Learning to become a teacher is a developmental process. This paper summarises some of our attempts to help our students develop the habits of critical reflection which will help them progress through the stages of teacher development. Our approach has been to incorporate ‘reflective practice’ into assessment tasks which have evolved over time through a series of teacher–teacher, teacher–student, and student–student partnerships.

The journey from beginning to expert teacher frequently has been conceptualised as developmental (Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Brown, 1975; Furlong & Maynard 1995). Stages tend to be hierarchical, with one stage subsuming the previous one, although depending on circumstances such as taking up a position in a new school, regression and fluctuations can occur (Borich & Tombari, 1995; Furlong & Maynard, 1995; Frid, Reading & Redden, 1998).

Novice teachers tend to begin their professional lives initially concerned with ‘self’ and their own ‘survival’ in the classroom. The survival stage is identified by the importance beginning teachers place on issues that focus on their own ‘well-being’ rather than their teaching strategies or their students’ learning and needs (Fuller, 1969; Fuller & Brown, 1975; Borich & Tombari, 1995). Subsequently effective classroom management and control, adequate content knowledge and the adjustment to a new ‘identity’ — one that has changed from pupil to teacher — are of foremost importance (Fuller, 1969; Furlong & Maynard, 1995; Frid et.al.,1998). As novice teachers come to terms with managing the daily routines in the classroom their focus extends to
the teaching task (*the task stage*) and they develop a desire to master their content knowledge and improve their teaching skills. From this point teachers progress and become mindful of their students’ understanding of the lesson in order to ascertain the impact of their teaching (*the impact stage*). They become more flexible and responsive to their students’ learning needs in the hope that they will reach their full potential. Ingvarson and Greenway (1984) believe that directed change depends on the level of commitment an individual teacher has for professional development. It is also possible that some teachers may not progress past the early survival stage. Chaos may rule in the classroom so these teachers are trapped into a cycle of attempting to achieve some sort of order.

It makes sense that once teachers feel secure in their classroom environments and competent in relevant content and teaching strategies, then they will have more time and be more motivated to examine and improve their practice, if they are committed to professional growth. Hence it is the *autonomous* teacher who has been distinguished as the most sophisticated (Furlong & Maynard, 1995; Frid et al., 1998). At this stage the teachers believe that they have the responsibility for, control over, and ability to improve their professional work and are quite able to explore the assumptions which underlie their practice: ‘Competent teachers evaluate their own teaching effectiveness by reflecting on their own actions and student responses in order to improve their practice’ (Reynolds, 1992, p.25).

However the dilemma for us, as teacher educators, remains that novice teachers tend to operate at the basic level of teacher development and are very busy ‘acting like a teacher’ (Frid et al. 1998) and dealing with their day-to-day survival in the classroom. How could we facilitate the development of ‘the pedagogical habits and skills necessary for self-directed growth’ in our pre-service teachers (Zeichner & Liston, 1987) that would facilitate their progress through these stages? Reynolds (1992) suggested that how we define a competent teacher (ie. the pupil-centred, autonomous professional) could guide the formulation of meaningful assessment tasks.
Thus, we aspired to engage pre-service teachers in a range of meaningful assessment items which required them to develop the knowledge, skills, values and practices necessary for professional growth in the hope that these processes would be more readily translated into their future practice. A swifter progression through the stages of teacher development and the development of a more self-directed and autonomous teacher were our desired outcomes. So with these aims in mind, as well as the recognition of where these pre-service teachers actually ‘were at’ when they began our units, we have attempted to utilise assessment tasks as tools to assist in this growth.

Attaining these outcomes has proved problematic and has required the development of genuine partnerships between all participants in our units. In fact, these assessment practices have been both outcomes of and instrumental in the formulation of partnerships between student and student, teacher and student and teacher and teacher. It has required us, as co-teachers, to continually plan, teach, evaluate and subsequently re-plan and change tasks as we have learnt ‘with’ our students about their effectiveness. Valuable feedback has been gained through student evaluations and sustained informal dialogue with students throughout the operation of our units. Student–student partnerships have been facilitated through peer review and assessment activities.

