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Taking the Long View by Focusing on Description: Examining Bias, Agency, and the Messy Parts of Teaching

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Abstract

Many times, teaching is viewed only in terms of the end product: what a lesson produces in terms of student learning. This all-or-nothing view ignores the many complicated components of teaching. Consider how this idea of teaching as a singular product is communicated. Some common sayings about teachers are: "Teachers are born, not made" or "Those who can, do. Those who can't, teach." These sayings and the ideologies behind them suggest that good teaching is an inborn trait or singular action: you've either got it or you don't. But what if teaching were viewed as a layered process like archaeology or an exploded diagram? Such perspectives would no doubt help learners recognize that teaching is a complex, nuanced process that is situated within our own lived histories and embodied experiences.

Disciplines

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Comments

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Chapter 5

Taking the Long View by Focusing on Description: Examining Bias, Agency, and the Messy Parts of Teaching



<https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/5/5c/Double-alaskan-rainbow.jpg/400px-Double-alaskan-rainbow.jpg>

It is hard to imagine that once a teacher has seen the stunning array of colors present in students' learning he or she would turn back to the monochromatic world of teaching as the delivery of a product. Teachers involved in ... reflective development discover that life in the classroom cannot be scripted. It is therefore harder, but ... full of passion and breathtaking color. (Rodgers, 2002b, p. 251)

Stop and Think

1. Look at Figure 5.1 below. How comfortable are you reading these images? What influenced your level of comfort with reading these images?
2. Have you ever taken something complex apart and tried to understand it? How successful were you in understanding the individual parts of the item and how they worked? What helped or hindered your ability to understand?

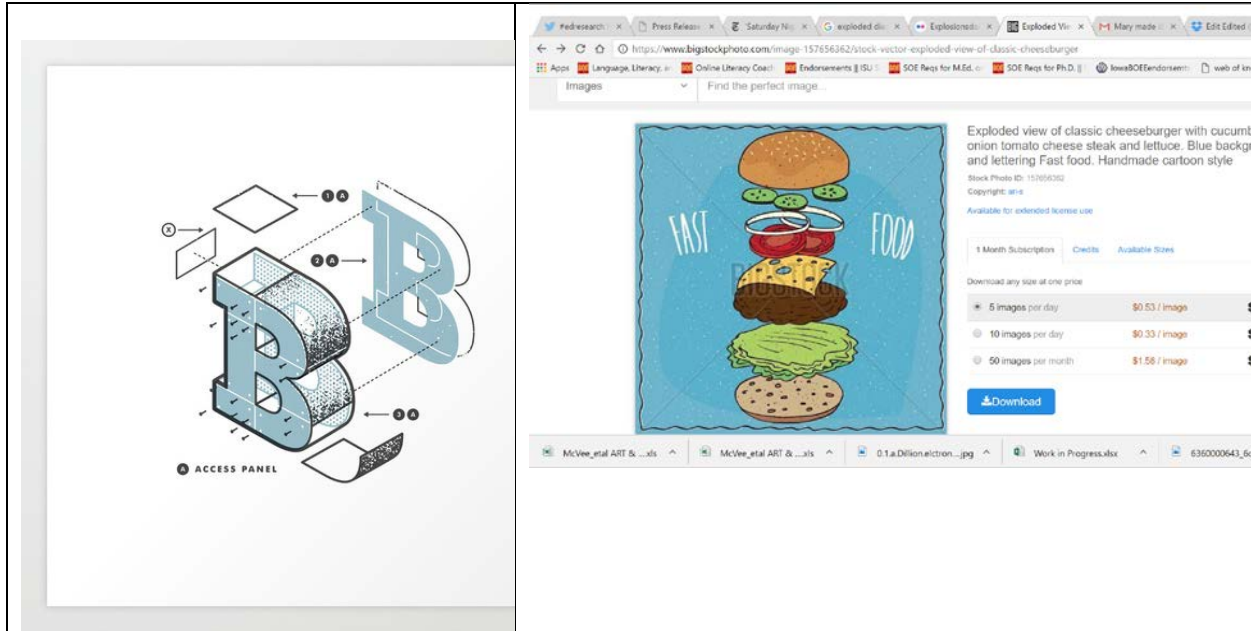


Figure 5.1. Figure 5.1. Matt Stevens “The Exploded Alphabet”https://society6.com/product/the-exploded-alphabet--b_print#s6-850253p4a1v45

Exploded view of classic cheeseburger. Bigstock Stock Photo ID: 157656362



The drawings presented in Figure 5.1 are often referred to as “exploded view drawings” and these are often used in technical or parts manuals. Many people are familiar with these types of 3D drawings because they often accompany items that people purchase and put together at home such as a desk, breakfast stool, computer stand, or BBQ grill. Complex depictions of such diagrams are used in a variety of fields such as engineering or auto mechanics. Engineers even have a term for taking a completed product apart to understand how it works; they refer to this as “product archaeology.” This is an interesting idea because archaeology is usually associated with ancient civilizations and dusty historical sites, but in product archaeology, engineers or students learning to be engineers disassemble a product to figure out what its component parts are and what makes it work. Drawing or understanding an exploded diagram helps to identify the component parts and understand how they fit together. As you read the various chapters of this book, part of what we want you to think about is how the varied and complex pieces of teaching fit together to form a cohesive whole.

Many times, teaching is viewed only in terms of the end product: what a lesson produces in terms of student learning. This all-or-nothing view ignores the many complicated components of teaching. Consider how this idea of teaching as a singular product is communicated. Some common sayings about teachers are: “Teachers are born, not made” or “Those who can, do. Those who can’t, teach.” These sayings and the ideologies behind them suggest that good teaching is an inborn trait or singular action: you’ve either got it or you don’t. But what if teaching were viewed as a layered process like archaeology or an exploded diagram? Such perspectives would no doubt help learners recognize that teaching is a complex, nuanced process that is situated within our own lived histories and embodied experiences.

