

# JOURNAL WRITING FOR THE ACADEMIC AND PSYCHOSOCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF STUDENT TEACHERS: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT<sup>1</sup>

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## Abstract

This study explored reflective journals as a means to enable students to take a more active role in their learning to understand their own psychosocial growth towards maturity. This article presents the author's living journey to explore the value of journal writing in the identity formation of third year student teachers. In this article, the researcher makes a case that her own values of involvement in the personal lives of students may have contributed to facilitating the emotional growth of her students. In the process, they learnt to write about their emotions and feelings and to come to grips with unpleasant experiences in their lives. They also learnt that reflection could support their professional growth as teachers.

**Keywords:** psychosocial development, journal writing, reflective practice, living theory, student teacher development

*"Every man who rises above the common level has received two educations: the first from his teachers; the second, more personal and important, from himself" Edward Gibbon.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION: MY PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

I am a teacher educator (one of the authors) at the Central University of Technology (CUT), Free State in Bloemfontein, responsible for Academic English to students in the B.Ed (Further Education and Training Phase) programme. I have been involved in teacher education since 1981 and believe that my experience and involvement in teacher training enables me to contribute in a positive way to the education and growth of my students. In my classroom, teaching and social contact with my students, the student, as a whole person, has to be developed. The teacher should not only possess good teaching abilities and sound subject knowledge but a good teacher should also foster compassion and respect to help raise a balanced youth, who are able to face the many challenges of the modern world.

<sup>1</sup>This article is based on a study done by Maryna Roodt in partial fulfilment of an MA in Higher Education Studies at the University of the Free State. Prof. Rita Niemann, the co-author of the article, was the supervisor. The first person (I) in the article therefore refers to Maryna Roodt, the principal researcher, who used living theory and appreciative inquiry as methodologies for the research.

My own values of self-respect, respect for others and the fact that I strive to have a personal relationship with my students have always characterised my teaching. I try at all times to be approachable and treat my students with respect.

My teaching has always been value-driven and I believe that students should be developed 'by example' rather than 'as examples' (Pienaar & Lombard 2010: 262). Large numbers of the students at my institution come from deprived backgrounds and a flawed school system, confirming their need for support in a warm and supportive environment. My students are no exception.

## **2. MY CONCERN**

The first priority of teacher education students is to become professionally and academically qualified, but they also have to mature emotionally to become responsible adults. University students are usually adolescents from the ages of 18-24 who still have to discover "emotions, feelings, independence and achievements" (De Larrosa 2000: 1) as part of their cognitive and psychosocial development towards maturity. Development should not involve the acquisition of knowledge only, but also as a series of changes in their way of thinking. This psychosocial development concerns the tasks that an individual has to contend with and which "serve as important functions in a student's learning and development processes" (Zhang 2010: 1).

I believed that my students were not performing as they should and I wanted to see whether writing journals could help me develop a deeper understanding of the issues they have to contend with and in this way improve my own teaching.

### **2.1 Why was I concerned?**

My central concern was with the low standard of education in our country and I felt that I have the responsibility to develop my students optimally. To respond positively to the challenges students will encounter in their careers, they should be adaptable and flexible. Trent (2010: 154) emphasises the fact that learning to teach is essentially a process of "becoming". Teachers are required to be agents of change, which means that the teacher trainers need to be powerful intellectual and socialisation agents who can influence their student teachers' thinking and performance positively (Al-Issa & Al-Bulushi 2010: 43).

### **2.2 What I wanted to do about my concern**

I wanted to improve my own teaching practice to generate 'new' knowledge for my students and myself by exploring journal writing as a possible vehicle for developing students academically and emotionally. In doing so, I embarked on a living journey in which both my students and I reflected on our learning and growing awareness of the complexity of teaching.

The purpose was to determine whether journal writing could assist students to learn to reflect, not only on their academic learning, but also on their psychological and social growth. As writing is acknowledged as an effective way of learning and clarifying one's thoughts, I decided to allow the students to write as much as they wanted (Stevens & Cooper 2009: 15).

