

**Reflective Practice and Action Research as a Source of Pre-service
and In-service Professional Development and Classroom
Innovation:
Burden or Benefit? Myth or Reality?**

by

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**Working Paper No. 14
August 2005**

Abstract

The concept of the teacher as reflective practitioner and teacher as researcher of his/her own classroom practice now has a long 20th and 21st century tradition and is promoted widely in the teacher education literature of recent years. But does it have real benefits for teacher skill development and innovation in classroom practice? This paper describes the outcomes of two research projects. The first examines the effectiveness of a reflective practice exercise carried out by both pre-service and inservice English teachers at AUT. The other follows the development of a collaborative action research project in which teachers reflected on and took steps to improve the teaching of casual conversation in their own classrooms. The paper will draw conclusions about the benefits and constraints for teachers of both reflective practice and the more formal action research, examining to what extent they help teachers to develop skills and encourage innovation in the classroom. Recommendations are made for future practice to support both reflective practice and its formalisation as action research.

Introduction

In this paper I will explore from a practical point of view a teacher development tool called reflective practice, both in a pre-service/novice and an inservice context and ways in which this can be extended and formalised into action research.

I will start by discussing the concept of reflective practice, outlining in brief some theoretical principles and some insights from the literature which have been influential in developing these reflective practice exercises and its more recent extension into action research. Then I will introduce you to two projects in which reflective practice is the focus of ongoing professional development for classroom teachers at AUT as well as an action research project we have recently undertaken. I will examine the role of reflective practice in each of these exercises and describe aspects of their development in recent years. I will then describe and compare the approaches and attitudes of novice and experienced teachers to reflective practice as a form of professional development and describe some outcomes of the inservice programme and the more recently completed action research project. From this information I will draw conclusions about their perceived value in terms of professional development and classroom innovation and to what extent each is a preparation for the next.

Finally I plan to make recommendations, drawn from reflection on our experience and from the experience of other practitioners in the literature, for future developments and for creating a climate in which both pre-service and in-service teachers can take part in, enjoy and benefit from reflective practice, and, if they so choose, action research..

The Two Reflective Practice Programmes and the Action Research Project - Overview

We have used the reflective practice process as a tool for teacher development in both the Practicum 1 module of the Grad Diploma in Language Teaching to Adults with pre-service and novice teachers and in an annual exercise undertaken by classroom teachers in the Certificate in English Language (CEL) programme. The same principles drive these two exercises but the way in which teachers at each stage are required to carry them out and the expected outcomes vary because of the different needs of the two groups. In the last two years a small group of teachers has used the expertise they have built up over many years of engaging with reflective practice in order to carry out some action research, examining new ways of teaching casual conversation in English. I will first outline the general principles which have inspired all of these, then move on to discuss in more detail how these are realised in the two programmes and the project.

The Concept of Reflective Practice and Action Research and Some History

Reflective practice as it is used at AUT is a process in which teachers look at their own practice, reflecting with a tutor or trusted peer on what they see in the light of their beliefs about teaching and learning, identify weaknesses, plan improvements, action these and evaluate the revision, thus starting a new cycle of reflection. The cycle is the same in action research except that the evaluation involves more rigourous data gathering and analysis than

is normally undertaken in reflective practice as the aim is to present and publish results. Reflective Practice is a bottom-up process because it is self directed, confidential to the teacher and his/her tutor or chosen peer, flexible within certain guidelines in terms of time and method, and collaborative. It is to a large extent initiated and driven by the teacher, and therefore more empowering than the more top-down types of teacher development. But it is also conscious, planned and systematic. Of course good teachers are always constantly evaluating their practice and the idea of critical reflection is not new but the systematic pursuit of it has been promoted more in the last twenty years.

The idea originally arose from studies in general education and also has links to critical theory (Smith & Lovat, 1999). Schon (1983; 1987) spoke of 'reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action' as two processes which lead to development in teaching skills. The former referred to reflection while teaching, and the other to reflection after teaching. The idea was picked up and has been further developed in relation to language teaching over the last 15 years by researchers and theorists such as Freeman (1989), Richards and Nunan (1990), Allwright and Bailey (1991), Wajnryb (1992), Richards and Lockhart (1994), Brookfield (1995), Head and Taylor (1997), Wallace (1998) and Burns (1999). The parallel and closely related development of action research as a self directed and empowering method of enquiry started with Kurt Lewin, and was instigated and developed in education by Corey in the USA, Stenhouse and Eliot in Britain, and Kemmis and McTaggart in Australia (Zeichner, 2001).

