**DIALOGUE WRITING: CONTEXT FOR REFLECTING ON SELF AS TEACHER AND RESEARCHER**

**JESSIE A. RODERICK, University of Maryland**

*Student.* My perception of myself as a teacher changes daily. On a good day I'm anxious to share my enthusiasm for learning. I hope to emulate the "good" teachers I've observed. I see myself as an educator who will stimulate curiosity and offer students the freedom to anxiously explore the unknown. I want to learn to get them to think for themselves, not wait for the teacher to tell them all the answers they should know. I want to avoid turning out students who have memorized all the right answers, but don't know anything.

On a bad day I worry about gaining the students' respect and handling discipline problems.

*Professor.* You certainly have thought through a basic issue in teaching. Helping students want to uncover, not just memorize, is a challenge to any teacher. If we value the personal aspect of learning, we really don't try to tell all, as how do we know what is important to an individual? You are talking about different kinds of knowledge—personal and public. Unfortunately, many teachers deal only with public knowledge. Don't worry about respect and discipline. We'll help in the latter. The former develops as students see you as a caring professional.

This written conversation between a student and me was excerpted from a dialogue journal she and I kept during the semester she was enrolled in my undergraduate class in teaching language arts in the elementary school. In my search to highlight the person in my teaching and in an effort to act upon my view of students and teachers as co-creators of educational experience, I invited her and other students to join me in weekly exchanges of ideas, perceptions, and questions through the medium of written dialogue. As a result of this collaborative effort, I hoped to learn more about myself and my students and to obtain insights that could form the basis for planning a professional experience focusing on teacher as person. I was encouraged in this endeavor by George Willis's writings on creating curriculum knowledge from students' phenomenologies and by Judith Green's state of the art paper on teaching as a linguistic process. In the latter, Green asserts that "additional

---

work needs to be undertaken to explore ways in which teachers can use strategies for obtaining students' perspectives as instructional resources."

To determine whether the context provided by dialogue writing was an appropriate one for the purposes set, I studied our journal entries for themes or patterns. During this process, I sought answers to the following questions: How do pre-service students view themselves as teachers? How might these perceptions provide direction for planning an educational experience focusing on teacher as person? I was open to other questions, observations, and insights in studying our dialogues, but these questions shaped my initial thinking about the experience.

In this article I share what it means to me to try to make sense of my efforts to plan, implement, and reflect on an activity based on assumptions and beliefs I hold about persons, contexts, communication, and inquiry as they relate to curriculum development. When expressed in print, assumptions and beliefs can assume a false appearance of immutability. To offset this tendency I propose that one's beliefs are situationally oriented, that they may not hold across the several aspects of a process, and that different persons may hold different assumptions for similar experiences. After describing the students and what we learned in the process of dialogue writing, I reflect on what the study means to me as a person who engages in an inner dialectic that addresses perceived inconsistencies between beliefs and assumptions on one hand and actions on the other. The attempt to resolve contradictions and to establish a both/and stance reflects my desire to acknowledge the dynamics of life while at the same time achieve a sense of unity. My inner dialogue may be similar to Berlak and Berlak's pattern of resolution in which "apparently inconsistent or exceptional behaviors are not ignored, but are seen as a part of a dynamic, reflective combination of opposites."

DIALOGUE JOURNAL WRITING. THE PROCESS AND THE PARTICIPANTS

The practice of writing journals is not new, but the systematic study of what happens when persons engage in dialogue journal writing is a relatively new phenomenon. In fact, the seminal study of this process was recently completed under a grant from the National Institute of Education. In this study, Jana Staton, the principal investigator, and her co-researchers analyzed 26 year-long dialogue journals written by a teacher and her 6th grade class. germane to this study was the following characterization of dialogue journal writing: "interactive, functional writing which occurs between students and..."
their teacher on a daily basis, about self-generated topics of interest to each writer. "8 Journal writing so defined is seen as a type of discourse that enables persons to solve problems, develop a sense of audience, and share personal meanings. Other benefits Staton attributes to dialoguing in writing include purposeful uses of writing, meanings and benefits for all participants, shared power in the communicative event, and a bridge between spoken communication and classroom writing tasks such as composing essays.

