

Online interaction: How does it help preservice teachers become better reflective practitioners?

Abstract: *This article investigates online interaction as a means of support for reflective practice in preservice teachers during internship placement. We first present the concept of reflective practice and its operationalization in initial teacher training. From this perspective, and because interning teachers are distributed among diverse placement locations, we propose that the teacher internship provides a particularly suitable opportunity to develop reflective practice in initial training and to integrate Internet interaction tools. Thus, as a coaching mechanism in preservice teacher training, online interaction is implicitly perceived as a driver for reflective practice.*

Within the space of twenty years, reflective practice (Dewey, 1933; Schön, 1983) became a core notion in initial teacher training (Mansvelter-Longayroux, Beijaard & Verloop, 2007; Richardson, 1990). It entered as part of the international movement launched in the 1980s to reform education and improve its quality (OCDE, 1989). In Quebec, this movement was first taken up by the *Conseil supérieur de l'éducation* (Superior Council of Education) (CSE, 1991), followed by the *Ministère de l'éducation du Québec* (Quebec's education department) (MEQ), in which the notions of professionalism and reflective practice were closely connected:

The approach to a continuum of professionalism requires first ensuring that all future teachers acquire the habit of reflecting on their teaching practice (MEQ, 1994, p. 3) (translation).

In 2001, the MEQ formalized the role of reflective practice in initial teacher training by inscribing it as Competency Component Number 11. This component consists of "reflecting on the practice (reflective analysis) and reinvesting the results of this reflection into action" (translation) (MEQ, 2001, p. 157). Reflective practice is also a component of initial teacher training worldwide (in French-speaking Belgium, see the *Administration générale de l'enseignement et de la recherche scientifique*, 2001; in France, see the *Haut conseil de l'éducation*, 2006; in the United States, see the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education, 2008; in Europe, see the *Institut national de recherche pédagogique*, 2005). Reflective practice aims to strengthen teaching professionalism. However, this concept has been challenging to theorize, as frequently noted in the literature (Beauchamp, 2006; Ecclestone, 1996; Fendler, 2003; Grimmett, Erickson, Mackinnon & Riecken, 1990). This fuzziness probably explains why several theoretical approaches to the concept of reflective practice have been put forward. A critical literature analysis reveals three main approaches:

- Sequential models viewing reflective practice as a process involving a series of steps, generally cyclical. The models developed by Dewey (1933) and Schön (1983) follow this format.

- Evaluative models that do not consider steps so much as levels of reflective practice. In other words, the emphasis is placed on the hierarchical quality of the reflection rather than the reflective process itself, involving gradations of the various reflective levels. The most well known evaluative model was developed by Van Manen (1977).
- Thematic models that focus on reflective practice by describing the constituents, generally producing a typology. For example, Zeichner and Liston (1996) propose a typology of five major traditions in reflective teaching: academic, social efficiency, developmental, social reconstructionist, and generic.

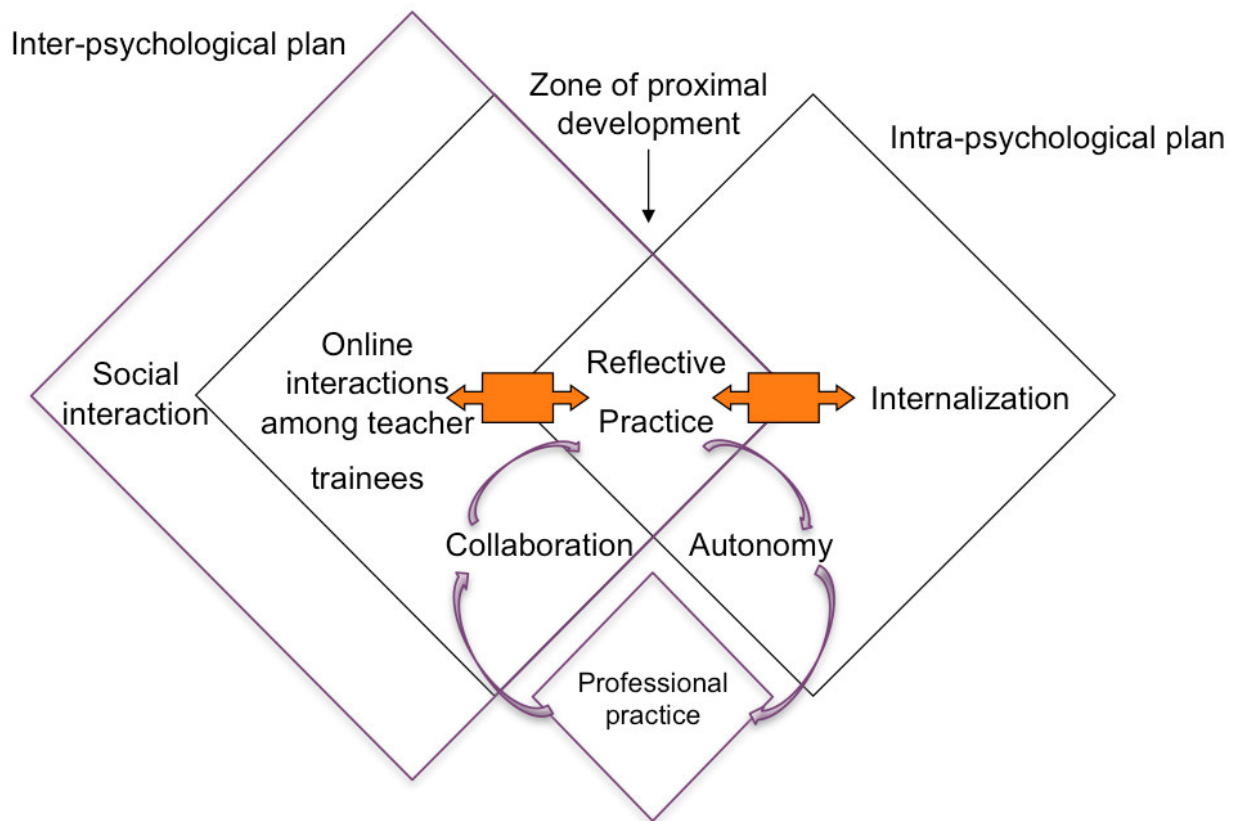
In initial training, teaching internships are usually considered as a key time for the development of reflective practice. In fact, reflective practice, because it is fundamentally constructed in relation to professional action (Schön, 1983), is particularly likely to be developed during the teaching internship. Moreover, along with recommending coaching to develop reflective practice in the initial training program, Schön (1987) suggests immersing the teacher-in-training into professional practice (Calderhead, 1989). We therefore propose that the teaching internship provides a uniquely propitious opportunity to develop reflective practice, particularly when supported by coaching. In this respect, internship seminars, portfolio preparation, and conducting practice analyses would be some potential tools to develop reflective practice during the preservice internship. Among these, Internet communication tools would appear to be especially valuable. Indeed, with the growth of ICT in education, Internet communication tools are increasingly used in preservice internships, a time when students are scattered to diverse assignments, reducing their opportunities for “face time.” Further, ICT hold great socio-cognitive potential (Depover, Karsenti & Komis, 2007; Jonassen, 2000), and have the capacity to support reflective practice in students throughout the internship.

