

February 2011  
Volume 1 - Issue 2

# A Mentor’s Musings on Reflective Practice

By Lynne Fedorcha, IU 8 PIIC Mentor

## Professional Development Dates:

May 4-6, 2011  
Radisson Penn Harris Hotel  
Camp Hill, PA

July 25-27, 2011  
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*Instructional coaches provide professional development for teachers and school leaders focused on refining classroom practices, increasing student engagement, and improving student achievement.*

Much of my work with coaches is rooted in reflective practice. Before our meetings, I consider the coaches and their routines. I check my notes from previous meetings and look for patterns of practice. Our meetings begin with an external reflection, helping us recall what we’ve done, rethink our actions, revise our thinking for the next time, and plan our important next steps. As coach and mentor reflect together, concerns are shared, successes are celebrated, and actions are analyzed.

When I met with Dennine, a middle school instructional coach from the East Penn School District, she asked me to observe a “Before-Meeting” with Lisa, a sixth grade teacher who wanted coaching support with literature circles. Lisa and Dennine collaborated about implementing literature circles. Dennine wanted to ensure that as a coach, she was providing a balance between direction and teacher autonomy. I scripted the meeting and later we reviewed the script and reflected on Dennine’s questions. Our reflection about Dennine’s questioning techniques and her guidance to this seasoned teacher reassured Dennine that she achieved her goal. The script revealed that the planning was definitely collaborative and the ensuing project was extremely successful. How important it is for coaches to reflect upon these situations, not only to gain insight into their work but also to gain support that enhances the coach’s professional practice!

*“Through reflection, we are reminded that our goal is to work towards improved student achievement and increased student engagement.”*

Not all reflections with coaches begin with the mentor’s observation of a teacher/coach planning meeting. Listening is also quite important and, occasionally, a coach needs to think aloud with the mentor as s/he reflects on a current situation. I recall listening as a coach lamented about an unexpected turn at one of her workshops. In the coach’s effort to engage participants in a pair-share and whole group share-out, focused conversations quickly dissolved into contractual issues. Although we could argue that this flies in the face of professionalism, this reality cannot be ignored. The coach was devastated and

admitted that she struggled to return the group to topic. The workshop ended earlier than planned and the coach felt like a failure. As I listened to her account of this situation, I asked, “At what part of the pair-share and share-out experience do

you think the conversation lost focus?” Upon reflection, she was able to recognize the importance of pacing during a workshop so that focused discussion time stays focused.

Because reflections are external as well as internal, I do not always reflect with my coaches. PIIC provides opportunities for mentors to reflect with each other as well as with the executive director. These occasions help us deepen our practice through shared experiences and our commitment to our PIIC model of coaching. Through reflection, we are reminded that our goal is to work towards improved student achievement, increased student engagement, and changes in instructional practices.



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## Letter from PIIC's Executive Director

In today's information-rich, incredibly fast-paced society, we are able to retrieve all kinds of data with a touch of a button. Sometimes, the information comes so quickly that we do not take time to think about our thinking or to process how our actions are the direct results of our thoughts. We are living in a world that supports and sustains immediate feedback with little or no time allowed or encouraged for a simple, "Let me think about this" before the email is sent or the observation form is given to the teacher.

As learners, both teachers and students use a wide array of critical thinking skills and strategies to help make decisions that yield positive outcomes. However, thinking does not stop there. The learner must also analyze and make judgments about the thinking that prompted the actions. Dewey (1933) suggests *"...reflective thinking is an active, persistent, and careful consideration of a belief or supposed form of knowledge, of the grounds that support that knowledge, and the further conclusions to which that knowledge leads. Learners are aware of and control their learning by actively participating in reflective thinking – assessing what they know, what they*

*need to know, and how they bridge that gap – during learning situations."*

Reflection stimulates thinking and acting. We need students to be more aware of *how* they think and *if* their thinking generates successful results. We need them to make their thinking visible and explainable. They, however, cannot do this alone. Teachers and teacher leaders need to model the practice and help students understand their own thinking. They need to facilitate the process where students identify effective learning strategies and styles that meet their learning needs.

Teachers can provide a variety of activities that encourages reflective thinking. They can encourage students to engage in conversations with partners and listen to different points of view; they can provide appropriate wait-time for students to reflect when responding to questions and can arrange for small group discussions and presentations where students must support and provide evidence of their thinking. Classroom "I-Search" topics offer students opportunities to pursue their own interests and share their knowledge with their peers; and lastly, teachers can provide many opportunities for reflective

journaling so students can record their thoughts in a no-risk environment. Reflective thinking is most important in activating learning during challenging problem-solving situations; it provides students with an opportunity to step back and think about how they actually solve problems and how a specific set of problem solving strategies is appropriate for attaining their goal. As teachers and teacher leaders help students become metacognitive, they, too, must think about their own practices and recognize what contributes to a healthy, conducive environment for learning. They must engage in social learning, focus on one-on-one support with their coaches, and take time to become reflective practitioners. They must take time to think about the various approaches to student learning and consider why some strategies work better than others. They must take time for analysis, interpretation, refinement, and revision on what classroom instructional practices are beneficial to all learners.

