

***DEVELOPING AN AWARENESS OF YOUR OWN PARTICULAR CONTEXT:
AN INTERVIEW WITH DR. STEVE WALSH***

SHANE DONALD

Introduction

Steve Walsh arrived at Newcastle University in March of 2007. Prior to this, he was based at Queens University Belfast for almost a decade. Teacher education and professional development is one area Dr. Walsh has published research on. This interview aims to provide some insight into the role critical reflective practice plays in teacher development, how he defines critical reflective practice and how it can inform and aid teachers in investigating their own teaching context.

The interview begins with a definition of critical reflective practice, then focuses on how teachers may employ reflective practice as a form of action research by collecting data from the classroom. The discussion touches on themes such as possible reluctance on the part of instructors to reflect and how reflection may not be carried over from pre-service courses. The interview concludes with Dr. Walsh outlining how he is currently using reflective practice in his own practice at the Newcastle University.

Interview

SW – Steve Walsh

I – Interviewer (Shane Donald)

I: First of all Steve, thank you for agreeing to be interviewed.

SW: You're welcome.

I: The topic we're going to talk about is critical reflective practice. First of all, what is reflective practice and how would you describe it?

SW: Well, that's a very difficult question. It's probably the question that, I guess, that there's most disagreement on in many ways. Most people would agree that it's some kind of reflection plus action. Most people would agree that it's something to do with changing what you do in order to be more efficient as a teacher, for example. I think it's not necessarily about change, I think it's more understanding and it's about developing an awareness of your own particular context. I think, in my own mind, the first step is about raising awareness, raising understandings, being able to describe, being able to articulate what's happening in a particular context, much more than necessarily changing it. Because the first step to any change, any educational change has to be some kind of understanding. So I would say, I would put the emphasis on understanding with a view to possibly changing later on but the first step has to be raising awareness and developing understandings and actually being able to articulate that in a coherent way, which is why I think it's important for reflective practice to be a dialogic construct rather than a kind of mono construct. If I can say it like that!

I: You've mentioned raising awareness. What else does reflective practice offer to language teachers in particular do you think?

SW: Well, I think it gives them a chance to become researchers of their own context essentially and um a researcher with a small 'r' rather than a capital 'r'. That research is very much a private enterprise. It's not something that's necessarily going to be published. It's not necessarily going to be presented at a conference but it's a tool for

helping them acquire and develop their own professional practice. That's what I think the main focus is or should be anyway. And the reason why I think that's important is teaching can become a very mundane, very unprincipled, a very routine-led industry or enterprise if you're not constantly appraising it or looking at it and trying to understand it and I think that's why in my mind it's not necessarily about change, it's about understanding and it's about helping teachers to become researchers of what they do in their own classes.

I: OK. It's interesting you mention that teaching can become a mundane activity. I have a question related to that coming up.

SW: OK.

I: But right now I'd like to read you a quote from Moon if I may.

SW: Sure.

I: Moon states 'reflective practice is a form of mental processing with a purpose and/or an anticipated outcome that is applied to relatively complicated or unstructured ideas for which there's not an obvious solution'.

SW: Hmm.

I: So what are some methods in which language teachers can be trained in this mental processing?

SW: Well, I mean in my own mind again, the reason that reflective practice...I don't think it's happening on the scale that people claim it's happening. I think reflective practice is something that people do when they're taking a course, when they're involved in a Master's degree or a certificate or diploma course because it's pretty well always a course requirement, it's something they have to do.

I: That's something you found in your research isn't it?

SW: Yeah, yeah, that's what I found, yeah, exactly and I think one of the reasons for that is we're not using the right tools, we're not using the right approaches so the first step in my mind is some kind of data. We need some data which we can look at. It might be a recording of a class, it might be a transcript, it might be a conversation with a colleague while we're watching a video of some teaching. Anything like that constitutes some data. It might even be a focus group with a small group of students about a particular issue.

I: So do you think experienced practitioners might be more resistant to employing reflective practice?

SW: Well, I mean some are and some aren't. I mean, for example today I've just had an email from a group in Taiwan actually.

I: OK.

