



Editorial: Teaching as Inquiry—Mandated requirement or critical disposition?

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Years after Argyris and Schön (1974) popularised the idea of reflective practice among practitioners, and even more years after Dewey talked of reflection as the “*persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it*” (1910, p. 6, original emphasis), the idea of practitioner reflection is once more in the foreground of professional practice. Here in New Zealand, in the form of ‘Teaching as Inquiry’.

When Teaching as Inquiry (TAI) appeared in *The New Zealand Curriculum* (Ministry of Education, 2007) it appeared to be a very exciting development. At last teachers would be at the same time motivated to inquire into educational issues, sanctioned in that inquiry, and be recognised as having inquiring, active, intellectual minds which were capable of critique and development with regard to their own work, their school, the environments from which their students came, and the social, political and economic contexts in which their jobs were constructed.

In reality, TAI is a cyclic model (Ministry of Education, 2007, p. 35), consisting of three inquiring questions: What is important (and therefore worth spending time on), given where my students are at? (‘focusing inquiry’); What strategies (evidence-based) are most likely to help my students learn this? (‘teaching inquiry’); What happened as a result of the teaching, and what are the implications for future teaching? (‘learning inquiry’) (p. 35). Two major elements are missing here: critical reflection on structure and policy; and, even more significantly, the ethical implications embodied in Dewey’s notion of reflection or inquiry.

Thus it appears that TAI has been conceived very narrowly as a project, an additional task for teachers, which focuses their attention on an aspect of their own classroom work, with a view to ‘improved outcomes’, rather than as an aspect of their being, a disposition to inquire, a critical frame of mind. Jenny Vermunt (this issue) quotes a relevant extract: “The primary purpose of teaching as inquiry is to improve outcomes for students through purposeful assessment, planned action, strategic teaching and focused review. (Ministry of Education, 2011, p.1).

This approach to practitioner reflection may have something to do with the penetration of education by notions of ‘evidence-led practice’, which, as Biesta (2007) has shown, is derived from a medical model. Clearly, the New Zealand Ministry of Education, motivated by such external factors as PISA test scores, and the perpetual mantra of ‘one in five’, will seek, by whatever means, the ‘silver bullet’ to raise student achievement, forcing teachers to turn in on themselves: to query their own performance as the source and cause of poor performance on standardised tests, and to absolve or ignore wider contextual

influences. Ken Zeichner's critique of Teacher Reflection is equally appropriate to Teaching as Inquiry:

Here the question is, how well does my practice conform to what someone wants me to be doing? Sometimes the creative intelligence of the teacher is permitted to intervene to determine the situational appropriateness of employing particular teaching strategies and materials, but often it is not. (Zeichner 2008)

We would like to suggest a teacher's comment on the TAI report card: 'Good start. Could do better'. We would wish too that any critique emerging from a 'teaching as inquiry' inquiry is not directed at teachers, but at the superstructure within which they work. But that may be wishful thinking. So, as editors, we invited contributions on this theme of teaching as inquiry, and have an interesting mix of contributions, including two, invited op-ed pieces, from Michael Peters (Waikato University) and Mary Hill (University of Auckland).

This Special Issue includes two worked examples of TAI. The first, an editorially reviewed contribution, is a 'teaching as inquiry' capstone project, completed by recent AUT Master of Teaching and Learning student, Christine Orr. This contribution demonstrates how the cyclic model can be put into practice. In her exemplar, Orr, working with a class of New Entrant children at her AUT partnership school, has sought to examine whether a particular intervention will not only enhance the engagement levels of four identified 'priority learners', but will increase the scientific capabilities of the entire class. It is an admirable piece of work, and one can only hope that teachers will be able to follow this kind of dedication. Experience suggests, however, that teachers, under various dimensions of the accountability regime operating in the schooling sector today, will struggle to find time to implement such thorough inquiries.

The second, a peer reviewed article by Cop and Hatfield, takes a slightly different approach to that of Orr, by choosing to concentrate on only one of the three TAI questions, namely the ('focusing inquiry'): 'what is important (and therefore worth spending time on), given where my students are at?' As university practitioners they seek to apply this model to their own practice in making sense of the errors they find University of Otago Health Science students making in English diagnostic testing.

Readers may wish to place Orr's contribution against the background fleshed out by Vermunt, who reflects on the journeys of two Master of Teaching and Learning students graduate students. In her research, she has explored how the personal and professional values of these student teachers influence their perceptions of the Teaching as Inquiry framework. What she finds is that deep-seated beliefs and values are an essential element in reflective inquiry, but perhaps, as hinted by Dewey, if these beliefs do not come in for interrogation, then, arguably, we suggest, no number of prettily-presented models of reflection will actually *lead to* reflection.

We argue that the flaw—not highlighted by these contributions—is the narrow emphasis on individual classroom practice, or on what Mary Hill highlights, namely inquiry as a requirement, rather than a stance. A clue to challenging this narrowness may be the significance of *collaborative* reflection,

and this is central to the article by Bills, Rogers and Giles. Rather than having individual teachers focus narrowly on what is going on in their private classroom domains, perhaps the answer may lie in school-wide exercises in inquiry, as that reported on by these authors. The danger, however, still lies in the narrowing effects of a culture of performativity and adherence to standards, as they suggest.

Indeed, as one of our invited opinion writers for this issue, Michael Peters states, practitioner reflection has “become bureaucratised and managerialised” under neoliberalism.

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