Once our students leave us to become teachers themselves, our direct influence over their development ceases. But we believe our indirect influence continues — or at least has the potential to continue — and so we have tried to work out ways of helping them develop habits which will ease their transition through the stages of teacher development. We cannot do much directly to help them survive their early months in a difficult classroom. What we can do is help them be aware of the stages they are likely to experience and develop ways of thinking about teaching that will prove helpful in progressing through the stages. Reflective practice is one way which has been advocated as facilitating the progression from novice to the autonomous
teacher as it helps develop the ability to think critically about one’s practice (Zeichner, & Liston, 1987; Reynolds, 1992, Frid et.al, 1998). Thus, the integration of reflective practice into our assessment tasks became our goal.

To arrive at a stage of concentrating on student learning inevitably involves a focus on examining our teaching practice (rather than, for example, simply our behaviour management strategies). And this in turn means examining our assumptions about teaching and learning: What does it mean to teach someone? And, in our case, What does it mean to teach someone to be a teacher?

In the introduction to our course notes we tell students we do not think it is possible to teach them how to teach — because we do not think teaching is a prescriptive activity (‘Do this and that will happen’). However we do believe it is possible to help them learn how to teach and we use a combination of three different approaches in this process:

- learning by modelling
- learning by applying theory
- learning through reflection.

The first approach is readily accepted by students, especially the modelling they witness during their practicum experiences but also, we hope, the modelling we engage in. The second approach is typically resisted by students unless they are able to see the relevance of the theory. Over the years we have come full circle in our implementation of this approach so that instead of beginning with theories and drawing out the implications for practice, we begin with practice — both successful and unsuccessful — and examine it in the light of particular theories. This way of examining theories has proved more successful and allows us to make direct links with our third approach, that of learning through reflection. In thinking about why a particular
strategy proved successful, for example, a student must by definition engage in reflection.

Just as our students will pass through stages of teacher development, so too have we passed through developmental stages in the process of implementing teacher education units with a reflective element. As we have planned, trialed and evaluated different tasks we have had to become more reflective ourselves, and so the process of learning about reflection has proceeded as a form of partnership between us as co-teachers, our students as co-learners, and us and our students as co-learners.

There is a large corpus of literature based on ‘reflective practice’ (Van Manen, 1977; Britzman, 1986; Schon, 1988; Francis, 1992; Brookfield, 1995; Frid, 1998). The model we have found most useful is the one put forward by Stephen Brookfield in his book *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher*.

The first part of his model which we have found very useful is the central place given to ‘assumption hunting’. Brookfield identifies three types of assumptions which he claims influence our actions and part of the critically reflective process consists of uncovering and making explicit these assumptions. Without reflection, we are unlikely to examine these assumptions in any critical manner and yet they are primary causal agents in explaining our practices.

Although our assumptions are central to our behaviour, they are not always easy to uncover. The second part of Brookfield’s model which we have found useful is his categorisation of ways of uncovering our assumptions — by examining our behaviour through four different ‘critical lenses’. These critical lenses are:

1. our autobiographies as learners and teachers
Our primary aim has been to encourage our students to develop habits of critical reflection. The mechanism we have chosen has been assessment tasks which involve looking at their practice through the four different lenses delineated by Brookfield. The ‘practice’ has included their practicum experience in schools but because this is only a small part of their year of study with us we have broadened the term to include their attempts at implementing a particular teaching strategy, even if only at the planning stage.

Our first attempts to encourage reflection consisted of asking students to engage in reminiscence about their own experiences as a learner: ‘[There is a] need to focus more closely on what beginning teachers already know and believe about teaching. Strategies are sought that make it possible for beginning teachers to confront their own notions of teaching and learning as a beginning step in learning how to teach’ (Wideen, Mayer-Smith & Moon, 1998, p.130). We asked them to think about what conclusions of relevance to the teaching and learning process they could deduce from the analysis of their experience. This type of reflection, we believed, would help them use the critical lens of autobiography to uncover other assumptions they held about teaching. In addition, we asked them to write a ‘reflective journal’ not only about their reactions to particular experiences but also to their reading. We gave them particular books and articles to read and asked them to write about the significance they attached to the ideas they read about in terms of the way they saw themselves as future teachers. This type of reflective writing would, we believed, help students analyse their assumptions in relation to the fourth lens, that of the theoretical literature. Some abbreviated examples of students’ reflections based on their reading are reproduced below:

As a supporter of the philosophy of lifelong learning this unit (my reading) reinforces for
me that as a teacher my preferred role as facilitator and/or director of learning is not a misguided self-perception. This unit has provided me the opportunity and insights to appreciate other learning styles and approaches. From this unit I can have confidence in different experiences that both students and colleagues might offer to the learning process. A convergence of various individuals and their resources can lead to opening up learning possibilities that are appropriate and interesting for everyone. (female student)

My greatest satisfaction in this course is the realisation that many of my ‘implicit theories’ have been grounded in some established explicit theories. For instance, Bloom’s Taxonomy seemed to ring true in a way that complemented my own implicit thinking and logic. I was also impressed with the inductive and deductive approaches to learning and I feel that I have developed these idea in a way that causes me to be aware that some lessons are more conducive to one or the other approach, depending on the students concerned and the subject at hand. …The political nature of education has become more apparent than ever for me and I hope to encourage skills in students that make them enquire about the relevance of education for themselves and others as well as seeing appropriate ways to learn how to learn. (male student)

Furthermore I have expanded my view on the participation of students’ roles in relation to classroom rules to include not just their input in the formulation of rules but also the principal responsibility to resolve breaches of the rules. Initially I believed my role as teacher to be a director. Now I see it more to be a mediator when conflicts cannot be reconciled. My progress, learning and reading of Kohn’s approach to classroom management made me question the need for classroom rules to exist at all. This is an important consideration as I have not questioned the use of classroom rules and punishment as a way of legitimising teacher control. Although I still believe that classroom rules have an important part to play in my classroom at present, I feel that when I am more familiar and comfortable with teaching I would like to attempt Kohn’s approach to see the outcome. (female student)

For some students these two foci of literature and autobiography led to some powerful
‘assumption hunting’ and some sophisticated reflection. Some other students were able to produce ‘stream of consciousness’ writing which contained a rich source of fodder for critical reflection which they nevertheless ignored. In these cases the ‘reflection’ was purely descriptive rather than analytical in any sense. A third group of students proved incapable of writing anything that even resembled reflection. They seemed unsure of what it means to be reflective, what it means to analyse and discuss, and what it means to relate two things such as experience and theory.

Our own evaluation of the students’ reflective journals led us to affirm our own assumption that students are more likely to engage in critical thinking if it is based on thinking about practice rather than thinking about theory. In asking them to read and respond, we were asking them to be more mature or motivated than they were ready to be. So we had to work out ways of incorporating ‘practice’ into their ‘reflective practice’. One technique we used was that of incorporating metacognition.

‘Metacognition’ refers to the process of ‘thinking about your thinking’. One of the ways we incorporated metacognition into our assessment tasks was by asking our students to engage in ‘before’ and ‘after’ analysis. At the very beginning of the year we ask them to complete a ‘Preliminary Activity’ which involves their writing down what they currently think about various things — what a good teacher is, what it means to learn or understand something, how they would define intelligence, what defines a good question, how they expect to assess their future students, and what sort of behaviour management persona they expect to adopt. Their responses are read but not graded because they are meant to be ‘implicit assumptions’ rather than positions which can be supported from the literature. When a particular topic has been completed during the year, we ask them to ‘revisit’ their response in the Preliminary Activity and see how their ideas have changed. This process should involve not just writing their current thinking about a topic — the current ‘what’ — but stepping back to work out how and why
their ideas have changed. This metacognitive process can be very fruitful but again, we have found that there are students who are able to resist very successfully this sort of detailed analysis of their assumptions and their thinking.

Where do you start with a question like this [how my ideas have changed?] Since Week 1 my ideas have developed so much that I can now confidently write this report depending solely on textbooks and other people. I have the knowledge and even a bit of experience so if a child’s behaviour is inadequate I now know about twelve strategies I can use before I have to send a child off to the Principal. (male student)

To reflect and write how my ideas have changed since the beginning of the year is impossible. For they have changed and developed more than I know. Everything that I knew has developed and new ideas have combined with the old. To reflect on all my ideas would mean numerous paragraphs of elementary progression and to reflect on classroom management specifically would mean regurgitating the information above. (male student)

Some students, however, are able to define more specifically some of their progress and learning:

In my first reflection I was aware of the importance of using open and divergent questioning as an integral part of teaching and learning episodes. This is of course still relevant, however I am interested in shifting the focus of questioning from the teacher to the students. This enables student-guided discovery to come into play, which makes the learning more meaningful to the students and hence more real. Because teachers need to structure lessons in a way that encourages students to use their own questioning as a way of finding out it would require more planning by the teacher. (female student)

A different way of incorporating metacognition with which we have experimented has involved getting the students to perform a specific task, such as constructing a concept map or using the Six Thinking Hats strategy, and then reflecting on the experience: How did they feel as learners
when using the Six Thinking Hats or constructing a concept map (a very difficult thing for some of them)? What did they learn from the experience, about concept maps and also about themselves? How do they think they might use concept maps in their own teaching? This task of structured experience and structured reflection has helped some students become better ‘reflecters’ because it provides an explicit scaffold:

My feelings about concept maps: this is the first time that I have needed to construct a concept map and I am not happy with the result. I have reworked it a number of times and this is the best I can come up with. To me the result seems messy. I have had to leave out many related ideas and it is basically linear in design. (female student)

The main thing which I learnt from doing this concept map is that they are definitely harder than I expected. When receiving this task I thought that it would be relatively easy but once I sat down after completing all the readings I was stuck. … I feel that they are useful because you have to gain a great understanding of the designated topic, in order to produce the map. Also you have to really think hard in order to link the topics. (male student)

This particular activity I would have to say has been possibly the most challenging and time-consuming but also the most useful. I found it quite challenging, particularly when having to answer the Yellow and Black Hats because I continually wanted to use my Red Hat at the same time. It was difficult having to put that aside. It kept creeping in every now and then. I have tried to work out whether finding out about Bloom’s Taxonomy and the Six Thinking Hats could have been done in a less time-consuming manner. However by using the Six Thinking Hats as a structure and Bloom’s Taxonomy as the focus, I think I was able to gain a much deeper understanding of them both and so was able to create an opinion based not only on feeling but also on knowledge of the strategies. Had I simply been asked to find out about the two teaching strategies my understanding would have been developed but not in such a complete manner. (female student)
The process was not overly difficult although it did require you to actually think (I guess this was the purpose of the exercise!). The main difficulty I had was in attempting to wear a new Hat. Considering the positive features of Bloom’s Taxonomy first made me see all that was good about it, so that when it came time to adopt the Black Hat I found it more difficult to think of the negatives. From this I can see how the Six Thinking Hats would be especially beneficial in a group situation as different people are likely to have different opinions. (female student)

The third of Brookfield’s critical lenses is our colleagues’ experiences. In the case of our students, this means their peers. Our attempt to incorporate this lens into our assessment tasks has focussed on devising tasks which include peer assessment. In order to engage in peer assessment there has to be something to assess, and whatever this is constitutes the ‘practice’ for the ‘reflective practice’. In some cases, the practice is a seminar presentation and our experiences here mirror what we are certain is a common experience — students are unwilling to be too critical of their peers, especially if they think they will be identified. So while we persist with peer assessment of oral presentations, we have also expanded the sorts of peer assessment tasks required. This year, for example, we are asking our students to assess discussion. The process involves assessing the discussion leaders as well as the discussion participants (who are randomly chosen each week) and to include an assessment based on the level of critical thinking displayed (using Bloom’s Taxonomy as the framework). We are also asking our students to assess each other’s practical experience by analysing the transcript of a lesson or part of a lesson given on prac which includes a questioning sequence. The students have to record the lesson, transcribe it, and analyse it in terms of their questioning. The sequence is assessed by two peers, and the original student then has to reflect on their peers’ evaluation — do they agree with the comments made? Do their analyses generally agree or are they very different? What have they learnt about questioning through this process of analysing their own experience and comparing their analysis with those of their peers? What have they learnt from watching experienced teachers question? And how have their ideas about a ‘good
question’ changed since the beginning of the year when they completed the Preliminary Activity? Again, this task provides a scaffold for reflection but it incorporates the third critical lens of our colleagues’ experiences:

   Peer: I feel some of your questions needed to be a bit clearer. Prompting was good with Rafael because it kept him on track. I’m not sure if the focus of your lesson really stood out. It was touched on in the lesson but not reinforced for the students to grasp.
   Response: I found myself in the heat of the lesson focusing on Rafael as he had the tendency to disrupt the whole class. I noticed that his normal teacher did this also so think his behaviour may be reinforced.