SW: When I was there last year they were using my framework in their own teaching on a weekly basis and having discussions about the videos they were using with the framework.

I: Great.

SW: So I'm getting email queries from them which is great. You know that's the kind of thing that I think should be happening on a much bigger scale. But you said, what are the tools I think was the question, wasn't it?

I: Right.

SW: What are things that teachers can do? Well I think it's got to be data-based, it's got to be some kind of evidence. There's no point just reflecting in the abstract. We have to reflect on something concrete. We have to look at something, we have to talk about something, we have to have issues that we can discuss. We can't discuss those

things in the abstract because they are so complex but if we can see them on a video recording or hear them at least. This is why I think interaction, classroom interaction should lie at the heart of reflective practice. I think the two things, when they're coupled together like that could work very very well.

I: When I mention reflective practice to my experienced colleagues back in Taiwan they treat it as if it's face-threatening to actually bring in recording equipment to the classroom...

SW: Yeah.

I:...and actually capture what's going on. So do you think there's any way around this?

SW: Well you could have a critical friend to just observe you. You don't have to necessarily record it. It could be getting a friend, colleagues, somebody else in the profession to reflect back to you what they saw. And it could be a written log or written notes or a narrative if you like of that incident. It doesn't have to be recordings. But I would say to people recordings are far better because you get into the finer detail and once people ...This isn't something you just do once and that's it you know, this is something that you have to do on a regular basis, maybe I don't know, some kind of...once a month you have a session where one group, one person in a group makes a recording and then they sit around and discuss it. You know, that's the kind of professional network I think would facilitate reflective practice and would promote it and would actually make it happen. If you do it on your own just as a kind of individual enterprise it can be quite soul-destroying and it can, in my experience, be quite demotivating as well because you just keep telling yourself you're a lousy

teacher and it may not be the case at all. It may just be you need to refocus what you're looking at, you know.

I: Do you think reflective practice makes tacit knowledge much more explicit?

SW: It should do.

I: For language teachers, if they have a nagging concern about their practice and then they can see concrete examples that makes it much clearer.

SW: Definitely. I think that's very much a part of it. I think that's what Simon Borg talks about in his work on teacher's beliefs and so on. It's about bringing that tacit knowledge to the fore, using what Steve Mann talks about as experiential knowledge which is much more complex than the knowledge of the discipline, the received wisdom if you like, to use that kind of quote, the received wisdom of the profession. It's much more about your own tacit knowledge, your own cognition, your own beliefs, and actually bringing those out into the open. And again the best way to do that in my experience is through some data and through some dialogue. You know, that's what we need.

I: You've already touched on the idea of reflective practice leading to some action and you've talked about action research. Do you think reflective practice and action research are distinct from each other or are they inextricably entwined?

SW: I think reflective practice is a form of action research. I think action research is the kind of super-ordinate, the bigger category of you like, and within that we have reflective practice. But the term itself, in my opinion, is getting a little bit tired and I'd be very happy to see some new kind of way of talking about reflective practice because people sort of glaze over a little bit now when you say, 'Do you reflect on

your practice? What is it? How do you do it?' Because everyone believes they do it. They do it almost intuitively.

I: Right.

SW: So for example Dick Allwright has come up with this notion of exploratory practice hasn't he, as a kind of an alternative? And Julian Edge talks about cooperative development which are all forms of reflective practice and I think it would be good to give it a kind of re...a make-over really and rejuvenate and regenerate it. There's definitely value in it but I think as a term it's become a bit tired.

I: I've noticed in the reading I've done on this topic that it tends to be that reflective practice is used to analyse a problem in teaching.

SW: Yes.

I: Do you think it's exclusively used to investigate problems as Loughran states or is it ever used to investigate what's working about someone's practice?

