THE BRIDGE: FROM RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

Creating a Reflective Climate for Success

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Let's pause for a moment. A rare indulgence in the fast-paced, content-packed schedules of our schools. It feels as though there is no time. Yet research supports the practice of pausing, not just to catch our breath, but to think, articulate and question what we experience in our classrooms. Both teacher and students in a reflective classroom can stop, reflect and deepen our understanding of events as we consider options and consequences of our actions and recognize ourselves as decision-makers. Here you will find questions posed to prompt teacher reflection along with classroom strategies designed to provide that deliberate pause for students to reflect as well. The purpose is to encourage reflection on why we do what we do and to highlight how providing language structures can facilitate the social interactions that make up classroom climate.

What is classroom climate and how can it enhance success? First we may think of the physical space, the visible and tangible characteristics of the place where a group of people are gathered for learning. Temperature, furniture, lighting, and bulletin boards make an impression. We also know elements we sense but cannot touch. A feeling of unity, purpose, comfort, tranquility, and/or excitement can be perceived as we walk through the door. Beyond the physical elements, we can focus on environment as a social construct of human interactions that gives all else meaning (Halliday as described by Silvers, 2001).

In immersion classrooms, teachers organize experiences and activities, and support interaction that leads to shared knowledge as students make meaning of content using the target language. In addition to providing content and language, classroom practices can enhance students' capacity to make meaning of their actions, their sense of self and their being in the world. Research and theory also support strategies designed to enhance students' capacity for and practice of reflection (York-Barr, Sommers, Ghere & Montie, 2001). "In a classroom where reflection is an important part of the climate and culture, the teacher can provide demonstrations to students on how to begin to illuminate their thinking processes and assume more control over their own learning and behaviors" (Silvers, 2001, p. 2).

The definition of reflection is multifaceted, from metacognition (overt thinking about one's thinking) to being critically reflective for a particular purpose. For example, we reflect critically to take responsibility for decisions we make that change behaviors (Canning, 1991). Is that not what we work to teach our students in making smart behavior choices? Reflective practice in the classroom promises to promote growth by looking at what we do from unfamiliar angles, unearthing assumptions of power, and deepening our understanding of what drives our actions (Brookfield, 1995). Action research with student teachers found reflection "prompted changes in perception of an event or a person(s), or plans for a change in behavior" (Canning, 1991). The intent of deliberate pauses is to assume an open perspective, to consider options and to choose responses.

Four directions of reflection (York-Barr et al., 2001) help clarify the sometimes difficult, confusing and often risky work of examining our beliefs, goals and practice. Reflecting back, forward, within and in the present sheds light on our teaching.

Reflect Back

Begin by reflecting back to your own learning experiences. What environment is most conducive to your learning style? What were your experiences as a language learner? How does that influence the environment you intend to create for your students? What was your preparation as a teacher? By looking at our own story, listening to our colleagues' perspectives, reading literature about classroom environments/interactions, and seeing issues of power and control in the classroom through our students' eyes, we can become more aware. We can start to think more deliberately about creating a classroom climate conducive to learning (Brookfield, 1995).

Look back on what happens in your classroom. You may choose to take a closer look at an encouraging experience or one that seemed challenging. "In the aftermath of action, we try to find the opportunity to reflect back on the memories, experiences, and interpretations that caused us to make what felt like instinctual responses" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 42). Consider these four steps in guiding you own reflection (York-Barr et al., p. 47) as well as helping your students follow a similar set of questions in a weekly learning journal. With modeling and guidance, reflecting can become a routine expectation and a meaningful application of the target language.

1. What Happened? (Description)
- What did I do? What did others do?
- What was my affect at the time? What was their affect?
- What was going on around us? When and where did this occur?

2. Why? (Analysis and Interpretation)
- Why do I think things happened this way? What are my hunches?
- What was I thinking and feeling?
- How might the context have influenced what happened?

