

Exploring What Makes a Successful Teaching Journal Experience

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ABSTRACT

Keeping a teaching journal is a teaching practice that has been done by teachers as a reflective form for years. Writing a teaching journal can help teachers think about their work, explore their teaching practices, or express their feelings and frustrations about their practice (Farrell, 2017). However, oftentimes teachers are in one of two groups; they either find it helpful, or not helpful at all. This paper explores different types of reflective teaching journal processes, reflects on the teaching journal process itself, and offers a definition of what makes a successful teaching journal. This paper also explains different types of reflection and possible factors that contribute to making a successful, or unsuccessful, reflective teaching journal experience.

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of the fall semester at Rikkyo University's English Discussion Center (EDC), teachers in their first year, second semester of teaching at EDC are instructed to keep a teaching journal over the course of five to nine weeks. Teachers are told to observe either a specific aspect of student behavior or student performance in one or multiple classes. In my experience as a first year EDC teacher, even as I thought through all of my classes and students, there was no one specific aspect that I particularly felt compelled to observe. I therefore decided to journal after every class, of which I had a total of thirteen, and see what themes would emerge.

Instead of keeping a physical journal, I recorded my thoughts on a Google Document, and separated my entries by class and week. I did not want to overcomplicate my entries, so I decided to keep it to a minimum of three questions which I would write about at the end of each day. (Although, my diligence in making sure I recorded it by the end of the day faltered by the end of my five weeks). I started off with three questions, which then turned to two, about the lesson procedure, students' behavior, and any additional thoughts. These entries would average to be around a paragraph at most, and nothing more than a page.

Despite having recorded my thoughts after each class for five weeks, I was left feeling frustrated that I had not come up with a clear student behavior or aspect of student performance I could write about. It possibly could have been due to a variety of factors, such as the number of classes I was writing about, the different dynamics of each class, or that I did not do an overall review of my notes at the end of each week, which is what Farrell (2007) suggests for keeping a reflective teaching journal. For me, in order for this teaching journal writing experience to be successful, I thought there would be change from one week to the next week's class. The change did not have to be in the students, but in my own teacher performance and reaction to the students. Yet, this did not appear to be true in my case.

There are three forms of reflection that Murphy (2014) describes: reflection-in-action, reflection-on-action, and reflection-for-action. Reflection-in-action is when teachers "depend on previously assimilated forms of knowledge...that they carry with them into the classroom," (p. 615). Whereas reflection-on-action occurs after the lesson and involves taking time to reflect on what happened during the class and why. Reflection-for-action is "more proactive and future-oriented" where teachers take active steps forward and think of how to act differently to improve (p. 616). Although there is no singular correct way to reflect, after going through this process myself, I believe the best teaching journal would reflect a combination of at least two of these methods of reflection. However, in my teaching journal writing experience, I found that I was

constantly using the reflection-in-action but not moving anywhere beyond that. Therefore, in the end I think my teacher journaling experience was not successful.

In this paper I will reflect on why this teaching journal experience was unsuccessful for me, explore the different methods of teacher journal writing, and consider what would make a successful teaching journal experience in the future.

DISCUSSION

Types of Journaling Experiences

There is no best or most correct way to keep a teaching journal, as different styles and formats will suit different people and purposes. Mann and Walsh (2017) introduce several different methods of keeping a teaching journal, which can be separated into three different categories: visual (checklists and forms, non-linear forms, and portfolio), reflective (diaries, journals, blogs, narrative enquiry), and collaborative (interactive writing, using a website to share with other teachers).

Visual journaling experiences range from very simple and to the point, along the lines of a simple checklist of tasks accomplished in the class, to mind mapping, where the writer writes out their thoughts of the class through bubble mapping. Also, teachers can keep a portfolio of the lesson plans and key materials that lead to significant incidents in the class. There is more liberty to be creative with the reflective process and it can be more analytical in its results.

When it comes to reflective teaching journaling experiences, there is a wide range of types. There are many measures of media that teachers can use to journal, whether it is on a computer, an actual notebook, or a blog. The types of writing greatly differ as well. For example, Richards and Farrell (2005) suggest two forms: a *stream of consciousness* where the teacher obtains a written record of teaching acts and focuses on the teacher's feelings and thoughts on those acts, and an *edited* approach, where the teacher is writing for a peer to read and review. Similar to the stream of consciousness approach, the edited approach is easy for the peer to read over, and provides the opportunity for the writer to choose what to share or not to share.

Lastly, with collaborative journal writing, as with the edited approach described above, interactive journal writing invites other peers to read entries, and utilizes tools such as websites that others can comment on. Through this method of journal writing, not only can teachers have an audience that they are writing to, but they can also choose to meet face-to-face to discuss further about what they read on the website.

My Teaching Journal

As for me, I initially went with the stream of consciousness approach and answered three questions after every class each day:

1. How was the class?
2. What problems came up?
3. How were students' attention?

However, I decided to drop the third question and answered the first two as it eventually became apparent that it wasn't applicable for all of my classes. The first two weeks I was answering it, for most of my classes I had nothing to write about, since they were well behaved classes. It was only for one or two classes this question was applicable, so I included it in the first question, thus forgoing the third question.

Some common themes I noticed I would bring up in my journal entries were: concerns about student groupings, attendance or tardiness, incidents regarding student feedback, and students' progress in using the new target language. I also had a few students that I would write about more often than others, either because of student behavior in class or lack of participation.

However, when I thought that I could write about one of these aspects of student behavior, those students would be well behaved the following week.

