our students to draw, rather than write, for their first reflective piece on what they had learned. We gave students each a blank piece of paper and asked them to fold it in fourths. In each space we had them draw an image that represented something they had learned during the week and then asked them to label each image. Some students included brief labels (Figure 1); others wrote full sentences to explain their thinking (Figure 2).

By folding the paper, students were able to focus on one idea at a time in each space rather than facing a full sheet of blank paper. While not all students filled each quadrant of the paper, all were successful with this first attempt at written reflection, although at this early stage their reflections consisted almost entirely of recalling all or some of the week's activities.

We continued with this procedure for several weeks. Our older students often filled their squares with writing and chose not to draw at all. Some students focused their reflection on one or two topics, while others wrote shorter pieces on a larger number of learning topics. Students soon asked for lined paper, so we gave them a choice.

Figure 2. More Written Explanation: "We drew our names on paper and what they look like."

Over time, we have learned much about making this process work for us. During quiet time everyone in the classroom focuses on writing. If students get stuck, I ask questions to nudge them forward. "What did you notice?" "What are you wondering about?" "Do you have any connections?" "What does it remind you of?" I don't write prompts on the board because I don't want students to be limited.

Students continue to write until I tell them to stop. But I don't want them to quit too soon. As they begin to get restless, I remind them to "go past done," searching the furthest reaches of their minds for thoughts they haven't noticed. By the end of the school year my sixth-grade students were able to sustain this reflective writing for thirty to forty minutes and often groan when I ask them to finish their last thought.

Types of Thinking and How They Change

Students' reflective writing changes over the course of the school year. What begins as simple labels or a telling of what was done, a type of thinking that I call recounting, develops into more complex thinking. By analyzing students' written reflections and discussion, I have identified several types of thinking that develop.

Recounting: "I learned about the field trip plants."

Observation: "Ben's grandma looked fancy."

Questions: "How many astronauts have landed on the moon? If few, how come we know so much about it?"

Connections: "When we did circle fractions I thought it was pretty easy. But when we did the fractions with the rectangle we had to think about what we already knew about fractions and put it to the rectangle form."

Evaluation: "We had a debate over one fifth of 20 is four or five. I thought it was four because four goes into 20 five times. Joanna thought it was five because it was one fifth. What a sad answer!"

Self-Awareness: "I think the patterns helped me count by threes and nines, so now whenever I need to know my threes or nines I can just look at the piece of paper."

New Information: "When we went to Mission Trails I learned that poison oak likes to grow under oak trees."

Details: "When we did Ocean in a Bucket we added a lot of salt and also gummy worms and we also added rocks, shells, gummy sharks and also dry ice."
A comparison of types of thinking used in October (Figure 3) and May (Figure 4) shows recounting as the most common initial type of thinking used in reflection. First and second grade students began to use more types of thinking as their experience with reflection increased. Third grade students began the year with more types of thinking represented in their reflections and used less recounting, probably because they had more sophisticated writing skills and experience with reflection than the younger students in our class.

Over time, all students' reflections included more types of thinking, although the various types of thinking did not seem to develop in any particular pattern. The inclusion of two types of thinking in a reflection changed the reflection dramatically. Students moved from a simple statement in their reflection, to a more thoughtful description of their thinking. As they included more types of thinking, their reflections became more complex and connected.

By May, none of the second and third grade students relied on a single type of thinking to express their thoughts through the written reflection. While developing different types of thinking is not, by itself, the goal of reflective thinking, it is clear that students show greater understanding as they are able to move past telling what happened toward drawing conclusions, connecting their learning to their own experiences, making observations, and evaluating their own learning.

**Haiku Reflection**

Julie, a third grade student, uses several types of thinking in her reflection about haiku.

At first, when we did the Haiku poetry, I thought I couldn't do it. It sounded so hard! Doing all of the syllables so it went 5-7-5?! Then I just did it! I thought of a sentence that matched what I wanted to write about, and checked it. If it worked, I'd write it down. If there was a few syllables too less or too many, I'd see if I could cut down on the contractions or delete a useless word like and. I think writing Haiku poetry is a good way to learn what syllables are, and how to use them. If you don't know your syllables, then you can't write Haiku because there has to be a certain amount of syllables in each line!

Julie shows self-awareness as she explores her initial difficulty with haiku. She continues with an explanation of her newly learned strategy and evaluates the usefulness of haiku in teaching syllabication. Through her reflection, Julie shows her analysis and complex understanding of haiku.

**A Tale of Two Students**

Reflection does not develop evenly for all students, though many students follow a similar pattern. Brian came into first grade already reading and spelling at a high level. He was reluctant to write, even though he didn't struggle to spell the words he chose. Many early readers are critical of their writing ability, not wanting to risk writing words incorrectly. Brian's October reflection...
does not include any drawings, unlike the reflections of most first graders. He wrote two sentences, both complete and spelled correctly, briefly naming topics covered during the week: “I learned about the field trip plants. I learned about non fiction writing.”