3. So What? (Overall Meaning and Application)
- Why did this seem like a significant event to reflect on?
- What have I learned? How might I improve?
- How might this change my future thinking and behaving?
- What questions remain?

4. Now What? (Implications for Action)
- Are there others to include in my reflecting?
- What do I want to think about next time a similar situation arises? How do I want to behave?
- How could I set up conditions to increase the likelihood of productive interactions and learning?
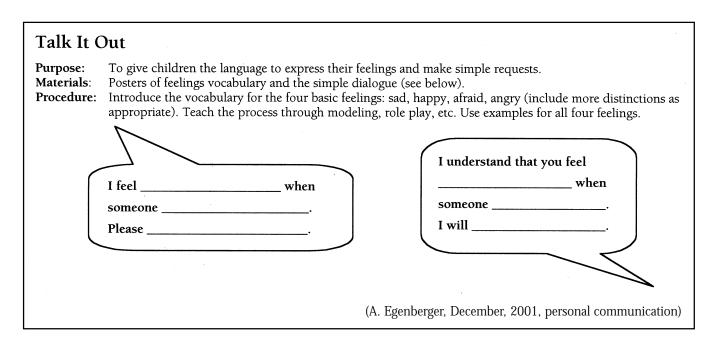
(Quoted and adapted from J. York-Barr et al., 2001)

Beyond prompting students to listen to multiple perspectives and reconsider their choices, actually recording interactions and reflecting on them is a technique that prompts student inquiry. As a tool for students to review and rethink their group discussions, Penny Silvers (2001) videotaped her fourth graders during their literature discussions. Her students then watched the videotape of their conversation and analyzed reasons why they felt and behaved the way they did. This led students to genuine questions about the group dynamics, for example, noticing gender inequities and power relationships. Silvers observed students expanding self-awareness and revealing their beliefs. "It was not a linear process, but rather, a recursive one in which their behaviors informed their thinking, their reflecting began to modify their behaviors, and their reading further informed their understanding" (Silvers, 2001, p. 8).

More immediate opportunities to reflect arise when students are in conflict. To effectively express their wants and needs, they must pause. While zero-tolerance for violent behavior would be part of the rules with clear consequences, sometimes a simple expression of feelings and a request can defuse an emotional or even potentially volatile situation. More in-depth conflict resolution techniques give children the words to think and "Talk it Out" when emotions run strong. This is especially important for the immersion context because students are likely to revert to English when they have strong feelings and emotions and lack the language necessary to express them.

The following activities, "Talk It Out" and the "Peace Table", are structured to provide students with very important conflict resolution models, so necessary for a peaceful social climate. At the same time, these processes introduce students to much needed vocabulary, functions, and structures of the target language which will enable them to communicate successfully in emotional situations.

An example of students "talking it out" might occur when a child says something derogatory about another student. One might say, "I feel angry when someone says mean things about my friend. Please don't use those words." Then the child caught speaking insults could say, "I understand you feel mad when someone says those words. I'll stop saying that." Using "someone" instead of "you" can eliminate accusations and defensiveness as children focus on the general behavior and the impact that behavior has on others.

Talk It Out

Purpose: To give children the language to express their feelings and make simple requests.
Materials: Posters of feelings vocabulary and the simple dialogue (see below).
Procedure: Introduce the vocabulary for the four basic feelings: sad, happy, afraid, angry (include more distinctions as appropriate). Teach the process through modeling, role play, etc. Use examples for all four feelings.

> I feel _____ when
> someone _____.
> Please _____.

> I understand that you feel
> _____ when
> someone _____.
> I will _____.

