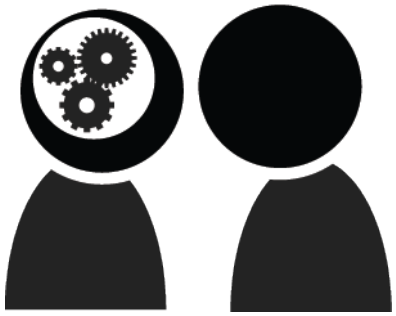
Mentoring Practice: MAKING YOUR THINKING EXPLICIT

What is this practice?



Making your thinking explicit involves describing the reasoning behind the instructional decisions you make, or the ways you respond to professional situations. You can think of it as pulling back the curtain—allowing the teacher candidate to see your internal, otherwise invisible thought processes at work. Being explicit is also a way of communicating with the TC *during* all the other practices—modeling the work of teaching, co-planning, co-teaching, debriefing, analyzing student work. All of these are occasions for you and the TC to reason out loud together.

Why is it important?

TCs get plenty of chances to observe what is happening in your classroom and around the school. They'll see you make moves with students or how you organize activities, and they can learn from that, but the learning opportunity is limited if you don't share your reasoning about the choices you make. For example, if they see you re-arranging student groups, they have no way of knowing if someone was misbehaving or if an English Language Learner was being paired up with a slightly more advanced ELL who speaks the same home language. If your mind is a black box, the TC will lose out on making sense of your decision—they need to hear what professional reasoning sounds like, even when it is hard to articulate.

> *Every single thing I do—they're gonna ask me why… Veteran teachers don't often think about why they're doing those things... It's not just about helping somebody else learn how to teach. It is really reflecting on what you do, why you do it, and is there a better way to do it?*
>
> Mentor, 2018

TCs "internalize" what they hear from mentors, and they gradually come to ask themselves the same questions that mentors pose. So share your reasoning about matters large and small. It is often transparency about little things that are most impactful.

Tips for doing this practice effectively

First, when should you make your thinking explicit? Allow the TC to hear your reasoning about decisions you are *making for the future* (e.g., planning tomorrow's lesson, shifting the order of your units). They need to hear about your plans, to learn from the things you notice and value as an educator, how you frame challenges, and what resources you draw on to solve problems.

Also allow the TC to hear *why you respond to on-demand situations in particular ways* (such as a recent e-mail from a parent, students being confused about a science idea, Tuesday's class being interrupted by a fire drill, etc.). They need to hear about responses to real-time situations in order to see what rules of thumb you use to make quick decisions when plans get interrupted or little emergencies pop up. You can discuss such situations with them later rather than in the moment.

In each case, highlight the following:

1. State the decision you have to make. This is not always obvious to the TC. Try to talk about the root cause, if there is one, rather than the symptom. For instance, you may be considering what to do about the low energy you're seeing from students in 1st period (symptom); after talking with other teachers, you find out that many of the students in that class have multiple big projects due around the same time and are overwhelmed (root cause). Discussing the root cause (or possibilities) helps clarify the nature of the situation and subsequent decision.

2a. Describe what the alternatives seem to be. Sometimes there are clear options. It might start like this: "I need to [plan to teach this science practice, solve this management problem]. I could choose to [Option A] or I could choose to [Option B]. Here are the tradeoffs." If the teacher candidate is watching you during class, while students are working you can say, "So I was planning on having them [do a structured reading about this science idea], but because [they seem to have a lot of experience with this idea] it may be better to [introduce the next activity]." As a mentor you can then ask, "What do you think?" and your TC will be more ready to deliberate with you because you've thought "out loud" with them about your perceptions of the situation. These examples are, of course, over-simplified. Teaching is rarely if ever this clear-cut. But even if you can voice some options, it opens the TC to what's possible.

2b. Describe some principles you use to guide action. If you are co-planning, you can say, "When I design a discussion after an activity, I have three things I think about…" or "I have two goals for the conversation that guide my decisions..."

3. Describe why you choose a particular path of action—"Here's why I am picking [Option A]." The TC benefits from knowing what tipped the scales. Was it based on values ["I wanted to spend the extra time sharing out ideas at the end of class, even though we may have to carry it over to tomorrow"]? Was it based on a desire for rigor ["Our students can do better on this project, we just need to find a way to support them while we keep the challenge level high"]? Perhaps a decision was based on professional ethics in working with peers ["I did not want to be overly critical of our department chair's idea in yesterday's meeting, she has had to make some hard choices lately but they are always in the best interests of our students"].

Where to start?

At the beginning of the school year, your TC will want to hear your thinking about organizing the classroom, setting norms, and selecting your initial units of instruction. Consider beginning with these topics or inviting the TC to share what they have noticed or what they are puzzled about, and share your reasoning in response.

Summing up

- Make your thinking explicit about spontaneous as well as planned decisions
- State the decision you have to make, what the alternatives are, principles you are using to guide your thinking, and why you made key choices
- Allow the TC to respond and ask "what if" questions