

Reflections – New Learning Environments  
Christina M. Anastasia

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Address: 5620 US Highway 50 E  
City, State, Zip: Salida, CO 81201  
Phone: 719-539-0999  
E-mail: rushsigns@amigo.net  
Instructor: Dr. Bandow  
Mentor:  
Abstract

## ABSTRACT

This paper offers an experiential approach to my personal journey as an instructor. Using the Four Lenses of reflection by Stephen D. Brookfield (1995) the past, present and future are the catalyst for understanding and personal reflection. Through these same lenses, I present my assumptions and beliefs as a teacher, an analysis of appropriate teaching methods, approaches, and techniques, and a review of the theoretical literature. As a result of this reflection, I will discuss the evaluative criteria that I would apply, indicators, and a summary of what I would like to accomplish as a teacher for myself, my learners and the world in general.

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## ASSUMPTIONS AND BELIEFS – THE FOUR LENSES

### Self Autobiographical Lens

As humans, we have the distinct advantage of thought and feeling over the vast majority of mammals. We have the uncanny ability to use our giant brains to solve problems, make decisions, and remember events from the past. I personally believe (perhaps with great bias) that we are made up of our experiences and that one is a catalyst for the next. Those events from childhood have an impact on choices made as adults. For example, a child that grows up in an environment where both parents are alcoholics, there is a greater chance that the child will carry on the behavior. (Sherr:1997:247) Growing up in an alcoholic home environment, the young years of my life were a constant struggle for survival and attention.

The years of neglect took a toll on me as a child and then as a young adult and initially the patterns of my childhood began to take hold of my adulthood. For some reason I was able to recognize the pattern and in my early thirties I made the decision to stop the behaviors. From that point on school and business were my goals when I became the first in my family to graduate from college. The drive for the new behaviors was mixed with anxiety and bouts of depression which are normal occurrences according to Sherr and the National Institute of Abuse and Alcoholism. These are conditions that I deal with each day of my life albeit the desire to achieve my goals keeps me moving forward.

As an adult I continue to confront my demons, however, as an academic I am able to utilize methods such as critical thinking and emotional intelligence to recognize the sources behind the situation. For example, if I find myself feeling left out of a situation I

am able to understand that these feelings stem from neglect in my childhood and it is my responsibility as an adult to correct the situation.

I use my past experiences to set the groundwork for present and future experiences. Sometimes it works, and sometimes it fails. Either way, what is important is that the outcome becomes a learning experience for future situations. The idea of teaching only recently entered my life and has since become a passion that I can not explain. Where emotional voids once consumed me, teaching caused them to disappear.

With each revelation in my life whether tragic or wonderful I was pushed forward to better myself. The need to make myself a better person is the driving force in my teaching philosophies. Each student that enters my class has the potential to become a better person through knowledge. I can provide that knowledge and as an “equal opportunity knowledge provider” my goal is always the success of my students. My life is a series of jumps from one life style into another lifestyle. With each new life I have gained a better understanding of my capabilities and the one true gift that I possess, the ability to teach others. The assumptions and beliefs that surround me require constant personal reflection is discussed through the four lenses of critical reflection offered by Brookfield (1995).

### The Lens of the Student

I have spent the last fifteen years of my life either as a student or an instructor. When I began my teaching career in 2004 I promised myself that my number one goal would be to provide my students with attention and commitment that periodically lacked in my own learning experience. However, the journey we begin will most likely have a few detours along the way. The lens of the student offers an honest look into the way we

teach, communicate and reflect. In my own experience through the lens of the student, I learned some lessons that brought a stark reality into my fantasy. I recently spent time practicing my teaching methods for an audience of friends and family to get a better understanding of how students perceive my methods. The result of this exercise is presented through the assumptions of Angelo and Cross (1993) the view of my teaching ability through the eyes of my students were bittersweet.

Assumption 1: The quality of student learning is directly, although not exclusively, related to the quality of teaching. Therefore, one of the most promising ways to improve learning is to improve teaching.” According to the assessments, examples appear to be an important factor when discussing a subject in which students may have limited knowledge. In this exercise one of the examples compared Organization Development to a physician. The company is the patient and the doctor the OD consultant. The company has an illness and they can explain the symptoms which would be the preliminary information a doctor would use to determine what tests and measures to take in order to create a diagnosis. Once the diagnosis is established then the problems can be cured. The idea is to avoid putting a band aid on the problems by fixing the problems not the symptoms. This appeared to be a factor in which each of the participants could relate.