Video and other means of reflection can help capture the complexities in teaching. Video viewing or analysis does not merely record the process of teaching; it records the embodied, historical, socio-emotional aspects of a teacher's self. More specifically, a visual record can evoke the in-the-moment actions and feelings a teacher may have experienced during teaching. Consider the following story of a Reading Recovery lesson from Emily, one of the co-authors of this book. Reading Recovery (Clay, 1985) is a one-to-one intervention program for first grade students. Ongoing teacher training is required, and this includes teaching "behind the glass"—that is, teaching in front of a two way mirror while being observed and critiqued by certified teacher trainers and peer teachers. These teaching sessions are typically video-recorded for further analysis.

Recently I uncovered a video of myself from more than 10 years ago teaching a Reading Recovery lesson 'behind the glass'. Even though it had been recorded more than a decade earlier, memories of that day came flooding back. It was a particularly busy semester, and I was serving as an administrator for my elementary school as well as teaching Reading Recovery lessons. Life was hectic! On the spring day that recording was made I was actually very sick, but knew that I could not miss my 'behind the glass' session: my teacher trainer was a stickler for attendance. I vividly remember being very hoarse, having very little voice. And I worried about trying not to breathe too much on my student or anyone else because I didn't want to make them sick. Seeing the video even brought back seemingly insignificant memories like recalling why I wore those khaki slacks that were too big and did not fit well. I chose them specifically that day because they were lined with flannel and very comforting. As I re-viewed the video it was not only my teaching interactions during the literacy lesson that were captured, it was the emotional and affective components of that lesson, that day, and the broader context. When I read about exploded drawings, I saw an immediate connection to how video allows us to pull out all aspects of an interaction whether it was helping my student to hear and record all the sounds in a word by saying it very slowly while my student wrote the letters, or the emotions and memories of that day.

Emily's story shows us that video can be a powerful memory device but also a powerful record where experiences are framed and recorded so we can pull out and examine various elements of literacy interactions.

The principles outlined in Chapter 2 reminded us that 1) teaching and reflecting are complex endeavors; 2) learning to teach and learning to reflect are scaffolded processes, and these two processes help teachers consider what learners need to do in the present and future; and 3) educators can use a gradual release of responsibility (GRR) model to scaffold learning in and through video reflection. In the same way that watching video brought back emotions and physical memories connected to the experience for Emily, teachers can review teaching actions and decisions by viewing video of their lessons as a scaffold for developing reflective inquiry and teaching expertise. We re-visit each of these principles in this chapter, while considering examples of novice and experienced teachers using video viewing to position themselves to reflect *in* action while they re-experience the action of teaching and reflect *on* action. We discuss the value of spending extra time describing a teaching interaction because it helps us notice

nuanced details, uncover bias, and, in the process, develop agency. In other words, we discover ways to respond to the messy parts of teaching. Finally, we introduce the use of critical incidents as a way to deepen reflection and build a bridge to the action of teaching.

Chapter 3 established the need for structure for reflection on video-recorded teaching, and described the benefits of Communities of Practice to provide support in this type of analysis. While video can mediate or act as a go-between or a vehicle to carry out and facilitate reflective inquiry, structure is needed in order to focus effectively on the teaching action and results rather than the surface elements noticeable in video, like personality or behavior habits. Once the elements of the reflective cycle (*Presence, Description, Analysis, Experimentation*) are developed teachers can apply these elements to break apart and examine critical teaching interactions, emerging with new understandings that help them build more responsive teaching actions. In much the same way that design specialists use exploded drawings like those in Figure 5.1 to view parts of an item and how they go together, critical incident analysis can add depth of understanding and connect reflective inquiry to problem solving and action.

Adaptive Expertise

Principle 1) Teaching and reflecting are complex endeavors.

In Chapter 4, we introduced adaptive expertise as the ability to “combine thought and analysis with action in practice” (Hayden, Rundell, & Smyntek-Gworek, 2013, p. 395), and we proposed reflective inquiry as the required foundation for adaptive expertise in teaching (Figure 5.2). In this chapter we provide more examples of teachers using the four parts of reflective inquiry *Presence, Description, Analysis, and Experimentation* (Dewey, 1910/1933; Rodgers, 2002b) in order to develop teaching actions.

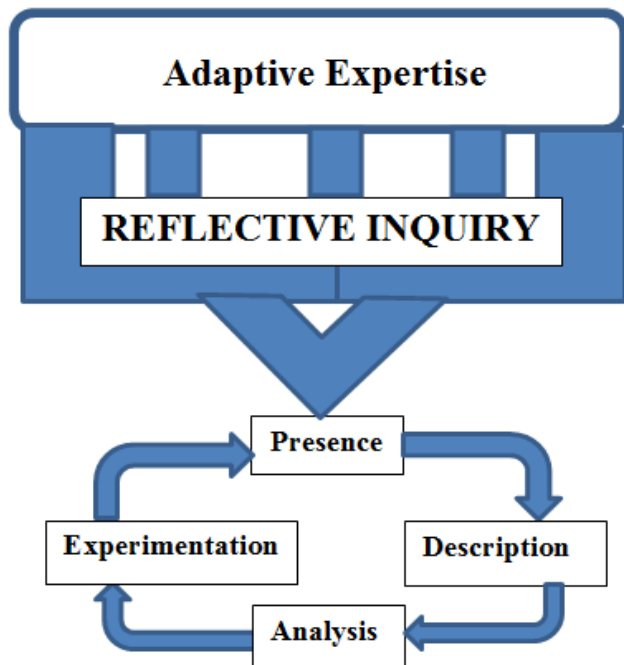


Figure 5.2. Elements of reflective inquiry, and how it supports adaptive expertise.

