

# “[The problem] with reflective practice is that it often ends up in the teacher’s head, not shared”: Reflecting on TESOL Twitter Bytes

by Thomas S.C. Farrell

## Introduction

Recently a friend was alerted to a Twitter comment that one of the main speakers at a major conference made (which is also the title of this article, although I added full words); the comment that was widely shared is: “[The problem] with reflective practice is that it often ends up in the teacher’s head, not shared.” The friend asked me what my reaction to this comment was. Of course, I realize that this is but one sentence and decontextualized, and so I wondered what the context was that the sentence was plucked from. When thus prompted, my friend then gave me further background that the speaker provided in the talk but not in the Twitter comment, that a “problem” with reflective practice is the problems of teacher isolation and that the discoveries in reflective practice

be a powerful social media networking mechanism and, for that reason alone, is very useful in instantly connecting language teachers from around the globe. It also seems to be an excellent form of self-promotion and many businesses are successfully using it in such a manner to promote their products. There are many more advantages of using Twitter for language teachers, I am sure, but from my (limited) observations the limitation of 140 characters leads to my main worry about this new form of “communication” for language teachers, which is that the comments, by their nature, are decontextualized. Thus, there often seems to be a need to come up with sensational one-liners about teaching and learning such as the tweet I am addressing in this article. However, those who have been involved with teaching and learning a second or



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seldom go beyond the individual teacher; according to my friend, the speaker’s main presentation centered on teacher learning communities. I have several reactions, including recognizing the danger of the Twitter bytes of information that emanate from conferences, but this is subordinate to my main reaction, which is more detailed as it concerns some of the ignorance that surrounds what reflective practice is and what it can do for language teachers.

## Twitter

First, let me confess that I do not use Twitter and only occasionally read the bytes of information that appear there (usually in one or two sentences with a maximum of 140 characters in a tweet). It seems to

foreign language know how complex this is in terms of teaching and learning, and I believe they do not do justice to all the research that is ongoing that proves there are no simple cause-effect solutions nor answers to complicated issues such as teachers reflecting on their practice.

## The Tweet: “...it often ends up in the teacher’s head”

Looking at this tweet bite (and not the context that was provided as it was not provided in the original tweet I was shown), one reads immediately that reflective practice has a big problem: “it often ends up in the teacher’s head” and is not shared. I am not sure if the speaker really understands why engaging in reflective

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practice is important for individual teachers, but it (i.e., self-reflection) *should* end up in the teacher’s head. Teachers engage in self-reflection with the idea of gaining self-understanding and self-knowledge, which is in *itself* a valid means of knowledge generation because the resulting self-awareness will provide such knowledge (Farrell, 2015). Some may say that such self-reflection is self-indulgent (as the tweet perhaps may be alluding to?), but as Palmer (1998, p. 3) correctly notes, “The work required to ‘know thyself’ is neither selfish nor narcissistic. Whatever self-knowledge we attain as teachers will serve our students and our scholarship well. Good teaching requires self-knowledge; it is a secret hidden in plain sight.” Which brings me to my final point about the importance of such self-reflection: it never really just stays in a teacher’s head because it goes beyond the teacher to his/her *students*, and who better to benefit than our students? I think in all the discussions related to encouraging TESOL teachers to engage in reflecting on their practice, we have somehow forgotten that the main reason for this is that our students will benefit as we become more aware of our practice so we can provide more learning opportunities for our students. Yes, we can share our reflections with other teachers, but what we share now as a result of self-reflection is the strong sense of personal identity that infuses our work.

### Conclusion

In this article, I have cautioned that although Twitter

may be a wonderful means of networking and promotion among teachers worldwide, we in the TESOL profession must be careful of always looking for sensational one-liners (because of the limit of 140 characters – of course, there is a lot more I could have said in this article, but I too am restricted by space) that are decontextualized and may be misleading to others reading them. I used one particular recent tweet that was brought to my attention because it was related to a perceived “problem” with reflective practice in that it ends up in a teacher’s head and thus may not be useful. However, I have attempted to point out that the result of such self-reflection will not just stay in a teacher’s head because his or her students will be the ultimate beneficiaries of such engagement in reflective practice. As Palmer (1998, p. 2) relays, “Knowing myself is as crucial to good teaching as knowing my students and my subject.”

### References

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