



# Reflective Practice

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## 'I felt a sense of panic, disorientation and frustration all at the same time': the important role of emotions in reflective practice

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### ABSTRACT

For many novice teachers, their first year on the job can be a roller coaster experience of 'ups' and 'downs' as they transition from their teacher education programs to teaching in real classrooms. While to 'ups' are always good to experience, the 'downs' can be so traumatic that novice teachers can feel so stressed that their teaching is adversely impacted and burned out to the point that they consider resigning for the profession. For the most part, however, the language teaching profession has not addressed this aspect of a novice ESL (English as a second language) teacher well-being in terms of their personal and emotional investment as they transition from trainee to novice teacher in their first year. This paper attempts to shed light on the emotional experiences of three female novice ESL teachers in a university language school in Canada as they reflected during regular group discussions and journal writing during their first semester (12 weeks) as novice ESL teachers. The results reveal that the group discussions and journal writing provided a platform for the teachers to articulate their mostly negative emotions with three most frequently expressed: frustration, anger and boredom.

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## Introduction

For most teachers, professional life is hectic as their day begins well before they enter their classrooms, and never really ends given the endless preparation, planning, and grading that they must engage in. For novice teachers, who are expected to carry out the exact same duties as their more experienced colleagues unlike many other professions, their first year on the job can be an overwhelming 'sink or swim' (Varah et al., 1986) survival process. Although novice teachers enter the profession and bring with them fresh enthusiasm, new idealism, and new training and teaching approaches that can only improve the profession, many report feelings of disappointment as 'the missionary ideals' formed during their teacher education program are quickly replaced 'by the harsh and rude reality of classroom life' (Veenman, 1984, p. 143). Similar findings have also been reported of the experiences of first year English as a second language (ESL) teacher woes in the field of teaching English to speakers of other languages (TESOL; Artigliere &

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Baecher, 2017; Farrell, 2017, 2021), with many also left to cope on their own without much guidance or support decreasing their enthusiasm for work and emotional exhaustion (Frenzel et al., 2016; Higginbotham, 2019). Research has indicated that when the gap between novice teachers' expectations and the reality of their first-year experiences is vast, they will struggle in the transition period, which in turn will lead to emotional stress, which in turn adversely affects their teaching, leading to a negative outcome for their students, burnout, and teacher attrition (Farrell, 2019; Faez & Valeo, 2012).

For the most part, the language teaching professional has somewhat neglected this aspect of a novice ESL teacher well-being in terms of their personal and emotional investment as they transition from trainee to novice teacher. Research in general education suggests that it is important to pay attention to teachers' emotional investment because, as Callahan (1988, p. 12) points out, they 'constitute reflexive personal signals, or "vital signs" informing us of inner processes' of teachers' emotions. One way of exploring the affective reflective experiences of novice ESL teachers during their first year of teaching is by encouraging them to reflect on their practice (Farrell, 2022). This paper attempts to shed some light on the affective reflective experiences of three novice ESL teachers in a university language school catering to adult English as a second language learners in Canada during regular group discussions and journal writing during their first semester (12 weeks) as novice ESL teachers.

## Teacher emotions and reflection

For many seasoned teachers, the act of teaching can be stressful professions because they must endure a severe hectic pace, or the 'hot action' (York-Barr et al., 2006, p. 2), they are constantly involved in throughout each day of each term. At the center of this 'hot action' is a person-as-teacher rather than a mechanical robot because it is impossible to separate the person-as-teacher from the act of teaching because emotions constitute a fundamental dimension of teaching and of being a teacher (Kelchtermans & Deketelaere, 2016). As Teng (2017, p. 118) points out, 'emotions are part of the very fabric that constitutes the teacher's self'. Thus, it is not surprising given such a hectic pace where teachers must juggle various multiple tasks while making thousands of different on-the-spot decisions each day, that the risk of burnout because of emotional and physical exhaustion is very real (Byrne, 1999).

