

# Reflective Spaces for English Language Teachers

By Daniel Xerri

## Introduction

On a recent visit to a botanic garden in Perth, Australia, I spent some time at its Place of Reflection. The latter is a small garden opened in 2011 with the purpose of providing victims of trauma and visitors in general with a space in which they can find solace and engage in meditation. The garden consists of a number of sheltered recesses connected by wooden boardwalks and is screened off by rust-covered metal sheets with intricate designs incised into them. While seated on a solitary bench in each recess, visitors can admire the thick foliage around them and look out over Swan River at the foot of the hill on which the garden is situated. As someone who helps university students to enhance their reflective abilities through writing, I consider it admirable that a major city has designed a space for its citizens' reflection. The Place of Reflection made me think about the spaces that novice teachers can use in order to reflect on their students' learning, as well as on their own beliefs, practices, and well-being.

## Value of Reflection

Reflection has long been deemed vital for English language teachers given that it promotes their professional growth. In particular, there seems to be consensus that teachers who engage in reflection can gain new insights into their practices (Farrell, 2016a). In fact, reflection can help to develop *eupraxia*, i.e., good practice (Smagorinsky, Shelton, & Moore, 2015). In the case of novice teachers, when they are taught how to figure out their experiences through reflection, they are able to deal with the challenges they face in the classroom (Shoffner et al., 2010). In fact, it is suggested that reflection can help novice teachers to address such concerns as adjustment to the profession, acceptance of students, and management of emotion (Shoffner, 2011).

## Spaces for Reflection

There are various spaces that novice English teachers can exploit in order to engage in reflection. These spaces can take the shape of tools, activities, or physical and digital places. While different reflective spaces seem to

share similar benefits, knowing how to capitalize on the special characteristics of each one is significant for novice teachers.

One of the main avenues for reflection is that of journal writing, which helps teachers to develop self-awareness and leads to constructive behavioral changes both inside and outside the classroom (Farrell, 2013). Journal writing has been found to help teachers cope with uncertainty, instability, and value conflict, as well as to make changes to their practices and beliefs (Chi, 2010). Despite the fact that the production of texts such as dialogue and response journals provides teachers with opportunities to engage in reflective thinking (Lee, 2007), there are also some considerations that need to be borne in mind. For example, in his analysis of three Korean EFL teachers' use of a journal as a means of reflecting on their work, Farrell (2016b) indicates that

while writing a teaching journal may facilitate the reflective process for the majority of language teachers, for some other teachers (granted, a minority), writing a reflective journal may lead to increased levels of anxiety that may be associated with reflecting in general and with the act of writing itself. (p. 91)

Hence, it is important that novice teachers are provided with the right kind of support when it comes to choosing a topic to focus on, sharing their writing with an



▲ *The Place of Reflection, Kings Park, Perth*

audience, and engaging in systematic reflections when writing a journal (Farrell, 2016b). Supporting teachers with reflective writing is essential, whether it is for producing journals or other text types. For instance, portfolios have been shown to help teachers to engage

in in-depth self-reflection as part of their professional development process; however, they can only do so effectively if they are provided with training on reflective writing (Xerri & Campbell, 2015).

Other reflective spaces that novice teachers may use are centred around dialogue. For example, engaging in collaborative group discussions with one's peers has been shown to affect teachers' ability to understand and resist plateauing, as well as to maintain their commitment and enthusiasm for teaching (Farrell, 2014). Olsher and Kantor (2012) discuss the value of questions as a mentoring resource in enabling a novice teacher to engage in critical reflection, while Gabriel (2016) analyzes post-observation debrief conversations between novice teachers and mentors to show how these can help to shape reflection. In some cases, dialogue complements the use of a tool like an e-portfolio. Liu (2017) reports that e-portfolios have strong potential to support a dialogic approach to reflection, especially in reinforcing critical dialogue between teacher educators and pre-service teachers, this being an important means of developing the latter's critical reflection, transformative learning, and teaching practice.

Some other spaces for reflection available to novice teachers consist of research and digital technology. Classroom research is considered an effective way of enabling teachers to develop their reflective thinking (Medwell & Wray, 2014) and can help them to critically interrogate their beliefs and practices (Xerri, 2017). As a contributor to English teachers' continuing professional development (Xerri, 2014), social networking sites like Twitter are reported as being a useful tool for facilitating practitioners' on-going reflection (Benko et al., 2016). Despite being around for some time, video has become easier to produce thanks to digital devices. This has meant that teachers can maximize its use for reflection. Video is recognized as having the capacity to empower teachers to adapt and grow via critical inquiry (Ortlieb, McVee, & Shanahan, 2015).

## Conclusion

Notwithstanding the different kinds of reflective spaces that are available to novice teachers, it does not mean that they will use them productively, if at all. Research indicates that once pre-service teachers start working, the tendency is to quickly fall into a rut partly because they do not seem to find the time for reflection. In fact, Shoffner et al. (2010) claim that "reflective practice is often pushed aside when teachers enter the classroom, a casualty of too little time and too many demands" (p. 70). One of the factors behind this phenomenon could be that novice teachers might not have received adequate training on how to sustain reflective practice in the course of their profession. In addition, they might have only been trained to utilize one space for reflection, and they might be unaware of how other spaces could be used for the same purpose. Hence, it seems fundamental that novice teachers be provided with adequate and continuing support and guidance in order for them to develop the necessary skills to engage in critical

reflection and to harness the potential of the different spaces in which they can do so.

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