Sincerely,



Ellen B. Eisenberg

## The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action

Book Review By Elizabeth (Tiz) Powers, Mid-Atlantic Comprehensive Center

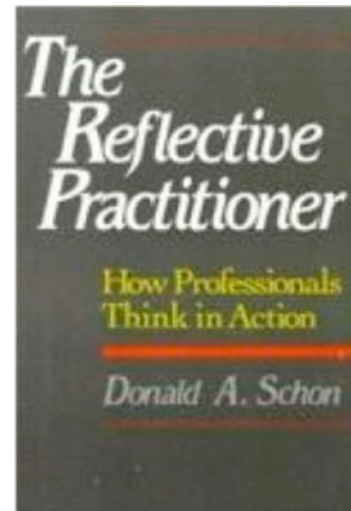
In learning more about reflective practices, I encountered the work of Donald Schon, an expert on reflective professional learning, and became intrigued by his notion of reflection –in-action and reflection-on-action. Schon's *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action* made me think that insightful educators engaged in both kinds of reflection, and that each kind of reflection provided different insights into educational practice. I interpreted "reflection-in-action" as allowing educators to more effectively deliver the information they intend to share with their audiences – as they deliver it. Reflecting on participants' non-verbal or verbal reactions to the information being presented allows an educator to adjust

***"In 'reflection-on-action' we can ask ourselves not only about the quality of our instructional plans, but also the effectiveness of the choices we made as we implemented our plans."***

the style, pacing, or tone of the presentation to allow more participants to access the knowledge. This is the kind of reflection we emphasize with new teachers so that their instructional plans mesh more closely with their students' needs. I interpreted "reflection-on-action" as the type of reflection that we do after teaching. We are still considering the responses of our audience, but we now have the time and mental space to think about our instructional plans, our explicit and implicit goals and the match between what we envisioned and what actually happened. In "reflection-on-action" we can ask ourselves not only about the quality of our instructional plans, but also about the effectiveness of the choices we made as we implemented our plans.

*Continued on page 3, Reflective*

Based on personal experiences, veteran teachers reflected-in-action every time they planned lessons or taught students, and often did their reflection-in-action unconsciously. I wondered, however, how much opportunity teachers had to reflect-on-action. In providing training and support to instructional coaches, I highlight both kinds of reflection and provide experiences for coaches to be supported in reflecting on their coaching actions. I want to improve the quality of their coaching, and to help them provide reflection-on-action experiences for their teachers. When I work with coaches, I ask them to share examples of their coaching work, along with their own reflection on this work, and a focus question for responses from their coach colleagues. The responses coaches receive from their colleagues along with the thought they put into asking their focus question are two processes that help coaches in their “reflection-on-action.” Clearly Schon’s work documents the value and power of reflective practice.



*“A practitioner’s reflection-in-action may not be very rapid. It is bounded by the ‘action-present,’ the zone of time in which action can still make a difference to the situation.”*  
*-The Reflective Practitioner*

## The Principal: An Instructional Leader and Collaborator

By Charles Territo, PIIC Educational Consultant

There is a plethora of research confirming the principal’s critical role in developing a school where students learn and grow. And, although the principal is often called the instructional leader in a building, there are several others who contribute to the myriad successes in schools.

Our experience in both the Pennsylvania High School Coaching Initiative (PAHSCI) and the Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching (PIIC) has demonstrated that it is crucial for the principal to give legitimacy to the role of instructional coach if the Before, During, and After (B, D, A) cycle of coaching is implemented effectively. Teachers must see the coach as an integral part of the organization with expertise to share, and the principal is in the position to provide that understanding. Additionally, the principal’s role in supporting one-on-one work with teachers, using evidence-based literacy strategies, advocating reflection and non-evaluative practices, and collecting and analyzing student data are all critical components for school improvement. The expectation that students are actively involved members in every classroom is supported by a collaborative effort

of the teachers, administrators, students, coaches, and mentors.