Assumption 2: To improve their effectiveness, teachers need first to make their goals and objectives explicit, and then they need to get specific, comprehensible, feedback on the extent to which they are achieving those goals and objectives.” The assessment results show that the subject matter needs to be an area in which students

have a prerequisite understanding prior to taking the session. In the case of this example, only one of the participants has a college education.

Assumption 4: The type of assessment most likely to improve teaching and learning is that conducted by faculty to answer questions they have formulated in response to issues or problems in their own teaching.” One of the participants offered some incite into my vocal tones. I found this to be a fascinating area and for that reason, will take some time to actually listen to my own vocal reflections on audio. This is very important for online lectures as well.

Assumption 5: Systematic inquiry and intellectual challenge are powerful sources of motivation, growth, and renewal for college teachers, and classroom assessment can provide such challenge.” Once again it is important to note that subject matter can only be challenging if the students are prepared for what is about to be presented.

“Assumption 6: Classroom assessment does not require specialized training; it can be carried out by dedicated teachers from all disciplines.” The individuals that provided assessments for this exercise range in age, educational level, and sex. Each participant provided an honest assessment of the class.

Assumption 7: By collaborating with colleagues and actively involving students in classroom assessment efforts, faculty (and students) enhances learning and personal satisfaction.” (pp. 7–11). This statement holds more meaning for me after the exercise because it confirms that we can recite theory all day long, however, if the audience has no idea what we are talking about then how are they to learn?

This assessment through the lens of my students forces me to acknowledge my strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats through the use of a SWOT analysis.

My strengths show that I am obviously knowledgeable about the topic I am teaching which is a great attribute for an instructor. Being a both a visual and audible learner I tend to use these techniques in my own classrooms to bring about a better understanding of the subject. My Weaknesses include monotone vocals at times and sometimes I tend to get too caught up in the theory. Somehow I need to create a signal to myself that indicates when this is happening. There is also a great need to assess pre-knowledge. I also address this very subject in “opportunities” as I believe that with any weakness lies an opportunity to learn and grow.

Opportunities are abundant if we simply take the time to acknowledge them by utilizing processes such as assessment in future classes and this need extends to both me and my environments to get a feel for what my students know. The use of some simple assessment tools can offer a better feel for the environment as it pertains to what I am teaching and if my students are actually learning. This is a concept that I did not utilize in past classrooms. The biggest threat is fear. The fear of losing the attention of my students is an important concern which ties in with my opportunities to better myself through assessment.

### The Lens of Colleague Experiences

The opportunity to see my world through the eyes of my colleagues is both exciting and threatening. The fact that other teachers experience the same fears and realities offers comfort in a situation where so often I have felt alone. However, the fact that those same colleagues may see error in the way I present my instruction or ideas brings fear into that same element. As Brookfield (1995) so eloquently points out that we all experience these feelings of ineptness. The lens of our colleagues allows us to see

“that what we thought were unique problems and idiosyncratic failings are shared by many others who work in situations like ours.” (p. 36)

Oh to have the opportunity to work with those who have experienced the tragedies and the successes!! As an instructor I have had the opportunity to mentor many of my colleagues that are new to the teaching experience. My goal is to show them the ropes (most likely very bias ropes) and to help them become comfortable within the virtual teaching environment. Once again I return to my own experiences (or lack thereof) because I did not have a mentor when I began teaching. As students we need to know that we are not alone; that others have experienced some of the same things that we have experienced. Each one of us has a story to tell and this is a wonderful opportunity to take advantage of each other and this is done through the lens of our colleagues.

#### The Lens of Theoretical Literature

The literature is crucial to critical reflection. Sometimes as Brookfield (1995) points out, the writing is dry and boring, whereas other times the writing is fun and interesting. (p. 37) The two rules of thought in academic literature focus on elemental/pedagogical models and holistic/andragogical models. The dividing line between the two schools of thought is wide whereas it is my opinion that there needs to be a third model that applies to the virtual environment which consists of elements from both sides. Marshak (1983) suggests the addition of a third method which combines both pedagogy and andragogy which would be called adolegogy. Those teachers that recognize that they are working with adolegogy will be better able to cope with the situation allowing them to work towards the more “pure” method that they feel more

comfortable using in an academic environment. This ideas sets the groundwork for my focus on a newer method appropriate for virtual learning.