Just as the act of teaching is not devoid of any teacher emotions, so too emotions cannot be detached from the teacher who is reflecting (the reflector), because the moment feelings behind events and behaviors are revealed, the reflective process itself becomes emotional (Boud et al., 1985). However, for the most part in language education, reflective practice has been conceptualized as a problem-solving intervention where the 'problem' that exists outside the person who is doing the reflection, or the teacher-as-person, needs to be 'fixed' (Farrell, 2019). As Freeman (2016, p. 201) has pointed out, within language teaching such a focus on 'post-mortem reflection' 'limits reflection to a process of problem solving rather than reflection to achieve self-awareness and understanding'.

Because emotions are said to be a the 'core' (Holmes, 2010, p. 147) of reflective practice in the context of teaching, attending to this affective side of teacher reflections, can help develop a greater awareness and understanding of their emotions, as well as evaluating

them for appreciation or censure (Frenzel et al., 2016). As Marathe and Sen (2021, p. 568) note, as a result of focusing on emotions while reflecting, the teacher can revisit events to find out reasons 'for "what" happened in the event and "how" the situations unfolded itself to lead to the present event'. Marathe and Sen (2021) maintain that this process enables the reflector to label their experiences and feelings as being either positive or negative, and then analyze why they experienced such feelings. Indeed, because novice teachers, and especially probationary novice ESL teachers, tend to avoid displays of negative emotions related to their practice because they fear repercussions from the administration (Winograd, 2003), it is even more important to that they be encouraged to engage in reflective practice from a personal emotional lens. However, not many studies exist related to novice ESL teachers' reflections on their emotions during their first year of teaching. Thus, the case study reported on in this paper is one attempt to narrow this research gap by examining the emotions of three female ESL novice teachers as they reflect during interviews, group discussions and journal writing in their first semester of teaching in Canada.

## The study

The theoretical framework that guided the study was the appraisal theory of emotion (Moors et al., 2013). As Moors et al. (2013, p. 120) explain, 'Appraisal is a process that detects and assesses the significance of the environment for well-being' where well-being is considered in terms of satisfaction or obstruction of concerns. Thus, appraisals are an individual's cognitive judgments about situations and events and whether these are considered positive or negative for that individual, rather than by the situations and events themselves (Moors et al., 2013). In addition, Zhu and Thagard (2002, p. 20) explain that emotions 'serve the function of providing appraisals about what is happening' and as a result these emotions 'supply the most reliable information about the situation and ourselves'. The central research question that guided the present study is as follows: what emotions do three female ESL express as they reflect during group discussions, interviews and journal writing?

The study utilized qualitative methods of research that include a case-study approach that was exploratory and descriptive in nature (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The case-study methodology was chosen for language teacher research because it best facilitates the construction of detailed, in-depth understanding of what is to be studied, and therefore can engage with complexity (Van Lier, 2005). As Van Lier (2005, p. 195) notes, rigorous analysis of a case study of just a few teachers can provide in-depth insights into intricate pedagogical and contextual issues that, 'cannot be done adequately in any other common research practice'.

## Participants

Three female novice ESL teachers (each had just started their first-year teaching ESL) volunteered to come together as a teacher reflection group for one semester (12 weeks) to reflect on their work together with the aid a facilitator (this author). Josephine, Laura, and Tracy (all pseudonyms) had a similar initial qualification in teaching ESL (a BA in Applied Linguistics and a Certificate in Teaching English as a Second Language [TESL]), one had an MA in Applied Linguistics and a certificate in Teaching English as a Second

Language [TESL]) (Josephine), and the other two (Laura, and Tracy) had similar certificates in TESL that qualified them to teach. All three were employed in the same institution under one semester temporary contracts as ESL teachers.

### ***Data collection***

Data were collected over a one-semester period (12 weeks), and from the following sources: the researcher's field notes, group discussions, journal writing and interviews with the teachers. All three teachers agreed to attend weekly group meetings, write a teaching journal and attend all interviews. The group had weekly discussions (12 in all) in which mutual understandings were constructed through talk. As Garton and Richards (2008) remark, 'the way teachers talk about their experiences is fundamental to understanding how a teacher's knowledge influences what happens in the context of their work' (p. xxii). All group discussions were audio-recorded, transcribed and later coded for content. The teachers agreed to write whenever they wanted to in their teaching journals rather than have any fixed requirements. An initial interview was conducted to elicit necessary background details pertaining to the ESL teachers' initial education experiences. Other interviews (four in total) conducted after this consisted of questions on topics that came up during the course of the reflections in general or in the teaching journals, and/or group discussions. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

