

Assessing Reflective Responses in Journals

In studying the journals of student teachers, three researchers categorized their responses in order to better understand the students' thinking and encourage them to become reflective practitioners.

Why should I keep a journal?" We felt frustrated as we tried to answer our student's question with assurance. We knew that journal writing encourages thinking; we hoped it would even "serve the important function of integrating course content, self-knowledge, and practical experiences with teaching and learning situations" (Yinger and Clark 1981, p. 25). We also knew that journal entries can reveal how undergraduate teacher candidates think about teaching (see Zeichner and Liston 1987). Intrigued by the possibilities, we had added journals to our course requirements. What we did not know was how our students typically organize their thinking and whether there are common strategies by which their thinking could be examined for focus and content.

In their biweekly journal entries, we asked our students to focus on course content and readings as each related to (1) their beliefs and knowledge about



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teaching, (2) how such information was applicable in field experience and/or other classrooms, (3) how children responded (or might respond) to methods students experienced in class, and (4) personal reflections and feelings about the teaching/learning process,

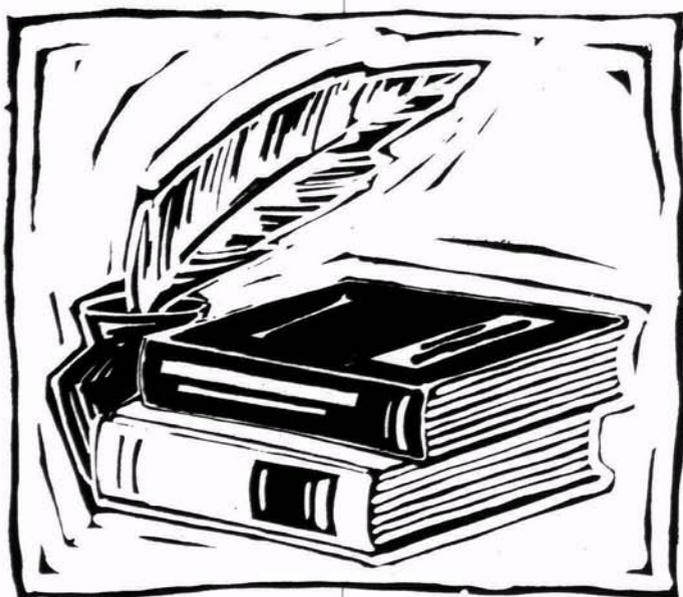
both in the college classroom and in the primary grades. They turned in their journals every month; then each professor read and responded to the entries.

Ten students volunteered to let us do an in-depth examination of their journals. Through naturalistic research, we developed the following framework of categories and subcategories of student responses from these journal entries.

Reaction

The Reaction category contained students' initial responses to class content, including peer teaching, discussions, activities, lectures, environments, instructors, peers, and articles they had read. The reactions included the following subcategories:

1. Positive Feeling: describing satisfaction or pleasure regarding themselves, others, or the class activities.



The students expanded their first reactions by explaining their feelings, verifying their thinking, giving an example, or referring to other situations.

STUDENT #8 (August 29):

Mary [a guest speaker] is very inspiring. Her enthusiasm for children's literature is exciting. I also share that excitement. I love the idea of incorporating literature and textbooks to give a creative, exciting curriculum.

2. Negative Feeling: expressing dissatisfaction or complaints about themselves, others, or the class activities.

STUDENT #7 (October 24):

We gave our pre-number presentation. Our group endeavor seemed to be unsuccessful to me.

3. Report: stating facts of what the students did in class; does not include any personal concern or feelings about the class activities.

STUDENT #5 (September 19):

Toured science, math, and social studies labs. . . Discussed Piagetian interview—directions for administering. . . Also discussed, in our groups, thematic unit.

4. Personal Concern: expressing specific personal matters that had an impact on student's class participation.

STUDENT #7 (October 26):

I had a bad migraine headache. It

lasted all week. I've had migraine headaches since I was 7. When they hit, they hit hard.

5. Issues: referring to educational issues, problems, knowledge, or related matters.

STUDENT #1 (August 24):

I think that parents, and even teachers and administrators, should be educated on the importance of developmental learning.

Elaboration

Elaboration emerged as the second core category. The students expanded their first reactions by explaining their feelings, verifying their thinking, giving an example, or referring to other situations. Here we present examples of their first reactions and examples of the three types of elaboration.