### Elemental Models

Knowles et al. (2005), explain that elemental models of development represent the universe as a machine composed of discrete pieces operating in a spatio-temporal field: reactive and adaptive model of man. (p. 23) Theorist Edward Thorndike (1898) is responsible for the “Stimulus Response” which actually was built on the initial studies of Ivan Pavlov (1902) and “conditioned reflexes.” Thorndike proposed that three laws actually ruled both the learning in animals and people; the law of readiness; the law of exercise; and the law of effect.

The theories presented by Thorndike and Pavlov fail to take into account that humans have the distinct advantage over animals because of the ability to feel and think logically. Elemental models also do not explain the underlying motives for why people want to better themselves. For example, if the drive is to acquire better status or more money then the stimuli is obvious. However, if the drive is an unfulfilled need such as those presented by Maslow, then the stimuli is no longer obvious.

Additional work and interpretation of elemental models are found in the writings of Guthrie (1930) with the “principle of contiguity of cue and response” and Hilgard and Bower (1966) with the stimuli and movement. Elemental models have a place in learning and should not be discounted, although whether that place fits into to adult education may be questionable. The authoritarian approaches to teaching still remains predominate in academic institutions. Caudron (2000) goes about gaining an understanding about why adult learning is still overlooked in these academic institutions by interviewing and

researching adult learners. Caudron offers several ideas on what is necessary to satisfying adult learners.

Context is essential to the adult learning experience and must include real life experience in the mix to successfully facilitate the learning experience. “Because adults learn best by having experiences and then reflecting on them, every session must provide an opportunity for participants to either experience something new and discuss it, or to analyze the material in light of their own experiences.” Relevant to this view is the fact that not all experiences teach making it essential for the instructor to assess experience and knowledge.

#### Holistic Models

Knowles et al. (2005) explain that the holistic models of development “represent the world as a unitary, interactive, developing, organism: active and adaptive model of man. (p. 23) this approach focuses on the behavior of individuals. Kurt Lewin (1933) offered “field theories” in order to understand the interrelated pieces of the integrated whole. This approach takes into account the environment as a whole such as the satisfaction of different levels of needs presented by Abraham Maslow (1941). When the environment changes the needs change and when one need is satisfied it no longer remains a need. Rinke (1995) offers some characteristics of holistic teaching that include the promotion of creativity and insight; the focus on brain dominance and creative literature; understanding that the learner holds responsibility for their own learning process; and that assessment of the knowledge brought to the classroom by the learner must be determined by the educator.

Maslow, like Lewin offers a deep look into both environment and behavior that hold true to this day. Lewin shows the forces that affect the behavior and drive of humans, where as Maslow shows how the needs change depending on the environment. These are basic elements needed for understanding the learning needs for adult students. The traditional model of “Shut up and Listen” no longer applies to adult learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Could it be that the reason so many adults still are not embracing education in their later years is attributed to authoritarian teaching styles that they were subjected to as young learners?

Andragogy refocuses learning to the level of adult and learning-centered (Knowles:1978) where experience and scenarios bring a new perspective into view. Although this view had several advocates in the early 20th century, the ideas remained in the abyss of eternal "good ideas" until middle of the century when by some coincidence they found their way into the main stream view of learning. Behavior coupled with sociology and psychology adds the ingredient necessary for understanding learning.

As both a student and teacher the two hats become interchangeable when it comes to the theories that resonate with me personally. There are instances when the confusion of pedagogy versus andragogy is predominant in classes in which I was a student. Only at the time I was not aware of the confusion. I now have a much better understanding that pieces of both methods are necessary to the learning and teaching experience. That said as I read through the theories of both Dewey (1938) and Rogers (1969) I was enveloped in a complete comfort in relating to these works.

Dewey (1968) explains that everything evolves around our experiences. My experiences both personally and academically as well as those experiences of my

students. Dewey offers several concepts in which experience is the balancing factor. Democracy, for example focuses on fairness within the classroom. For me this goes a lot further than fairness, it delves into areas of emotions, diversity, biases, critical thinking just to name a few. For real democracy to take place within the classroom, all of these issues must be understood by the instructor.

Dewey also offers the concept of continuity. We learn from our history, our past experiences and in turn shape the outcome of our future experiences. As an instructor I learn something new in each class that I facilitate which makes the next session even better. The instructor must also see this in the experiences of the students.

Finally Dewey offers the concept of interaction which he presents as both objective and internal conditions which are based on experience. Simply put, it is the “situations” that we face each and every day whether in the classroom, at home, or at work. “Every experience should do something to prepare a person for later experiences of deeper and more expansive quality.” (1938, pp 46-47)

Rogers (1968) proposes that the role of the teacher is actually that of the “facilitator.” In turn he offers ten different guidelines to assist the facilitator in his or her role. Here I will discuss a few of the guidelines.

