

Educator as Critically Reflective Practitioner
The Virginia Commonwealth University
Conceptual Framework
April 2012

Introduction and History

After the NCATE accreditation visit in 2001, we revisited our conceptual framework, *Teacher as Decision Maker*, in order to incorporate our work with a broad range of school personnel. Together with members of the larger educational community (including P-12 classroom teachers, public school counselors and administrators, professors and deans from the School of the Arts and the College of Humanities and Sciences, alumni, and candidates) we began to read and discuss where we have been and where we wanted to go; and we realized that we could still subscribe to much of our previous thinking. We also concluded that we wanted to change the language of the conceptual framework to more accurately reflect our work with people involved with education as teachers, counselors, administrators, and policy developers.

Teacher as Decision Maker was built on the works of David Berliner and Lee Shulman, among others. The faculty and our larger educational community still agreed with the precept that candidates who make informed and reasoned decisions are more likely to be effective. We believe that informed decisions are based on knowledge of the social context of schooling, subject matter knowledge, pedagogical knowledge, knowledge about how people learn, the applications of data-driven knowledge, and knowledge of differing cultures. Then, as now, virtually all program courses and field experiences either implicitly or explicitly prepare candidates with an appropriate knowledge base on which educational decisions may be made.

However, what we had come to notice was that the logic-driven *Teacher as Decision Maker* model failed to take into account what Dewey (1933, 1938) refers to as the holistic nature of true reflection. The holistic view encompasses the objective and personalized knowledge bases as well as the influence of intuition, emotion, and even passion (Greene, 1986).

From that point, the unit collaboratively refined our conceptual framework so that it now encompasses not only decision making, but the reflective qualities we see as prerequisite for quality judgments across the spectrum of education. The ideal that guided our thinking became the metaphor of the *Educator as Critically Reflective Practitioner*.

Philosophical and Pedagogical Underpinnings of the Educator as Critically Reflective Practitioner

We believe that people come into education programs with a personalized knowledge base from their experiences in schools and leave, minimally, with an objective set of professional principles. When combined, these two forms of knowledge can assist in making informed professional judgments. Because we understand the complex nature of

schooling, we value the idea that we are not teacher trainers, but teacher educators. As such, we are less concerned with “the correct definition of procedures for teachers to follow than the development of teachers’ capacities to make complex judgments based on deep understandings of students and subjects” (Darling-Hammond, 1994, p. 5). Similarly, we support critical thinking in our work with all candidates across all of our professional school programs.

However eclectic, the research and literature underpinning our programs support the faculty’s overriding purpose: the improvement of the academic, personal, and social education of all people. Inherent in this purpose is a commitment to the deeply held conviction that all children can learn. We recognize the necessity of educating caring and competent educational leaders, teachers, and counselors who are able to sustain the viability of this belief. The diversity of our philosophical and pedagogical foundation reflects the diversity of the faculty and of the programs we offer to professional educators. Our programs find grounding in the well-established works of Bruner, Dewey, Piaget, Vygotsky, and others and in the work of more recent scholars such as Berliner, Darling-Hammond, Fullan, Griffith, Hargreaves, Ladson-Billings, Lambert, Knapp, Noddings, Noguera, Oakes and Lipton, Ravitch, Sergiovanni, Shulman, Tozer, Zeichner and Liston. .

Pedagogically, we believe it is important to create environments that support active learning. Though methods may vary both within and among classes from lecture, to cooperative learning, to case-based learning, to a Socratic interaction, to mock lessons, to technological demonstration, efforts are made to establish problem-based, contextual, real-life learning. Several field experiences are linked to pre-service programs and programs for in-service candidates to incorporate on-site projects. The intent is to provide experiences for the conscious construction of knowledge in meaningful contexts.

Critical Reflection

“The function of reflection is to make meaning: to formulate the ‘relationships and continuities’ (Dewey, 1933, 1938) among elements of an experience, between that experience and other experiences, between that experience and the knowledge that one carries, and between that knowledge and the knowledge produced by thinkers other than oneself” (Rogers, 2002, p. 848).

Critical reflection examines one’s work in education with scrutiny and takes into account the values, assumptions and beliefs that influence how problems and solutions are framed (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Furthermore, critical reflection looks to the consequences of decisions for the long term (Dewey, 1933), is aware of situational context, and advocates for democratic values in schools (Oakes & Lipton, 1999). The complexities of working with students are such that unless we support the development of critical reflection, life long learning and professional growth will suffer. We recognize that our candidates will generate a wealth of knowledge from their own professional experiences and believe that a habit of critical reflection may serve them more than any other single trait.

The term “Reflective Practitioner” may be used interchangeably with the notion of critical reflection in VCU documents. Since the last NCATE review, we have built a culture of critical reflection among faculty and students by incorporating reflective processes into our work. These processes create a feedback loop that includes the analysis of a problem, the formation of a plan of action, the action itself, and a reflection on the results of that action. We recognize that valuable reflection may be focused on planning the next steps, or while interacting with students, whether as their teachers, counselors, or administrators (See Schon, 1983; Griffith & Frieden, 2000).