Early teaching practice: Skimming the Surface

Research on teacher development typically identifies varying levels of expertise. Early-career teachers are highly focused on their own performance: Did I plan a lesson with all the elements of best practice? Did I get through all the parts of the lesson plan in the time I had? Am I doing what my administrators expect of me? Are any students misbehaving? As a result, early teachers may be less aware of their students: they may not easily recognize when students are not engaged, or when students could benefit from re-teaching. One of the first things novice teachers need to learn is to get past worrying about their own performance and focus instead on whether and how their students are learning (Hayden, Moore-Russo, & Marino, 2013). This takes time and practice, but one of the benefits of video is that it provides an opportunity for teachers to step outside of their practice and view their teaching from a more objective space. Consider Joy's vignette below. While the problems of practice she describes are very typical for a preservice teacher, or even someone in the first years of teaching practice, consider how video helps Joy get a jump on solving some of these problems of early teaching practice.

Joy

Joy, an undergraduate in her final practicum experience before student teaching, used video to record herself teaching in a kindergarten classroom on two separate occasions, once near the beginning of the three-week practicum and once near the end, for 20 minutes each time. Watching video of her practicum teaching helped Joy relive the teaching event and reflect on her actions. It provided her with an objective space where she could begin to develop **Presence**: her ability to see in the moment and perceive more so that she could make an informed judgment. Remember our discussion in Chapter 4 of Rodgers (2002b) definition: “[**Presence**] is a teacher’s ability to attend to a single learner while simultaneously casting her attention, like a net, over the entire group” (p. 235).

When viewing video of her teaching, Joy first reflected on something she noticed about her teaching performance over time: “One problem that I can identify after reviewing my videos and reflecting on my experience would be time management. I noticed that my ability to manage my time became easier once I got used to the teaching part of my lessons.” Spending time in **Description** Joy looked more closely at this time management problem, identifying contributing factors: “At first I was so worried about running into my classroom teacher’s time.”

Time management is a very typical problem of practice that novice teachers encounter (Hayden & Chiu, 2013), but Joy experienced it in a different way than practicing teachers do. As a practicum student she not only felt pressure to finish the lesson, but also to do so in a time frame that did not interfere with her mentor teacher’s schedule. This is an important consideration, because the mentor teacher was Joy's evaluator as well as her guide. A practicum student or student teacher has to manage these additional pressures while also working to master lesson delivery, classroom management, assessment of learner needs, and so on.

After describing the problem, Joy went on to **Analysis**. This is where her reflection shows the power of spending time, because Joy noticed the impact her teaching was having on her students. She began to recognize that rushing through lessons inhibited her students’ learning. [When I] read stories to get through them, [it] made my students have to rush their work at the end of the lesson because I couldn’t balance everything out as well at first. As time went on, I was able to better judge the length of my story and the length of my student

work so that they were able to complete and share their work. This was great because then I was able to see their learning through their sharing.

Video helped Joy build a bridge from reflection to action because she then used *Experimentation* to create a solution to try in her future teaching.

A routine that I would develop for myself to avoid this problem would be to read through the story a few times first. Then, I would put my questions that I want to ask my students in the book so that I don't have to try and remember them. Next, I would allow a 5-minute brain break to partner share in my lesson. Finally, I could fill in the whole worksheet to see how long it takes me to complete [to get a ballpark estimate]. If at this point there is extra time, I could include a share portion at the end or a whole group activity throughout the lesson. This could help me better regulate my time.

Spending time developing *Presence*, using *Description*, and trying out *Analysis* and *Experimentation* is powerful for a preservice/novice teacher, and it helped Joy notice how her teaching actions impacted her students' learning. While these types of insights may be typical of someone who is just learning to teach, using video as a mediator for such reflection jumpstarts the process. It takes time and practice in teaching to move beyond concern about one's own performance and toward noticing and responding to students' responses (Hayden, Moore-Russo, & Marino 2013). Using this structured reflection process with video helped Joy notice and name some of the problems of early teaching practice, and helped her begin this shift from self to students before moving into student teaching.

Reflecting “after the moment” as practice for “in the moment”

Principle 2) Learning to teach and learning to reflect are scaffolded processes where teachers consider what learners need to learn and do in the present and in the future.

By looking at teaching interactions and specific challenges over extended periods of time, teachers at all experience levels can generate more instructional choices. This is empowering and develops a sense of agency as well as an awareness of one's impact. Video plus time in *Description* gives teachers a ‘space’ to view and think critically about the challenges and complexities in a teaching interaction. In Konnor's reflection below, both video and Rodger's reflective framework or cycle scaffold his reflective process.

Konnor

Konnor, a certified teacher working toward a literacy specialist endorsement, used video-supported reflection for a more extended period of time than Joy. Over eight weeks of teaching in a reading center, Konnor critiqued his development of *Presence* and expanded his use of *Description*. He set two goals for his teaching practice during these eight weeks: first, improving his ability to take anecdotal notes on his student's reactions during lessons, and later, to improve his questioning techniques. By spending time in *Description* throughout the term while using video and a structured reflection format, Konnor developed adaptive responses and began to see opportunities to apply the gradual release of responsibility and turn over more of the learning tasks to his student, Jerry.

Rodgers (2006) called *Description* “the most challenging aspect of reflection for teachers” and notes that description “*after the moment*,” as in video viewing, can be practice for seeing “*in the moment*” (p. 216, italics added) in later teaching interactions. In week one of the eight-week tutoring term Konnor first focused on developing procedures for capturing anecdotal observations of his student’s actions and confusions, and then on using these observations to plan teaching responses. He viewed video of his teaching to describe, *after the moment*, what he saw.

At no point during the lesson did I observe myself taking notes ... However, there were multiple instances where I should have been. The first was at 6:27PM when I had Jerry sort words with affixes into columns for prefixes or suffixes. While I watched and provided feedback, I should have noted whether he was able to place each word in the correct column or not—especially because he placed the last word in the wrong column but self-corrected a few seconds later.

Video enhances the amount of information teachers can collect and reflect on by supplementing anecdotal notes and filling in the gaps that remain even after careful observation and *Presence* during instruction. With video as a material scaffold, Konnor was able to see important aspects of his student’s learning that he did not capture on his anecdotal notes. While describing his notetaking on student responses, he also described his questioning techniques, noting missed opportunities for effective questions.