The facilitator sets the mood of the classroom. I personally have experienced this in both positive and negative situations. In my own classrooms I work to set an environment of openness and comfort from the first day students enter the classroom. As a student, I have experienced instructors that appeared to be absent from day one. Communication is close to non-existent which creates extreme frustration.

The facilitator clarifies the purposes of the classroom. In most of the doctoral courses I have taken I can honestly say that the purposes are well defined and overall the experience has been positive. However, it should be noted that at the doctoral level education is completely different from that of undergraduate degrees. It is this higher academic influence that pushes me to provide my own undergraduate students with as much clarity as possible including rubrics, expectations, sources, personal contact, etc.

The facilitator organizes resources for students. Again, as I wear both of my hats I can say my experiences have been positive on the doctoral level. Rogers continues with the facilitator him or herself becomes a “flexible resource” as a coach, mentor, and advisor. This is a wonderful ideology that sometimes may not be as easy to do as it appears. For example, in the one of the schools where I teach, the role of advisor is “off limits” to instructors.

The facilitator takes the lead in sharing feelings and thoughts with the classroom. Sometimes all it takes is one live session with my students to show them that it’s okay to think outside of the box. Sometimes it takes a little longer. Either way, my students are encouraged to speak their mind, use their experiences, and dare to be creative.

Andragogical methods focus on adult learning albeit, both andragogical and pedagogical methods need to be combined in some cases and in my opinion which is based on my experiences as both teacher and learner both methods have a place in academic institutions.

### Pedagogy versus Andragogy

The confusion between pedagogy and andragogy as well as the opponents and proponents of the two styles is a difficult barrier to overcome as an instructor.

Understanding that a mixture of the two styles may be predominant in some institutions will reduce the stress of conformity to either and allow the instructor to determine the direction of their classroom.

The newness of the virtual academic environment creates a division between the ways of the past and the needs of the future. (Garavan, 1997) For example, a moment of silence in the virtual class can seem like hours whereas that same moment in a traditional classroom is filled with movement and other detractions from the teacher. This is why a virtual facilitator must be aware of how to fill space within the virtual environment.

Where pedagogy prepares the student to continue to the next level of learning, andragogy prepares the learner for hands on real life scenarios. In addition, the androgogical instructor takes on the role of the mentor and the communication that exists between teacher and learner is based on a “partnership.” Marshak (1983) offers some enlightenment between pedagogy and andragogy and the solutions of mixing the methods. The advocates for andragogy need to recognize that accrediting institutions require certain pedagogical elements in learning environments including virtual classrooms. These requirements alone will not allow a curriculum based entirely on andragogical methods. There are still learners that prefer pedagogical methods over andragogical methods. For example, case study method is an accepted tool for teaching concepts to adult learners (Weber and Delaney, 2000) whether case study or scenario; the instructor must know how to use the tools effectively in the classroom.

The adjustment from traditional to virtual classroom requires the instructor to take a second look into non traditional teaching styles. (Clark,2005) Are pedagogical methods suitable for the virtual environment or is there a division between what works for in

traditional brick and mortar environments versus virtual? Is it possible that characteristics from both methodologies can be used for all types of learning? (Forrest and Peterson, 2006) Could the answer lie in metaphoric (Marshall, 1990) and experiential learning which uses both scenario and experience to teach the student? (Merryfield, 1993) Oliver (2000) explains “Online learning and teaching is harder to characterize, due to its relatively short history and diverse forms of implementation.”

Corley and Eades (2004) propose that experiential learning “promotes an individualized perspective on learning.” Today’s business environment requires skills based knowledge that can be applied directly and utilized for company needs. “Knowles’ use of andragogy unified the adult education field of study by providing a rallying point and separating the adult education principles from those of children.” There must be an understanding that the two forms of teaching and learning are distinctly different albeit that the two styles may be intertwined at different times depending on the need and curriculum.

Online instructors need and want the ability to follow-up; classes that fit into their own schedules; matched learning styles; curriculum focused classes; support from the program chair; and support available to answer questions at any time Feist (2003). Teaching adult learners requires instructors to facilitate the learning process based on the fact that these learners are professional and bring with them prior knowledge and experience to the classroom. The skills needed to manage in the organizational environment must be immediately accessible in a manner that “training” would bring about, while at the same time invoke the skills that are only available to those that have acquired both a theoretical and case study focused education. Can a company actually

train its managers in a time of constant change in the environment? Or will the company need to embrace those that have a solid educational foundation?

