

# **Improving Teacher Reflection in the Religious Education Classroom**

**OR, “Serious Reflection and Great Uneasiness”:  
Professional Reflection for Religious Educators**

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# Reflection & Uneasiness

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- ◉ Why does “serious reflection” sometimes lead to “great uneasiness”?
- ◉ Should “serious reflection” always lead to “great uneasiness” of some kind? Why or why not?
- ◉ Can the depth of our reflection be determined by the degree of our uneasiness? Why or why not?

# Reflection Definition

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- “Deliberate thinking about action with a view to its improvement.” (attributed to John Dewey)
- “Reflection may be seen as an active and deliberative cognitive process, involving sequences of interconnected ideas which take account of underlying beliefs and knowledge. Reflective thinking generally addresses practical problems, allowing for doubt and perplexity before possible solutions are reached” (Hatton and Smith)

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# Alignment Dilemma

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- Fred A.J. Korthagen--Netherlands
- Reflect on what? Many facets of “good teaching” and being a “good teacher”

# Korthagen Reflection Model

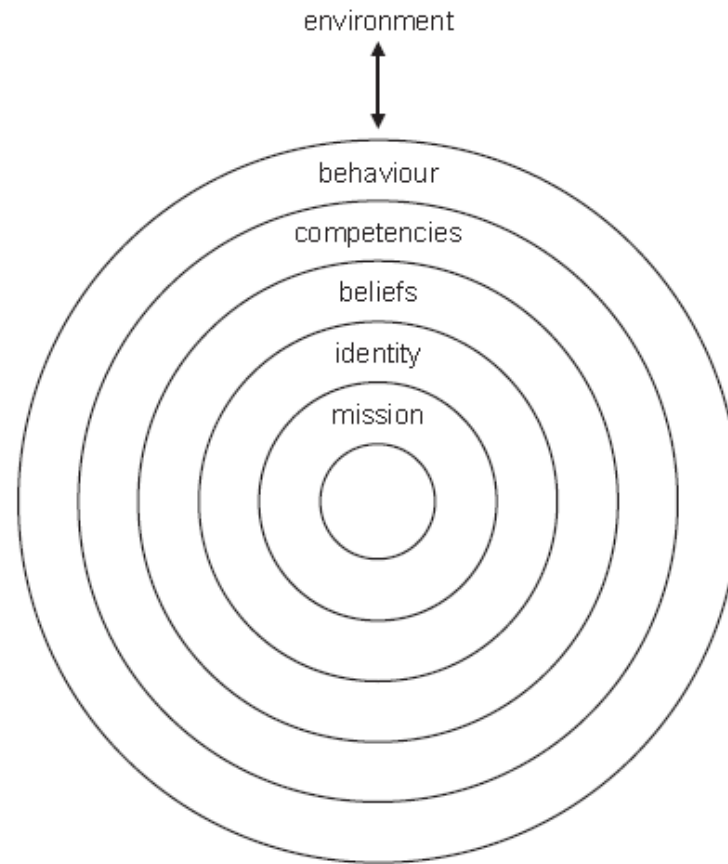


Fig. 1. The onion: a model of levels of change.

# Alignment Dilemma

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- Fred A.J. Korthagen--Netherlands
- Reflect on what? Many facets of “good teaching” and being a “good teacher”
- Stagnation danger—mostly comes from focusing strictly on improving competencies/skills
- Gestalts—behavioral “forms” that interrupt our use of knowledge and training in response to dynamic disruptions that evoke strong emotional or mental stress

# Incongruency Dilemma

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- Argyris and Schön—professional reflection
- Espoused theories—what we *say* we would do, or what we *say* we believe
- Theories in use—what we *actually* do
- Hybrid theories of practice—developed by identifying and reconciling incongruencies between espoused theories and theories in use
- Barriers to development of theories of practice: limited self-recognition; discomfort; self-deception



# Research Problem

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- The central problem under examination in my dissertation study was that there seemed to be a lack of description, understanding, interpretation, or explicitly articulated theory of teacher reflection as an integrated function of professional development in the Department of Seminaries & Institutes of Religion (S&I) in the LDS Church Educational System.

# Dissertation Research

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- My study sought to: 1) describe current reflective practices of seminary teachers; 2) analyze and interpret those practices through the theoretical lenses of teacher reflection put forth by Hatton and Smith (1995) and Korthagen (2004); and 3) generate a “theory of practice” (Argyris & Schön, 1974) that describes the present state of teacher reflection as a function of professional development in S&I and provides a framework for improvement.

