

Nov 29th, 9:00 AM - Dec 1st, 5:00 PM

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### Citation

Faerm, S., and Quinn, K. (2023) Reflective Teaching Practices and Inclusive Learning Environments, in Derek Jones, Naz Borekci, Violeta Clemente, James Corazzo, Nicole Lotz, Liv Merete Nielsen, Lesley-Ann Noel (eds.), *The 7th International Conference for Design Education Researchers*, 29 November - 1 December 2023, London, United Kingdom. <https://doi.org/10.21606/drslxd.2024.012>

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## Reflective Teaching Practices and Inclusive Learning Environments

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doi.org/10.21606/drslxd.2024.012

**Abstract:** This article discusses the importance of reflective teaching practice in creating inclusive learning environments in design education. It explains what reflective teaching is, how it impacts inherent biases that can exist in teachers, and how, at its core, it is critical for creating an inclusive learning environment. With reflective teaching, we seek to understand better the effect of our pedagogy on our students so that we may develop ways to connect more meaningfully with them. This makes us better equipped to cultivate inclusive learning environments, which are fundamental to the successes of our students and our institutions. This article includes an examination of the five key tools used in the practice. This article describes how reflective teaching practice is integral to promoting inclusive classroom environments and how it can be used to strengthen our pedagogy continuously to ensure we are always improving our teaching over the duration of our academic careers. As a result of engaging fully with the reflective practice, we are able to communicate and deliver more effective curricula for our students and foster stronger, more trust-filled teacher-student relationships, which are foundational elements required to develop inclusive learning environments for our students.

**Keywords:** *reflective teaching; inclusive pedagogy; faculty development; mentorship; design education*

## Introduction

As design educators, there are three critical questions we must continuously ask ourselves:

“How do I know if my teaching is effective and my students are learning?”

“Am I creating an inclusive environment in my classroom, one that enables all students to feel appreciated?”

“If I’m not currently doing that, how do I work toward constructing an inclusive environment that supports all of my students?”

A valuable technique for finding the answers to these questions lies in the practice of reflective teaching.

Reflective teaching requires teachers to assess their underlying assumptions about both learning and teaching as objectively as possible, as well as how those assumptions align—or misalign—with their classroom practice (Schön, 1984; Brookfield, 2017). When we adopt a reflective approach to our practice of teaching, we proactively and critically examine our methods and make adjustments to our practices where necessary (Rodgers, 2020; Schön, 1984).



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Additionally, those of us who teach through this reflective lens provide a model of the practices of critical analysis and continuous improvement for our students, thereby furnishing them with important lifelong skills.

The art of the reflective teaching practice is, at its core, a critical component of developing more inclusive and supportive environments for our students, our colleagues, and our institutions (Faerm, 2023). It assists us not only with improving our own individual educational pedagogies; it also gives us opportunities to identify opportunities in our students where we can share the fundamental principles of reflection (Brookfield et al., 2023; Fook et al., 2015). It enables us to model for our students best practices for improving our own work—whether in design, teaching, or some other area—so they may learn how to identify the best practices for their continuous improvement over the course of their academic and professional careers.

As a result, pedagogy requires continuous attention and development. The reflective teaching practice examines what constitutes “teaching.” This can include things such as how our concepts about teaching and the accompanying real-life practices can best address the continuously evolving situations we face in and out of the classroom with students. Critical to its success, the reflective process requires us to view our teaching practices from different perspectives so we may “probe beneath the veneer of a [one-dimensional] commonsense reading of experience. Reflective teachers investigate the hidden dimensions of their practice and become aware of the omnipresence of power” (Brookfield, 2017, p. 7). In order to maximize the benefits to us of adopting a reflective teaching practice, we must seek new input from diverse sources continuously so we can persistently learn how we can improve every interaction we have with students (Rodgers, 2020; Faerm, 2023; Brookfield, 2017).