Often the language we use to describe an idea shapes the way we conceptualize the issue. For me, the title “the instructional leader” suggests that leadership is assigned to a role in the organization and that the responsibility is posited in one office. Anyone who has spent time in a comprehensive high school knows that it is a highly

***“Instructional coaching supported by an effective principal helps build teacher capacity and ensures growth on several different levels.”***

complex organization requiring expertise in many different areas. No one person, not even one person and several assistants, can provide all of the leadership necessary to make that organization move forward. I prefer to think of leadership as a function necessary in an effective school. The principal may perform this function, but the ninth grade art teacher who is willing to take a risk with a new idea can also perform it. Everyone in the school has the capacity to lead in some way. It is the principal’s responsibility

to encourage and enable each person to reach his/her full potential and to develop leadership skills in all teachers. Instructional coaching supported by an effective principal helps build teacher capacity and ensures growth on several different levels.

PIIC has designed a process to create a formal teacher leader role called “Instructional Coach.” The coach gives a voice to the teachers in a variety of activities and decisions that are made in and about the school. Professional development, instruction, assessment, and data analysis are the obvious issues that the coach can support both directly and indirectly. The truly effective principal develops and nurtures the leadership potential in every staff member. That building leader coaxes the leadership abilities out of each teacher and finds opportunities to practice those skills. The outstanding principal supports the individual through the process, ensuring that it is a successful experience. Each leadership experience builds on the success of its predecessor. This is a perfect training ground for the next generation of school administrators and frequently provides the experience for instructional coaches to pursue their next level of leadership growth.

## How Sweet It Is...

By Joy Lhota, Title I Reading Specialist, Centre Elementary, Clearfield Area School District

Few things are sweeter than the attainment of a set professional goal. (Except, of course, if you are talking about chocolate!) For my district, the “sweet” professional goal we attained is that we are now involved in the Pennsylvania Institute for Instructional Coaching (PIIC).

I first heard of PIIC at the 2010 Improving Schools Conference in Pittsburgh. I resolved while attending a session entitled “The Impact of Instructional Coaching On Effectiveness of Secondary Instruction and on High School Student Achievement” that I’d take any steps I could to put Clearfield on the PIIC map. I wondered how to bring the advantages of this model of instructional coaching, supported by mentoring to my district. I drafted an email to our high school principal, described PIIC in a report I gave to my Title I (elementary) colleagues, and provided contact information for Ellen Eisenberg, Executive Director of PIIC. Having a collaborative, reflective, non-evaluative support system for classroom secondary teachers was not only demonstrated to have positive impact on student learning in this session, it rang true to my experiences in thirty plus years of teaching, a portion of which has been in secondary classrooms.

In March, still motivated by this vision of continuous school improvement, I saw an internal posting for a temporary assignment for which I applied, was accepted, and became our district’s EETT/CFF coach from March 17, 2010 to January 17, 2011. The posted job qualifications and I were a very good match. However, I wondered what was in store for me. It required leaving my current teaching position, putting my young struggling readers in the care of a substitute, sharpening my technology skills and spending my days in our middle and high school. PIIC responded quickly and I found myself invited into a community of learners.

The journey has been break neck speed and full of discoveries such as the alignment of common goals and structures of Classrooms of the Future and the PIIC four quadrants. At Boot camp, as well as at PIIC PD events, participants are immersed in the professional experiences

that support and promote effective instructional coaching. Our classrooms need to provide our students what we experienced ourselves as learners - engaging, collaborative, and focused on authentic learning activities. CFF and PIIC have welcome me into an amazing network of professionals who have provided immediate wisdom and action to help me navigate my role as an instructional coach. In both settings, the energy for improving so that others may improve is infectious and sustaining.

***“Our classrooms need to provide our students what we experienced ourselves as learners - engaging, collaborative, and focused on authentic learning activities.”***

I have since returned to the classroom. My struggling elementary readers have welcomed me back and I enjoy them, too. I have an enhanced sense of the urgency in their journey as

they prepare for their lives in our changing world economy. The coaching initiatives continue to support their present and future teachers – a wonderful recognition that teaching is far too important a job to do in isolation. I feel assured that since many of their future teachers and I have just completed our district’s first Penn Literacy Network (PLN) course, our students will benefit. Thank you, PIIC.

### Tom Sebastian’s Recipe for Implementing Effective Summative Assessments:

#### Ingredients:

- One class of highly valued students
- One well conceived curriculum aligned with standards
  - Several focused, measurable goals
- A ton of varied research-based instructional strategies
  - Lots of authentic student engagement
  - An array of formative assessment tools
- Frequent opportunities for student self correction

Place students in a classroom and add one student-based teacher. Introduce goals, stir in authentic instruction, flavor with activities and engagement, add co-construction yeast, check for understanding, remediate flavor to suit taste, and add preservatives.

**Serves:** All you can eat buffet

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