I also wanted to interrogate my own practices and remind myself that I have to live my values. I posed the following questions to myself:

- Do I treat my students with respect and do I regard them as more than subjects to whom English is taught?
- Am I supporting students in their psychosocial development by providing an atmosphere of acceptance and encouragement?
- Do I regularly reflect on my own teaching?
- Am I open to making changes to my own ontological views?

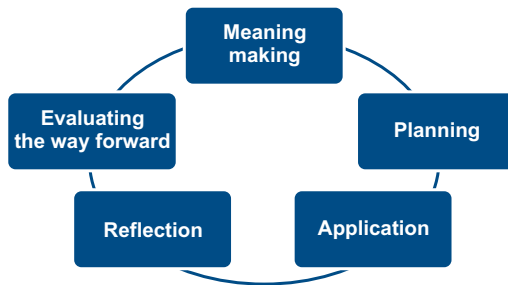
My study was based on an action research cycle of meaning making, planning, action, reflection and evaluation. To achieve this, I had to (i) familiarise myself with the underpinning theoretical principles of journal writing and student development, (ii) plan how I would use journal writing to assist students in learning to reflect on their own learning. I also wanted to (iii) interrogate my own practice and (iv) develop my own living theory to guide me in modifying my own way of teaching as I gained more insight into my students' needs and problems.

### **3. HOW I PLANNED MY RESEARCH**

My research design was based on the principles of living theory, which is dominated by an interpretivist paradigm. Living theory forms part of the action research approach, which focuses on personal experience. Action research is regarded as “a form of self-reflective enquiry that enables practitioners to take control of their practice by asking questions about how they can improve it” (McNiff 2010: 1). McNiff and Whitehead (2006: 104) regard living theory as an explanation of the researchers' learning journey and of those they are teaching. The design of such a study is research 'with' rather than 'on' people and is value-driven, because of the basis of observation being personally informed (Wood, Morar & Mostert 2007: 70). Because living theory is based on using action reflection cycles, it is, in terms of Schön's 'reflection on action', also practice driven, and through practice further informs on the theoretical expansion itself (Ryan 2011: 100). According to Kajinga (2006: 5), teachers' lived experiences act as the strongest influence on their beliefs regarding what should happen in practice. In this study, I was concerned about improving my teaching and in the process developed my own teaching philosophy, commensurate with my own beliefs, values and views on academic development. My enquiry process did not remain an impersonal reflection – it became a process where my own emotional and intellectual vantage point informed critical practice (Wood et al. 2007: 70).

Living theory is a holistic, integrated and flexible pedagogical approach in which the subject and the process are inextricably connected (Levy 2006: 237). I hoped that my students would realise that teaching involves one's entire being. Action research is open-ended, where the result should always be better practice. My research is cyclic and recursive and divided into phases:

- Phase 1:** making meaning of journal writing and the theories of the psychosocial development of students, as well as its value for the personal and academic growth of students
- Phase 2:** planning how I was going to use journal writing
- Phase 3:** applying journal writing in my own teaching of students
- Phase 4:** self-reflection and discussion: my own lived theory
- Phase 5:** evaluating and validating my research



**Figure 1: Cycle of action research**  
**Source: Adapted from McNiff and Whitehead (2006)**

Nineteen third year CUT B.Ed students (fifteen women and four men), all with English as a major, participated in this research. The research was carried out from February to October 2010. My living journey is described below.

### **3.1 Phase 1: Meaning making: understanding the role of journal writing in teaching and student development**

Park (2003: 184) defines a journal as writing that requires the writer to think about something and then record those thoughts. The difference between a journal and a diary is that a journal keeper focuses and reflects on a given theme at a specific time.

The art of keeping a personal journal and reflecting on daily events and experiences, goes back to ancient Greek and Roman times (O'Connell & Dymont 2006: 673). In modern times, journals are increasingly used in academic environments to promote learning. Stevens and Cooper (2009: 3) believe that reflection leads to self-knowledge and greater self-efficacy. Such a reflective journal provides tangible evidence of a person's thought processes. Ultimately, it is a meaning-making tool, organising and re-organising events and experiences.

Reflective practice as a teaching tool has its roots in John Dewey's ideas about reflection (Hatton & Smith 1995). Dewey (1934: 293) and Liou (2001: 199) argued that reflection is a special kind of problem solving method and therefore encompasses emotions, passions and logical thinking. Dewey believed that reflection develops attitudes, such as open-mindedness, focused interest and responsibility in facing consequences of actions, which are the values that I wanted to instil in my students to become the best teachers that they could be.