This article describes the principles behind the reflective teaching practice, the five key tools used in the practice, how the practice is integral to the creation of an inclusive classroom environment, and how we can use this practice to strengthen our pedagogy continuously over the duration of our professional careers. Through this comprehensive overview, the article aims to show how reflective teaching practice can be adopted by design educators so they may deliver more effective curricula for their students and foster stronger, more trust-filled teacher-student relationships, which are foundational elements required to develop inclusive learning environments for all students.

## What is a Reflective Teaching Practice?

The practice of reflective teaching is a powerful tool you can use to improve your quality of teaching and subsequent learning outcomes of students (Brookfield et al., 2023; Faerm, 2023). A reflective practice is a well-defined and planned action that helps make clear and concrete that which is, often by its very nature, ambiguous or only implied (Loughran, 2002; Schön, 1984). Reflective practice helps us focus on areas of our teaching that may be challenging to us so that we may improve in those areas. It is grounded in “[a] disposition to inquiry incorporating the process through which students, early career and experienced teachers structure or restructure actions, beliefs, knowledge and theories that inform teaching for the purpose of professional development” (Zwodiak-Myer, 2012, p. 5). Accordingly, like all forms of practice, select principles and guidelines are adopted to direct the process of reflective teaching.

There are three principles that are essential to our understanding of the importance of reflective teaching practice. First, by engaging in this practice, we are actively seeking to understand better the effect of our teaching on our students and connect more meaningfully with them. We do this to promote significantly improved teaching practices and learning experiences with the goal of continuously improving the quality of our teaching for our students. Second, this practice requires teachers to question the beliefs, approaches, and techniques they inherently possess and identify any internal biases or issues that must be resolved. This is essential to ensuring we are able to foster inclusive classroom environments, as it is impossible to do that if we allow ourselves to remain weighted down by conscious or subconscious discrimination and bias. As Loughran (2002) asserts, “[w]hat that problem is, the way it is framed and (hopefully) reframed, is an important aspect of understanding the nature of reflection and the value of reflective practice” (p. 33). Third, the reflective process directly works to improve our professional experiences by developing structures we can use to analyze and evaluate our teaching practices (Schön, 1984; Brookfield et al., 2023; Faerm, 2023). Simultaneously, by incorporating important tools such as critical theory and peer mentorship into the reflective process, we are able to identify and examine more clearly how effective we have been in past actions and events—and how we can improve our effectiveness moving forward.

Key to successful reflective teaching is the practice of prioritizing introspection around *what* is being done, *why* it’s being done, and *how effectively* it impacts students’ knowledge acquisition (Mathew et al., 2017). Brookfield (2017) explains that a critically reflective teaching practice has a specific goal, namely, to understand how considerations of

power undergird, frame, and distort educational processes and interactions. Additionally, he encourages us “to question assumptions and practices that seem to make our teaching lives easier but actually work against our own best long-term interests” (p. 8). Reflective practice is a critical tool for enabling us to get out of our own heads, as we all are, to a certain degree, prisoners trapped inside the perceptual frameworks that determine how we view our experiences (Brookfield, 2017).

These perceptual frameworks can become self-limiting psychological prisons for us if we do not identify them in ourselves and recognize the control they have over us as well as the biases inherent in them. This is an essential tenet of the reflective teaching practice: we use the technique to extricate from our teaching practice the conscious and unconscious biases and presumptions we hold that can distort our perceptions, affect our objectivity, or otherwise negatively impact our overall pedagogy and, ultimately, our institutions (Faerm, 2023; Brookfield et al., 2023).

This point is of critical importance as it speaks directly to the issue of inclusivity in the classroom. Our internal limitations mean student exclusions. It is inherently impossible for us to develop and foster inclusive classrooms if we, ourselves, are limited in our views on individual students, clusters of students, and the overall student population as a whole due to our own unchecked biases. Scaling up to a larger view, we see that when these biases are not addressed and resolved, they lead us to undermine our own inherent potential as educators, our students’ ability to learn and evolve into successful designers, and negatively impact the inherent value of our educational institutions. It is for these reasons (and many more) that a reflective teaching practice is critical to being able to create a truly inclusive classroom.