### ***Data analysis***

All transcripts and journal entries were scanned and coded through the lens of the linguistic appraisal framework (Martin & White, 2005). A central element of the linguistic appraisal framework is to provide a systematic account of language for expressing attitude, and especially the subsystem of affect, with affect referring to the language used for expressing emotions (White, 2000). Affect is defined in this study as "a feeling encompassing a variety of moods and emotional states that help form the emotional makeup of an individual (Robbins et al., 2017, p. 261). Thus, I analyzed the teachers' reflections for affective language using White's (2000) approach which include examining the data for *adverbials*: 'happily', 'angrily', 'fearfully', 'proudly'; *attributes*: 'I'm sad'. 'He's frightened of spiders'; *nominals*: 'His fear was obvious to all'; and *verbs*: 'This pleases me'. 'I hate chocolate'. Thus, by applying the above categories of affect to the linguistic expressions which appeared in the teachers' reflections, a deeper scrutiny of their use of affective language was possible and the results were presented to the participants for their comments. In order to establish the trustworthiness of my findings, I (along with graduate research assistants who were trained in the coding techniques) assessed the quality of the data by checking for their 'credibility' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 300) and thematic saturation when no further themes or patterns in the data emerged (Gaskell, 2000; Green & Thorogood, 2004). During data triangulation from the three different sources (interview, group discussions and journal writing) and the researcher's field notes, codes and themes were cross-checked for example, when a piece of evidence was compared and crosschecked with other kinds of evidence.

## Findings

The three ESL teachers expressed their 'enthusiasm' about teaching and their overall 'excitement' about moving forward as language teachers during the first group meeting and their initial journal entries but before they had entered the school to begin their teaching careers. However, all three novice ESL teachers then moved in a similar trajectory of expressing their negative emotions in order of frequency: 'frustration(s)' and 'anger' throughout the twelve weeks, and 'boredom' towards the latter part of the semester.

### **Frustration**

'Frustration' generally refers to negative feelings stimulated when people are prevented from accomplishing their goals or changing unpleasant experiences (Kuppens & Van Mechelen, 2007). On her first day on the job, Josephine reported that she had no orientation, was given no contract to sign (although she was informed previously that it would be ready to sign that first day), and no access to internet because she was given no password to log onto the system. This was further compounded by the fact that the more established teacher she shared office space with refused to share his password to allow her such access. Josephine noted that after two or three weeks teaching her writing class, she was 'feeling very frustrated' and 'struggled with' what she perceived as a mismatch between lesson plans prepared by the other teachers and the use of the prescribed textbook. She explained, 'I don't mind using a textbook when it's helpful, but if [others] plans for how the course should develop don't match the textbook that's where I struggle. I should be using it [the textbook] because they bought it, but it doesn't really fit in with this, so that's what I'm frustrated with the whole thing'. Josephine then said that during her first weeks she, 'felt a sense of panic, disorientation and frustration all at the same time'.

In the final group meeting she also said she was feeling frustrated with the time she spent marking exams. She said, 'I was very frustrated when it came to making exams'. She said this was particularly 'frustrating' for a reading class she was teaching, because she not only had to develop the exam, which she thought was 'pretty good', but then also submit it for approval. However, Josephine said that 'it was sent back almost immediately with the words "No. This is too difficult"'. The supervisor, who had received and approved all of Josephine's previous lesson plans, and thus was aware what she was teaching, and that the exam reflected this, proceeded to give her a different 'approved exam' to administer. Josephine, although found the whole experience 'frustrating to deal with' and 'a bit of an insult' said that she decided not to object just to get the exam 'over with'. Josephine expressed her frustrations: 'Here I've spent all this time making sure you get my lesson plans thinking that it's for you to also give me feedback if you think I'm going off track. I hadn't received anything back until the exam. So that's kind of frustrating'.