Keeping a journal allows “pre-service teachers to reflect by writing about what they are learning or have learned” (Byrd 2010: 2). Writing is widely acknowledged as a very effective mode of learning. Emig (1977: 124) states that writing involves the fullest functioning of the brain, combining logic and creativity. Trent (2010: 155), who argues that identities are established in discourse by 'texturing' identity and which may act as a catalyst for increased self-knowledge, supports this. In this regard, Byrd (2010: 2) also points out that reflection facilitates new understanding. Reflection does not come naturally, but has to be taught (El-Dib 2007: 26). Walker (2006: 217) emphasises that the process of reflection is best taught through a one-on-one dialogue between the student and instructor. This one-on-one dialogue may include challenges to the student and will include feedback from the instructor. This feedback is valued by students as “validating their thoughts” (Walker 2006: 218) and ultimately empowers them. I realised from the beginning that my feedback on my students' journals was crucial and that I should carefully contemplate my responses.

According to Hutchings (2006: 235), students from disadvantaged backgrounds suffer from the relics of old learning, meaning that they have been taught to replicate what is taught. They typically come from teacher-focused and content-oriented teaching environments. These students have to be actively taught to engage with learning material and to become critical learners, as universities require “critical thinking – which, by implication, involves reflection and dialogue...” (Hutchings 2006: 235). Critical thinking forms the core of the required graduate attributes and as future teachers, my students will have to be critical thinkers to manage the complexity of shaping the lives of learners. The HESA-SAQA document (2009: 5) states that graduates should possess the skills of inter alia, problem solving and the ability to “reflect productively on experience”. Hutchings (2006: 235) says that good reflectors are able to “engage in higher levels of thinking and analysis and be active learners, who can critically review their own assumptions and presuppositions”. Stevens and Cooper (2009: 19) regard the entire learning process as cyclical, which implies that learning leads to more learning and that reflection becomes the vehicle that drives further learning. This was also relevant to this study, which involved the learning of my students as they reflected on their experiences through journal writing, as well as my own learning as I reflected on my teaching and my support to my students.

After the first few rounds of journal writing, I realised that my students had to cope with many problems.

The process of learning continues throughout a person's life. Central to the development of any person is the issue of constructing meaning of one's life and experiences (Stevens & Cooper 2009:42). During this process of development adults learn to distinguish between what they really feel, want and need, as opposed to what younger people believe they should feel, want and need. One way to grow is to have conversations with the self and with others. Writing a journal is one way of engaging in such an interaction as a means of interrogating the inner self in the journey towards an internalised drive. Stevens and Cooper (2009: 37) state that journal writing can help young adults "to make long-term, relatively permanent changes in cognition as well as behaviour". This process also touches on meta-cognitive processes. Dart et al. (1998: 295) state that meta-cognition incorporates "a person's knowledge of learning; recognition of strengths and weaknesses, assets and liabilities". The authors make a clear link between meta-cognition and reflection as they see meta-cognition as an outcome of reflection. When learners are able to reflect on their learning, they are able to make the connections between new and prior knowledge, between formal knowledge and intuitive beliefs. Keeping a journal can facilitate the integration of the above-mentioned aspects and in doing that they construct their own knowledge. Because of the limited scope of this article, an extensive elaboration on meta-cognition will not be included.

Chickering and Reisser's (1993) well-known model on psychosocial development proposes that the key development of a student during the university years is that of an own identity. Chickering used the term 'vectors' instead of 'stages' to indicate that there is no set timeline for students to be at a specific point at a particular time. In addition, these vectors are not necessarily developed in sequence. The seven vectors of student development are presented as "maps to help us determine where students are and which way they are heading... [and] describe major highways for journeying towards individuation..." (Chickering & Reisser 1993: 35). The purpose of the seven vectors was to illustrate how a student's development in a tertiary education environment can affect him/her on a holistic level, whether "socio-emotional or intellectual, but specifically also within the realm of identity construction" (De Larrosa 2000: 1).