One reason why I did not find my experience successful is because, as Farrell (2007) states, writing a reflective teaching journal should help teachers change “their level of awareness of their current practices so that they can articulate their current practices” (p. 7). Frequently throughout my journal entries, I would write about debating whether to use a different form of feedback, use a different method for the presentation of the target language, or try to make the material more relatable. However, through all of these notes from the classes, I did not take the time to reflect on my teaching beliefs or think of future actions to take in the following classes. I think that reflection-for-action is just as important as the reflection itself, or else, what is the point in reflecting in the first place? Also, reflecting back after the end of writing these journal entries, I realized that I was focusing less on reflecting on the classes and my teaching beliefs, and more so on trying to find a focus I could write about at the end of this process.

Another aspect that contributed to my teaching journal experience as not successful was my failure to review my entries regularly at the end of every week. Being a forgetful person to begin with, in not reviewing what I had written during the week, I routinely forgot what I had written about and failed to look for points to improve on and how to better express my teaching values and beliefs from class to class. If I had reviewed my entries more frequently, I think it would have led to a more successful reflective teaching journal experience.

Lastly, I thought my teaching journal was unsuccessful because I did not have an audience I was writing for. As Mann and Walsh (2017) say, “the act of writing about an experience may cause practitioners to focus on the writing task itself rather than their reflection and accurate reporting of that experience,” (p. 132). Although it is true some teachers may feel pressured or self-conscious when knowing a peer is going to read their journal entries, I think that pressure is helpful and necessary for a teacher to reflect critically on their class and to relate it back to their teaching beliefs. Although collaborative teaching reflection does take more time and energy from both parties, in the end it is a truly mutually beneficial practice for both teachers involved.

Farrell (2007) mentions that when talking about reflective teaching, Day says that “the dialogical dimension of learning can only emerge from the process of confrontation and reconstruction,” or in other words, “reflection needs to be analytic and involve dialogue with others,” (p. 6). Thus, even though the reflection is on the teacher’s own practices and the behavior within the classroom, it is important to share these thoughts and reflections. The reason being is that even if, for example, a teacher has reflections that they think are correct, they might not feel the desire or need to change anything in their teaching practices. In my journal entries, I did not think to delve deeper into the reason behind certain actions or events in the classroom, but simply recorded it. However, if I were to have discussed this with a peer, I think it would have provided that level of accountability, space, and environment to explore more of the ‘why’ behind my actions.

What is a Successful Teaching Journal?

After researching more about what a teaching journal should be and what teachers should focus on, I believe teaching journals are the most useful to the teacher if they are writing to an audience and know that someone will read it. When there is a known audience, the teacher can write with the knowledge that another teacher will read it and give constructive feedback.

In my journal entries, I did not expect anyone else to read it beside myself, so I wrote out my feelings and frustrations candidly. Since I did not have a reader in mind, I expressed my thoughts freely, not worrying about hiding anything because the only person I was writing for was myself. However, when a fellow teacher asked if I wanted her to read my entries, I was too

embarrassed to show her. If I had written my journal entries with the expectation that others would read them, I would have written it differently. This way, I could have readily offered my entries to her and ask for her feedback and comments. As Farrell relates, research suggests, “that practising language teachers can benefit more from having others (peers) read their journals (once issues of trust and confidentiality have been agreed upon) so that they can get another’s perspective, insight, and interpretation that may be difficult to achieve if a teacher attempts to reflect alone,” (p. 108). I am certain that if I could have readily shared my journal entries with my peer, she could have helped me realize insights that I would not have been able to realize on my own. It is important that a teaching journal has an audience, as not only is there additional purpose behind writing, but it also gives the writer confidence that their view will be heard and no longer private, but public, even if only to one or two people (Watanabe, 2017).

Having others read entries from a writer’s teaching journal also contributes to the three main attributes of reflective individuals Dewey (1933) identifies: open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. Open-mindedness is a desire to listen to different views of an issue and also being open to views other than our own. Responsibility means considering where an action leads and the consequences of such decisions. Wholeheartedness regards teachers’ ability to overcome any personal obstacles so they can critically evaluate their teaching to make change.

While writing for an audience and sharing with peers is one aspect of making a teaching journal successful, another significant aspect, in my opinion, is for some part to be actionable, whether soon after the reflection or at the end of the journaling process. Through my writing, I found that what my entries lacked was any reflection for how to act in future classes and how these thoughts or actions affected my teaching beliefs. If I were to do this process again, I would write my journal entries about what happened in the class, as well as relate what happened back to my teaching beliefs and practices. I believe it is one thing to simply record what happened, and another to relate what happened back to personal teaching beliefs. In that way, it can be applied in future classes.

Although not necessary for all teachers, I believe that there should be some amount of action taken in moving forward, whether that be adjusting our behavior to our students, or being more aware while teaching our classes. That way, as teachers we are not only reflecting, but also carrying and internalizing this reflection as we make changes in the classroom, and hopefully growing and improving in the process.

CONCLUSION

Though keeping a reflective teaching journal is a good practice, it can be difficult to start if there is no predetermined focus. For teachers who do not have an aspect of student behavior or student performance they know they want to observe, it can be helpful to have some form of accountability. This can be ensured by writing for an audience, regularly looking back at entries, or creating ways to teach the class differently in future classes. Of course every teacher is unique and different methods might work better for some teachers, while not as well for others. Whatever method a teacher uses, an important aspect of reflecting as a teacher should invite and involve discussion with other teachers. This provides not only accountability, but helpful feedback and a different perspective other than our own.

I am certain that this will not be the last time that I keep a reflective teaching journal. However in future teaching journal experiences, even if I do not have a specific focus in mind, I want to write as if I am writing for an audience and invite peers to read my entries to help give feedback. Also, I intend to review my past entries more frequently to recognize any patterns so that I can take action in future classes. I believe that keeping a teaching journal is important, but that the motivation of why a teacher is writing it in the first place is necessary to establish first and

foremost.

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