A structural analysis of the 6th-grade students' journals revealed that during the year they had (1) increased their competence in writing, (2) shifted toward writing about more personal topics, (3) increased the number of language functions used with evidence of more personal opinions, evaluating, and complaining, and (4) become more proficient in organizing and in handling surface difficulties. Although Staton and her colleagues did not study the teacher entries in the same manner, teacher benefits of dialogue journals included the opportunity to personalize instruction and to obtain daily feedback.6

In the study of pre-service teachers' dialogue writing described in this paper, dialogue journal writing was defined as weekly written exchanges between students and professor about teaching in the elementary school. In general, the participants focused on teaching communication in the elementary school, but they also discussed other aspects of teaching. Teacher and student entries were examined for substance only and not language structure.

The Students

Twenty-two juniors preparing to be elementary school teachers and I conversed with each other via dialogue journal writing once a week for a semester. These students were enrolled in the elementary block—a group of five methods courses taught by five professors, each a specialist in a content area such as social studies and math. The organization and content of the block reflect the department's commitment to a separate subject-matter view of curriculum. Also included in the block program was an elementary school field experience in which the college students had opportunities to apply and test what they were learning on campus. The professors met weekly to discuss the program and plan special activities such as a week in Washington during which students explored the nation's capital as an educative setting. Professors also visited the students in their field placements and conferenced with the school staff.

Prior to entering the block, the students had had at least two other professional courses with accompanying field placements. In addition, many of them had been camp counselors, baby-sitters, or had served in other childcare capacities. During the block semester, several students found it financially

6Ibid, p. 2
necessary to be employed during the evening and on weekends as store clerks and government employees. After completing the block, the students normally satisfied degree requirements by taking a foundations of education course and student teaching.

The Professor

At the core of this experience with dialogue journal writing is my commitment to the notion that students and teachers are co-participants in and co-constructors of educational experience. Embedded in this area is the assumption that the person is central to the processes of planning, implementing, and evaluating learning experiences. Consequently, the development of personal qualities becomes the focus of planning contexts made available to participants. Dialogue journal writing is a personal experience that enables participants to reflect on themselves and to share these reflections with a significant other. Since the direction an interchange takes is determined by both participants, the experience is a collaborative one. A parallel to this phenomenon is Barnes's description of the relationship of communication to curriculum in which he portrays curriculum implementation as a joint venture involving student and teacher intention.\footnote{Douglas Barnes, From Communication to Curriculum (New York: Penguin Books, 1976)}

Also implied in the notion of teacher and student as co-constructors of life experiences is the assumption that individuals are active participants in life and as such have opportunities to act and react—to initiate and respond. That is, persons have an option to the passive recipient role so often imposed on students. It follows that if persons are viewed as initiators, then the context with which they interact should enable them to initiate as well as respond. The elements of context such as knowledge, persons, materials, space, and time together should offer participants opportunities to change the contexts—to bring to bear upon them their own views, ideas, and experiences. The following dialogue entries suggest that dialogue writing can provide such opportunities.

Student. I'd like to get my 2nd grade class active in some role-playing. What books could you suggest that involve the entire group? I feel they are too immature and self-conscious to act out separate parts. Am I under the wrong opinion?

Student. I would like to change my topic here today. I would like to tell you something about me (because I am having trouble) and would very much appreciate if you could give me some advice.

A closer examination of dialogue writing as context implies a view of communication as sharing personal meanings, for in written dialogue participants have opportunities to move toward Buber's genuine dialogue where "each of the participants really has in mind the other or others in their particular being and turns to them with the intention of establishing a mutual relation between himself and them."\footnote{Martin Buber, Between Man and Man (Boston: Beacon Press, 1955), p 19} Also fitting is Riceour's contrast of the
linguist's view of communication as a fact with the concept of communication as an existential investigation. The event or experience cannot be transferred, but something is. "This something is not the experience as experienced, but its meaning. Here is the miracle. The experience as experienced, as lived, remains private, but its sense, its meaning becomes public."9 This perspective on communication comes alive in dialogue writing where personal meanings are exchanged in a nonevaluative setting and where factual knowledge and an answer are not the goal.

Recent research on the relationship of oral and written language provides another perspective for viewing dialogue writing as a context for sharing personal meanings. Based on her finding that features one generally associates with speaking often occur in writing, Tannen10 proposed that the traditional view of oral versus written language be replaced with a continuum of orality and literacy. Corroboration of this continuum notion is found in Shuy's11 discussion of the oral basis for dialogue journals in which he proposes that the dialogue journal and speaking have much in common in that the journal permits and encourages a wider use of language functions than do most traditional classroom writing assignments. Journal writing that assumes the characteristics of speaking provides opportunities for each participant to respond, clarify, and move to new topics. In short, dialogue writing makes it possible for the text to answer and as such moves the text from the "separation, tyranny, and inequality" traditionally ascribed to writing."12 One might take the next step and propose that dialogue writing is probably an instance of writing as "the full manifestation of discourse."13

Finally, at the root of my attempt to explore students' perceptions of self as teacher is the assumption that inquiry modes derived from a phenomenological perspective that asks what it is like to experience something or to be someone can encourage reflection on self and one's experience in the socialization process. Achieving a match between question and inquiry mode appears to be a logical and obvious step. However, it involves more than an objective effort, as the person as researcher am closely bound to the decisions of how to map and traverse the terrain of an inquiry into a human phenomenon. My assumptions, my decisions on procedures, and my reflections illustrate this.