While some of it [questioning] is planned and other times it is spontaneous, I noticed that there were multiple instances [when] I asked minor questions during the lesson to assess whether or not Jerry was retaining what I had explained or understanding the material. For example, at 6:29PM I asked whether suffixes are added to the beginning or end of the word, after I had explained it a few minutes earlier. Jerry hesitated, but again I failed to note this.

As Konnor continued to work on anecdotal notetaking in week two, engaging in video viewing while also spending time in *Description* revealed some roadblocks.

As I watched ... I recalled what I was thinking at the time. I remember feeling as though Jerry might become self-conscious of me taking notes. I also felt that stopping the lesson to jot down notes might have wasted time, which was precious that night ...and I thought it might interrupt the flow of the instruction. Therefore, while I did have the observation sheet in front of me and went to take notes, I [did not] write everything I needed.

Using video of his teaching helped Konnor recall the emotions and thoughts of the teaching interaction, and describing these helped inform his *Analysis*. Konnor decided to develop his own kind of shorthand, with abbreviations for common words to use on the anecdotal note sheet. After reaching this solution, he moved to focusing on his questioning techniques. In week four, he described how he could refine his questions to better assess his student’s learning:

After this week’s Wednesday discussion as a group [with my peers and course instructor], I left wondering what my abilities were with questioning the student. While I was still very much focused on the anecdotal notes, I did pick up a few interesting

observations from my questioning Jerry. At 6:08 PM during the Monday session I noticed that at the beginning of the lesson I was asking quite a few recall questions. This is something that needs to be done because he needs to improve on his ability to recall information, but it should not be the only focus. I also need him to understand why it is important to understand the material and strategies we are teaching him. In addition to having Jerry recall what was previously taught I may want to begin asking more inference questions. At 6:03 PM during Wednesday's session I asked Jerry, "Do you remember what we covered last time?" A better way to frame this question would have been to ask "What two characteristics of fluency have you been practicing?" I need to name the strategies more often.

Here, Konnor reflected on the support of the Community of Practice formed by the other teachers working in the reading center and the center supervisor. The Wednesday discussion group with these teachers, held after tutoring, provided fuel for his exploration of questioning techniques. He also noted the value of anecdotal notes for reflection *after the moment* and for planning with his teaching partner. These teaching conversations, supplemented by notes and video, lead to thoughtful teaching adaptations for future lessons. What is important to note is that the conversations with others along with the notes and video all served as scaffolds when Konnor engaged in the reflective process.

As I improve in my recording anecdotal [notes], I have seen the improvement in the conversations I have with my clinical partner after each session. We both reference our notes and recall specific examples that enable us to make informed decisions about where the instruction should head in the future. For example, the other day I recorded notes on significant miscues that [Jerry] was making during a read aloud. I noted that he was breaking multisyllabic words into chunks but failing to blend those chunks together into the full word. I [wrote] specific examples that I used to explain my thoughts, [and] I can use these words when teaching Jerry to blend syllables into words because I know that he has struggled with these words.

By week six, Konnor's time in *Description* and reflection *after the moment* was helping him develop adaptations for better use of questioning with his student as well as helping him understand why these techniques were important.

Before starting the new book at 4:37 PM I asked Jerry if he remembered reading a chapter out of the book when we completed the diagnostic assessment [at the beginning of the tutoring term]. He did not remember and what I should have done is asked him to make predictions. Especially because we have read from the Magic Tree House series and he has an understanding of their format. When we have asked him to make predictions ... he often repeats the title as his prediction, but occasionally when given enough time to respond, he comes up with a very strong and creative prediction. Not only would it be highly beneficial to provide him with practice in predictions but it would require him to use higher order thinking. Another example of a missed opportunity was when I asked, "how do you feel about the strategy, does it help you?" Instead I could have asked, "how might this strategy help you comprehend the text better?" [This] would have given me much more information on his understanding of the [strategy].

Konnor described the value of giving his student wait time and of asking questions that require more than a yes or no answer. Using video to scaffold his understanding, he was able to see that sometimes, “when given enough time,” Jerry would come up with a stronger, more creative prediction than just repeating the title. Konnor also was able to see that asking Jerry to think metacognitively about where and when he could use a particular strategy (e.g. “How might this strategy help you comprehend the text better?”) is more beneficial than just labeling a strategy as helpful or not helpful.

Clearly, Konnor is a strong teacher. None of the teaching actions he described were inadequate or unhelpful. However, by spending extended time in *Description* with the mediation of video, he was able to see ways to improve and refine his teaching, thus improving and refining his student’s learning. In our work with teachers at all levels of experience, we have emphasized this cycle of reflection as a way to manage the complexity of daily practice and develop agency. Teachers can transform the “raw data” they receive from teaching—the responses of students to curriculum, content, and instruction—into mindful instruction for student learning. By the end of Konnor’s eight-week tutoring term he had ideas for how to gradually release responsibility for learning to his student, Jerry.

At 6:33PM Jerry made a text to text connection. He asked if Blackbeard had been discussed in the book because he saw a [TV] show on sunken treasure, and they were trying to find Blackbeard’s treasure. While I allowed him to talk about this, there were so many opportunities that I could have taken advantage of to get him to use higher order thinking. For example, I could have asked how the topic of the show relates to the book we were reading. It would have been the perfect opportunity to compare and contrast what was taking place in both stories. At 6:45 PM there was [another] opportunity: Jerry asked a question about the shipping records, and I immediately explained their purpose in discovering the treasure. I could have used prompts to have him logically determine why the shipping records were important to the explorers. This would have been much more valuable than just telling him.

Principle 3) Educators can use a Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) model to scaffold learning in and through video reflection.