# Technical Reflection

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- **Definition**: reporting use of teaching skills or general competencies; reporting without rationale
- **Description**: “If someone were to evaluate, . . . talking about a baseball pitch, did I get the mechanics right?”
- **Examples**: Presence of student participation; lesson pacing; classroom discipline; reporting the “what”

# Descriptive Reflection

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- **Definition**: description with rationale; considers multiple perspectives and factors
- **Description**: “I set goals. And with my goals...I don’t just say, ‘I want to do this.’ But I say, ‘I want to do this—why?’ And that becomes a writing experience.”
- **Examples**: Writing as reflective practice; evaluating teaching performance against personal goals; evaluating student acquisition of religious education learning skills; purpose/impact of student participation

# Dialogic Reflection

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- **Definition**: weighing competing claims and viewpoints, and then exploring alternative solutions
- **Description**: “As I am learning to see my blind spots in teaching I am grateful for colleagues and supervisors that are willing to be kind and candid with me, I cannot improve my teaching and overall effectiveness in the classroom without that help.”
- **Examples**: Working with the principal; seeking, receiving, and giving feedback; collaborating with others to prepare lesson plans

# Critical Reflection

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- **Definition:**

1. “seeing as problematic, according to ethical criteria, the goals and practices of one’s profession”
2. “thinking about the effects upon others of one’s actions”
3. “taking account of social, political and/or cultural forces”

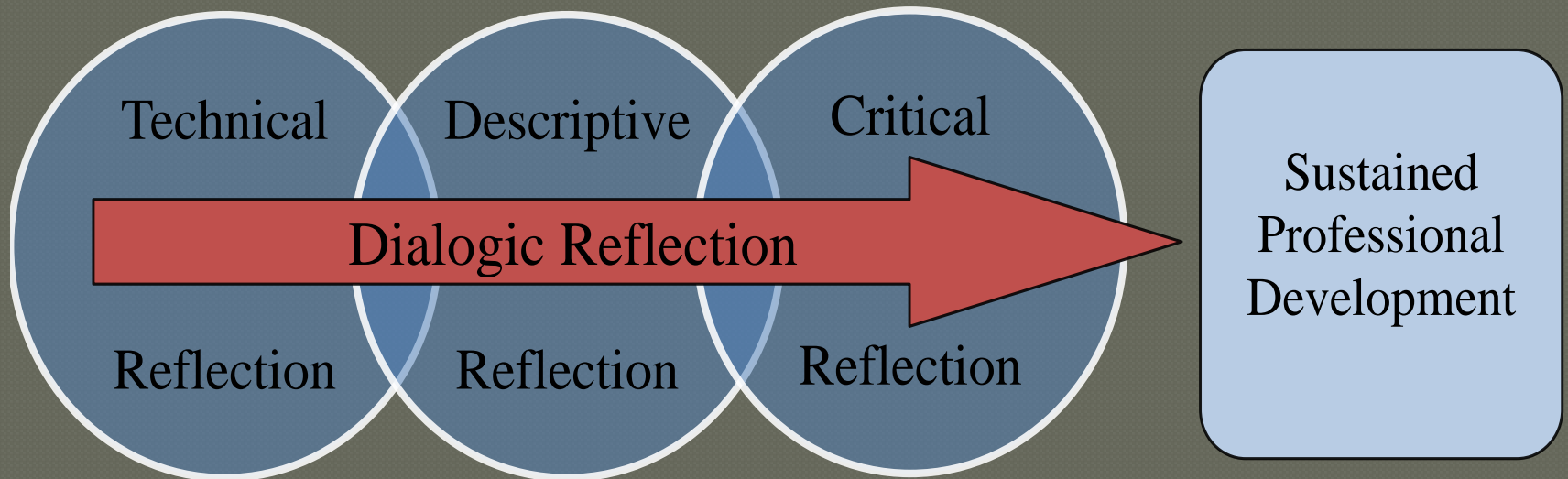
# Critical Reflection

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- **Description**: “I like them to feel close to God, by the time they leave class, I want them to feel closer than when they walked in, and I want them to feel appreciated, loved, and I want them to feel encouraged.”
- **Examples**: Promoting spiritual growth and development of students; coordinating teaching with S&I Objective; knowing students’ background/circumstances

