

Reflective Journal Writing

Chhaya Sawhney

As a part of their pre-service for the four year teacher-training programme, my students in college are required to engage in practice teaching for four months in their fourth year. The final year is quite demanding for them as they prepare themselves as interns for their first teaching assignment. The preparation includes making weekly lesson plans, writing journals and doing two projects, along with attending classes for three theory papers. While all of this is an essential requirement of the programme, it also is a great opportunity for them to learn and grow personally and professionally. As they engage with elementary school children, they begin to weave valuable and meaningful threads of learning experiences, insights and perspectives.

While everyone reflects on a daily basis about many things under the sun, not many people maintain reflective journals. It is not an easy task by any measure. I have included a few vignette accounts of our student teachers that describe some aspects of their language teaching, and what they have learnt from it. Though many of us have often remarked that journal entries tend to be more descriptive than reflective in nature, we all agree that reflections take time to be written well. As our student teachers evolved and developed, they started to reflect critically and creatively about their teaching, and write reflectively about it, often making connections between theory and practice. This paper attempts to highlight the practice, the importance and the benefits of writing reflective journals and to also offer suggestions that could make journal writing more effective and reflective.

What are Reflective Journals?

Journals are accounts or records of classroom teaching, and whatever goes on in the school. They serve as powerful personal archives that can be used to revisit, review, analyze, and evaluate from time to time one's teaching and teaching styles, and the complexity of students' learning with a view to inform future judgment and action. Self-inquiry becomes crucial in the process as one begins to record not only 'what happened in the classroom' but also question 'why and how it happened', and 'what can be done to resolve an issue or to approach it differently?' It is when one starts thinking in terms of 'why', 'how' and 'what next', that reflections become purposeful. Just the way we sometimes 'think aloud' and speak, reflective journal writing helps teachers to 'write aloud' explicitly what they have been thinking about implicitly.

Why Reflect?

My students have always commented that although they find writing their reflections a difficult task, they find this exercise to be very useful and insightful. They realize that writing journals helps them to:

- Capture their teaching goals and achievements in a systematic manner
- Increase their sense of pride, confidence and ownership of ideas, methods and strategies that they use
- Observe patterns in their own teaching

- Question themselves, solve problems and develop critical thinking skills

To put it in Socrates' words, reflections help to "Know thyself". More than eighty years ago, Dewey (1933) also valued the role of reflection as the road to learning. He described a reflective teacher as the one who "seeks meaning from teaching practice and students' learning and creates from this a theory to live by, a story that provides structure for the growth of the students and the teacher."

Areas of Reflection

Reflective journals broadly tend to focus on the following areas:

- Observations and evaluations of lessons transacted
- Defining teaching goals and beliefs
- Assessing students' needs
- Implementing lesson plans
- Assessing teaching methods and strategies
- Issues of classroom management
- Factors leading to personal and professional growth

The following vignette reveals the observations and comments of a student-teacher on the basic infrastructure within the classroom, and what she did to make it flexible and suitable to her teaching and learning environment.

The First Vignette

The classrooms in the school are spacious, airy and well-lit. The blackboard is visible to all. However, the seating arrangement is highly rigid and not suitable for any kind of group activities. The bulky desks and chairs are difficult to move around. The students, 45-50 in number, stay confined to one place throughout the day. Piaget has talked about the importance of flexibility in the classrooms to allow students and the teacher

to move about freely. Being inspired by him, I wish to create an environment that is conducive for active learning. For operative, connotative and figurative learning to take place, furniture should be arranged in a way that it allows for active participation and mobility.

Though I knew that a group activity was going to be challenging since it was not feasible to move the furniture, I still decided to try it out by doing an activity called 'Word Bricks'. I wrote words from different parts of the speech on thick pieces of paper. Working in groups of 4-5, the students had to use the word 'bricks' to build a story around a particular theme. The groups were formed in a way that two students in each alternate row had to turn themselves on their chairs to face two other students. A lot of time was wasted as the students who had to turn around were uncomfortable. I then told them to stand and participate in brainstorming with their group members. Somehow, the students remained distracted. Finally, I decided to make it a pair activity. I will have to be careful in the future and avoid planning group activities because of the seating constraint.

Parul Nadar

Reflection

- Do you think Parul could have thought of other innovative ways to do this activity?
- Should she have given up the idea of doing group activities in the future? Why or why not?

The following vignette is an example of an approach adopted by a student-teacher to meet her goals of providing ample language exposure to her students, and creating opportunities to foster interaction.

The Second Vignette

I had decided at the beginning of my primary internship that I would begin each day with circle

time and a *baal sabha* in which I wanted to include poems, *baalgeet*, stories, jokes and incidents from daily life. This would give an opportunity to the students to talk about and share their experiences. They generally love to share their experiences. I wanted my students to have a lot of language exposure to both Hindi and English, and become confident speakers and participants, without thinking of the ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of their comments. I wanted to keep the desire to learn alive in them.