Coming in the final week of Konnor’s tutoring experience, this reflection provided just a glimpse of *Principle 3*. When thinking about using video within the GRR model, setting up the reflective process so that preservice or inservice teachers have multiple forms of scaffolding is important. Space to engage in conversation with others and the use of reflective frameworks when reflecting on video both have the potential to scaffold the reflective process.

We’ll return to this principle later in the chapter, but it is important to note that Konnor came to this realization after several weeks of reflecting on his teaching, using video, conversation with a teaching partner, and time in *Description*. He then began to use *Analysis* to explore how and why he might apply the GRR.

Sometimes I feel that I might hold back from asking Jerry higher order questions because I am not sure if he is capable of comprehending at that level. Not only is this not fair to

the student but they will not improve if I do not allow them attempts at answering these types of questions. In the case of the shipping records I explained their significance without allowing Jerry the opportunity to figure it out for himself. Peterson and Taylor (2012) suggest that, “The teacher could then respond by modeling how to give a higher order response” (p. 297). Therefore, what I should have done is asked Jerry higher order questions to see if he could figure out the significance of the shipping records. If he was unable to, then I could have modeled how to answer the question. From there we could have read on, and I could possibly have found another topic in which I could ask a similar question. This way he has an opportunity at answering a higher order question immediately after I modeled how to answer one.

Messing with the details, and messy problems

One reason Rodgers (2002b) called the *Description* phase of reflection “perhaps the most difficult” is “because it asks [teachers] to withhold interpretation of events and postpone their urge to fix the embedded problems until they can ‘mess about’ with the details of their stories” (p. 238). Joy spent very little time describing her problem of time management, just skimming the surface, but this was enough to help her notice that her students’ learning was affected when she rushed through her lesson. Konnor spent eight weeks in *Description* mediated by video, and at the end of that time he was able to begin to plan ways to release responsibility for learning to his student, reflecting Principle 1 (teaching and reflecting are complex endeavors) and Principle 2 (these are scaffolded processes). They take time, space, and support. In this case, the support or scaffolding was Rodgers’s reflective framework, conversations with another teacher, and the material scaffold of the video.

With more complex challenges, or the messy parts of teaching, spending more time on *Description* becomes even more important. By asking teachers to pay attention to *Description* we ask them to look at all the diverse and complex elements at play. By doing this, they develop *Presence*, noticing their subject matter, their teaching actions, and their students’ responses; all within the larger teaching context which includes elements of bias, assumptions, conflict, and resolution. Noticing and describing all these elements of a teaching interaction increases a teacher’s ability to support instructional choices, meaning that teachers will be better able to provide reasoned responses to questions from administrators, parents, and outside stakeholders. This can go a long way toward increasing feelings of confidence or efficacy—feelings which are quite frequently under attack within school and from outside of school these days. Spending more time in *Description* can help us notice and respond to the biases we all bring to teaching.

Using Critical Incidents to “Explode” Description

We all bring our own experiences and perspectives to our interactions with others. We all bring biases. Using critical incidents as a reflective framework in teaching can help us think about how those biases might shade our decision-making. Critical incidents are significant vivid events that are remembered and that have impact (Brookfield, 2012; Tripp, 1993). They don’t necessarily have to involve classroom instruction. For example, Chad shared this story about his time working for an in-school tutoring program in a high poverty, high needs urban school where most of the students were African-American. Not only is Chad a white male, his last name is also “White.” As a certified Social Studies teacher, Chad had a passion for history and was

committed to principles of social justice, but at the time he had had few opportunities to work with African-American students. On one of Chad's first days in the school, a group of boys teased him about his name, saying things such as, "He's white, and his name's white, so he's *Mr. White*."

Chad later reflected on this story and his response to these black students' overtly drawing attention to his white skin color—something that Chad was unused to. Despite the focus on race and skin color—two topics often considered taboo in white, middle class culture, Chad responded back that yes, he was "**really**" Mr. White—a play on both his name and his skin color. This led to laughter from the boys and continual ribbing across the following weeks related to more word play from students on the words "white" and Mr. "White." Chad related how this one small moment came into focus for him in retrospect, as he thought about a University class he had completed that focused on language, literacy, and culture. In this class concepts such as race, whiteness, literacy, and teaching had been discussed. Race was "put on the table" rather than "swept under the carpet." Chad observed that many white teachers have not been given that opportunity to deeply and reflexively explore the intersectionalities of race, class, and beliefs about teaching. Without such an opportunity to explore his own racialized positions, Chad pondered, would he have been as likely to respond to humor with humor? Or, he wondered would he have misread humor as disrespect or even a threat from young black men toward a new teacher? Having been part of a Community of Practice where participants considered their own racialized positions, Chad had become aware of his own position as a teacher who was white and male. As described above, this was a critical incident: a significant, vivid set of events that were remembered and had impact.

Using a critical incident approach to consider teaching interactions encourages learners to stay in *Description* longer, and the longer learners stay in *Description* the more that can potentially be noticed (Dozier, 2008; Dozier & Rutten, 2005). Describing a critical incident is akin to making a detailed illustration of a teaching event, something similar to exploded view drawings such as those provided in Figure 5.1 at the beginning of this chapter. When learners use the critical incident steps to stay in *Description* longer, they can provide a highly detailed view of a teaching interaction. The process looks like this:

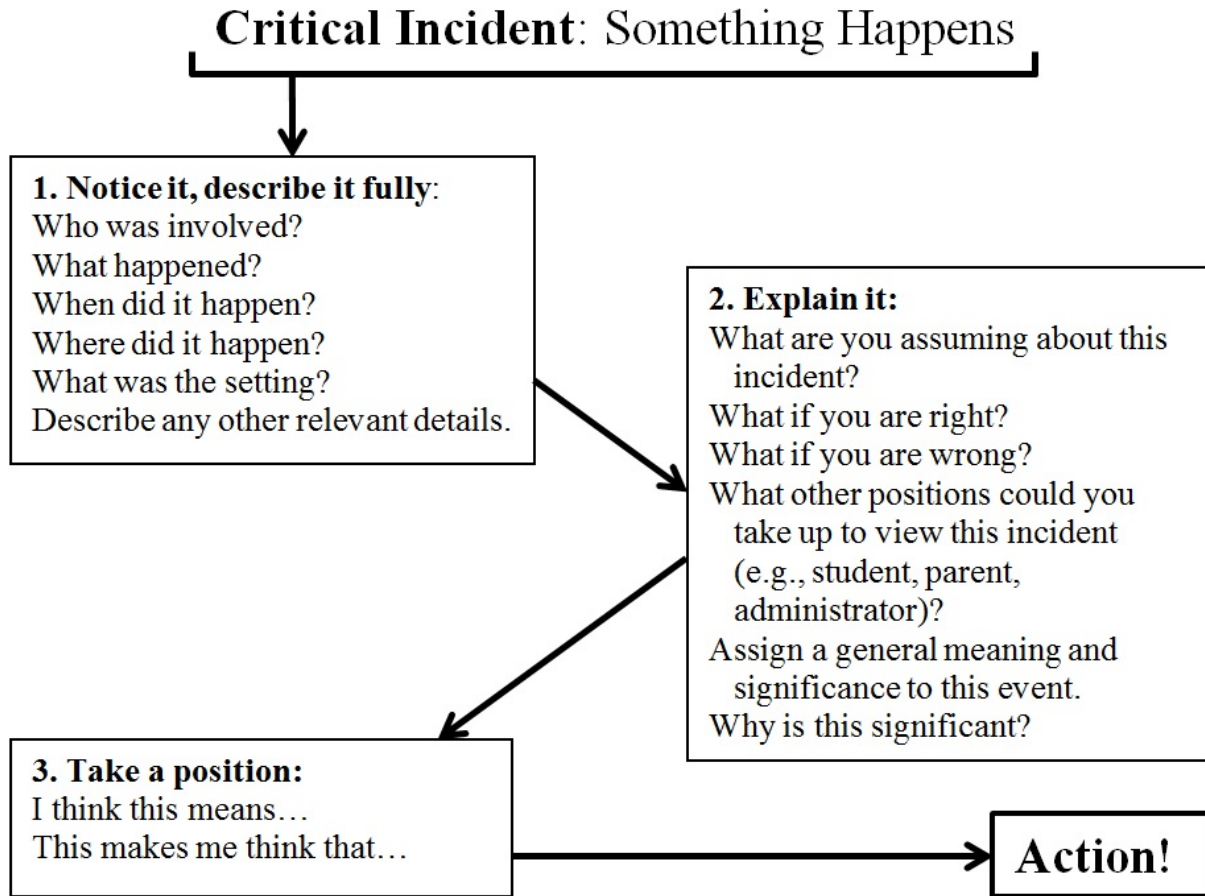


Figure 5.3 The critical incident framework.

Observation and description of a teaching incident is followed by creating an explanation that includes naming assumptions and biases as well as identifying other ways to view the incident. After this examination, teachers take a position and develop a responsive teaching action based on their ‘exploded’ view of the critical incident.

Appendix X provides the critical incident framework in “fill-in” form. Here is a critical incident written by Karen, a white high school English teacher.

Karen’s Critical Incident

Notice it, describe it

One of my students, Josh, is African-American. Josh’s mom works at a bank, and his older brother was arrested this past summer and is currently in jail. Josh’s standardized testing placed him at the 3rd grade reading level, and he has multiple accommodations to help him be successful in the classroom. He also has a detailed behavior plan as he struggles with dishonesty, rude and disrespectful speech towards adults, and “shutting down” as a coping mechanism.

Early in the year we were working on writing paragraphs using the stoplight paragraph structure: topic sentence (green: GO!), key idea (yellow: Slow down!), and

supporting detail (red: Stop!). We use this language all year, really focusing on it in the co-taught classes since many students have disorganized writing or don't use any supporting details. Using a graphic organizer and color-coding his sentences, Josh turned in a paragraph that was similar to: "My summer was fun. I went swimming. It was fun. I ate food. It was fun. See, my summer was fun." Josh was on the right track, and had technically followed the paragraph format, but my next goal for Josh and all my students was to expand on details in their writing. I asked all students to revise their first drafts.

When I sat down with Josh to explain that I wanted him to work on adding and expanding his supporting details in his revision, he immediately shut down and said, "I did what you said. I'm not doing it again." Even after he would listen to what I was asking him to do, ("Can you be more specific about swimming? Why was it fun? Etc."), he would just look at me, shrug, and say, "I don't know. I can't do this."

Explain it: Examination of assumptions, biases, and other lenses

In these power struggle moments, I'm never fully sure what to do. Argue? Demand it happens? Send the student to the Dean for not following directions? Give him a pass and let him just sit there? I will admit I've done all of the above to varying degrees of success depending on the situation, but with Josh, I wonder if my assumptions of him, his home life, his capabilities, etc. affect how I treat him.

Josh's abilities are low, he doesn't have a father in his life, his older brother is in jail, he has a negative response towards adults, and he doesn't hang out with the "best crowd." I assumed many things about Josh based on these bits of information. I assume he doesn't get much educational support at home, that he doesn't have many positive role models in his life, that he may be "acting out" to impress others, that he may have been exposed to a multitude of criminal behaviors due to his brother, etc. Are any of those true? I don't actually know. Lisa Delpit, in "Lessons from Teachers" (2006), warned of the dangers of "being nice". When I just let Josh sit in class and not do what I was asking of him, was I giving up on him and "being nice"? Was I afraid of his eight-page-long behavior plan and what further disciplinary action may result in? Was I more "afraid" of looking like a racist if I sent him to the Dean?

What was Josh assuming about me by choosing to behave so defiantly? Did he assume I wouldn't "get it"? Was he just afraid of looking stupid in front of his peers and needing my help? Did he think I was judging him or treating him differently because I'm a white female and he's a black male?