SW: I think it should be. I think it should be both. I don't think we should always focus on the negative. We should look at something we think we do particularly well or works particularly well with one group of students perhaps and maybe not so well with another group and perhaps try and understand why. In my mind the process of reflective practice should give us a wider menu to use when we're teaching. It should give us a better range of options. That's the whole point of it. So if you think about, you know, going out for dinner, if there's only three things on the menu, you might not find anything you like. You're kind of restricted, you might walk out and find something else. If you've got ten things to choose from...and I think the same applies in classrooms. Effective teaching is largely, or at least in part to do with making the right decision at the right time. And I think reflective practice has a great role to play

in helping teachers understand their decision-making. How do they make decisions? How do they decide at a particular point in a lesson to do x rather than y? But maybe they don't know about y so we've got to explore these different options. Yeah?

I: You've already mentioned that in training programmes it's more of an institutional requirement. Do you feel that teachers actively perform reflective practice on their own after pre-service training or do they just say that that's what they're doing?

SW: You see this is where I have doubts. I honestly don't think that people really engage in a reflective practice process once they've done a particular programme, finish a programme or a particular course, or you know, whatever it is they're doing. Because teachers are extremely busy people, they don't have a lot of time available to go through these particular hoops, to jump through these particular hoops. But they could. I think one of the things that teacher education programmes could do as a kind of forward-looking thing is to say, 'How are you going to do this on your own, when you've finished this course, when there's no formal requirement to do it?' But it's still valid, it's still useful. And what I've found in the bits and bobs of research that I've done before is that what people find to be most effective is having the opportunity to talk to other professionals about what's happening rather than to write everything down, because typically when it's an institutional requirement, reflective practice is written. It's written in self-commentaries, in, you know, your own reflections in your assignments, whatever. But in fact the value of it is in conversation and what I think we could do in teacher education programmes is say, 'Well, look here's what you could do when you go back to your own school. Here's how to have conversations about your practice, here's what you might organize as a group of teachers.' And set up kind of mini-networks in or across schools where people come together to actually

reflect through dialogues, through discussion, and that's going to be extremely useful in terms of professional development. And also very rewarding I think, you know.

I: I have a friend who's talked about something similar to this but he's said it's every Friday down at the pub after work, chatting with colleagues about the week they've had.

SW: That's fine, that's fine. That's equally valid you know, and perhaps some of the best ideas come from those chats, you know.

I: My next question. Do you think reflective practice is necessary for language teachers, in terms of development, because some experienced instructors might say, 'Well, I've seen it all, I know what I'm doing in the classroom, it's not going to help me so much.'

SW: And I think that's a big mistake. I don't see how anyone in any profession can grow and gain expertise if they are constantly going through the same motions year after year. It's like, you know, you can be a very experienced teacher but you've had the same experiences in the same place, in the same classroom, with the same students, more or less, for ten years, versus the teachers, who, you know, try to broaden their experience, and you know, broadening the experience is one thing. Understanding that experience is a different thing altogether and I think what reflective practice is trying to do is to say, well, why didn't that work last time, what's the issue, why...how could I do it differently next time. Which parts of my teaching am I really comfortable with, which bits will make me feel more comfortable, happier, would make my students feel more secure? You know, it's a constant thing, I don't think you can just dismiss it like that. But what people will say is they do it almost intuitively. And I think intuitions are valid actually, there's nothing wrong with

intuition. Intuitions are often a very strong and powerful guide to good practice and there's nothing wrong with that. But I think it would be useful to discuss and share those intuitions with other professionals as a way of, kind of like a self-help group, you know, that kind of thing?

I: Do you think it would be useful to have something online if people are separated by distance?

SW: Sure. Definitely, definitely.

I: Forums or...

SW: Blogs or online discussion forums, all of that useful stuff, yeah. There's huge potential once you start to see what the technology can do.

I: Right. I'd like to move if I may into looking at higher education now. Do you feel that university lecturers should apply reflective practice to their teaching in the tertiary sector?

SW: Yeah, I mean it doesn't matter what the context. I think it's got an equally valid role to play. There is in a university setting...it's even more compelling really because university lecturers are by definition always researchers as well. They are doing research in their own field so what's to stop them researching their own practice as a university teacher, you know? And in my experience once you give lecturers the right tools to do this or tools that they can adapt they are very good at it because they are very able to articulate and talk about what's happening, you know.

I: Is it an institutional requirement at Newcastle for example, that lecturers should do this?