(A. Egenberger, December, 2001, personal communication)

A "Peace Table," with specific parameters, problem-solving forms and procedures is another way to help students overcome an impasse when a conflict or disagreement stops them cold. Children experiencing conflict can learn to articulate feelings, make requests, listen to other perspectives and negotiate solutions in the immersion language. Every step of the process invites them to reflect. After the process has been modeled when a conflict comes up early in the year, children can practice and learn to make peace on their own. In this exercise, one student reads the questions and writes down the other's responses. Before they brainstorm solutions, each child has a chance to speak and be heard. It is important that the children in conflict do not write for themselves, but must dictate to one another to encourage listening. The form is designed with text boxes so that children make the clear distinction between the two perspectives as they take turns asking the questions and noting down the responses. It also highlights that negotiation is necessary on the generation and selection of solutions. This structured process is designed for students to view what they do through different lenses and to alert them to what they may not have recognized before. It is a way for students to ask, 'What can I do differently in my life based on new understanding?'.

Let's Make Peace!

Date: _____

Name: _____ 　 Name: _____

What's the problem?

↓

How do you feel and what do you feel like doing when you feel this way?

↓

What do you want?

What's the problem?

↓

How do you feel and what do you feel like doing when you feel this way?

↓

What do you want?

↓

What could we do to solve the problem?

↓

This is what we choose and agree to do:

Later . . .This is what we did to solve the problem:

Thanks for making peace!

Reflect Within

Because we tend to teach the way we were taught, or the way we see others teach, deep reflection can unveil the rationale and assumptions that drive the design of our classrooms. What do you believe? What do you want to believe? Who are you, the immersion teacher? What do you believe about your role as the immersion teacher and how does your role differ from that of other teachers? What do you believe about your students? What do you believe about how children learn to behave? What do you believe about how children learn languages? The clearer you are about your own belief system, the more intentionally you can make changes and choose strategies that promote your values and intent. Even if we do not articulate what we believe, we still make decisions based on those underlying premises. It is most powerful to act with clarity, and that comes with the hard work of reflection.

As you reflect on your own teaching and learning, students can do the same. Reflecting on our preferred learning style can help students recognize diverse approaches and discover what works best for them as they build their own understanding. When children can identify various areas of intelligence, they can begin to dispel the polar notion of "smart and not-smart" people. Reflection can help make learning an overt operation. When a teacher explains why she has planned to address multiple learning styles by including input for visual, auditory and kinesthetic processing, for example, learners can reflect on their own preferences and strengths. By pointing out what you are doing and why, children learn how they learn and how to learn better.

Reflect Forward

Reflecting forward involves considerations for the future. What do you want your classroom to feel like, look like, sound like? How would you like children to interact and use the target language? How will you make choices to reach that aim? How do you define success? How do your students define success? Our task becomes revisiting our purpose, looking forward to the desired outcome, and aligning our choices with that outcome in mind.

As you and your students envision the classroom environment, generating and agreeing to class norms and a mission statement can give focus to choices made in the classroom everyday. I believe that students' voices must be evident in the generation and evolution of classroom rules and procedures that are created with the purpose of reaching the overall, agreed-upon mission of the class. As we practice reflection, we refer to our mission and vision for a safe learning place and continually question together how to create and maintain such a climate throughout the year. For example, in my immersion classroom, students shared their ideas about our purpose as a community of learners and we all agreed to post our mission in our classroom: To Learn and Improve ("Aprender y Mejorar"). The sign on our door displayed the summation of student ideas for behavior guidelines: Be Punctual, Prepared, Polite, and Productive ("Qué seas persona: Puntual, Preparada, Positiva y Productiva"). As students make decisions or reflect upon their behavior, these goals serve as our point of reference.

Once a common purpose is established, investing time teaching classroom norms and procedures as a content area by using sound instructional strategies will help ensure a collaborative learning environment. Since procedures in the classroom (how to sharpen pencils, where to turn in work, what to do after lunch, etc.) may seem countless, especially when presented in the target language, no more than five or six rules or norms with clear consequences is recommended. Students' participation in activities such as role-plays, games, songs, quizzes and stories helps them to learn the details and rationale of those rules. Again, their voices are heard. Then the teacher's role shifts from teaching the rules to enforcing the class agreement with clarity and consistency.

