



Arts Teacher as Reflective Practitioner for Personal SEL Growth

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As educators our minds are always 'on', planning, questioning, wondering, and continually observing students and learning.

We are able to look at any given moment in our classroom, and in a flash, envision the outcome while considering student feelings, backwards designing the necessary steps from that very vision, and in the next breath share the exact words and needs that will support learning for everyone involved. We are thinkers! We care about how and what students learn, and as arts educators, we also care about how they feel because we know that their feelings will drive or inhibit their engagement and learning.

As adults, we are similar to our students, because our feelings and personal traits also either motivate or deter us from tasks and relationships, depending on our strengths, needs, and the given circumstances. The difference is that we get to design these learning moments for ourselves as reflective practitioners.

As a music teacher, I don't think I have ever had an evening where I didn't stop and replay various moments

from that day's instruction.

Sometimes I would replay a conversation with a student and try and solve the problem, and other times I would replay a moment and feel so embarrassed that I overreacted and didn't have a better approach. While some of this was reflective much of it was rumination that may or may not have been helpful.

The question is, how can we embed a reflective practice into our daily routine so that we, too, can improve in our own competency levels of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making and that also anchor us in our Identity, Belonging, and Agency? These are the very skills

that we strive to support in our students.

I think it's so interesting that as an arts educator (specifically music, for me), the very reflective practice that makes a musician great was never a part of any class or ensemble I experienced. Music is the very sound that expresses emotions and ideas, but growing up, I was never asked to really think and reflect about the process of who I was in relationship to the process and art of creating or composing music. Music was a reflective task of 'the error was made, so fix it', instead of, "I wonder what you are thinking before or after the mistake, what would help address this?" Or, "What steps or guidance do you need to achieve or complete this task?" I also so





wish that someone could have helped me deal with the extreme anxiety I had in college when it came to performing. **There was this prevalent idea that if you broke down, you weren't strong enough to make it.** Thinking back, I just needed someone to coach me and to do it in real time. What authentic learning moments those would have been!

Thankfully, we know more about the brain and our emotions and we can now integrate Social Emotional Learning in the moment for authentic and embedded learning.

The importance of the integration of the five competencies of Social Emotional Learning, as a model for our students and for our individual growth, is three-fold. **Firstly**, when we reflect and grow, we develop as individuals and educators, and then our students benefit from an educator that is thoughtful and who cares for people as much as they do for their subject matter. Students will also see Social Emotional Learning in real-time along with our personal process of improvement. This opens a safe space for learning and growth, and it will be felt, seen, and emulated. **Secondly**, if SEL learning is modeled by the classroom teacher in the arts classroom, the educator is sending a clear message to

their students: 'this is how we do things around here' and 'we are in this together as learners and creatives'.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to continue to reflect and improve in our own Social Emotional Learning because we should always participate in the very tasks or experiences that we ask our students to do. We get the opportunity to 'walk the talk.'

Simply stated, understanding, and engaging with these competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making will help us continue to grow as people and educators.

For most of us, Social Emotional Learning wasn't a concept that was introduced in college or embedded into other subjects, and clearly SEL wasn't viewed as 'skills to learn' like multiplication tables or scientific terms. As a flutist in many ensemble rehearsals, I was never asked how I felt or what I thought because it was an outcome-based learning. Learn the music to play for the concert. **We might have been judged, 'given a look of disgust', or negatively graded if we didn't have the SEL skills, yet no one ever bothered to teach these with intentionality or in the context**

of the learning. So, it makes sense that improving in our own social emotional growth in front of our students and peers just might be challenging because it feels new and awkward. It might also feel embarrassing to be open and vulnerable, but the outcomes will benefit everyone in connection with you.

Social emotional traits are the most important skills that are needed for survival, success in life, learning, and relationships, and are arguably the hardest skills to learn as a human. These are not 'soft' skills at all, as I've heard and read all too often! Trust me when I say that I would much rather memorize an algebraic formula than have a personal confrontation with another individual, which requires social-emotional skills to confront, listen, grow, or possibly identify areas where I have fallen short.

The reality is that the very understanding and skills that make us human and help us function and succeed in society can't be memorized or recalled to simply 'pass' in a multiple-choice test, but rather they must be experienced in real time, over and over, and in a multitude of contexts in relationship to our emotions. I can only imagine how this will benefit all of our students in the arts because we then support a higher level of artistic literacy, one that integrates the students' personal expression and emotions with the skills and knowledge of an art form to become a whole artist. Experiencing these emotions and skills can be hard, and the classroom is a perfect place for these moments because the people and the connected experiences are real world

opportunities for personal growth and lifelong learning. We just need to take the time to reflect and connect ourselves to each of these moments because

reflection is how we learn. As John Dewey said, “We do not learn from experience, we learn from reflecting on experience.”



