

Book Reviews

Reflecting on leadership in language education (a review)

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This is a very interesting book which covers and promotes the role of reflective practice or, as some call it, reflexivity, in language teaching and leadership in education. Reflective practice involves devoting time to thinking about your work, examining what has gone well and what could have gone better and deciding how you can improve your performance.

The editor and organiser of the book is Andy Curtis, Professor of Graduate Education at Anaheim University in the USA and one-time President of the TESOL international organisation. The book is part of a series on reflective practice with Thomas Farrell of Brock University as series editor.

The book is organised into four parts with an introduction and conclusion by Andy Curtis. The topics of the four parts are *Learning from the life stories of others*, *The multiplicity of meanings of reflective practice*, *The challenges of doing reflective practice* and *Reflecting on leadership challenges in language education*.

Aware of the danger of what he describes as 'exclusionary academic language' which often fails to communicate with practising teachers, Andy Curtis adopts a policy of narrative disclosure, which he defines as giving examples from his life to illustrate the points he is making. To do this he enlists the services of a group of leaders in language education and gets them to give their views on the four topics on reflective prac-

tice described above. The book asks what effective leadership in language education involves and focuses on the reflection of ten reflective teacher leaders. The ten leaders in language education are leaders in class, in school and in teaching organisations.

Each chapter begins with a brief introduction to the topic under discussion by Andy Curtis followed by the contributions of the ten contributors (including Andy himself) reflecting on their experience and their ideas. Each chapter concludes with references and a brief contributor biography. Apart from Andy Curtis himself, the contributors to the book are Okon Effiong, Christel Broady, Leo Mercado, Marjorie Rosenberg, Rosemary Orlando, Rosa Aronson, Deborah Healey, Neal Anderson and Kathleen Bailey. An interesting and useful practical activity is included in the *Reflective Breaks* which punctuate the interviews and invite the readers to reflect on their own knowledge, experiences and ideas regarding RP (reflective practice) and LiLE (Leadership in Language Education). There are 62 Reflective Breaks, offering excellent guidelines for a teacher training course in reflective practice, not just about leadership but about the practice itself and how to manage your life and career as a teacher of languages.

So, what do we learn? In Chapter 1, *Learning from the Life Stories of Others*, Andy Curtis sums up the ideas of his interviewees as follows: (1) it is never too early

for a teacher to start thinking about a leadership role – even if they think they will never achieve it; (2) it is never too late to start your leadership journey; (3) build resilience, determination and perseverance, all essential leadership qualities; (4) leaders in language education often follow different paths to their peers, and this may make the journey more difficult but also more rewarding; (5) diversity is a strength but with it also comes the challenge of understanding ourselves and the world around us.

Andy Curtis also mentions Accelerated Language Learning, which he says, ‘*May be more myth than method*’, and warns users of accelerated language learning to, ‘*beware of burnout*’.

Kathleen Bailey, another former president of TESOL, reflected interestingly on some of the key skills she had learned. The first was interpersonal skills, the second was management and leadership skills, the third was professional communication skills, and the fourth was time management. All valuable lessons for teachers, trainers and leaders in education.

In the Reflective Breaks at the end of Chapter 1 readers are asked to write a no more than one-page summary of where they are in their professional lives, how they got to this point and where they would like to be in the future. In another reflective break they are asked to say what images, metaphors or analogies would describe their journeys as language teachers. So, Reflective Breaks allow teachers to reflect on their progress and performance but also encourages them to use their creativity and imagination in expressing their thoughts.

Chapter 2 explores the meaning of reflective practice and compares it with two other important management disciplines that have come into prominence in recent years – mindfulness and metacognition. Mindfulness is being in the present, a practice that derives from Buddhist philosophy, but which was popularised internationally by Jon Kabat-Zinn. Metacognition is the understanding of your own thought processes and patterns and using that knowledge to solve problems. Summarising the views of the contributors to the topic of the definition of reflective practice Curtis says: (1) reflective practice means different things to different people so it is essential to be clear about what it means for you; (2) to be effective it means the conscious setting aside of time for reflection; (3) it is not a quick or easy solution but it has important results both for the way we teach and in our career development; (4) think of reflective practice in relation to metacognition and mindfulness,

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as it will help you become a more conscious and self-aware learner, teacher and leader; (5) data gathering of all kinds is useful in reflective practice; (6) think of reflective practice as a deliberate stepping back so we see both the big picture and the detail at the same time so that we can learn lessons from it.

In response to the third topic, the challenges of doing reflective practice, Curtis summarises the responses of his contributors like this: (1) he re-emphasises the point about devoting dedicated time to reflective practice; (2) he suggests reading not just research in language education but also in other areas to gain knowledge; (3) on data collection he stresses the importance of getting feedback from the classroom, using audio and videos, journal entries and teaching portfolios; (4) he also stresses the value of receptive practice mentors; (5) next, he emphasises the importance of learning to set reflective practice goals; and finally (6) to balance the moment to moment interactions in the classroom with the ‘big picture’, long terms aims.

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In the final chapter, Curtis recaps the lessons learned by the contributors and makes a number of concluding remarks. First, language education needs to be much more aware of the importance of reflective practice in improving the quality of academic leaders in language education. Secondly, there tends to be a 'silo effect' separating the study of reflexive practice from academic studies of applied languages and teaching methodology. This needs to be overcome. Thirdly, he stresses the need for better training in management skills of leaders in language education and finally, he notes the huge impact on reflective impact of the introduction of new technologies.

Reflective practice is already an important concept in education and in management and is likely to increase in importance as an essential skill and attitude of mind for teachers, trainers and leaders in language education. This addition to Equinox Publishing's expanding list of studies of the role of reflective practice in language education is important for researchers and for teachers in administrative and leading teaching and teacher training roles. As well as its extensive use of reference its dynamic quality comes from the actual reflections of leaders in language education about their lives, their teaching and their working in running teaching organisations.

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