Richards (1987) and Freeman (1989) writing in the TESOL Quarterly at the end of the eighties espoused the teacher development rather than training model of teacher preparation. In addition a number of articles in Richards and Nunan (1990) explore early conceptions of how Reflective Practice might be used in different types of teacher education programmes. Wallace (1991; 1998) gives a very clear account of the notion of the reflective practitioner in the context of other models of teacher education and also provides guidelines for teachers wishing to extend reflective practice into action research. The introduction to Wajnryb's 'Classroom Observation Tasks' published in 1992 has an enthusiastic and persuasive outline of the rationale behind reflective practice as a teacher development tool emphasising the empowerment of teachers. Richards and Lockhart (1994) also take up this theme of the empowerment of teachers and include an excellent discussion of the theory of reflective practice and some practical guidelines and methods for collecting data in classroom observation as part of an action research cycle. Finally Nunan and Lamb (1996) see the reflective practitioner as a complement to the self-directed learner. Numerous articles have been written since, notably in the 1998 TESOL Quarterly 32/3, which focus on different aspects of Reflective Practice.

A number of books have also been written in the last ten to fifteen years to give theoretical background and practical guidance to the teacher action researcher. Those which influenced our project include Burns (1999), Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) and Wallace (1998), and latterly Mills (2003). The model of action research we used drew on a number of writers mentioned above and followed an observe - reflect - plan - act - observe cyclical pattern.

The Graduate Diploma Course

The Practicum 1 paper of the Grad Diploma LTA/TESOL was set up in 1997 with the aim of helping novice teachers to develop the skills of formal and systematic 'reflection-on-action'. This course has developed somewhat over recent years and is still evolving. In its latest form

learners are required to submit a portfolio of 7 items and a reflective summary on each. Items for reflection include a lesson plan, a worksheet or assessment task created or modified by the teacher, an account of an observation by or of a peer, a videotape or audiotape of a segment of their own teaching, a teaching or reading journal or an account of a peer discussion. Teachers on the programme have a degree of choice about which items to reflect on and the focus of their reflection within certain guidelines. A lecture at the beginning of the course introduces the concept of reflective practice and a group tutorial helps teachers to conceptualise and practise aspects of the process. In addition there are individual and group tutorials for discussion and feedback to teachers on items submitted to date, help with individual difficulties and guidance in planning further items and writing a critically reflective essay. A set of detailed guidelines and assessment criteria given out at the first lecture are also designed to help learners write in critically reflective rather than narrative mode. The role of reflective practice is to accelerate and focus the development of the novice teacher and in our experience is very effective in doing so.

Reflective Practice in the Certificate in English Language

The reflective practice exercise in the Certificate in English Language is based on similar principles but, because it is designed for more experienced teachers, individuals are given more freedom in the choice of techniques used, the focus of their reflection and when it is undertaken. Teachers are required to choose a problematic area to focus on in their teaching, (for example blackboard writing, group work, questioning techniques, the design of worksheets or developing fluency in learner's conversation skills). They gather data on or observe in some way this aspect of their teaching, analyse the data and form an action plan to improve if necessary. They then reflect on the exercise with a trusted peer. The exercise is owned and operated by them and the reflection itself is not open to scrutiny by a supervisor. The supervisor requests only minimal information - the fact that the exercise has been done, when and with whom, the focus and the technique. Guidelines are provided but they are less extensive. They explain the rationale behind the process and state the requirements. Guidelines also include examples of methods and foci which have been used in the past and principles of non-directive listening and discussion for the person who is undertaking the role of peer. Confidentiality is agreed on as a basic protocol to ensure there is a climate of trust and to encourage honest critical self-assessment.

The Role of Critical Reflection in the Certificate in English Language

The role of critical reflection in this programme is to ensure the continued self-development of teachers and the improvement and renewal of their classroom practice, at whatever point they have reached in their career. Collaboration ensures that participants have to articulate and frame the rationale behind their practice. Teachers also find that talking with a trusted peer about teaching practice is both stimulating and motivating.