An activity I find useful as a metaphor for reflecting forward and setting group and individual goals is the "Ball Toss", which can be adapted for any age. This process can be especially valuable in an immersion context because it makes concrete what otherwise would be an abstract discussion. This is particularly important because the discussion needs to occur in the immersion language.

Ball Toss

Purpose: To experience the purpose of setting reasonable goals and having others help you reach your goal to maximize true accomplishment.

Materials:
- 3 tennis balls or beanbags for each team of 4-6
- 1 bucket or trashcan for each team
- 1 blindfold (optional)
- pencil and paper (or some other way for each team to keep score)

Scoring: One member for each team keeps a running team score for each round
       Ball hits the bucket = 1 point
       Ball goes in the bucket and bounces out = 3 points
       Ball stays in the bucket = 5 points

Activity: Team members take turns throwing the balls for each round. Follow each round with discussion asking how students rate the degree of difficulty and the degree of fun. You could take a silent finger vote on a scale of one to ten.

Lead-in demonstration: 10 feet away
Blindfolded or facing away from the bucket (you can also spin them around first), have one volunteer throw the 3 balls.
Discussion: Difficulty of hitting a goal you can't see or haven't set. Ask if encouraging words help in this case.

Round A: 35-40 feet away
Looking at the target, team members take turns throwing the three balls.
Discussion: Goals that are too far away rarely get reached. (Note that some students prefer this added challenge!)

Round B: 3 feet away
Same as round A
Discussion: Goals too close are not much of a challenge. (Notice if there is more off-task behavior during this round.)

Round C: 20 feet away
Same as rounds A and B
Discussion: Usually the most enjoyable. The goal is challenging, yet achievable.

Round D: 20 feet away
One person from each team holds the bucket. Not moving until the ball is tossed, this player can move to try to catch the ball in the bucket.
Discussion: It can be easier to accomplish a goal with someone helping you.

Further Discussion Questions: How did you feel? Are goals important? How much were you trying? How was it different when someone was helping you? What are some examples of goals that are too hard? Too easy? What happens when other people set goals for you? What are some ways others can help you reach a goal?

(Adapted from T. Jackson, 1995)

Keeping track of progress toward both short and long-term goals and on-going evaluation is most effective when students have a hand in selecting a target, charting their results, and renegotiating when necessary. This not only sparks reflection and enhances accountability but sweetens the taste of accomplishment. For example, compiling a portfolio of work samples, charts of test results and student reflections starting in September can make student-led conferences a natural celebration of learning in the Spring. Students can reflect on current evidence and compare their work to goals they understand. Students do the thinking about learning. And, talking about such thinking throughout the year as an ongoing part of instruction in the immersion language familiarizes the students with the language they need to talk about their work and progress in a meaningful way.

A circle meeting led by students provides another forum for communicating and constructing changes that enhance the reflective climate of cooperation. Structure and routine in the orchestration of regular class meetings lends itself to reflective practice and creative shared leadership. Posting a chart of rotating student responsibilities may not be enough. How are students accountable? What jobs may need to be added or
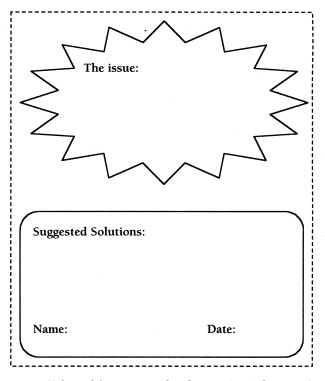
adapted? Having a daily circle meeting with participatory systems for input, such as the "Issue Bin," and shared decision-making can allow the processes of the learning community to evolve and all voices are heard.