Laura and Tracy expressed that they were 'frustrated' throughout the group meetings and in their journal writing. Similar to what Josephine noted above about her frustrations with different sets of rubrics they were instructed to follow, so too did Laura express similar issues and noted that she was 'frustrated with the amount of work I have to do either calculating marks or giving letter grades' because the rubrics were so different. She wrote in her journal entry towards the end of the semester about this, 'I received the

marking schema yesterday, marks need to be posted Wednesday [two days later], and there is stuff on the rubric that I didn't even include in my evaluations. We still haven't had a meeting. I don't know where to post things. These are the little things that make me frustrated'.

This also related to her frustrations with the whole marking and assessment requirements they were told to follow. For example, Laura expressed that she was 'frustrated with the amount of marking and assessment I am required to do on top of the teaching' as she noted she had to make up her own tests and quizzes. Laura continued, 'That takes time, a lot of time. And then you try to make the kind of quiz that is easy to mark, right? So that's not my best teaching if I am always concerned of how much time is this going to take. And I'm like frustrated. I like to do a lot also, but I have to balance'. Laura also wrote later in her journal that she was 'feeling frustrated about all the marking because nothing was consistent'.

Tracy also noted her frustrations with much of what the other two relayed above and this came out towards the end of the semester when she reflected that all her expressed complaining 'about the red tape and all the outside issues or inside issues, and my frustrations' that she 'felt like I was getting free therapy' from the group discussions. Tracy continued, 'You know, I go home and I'm nice and happy. I don't have to complain to my husband about no [staff] meetings and all that stuff'.

### ***Anger***

'Anger' is an emotion people either direct at others when they want to blame them for unwelcome events, or it can be directed at the self (Kuppens & Van Mechelen, 2007). Tracy expressed her 'anger' more than the others even from the very beginning of the semester, when she remarked the overall atmosphere of the institution the first week was 'not welcoming' and that she felt 'isolated and angry' about it. This was made clear to her when she realized that the other teachers would not share information with her. Tracy said, 'during the first week, your classes are kind of disheveled and everybody's talking, everybody's excited, but nobody was sharing any information with me'. In addition, Tracy said that she was given a different textbook after a week and informed by her supervisor, "Oh, there's another book". I said, "You're kidding, right?" And she says, "No". I said, "Well, where is it?" And she says, "I don't have it yet". So, I said, "What do you want me to do?" and 'How can I plan for this'. Later the following week when she still did not get the book, Tracy said 'I was so angry with the whole situation' because she said she had to 'nag them' the whole week to get any response. She remarked, 'it took me a week of nagging "Where's my book? Where's my book?" "Oh, I didn't buy it" was always the response. Friday the book shows up. I'm like I'm not working on the weekend to finish my lesson plan'.

Tracy was also angry with the way she was assigned various skills to teach without asking her about her level of interest in teaching that skill. For example, she said was assigned to teach a pronunciation class and even told how to teach it. Tracy said, 'It kills me to teach the way they expect me to teach pronunciation. It's not only boring and it drives me crazy, and I feel so angry coming out of these lessons'. Tracy said that she feels outright 'anger because every Friday I'm dreading because the students just sit like

mimicking me. It is absolutely brutal'. Tracy said her anger was compounded because on top of all this, she was in a room with no windows so she, 'I feel like when I close the door, it's like we're fish in a can'.

Tracy said that she also felt angry and underappreciated because she noted that the school attempted her to 'volunteer' her time outside class by asking her to invite her students to her house. Tracy said she will not invite students to her house, 'I would never want my students to know where I live because this is me. This is my place, and I don't want to be taken advantage by the school either by being pressured to cross my boundary'.

Laura also expressed anger about similar events outlined by Tracy above as about how she and the other new teachers were being treated because of their probationary part-time status and lack of seniority in the system. Laura noted that there are staff members who work full-time, and they are being paid for those hours whether they are teaching in a classroom or not. Laura said that this was unfair because they (new teachers like her) are only being paid for the hours they teach and nothing else such as planning, marking and the like. Laura said, 'So they're there, and they are being paid for hours that they are there, while we are being paid for hours that we're teaching, but obviously we have to put in a lot of hours too'. However, she also noted that their students do not distinguish between full-time or part-time teachers and that they want to receive their marks as soon as possible without knowing part-times mark their papers on their own time. As Laura noted, 'we're all [teachers] in the same mix together. So, students don't know who is who and what's what. So, I feel like if I was in a different category, I am angry about putting in so much extra time'.

