

Sati Center for Buddhist Studies
Buddhist Chaplaincy Training Program

The educational method of the Sati Chaplaincy Training is one of action and reflection, wherein students not only learn in class, but also apply their learnings in real life situations and then reflect on these. This is a tried and true method for the training and development of chaplains, ministers, therapists, and the like. Here is an explanation of this method, published in *TAP into Learning* (Winter 2000, vol. 3, issue 2).

Action + Reflection = Learning

Learning is both an active and reflective process. Though we learn by doing, constructing, building, talking, and writing, we also learn by thinking about events, activities and experiences. This confluence of experiences (action) and thought (reflection) combines to create new knowledge. Both action and reflection are essential ingredients in the construction of knowledge. Indeed it is difficult to extricate one from the other since we are often “parallel processing”¹ — reflecting upon activities even as we are in the midst of doing or experiencing them. Because learning is so often subconscious, we don’t realize we’ve actually gained new knowledge or understanding until we stop to contemplate a particular activity. Reflection then is the vehicle for critical analysis, problem-solving, synthesis of opposing ideas, evaluation, identifying patterns and creating meaning — in short, many of the higher order thinking skills that we strive to foster in our students.

The optimal learning environment provides sufficient time for both action and reflection. This is often difficult given the pressure to cover the curriculum and prepare students for state exams. Because of these and other demands, we often must end an activity without giving students some formal or informal means of discussing what and how they have learned. Thus, an opportunity for the meaning making, the introspection of reflection, is lost, and true learning is not fully actualized. Further complicating this, in our formation as teachers we may not have learned how to engage students in authentic speech where they are allowed to honestly share their viewpoints about a particular activity, as opposed to giving formulaic answers (reflection versus recitation). We may attempt to get students to reflect but they sit silently, unwilling or unused to sharing their thoughts, and we are unsure of how to elicit such thoughts.

Yet, as humans, we are reflective beings, who by our very nature constantly search for meaning.⁶ Speech — our ability to communicate concepts — can shift us from a state of unawareness to deliberate, self-conscious action. This helps us internalize and link thought to action, allowing us to problem-solve, create coherence, and form patterns of understanding.⁷ Yet, in the classroom, students’ “social speech” — the sharing of their thoughts and ideas with classmates — is often silenced, thus stifling “inner speech”: the internal realizations and concept-formations that can result in higher order thinking.⁸

As teachers we may have experienced the situation where we actually learn a certain subject more when we have to teach it than when we studied it as students. Certainly, this is the result of our action — our having to *do* (teach) the material — to engage with it in an authentic and meaningful manner. But it may also be the result of our having to *think about/reflect upon* the material. Thus our understanding of the material is both broadened and deepened. This holistic approach “captures” the greatest amount of learning.

As learners we are constantly constructing, revising, and reconstructing our knowledge and beliefs to create a new framework of understanding. Reflection is the engine that drives this process. Through reflection students build upon and develop existing understandings to generate new knowledge.

Paulo Freire and Education for Critical Consciousness

Reflection, for the influential Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, was the critical component of education. Reflection, he believed, resulted in “critical consciousness” in which learners become actors, not observers, and authors of their own decisions.

“We apprehend the objective data of our reality through reflection,”³ Freire wrote in 1973. When we as learners do not reflect on our place in the world or critically evaluate the validity of information presented to us, Freire claimed, we become passive and superficial, accepting faulty logic, untested ideas, and allowing ourselves to be swayed by deceptive arguments and polemics.

By combining action and reflection, we create what Freire called *praxis* — a set of practices informed by reflection. Thus our actions are not random or haphazard but informed and deliberate and we are aware of why we do what we do.

In Freire’s model of education, the teacher is a co-learner with his or her students. Freire was critical of teachers who did not believe that their students had the ability to “discuss, to work and to create.” “Education is an act of love and courage,” wrote Freire in *Education for Critical Consciousness*. “It cannot fear the analysis of reality, or under pain of revealing itself as a farce, avoid creative discussion.”⁴

Freire utilized the component of reflection in the adult literacy programs he devised for peasant farmers in northeastern Brazil. So successful was this educational method that formerly illiterate adults exhibited reading success in a matter of days.⁵ Freire’s use of reflection and critical consciousness in adult education has been emulated by adult literacy educators throughout the globe.

1 Caine, R. & Caine, G. (1991). *Making Connections*, 29. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley/ Innovative Learning Publications.

3 Freire, P. (1973). *Education for Critical Consciousness*, 3. New York: Seabury Press.

4 Ibid, 38.

5 DePaivaBello, J.L. Paulo Freire and a New Philosophy for Education. <http://pedagogia.click2site.com/pfreire.htm>. (Accessed November 2000). See also Brown, C. (1975) *Literacy in Thirty Hours: Paulo Freire's Literacy Process in Northeast Brazil*. London: Writers and Readers Publishing Cooperative.

6 Caine, R. & Caine, G. (1991). *Making Connections*, 29. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley/ Innovative Learning Publications.

7 Wittgenstein, L. (1965). *The Blue and Brown Books*, 106-107. New York: Harper Torch Books. Vygotsky, L. (1978). *Mind in Society: The Development of Higher Psychological Processes*, 25. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.

8 Vygotsky, L. (1962). *Thought and Language*. Cambridge: MIT Press. The terms, “social speech” and “inner speech” are Vygotsky’s.

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