## Why is a Reflective Teaching Practice Important for Inclusive Learning Environments?

The practice of reflection enables us to identify the assumptions and biases we hold toward our students, both as a unified cohort and as individuals. These biases are likely to distort, obfuscate, or otherwise inhibit our teaching abilities and how we view the multitude of complex situations both we and our students face daily. When our biases are left unaddressed and unresolved, they work to undermine not only our students’ learning but also our professional development and the value our educational institution provides.

At their core, reflective teaching practices fundamentally require us to deconstruct and subsequently reconstruct our ways of understanding our roles as teachers and our ability to present to our students truly inclusive educational environments. Moreover, when we are able to communicate effectively our educational agendas and rationalized pedagogical methods, we establish our credibility and trustworthiness with students. As a result, this fosters a deeper sense of trust within the learning environment (Rodgers, 2020; Faerm, 2023). This aspect of reflective teaching is of paramount importance when working to cultivate classrooms that are fully inclusive.

## Reflective Teaching Tools

There are five major tools that are used in reflective teaching practice. They include the following:

1. **Autobiographical Reflection.** This tool focuses on introspection and self-reflection. Through autobiographical reflection, we are able to examine and explore our own personal histories as both teachers *and* students. It enables us to revisit critical turning points along our educational trajectories, points during our growth that mandated we face a milestone in our learning where we were forced to either accept or reject a theory, practice, or other element of the educational process. Autobiographic reflection helps us become aware of the internal assumptions and instincts that drive how we teach (Brookfield et al., 2023; Miller, 2010). The key tool available to us with autobiographic reflection focuses on our ability to critically process our experiences, whether that is through writing or journaling, discussing our perspectives with others, or through our own internal cerebral and emotional contemplation.
2. **Our Students’ Perspectives.** Placing ourselves in our students’ roles offers the greatest long-term effect in evolving our pedagogy (Brookfield, 2017). The process is particularly beneficial to those who have been teaching or in professional practice for so long that, due to the passage of time, may not fully remember their own experiences as students. By viewing our teaching through the perspectives of our students, we can come to understand better the cognitive and emotional challenges students face in the learning process. When we are able to consider the external stressors affecting them and their views of our teaching more objectively, we can identify areas where we can be more supportive of students and improve our teaching styles.

Gaining perspective in this way can function as a starting point for developing more effective curricula, responsible teaching, and empathy for our students. After all, without this knowledge all the pedagogic skill in the world means very little, since that skill may unintentionally be exercised in ways that confuse or intimidate students (Brookfield, 2017). Useful tools for this practice include actively listening to our students, thoughtful contemplation of conversations with students, and consistently proactively working to notice our biases when they arise and working to resolve them for the benefit of our students.

Another practical, impactful way to gain these insights is to enroll in a course or program ourselves. This experience transformed the teaching of one author when he entered graduate studies as a mid-career professor. By immersing himself in rigorous coursework, re-learning how to navigate and meet high academic demands, and observing advanced and artful pedagogical practices delivered by highly seasoned professors, he acquired greater empathy for his students. Moreover, gaining first-hand experience in numerous courses led him to broaden and strengthen his pedagogical techniques, syllabi development, and understandings of students' cognitive and emotional development—all of which enabled him to better support his students' academic, professional, and personal goals.

**Peer Mentorship.** Peer mentorship involves inviting a colleague into our classrooms to provide us with feedback on our teaching performance. When we receive their feedback on our practices through their unique perspectives, we gain wisdom from our colleagues' observations and insights. This enables us to discover new ideas we can use to address any problems or concerns in our teaching. Additionally, mentorship gives us emotional support, an improved sense of connectedness with our colleagues, and reduces feelings of isolation in challenges we face in our teaching (Brookfield et al., 2023; Fook et al., 2015). This results in greater confidence, autonomy, and motivation within us as teachers, and helps us improve the quality of our teaching, our students' learning capacities, our larger academic community, and the overall quality of the design school education for students. Key tools we can use in the process of peer mentorship include teaching observations, informal conversations, reviews of materials (e.g. syllabi or teaching philosophies), and other approaches that foster an environment in which we as teachers can share our experiences in order to remove the cloak of silence in which our teaching practice is covered (Brookfield, 2017).