For example, a student might be upset that others say no when she asks to join their games on the playground. Children in the class might suggest that people say "yes" or find nicer ways to decline such as "Not today, but how about tomorrow?" or "I'm sorry, but we already started. Can you wait until the next game?" This becomes an opportunity to help students choose and learn necessary structures and vocabulary in meaningful ways. Not only do students raise issues and negotiate solutions in the target language, the solutions often create ways for developing competence in the immersion language.

Issue Bin

Purpose: To capture ideas, concerns, and questions that deserve investigation, discussion and/or decision-making at a later more appropriate time (such as during a class meeting).

Step 1: Explain the purpose of the issues bin. This can be done when a real issue arises. Talk about some possible examples and how to fill out the issue bin form.

Step 2: As a class decide on the best place for the "Issue Bin" and the forms.

Step 3: Decide how to keep track of issues and agreements.

Step 4: Develop a few decision-making processes to choose from as appropriate; e.g. consensus, "thumbs-up" voting, majority rules, problem-solving committee, etc. (Make sure that all agree on the method to be used for settling any given issue. For example, to go with a majority vote, everyone must agree on that method prior to the actual voting.)

Step 5: Review and update.

The issue:

Suggested Solutions:

Name: Date:

(Adapted from E. McClanahan & C. Wicks, 1993)

Reflect in the Present

Reflection also means looking at what is actually happening in your classroom. What is working and what is not? Perhaps the most challenging is reflecting in the present as we make countless decisions each minute. What if the teacher were to think out loud and model that reflective practice? Children could witness and overhear the thinking that we do all the time. Considering that imitation is perhaps the most basic form of learning, there is evidence that the teacher's engagement in active reflection impacts learning in the classroom. As we speak openly, we "model our quest for insight, critical clarity and openness to alternatives that we seek to encourage in others" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 46).

One way to be aware of our thinking as we are thinking is to pause. Just as teachers need to pause, so do students in order to be able to reflect in the present. The simple cooperative learning technique called "Think-Pair-Share" facilitates this moment of reflection. In my Spanish immersion classroom, I often incorporated an adaptation of the "think-pair-share" activity to promote think time. Not only do students think about their answers, they are asked to explain the thought processes that led them to their response. Language provides the evidence of their reflection as students voice their understanding. In the process of putting their thoughts into words for their classmate, they practice this routine of metacognition.

Think-Pair-Share ("Piensa-Pareja-Palo")

A Cooperative Learning Strategy

Purpose: To allow all students "think time," to ensure accountability and to eliminate waving hands.

Materials: One craft stick per person (including one for the teacher if you like). On each stick, write one name so that each person has a corresponding stick. A plastic cup or cloth bag to hold the sticks (the quieter the better).

Procedure: After posing a question, give students 30-60 seconds of silent think time. Then have them confer with a neighbor to compare and explain the thinking behind their answers. Once everyone has a response, choose a stick at random. The student whose name is on that stick is called upon to give his or her own answer and explanation or to relay that of his or her partner. In either case, students are using language to articulate reasoning.

Suggestions: Introduce this technique in a non-threatening setting such as a game. Some students will need encouragement to pair-up, so you may want to assign partners depending on the class. Returning chosen sticks to the bunch keeps kids from "checking out." The student leader for the day could be in charge of picking the name sticks.

(Adapted from D. W. Johnson & R. T. Johnson, 1999)

Thinking about our thought processes in the moment we are solving problems and making decisions invites us and others to learn from what we know and apply that understanding to future situations.

Conclusion

So, pause. Listen. Share your reflections and insights with yourself and with your class as you consciously make decisions to create a safe, caring and supportive learning environment. "Reflection in and of itself is not enough; it must be linked to how the world can be changed" (Brookfield, 1995, p. 217). To nurture a reflective climate of learning requires an investment of time – time thinking back on our own decisions, modeling a reflective spirit, and creating opportunities and structures for students, in turn, to think about their own behaviors as choices that affect the classroom environment.

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