So, here are a few tips to guide you as a reflective practitioner in your own Social Emotional Learning:

- **Align mind and body to focus.** Play or listen to your favorite music that is relaxing and helps you wind down a bit. If you like to dance, put on your favorite music and move, or if you like to draw or paint, take out your favorite medium and spend a few minutes creating. Allow yourself time to anchor your body and mind in the very art that grounds you.
- **Carve out 5-10 minutes every day to think about the various situations you encountered during the day.** These could range from students forgetting their music or leaving their final art piece at home, or maybe a verbal exchange with a student that escalated. View yourself as an individual who has the opportunity to learn from these situations and suspend judgment.
- **Be kind and honest with yourself** and know that every person is on a continuum of growth throughout their entire life.
- **Have an honest conversation with yourself about your strengths and needs** connected to the SEL competencies of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making. Identify where you excel or where you feel that you need improvement and note what and how you will improve upon. Spend time reflecting on which competencies are tested at different times in the class or rehearsal. Look for patterns that help provide a deeper understanding.
- **Pinpoint one moment in the day where you were truly your best** in relation to the 5 competencies and identify key aspects that demonstrated this. Celebrate the moment!
- **Pinpoint one moment that didn't go so well** and identify how it could have been improved. Celebrate the recognition of this!
- **Reflect on your thoughts, actions, and words from that moment and replay the situation**, choosing different words and actions to improve the outcome for the next time it comes around.
- **Use each of the above moments as templates or experiences to guide you in new situations.**
- **If you don't have time to reflect, or a situation has caught you off-guard, use the following chant:** *listen, pause, think, breathe, respond*. This will give you something to hold on to and to provide time to respond and not react.



We Are Learners and We Are Teachers

We are learners and we are teachers. Social learning in the service and context of teaching is challenging because we are trying to improve in our own SEL growth at the same time that we are guiding students to do the same. However, once we've found anchors and know our strengths and needs, we will continue to practice and reflect for improvement, and we'll feel safer to admit our truths and grow.

Some of the most powerful moments in my musical ensemble classes occurred when I stopped the class and let them know that I felt uncomfortable by how I spoke or reacted. I remember one after-school rehearsal where I had truly lost all patience. I was exhausted, the concert was a week away, and we had rehearsed a particular section repeatedly, but the errors were still glaring. I stopped the ensemble and said, “Come ON - what's going on?” The students could feel my exasperation, and no one spoke. I knew in that moment that my reaction was just that, a reaction, and wasn't helpful. Everyone knew why we had stopped, and no one spoke. The drummer started the group again to give it another try, while in my mind my internal dialogue was so fierce that I floated away from the rehearsal. “Anne, they are more tired than you, there is NO reason to place any guilt or anger on the students. How else can you review this to support them, because now they've shut down.” I let the music play for a moment and then I stopped the group and paused. The students looked up at me and

the silence was deafening. And then, I glanced around the room, looking at each student, and simply apologized. **I told them I was so sorry for my reaction, I knew that they were working hard, and that I had lost my patience and needed to find a better way to help each person.** I literally heard students give a sigh of relief. A student then spoke, "Thanks, Ms. Fennell. We get it, we're tired too." I smiled and said, "I will do better and you can always call me on that if it happens again. OK, let's take a break and come back in 10 minutes, would that work?" The students smiled, walked away from their instruments, and when they returned, it was like a new class of students entered, and guess what, the errors were gone. From that point forward, I would often apologize, share my emotions and what I was thinking, and then give it another try.

This was truly a pivotal moment in my teaching and this was all a part of my transition to a learner-centered classroom. The classes became a safe space where everyone belonged and where they could be authentic.

When I made a mistake talking about the music, or misjudged something, I admitted error and corrected myself or asked for a student to find my error. I began to release this concept of having to be the 'expert', and fell into a space as a guide, and all of my classes shifted. I have to say, that when I first started apologizing or admitting my errors, students would sit in absolute silence and then it eventually became



the classrooms' norm. Without judgment, students would simply say, "My error," or "I'm sorry, that came out meanly." Grace and kindness lived in our classes where we held a safe space for being human and learner-centered. My favorite times were when the students themselves would stop the ensemble rehearsal and say, "I keep on playing that wrong, can we run it again or can someone help me," or "I don't understand this, can someone explain it to me in a different way?" Learner-centered classes where students advocate for their needs in a group in which they truly belong, is a positive and nurturing classroom environment like no other, and agency in action is powerful for everyone.

As we as individuals become aware of ourselves and identify the perspectives of others and their needs, we will also

continue to monitor, contribute, and improve as educators. This creates a classroom environment that is inviting for students to do the same. The classroom culture then becomes one of growth and acceptance. For our students to understand and see authentic application and integration of self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making, our modeling will pave the way for their success through authentic, embedded, sustained application.

We can be aware and support the needs of our students for their personal and collective social-emotional skills, but to truly grow as an individual, it's our job to reflect as learners in this work as well. Now - take 5 minutes, carve out a little time for yourself, and think back on your day!



Mission Statement

The Center for Arts Education and Social Emotional Learning (ArtsEdSEL) is dedicated to illuminating the intersection between arts education and social emotional learning to facilitate the embedded, intentional, and sustained application of SEL-informed arts education.



ArtsEdSEL

The Center for Arts Education
and Social Emotional Learning

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