The benefit of classroom observation, while ostensibly for the observed teacher, is in fact equally beneficial for the observer. Being routinely invited to perform teaching observations, for one author, has always provided him with new pedagogical methods, classroom management techniques, formats for design studio critiques and discussions, and ways to bolster classroom community. When we observe our peers' teaching practices with a critical lens, we consciously or subconsciously apply this lens and attendant discourse to our *own* teaching practices. In doing so, our reflective teaching is activated and we can become better educators.

3. **Scholarly Literature.** Academic research on higher education (such as the articles contained in this journal) can provide us with multiple, diverse perspectives both on specific issues relating to teaching and on macro-level views of design school pedagogy. Scholarly literature about education can assist us both in "naming" critical parts of our experiences and practices and in identifying alternative perspectives through which we can assess the issues we face. We can use this literature to further challenge our assumptions and biases and clarify situational contexts. Like peer mentorship, examining scholarly literature can expose to us issues that we might perceive as personal failings or challenges that, rather than being personal issues, are actually issues related to external factors outside of ourselves, such as the structural or cultural conditions of our educational institutions. The increased self-awareness we gain from reviewing this literature can improve our awareness about all aspects of our situations, prevent self-blame for issues that are outside of our control, conserve emotional energy, and improve our confidence in our own teaching (Brookfield et al., 2023; Faerm, 2023; Fook et al., 2015).

Indeed, for one author, learning about undergraduates' cognitive and emotional development across the four years of study radically altered how he develops syllabi, delivers critique and guidance to his students, and determines course learning outcomes. For instance, students in the more formative freshman and sophomore years rely on greater specificity of project parameters and course expectations; they see their roles to give the teacher what is asked of them. Without this strong guidance, these students often become frustrated and feel "lost," believing their professor is not caring. In the later periods of study, particularly the final senior year, students relish greater autonomy and agency over their learning and project formats. At this stage, they are more focused on specific career goals and, thus, creating a graduate portfolio that is self-directed for their

distinct aims. Should these students receive the high levels of guidance needed by freshman, their reaction could be one of resistance and feelings that the teacher is being “too controlling,” infantilizing, and unsupportive to their personal goals (Faerm, 2023).

4. **Professional Support Groups.** Through professional support groups, we can gain new perspectives on our teaching practices through our colleagues’ stories, feedback, suggestions, and assessments. While support group formats can vary, their overarching purpose is to allow group members to share their experiences and learn from the experiences of their peers. In these groups, colleagues actively listen to one another and respond with their critical analysis and personal views. We do this to gain objective perspectives on those aspects of our teaching practices that may need closer attention from us.

Throughout the process, group members must remain vigilant in monitoring for “groupthink,” a phenomenon whereby members mutually reinforce negative assumptions or dispositions (Brookfield, 2017). Professional support groups can also help experienced teachers detect longstanding, self-fulfilling routinized teaching frameworks that close them off from alternative, more effective perspectives. These groups can help greatly improve our teaching practices by enabling us to recognize the complexities inherent in them. Subsequently, we can use what we learn from our reflective teaching practices to promote a highly visible and valuable practice that is part of the publicly active culture of pedagogical discourse in design higher education.

The positive impact of support groups was evidenced when, for this author, he created and hosted a series of “Faculty Roundtables” that provided informal opportunities for faculty colleagues to share their experiences. During one roundtable, a junior-level faculty member expressed her challenges with a student who was exhibiting adversarial behaviors during studio critiques—so great that she was contemplating leaving the teaching profession altogether. Immediately, her peers, who were more seasoned teachers in the design program, offered emotional support along with practical, actionable strategies she could use to alleviate the situation. When this author checked in with the teacher several weeks later, she noted not only had the situation improved itself but the student was beginning to flourish and the overall classroom community was now strengthening. She then decided, without hesitation, to stay in her teaching position and soon became one of our leading educators, going on to be awarded The Faculty Award during an ensuing year.

