

## Paparazzi and Self-Awareness: Reflective Practice Using Digital Technology

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**Abstract.** In the era of selfies, photo-bombs and Facebook, candid captures of interactions with others in the classroom have taken on new meanings. Seeing ourselves in moments when unaware of our professional demeanor, pictures can become a powerful tool for professional development. An evidence-based reflective Insight into Interactions workshop was developed based on observations made through university and elementary classroom activities with teacher education candidates and professionals from two disciplines, teacher education and school counseling. This professional development session created by an academic peer focused on analyzing both lived experiences and candid pictures through the eyes of professionals and students. These reflective debriefings resulted in more articulate self-awareness, perspective taking, and non-verbal communication skills.

**Keywords:** Professional Development; perspective-taking; self-awareness; reflective

### **Introduction**

Reflective practice is a powerful idea in education. The act of paying attention to oneself while engaged in professional practice is critical to good teaching and good counseling. Teaching teacher candidates and school counseling interns to self-supervise, is an essential part of what professors do in teacher education and school counseling programs. Through a series of serendipitous experiences and relationship building, a graduate student and two professors partnered in creating workshops, conference proposals, and a journal article in order to promote professional development through reflective practice and photography. In this article, the evidence-based reflective professional development workshop Insight into Interactions is highlighted. After viewing pictures, providing

constructive feedback, and professional experiences, teacher candidates learned about others' perceptions of themselves as educators. *Pictures at an exhibition* is a mixed metaphor underlying how paparazzi capture people's images when they are unaware. If a person becomes aware of the multiple images of self he/she presents this becomes an opportunity to stroll through pictures at an exhibition, with the intent to reflect, gain insight, articulate and improve professional practice.

### **Literature Review and Workshop Description**

The university course teacher candidates take is a methods course in English Language Learning. Teacher candidates learn theoretical ideas and strategies, which they have a chance to try out in the context of real elementary classrooms (kindergarten and second grade) with English Language Learners. This pedagogy is anchored in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle where a concrete learning experience is followed by reflective observation (reflecting on the experience) which leads to abstract conceptualization (learning from the experience) and active experimentation where learners are planning or trying out what was learned in the experience and reflecting on it. Experiences are crucial because many teacher candidates had never experienced linguistic diversity or realized that in their future they would be teaching children who are just learning to understand and converse in English. Respect for learners and their culture is a big part of this course.

One of the most perceptive and respected tools for teacher development is Schön's idea of reflective practice (1987). Reflection-in-action is when teachers think about what they are doing as they interact with their students or their colleagues. Reflection-on-action occurs after the educational event has passed and teachers think back to what they learned (notice the parallel with Kolb's experiential learning).

Rolfe (2014) suggested that: the primary task of reflective educators is therefore to form partnerships with their students in order to identify what they see as their learning needs and problems; to try out and appraise novel and individualised responses aimed at meeting those needs, and to arrive at a mutual agreement about what might constitute a resolution. Rather than regarding education as a technological intervention based on the technical-rational model, with learning outcomes, teaching methods and assessment schemes laid out in advance, learning becomes a joint enterprise which requires a personal and individual partnership between tutor and student (p. 1181).

Thus, reflective practice activities were sprinkled throughout the semester and self-perception became more articulate as the semester progressed as evidenced by student feedback and classroom interactions.

In preparation for school visits the teacher candidates had a nonverbal communication workshop in the university class to understand how important communication is and what the effects of non-verbal interactions are with

children. Teacher candidates participated in exercises and dialogue about proximity, gestures, facial expressions, posture, and prosodic features of language (intonation, stress, tone of voice, pitch, pace, volume) (Okon, 2011). There were discussions, demonstrations and role-play about posture and matching messages, and the importance of purposeful interactions.

The impetus for the evidence-based workshop using digital technology started as a pilot project when Catherine (School Counseling Graduate Student and Graduate Assistant) received direct and non-complimentary feedback on a classroom presentation in her first year as a graduate student from Beto (School Counseling Professor) that caused her to reflect on self-awareness and presentation skills. The feedback was critical in her development as a counselor. Catherine started working as a Graduate Assistant in 2012 with Heljä (Professor in Teacher Education) with the focus on assisting with research and teaching-related activities. Over the first year, Catherine had a professional awakening where she discovered new ways of engaging with students and professionals. Catherine shared these experiences with Heljä and the growth experienced since she had been given the feedback from Beto.