I also wonder if part of Josh's low ability stems from a lack of experiences in his life to build schema, but then again, this is an assumption I'm making based on what I know about his home life and minimal comments he's made in class. Often Josh struggles with adding relevant details to his writing, perhaps because he doesn't have much schema to help him put language to his experiences. Josh also has trouble comprehending texts.

I don't have access to Josh's individual testing results, but I have noticed that he has trouble "hearing" if grammar is incorrect. Often students can hear mistakes if I read their writing out loud, but Josh can't tell why "They box last night" is wrong, in formal grammar assignments, even if I lead him by prompting him to think about a certain word. Maybe Josh has phonemic difficulties and this weakness has "fanned out" to affect all other aspects of reading as well? Maybe he has to spend so much time decoding that

comprehension is short-changed? I keep switching between reading and writing because they're so related. Rarely have I had a student with a great discrepancy between their reading and writing skills.

Take a Position, and Develop a Plan of Action

Thinking about how I interact with Josh is significant because there are so many students like him in my classroom. Students that are different than I am, and students that struggle. Since these students whose reading and writing skills are far below grade level will not be leaving my classroom, it is up to me to figure out how to meet them where they are and go from there.

First of all, I need to continue to take the time to assess my biases, my actions, and my words in order to critically evaluate how I'm treating my students. Instead of fearing "the other," I need to work to embrace the cultural (and all other types) of diversity within my classroom while still holding the same expectations for all students. This reflection and self-evaluation takes humility, honesty, and processing time, and would be beneficial to discuss with my co-teacher too.

In order to actively help Josh and other students like him, my co-teacher and I must work more effectively together. Ultimately, these students who are reading at 2nd and 3rd grade levels need access to texts that they can navigate on their own at least weekly, if not every day. My co-teacher and I also need to become better at breaking the kids into groups to do more individualized instruction to help students improve their weaknesses and build upon their strengths.

Adaptive Expertise in Real-Life Teaching

Karen's critical examination of her interactions with Josh raises many uncomfortable questions. How do our assumptions about students impact our daily, minute-to-minute instructional decisions? Once we've uncovered some biases, as Karen does here, what should we do next?

Since both Karen and Emily (the instructor for the graduate-level class Karen was enrolled in) are white women, it is also important for them to consider Josh's position as an adolescent black male. For example, as an English teacher, Karen may be viewing Josh's grammar usage only through the lens of the formal grammatical rules set out by the high school English curriculum, without considering aspects of African-American English Vernacular (AAEV) that Josh may be using. Adding consideration of AAEV means that Josh's grammatical usage is not a deficit, just a difference. On the other hand, Karen's desire to know more about his phonological processing and decoding skills also seems valid. Since Josh has difficulty reading and writing, knowing more about his skills in these areas could help Karen target her instruction for him.

In helping to think through reading difficulties, Tatum (2005) recommends a number of what he calls "close-ups" which include "cognitive close-ups, pedagogical close-ups, psychological close-ups, and in some cases physiological close-ups" (pp. 125-126, see also 126-128). Karen seems to be incorporating several of these close-ups: cognitive, pedagogical, and psychological. While Tatum writes specifically with black male adolescents in mind, most of his recommendations apply to struggling readers of any ethnic or racial background and across

genders. Tatum (2013) also writes about the importance of helping students hear the voices of those who have come before and find their voice among them.

STOP AND THINK

What do you think Karen should do next? Why?

What would you do to reach Josh? Why?

How do you think Karen's reflection might be assisted through video reflection?

Video Connections and Extensions

Question: How could Karen's reflective process have been expanded or enhanced if she had been able to view video of her interactions with Josh? What additional affordances might video reflection offer?

Since reflection on teaching is often not visible externally or readily seen by others, video evidence can help teachers like Karen, as well as teacher educators, articulate specific practices regarding how and when teachers reflect and adapt, as well as reveal the instructional conditions that support these processes (Parsons, 2012). In Karen's case, the concreteness and objectivity of video could make viewing from different perspectives easier. After using the critical incident framework to help identify, describe, analyze, and plan an action, what if Karen could then utilize video to capture specific moments of interaction with Josh? She could use these specific video moments and the objective space they provide to deepen her analysis and critique of her teaching as well as refine her plan of action.

While this book foregrounds video recording as a means of reflecting on one's teaching, audio recording can also be helpful. Even having an audio recording of Josh might be helpful. Remember Karen's comment about Josh's grammar:

I have noticed that he has trouble "hearing" if grammar is incorrect. Often students can hear mistakes if I read their writing out loud, but Josh can't tell why "They box last night" is wrong, even if I lead him by prompting him to think about a certain word. Maybe Josh has phonemic difficulties and this weakness has "fanned out" to affect all other aspects of reading as well? Maybe he has to spend so much time decoding that comprehension is short-changed?

As stated earlier, Karen may have failed to recognize a common grammatical rule of African-American English Vernacular (AAEV) where consonant clusters at the end of a word "boxed" (e.g., /bɒkst/) are often dropped (e.g., /bɒks/). Thus a speaker using AAVE might say, "They box last night." If Josh is a speaker of AAVE, this could be one reason he does not recognize "They box last night" as incorrect when reading it aloud because in the rules of AAVE, it is acceptable because it is correct. If Karen were able to listen to Josh reading, she could listen and watch for these patterns and support Josh's learning through exercises in contrastive analysis (Wheeler & Swords, 2004; 2006) where students study their own language systems in comparison to formalized ways of speaking and writing English. Such analysis enables learners to view their own languages or dialects as different—not inferior or wrong, but they also provide tools for children to think about linguistic systems for formal and informal communication. As Karen, rightly notes, it is not enough to be the "nice" teacher who affirms a student. Authors such as Delpit (1988) and Wheeler and Swords (2006) acknowledge that explicit instruction and teaching

is necessary to help learners think about varieties of language as well as to make implicit rules explicit.