### Close Up: Peer Mentorship

We can use a variety of instruments to engage with these practices, including peer observations, as discussed above. Additionally, video recordings of us while we are actively teaching can be invaluable tools for showing us what the *reality* of our teaching is rather than our *perceptions* of it. Video recordings, which can easily be made using a smartphone camera, provide us with factual portrayals of ourselves in the act of teaching. They objectively present to us exactly what the balance of power is like during teacher-to-student discussions, the quality of our design instructions and critiques, and whether or not we allot enough time for students to reflect and respond fully. In particular, videos also show us our classroom “performance,” namely our use—or lack—of physical gestures, vocal modulations, facial expressions, overall body language, how much space we take up in the class, and other characteristics that directly impact our students’ learning and teacher-student dynamics.

Peer observations can provide important insights into our teaching. Still, inviting a colleague to watch, analyze, and critique our teaching may not feel comfortable to us, particularly because of the connection between classroom observations and the critical assessments made in the determination of promotions, reappointments, and tenure reviews. Those of us who experience “imposter syndrome” may feel significant discomfort due to our fears of our “inadequate selves” being revealed to our colleagues. Therefore, it is essential that we carefully pre-screen who we are considering as peer candidates for peer mentorship. We must find peers we respect, trust, and value to perform this critical reflective practice.

Our mentorship candidates should possess substantial practical experience and be people with whom we have developed mutual trust and with whom we feel comfortable revealing all aspects of our teaching practices. A preliminary discussion in which each of you shares what specific areas you’d like observed will make sure observations are clear and direct, and offer useful feedback. When you identify the peer you wish to have mentor you, clearly and concisely articulate to them exactly what you want them to evaluate about your teaching, including the what, where, when, how, and effect or impact on students. Then, ask your colleague if they have any specific questions about the metrics you want to have observed and whether or not they have ideas about other areas for observation. Feedback

from your peer mentor should contain even amounts of positive and constructive feedback and offer clear and actionable suggestions for improvement. Remember: good feedback is *specific* feedback.

It is also common for observations to be reciprocal to ensure mutual benefit. Often, colleagues will pair up and “trade roles” to gain mutually useful insights. For example, the teacher being evaluated initially can subsequently act as the evaluator of their peer when their peer wants to be evaluated in order to receive important feedback, discover new ways to improve their own teaching practices, and gain numerous other benefits, which will be discussed in the following section.

## The Benefits of Reflective Teaching Practice

Reflective teaching practice gives us a framework through which we can view our teaching as a process of continuous development and improvement, both with regard to our techniques and our biases. As a result of engaging fully with this practice, we are able to communicate and deliver better curricula to our students and foster stronger, more trust-filled teacher-student relationships (Faerm, 2023; Leitch & Day, 2000), which are essential if we are to develop inclusive learning environments for our students.

When we adopt this approach to self-evaluation, we are able to improve our confidence in our teaching practices, more carefully refine our intentions in our practices, feel more grounded, have a greater sense of agency over the direction of our work and our careers, and, for those with imposter syndrome, gain a stronger sense of true authenticity in our teaching practices. After all, reflection reveals and affirms our personal agency—and responsibilities—that we have as teachers (Faerm, 2023; Brookfield, 2017; Bartlett, 1990). By acting with intention, having purpose in our actions, and discovering deeper meaning in our work, we can achieve greater fulfillment as more self-directed and empowered professionals (Fook et al., 2015; Zwodiak-Myer, 2012).

