

PROMOTING LEARNING THROUGH JOURNAL WRITING

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Abstract

Journals have received an increased interest in education context. They have been found to be a fruitful way of communication between teacher and students. Liuolienė & Metiūnienė (2009) mention some purposes of journal writing. It can create a positive atmosphere for learning and foster deep learning by making learners relate new knowledge with the previous one. Moreover, as confirmed by Boud (2001), journal writing encourages students to articulate their level of understanding. It is part of reflective learning and a tool to facilitate language skill development. Through this activity learners are shaped to become reflective, which is crucial for their learning advancement. The study aimed at describing the effects of journal writing on ELESP students in three courses from different semesters. They were Structure I, Textual Pronunciation, and Micro Teaching classes. The sources of the data were the students' reflective writings. From the analysis it was discovered that the students gained benefits from the use of journal writing in their classes. They showed that they became reflective learners, who could make meaning of what they learned. They were also trained to be more critical of their own ability, and hence were more able to find ways to advance. By so doing, their autonomy in learning was developed.

Keywords: *journal writing, benefits, reflective learners*

A. INTRODUCTION

Journals have received a growing interest. They have been used in many contexts, be it educational and non-educational contexts. Since the context of this paper is education, the journal writing referred to here is limited to educational context.

Journals are claimed to have numerous benefits. That is why many courses are now incorporating them in the learning process. In the ELESP of Sanata Dharma University, the use of reflective writing is highly encouraged. This is in line with Reflective Pedagogy, which the university embraces. Reflective writing may be facilitated with the use of journals. This study was conducted to analyze the reflective writings the students produced and describe the effects of journal writing on them.

Theoretical Review

This section is devoted to presenting the theories related to journals, journal writing, and reflective learning.

1. Journals

Journals refer to “collections of personal writing about or around a topic or general theme” whose entries are made regularly and are usually kept together in a notebook or folder (Ohio Literacy Resource Center, n.d.). Journals may take forms of various shapes and sizes, like tapes, video, electronic form or paper. Klug (2002) in Smith (2013) says that a journal is “a tool

for self-discovery, an aid to concentration, a mirror for the soul, a place to generate and capture ideas, a safety valve for the emotions, a training ground for the writer, and a good friend and confidant.” Hedlund *et al.* (1989, p. 108) argue, “As a literary form, the *journal* falls roughly between the diary and the log: it consists of regular, though not necessarily daily, entries by which the writer focuses and reflects upon a given theme, or a series of events and experiences.” It means to say that journals are like diaries in that they have objective and subjective dimensions. They are the places to pour out thoughts and feelings but they are also the place to reconstruct experiences. However, unlike diaries, journals are a working document that makes the writer able to make sense of what is out (Holly (1989) as cited in Smith, 2013). Besides, as stated by Liuolienė & Metūnienė (2009), in journals there is always an intention for learning, either from the process or the results.

There are some types of journals which are commonly used in education context. They are (Ohio Literacy Resource Center, n.d.):

- a. **Personal Journals/Diaries.** In this kind of journal learners are to reflect on their own experiences.
- b. **Dialogue Journals.** This kind of journals requires two people to be involved, e.g. teacher-learner. This is written in the form of dialogues, like personal letter, over various topics.
- c. **Response Journals/Reading Journals.** This kind of journals requires the learners to respond to some experience and the responses may take a number of forms such as jotting down new vocabulary, writing about a certain character, making future predictions, writing about their feelings towards a certain reading and many others.
- d. **Double-Entry Journals.** This kind of journals is divided into two parts. The left hand column is filled in with the quotes or notes from certain reading. While in the right column, responses or reactions to what is written on the first column are presented.
- e. **Learning Logs.** In this kind of journals the learners are asked to reflect on their learning experiences in which they are involved. For instance, they may respond to the content of the experience or they can describe how well they understand the materials.

2. Journal Writing

Journal writing is an activity which emerges as a way to foster critical reflection. This can happen because “the act of writing begins a reflective, analytic process” (Bailey, *et al.*, 2001, as cited in Gebhard & Nagamine, 2005). Various research has been done on the use of journals in teaching-learning process. For instance, teaching journals have been used by pre-service and in-service teachers to explore their teaching beliefs, practices, needs, and experiences as well as to promote reflection (Brinton & Holten, 1989; Holten & Brinton, 1995; McDonough, 1994; Esbenshade, 2002; Numrich, 1996; Farrel, 1998; Richards & Ho, 1998; Yahya, 2000; as cited in Gebhard & Nagamine, 2005).

Journals are often used in educational context because they facilitate the authentic and meaningful communication which focuses on message rather than form to occur. It is believed that “when the learner participates in meaningful communication ... and with a focus on the message rather than the forms of the language, competence with the forms will follow” (Kreeft, 1984, as cited in Duppenhaler, 2004). Journals are believed to be a means to engage students in the learning process. It is claimed to have potential to increase students’ interest in the materials, to encourage and empower students to be more responsible for their own learning, to be reflective learners, and to provide useful feedback for their teacher (Park, 2003). Looker (2005) argues that “When students are encouraged to take responsibility for their own learning, they are

more likely to develop higher-order thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.”