   Peer: As above, I’m not sure whether your goal was achieved. No, that doesn’t sound right. What I mean is the class’s understanding.
   Response: I disagree here. Whilst in this small cross-section it may appear that way I tested the students’ understandings of the subject at the beginning of the learning sequence and at the end of the learning sequence and I think that the understanding was fine. (male student)

   After taking a look at what the reviewers have said about my sequence, I have been able to reflect that if I did the task again it would be different in many ways. … Wait time, higher-order thinking questions, children’s names to clarify which child said what and when, whether children put their hand up or if they called out, children’s names for answers, and positive feedback were some of the things reviewers mentioned in their report. I have taken these things into account and these are the ways I would have addressed them: … (female student)

   The last lens, Brookfield’s second lens of ‘our students’ eyes’, has been more difficult but not impossible to incorporate into an assessment task for the students. As teachers marking their work and reading their reflections, we learn how they see things and so we are able to use this lens in assessing our own practices. In reflecting on our own practices and testing our own
assumptions (about useful assessment tasks, for example) we are in partnership with our students. Finding ways for our students to get this sort of feedback from their own students is more difficult because of their limited opportunities for teaching practice. By including an assessment task from prac, as described above, we have been able to get our students to look critically at their teaching practice — did their students understand the questions they were asked? Were the questions used constructively as a learning experience? Were our student teachers able to achieve their goals in their questioning sequences? What feedback did they receive from their supervising teachers?

We have also been able to incorporate the lens of ‘our students’ eyes’ in the oral presentations sometimes given in workshops. Part of the requirement for a presentation has been to take away and analyse the peer assessment sheets and reflect on their value, and to write about what they would do differently if making the same presentation again. By including these two elements of reflection in this assessment task we are trying to model the process of plan, teach, evaluate, re-plan and re-teach so, we hope, to further develop habits of reflective practice in our students:

Prior to the presentation of my semantic overview I believed that such a strategy for Ancient History would most definitely not work. … The reason for such a belief is that I was never taught History through such a method and I still enjoyed it immensely — all my knowledge about the Ancient World, even at University level, was still regurgitation from old texts and lecturers. I was sceptical about the idea right up to the moment that I delivered the presentation to the class. … Once I had read all the feedback sheets the results that I received were promising and inspiring. Not all were positive feedback but the majority all filled the ‘things well done’ section. (male student)

The journey towards critical reflection has not always been a pleasant one. Some students resist genuine ‘assumption hunting’ with a passion. Some write what they think we want to read.
Some write pages of what can only be termed ‘waffle’ or description rather than analysis. Because they are still students, they do not always see the purpose of developing habits and routines they will need as teachers. The misguided division into theory (university) and practice (schools) is very much alive and has obvious effects on student motivation. The current practice of having only one small-group class each week (or one on-campus residential school for our distance education students) severely limits what can be done in a face-to-face situation. But our attempts to make assessment tasks more firmly rooted in practice have had a positive effect on motivation and on attempts to engage seriously with the literature. The following brief examples are taken from students’ anonymous end-of-unit evaluations:

Talking about tangible, solid ways of improving our own teaching practices was one of the best aspects of the degree as a whole. Of course it is nice and at times helpful to talk about the theories of teaching and learning but relating these to real life examples and fleshing out each facet of them in the context of a more practical approach to learning how to teach was what made the unit so invaluable.

This unit in particular caused me to develop analytical thinking skills and to reflect on some long-held paradigms.

I have never been made to really think about the subject matter and apply it like I had to in this unit. It was hard and draining but I learnt a lot.

This unit very much stimulated my interest in the subject area. It was also relevant to my learning about my own learning.

The process of trying to develop habits of critical reflection in our students has proceeded in tandem with our own development as reflective practitioners. We have had to uncover our own
assumptions about learning and teaching, such as the value of collaboration and partnership.

We sometimes feel life would be simpler if we just set essay assignments and taught by ourselves and it probably would — but then we would only be teachers, not learners as well.

References