13Ibid., pp. 25–26
STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF SELF AS TEACHERS: THE PROFESSOR ANALYZES STUDENTS' JOURNAL ENTRIES

Although I structured the students' first and last dialogue journal entries by asking them to tell me how they perceived themselves as teachers, the intervening entries were shaped by each participant. At the end of the semester I received their permission to summarize our entries and share them with the class and with a broader audience. I assured them that anonymity would be maintained.

When I examined the first and last entries of the students' journals, the following common themes or categories emerged:

- **General Statements About Self**—no reference to specific personal attributes of self as a teacher. Example: "I see myself as a good candidate for a teacher."
- **Statements About Teaching in General**—comments about teaching that are not focused on self. Example: "I think teaching takes a certain character."
- **Positive Statements About Self as Teacher**—comments that seem to convey satisfaction with self as teacher using personal or public criteria. Example: "I see myself as a teacher with a sense of humor."
- **Positive Confirming Statements**—comments that repeat a positive statement about self as teacher or refer to an earlier positive statement. Example: "I feel that I have the raw materials necessary to be a professional teacher." (First entry also contained comment about having the necessary raw materials)
- **Negative Statements About Self as Teacher**—comments suggesting inadequacies or dissatisfaction with self as teacher. Example: "I lack firmness and toughness."
- **Statements About Changes in Self from Beginning to End of Semester**—comments describing perceived differences in skills, attitudes. Example: "I now have confidence to accept things that might not work and change them."
- **Statements Reflecting Future Goals**—comments describing plans or expressing ambitions. Example: "Most of all, I'd like to inspire the young to enjoy school."
- **Statements Giving Rationale for View of Self**—comments that suggest how student arrived at perception of self as teacher. Example: "I've been told by others that I am a caring teacher."
- **Statements Describing Experiences That Helped a Person Develop as a Teacher**—comments noting factors that contribute to development as teacher. Example: "Encouragement of others and course experiences have influenced how I see myself."

Note: Statements were judged negative and positive by the investigator's examination of them within the context of the complete journal entry.

A comparison of category frequencies in the first and last entries indicated that by the end of the semester the students were more specific in their descriptions of themselves as teachers, were generally positive about their perceptions of themselves as teachers, spoke about how they had changed and their personal goals for the future, and reflected more on how they arrived at their perceptions of themselves as teachers. The results of this initial analysis suggested that for this group dialogue writing was a viable context for viewing self as teacher.

I also wanted to discover if dialogue writing could function as a context in which participants see opportunities to experience conversation as giving and receiving gifts. Viewing communication in this manner encompasses the concept of peopling\(^4\) in which persons see others as co-equals who possess

---

\(^4\)Louise Berman and Jessie Roderick, *Curriculum. Teaching the What, How, and Why of Living* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1977), p 92
diverse gifts and who are handled carefully and sensitively. Reciprocity in relationship accompanied by the giving of comfort and consolation with warmth and grace also characterize peopling.

Repeated readings of our journal entries suggested that it was possible to view our conversation as a process of giving and receiving gifts. The following entries illustrate one of my attempts to give a gift that was probably not needed at that time. My gift was prompted by a student's journal entry in which she described how she used literature in her teaching.

Teacher: I can see where you probably will do much of your language arts teaching around literature. About 10 years ago, one of the federally funded projects in English resulted in a curriculum that used children's literature as its basis or core. If you'd like to see it, I'll be glad to share it with you.

Student: My classroom teacher says she is grateful for my help. The individual attention is an important educational tool that is usually lost in the shuffle of daily routine. Once the rapport is established, we have a nice day.

Teacher: You seem to be quite perceptive about people and make each individual feel you care about them. I know you will do well as a teacher. Perhaps you can relax a bit as you move into student teaching as you certainly prepare carefully and analyze your experiences.