The first vector, developing competence, includes aspects such as the development of critical thinking and reflective judgement. The second vector is about managing emotions, whereas the third is about moving through autonomy toward interdependence: the realisation that I need to rely on others to achieve emotional autonomy. The fourth vector is concerned with developing mature interpersonal relationships and the fifth vector deals with the ability to establish one's own identity. The sixth and seventh vectors address issues such as developing purpose and integrity.



All of these developmental stages or maps can be addressed in journal writing, as the writer has to confront emotions and inter- and intrapersonal relationships when writing about issues in his/her life. Chickering and Reisser (1993) also believe that frequent and friendly interactions with lecturers positively affect students' intellectual and psychosocial growth. A self-reflection journal is for example a good basis from which to have students reflect on these specific vectors as a means to establish patterns of change.

Perry and others (Chickering & Reisser 1993) interviewed students at Harvard University and when they analysed the recorded conversations they found that students had changed in their perceptions of the world around them. "They heard changes in the forms of seeing, knowing, and caring that transcended the mastery of content; they conceptualized these evolving frames of reference as changing cognitive structures, each of which incorporated the form of the preceding stages in a coherent way" (Chickering & Reisser 1993: 7). This is what I had hoped to achieve with my students' writing: that they would learn to view themselves and the world (their environment) differently as a means of enhancing real-world interaction and as such provide a critical platform to develop self-regard within society.

The developmental psychologist Kegan believes that there are two basic types of learning: informational and transformational learning. Informational learning is concerned with the acquisition of skills and knowledge and transformational learning, on the other hand, involves critical reflection of one's assumptions (Stevens & Cooper 2009: 37). The keeping of a journal, in which students reflect on experience, can be regarded as both informational and transformational learning. Transformational learning is the kind of learning that leads to personal growth and development (Stevens & Cooper 2009: 38). Journal writing helps to develop self-awareness (Farrell 2013: 467). Students should learn how to employ writing as a form of thinking and of a way to transform experiences. Kegan's notion of transformational learning is relevant since it is learning that involves a critical reflection of one's own actions and beliefs. There was strong evidence of this kind of reflection in the students' writing.

My own journey has also been one of critical self-reflection and of 'becoming'. I once again realised that teaching is my calling and that I first teach students and then the subject English. Chickering and Reisser (1993) indicate that development of an own identity is the ultimate kind of development and critical reflection of one's own assumptions can only lead to further development. When Parker Palmer asked students to tell him about good teachers, they all mentioned one trait: "...a strong sense of personal identity" (2007: 11).

## 3.2 Phase 2: Planning the journal entries

I believe that living theory research, like all research, should be underpinned by strong ethical considerations and therefore I ensured that the students were aware that all journal entries would be treated as confidential.

In this way, I emphasised my own beliefs of respect for others' privacy which is central to my approach.

At the beginning of 2010, students started writing their entries. The cycles were structured so that I could give them a prompt (a topic to write on) and I commented on each entry. I only commented on the content, as Stevens and Cooper (2009: 6) indicate clearly that the emphasis in a journal entry should be the flow of ideas, responses and interactions. There was little evidence of any real reflection in the first entries. I explained that their entries should focus on experiences and their feelings or emotions regarding those experiences, rather than just the events themselves.

I started my own reflective diary in which I recorded observations and concerns. As students revealed traumatic aspects of their own lives, so my understanding of the complexity of their existence grew. I came to the realisation that their studies were, in most cases, not the only things they had to struggle with, but that abusive relationships, HIV status, single parenthood and poverty were real issues. I recorded my own feelings and worries regarding the comments made by students.

## 3.3 Phase 3: Applying journal writing in my own teaching

Initially the students wrote about everyday occurrences and their focus was on minor daily problems. However, from the third round, some students started writing about their feelings and problems. I noted that there were many other issues, which prevent students from reaching their academic potential. Gradually they engaged directly with their feelings and concerns and wrote about issues that were more private. Entries became more personal, like the following:

*"...thank you...for allowing us to share our lives with you, most people do not realise how therapeutic it can be to talk..."*

One student wrote about being gay in a community which does not readily accept gay people, *"...they hate me and want to stone me because of my loves..."*. Another wrote about the death of her mother when she was in Matric and another about her divorce. I became aware of the fact that most of the 19 students had to contend with serious and real issues.