### ***Boredom***

Boredom is an emotion characterized by low arousal in those that experience it (Frenzel, 2014). Regarding teachers' emotions, it has been called a 'silent' emotion (Goetz et al., 2014) because teaching is considered an intellectual job, so some may consider it unbelievable that teachers could or would feel bored when teaching. Laura, for example, expressed her emotion of being 'bored' and most likely the result from her initial feelings of frustration and anger with having to follow what the school wanted her to do in terms of the prescribed textbook and topics within those texts, and the marking scheme she said she was required to follow. Laura pointed out that when she first received the textbook for her speaking class that she was required to follow, she worried about the suitability of the topics for discussion with her students. For example, she noted that one topic was on transportation, and she remarked, 'I thought, oh my goodness, here we are adults talking about cars and planes and trains, like seriously'. In fact, this materialized for Laura early in the semester when she noted how basic this topic was for her adult students. She reflected, 'We were talking about transportation, and it was one of my first classes, so it was pretty basic. Boat, car, plane, whatever. They're not in Grade 2. They are learning a language, but they are not in Grade 2'. Then in the following meetings Laura expressed that she was 'bored' and/or it was 'boring' to reflect the contents of what she was required teach more than eight different times. Then she decided to take matters into her own hands and make changes. As Laura said, 'I just find that I couldn't teach the same thing over and over again anyways because I would be bored of myself, bored listening to

myself speak. So, if that's the case, then how are they are feeling?' She said that she would add more items of transportation like 'rickshaw' to talk about and she noted, 'we talked about totally different, like rickshaw and like all crazy things instead of... because the first one I found it was kind of, I was bored with it. I was bored, so I had to change it'.

Laura said also that she found all of the marking challenging but also really boring for her. She said, 'I have spent the whole week trying to stay on top of evaluations they are a nightmare for me'. Later she reflected about this in her journal, 'Of course I understand that being a teacher means that you put in planning hours and marking hours in addition to teaching hours, but I am feeling as though I am doing too much. I cannot keep this pace. It is boring too'. Similar to what Laura noted above about the books she was given to use, so too Tracy and Josephine expressed some issues that led to them expressing feelings of being 'bored'. Tracy said that she supplements the book because it is 'so boring because it consists of rules. Just lists rules to follow'. For Josephine too her 'boredom' was related to a book she was required to use in her writing class because she was required to follow its outline rather than 'a more creative approach to writing' that she thinks would be more appropriate for her students. She noted that her students 'seem to be really dragging their feet'. She said, 'I think they're bored too'.

## Discussion

The findings reveal that the three novice ESL teachers expressed three negative emotions throughout the twelve weeks in order of frequency: 'frustration', 'anger' and 'boredom'.

The main sources of their frustrations seemed to stem from their perceptions of a lack of support and interaction from the administration and their more experienced colleagues. As Tracy remarked in her first few weeks, 'You don't feel like, "Hey come on in. Thanks for joining the team. This is what's going on". You're just thrown in to survive yourself'. Some of their frustrations resulted from having no contract during the first few weeks, no access to the computer system, no textbooks or sudden change of textbooks in the first weeks, no staff meetings and thus no direction from anybody, as well as new students continually entering or exiting their classes up to the fifth week, their confusion with marking and grading, and individual difficulties teaching individual classes. Indeed, it is likely that that many of their reported frustrations may have led to their reported feelings of anger because many of the issues remain unresolved. The fact that these three novice ESL teachers articulated such frustrations and feeling of anger and boredom is particularly salient given that for teachers any such displays of these three emotions are socially and professionally undesirable, thus if anything, such teacher reports of these may be downwardly biased (Frenzel, 2014).

For the three novice ESL teachers reported on in this case study, it is possible that their frustrations, anger and boredom could also be related to the fact that they were hired under temporary contracts (as is the case for all novice teachers in that school when they are first hired in Canada) and as such the school administrators may have been reluctant to invest any time, energy or resources into guiding those they may have considered as transient teachers. Unfortunately, this also suggests such an informal entry into the profession that may constrain novice teachers' full development of their teaching routines, their relationships with students and colleagues, and even their mode of interaction with administrators. On the other hand, the only way all three novice teachers could ever

hope to obtain a continuing contract is by taking on as many temporary fixed-term contracts as they can manage. In addition, they must take on volunteering duties whether they wish to or not, in addition to unreasonable workloads. Further, if they are to ever hope to gain permanency, they have to avoid complaining about anything (i.e. expressing any negative emotions to other teachers or administrators), to make sure they are not seen as teachers who will be difficult as future colleagues.