In the fall of 2013, Catherine was asked to partner in one of Heljä's classes to a local elementary school providing transportation for teacher candidates as a van driver. The practical portions of the English Language Learners course was taught at the Professional Development School. Heljä and Catherine interacted informally discussing details of the interactions going on between the children in the school and the teacher candidates interacting with them during the learning activities they had designed in the bilingual classrooms. Catherine took pictures during the visits while observing the collaboration between the adult partners with their kindergarten and second grade classes with the intention of sharing a gift with the teachers and children at the end of the semester.

The insights gained from revisiting these pictures and the conversations before, during and after the van trips, the Insight To Interactions Professional Development Workshop was created. Some pictures taken without the awareness of teacher candidates, showed an interesting spectrum of observations; a continuum of facial expressions ranging from excitement to boredom, social engagement and disengagement, undesirable attire, frustration, and discomfort but also encouragement and joy in interactions with the English Language Learners. After Heljä and Catherine viewed and discussed the benefits of viewing the pictures in class and peers giving and receiving feedback, an evidence-based (through photographs) reflective professional development workshop was created using the Johari window as a framework for the workshop.

The Johari Window (Halpern, 2009) is a self-awareness tool developed by Joseph Luft and Harry Ingham. The Johari Window has four quadrants. Those quadrants are: open, blind, hidden, and not known. The open quadrant is behavior that is known to the individual and to others. The blind quadrant is behavior that is known to others but not the individual. The hidden quadrant is

behavior that is known to the individual, but not others. Lastly, the unknown quadrant is unknown to both others and the individual. These quadrants were explored throughout the workshop by asking questions such as:

How and what do we communicate to others?  
 What are our beliefs about ourselves?  
 How do other people perceive us?  
 What can we do about it?  
 What do you view as your strengths as a leader/educator?  
 Where are your areas of improvement?

Teacher candidates shared their observations and insights in pairs and in small groups with their peers. While Catherine and Heljä observed these interactions and discussions, it became apparent that the teacher candidates had built valuable relationships with one another through their experiences in the class and they were comfortable in providing constructive feedback and observations with one another. But what leads to such value in relationships? Carthy and McGilloway (2015) suggested that promoting social and emotional development is associated with both increased learning and positive academic achievement (Carthy & McGilloway, 2015). Therefore teacher candidates must be self-aware in order to teach their students similar social emotional competencies, which are often required by state standards (ISBE, n.d.)

### **The quality of teacher presence**

Purkey (2002) is known for invitational theory that supported the conceptualizing Insight to Interactions workshop created by Catherine and prompted by interactions between three university colleagues (Catherine, Heljä and Beto). In invitational theory (Purkey & Novak, 1993, Purkey & Schmidt, 1996, Haigh 2011) there are four anchoring principles: optimism, respect, trust and intentionality. A person can be unintentionally inviting or disinviting or intentionally inviting or disinviting in interactions with others in relation to the anchoring principles. Throughout the semester class meetings the intentionality of one's persona and behavior was the topic of discussions, which Heljä purposefully brought up in relation to class activities.

When looking at the Johari window, many times the quadrants are not equal or the same for every individual. It is through self-awareness and professional development experiences that the quadrant boundaries shift (Halpern, 2009). During the evidence-based professional development workshop, it was particularly important to assist teacher candidates in discovering some of their blind spots. Therefore, feedback was one of the most crucial elements of the workshop. Without feedback from peers and analysis of the photographs, teacher candidates may not have been aware of their behaviors, verbal and nonverbal. After the analysis, teacher candidates were then asked to compare both the feedback they received from their peers, to the beliefs and views they had about themselves. Purkey and Novak (1993) emphasize that positive self-image creates a success identity that our teacher candidates were articulating while learning to analyze their own behavior, relationships and how those came

out to look in pictures taken by Catherine. Reviewing pictures assisted teacher candidates in expanding their own self-awareness. Through the process of constructive feedback, students were able to reflect and grow in their leadership skills and teaching styles by helping each other explore the behavior and plan for future interactions and professional demeanor.

Pictures were used with teacher candidates as an important part in analyzing intentionally invitational attitudes (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996). Teacher candidates were creating big books to take to the children as a thank you for collaborating with them during the semester. When choosing pictures for the big books a thought emerged: “what can we learn from these pictures?” Teacher candidates decided that not all pictures were eligible to be chosen for the big books and shown to the children due to the messages they carried; boredom, uninviting facial expressions, postures that communicated disconnected attitudes etc. Throughout the semester Heljä’s class came back to the Johari window as a way to compare the personal journeys of teacher candidates to what was going on in the classroom with the kindergarten and second grade children.