The Gradual Release of Responsibility

One of the worst things that can happen in an incident like this is for Karen to feel like she has no response, and no agency to act in a way that will advance Josh's learning. However, an "exploded view" of the critical incident asks her to develop an action plan. Karen ends her critical incident with a plan to work with her teaching partner to group students for skill building and find more accessible texts. It's a start. Additionally, if Karen (along with her partner) continues using a reflective process of developing *Presence*, spending time in *Description*, using *Analysis* and *Experimentation* she will build her Adaptive Expertise over time.

Unlike Joy and Konnor, Karen wrote this reflection in the context of a graduate level literacy leadership class without a matching practicum component. In the description of Joy's teaching, the structure of Joy's teacher training program provided the fertile ground for her to practice her teaching skill. The Community of Practice and teaching partnership that Konnor experienced in the reading center provided support for examining his teaching over time. This was not the case for Karen. In Chapter 3, we mentioned the importance of choice when reflecting. Karen had the opportunity to choose this incident from her teaching practice. Some of the responsibility was thus released to her for choosing when to practice the reflective cycle as well as what to reflect on. However, the way she reflected was still structured with the critical incident format (see Appendix X), and Karen was prompted to think about her biases and her assumptions as well as to ask herself, "What if I'm right in the way I am viewing this? What if I'm wrong?" This structure resulted in reflection that was more nuanced, demonstrated risk-taking, and perhaps was more honest.

Principle 3) Educators can use a Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) model to scaffold learning in and through reflection. The structure of the "Explain it" section pushed Karen to begin to confront her biases by naming them and examining them. We could say that she has done a pretty good job of this. Karen admits that what she believes she knows about Josh's home life influences her view of the incident with him in addition to her view of his abilities. She admits that she has some fear about pursuing a disciplinary path with him because such action may be perceived as racist. She doesn't deny that there may be racial undertones at play in her interaction with Josh: she says it, and she thinks about it, although she stops short of directly asking the next difficult question that lurks below the surface: Is race playing a part in my decision-making or my opinions of Josh? As a teacher, she considers her options for proceeding, and she develops a teaching response only after this complex analysis of the interaction. After weighing options including disciplinary measures, Karen develops an Action that instead focuses on developing supports for Josh and other students who need more help with skill building—adapting the instructional approach. Karen opts for what she can attempt to do as a teacher instead of punishing Josh and perhaps further cementing biases that will work against him and his success. Karen's Action comes out of the deeper understanding and critique that comes from "exploding" the *Description* part of reflection to look at all the working parts of this incident. It brings more of her expertise to her teaching of Josh.

Jump-Starting or Boosting Growth

Research on teacher development typically identifies varying levels of expertise. While novices are more focused on their own performance and less aware of the feedback from their students, adaptive experts are the opposite. Adaptive experts are more keenly aware of the effectiveness of their teaching performance, and they are able to monitor, check, innovate, and modify (McNaughton, 2011). They notice features that may escape the attention of novices (Bransford, Darling-Hammond, & LePage, 2005).

The use of video and the GRR model can mediate this development, because teachers of all experience levels can more readily examine the effectiveness of their teaching performances as well as the responses of their students. The objective space of video scaffolds or supports teachers to examine the concrete evidence of their teaching practices as well as student responses, as Joy and Konnor demonstrated at the start of this chapter. But learning to teach and learning to reflect are complex processes that need to be scaffolded. The reflective cycle or framework of *Presence, Description, Analysis, and Experimentation* is a scaffold that supports the development of adaptive expertise. When the critical incident framework is practiced as a way to “explode” the *Description* process, teachers spend more time uncovering and confronting biases as they work to develop action plans, as Karen did. The “Explain It” part of the critical incident prompts teachers to name and examine their biases, pushing towards a level of awareness many of us don’t take to naturally. However, this awareness is essential for teachers when working in the diverse environments of schools.

Using critical incidents is a way to spend more time in *Description*. The collegial setting of a teacher group (for Joy, Konnor, and Karen, a college class) provides support for this exploration. A group of colleagues who “live” the reality of school life establishes a base of understanding for the kinds of incidents described here.

Continued growth

Teachers, teacher educators, and professional developers need to consider sound pedagogical knowledge at all levels of development and experience. We need to look for ways to support examination of biases and questioning of assumptions about our students as well as our teaching. Otherwise, we run the risk of having our initial teaching experiences insulate us from growth—and from our students (Henry, Bastian, & Fortner, 2011).

Chapter Activities:

1. Use websites such as Teaching Channel, TeacherTube, Edutopia, or another website that houses free video to identify a video of a literacy-related teaching event. With your peers explore the video using the ideas of ***Presence, Description, Analysis, and Experimentation***.
 - a. <https://www.teachingchannel.org/>
 - b. <http://www.teachertube.com/>
 - c. <https://www.edutopia.org/videos>
2. If you have access to a classroom, literacy center, or tutoring situation, record your own literacy teaching. Explore the ideas of ***Presence, Description, Analysis, and Experimentation*** (see Figure 5.2). Then share your video and your reflections with a peer or a group of peers.
3. From your own teaching or classroom experience. Pick a critical incident. This could be something you experienced while teaching, something you observed, or something you experienced as a student. Write up this incident using the outline that Karen used:
 - Notice it, describe it.
 - Explain it: Examination of assumptions, biases, and other lenses
 - Take a position, and develop a plan of Action

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Appendix X

Critical incidents are *significant vivid events that are remembered and impact people* (Brookfield, 2012; Tripp, 1993). Examination of critical incidents can lead us to **ACTION!** because they enable us to arrive at a position.

The vast majority of critical incidents ... are not at all dramatic or obvious; they are mostly straightforward accounts of very commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice which are critical in the rather different sense that they are indicative of underlying trends, motives and structures. These incidents appear to be 'typical' rather than 'critical' at first sight, but are rendered critical through analysis. (Tripp, 1993, p. 24-25)

Critical Incident: Something Happens