One female, who wrote about her happy childhood, still wrote, "I am very glad Ma'am is allowing us to talk about our feelings".



Everyone, even those who did not experience any emotional problems, seemed to appreciate the fact that they could write about their feelings and experiences. The best performing student also expressed her appreciation of being given an opportunity to verbalise her feelings

*“I am trying to work on myself and my self-growth, as I do not easily expose my true feelings”*

Students increasingly voiced their concerns about their academic performance. Two subjects were mentioned in almost everybody's entries: English and Education.

*At the beginning of the term, I thought I was seeing English for the first time... I do not know if I'm going to pass Education this year...*

Another one was even more vocal about her academic problems:

*Whenever I study and get into the exam room, I feel like if a block is standing in front of my brain. I forget everything or I remember only a few things and then the rest is just blank. I feel as if I have wasted my time coming to the CUT (Central University of Technology).*

A very quiet student was very eloquent in his comment about the first test in English:

*The fear is the only force that drives or pushes me to picking up a book, fearing to fail. I strongly believe fear is the only motivation behind my studies that keeps me going... It was just that I didn't prepare thoroughly...*

### 3.3.1 Accompanying my students on their journey

Todd et al. (2001: 355) refer to the affirmation of beliefs and ideas. I often asked questions like “Did you feel better after you wrote this down?”, or “Would you like to come and talk about this?” Some students would then come to my office to discuss their fears and concerns, while others would write about the issue in their next entry.

If students expressed concerns, like one married woman who wrote about being sexually harassed by another lecturer, I could act on this by calling them in and discussing the issue. However I made it clear that I am not a trained therapist and that my role is that of a mentoring adult and as such issues that arose outside of my level of qualification was referred to a qualified health care professional. Another student wrote how she had her father arrested because he had repeatedly beaten her up. She was on the verge of a breakdown and I made an appointment for her with the campus counsellor. At the end of the year she wrote in her last entry

*“I have grown as a person and therefore the entries that I've written in my journal, rounds up all the things that I've been through this year and it has helped me grow emotionally. My heart is healed and I am at ease....”.*

Some students never wrote about any emotional or personal aspects but concentrated on academic issues only.

### **3.4 Phase 4: Self-reflection and discussion**

At the beginning of their third year (before the journal writing), these students questioned my choice of textbooks for English. At that stage, I did not understand their problems but as the writing continued, they voiced their concerns more openly and I became more aware of the obstacles that prevented them from engaging with the study material. I realised that the students required more scaffolding and mediating to facilitate understanding of the study material.

#### **3.4.1 Epistemological values and pedagogical theories emerging from the journey**

McNiff and Whitehead (2006: 95) explain that the difference between evidence and data is that evidence “refers to those special pieces of data that show the issue in action”. In the entries written by the students, I could discern that they appreciated the opportunity to express emotions and I became a sounding board for their thoughts and frustrations.

I firmly believe that my own values were reflected in my practice. Pienaar and Lombard (2010: 262) emphasise the fact that lecturers should reveal their values in their attitude and behaviour toward students. Students learn better in an atmosphere of trust and acceptance. When students learned that I would not judge them on their writing, an openness evolved and I became an active participant in their lives.

My emotional involvement in their academic and personal problems had a negative spin-off as well: I became too lenient in my classroom evaluation of their work and I had to ask a more objective lecturer to mark their end of the year exam papers. Wood et al. (2007: 76) speak of the contradiction and the tension between values and teaching methods. On the one hand, I had to teach my students that objectivity is essential when you are a teacher, but on the other hand, my own values of commitment kept on interfering. I therefore explained to them why I had their exam papers assessed by an objective party.

#### **3.4.2 Pedagogical implications**

I have learnt that we must increasingly focus on developing students' own awareness of their growth and their ability to generate knowledge, instead of just replicating what they have been taught.

They need to recognise that they also receive an education from their own inner, psychological and academic journey towards maturity. Their journal entries about their academic problems in their other subjects, especially Education, also revealed that they are not adequately equipped for a rigorous academic programme. Students have to receive more guidance and support in their first year so that the expected graduate attributes can be developed effectively.