Journaling has many benefits, both in terms of learning enhancement and personal development (Hiemstra, 2001). They are elaborated as follows (Smith, 2013).

- a. Journals help the writer to remember something later because it serves the function to record (as confirmed by Holly, 1989). By keeping journals the writers are helped to recapture the recorded moment so that they can look at it more deeply.
- b. The act of writing empowers the brain because it always stimulates thinking. By writing journals, engagement and reflection are promoted. Thum (2008) adds that the act of writing forces the writers to think deeper into a particular topic and eventually crystallize their thoughts into a written form. Writing facilitates people to examine problems and hence to find solutions. Furthermore, journaling helps the writers to get into the habit of writing. Thus, their intellectual growth is promoted.
- c. Journaling helps the writers to look at themselves, their feelings, and actions differently.
- d. Journaling allows freedom which can carry the writers into new directions and learn something valuable from any situations.
- e. Journaling allows the writers to clear their mind.
- f. Journal writing enables the writers to reflect on the experiences. The reflection can have immediate impact on the writers in coping with various situations and individuals.

Meanwhile, Boud (2001) states that there are several purposes of writing journals which are based on Moon (1999). He mentions that journaling deepens the quality of learning, in the form of critical thinking. Besides, journaling increases students’ active involvement in learning, which may make them take possession of their own learning process. Furthermore, journaling may also empower students’ self and make them gain deeper understanding of their own learning. Journaling may also provide a good way for people who are not good at expressing themselves. Thus, it can be concluded that journal writing has the potential to deepen people’s self-understanding and to develop greater awareness of their lives and beliefs.

The key point to writing or keeping a journal is honesty. As Klug (2002) points out ‘Write how you really feel and not how you think you *should* feel. Record what you really think, not what you believe you *ought* to think’ (in Smith, 2013). By doing so, the writers gain self awareness, which becomes the key to advance.

Journals are not writing assignments to be corrected or graded, but should be used for communicating and writing practice. The format of writing can vary depending on the students’ needs and the instructor’s goals.” Looker (2005) suggests some tips for using reflective journals. They are elucidated as follows.

- Students need to be told about the aims and benefits of journal-writing, when the teacher introduces the use of journals for the first time.
- Students need to be informed about the criteria for journal entries. If necessary, they should be provided with examples or models.
- Students need to be provided with prompts to guide students in writing the journal entries.
- Students need to be given feedback on their journal entries.
- Students need to be encouraged to reflect on the content of the course as well as their learning experiences and process.

3. Reflective Learning

Learning-centered paradigm (McManus (2001) in Park, 2003), is becoming more popular in recent years. Learners are put at the heart of learning whereby they are the centre of experience, empowered to take more responsibility for their learning, and encouraged to be active thinkers and problem-solvers. The findings from Looker's study (2005) showed that effective learning takes place when students are actively involved in the learning process. When students can recognize their prior experience and knowledge and can see the relevance of what they are studying to their context, they will become more engaged. Boud (2001) mentions "The basic assumption of the model is that learning is always grounded in prior experience and that any attempt to promote new learning must take account of that experience. All learning builds on existing perceptions and frameworks of understanding; therefore, links must be made between what is new and what already exists if learners are to make sense of what is happening to them."

This idea is in line with Reflective Pedagogy (Kolvenbach, 1993), which is believed to be able to make teachers perform better and able to encourage learners to be active and can assume greater responsibility for their own learning. One of the key elements of this model is reflection, in which learners are encouraged to reflect on the meaning and significance of what they are learning. Structured reflection provides opportunities for students to "explore their experiences, challenge current beliefs and develop new practices and understandings."

Reflective thinking, according to Walker (2006), is "a process regarding thinking about and exploring an issue of concern, which is triggered by an experience." Further, based on Boud, Keogh, & Walker (1985) as quoted in Boud (2001), reflection is defined as "those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations." There are two things worth noting in reflection (Kolb (1984) as quoted in Srimavin & Pornapit, 2004). They are: "the heart of all learning lies in the way students process their experiences, critically, and reflective learning involves recalling from experiences and reasoning out how these connect to present and future 'learning' situations." Journal writing is placed within reflective practice (Bolton (2005) as cited in Smith, 2013).

Boud (2001) explains that "Reflection can be undertaken as an informal personal activity for its own sake or as a part of a structured course. Within a course, reflection may focus on special activities (for example, workshop activities), events of the past (for example, what learners bring to the course from prior experience), or concurrent activities in the learners' workplace and community that act as a stimulus for learning." He states further that there are three occasions of reflection, namely "in anticipation of events, during them, and afterward." Journaling can be used in each of these times and they will play a significant role within each.