As the school year progressed, he continued to write complete sentences with most of the words spelled correctly. His written reflections do not become more complex over time. Even in May, his reflection includes just two complete sentences retelling events that happened during the week: “In library we watched a movie about scholastic's Book Fair. We did finger-painting with our kid righting.”

Maria came into first grade at the same reading and writing level as most first-graders in our district. She knew how to read and write some sight words but was not confident.

Maria’s October reflection (Figure 5) is typical of most first grade students.

She drew pictures of her learning—including a PE activity, jumping jacks, and Kumeyaay plants—and then labeled them. She also drew a picture of a computer to represent time spent in the computer lab and a picture of the word wall in the classroom (with the words on the wall spelled correctly), and wrote, “I Lrd hoo To Sal [I learned how to spell].”

As the school year continued, Maria’s written reflections became more complex, and she moved from drawing and labeling to writing her thoughts without pictures. Like most of our students by the end of the school year, Maria was able to express her learning without prompts or questions from others. Figure 6 shows Maria’s May reflection about Grandparent’s Day and a reading activity. Here is the text of her reflection with her phonetic spelling corrected:

**Grandparent’s Day**

*It was grandparent’s day. My grandma couldn’t come because she is sick and so is my grandpa. That is why they couldn’t come. But other people’s grandparents came. We sang songs for them and after every song they clapped for us. It was fun singing songs for them. Ben’s grandma looked fancy. Grandpas came too. That was really fun. Lizzy’s grandma and grandpa came and listened to her sing. It was really, really fun!...*

**Figure 5: Maria’s October Reflection**

We read a story called Puddles. In Puddles they used words like ka boom!! And words like slap slap slap and hop flap pop and it was all about kid stuff like jumping in puddles and getting dirty and stomping in mud and touching worms. And there is similes and metaphors...
of some new vocabulary (similes and metaphors).

While Brian’s reflective skills did not appear to improve during his first grade year, as he began second grade, his reflections became more complex. By October of his second grade year, Brian evaluated learning situations, pointed out new learning, and included more detail in his reflections.

In library we watched a movie about Christopher Colubbus. It was a good movie. I learned that you could sail west to go east. In circles and stars for home work journals. On the first game I got 200 something. On the second game I got 300, something. On the third game I got 300 something again. I got a total of at least 900!!!!!!!!!

Brian and Maria remind me that students develop different skills at varying rates, that the student who is the most skilled at reading is not necessarily equally skilled at thinking reflectively. Brian’s development points out the need for patience and trust in the belief that students will become more reflective over time.

Setting Goals and Evaluating Progress

The young students I teach have shown me their ability to be reflective and how that reflectiveness benefits their learning. As students reflect and become more aware of their own learning, they are able to set goals and evaluate their progress.

Edward, a first grader who speaks Spanish as his first language, began the school year with a limited knowledge of the alphabet and the sounds that letters make. Like the other students, he began his reflection with pictures, including more writing as he was able. In March he reflected on what he had learned—how to add and subtract, how to add big and small numbers, how to do calendar—and set goals for himself, to learn to tell time and to practice at school and at home. His reflection (Figure 7) helped him describe his learning at his student-led conference with his parents.

Besides setting goals, students who reflect also become more aware of their own learning. In the following reflection, Zach, a third-grader, evaluates his progress as a writer during his third grade year. He is aware of what he has learned as a writer, of the areas where he is still progressing, and of his growing awareness of his own reflective abilities.

Me as a Writer

Over the summer I didn’t write very much or at all! So when I came back to school it was a shock! The first couple of months I was just thring to get the feel for it again. Then I wrote my first poem that I really liked. Just Me: The one that I read at the poetry reading. After that I liked almost every poem I wrote. I don’t only write poems, I write reflections too. But they have always been my tough spot. Actually they have been getting easier for me. I wonder why? I am writing a reflection right now. Look at how much I have written already! Still, I could definitely improve by not just scratching the surface but getting deeper as Mrs. Douillard would say. In writing I probably write poems the best. If I have a subject. Otherwise I just sit there staring into space looking for a topic.
All the tools that I developed during the year (like 6-room poetry) I use to help me find a subject.

Students who set goals and evaluate their progress have more ownership of their learning. Through realistic, short-term goal setting and evaluation, students recognize their successes, become aware that they are responsible for their own progress, and are more motivated to work toward the goals they set.

**Going Past Done**

My students have pushed me to “go past done” when it comes to thinking about their learning. Rather than depending solely on educational research or learning theories to tell me what they are able and not able to do, I turn to them for answers. They have shown me that in a multi-age class such as ours, they can benefit from reflective activities during the school day. They have shown me that reflection is not just for adults, not just for university students, or pre-service teachers. Reflection helps us to remember, to make connections, and to make thoughtful, informed decisions. Reflection is a process for living.

**References**


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