However, as the semester progressed so too did their level of frustration and anger with the administration, in that they found it unorganized and not very clear in its procedures as well as resentment about teaching and testing against their beliefs about effective practice. As a result, all three teachers realized that they would have to act for themselves if they were to survive their first semester. They did this by trying to make their lessons more interesting, supplementing the required textbooks with more relevant materials. They also noted that they would have to come up with their own ways to deal with difficult learners, as they had little guidance from the school administration. Thus, the findings of the case study presented in this paper suggests that in language teaching we may also need to discover more of an understanding about what Fook (2010, p. 49) has noted as the 'complex interplay of personally and organizationally experienced emotions' and how this can be incorporated into reflective practice.

At the very least, institutions that employ novice ESL teachers could provide more support for their neophyte teachers especially in terms of helping them manage their emotions in a healthy way. For example, if mentor teachers are appointed to help novice teachers during their first-year transitions, they can encourage novice teacher to engage in personal reflective activities such as discussions and journal writing (similar to what the novice ESL teachers experienced in this case study) that can act as a cathartic release mechanism and promote their wellbeing. In addition, teacher education programs can do a lot more to make clear that emotions are at the 'epicenter' of language teaching (Agudo, 2019), because as Hoy (2013, p. 264) has noted, learner teachers are 'neither warned about nor prepared' for the emotional demands of teaching as a career. Thus, novice ESL teachers can be trained how to articulate, evaluate, and regulate any negative emotions and thus gain agency over them (Gkonou et al., 2020). Such training should encourage learner teachers to engage in reflective practice activities that include dialogue and writing about their emotions during pre-service training, and that it is ok to experience, and express rather than hide, such negative emotions as frustration, anger and boredom. What matters is how they regulate or handle them and what coping strategies they develop to ensure their wellbeing. In addition, case studies, such as the contents of this paper, can be discussed as a group during pre-service training so that novice teachers can be prepared to be more emotionally resilient during their first year of teaching. As Marathe and Sen (2021, p. 568) point out, when the emotions of other teachers are included, the reflective process grows into empathetic reflection" where 'the reflector, along with the focus on his/her emotions, now is able to understand and identify with the perspective of others'. This was also the case for the teachers in the case study presented in this paper. As Tracy wrote in her journal at the end of the semester

I liked hearing other ideas. I liked just getting some feedback when I said, 'Oh, this isn't working in my class.' Just to know that sometimes we were going through the same thing, you know we were frustrated with the administration. We were frustrated, so I think that's kind of nice because we created an opportunity to talk.

## Conclusion

This paper outlined and discussed the reflections of three novice ESL teachers in their first semester teaching in Canada through reflective activities of group discussions and journal writing. The findings reveal the three negative emotions they used in order of frequency were 'frustration', 'anger' and 'boredom'. All three novice ESL teachers talked about their 'frustration' about a lack of communication and that they felt confused when it came to certain procedures both inside and outside the classroom. These frustrations then turned to expressions of 'anger' and 'boredom'. However, rather than giving up, all three novice ESL teachers used their reflections to articulate what they were feeling, and as a result, were able to compare these with each other in order to take whatever action they needed to survive their first semester. Consequently, the results suggest that encouraging novice ESL teachers to express and reflect on their emotions can, as Hargreaves (2000) suggests, help them better understand and regulate them in order to enhance and promote their overall wellbeing. Given the small number of teachers in this study, further research is needed that delves into novice language teachers' emotional reflections during their first years, and how developing emotional awareness can help regulate their emotions to minimize stress so that they can *thrive* (rather than survive) their first year of teaching.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Notes on contributor

**Thomas S.C. Farrell** is professor of Applied Linguistics at Brock University, Canada. His professional interests include reflective practice and language teacher education. His work can be accessed at [www.reflectiveinquiry.ca](http://reflectiveinquiry.ca)

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