Challenges and Development

Methods

Several challenges have arisen in the planning and implementation of this exercise necessitating some changes. It began as simply a peer observation programme. It was then broadened to include other techniques, including peer discussion of materials and challenges, videotaping and audio taping of lesson segments, and, later still, reflective journal writing with peer discussion.

The focus and the reflective introduction

Teachers have been encouraged in recent years to find a focus by looking at student appraisals and course evaluations or by informal diary writing. To ensure the exercise has a focus, a purpose and clear goals, teachers are now encouraged to write an informal reflective passage introducing their focus and outlining the aims and rationale behind their exercise and to discuss this with their partner before doing the exercise.

Records and checks, feedback

There is a limited feedback sheet which teachers fill in at the end of each year. They are asked when the exercise was undertaken, when completed, with whom, using what method and with what focus. Using this tool the exercise and guidelines have been fine-tuned. Feedback has been very positive. Suggestions in the feedback from teachers have resulted in expanded guidelines, including more information about methods and tools and examples of foci that teachers have selected in recent years, as well as protocols on how to be an effective and supportive peer. The name of the exercise has also been changed from 'peer appraisal' to 'reflective practice' to better reflect the self-directed philosophy.

Teachers on the programme have gradually become more enthusiastic about this exercise and more skilled at getting the most from it. One very pleasing outcome as teachers have developed more expertise in reflective practice is the variety and relevance of the topics chosen for reflection. Some very innovative practices have been initiated and developed using reflective practice, some of which have been the subject of conference papers. Examples from the last two years include writing readers for lower level students, teaching negotiating skills using semi scripted dialogues as models, integrating the teaching of reading and listening using newspapers and radio news, teaching formulaic language in lower level classes, evaluating material developed to facilitate grammar acquisition and examining how speech perception relates to both listening and pronunciation.

Summary of Research Findings - Reflective Practice 1999 and 2000

Surveys of participants comparing the two exercises

After running both the teacher education and the in-service model for the three to four years I was curious to know how much teachers at both stages valued Reflective Practice, what

methods and tools they preferred, whether there was any difference in attitude and methodology between one group and the other and whether the principles and techniques taught in Practicum 1 carried over to the practice of teachers once they were employed in the 'real world'.

In order to explore these questions two surveys were carried out. One was of graduates of the 1999 Practicum 1 module in April 2000, 10 months after they completed the module. By this stage most had become novice teachers rather than students, though there were some still studying. A similar survey was given to in-service teachers as an extension of the usual end of year survey on the Certificate in English Language Reflective Practice exercise in 1999. Questionnaires were sent out to 12 graduates of the Diploma module (all of those who could be contacted) and to 12 CEL teachers (all the tenured staff on this programme). All of the CEL teachers were experienced practitioners. Eight Practicum 1 graduates and 11 CEL teachers responded. A copy of the Practicum 1 survey is attached as an appendix.

Results and Conclusions from Surveys

The quantitative data was collated and converted to percentages and the comments of respondents were collated under theme. There were a number of findings from these surveys and, for reasons of space and time, only those relevant to this paper are outlined here.

The Perceived Value of Reflective Practice

All novice teachers reported that they believed that Reflective Practice was a useful skill, and all the experienced teachers said that they would use Reflective Practice even if it was not a compulsory exercise, indicating that they also personally valued it, though most (75% of experienced and 85% of novice teachers) said that at least some of their self initiated reflection in the absence of compulsion would be informal (not formally recorded).

When asked how much impact (if any) this (formal or informal) reflection has had in their teaching practice, 50% of experienced teachers and 37.5% of novice teachers chose 'a lot'. 25% of both experienced and novice teachers chose 'some', and 8% of experienced and 25% of novice teachers chose 'a little'. Two experienced teachers did not answer this question but indicated in other comments that they felt positive about reflective practice. This data suggests a greater level of impact on experienced teachers but a significant impact on both.

Sample comments from novice teachers who chose 'a lot' (2 of whom had used formal and 1 informal methods) show an understanding of the basic process:

'Keeps my professional responsibility going on strong'

'Makes me self-observe my teaching and improve my teaching, spotting my teaching shortcomings and thinking about the ways to overcome the shortcomings thus making the teaching more effective.'