### **Evidence-based Reflection; Insight into Interactions Workshop Outcomes**

The evidence-based reflective workshop was borne organically out of interactions both at the university and the elementary classroom. Outcomes were both predictable results of carefully designed activities but also serendipitously occurring intuitive lessons that went far beyond the initial intentions of the university professor.

Meaningful and personal feedback is powerful in creating growth as in the case of Catherine’s professional awakening that she was able to pass on to teacher candidates who were also learning to become professionals, albeit in a different field. Teacher candidates were able to be more honest with each other because Catherine first told her story of professional growth from blind-spots and challenges to overcoming personal challenges in the public sphere. Her honest narrative cultivated an atmosphere of free sharing among the students and their own narratives and individual experiences in the classroom.

Intentional actions resulted in a variety of reflection-based benefits:

Active Interactions in the university classrooms were urged by many exercises, concrete activities both in modeling strategies for the ELL classroom and learning to know each other better as colleagues. These interactions became more comfortable, humorous and informal as teacher candidates rode to the elementary school together in university vans in teams driven by Catherine and Heljä. This also allowed for natural debriefing sessions that prepared teacher candidates for the elementary school visits and a discussion about the successes during each visit.

Collaboration was emphasized by having the two teams going to the different classrooms to work together in designing the activities for the day prompted by the classroom teachers and related to their curriculum goals. Teacher candidates

continued to collaborate with one another as they reflected on their experiences in the classrooms. This collaboration resulted in the awareness teacher candidates discovered through group discussions facilitated during workshops and van rides.

Connections were made between what was learned in the university classroom and the elementary classrooms. Everything we learned in theory, we got to try out in interactions with children and discuss the approaches with peers. Connections were made between the native language sensibility with that of a child who is learning a second language. Knowing how to use grammar based on your own native ability is not the same as being able to articulate and help another language learner to learn English grammar.

Modeling self-reflection and asking for feedback were tools that both Catherine and Heljä used in their interactions with the teacher candidates. Courage to interact, to take risks and to openly discuss personal growth became the norm rather than an anomaly. Part of modeling self-reflection was made overt by discussing the perspectives of children in the classroom, teacher candidates, classroom teachers and the university personnel. Teacher candidates started to become more self-aware of how they intentionally and unintentionally present themselves when working with students and were able to set goals for future presentations and classroom time with young students. Hearing their peers' viewpoint and feedback was imperative to changes seen in teacher candidates as they set goals for themselves for ongoing student interactions.

Process-nature of learning is another aspect of this workshop. A string of individual events (including the Insight to Interactions workshop) both at the university, the trips in the vans and the visits to the classrooms provided continuous reflection opportunities with peers. Throughout this process relationships were built and as a class they discovered the importance of helping each other grow in a supportive environment. Everyone is in the process of learning and becoming a teacher and finding out what that might mean for each individual; how to give feedback morphed from critical, sharp and awkward feedback to more constructive, supportive and helpful by the end of the semester. Despite learning many tools and tricks for classroom experiences, teacher candidates discovered that teaching is much more of an art than a recipe from a cookbook.

### **Professional Growth-Teacher Candidate Feedback**

Professional growth was articulated both orally in class discussions and in written reflections. After the Insight to Interaction workshop, teacher candidates reflected on the entire semester's experiences. Narratives from teacher candidates reflected growth in areas of perspective-taking, body language, professionalism and interactions in general. One candidate mentioned that the workshop "helped me look beyond how I was being as an educator to how my students were reacting to how I taught or acted". She continued: "I think working with students that are ELL has helped me with a student that was originally a Spanish speaker in my classroom. I can gauge when she is getting

frustrated or confused and I know how to break things apart better to make more connections to the concept before moving on" (Teacher Candidate). This excerpt shows how teacher candidates are becoming more aware of the students' emotional landscapes besides their own.

By analyzing pictures in small groups, teacher candidates noticed a poor posture, unprofessional attire, blue hair, inappropriate skin display, disengagement (facial expressions, body postures), and proximity. These observations were articulated as intentionally disinviting (Purkey, 2002) demeanor and actions. After the workshop and school visits teacher candidates wrote: "I enjoyed looking at the pictures of my classmates and myself... I liked the look on the children's faces when we came to the classroom... It was not only the [primary] students that were learning in the room, but my Bradley classmates and I who were learning, too."