Because of the relative newness of online learning, methods of evaluation are a process that requires both trial and error as well as restructuring from typical evaluative methods used in traditional schools. It is my opinion that characteristics of each of the methodologies must be combined to create the right method for the virtual academic environment. That said critically reflective practices are essential to my own success as a virtual instructor.

Depending on how the teacher views him or herself can have an impact on behaviors. This leads to a need for increased self-reflection. Although this is not the only means for self-reflection the process of understanding how instructors want to present themselves is a start for the reflection process. Perhaps the answer to the debate is to add a simple element into the mix that will work with both methodologies. Critical reflection as a basis for “equity and social justice” and the need for new teachers to use critical reflection for achieving “culturally relevant teaching practices” is essential in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. (Howard,2003) Cultural differences include race, religion, sexual preference, and cultural differences. Why race and culture are important areas to study? Why critical reflection is essential to cultural relevant pedagogy? What are the solutions and skills for teachers to develop their own reflection to create culturally relevant practices?

Although the cultural divide is in the process of being eliminated in the academic environment, it still remains in tact with a lot of work remaining. There are still social problems due to cultural differences that directly affect the academic success of some

individuals due to their race. Pedagogical practices must be reviewed in order to make the necessary changes in these environments.

Critical reflective practices are vital to creating cultural relevant practices. “Reflection gives attention to experiences and behaviors” and provides the components for teaching culturally diverse students successfully. When students are treated as “competent”, they will respond in competent manners. The traditional thoughts regarding cultural differences must be removed from the teaching process. Self knowledge and assessment allow instructors to removing the barriers present. (Birmingham, 2003). Reflection looks at intelligence, prudence, or practical wisdom, by enabling individuals to expand their skills and experiences freely without being “bound to routines.” According to Birmingham, “reflection incites moral responses.” This means that as we learn to reflect we tend to change the way we act and react to situations. What once may have been a reactive response may now be replaced with a proactive response based on our own reflections of what is morally right and what is morally wrong. Albeit, very important to remove our own biases from the practice.

### CONCLUSION

My assumptions and beliefs as a teacher focus on the needs of the student which requires that my own reflection is present in my teaching methods. This is partly attributed to the fact that I have been a student for so many years that I use my own experiences in the role of the student to shape my students experiences in my role as a teacher.

Students that learn within an on-line environment must work much harder than traditional students. Not only is the reading time more intense, the comprehension must

be unsurpassed. The distant adjunct must understand this and be able to help students with the comprehension process. The methods to accomplish this task differ depending on the academic institution and tools available for both adjunct and student. That said there are certain methods that should be utilized no matter what the academic situation. These include immediate feedback, constant communication, and continuation of my own learning in order to provide sound instruction to my students.

Feedback through the eyes of others along with personal reflection is essential to growth which must be solicited from my students, colleagues and superiors.. Brookfield (1998) points out that in order to grow as a teacher we must be able to analyze feedback from others and use the information to become better teachers. (1998:197). The problem I see in general when we ask for feedback is we are never sure if the feedback is genuine or if there is some sort of ulterior motive attached so it must be approached honestly and solicit honest evaluation just as the personal reflection or “autobiographical lens” entails stepping outside of our own biases in order to really understand ourselves. In conjunction, these three lenses offer a natural flow of information vital to the reflection process. One of them will not offer the complete picture; the others must be included in the mix before the work of changing can really begin. For this reason, the three lenses are now a permanent part of my life for successful reflection.

Part of my reflection is to continue my education for the sake of my teaching skills and my personal attainment. Education is such a staple in my life I have a hard time imagining a life without books, journals, and academic conversation. I have already made the decision to pursue a Masters Degree in psychology once my dissertation is complete and published. Education for me is simply a part of my life that has been

present for the past fifteen years or one third of my lifetime. The lens of literature must be present because without it, the elements of critical thinking would diminish. Critical thinking is the one thing that keeps me honest.

As Bob Dylan pointed out so many years ago, “the times they are a changin’” and what an opportunity to experience these changes in my lifetime. The excitement of new ideas and technologies that bring the classroom into the home; the thought that maybe cultural diversity will one day be an actual part of our lives and not just the title of a college course; and the idea that perhaps one day we may go to Mars are all possibilities within my lifetime. Change is invigorating and to be a part of that change is the ultimate experience of ones’ life. New theories, new ideas, new concepts are the quintessential goal.

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