

## **REFLECTIVE ESSAY #2**

### **Week 7: Reflective Essay #2**

Lance A. Webel

Cincinnati Hills Christian Academy

The past eighteen months have been a time of phenomenal growth for me. Not only have I been pursuing a Master's degree after a five-year break from classroom learning, but I also traveled halfway around the world to live and teach in the completely different environment of China. For this reflective paper, I will offer examples from both of these life paths to demonstrate my growth as a learner, reflective practitioner, educational leader, instructional decision-maker, and classroom researcher.

As a learner, I have found myself surrounded by dozens of new ideas, teaching practices, subject matters, and classroom situations. Because I never had a formal teaching education before, much of the subject matter in this degree program was new for me. I had a lot of experience in the classroom but had never before been exposed to the pedagogues and classical frameworks associated with teaching practices. I found myself having "eureka" moments quite often as I learned the reasons behind the behavior I saw or the experiences that I had. And I also benefited from the metacognition that occurred in my experience as a learner ... thinking about my own thinking was a useful and relevant process of development for me.

Similarly, almost every experience I've had here in China has contributed to my development as a learner. Every task, from going shopping to ordering food in a restaurant, is a learning experience here. I've had to continually train my brain to acquire new language and filter interpersonal experiences, learning and adapting as I've gone. The personal perspectives and thought processes of the Chinese people are also extremely

different from Americans', so the many Chinese friendships that I've been blessed to develop have provided another massive learning opportunity.

Furthermore, my growth as a reflective practitioner has also been quite notable. As I already mentioned, the metacognition involved in these courses has helped me to reflect upon my own practices in and out of the classroom and improve myself. I've also been able to analyze my curriculum, teaching habits, and relationships with my students through the filters of these courses to reflect upon my teaching. I feel that this degree program has helped me to fairly assess and understand my own practices, opening the door for transformational change throughout my career as an educator.

Here in China, this practice of reflection has also been amplified. Because I am not immediately connected with the friends and family that surround my life in Cincinnati, I have had ample opportunity to reflect upon many different areas of my life. As I encounter new situations, I also have noticed that my inner character is more easily displayed in this different environment, giving me a chance to see a more realistic picture of who I am, what I do, and how I think. Such reflection has been invaluable for my own personal growth.

It is, however, more difficult to see growth in myself as an educational leader. The very nature of an online degree is slightly impersonal ... though I am interacting with many other students from around the world, I don't think that the relationships that I've formed with them are extremely significant. As a result, it has been difficult to find

leadership opportunities or build up my own leadership abilities. Simply put, I expect to grow a lot more as a leader in education when I return to teaching in America and actually put this learning into practice.

My experience as a leader in China, however, has been drastic. In most situations, I find that I am the sole representative not only of America and its history and policies, but also of the entire western world. In the classroom, I am responsible for teaching an entire different way, bringing new thought processes, learning procedures, and communication schemes to over 1,000 students. The leadership that this has welled up within me, I believe, has been fairly amazing.

As an instructional decision-maker, I have found this graduate degree program very useful. I have been able to inform my thinking and understanding, important things to have when making decisions. I have also seen many examples of instructional decision-making in progress, learning from the experiences of others and informing my own abilities to make decisions in and out of the classroom. When I return to Cincinnati, I am excited to see how this informs and changes my role as an instructional decision-maker.

I have not, however, had much development as a decision-maker here in China. Though I am technically certified as a "Foreign Expert", I have found that my ability to make significant changes both in and out of the classroom has been very limited. The Chinese educational system has been developing for more than 5,000 years ... so this one

year in my life has hardly given me the status or platform from which I can make significant decisions.

Finally, I am also able to see quite a bit of growth in myself as a classroom researcher. I previously did little to no research on the trends and commonly accepted notions about educational practices ... I simply used common sense and experience to inform my classroom practices. Now, however, I have been exposed to resources and methods through which I can continue to conduct research, improving my abilities as a scholar practitioner throughout the rest of my career.

In China, the "research" that I conducted, for the most part, was informal and interpersonal. I learned from the situations that I was in but had very little opportunity for organized, formal research.

Overall, I believe that I have seen drastic growth and development in many areas of my life through my pursuit of a graduate degree and through my experience in China. As Fullan & Hargreaves claim, "Teacher change is individual and personal, but it also fundamentally involves changing the teaching profession, the institutional and policy conditions within which teachers work, and the myriad relationships that teachers must have within and beyond the school if they are to be successful." (1998). Ultimately, my growth as a teacher, though whatever medium or experience, will undoubtedly trickle down into my students' experiences as learners, changing them for a lifetime.

**Resource:**

Fullan, M., & Hargreaves, A. (1998). Teacher change. *ENC Focus*. Retrieved March 4, 2003 from <http://www.enc.org/features/focus/archive/change/document.shtm?input=CDS-000389-389>.