Perhaps the greatest benefit of applying the concept of communication as giving and receiving gifts to our entries was a heightened sensitivity of my notion of an appropriate gift and the response it evoked. Written discourse permitted me to freeze conversation and to examine what I had thought was an appropriate gift for an individual at a particular time. If students are given an opportunity to examine their interactions from this perspective, they might see how they too can come to know themselves better by examining the nature of the gifts they give, how they receive the gifts of others, and how others respond to gifts offered.

STUDENTS AND PROFESSOR ANALYZE JOURNAL ENTRIES

Up to this point, students had not participated in the analysis of our journal entries. However, since I wanted to learn from them how they perceived the process and what they saw as possible applications to their teacher preparation experiences, a colleague and I invited them to participate in a follow-up at the end of their student teaching semester. This follow-up had a two-fold purpose: (1) to ascertain the meaning the experience of dialogue writing had for the students, and (2) to obtain their ideas on what might be included in a pre-service professional experience focusing on self as teacher. Many of the students contacted felt they could not give up the time required for meetings and journal analysis, but the nine who did participate in the follow-up study were asked to identify the major themes, threads, or ideas they discussed in their entries, and to note what they learned from my entries. While the students analyzed their journals according to the guidelines pro-

---

I gratefully acknowledge the work of Dr. Diane Lee in the follow-up phase of the study. Diane's sensitive approach to people, her thoughtful problem analysis, and her research competencies were invaluable contributions.
vided, my colleague and I did the same. Emerging categories were identified and category agreement across the raters—student, myself, and my colleague—was obtained for the journal themes. Categories reflecting what students learned from my entries were also derived.

The themes identified in the student entries were: self as teacher, functions of a teacher, self-discovery, and schooling, the profession, and field experiences. Illustrative of the theme self as teacher is the following:

My general feelings about myself as a teacher, how methods helped me become more confident as I was able to identify my strengths and weaknesses

Another students' response is subsumed under functions of the teacher

Recognition of the complexities and comprehensiveness of the teacher's role

When students identified what they learned from my entries, their responses fell in two categories. perceptions about me and perceptions of what my entries suggested about them. Students saw me as mostly supportive but also reflective and encouraging. I was also perceived as giving insight into my philosophy. In commenting on what my entries seemed to suggest about them, the students saw themselves as learning from praise, having the attributes necessary to be a good teacher, and possessing qualities such as the ability to evaluate and assess a situation fairly well. They also commented that they saw themselves in a new way, had learned how to understand others and themselves better, were able to see teaching experiences in a better perspective, and could organize thoughts and use better vocabulary.

After completing the analysis of the journal entries, we met twice to obtain student ideas on planning a professional experience that would at least include a focus on self as teacher. We met one afternoon in a university conference room and one evening in my home.

During our discussion of a possible seminar that would include attention to self as teacher, the students spoke most about the teacher preparation program they were currently experiencing. Their comments included statements of satisfaction as well as suggestions for changes, particularly in the field component. Next in order of frequency were comments about on-the-job concerns such as working with colleagues and what and how to teach. And finally, less than one-third of their comments were stated in language that referred to self as teacher. One of these comments focused on dealing with fears of exposing self.

**STUDENTS REFLECT ON DIALOGUE WRITING**

In reflecting as a group on the experience of dialogue journal writing, students proposed that journal writing be used in college classes and with elementary school children. Some of these students had already used dialogue writing in their student teaching. On one occasion, a student teacher left me a note containing the following:

Here's the highlight of my teaching career so far. I'm doing journal writing with them and love it. I'll go into details later.
Another student reported that she was writing an article on her experience with dialogue writing during student teaching.

Students’ suggestions for using dialogue journal writing with college students included the following: provide more time to write in class or encourage students to take journals home, suggest topics, let topics emerge, and assure that journal contents are private and ungraded. Students saw the journals as the only place where they would feel comfortable sharing ideas, feelings, and perceptions of self. The latter statement was supported by the journal themes in which two of the four major themes were expressed in language that reflected concerns about self. The fact that the students talked less about self as teacher than they wrote about self as teacher could be viewed as support for the notion that contexts evoke certain kinds of communication. The communication contexts of writing and group discussion engaged in by these students differed along several variables: a one-to-one private interaction versus a small-group discussion, a semester’s time lapse, and a range of new and significant experiences that had been encountered by all participants.

THE PROFESSOR REFLECTS ON DIALOGUE WRITING

Analysis of the journals and reflections on the process as experienced by the students and me suggest that use of the journals appears to be mutually beneficial and that the concept of contexts as enabling and experiences as co-constructed are viable at least for this group of students and their instructor. My reflections on my involvement in the process underscore the need for sensitivity, patience, and openness to the unanticipated that sometimes seemed to get lost in the commitment to respond by the next class session.