1. Concrete Elaboration: expanding on the particular situation from which the reaction was derived.

STUDENT #10 (August 29):

Reaction—Today I learned how to go about making a list of what could possibly be used for a thematic unit.

Concrete elaboration—We brainstormed ideas, voted on one unit. . . We also incorporated the holidays and special days that would come up during the year into our ideas for units for the year. . . We webbed out or mapped out our thematic unit as a group.

2. Comparative Elaboration: comparing their first reaction with other classes, primary classrooms or kindergartens they had been working in as field experience students, or their own childhood experiences.

STUDENT #6 (October 19):

Reaction—Social studies and science appear to be so neglected in the educational system.

Comparative elaboration—The three semesters that I have been in an observation placement I have never observed science or social studies instruction. One teacher told me that none of the teachers knew science information, and they do not like the topics; therefore, they don't teach them.

3. Generalized Elaboration: referring to a general principle, a theory, or a broad philosophical context.

STUDENT #3 (September 7):

Reaction—*Focusing on process and not so much on product is important to do in early childhood*

Generalized elaboration—*Chapter 13 of Piaget for the Classroom Teacher made a good point about this on page 107. As quoted from Piaget himself, "Knowledge does not develop from 'all wrong' to 'perfectly correct.' All children have some knowledge about whatever we try to teach them . . ."*

Contemplation

We called the last category contemplation. To be counted as contemplation, entries showing the initial reaction combined further elaboration, as well as thinking about personal, professional, or social/ethical problems.

1. The Personal Focus: thoughts about themselves or particular personal problems.

STUDENT #2 (September 21):

Reaction—*Today we had numerous guest speakers on the various cultures we are studying for our in-class units. The impact the speakers had on me was so incredible*

Elaboration—*I gained a greater appreciation for the various cultures because I have a better understanding of them. I am very anxious for the reports to be shared in class*

Contemplation—*I found myself going back in time viewing historical events from an entirely different perspective*

2. The Professional Focus:

thoughts about educational problems, issues, theories, teaching methods, future goals, attitudes as teachers, and views about children's abilities and nature.

STUDENT #9 (September 26):

Reaction—*Today was the day we started wrapping up our unit. The*

Taking the time to write in a journal means also taking time to reflect.

I felt [the journal] was a wonderful way to expand my thinking about the events taking place in class.

hardest part about this whole thing is trying to get together with each other.

Elaboration—*Some of us live close, and some of us don't. It takes a lot of cooperation and giving and taking to be able to work together as a group*

Contemplation—*I don't know if children would work as well together in such a large group. I feel that three at the most is large enough for a group activity*

3. The Social/Ethical Focus: students' thoughts about social issues, ethical problems, or moral concerns.

STUDENT #7 (November 27):

Reaction—*I was really impressed by the graph that the professor made representing the population during different years. The prediction for the population for the year 2000 is frightening*

Elaboration—*What kind of a world will my children live in? Are we the last generations? This changing and complex society is not the same as it was 30 years ago*

Contemplation—*If our schools are going to abandon teaching religion—which I agree they must—and values, we have to replace it with something else. Children need direction. We need to help children be thinkers. . . . I've become more aware of the problems of society in the last 5 years. It seems so obvious that we are sinking fast. In a way I think that values have been exterminated by human rights*

Toward a Reflective Perspective

What did we the professors learn? We found that many students organized entries using the reaction-elaboration-contemplation sequence. That is, the sequence was at least partially devel-

oped in a majority of journals, though only a few entries included the contemplation category. When the complete sequence was present, we detected greater integration of information. The rough progression of thinking from personal and concrete reactions to a more sensitive social and ethical perspective is a focus for future journal writing guidelines. But what about the student's initial query *Why should I keep a journal?* Let the students answer the question. . . .

STUDENT #2 (December 5):

I felt [the journal] was a wonderful way to expand my thinking of the events taking place in class. It provided the challenge of questioning how I felt about concepts and how they could be applied in the classroom. Comprehension is greatly increased when students write information or concepts in their own words

STUDENT #5 (December 5):

My journal also helped me to gain interesting insights that I might not have gained if I didn't write in my journal. Taking the time to write in a journal means also taking time to reflect

Using journals this way takes time but assists prospective teachers in becoming better thinkers who probe deeper into both professional literature and their own teaching/learning ideas and actions. After all, "How teachers behave and what they do is directed in no small way by what they think" (Shulman and Lanier, cited in Fenstermacher 1978, p. 44) □

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