Zeichner and Liston (1996) delineate five dimensions of reflection. **Generic Reflection** as a dimension notes that all thinking about our work with students is vital. The **Academic Reflection** tradition is primarily concerned with issues of curriculum content and instruction. The **Social Efficiency Reflection** emphasis is on improving instruction through the application of research based models. The **Developmentalist Reflection** strand highlights knowledge of the students’ readiness, abilities, interests, and cultural and linguistic backgrounds. Issues of equity, social justice and democracy are the focus of reflection in the **Social Reconstructionist Reflection** dimension. Finally, as a sixth type, we have devised the category of **Data-Driven Reflection**, which takes into account various sources of information related to student, school, and district assessments.

Whatever the focus, when reflection is cognizant of taking the perspective of another, is rigorously involved in reframing issues from several vantage points, and strives to inform situations holistically, we consider it to be critical reflection.

We recognize that one’s own values, assumptions, and beliefs color judgments, for better or worse. We concur with Rogers (2002) in underscoring that “reflection that is guided by wholeheartedness, directness, open-mindedness, and responsibility, though more difficult, stands a much better chance of broadening one’s field of knowledge and awareness” (p. 858).

Building on the work of Dewey’s holistic reflection (1933), Schon’s reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action (1983), and Zeichner and Liston’s writing on teachers’ theory and practice (1996), **Critical Reflection** emerges as the ideal for effective reflection, whatever the educator’s analytical framework.

Coherence

The coherence of the principles set forth in the Conceptual Framework was assured through several processes. First, coherence was sought through the involvement of all faculty and representatives from the broader educational community in the drafting of the document. Secondly, coherence was strengthened by asking faculty across the unit to reflect specifically about the Outcomes and Goals section in relation to course syllabi and national SPA principles. Third, Program Groups were asked to discuss how the Conceptual Framework was aligned with and actualized within their programs. The Shared Vision statement was collaboratively constructed by the faculty with the Conceptual Framework in mind. On a unit level, we changed the unit’s leadership committee from the Teacher Education Coordinating Council to the Professional

Education Coordinating Council and thereby assured attention to all levels of professional educators. Finally, rubrics were designed for Practica, Clinical Evaluations, Lesson Plans, and Dispositions that were based on a combination of the outcomes and goals of the Conceptual Framework, the School of Education Shared Vision statement, SPA Standards, and Program objectives.

The Shared Vision

Led by a committee of faculty, we then revisited the School of Education Mission Statement. The following statement was officially adopted in 2005 and is clearly aligned with our Conceptual Framework.

School of Education Values Statement

The Virginia Commonwealth University School of Education is dedicated to the preparation of professional educators and clinicians, the ideals of academic scholarship, and the worthiness of service. Through our work in these areas, we recognize our responsibilities to students, university colleagues, the community at large, and professional organizations. While all of us share common values, the statements below intentionally allow for a variety of interpretations that may be influenced by our assignments, our experiences, and other philosophical principles within programs and across the School of Education.

We demonstrate our belief in the value of **high quality programs** by:

- Attracting high quality students;
- Being responsive to the external standards of accrediting and professional organizations;
- Providing meaningful clinical placements;
- Continually evaluating, assessing, and improving programs and services.

We demonstrate our belief in the value of **high quality teaching** by:

- Creating an environment that supports student success;
- Demonstrating a variety of effective teaching strategies, including technology integration, universal design for learning, and student-centered instruction;
- Fostering curriculum development that ensures familiarity with best practice across all disciplines.

We demonstrate our belief in the value of **diversity** by:

- Preparing students to work in culturally and linguistically diverse settings;
- Accommodating students with special learning needs;
- Promoting a diverse student and faculty community;
- Supporting intellectual curiosity;
- Modeling and promoting social justice.

We demonstrate our belief in the value of **high quality scholarship, and, in particular, the value of a research culture** by:

- Conducting relevant, high quality research that is responsive to the metropolitan community and contributes to the disciplines;
- Encouraging collaborative research with colleagues, practitioners, and students;
- Supporting the creation, interpretation and dissemination of knowledge;

- Integrating current research into teaching.

We demonstrate our belief in the value of **collaboration and partnerships** by:

- Serving as a resource for the development of policy, curriculum, instructional practice, and professional standards;
- Providing leadership and professional outreach to organizations, the university, and the community at large;
- Maintaining partnerships and shared responsibility for professional preparation.

We demonstrate our belief in the value of **critical reflection** by:

- Observing ethical practice and professional honesty;
- Encouraging students to exhibit dispositions consistent with accepted professional practice;
- Fostering a trusting, safe community of scholars;
- Engaging in ongoing professional development;
- Examining professional practices.