Researchers such as Trent (2010), El-Dib (2007) and Walker (2006) indicate clearly that written reflection remains one of the best ways to establish one's own identity (Chickering & Reisser 1993). Students found the journal writing very painful, in terms of what Stevens and Cooper (2009) call the discomfort linked to cognitive dissonance. Gradually, however, the writing became more fluent and they managed to reflect on disturbing events in their past and coming to terms with issues. I also realised that as the researcher, I had become part of their lives.

Living theory, however, is never conclusive and therefore ties in with the concept of life-long learning. After this research project, I have to remind myself constantly that I have to strike a balance: I cannot allow my own empathy and compassion for the students who come from deprived backgrounds to cloud my good judgement when I have to evaluate their academic performance. The most important thing that I have to remember is that these students want to become teachers and therefore they have to meet certain professional standards. I have an obligation not only to my students but also to the learners they are going to teach, to help them to become balanced, well-trained teachers who are able to effectively reflect on their own teaching. Our students will have to teach in a rapidly changing environment and will have to accept the challenge of being lifelong learners. Liou (2001: 198) states that reflective practice in the form of journal writing will foster teachers' professional development, while Wood et al. (2007: 71) believe that education will increasingly demand critical, reflective and creative thinking to solve dilemmas. Lee (2010: 138) states that lack of continuous reflection on practice may seriously inhibit a teacher's professional growth.

### **3.5 Phase 5: Evaluating and validating my research**

Beylefeld et al. (2007) refer to the fact that the outcomes of action research are not always predictable and that this can lead to a sense of discomfort. In my research, however, I was discomfited in a more emotional sense. Frequently during my learning journey with these students, I was confronted with my own emotional involvement and had to contemplate the question Wood (2009: 115) asks: "Are these values acceptable and useful for others in promoting transformation in educational practice?" Many lecturers and teachers may shy away from becoming too emotionally involved with their students or learners.

Wood explains further (2009: 116) that research can only be transformative if the 'new' knowledge can be useful to others, but concludes, "the bottom line in action research is 'Will it improve my practice?', but rather than being a 'recipe' of how to do things, it is a sharing of what worked for a particular researcher working in a particular context".

This journey has demonstrated to me that my own values are inextricably part of the way I teach and that I would like to instil the same principles in my students. My view that students need to be nurtured, accepted and trusted has been reinforced by the journal entries. I am convinced now, more than ever, that education, in the fullest sense of the word, can never be morally neutral but must be value-driven. I have always viewed my own practice as a developmental journey and not a destination, in terms of what Pienaar and Lombard (2010: 266) refer to as "being living, dynamic and constantly evolving". I have learnt through this process that journal writing extends the boundaries of teaching and that it may facilitate the transformation of education that our country desperately needs.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

I recommend that journal writing be considered an integral part of the students' curriculum, mainly because it corroborates my theories about teaching as a process of becoming and because of its therapeutic value in terms of voicing concerns, victories and any issues pertaining to both one's professional and personal life. Farrell (2013: 466) believes that a journal can become essential to teachers "as a means of legitimizing" own practice.

My own experience of and reflection on this journey is also encapsulated in the following comment made by one of my participating students who said:

*I read through the article and I strongly agree on many of the aspects mentioned. I was one of the rather troubled students. At that time I went through a very difficult phase, I couldn't really give 'it' a name until I started writing my journal.*

*It served as a platform where one could communicate freely and openly whenever you felt the urge to just let it out. Sometimes being away from home and maybe experiencing financial problems, relationships with friends and family can be strenuous at times and my journal was the 'friend' I could talk to without being judged.*

*I've grown tremendously. I learnt to deal with my emotions as I tend to get a bit overemotional at times. I've also learnt how to just let go of certain things which I do not have control over. It has given me a new perspective and has taught me to approach certain situations differently than before. Learning is most conducive when a person feels cared for.*

*Mrs Roodt has really gone beyond her 'work boundary' and has extended a helping hand to many who really did not have anyone to confide in keeping a journal is a healthy habit, it can only change a person 'for the better'.*

My final reflection is that this has been an exciting journey in which my students and I learned about the value of reflection as an essential element of growth towards emotional maturity and becoming part of their professional daily teaching activities.

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