As I am new to teaching, I have found myself constantly reflecting on every lesson.'

Some could go further and see the potential for enhancing development and innovation:

'I would estimate a lot as without I could not progress and improve my teaching practice or curriculum development when revising and creating new courses.'

Comments from novice teachers who chose 'some' or 'a little', (all of whom had chosen informal methods) identify environmental limitations to the effectiveness and viability of the Reflective Practice exercise. These include the large classes in Asian countries and the rigid teaching schedules in some schools.

Comments from experienced teachers (all of whom had taken part in a formal exercise) show a deeper understanding of the process and appreciation of the impact that the formal exercise had on their practice and are more aware of its potential to support innovation and development:

'particularly in forcing me to analyse and find solutions to problems/difficulties/challenges. Have developed better ways of teaching certain parts of the syllabus as a result of reflection'

'because learning and teaching languages are dynamic processes. No one student or learning situation is identical to another. Reflection, I believe, can with time increase teachers' sensitivity and effectiveness in meeting learners' needs.'

'I am constantly reflecting but time pressures limit the extent to which alternative approaches or ideas can be prepared and trialled with the same class. (Plan to try some with new class).'

The majority of comments from both groups stress the positive and ongoing nature of reflection in professional practice. Even where there is less impact reported there is usually a factor in the environment which is preventing it having a greater impact - for example the cultural climate, pressures of time in teaching schedules, the fact that the respondent is still in training, the method used, rather than the process itself.

A Comparison Between Approaches and Attitudes of Experienced and Novice Teachers

There was little evidence of any difference in attitude. Both clearly reported finding the process valuable and in both groups a similar majority preferred informal to formal methods.

However the more articulate and detailed comments of experienced teachers and the greater proportion of these who reported a significant impact of Reflective Practice on their teaching showed a more sophisticated grasp of the process, and also show that the process is an established and ongoing one.

Stanley (1998) posits a framework to reflectivity in which there are a number of stages which we go through in learning to become reflective practitioners: engaging with reflection, thinking reflectively (learning the concepts and skills), using reflection (having discovered its benefits), sustaining reflection (having overcome any setbacks from negative data) and practising reflection (the process is established and ongoing). The majority of learners on the Practicum 1 course are at the first stage and are (hopefully) moved to the second stage during the course. The majority of novice teachers (Practicum graduates now in the classroom) seem

from their comments to be in the second or third stage. The majority of experienced teachers seem to be in the fourth or fifth stage.

It should be noted that both groups are too small for figures from these surveys to show if they have any statistical significance or generalisability, but results are nevertheless indicative of what is happening in this group at least, and possibly others.

Fostering Innovation

The data from this research did not yield enough detail to judge whether reflective practice fostered innovation, though it was clear that it did foster the faster development of the majority of teachers. Nevertheless topics which were the focus of reflective practice over the last two years as reported by teachers in the Certificate in English Language programme serve as an indication of the type of innovation that can be encouraged and supported by reflective practice. Effective integrating of reading and listening in the teaching of news, new lower level readers, a series of semi-scripted dialogues for teaching conversational skills, and a project to develop innovative ways of teaching pronunciation have all resulted from or been developed and advanced through reflective practice exercises.

Action Research

This familiarity with and expertise in the process of reflective practice together with a desire to develop research skills, was a factor in the decision of a group of Certificate in English Language staff to go a step further and attempt to do action research over the last two years. In addition to the reflective practice cycle of plan, act, observe reflect and plan there is, in action research, a requirement that the results will be based on more rigorous analysis of carefully collected data and that these will be presented and there will be some generation of theory. Action Research, like reflective practice, is also by definition focused on improvement of practice.

The group was set up at the end of 2002 up by two Senior Lecturers with an interest in Action Research and in the improvement of the teaching of casual conversation. This interest arose out of reading the more recent literature in the description of English conversation and the more recent and innovative methods of teaching casual conversation using models and materials based on data from corpora and authentic texts advocated by such writers as Carter and McCarthy (1993) and Burns (2001). Other teachers were invited to join the group if they had similar interests and a desire to work towards formalising their reflective practice by undertaking Action Research in their own classrooms. In the first year eight teachers were involved in the group. This shrank to four in the second year. Five of the eight teachers completed at least one cycle of action research into some aspect of the teaching of casual conversation. Four presented their findings at a conference near the end of the second year. The process was made easier for busy teachers by the planning and submission of an application for ethics approval that covered the whole group and by the sharing of readings from the literature. Teachers met about 6 times each year to give mutual support and report on their progress. In the second year in order to give more support between meetings a system of pairing teachers to act as 'buddies' who met more often was instituted with some success.