At a higher level, we see that reflection helps us improve our communication skills vis-a-vis our educational agendas (Faerm, 2023). The rationalized pedagogical methods we craft as a result of reflective teaching establishes our credibility with students, and this, in turn, engenders greater trust within the learning environment. When that trust improves, more students feel included and important in your classroom. We can use reflection and critical thinking to identify, address, and resolve any biases we hold about education. With this information, we then can target and eradicate any discriminatory thinking that may exist in our teaching repertoire and/or attitudes toward students. This enables us to approach and interact with both the class as a whole and students individually with fewer preconceived notions, aversions, and other unproductive sentiments that are antithetical to the creation of an inclusive learning environment.

The reflective practice aims to bring light to negative hegemonic assumptions about students and teaching so that we can address these assumptions, displace them with more objective perspectives on our students—as part of your class and as individuals—and develop better methods to address the needs and goals of our evolving design student cohorts, ourselves, and our academic communities. Reflective teachers examine the hidden dimensions of their pedagogy and become aware of the omnipresence of power (Brookfield, 2017; Fook et al., 2015; Faerm, 2023). Thus, reflective teaching practice is critical to the creation and maintenance of inclusive learning environments.

Upon adopting a reflective practice, we may experience associated internal changes that commonly produce turbulent feelings of loss, bewilderment, and uncertainty about the worth and value of our teaching and ourselves (Loughran, 2002; Faerm, 2023). The deeply rooted beliefs and attitudes towards design education and pedagogy we have developed and nurtured must now, through reflection, yield to different beliefs, methodologies, and emphases. The associated cognitive and emotional demands can be destabilizing because our ways of existing within and understanding the world around us are upset by the foisting of new mindsets, teaching processes, and assessment criteria for what constitutes “good” teaching. As a result, we may question our identities, competencies, and goals as educators. However, by adopting the practice and using the methods and support systems outlined above, these challenges are outweighed by the promise of remarkable benefits to us, to our students, and to the creation of truly inclusive environments in design higher education.

## Conclusion

At its core, the reflective teaching practice informs and empowers us—and our students. It enables us to probe beneath the shroud of mechanistic teaching practices and answer vital questions, including those posed in this article’s Introduction. For instance, we come to know if our teaching is effective and if our students are learning when,

through reflective teaching, we identify formative moments when our students strengthened and advanced their knowledge and skillsets, applied course content in new and meaningful ways, and acquired greater independence within the learning environment. We know we are creating an inclusive environment that enables all students to feel appreciated when we view the classroom experience through our learners' perspectives. To gain a holistic view with this lens, we must assess the diverse array of classroom experiences. These include: students' peer-to-peer interactions along with our own teacher-to student(s) engagements, no matter how formal or informal these may be; the body language of our students, which may indicate their levels of comfort/discomfort in our learning environments; and anonymous surveys and/or reflective writing exercises wherein students describe their first-hand experiences in our classrooms. We must also reflect on the materials we use to teach and, within these, ensure multiple identities and communities are represented. Concurrently, any classroom power dynamics that undermine an inclusive learning environment must be addressed. These and other diverse reflections provide us with a greater understanding of our students' perspectives and their experiences in our classroom.

Additionally, we can work toward constructing an inclusive environment through self-development, which can be accomplished through several means. For example, we can form a peer mentorship relationship to gain new insights from a more experienced teacher-colleague. We can perform autobiographical reflections to check the possible biases and assumptions we may hold. We can review scholarly literature to gain a deeper and wider perspective from the field. And, for an enhanced sense of community, we can join a professional support group. Ongoing self-development cultivates reflective teaching practice and, in doing so, helps us promote inclusive learning environments.

The future of design education rests on ourselves and our community. Thus, the implications of reflective teaching on the future Academy cannot be understated. If we, as teachers and academic leaders, are to produce successful graduates—designers who will help determine our world's future—we must establish a solid, universal platform upon which reflective teaching can flourish across the global design Academy. The reflective practices outline in this article will support our students' feelings of psychological safety, belonging, and inclusivity in our design schools so they may, in turn, flourish academically, personally, and professionally. It is through reflective teaching practice that we strengthen our pedagogy, our students, ourselves, our academic institutions, our design industries, and consequently, our world. After all, if you ever want to see the future, just look into a design classroom.

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