The workshop also prepared teacher candidates for their student teaching experience following this course. A teacher candidate wrote: "I feel like I will continue to have people observe my teaching because I have trouble making conclusions or understanding my strengths and weaknesses if I don't see something. If I'm focused on a lesson, I might not notice the one student wedged in between the two strong students who doesn't understand a concept, so I need to practice becoming more aware of every child instead of just the whole group." This shifting between individual children and the whole group is an important part of learning group management and group dynamics. "Withitness" (Charles, 2011) is the term used in classroom management literature for the awareness of being able to do what needs to be done. Perspective-taking developed through the reflective analyses during the workshop.

The evidence-based reflective workshop also benefited in allowing for teacher candidates to see their self-identity as a success identity (Purkey & Novak, 1993). "After the workshops, I take my role as an educator more seriously; dressing and acting like I know what I am doing. As a compliment to this; one of the Bradley students thought that I was a professor at the University during the Literacy Fiesta" (Teacher Candidate).

Honest feedback was crucial in allowing for the growth to occur. The four anchors of invitational theory (Purkey & Schmidt, 1996); optimism, respect, trust and intentionality were seen both in interactions between teacher candidates during the photograph analysis but also in their written reflections: "The problem was that no one had pointed this out before. Now that the problem is in the light, something can be done about the defect. I think that videotaping myself teaching will be a great experience. I will be my worst critic and I might over-think my defects more than there actually are, but I am looking forward to the practice" (Teacher Candidate).

This excerpt demonstrated Teacher Candidates' changed perspective on receiving professional feedback as an important tool they can employ in their own career. Internal dialogue, the courage to ponder on the quality of

interactions and self-identity became valuable tools not to be feared but to appreciate. Invitational theory (Purkey & Schmidt, 1990) emphasizes understanding things from an internal point of view --- this becomes reflective when imagining the photographer is in the mirror taking pictures of us looking at ourselves, a valuable tool for awareness in how we talk to ourselves in our professional realms. Because of a trusting atmosphere and enough time spent to learn to know each other, in terms of the Johari window (Halpern, 2009), our open selves expanded and interactions flowed more easily as the semester progressed.

## **Conclusion**

We have shared the evidence-based reflective Insight into Interactions professional development workshop with professionals across our region in conferences. Professional discussions brought up insights of how culture-bound some of our reactions and interpretations might have been (for example body language). Similar to Thomas and Seely Brown's (2011) viewpoint: "The new culture of learning," where they discuss the one person cannot create a culture but in interaction with others we become transformed. What is interesting, is the process itself and moving and developing along with the organic culture the interactions invite. This does take courage and involves trust. Besides articulate learning goals, being open and intentionally invitational we often serendipitously learn more than we had hoped for. Thomas and Seely Brown (2011) suggest that we "embrace what we don't know, come up with better questions about it, and continue asking those questions in order to learn more, both incrementally and exponentially" ( p. 38).

In our work we found self-awareness enlarging the public space of the Johari window within ourselves, and observed it in our teacher candidates as well as in discussions with the classroom teachers. Trusting the process gave unexpectedly positive results in learning and pointed to paths otherwise unseen. The serendipitous coming together of the writers allowed for perspectives to be developed that used both experiential and disciplinary experiences previously hidden in the academic context we inhabited. The collaboration among the three university professionals pleasantly surprised us as far as how beneficial it really is to work across disciplinary lines although there are other examples that show the power of working with professionals outside of our own fields (Antola Crowe, Brandes, Davison Avilés, Erickson & Hall, 2013).

Prompted by our successful experiences, Heljä continues to use the idea of picture taking, analysis and reflection in the course for teacher candidates to articulate their learning and their progress in learning to become their best professional selves. Although teacher candidates were the primary focus in this instance, this process and workshop could be useful in any field where people interact with each other. Serendipity in our emerging project was marked by the confluence of spontaneity and intentionality---using language as a professional tool. As professionals we are on our feet all the time so we have to use our



intuition and the urge and the courage to act on it. Intuition springs from our past experiences and the strength found in our professional competencies. Intuitions are more than just hunches. They are reflective practice operating within a cognitive feedback loop that is sometimes not apparent to us.

Intentionality in professional articulation reaps both a joyful sharing and a deep learning within groups of colleagues. Both students and community cultures benefit from such positive action because we reflect on how all of us, regardless of our roles in learning, become a success identity that we can use as stepping stones in our future professional growth. In preparation of professionals, colleagues are mirrors who can support, encourage and critique us. In reality, we need the capacity to self-supervise and to have an invitational inner dialogue when no-one is witnessing, not even the paparazzi.

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