Hmm, the Christmas break. A breathing space at last. Time to reflect. I’ve been reflecting on reflection, meta-reflection I think it’s called. In particular, the nature of reflection in both professional and personal contexts – my own and those of the trainee teachers I’m working with. They are required as part of their course to keep a journal throughout their PGCE year, recording regular written reflections every week. This is not always a popular activity! I try to practise what I preach by keeping a journal myself, so I know it’s not always easy. But I also know that it’s an essential aspect of my personal and professional lives and the points at which they intersect and blend in the ways that seem inevitable for those of us working in education. It requires discipline, making time and space for reflection when there is clearly little time and space to spare.

Looking back on his year of writing reflectively Jack, a trainee teacher, wrote:

I freely confess that, at first, I was not greatly enthused by the idea of keeping a reflective journal... in fact keeping this journal has been one of the most interesting and thought-provoking aspects of my journey on the road to becoming a teacher.

Sometimes we don’t recognise reflection for what it is, seeing it as a commonplace activity, simply as ‘thinking things through’, ‘mulling over’, ‘hindsight’ or, something teachers are brilliant at, ‘thinking on your feet’. Jack went on to reflect back on previous experiences in his professional life:

There have been times over the years when mulling over events at work has led me to admit my own faults and conclude, after much soul-searching, that the error lay close to home. This process undoubtedly helped improve my practice and raise the level of my professionalism. Unpicking situations, imagining them from other people’s perspectives and seeing potential alternative outcomes are all hugely valuable. Today, I realise that this is reflective practice.

Another aspect of my current work on reflection is researching the stories people write and tell when they reflect, and exploring how writing and telling stories about our professional lives, and hearing other people’s stories, affects us. I find that as I listen to and write these stories down I am able to make sense of my own and other people’s experiences in ways that surprise me. Stories of lived experience often strike a chord, resonating with experiences in my own life. The practice of writing from different perspectives, which Jack refers to, is often extremely successful in developing deep insights into dilemmas, and frequently arises from critical incidents in the classroom or other aspects of professional life. The change of perspective also allows us to step back and ask the question: What does it feel like to be you? Or, more significantly: What did it feel like to be you in that situation? It enables us to become reflexive – that tricky state that sounds as though you have performed some kind of physical contortion! The word, from the French ‘reflecteur’, means to bend back on oneself. It’s like stepping through the mirror and seeing, like Alice, that the ordinary can become extraordinary, that things are not always what they seem. And indeed you have performed a mental contortion reflecting on how you see yourself in a particular context and how it looks from the other side of the mirror. Try it!

Does this kind of reflective practice work in the classroom? Are there ways to develop the attributes of the reflective practitioner in our students? We want them to have opportunities to explore and understand the richness, diversity and complexity of what it means to be human. Deep, reflective engagement takes time and can be supported through simple strategies such as giving thinking time when we ask questions, using a ‘no hands up’ strategy and allowing time to ‘think-pair-share’; encouraging an enquiry approach, developing empathy by putting yourself in the shoes of another person. In an enquiry-based approach the teacher poses questions to prompt the students to consider the issue under discussion at a deeper level without directing them towards a ‘correct’ answer. Such discussions develop the reflective powers and understanding of the student.

Best wishes,

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To find out more about Janet’s KS3 RE series, Living Faiths, please visit www.oxfordsecondary.co.uk/livingfaiths