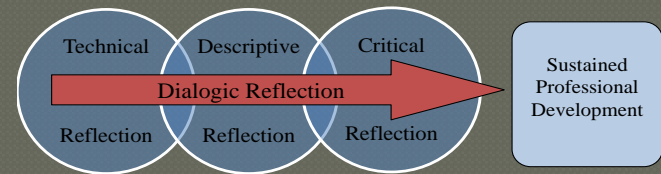
# Integrated Model of Reflection

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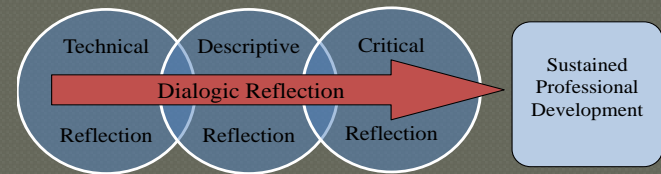


# A “theory of practice”



- *Technical reflection*: Teachers need to engage in reflective practices that evaluate their effective use of teaching skills.
- *Descriptive reflection*: This will help religious educators align their classroom behaviors more closely with their mission and values (personal and institutional); facilitates vital connection between technical reflection with critical reflection

# A “theory of practice”



- *Dialogic reflection*: Helps avoid the insular dangers of intellectual and pedagogical inbreeding; dialogic reflection practices in S&I cross all levels of reflection in an effort to consistently engage the teacher in dialogue with others in the quest for sustained professional development.
- *Critical reflection*: Focused on “thinking about the effects upon others of one’s actions.” Highest amount of reflective material in any level was “promoting the spiritual growth and development of students”; not explicitly connected to S&I Objective.

# Summary

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The connection between the “espoused theories” of S&I professional seminary teachers—usually expressed via critical reflection—could be strengthened through the effective evaluation of technical practices and reflection (i.e. “theories in use”) via descriptive and dialogical reflective means to generate effective “hybrid theories of practice” (Argyris & Schön, 1974). It is vital for seminary teachers to make explicit connections between the aims of their critical reflection and their technical reflection via descriptive and dialogic reflection in order to avoid the “directionless change” that comes from “competence without purpose” as well as the “inefficiency and frustration” that comes from “purpose without competence” (Glickman, 2004, p. 476).

<b>Teaching Event</b>	<b>Technical</b>	<b>Descriptive</b>	<b>Dialogic</b>	<b>Critical</b>
<b>Who was the teacher?</b>				
<b>Who were the students?</b>				
<b>What was context of this event—course, setting, etc.?</b>				

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Who was the teacher?	What did I do?			
Who were the students?	What did my students do?			
What was context of this event—course, setting, etc.?	What concepts were the focus of the lesson?			

<b>Teaching Event</b>	<b>Technical</b>	<b>Descriptive</b>	<b>Dialogic</b>	<b>Critical</b>
Who was the teacher?	What did I do?	Why did I choose the methods I did?		
Who were the students?	What did my students do?	How did their actions seem to affect their learning?		
What was context of this event—course, setting, etc.?	What concepts were the focus of the lesson?	Why did I focus on these concepts?		

<b>Teaching Event</b>	<b>Technical</b>	<b>Descriptive</b>	<b>Dialogic</b>	<b>Critical</b>
Who was the teacher?	What did I do?	Why did I choose the methods I did?	How does what I did compare with what I have read about other practices or methods?	
Who were the students?	What did my students do?	How did their actions seem to affect their learning?	What did my students think about what they did?	
What was context of this event—course, setting, etc.?	What concepts were the focus of the lesson?	Why did I focus on these concepts?	How have I seen other teachers approach this same content?	

<b>Teaching Event</b>	<b>Technical</b>	<b>Descriptive</b>	<b>Dialogic</b>	<b>Critical</b>
Who was the teacher?	What did I do?	Why did I choose the methods I did?	How does what I did compare with what I have read about other practices or methods?	How does what I did align with my sense of mission as a religious educator?
Who were the students?	What did my students do?	How did their actions seem to affect their learning?	What did my students think about what they did?	What impact did this lesson have on my students?
What was context of this event—course, setting, etc.?	What concepts were the focus of the lesson?	Why did I focus on these concepts?	How have I seen other teachers approach this same content?	How did the lesson objectives align with institutional objectives?



# Benefits of Reflection

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- Increase alignment
- Ever-improving “hybrid theories of practice”
- Increase “reflection-in-action”
- Teachers who take personal responsibility for sustained professional development

# Top recommendations

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- Increasing engagement with professional literature
- Education & training (teachers & administrators)—primarily focused on increasing descriptive reflection
- Pre-observation; observation; post-observation
  - “Teacher platforms”—observations based on these platforms
  - Lesson plan/observation tandem
- Producing effective observation/reflection tools