I planned to get some visitors during circle time with whom the children could interact and get some information about different professions. I invited the school sweeper one day. I had shared this idea of interacting with different people with the children, and they were excited about it. They made greeting cards to welcome sweeper uncle and prepared questions for him. His wife, also a sweeper in the school, came along as well. The children asked them about their working hours, whether they liked their job, the problems they faced and the salary they earned. I did not have to intervene while the children interacted with ‘Uncle’ and ‘Aunty’. After they left, we had a discussion so that we could collectively sum up our learning.

Meenu Yadav

Reflection

- What were some of the beliefs that Meenu had about her students?
- As a language teacher, apart from her goal of making her students confident speakers, how was Meenu integrating linguistic skills?

The following vignette shows how the student-teacher determines the needs of her students through a survey and offers suggestions.

The Third Vignette

For my first class with class 7, I planned to conduct a survey. I wanted to assess the reading habits of the students, and find out which type of genre and authors they enjoyed reading. I also wanted to gauge their reading level. I designed a short questionnaire and asked them to take 10-15 minutes to fill it. When I read their responses, I concluded that most of them do not read anything except their textbook chapters. Many students named Rabindranath Tagore as their favourite author but could not name any literary text written by him. Some filled in names of magazines such as *Champak*, *Tinkle* and *Nandan*. Some students mentioned Ruskin Bond.

I wanted to motivate the children to read more. So in my next class, I asked them to pay attention to the little things, to read what is written in newspaper advertisements, wrappers of biscuits, signboards, hoardings, posters, etc. I also suggested some names of books and authors that could interest them.

Parul Nadar

Reflection

- Parul made a few suggestions. How else would you have motivated the students to read more?
- Why is it so important to read? Why did Parul feel that the students needed to read beyond their textbook chapters?

The following vignette is an example of a teaching strategy that the student-teacher uses to deal with difficult words:

The Fourth Vignette

While doing the ‘The Bear Story’, a few difficult words such as ‘slain’ and ‘amiable’ had come up. The students had not heard these words before. I wanted them to guess their meanings

contextually but they were unable to do so. So I gave them these examples: between a deer and a lion, who would be able to overpower whom, and what would be the consequence of such an action? The students immediately guessed that 'to slay' also means 'to kill'. I then asked them to guess the nature of friendship between two friends. Their response was 'friendly' and this helped them to understand the meaning of the word 'amiable'.

Meenu Yadav

Reflection

- What would you do as a post-reading task to deal with new vocabulary?
- How do you provide contextual clues to aid comprehension?

The following vignette is an example that shows how the student-teacher was confronted with a classroom management and discipline issue because of her plan not working out, and how she decided to tackle it:

The Fifth Vignette

I finished writing the plan of the day and the news of the day that my students give to me every day on the blackboard. Once this was done, I started reading the poem 'UunThCalaa' from their Hindi textbook. I read aloud each line, and asked the students to repeat after me. I also stopped after each line to discuss it, and raise relevant questions. A few students began to answer my questions together. In no time, most of the students had lost interest. While the students seated in the first two benches were still listening to me, the ones at the back started to talk and do other things. Soon, the class became very noisy and my plan failed. No one was listening to me anymore. My supervisor was also in the room at that time. She advised me to stop doing the poem, and first manage the class. The following day, I decided that I

had to make some ground rules so that this would not happen again.

Sarla Tanwar

Reflection

- What suggestions would you give to Sarla for classroom management?
- How else could Sarla have done the poem?

Some Suggestions

Journal writing is quite complex. It requires a structure, purpose, audience and deep introspection. How can we make our students reflect better?

Sample Vignette Accounts

Before the student-teachers begin with their internship, the teacher educator, in addition to briefing them about the practice and importance of writing journals, should carry a few journals to the classroom that she considers as weak or strong reflections. Depending on the class strength, the students may be divided into groups. Each group should be given one vignette to read. After reading, they should discuss the elements—the format, the questions raised, the insights discussed and the comments made. This would help the student-teachers to get familiar with various methods, approaches and strategies that other students have used to implement or transact their plans, and explore classroom management techniques. Since journal writing is a reflective process, this exposure is an important first step that should help the student-teachers to develop reflective sensibilities, enhance their ability for self-analysis and the capacity to gradually reflect as they begin their journey as teachers.

Checklists

The teacher educators, in collaboration with the student-teachers could prepare checklists of

questions based on their reading of the journal accounts. What are the issues that these journal accounts discuss? Are these reflective accounts about evaluating teaching, about the teacher's role, goals or beliefs?; or about student roles, behaviours or needs?; or about teaching methods and strategies? Once the checklists are ready, the student-teachers will get ideas about the potential areas of reflection that they could write about in their journals.

Presentations

Once each group has gone through at least one vignette, they could make a presentation on what it was about, what they learnt from it, their comments and suggestions that could have made the reflections better. Other groups could participate by responding to each presentation.

Summary Thoughts

The teacher educator must provide a closure to these presentations by summing up the various observations and findings. By engaging in this process, the student-teachers will discover the significance of peer interaction and reflection, learn to construct their own knowledge, reflect critically on their learning and become reflective practitioners.

References

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Chhaya Sawhney teaches Linguistics in the Department of Elementary Education, Gargi College, University of Delhi. She has been a teacher educator for over 12 years. Her areas of interest include language education and storytelling.

chhaya_sawhney@yahoo.com