Summary of Research Findings - Action Research 2004

A research project designed to evaluate the impact on teaching and research skill development and to examine the issues which arise when teachers undertake collaborative action research in this manner was carried out in 2003 and 2004. Data used consisted of the minutes of the meetings, a reflective journal kept by the researcher and a questionnaire completed by the four teachers still in the project after 18 months. These yielded qualitative data which was coded for theme. The data from the major themes was summarized and the number of times themes appeared quantified. It is not possible within the scope of this paper to examine all the findings but some findings are relevant.

Group members reported major benefits for both teaching and research skills development in this type of group action research activity. For teachers there was faster professional development, through basing teaching changes and decisions not only on reflection but also on reliable data collection and analysis. There was also more effective and focused teaching materials development, some of it very innovative, and the generation and propagation of relevant and useful theory. Innovations which were facilitated by these action research projects included the recording and use of semi-scripted dialogues to help High Intermediate learners to focus on the formulaic expressions used in casual conversation and negotiation, the use of short authenticated dialogues for the same purpose at lower levels and the use of videoed role-play to teach sociopragmatic and pragmalinguistic skills to migrant medical professionals. Research skills were learned in this project through individuals 'learning by doing' and also through the sharing of expertise and experience. The voluntary nature of group membership was also an asset, as was the fact that members of the group all saw the area of the focus as being of interest in their teaching.

However there were constraints. The tension between teaching and other professional roles and research was a common and dominant theme in the data. The biggest and most pervading issue here was that research takes time and 'head space' and teachers found that without a time allocation there needed to be a willingness to spend large amounts of their own time on the project.

'Research conflicts with time for teaching/curriculum development – much bigger project than expected' 'Time on top of teaching' '[not]having the time to plan the research properly. Lack of time to do the research as thoroughly as I would like once planned'(Questionnaire data P 2-3).

The timing of some research processes (such as getting consent) sometimes conflicted with the optimum timing of some of the teaching processes.

'Problem of delay in consent coming through. This overlapped with the beginnings of teaching about conversation and distorted the teaching process as had to be careful not to intervene until ethics approval through and consent gained.....Not possible to do conversation teaching as it came up naturally as a result in the early stages'. (Reflective Journal 03 P1)

Many teachers felt keenly a lack of research experience. However this was not an insuperable barrier as one of the most inexperienced had with support managed to carry a project to presentation stage after 20 months in the group.

In addition, although the peer support model had strengths and empowered teachers, it also had weaknesses. Some, though not all, members of the group believed that some research skills might have best been developed before the research started in a focused workshop environment preferably lead by an experienced action researcher. Teachers less experienced in research might also have benefited from being given guidance on basic background reading in research methodology before the project started.

The issue of the number of and timing of meetings was also problematical. It was difficult to ensure that there were enough group meetings to provide necessary support but not so many for group members to fit in with their other roles. This was largely solved by the use of the buddy system.

However overall this project was a positive one for the participants as these extracts from the data show:

‘The reality is that you have to be prepared to in a considerable amount of time yourself, but to my mind, the benefits far outweigh the disadvantages’(Questionnaire data p2 – 3)

‘.....we have, as a result of being involved, developed our awareness of this area and shared some innovative ideas about teaching in this area, it has directly informed our practice in the classroom.....’ (Mins October 03 P5)

The findings of this project are remarkably similar to those in other reports on collaborative action research projects carried out with groups of language teachers (Burns, 2003; Nunan, 2001).

A Climate Conducive to a Successful Reflective Practice or Action Research Programme

The data from both research projects and our experiences in developing these exercises and projects have shown that there are a number of constraints imposed by personal circumstances and the environment on successful Reflective Practice and Action Research. Therefore it seems important to make recommendations about the environments in which Reflective Practice and Action Research can best be fostered.