Professional Commitments, Dispositions, and Outcomes

In alignment with our unit, School, and department missions and values, programs endeavor to enhance candidates' understanding of and commitment to the concepts of social justice and social responsibility in ways that support democratic ideals and enhance the human condition. To this end, we are openly committed to valuing diversity, collaboration, dialogue, and equity. Consequently, we search for ways to stay abreast of and engage in cutting edge scholarship that informs these philosophies and assist in guiding their practical application.

Candidates are expected to be able to utilize technology with students in whatever ways are appropriate to their roles. As evidenced in class syllabi, most coursework within programs has technological components or assignments and several classes are offered in part or wholly on line. Technology is also viewed as an important tool in ensuring the support of diverse student learning and as a mechanism for motivating learning for all students.

The importance of attending to diversity begins early in foundations courses and continues throughout programs. We recognize ethnicity, race, students with disabilities, linguistically diverse students, gifted students, learning styles, multiple intelligences, gender, and socioeconomic class as major issues of diversity in education (Tozer, et al, 2002; Hargreaves, 2003).

Programs attempt to include a variety of school contexts in field experiences. Applications of the ideals of universal design that support the development of all learners across all school contexts are encouraged. Again, as evidenced by class syllabi, several courses have specific requirements related to attending to diverse students' backgrounds and learning needs.

Overview of Professional Outcomes, Standards, and Goals

The following professional outcomes are expectations for all candidates, though the degrees to which they attend to some of them may differ depending on the focus of their work with students. Program reports discern these differences of degree in their assessment strategies and rubrics.

I. Candidates demonstrate content knowledge in their disciplines by

1. (Skills) Explaining major concepts and structures of inquiry of the disciplines and fields of study.
2. (Knowledge) Recognizing state and national content standards and/or professional standards appropriate to their roles.
3. (Dispositions) Exhibiting a commitment to professional standards associated with their areas of expertise.

II. Candidates demonstrate pedagogical content knowledge by

1. (Skills) Creating and conducting lessons that align goals, objectives, instruction, and assessment and /or creating positive learning environments that are responsive to state and national content standards, student needs, and best practice research.
2. (Knowledge) Using multiple assessments to inform their work and enhance student learning; understanding the appropriate use of information garnered from various assessments.
3. (Skills) Creating positive and safe learning environments, including organizing for effective classroom instruction and classroom management; linking theory to practice.
4. (Skills) Supporting student motivation to learn and student efficacy through selecting meaningful and developmentally appropriate materials and methodology and experiences.
5. (Dispositions) Committing to informing themselves about students to create supportive learning environments that encourage the academic, social, and personal growth of all students.

III. Candidates demonstrate commitment to diversity by

1. (Knowledge) Analyzing student abilities and disabilities, readiness, interests, cultural and linguistic backgrounds.
2. (Skills) Utilizing the principles of universal design for learning to enhance instruction for all learners, including the use of technology.
3. (Dispositions) Recognizing the importance of the social context of schooling.
4. (Dispositions) Collaborating with parents and other relevant parties.
5. (Dispositions) Holding realistically high expectations for all students.

IV. Candidates demonstrate critical reflection by

1. (Skills) Utilizing critical thinking in framing and solving educational problems.
2. (Dispositions) Taking other perspectives into account.
3. (Dispositions) Committing to engage in reflective practice.
4. (Dispositions) Adhering to a professional code of ethics in decision-making.

Assessment

Broadly, the assessments that relate directly to the Conceptual Framework are evidenced throughout the various programs. For example, each program has admission requirements specific to each field of study and generic admission requirements into Graduate School. Programs have aligned assessments with NCATE and SPA standards as well as other state and national standards. The entire school of education has adopted rGrade, an online data collection and management tool, for our SPA aligned assessments. Instructors load SPA aligned rubrics onto rGrade and use it to record candidate scores on key assessments. This allows us to track candidate growth in multifaceted ways, and provides data for the reflective process of program improvement. The Assessment System section provides charts that address assessment gates for the unit and specific programs. Below is a statement of various methods we utilize to develop a habit of Critical Reflection throughout our courses. (See Chart 1, pp. 17-18, for alignment of conceptual framework standards with key assessments. Also see Conceptual Framework exhibits for a chart aligning rubric items with the Conceptual Framework.)

Incorporating Critical Reflection into University Classes

We believe Critical Reflection is being developed, supported, examined, and/or practiced whenever candidates are asked to:

1. Reflect on their experiences with learners utilizing an Academic, Social Efficiency, Developmentalist, Data-Driven, and/or Social Reconstructionist emphasis.
2. Take the perspective of another or analyze multiple perspectives while examining educational issues.
3. Analyze case studies and evaluate in-case decisions regarding curricula, instruction, classroom management, instructional leadership, and/or administrative leadership, including the social organization of schools.
4. Examine, judge, analyze, assess, defend, or evaluate topics, issues, or procedures that frame problems in educational contexts.
5. Practice constructivist views of teaching and learning by being attentive to active student engagement.
6. Articulate their own values, assumptions, and beliefs about teaching and learning, their students, their subject matter, and the nature of schooling.
7. Advocate for students.
8. Broaden their work with parents, the community, and educational policy arenas.

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