Thus, internship coaching mechanisms using Internet communication tools to help develop reflective practice would be based on the premise that online interaction can support the development of reflective practice. However, it remains to be explained how online interaction (similar to face-to-face interaction) can be reconciled with reflective practice, insofar as reflective practice is theoretically an individual, not a collective, process (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). This paradoxical association between the highly *intrapersonal* aspect of reflective practice and the highly *interpersonal* aspect of online interaction needs to be theoretically formalized in the reflective practice field. In light of this, researchers investigating the relationship between reflective practice and online interaction must first find a conceptual framework to explain this reconciliation. To this end, semiotic mediation (Vygotsky, 1962), although limited in terms of reflective practice, sheds some light on the relationship between reflective practice and verbal interaction (which encompasses online interaction). We may then consider an interactional reflective practice (Collin, 2009), positing that teachers can develop reflective practice through interactive verbal activities concerning their practice, and subsequently reinvest in their autonomous professional actions. This conceptual framework therefore implies that reflective practice is not necessarily limited to the individual scale, but may also be collective, with verbal interaction becoming the *reflective medium* by which individual reflections are shared and enriched.

Figure 1 presents a diagram of the conceptual framework for online interactional reflective practice. We consider reflection only when it is communally constructed after the action has been carried out. The zone of proximal development, or the space lying between the development of the ability to conceptualize constructed both in collaboration and autonomously, is located between the inter- and intrapsychological planes. It represents the place (or “site”) where reflective practice is developed, through stimulation at the interpsychological level and internalization at the intrapsychological level. Through this process, preservice teachers can progressively develop reflective practice:

from the perspective of the individual, participation in such collaborative action and interaction provides the opportunity for him or her to appropriate the processes involved, which, when internalized and integrated with their existing resources, as Vygotsky explains, transforms the way in which they tackle similar problems in the future (Wells, 1999, p. 43).

Figure 1: Model of interactional reflective practice



The interpsychological plane corresponds to online interaction. Internet communication tools and the online interaction they make possible are thus formalized as a development “site” for reflective practice among preservice teachers. Hence, online interaction offers an invaluable access to reflective practice, providing a source of highly useful data that is generated on its own without the researcher’s interference. The idea is then to try to

identify the discursive manifestations of reflective practice through an analysis of these interactions.

Based on this conceptual framework, this article presents the results of a study on online interaction as a reflective practice “site” for preservice teachers. It consists of a primarily qualitative exploratory study. Data was collected during the internship of students in the fourth year of a teacher training program at the Université de Montréal in winter 2009. The three groups of teacher trainees observed were instructed to interact with members of a mailing list concerning events (e.g., problems, surprises, successes) connected with their professional practice as they experienced it during their internships. The analyzed data comprises online interactions, individual and group interviews, and responses to an online questionnaire.

Results show that online interaction between preservice teachers appears to form an effective “site” for co-constructing reflective practice, albeit to a moderate extent, in that the reflective process engendered by the interaction was not fully realized in the majority of cases. These results might be explained by the fact that the online interactions were evaluated by internship supervisors. On the other hand, it is noteworthy that the interactional reflective practice constructed by the preservice teachers was found equal for same interventions. In other words, it was apparently produced at two levels simultaneously: the interpersonal (interaction between preservice teachers) and the intrapersonal (interaction within a same preservice teacher intervention). Recalling Vygotsky’s (1962) theory, we may hypothesize that the reflective practice of the preservice teachers therefore results from an internalization of their social interactions, enabling them to reproduce at the intrapersonal level the interactional reflective practice stimulated at the interpersonal level. Hence, we wonder whether the conceptual framework of interactional reflective practice, initially developed for the interpersonal level, might not be extended to encompass both interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction in the development of reflective practice in preservice teachers.

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