SW: Well, we have a thing called peer observation of teaching where we are encouraged, in fact required I think to at least once a year observe a colleague teach

and then to observe us or you can do it as a triangle thing with three of you. But essentially it's a peer observation of someone's teaching and a discussion around that.

I: So you observe someone from a different department or it's within?

SW: It can be in education, it can be outside education, it can be, yeah, somebody within our section. Last year I did it with somebody from education. This year I haven't done it at all yet and my teaching's finished so there you go, I've broken my own rule here.

I: Life gets in the way.

SW: Yeah, but I think definitely it could and should perhaps become...but you see the thing is once you make it an institutional requirement, again it defeats the purpose.

I: It builds up resentment, perhaps.

SW: Yeah. And people say it's just another form to fill in, another evaluation to complete. I think what we have to do is instil in professionals the idea that reflective practice is inherently a good thing and something which should form part of their practice in the same way they sit and plan a lecture, they research their field, they make sure their powerpoint slides are up to date and so on. They should also be engaging in some form of reflective practice.

I: You mention powerpoint slides being up to date. Are you implying that some lecturers might use the same powerpoint for a decade?

SW: Well, we all use the same slides pretty well but we should be changing them, we should be adding in new references as new literature appears. As our thinking changes we should perhaps be changing the content as well, you know. My slides have certainly shifted a lot in the last five years. I used to talk about interactional awareness whereas now I talk about interactional competence.

I: Right.

SW: And that was through teaching, four years ago, my first group of students here, actually. So you know, that kind of, yeah, that should help.

I: What methods of reflective practice do you currently employ in your own lecturing?

SW: In my own lecturing?

I: Yes.

SW: Well, for myself, I rely very heavily on conversations with students, on feedback from students, thinking about suggestions that students give me, entering into dialogues with colleagues about their own practices. We have every year an away day for our section and we find that a very useful forum for bringing up issues in teaching and learning and changes to practice often come out of that. And of course it's part of my research as well, so I'm actually researching it as well as trying to apply it. So there's a kind of two-way thing there.

I: Have these methods altered as your career's progressed?

SW: Yeah, definitely. I think I used to rely a lot on self-introspection which is kind of the starting point for this, whereas now I depend much more on talk, some kind of professional dialogue with my colleagues or with my students who are more like colleagues anyway to be honest. So, you know, I benefit greatly from that, I find. Other people might not, other people might find that they haven't got time for that, they don't want to do that, it's kind of high risk because you're exposing yourself in some way in terms of what you do when you're teaching and people like that would have to find their own kind of level, their own kind of niche as a way of doing it but the important thing is just to be principled in your approach to teaching and understand what you do and why you do it in that particular way.

I: Finally, just to wind up, you've mentioned it can be a very introspective process. Do you think a teacher can reflect too much on their practice? And can it become a hindrance to reflect rather than a help in some cases?

SW: Yeah, I guess it can. I think I've certainly worked with people on Master's programmes before that.., it's a bit like, you know, you're a tennis player and you have coaching, and then your tennis goes to pot, you know, you become really bad at tennis because you're having to unlearn all the strokes and shots that you used to play in order to play in the new way which you've been coached to do. And I can point to lots of students over the years who've kind of become quite depressed as they've taken a Master's or diploma course with me because they, in their own minds, they feel that they're just doing everything badly, and they're doing it, in their own words, 'all wrong', you know. So yes, to answer your question, I think we can over-reflect, over-evaluate, and I think what you need to do is get different people's perspective on their own practice as a way of countering that. Not just...this is why I said it's probably a mistake to rely always on introspection and your own thinking. It's always better to have somebody else take a look at you as a teacher and give some feedback and get some comments. I would strongly encourage people to at least once or twice a year go and see somebody else teach or even team-teach, you know. You can learn so much by team-teaching, as a way of developing really. It's all about development. And it's all about actually making the job exciting and fresh and not a kind of mundane routine, which as I said, it can very easily become.

I: Steve, thanks very much for your time

SW: You're welcome.

About the author

Shane Donald is a second-year IPhD student in the Department of Educational and Applied Linguistics. He can be contacted at shane.donald@newcastle.ac.uk.