At times in the group discussions, I felt I might have been striving unsuccessfully to bring to the fore ideas about educational experiences that would focus on self as teacher. Yet, when I listened to the discussion, I did hear students say that the person is important, but to these students an expression of what one does or the doing of teaching seemed to be the avenue for viewing self at that point in their socialization process. I should not have been surprised at their unwillingness to give more attention to self as teacher. In essence, they were acting in accordance with what we know about the concerns of neophytes who must survive and make it through the first days—and making it often means giving priority to doing and acting in concrete ways. Isn’t their response an expression of the integration we talk about and tell them they should work to achieve? And is not this response an expression of the integration they openly asked for in their reflections on their college program?

THE PROFESSOR REFLECTS ON SELF AS TEACHER-RESEARCHER

As I reflect on the experience of having created a setting in which my students and I dialogued with each other about teaching and self as teacher, I see possibilities for varying the strategies I used. Perhaps I could make more
explicit the focus on persons as communicators within the present course framework. I might also offer more opportunities for students to reflect on how their view of self can influence the contexts they provide for children—contexts where children can experience the power of language that enables them to become more flexible, interesting, and caring communicators. I might also dialogue with a student during student teaching and into his first years of teaching. In this process we would together explore the values of dialogue writing at different stages of his career. In so doing we both might achieve, as Lewis and Miel suggest, a glimpse of the style of life and not just the facts of life.

At another level of reflection I see in the dialogue writing experience attempts to realize my beliefs and assumptions about persons, communication, and context in my everyday interactions with students and colleagues. More specifically, I see myself trying to do the following: find ways to learn more about myself and my students, develop meaningful experiences in which students, colleagues, and I can participate with each other; identify or create new lenses for viewing my interactions with others, and finally, deal comfortably and creatively with the inconsistencies within myself and between me and the many contexts I inhabit.

Earlier I proposed that change and inconsistency are common to the human condition, and as I think about my experience with dialogue writing, I find myself trying to appreciate my efforts to live with complexities that can create a healthy tension. Aoki's concept of a dialectic between first and second order worlds seems to be an appropriate lens for viewing my perceived inconsistencies. Aoki's characterization of the first order world consisting of the lived world of beings-in-relation-with other beings seems to embrace my assumptions about people, contexts, and communication and my expectations for the dialogue writing experience. There also seems to be a fit between the first order world and my journal entries, which suggests that at times I have been an attentive listener and a sensitive respondent—I've given appropriate gifts and accepted gifts with warmth and grace.

On the other hand, when looking through the lens of Aoki's second order world—a world characterized by objectification, assumed separation, and conceptual abstractions—I see research methods that highlight objectivity, numbers, and agreement on perceptions. Do these procedures reflect my basic assumptions? Why do I report a summary of findings by collapsing categories across persons? Why not present one student's journey through her experiences as expressed in the dialogue journal? I am reminded of Tornier's assertion that "it is far more interesting to understand one man

thoroughly than to examine a hundred superficially." Why did I think it important to achieve inter-rater agreement among the students, myself, and my colleague? This inner dialectic in which inconsistencies reappear provides the raw material for movement toward a both/and orientation and a further submerging of the old either/or perspective. Tournier appears to speak to the both/and dilemma when he proposes that it is in personal contact with people that objective analysis achieves a new dimension that gives man back his true nature. Personal contact also gives to introspection and living observation the necessary guidance to explore new fields of investigation. The personal contact that dialogue writing affords its participants prompts another set of questions. Which aspects of my students' lives have they shared with me? Which aspects would they share with another professor? In a sense, we share a common world but different life worlds as we attempt to discern the meanings each is trying to communicate. How far from reality and whose reality is the image of my students and myself that each of us constructs from the journal entries? And what of the constantly changing quality of our lives? How does a teacher, a researcher, celebrate this complexity, try to understand it, herself, and also help other participants to understand it?

To test one's assumptions in reality and to study what transpires in that process can bring to light multiple facets of the person. When inconsistencies emerge, the opportunity for dialectic and resolution are heightened as is the opportunity for knowing and reflecting on self. Dialogue journal writing has provided a context that has enabled me to see myself through others and to analyze my plans and my attempts to implement them.

JESSIE A. RODERICK is Professor of Education, Department of Curriculum and Instruction, College of Education, University of Maryland, College Park, Maryland 20742.

19 Ibid. p 123.