Support

Firstly there must be moral and academic support for teachers in training and novice teachers using these methods of teacher development. Peer support can be fostered initially by encouraging a culture of mutual trust and collaboration amongst colleagues and fellow students.

For students in teacher education programmes group work in the initial lectures and an informal, non-competitive atmosphere will contribute to this outcome. In addition academic support in the form of guidelines must be provided which lead learners into critical analysis, rather than narrative, though the provision of target questions to answer. These guidelines should also explain the collaborative developmental and non-judgemental nature of Reflective Practice. Individual and group tutorials can complete the moral and academic support process.

For practising teachers clear guidelines and a buddy system are important for reflective practice and a buddy system and a system in which teachers report to others during and on completion of their projects has been found to be beneficial and essential in the case of action research which demands more rigorous data collection, analysis and reporting.

Time

Next, time must be allocated and built into teacher contact loads for reflective practice and action research. If time is not given the split between teachers and researchers will widen and this kind of exercise will not be possible or will be a 'token' effort only.

Trust - security and confidentiality

In addition there must be an atmosphere of trust for true collaborative Reflective Practice. I have already mentioned how this can be created in a teacher education context. A non-competitive atmosphere in the workplace and a minimising of non-tenured employment contracts will foster this process for in-service teachers. Insecure teachers cannot and do not trust enough to be truly self critical when they have to prove themselves 'good' in order to win new contracts. A principle of confidentiality is also central to this trust.

Modelling

A leader or lecturer who models critical self-reflection will greatly enhance the atmosphere of trust in a workplace or classroom. They must undertake and be seen to be undertaking the same process (Woodward, 1988). Feedback surveys with reports back to staff are one form of modelling reflective practice.

Collaborative Groups for Action Researchers

The use of a volunteer group focusing on a topic of importance and concern to a number of teachers has been shown by this research to be effective in enabling teachers to carry out useful action research. This also enables teachers to share readings and a common ethics approval. Regular meetings with a tight agenda, together with a buddy system are effective in giving support. It is also helpful if at least one member of the group has experience in action research and at least one member has a knowledge of the literature on the focus topic.

Research Skills for Action Researchers

Some of these can be learned in the group reporting environment, but some may best be learned by background reading prior to the start of research or by focuses workshopping.

We have some of these measures in place at AUT, although I think we have a little way to go on some others. We have found Reflective Practice and Action Research to be exciting, stimulating and powerful tools for teacher development and innovation and plan to continue both with, we hope, further improvements in the future.

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**DIPLOMA IN LANGUAGE TEACHING TO ADULTS
PRACTICUM 1 MODULE
GRADUATE SURVEY – 1999 CLASS**

Please answer the questions as below:

Tick the box which is most true for you

Write comments or details on dotted lines

1. Do you still remember the process of reflection on practice which you learned and practised on the Practicum 1 module?
Yes No
2. When you had completed the module, did you believe that you had learned a skill that would be useful to you in your professional life?
Yes No

Comments:

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3. Have you had work as a teacher since you finished the module?
Yes No

If yes please give details:

.....

.....

.....

Please complete the rest of this questionnaire only if the answer to Question 3 was ‘Yes’

4. Have you used this reflective process formally (with a written record of some kind) or informally (just in your thinking) to improve your professional practice at any time since you completed the module?
Yes No

5. If your answer to question 4 was 'No', why haven't you used it?

I did not think it would be useful

I find other forms of professional development more useful

There is no time to reflect on my teaching

I think I now have the skills to do the job and don't need this process

Other (please give details)
.....

6. If you answered 'Yes', has your reflection been

formal informal

7. If formal (with a written record), have you kept a record of your reflection

for your own personal professional development

to satisfy the professional development requirements of the institution you work for

Comments:

.....

8. What methods (e.g. peer observation, peer discussion, journal, observation of another teacher and reflection) have you used?

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.....

9. How much impact, if any, has this (formal or informal) reflection had on your teaching practice?

a lot some a little none

Comments:

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.....
.....

10. How well did the exercises you did in Practicum 1 prepare you for critical reflection as a practising teacher?

very well quite well not very well

Comments:

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.....
.....

11. If you found the exercise on Practicum 1 of little or no benefit to your professional teaching, state why:

Comments:

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12. What changes could we make to Practicum 1 to make it more useful for practising teachers?

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