Clare Renner from the School of Creative Media won the 2007 RMIT Teaching Award for TAFE Outstanding Teacher/Trainer of the Year. Clare discusses how she reflects on her teaching practice.

What led you to teaching, as a profession?

I had always planned to be a teacher but actually didn’t start working as one until I was close to 30; I think this was because I felt that I needed to have more to offer in the classroom than my own educational experience. That being said, it was probably this very experience that initially led me to thinking about teaching as a career. I had enjoyed my education, and was lucky enough to have come across a couple of teachers who actually changed the way I saw the world. I remember thinking, even back then, that this would be something that was worth doing.

After teaching in schools for some years, I took a break and began writing for a living. I enjoyed the writing but not the solitary nature of the job and I missed teaching and the interaction with other people, so ten years ago I began working in the TAFE system. This suits me perfectly as it allows me to marry my skills as a practitioner with my experience as a teacher.

How do you reflect on your teaching practice? How regularly?

One of the greatest obstacles to regular reflection is the routine of the academic timetable. Weeks fly past and we mean to do so much before finding out that the semester is nearly finished – again!

For me, thinking about my practice works better when it is part of a continuous process and I find that much of what we do as teachers automatically provides both opportunity and stimulus for reflection. (The trick of course is capturing those thoughts and making time later to organise them into something more cohesive.)

I find that regular events like reviewing course content, preparing lesson plans, writing and moderating assessment, PAC and SSCC meetings, all cause me to think about my teaching - as does talking with students and with other teachers from the program.

I also find that involving myself in different areas of RMIT allows me to meet people who are interested in learning and teaching in a variety of contexts, which encourages me to think differently about the way in which I do things. Likewise, almost any form of professional development breaks the routine and again provides a new environment in which to reflect. Taking on training has a similar effect and I find that putting myself into the position of learner is one of the most useful ways of stimulating reflection on my practice as a teacher.

How does student feedback assist you in evaluating your teaching?

Student feedback is very useful in helping me to evaluate my teaching - it tells me whether that important connection between teaching and learning has been forged or not. However it has taken years of experience to learn how to listen to feedback and work out how to interpret it.

While formal student feedback can certainly serve as a prompt, I feel it has limits as a tool for reflection. It is dependent on students being able to interpret the questions in a useful way and there is little allowance made for students’ personal interpretations of learning and teaching.
Also, most teachers are not trained in the interpretation of this data and if too much emphasis is placed on surveys, it doesn’t encourage us to look at more important forms of student feedback.

As teachers, we remind our students that the feedback they receive from us is continuous and that it comes in many guises, not just in the form of numeric results or comments written on an assignment. The same applies to student feedback - it comes to us in the work our students produce, their engagement in the classroom, our course retention or drop out rates, the number of students signing up for a class because of word of mouth and of course in what happens after they leave us.

How did your preparation for the RMIT Teaching Awards help you to reflect on your teaching?

I found this a very interesting process (albeit time consuming) and I came to realise that preparing a submission for an award, a grant or funding of any kind can be a really useful tool. Apart from ensuring that you consider your teaching in an organised and coherent way, it also provides an alternative framework for reflection.

You receive feedback from people who see your teaching from a number of perspectives - students, colleagues, managers and industry professionals. These people come together to give you a full picture of your impact as a teacher and the willingness they show in doing this is often one of the most positive forms of feedback you will receive.

What is the most radical change you have made to your teaching, as a result of reflection?

Most of the changes I have made in both delivery and assessment have been gradual and born of a continuous (if sometimes erratic) process of reflection but I remember some years ago asking a colleague for advice about a class that was just not working – the students were not engaging with what I was teaching in the way other classes had done in the past. Literally as I was speaking, came the dawning realisation that I was expecting all my students to respond in the same way to my teaching and that this was at best unrealistic and at worst, bad practice.

Writing students tend to be a diverse group and ours range in age from 18 to 75. They also come from different educational backgrounds and I realised that I needed to find out more about different learning styles in order to provide an effective learning environment.

The result of this reflection was a shift away from delivering in a set way what I thought students should know, to recognising that learning had to be the driver rather than the end result.

What advice would you offer to other teaching professionals?

Implicit in the notion of reflection is a willingness to change – there really isn’t much point thinking about the way you do things if you are not prepared to do them differently. The idea of change can be off-putting as it carries with it the implication of an increased workload. However, in the end, changing the way you do something is a lot less stressful than continuing to do something that doesn’t work or has no integrity.

The best (and sometimes the most difficult) thing you can do for yourself is to give yourself the time to think about what you are doing and why you are doing it.