When reflection is employed in anticipation of events, the journals are used to explore what the participants want from their involvement in a certain activity. Besides, journals may also be used to find out what people need to know to make the event they are about to enter productive for them. When reflection is employed in the midst of action, this directs students to involve more in their learning through the process of noticing, intervening, and reflection-in-action. Students are trained to become aware of what is happening in and around them, to take actions to change the situation in which they are, and to interpret events and the effects of their course of action. When reflection is used after events, it requires the students to return to experience, attend to their feelings, and reevaluate the experience.

Methodology

The research employed document analysis, a research method which, according to Ary, Jacob, and Sorensen (2010: 29), focuses on analyzing and interpreting recorded materials, such as public records, textbooks, letters, films, tapes, diaries, and many others. The students' reflective writings from three classes were collected and studied. They were from Structure I, Textual Pronunciation and Micro Teaching courses. The number of the documents analyzed was 78, comprising 30, 28 and 20 respectively. The documents were examined and summarized. The themes emerging from the analysis were presented to describe the benefits of journaling activity on the students' learning.

B. DISCUSSION

The following was the presentation of the findings based on their respective courses.

1. Structure I

Structure I is a course offered in the first semester. This course once employed dialogue journals as a means of communication between the teacher and the students. This kind of journals was more interactive in that they were kept by both parties. In this class the reflection was done in the midst of action; that is, during the course. The journal writing activity was done outside class hours. A journal entry was submitted when one particular learning topic has been covered. However, the entries the student wrote were not limited only to the topic of the materials just discussed.

From the students' reflective writings, it was learned that the journals bridged the relation between the students and the teacher in that they facilitated the communication between them. They admitted that as freshmen, they felt shy to ask, and not confident with their English proficiency, as seen in the statement below.

“Journals helped me a lot because honestly, I was shy to ask. Why? I'm afraid I make mistakes in my language. Journal writing made me have more freedom to express anything, without feeling embarrassed.” (R#2)

From the statement it could be inferred that the journals had become a good way for them to express themselves. The existence of journals in the class had played a significant role in becoming a medium for the students to express their confusion about the materials. They could express their understanding and single out lessons they had not yet understood. This showed that the journal writing made the students more engaged in the learning process. It empowered them to become more responsible for their own learning. They tried to help themselves to succeed, among others by posing questions. This activity, thus, shaped them to become reflective because they were trained to articulate what they had and had not understood.

Not only did journals help them in coping with academic problems, they also helped them unburden their heart whenever they had problems. They felt closer with the teacher so that they felt comfortable to ask or tell anything. One of the students wrote,

“What I like most in the course was the reflection I feel closer to the teacher, I can share my problems ...whatever problems I have....and they helped me in my study because I can ask if I'm confused about a certain topic. Well, journals reduced the gap between the teacher and the students. Because of the journals, the relationship between the teacher and me are like friends.” (R#3)

Furthermore, some students admitted that they gained improvement in their writing ability, communication skills, and vocabulary knowledge because they had to pay attention to those issues while writing the journals.

“Through journal writing I learn how to write better, to communicate my thoughts with good language, appropriate vocabulary...even sometimes I go online to check the diction before I write.” (R#6)

2. Textual Pronunciation

The second course, Textual Pronunciation, is an elective course offered to the third and fourth semester students. In this class reflection was employed in the midst of action; which meant that it was done throughout the semester. Besides, this course also employed reflection after events, in which the students were required to submit a final reflection. The type of journal used was learning logs; the students were required to write reflective writings based on the results of the group practice and certain given prompts after a certain topic was discussed. Similar to what happened in the first course, the journaling activity was done outside class hours.

From the reflective writings, it was discovered that students became reflective, were able to articulate what they had understood and could do, and could identify what needed improvement. This resulted in the students’ active involvement in learning. As acknowledged by one of the students:

“If I compared English poem with the other materials, I was weak in this part. I did not have enough confidence to show myself in expressing poems; that was why confidence affected the other criteria in the assessment, like accuracy, speaking rate and voice volume. I have to understand the intention of the poem, so that I could have a better understanding and deliver the message well.” (R#35)

The students also yield meaningful learning; that is, they could gain deep meaning of what they learn. They could obtain useful insights. They became critical of their own ability and could discover ways to improve. In this sense, they became more autonomous learners who took possession of their learning. This was proven in the following statements produced by the students.

“The most important lesson that I learned from this class is especially about the pacing. I learned that no matter how good your accuracy in speech if your speech rate is too fast for most people to follow your speech will be rendered useless since they would not understand anything you said. In this class I learned that my speech rate is too fast to follow for most people and coupled with my so-so accuracy in pronunciation make my speech much worse. In this class through some practices I learned how to control my speech rate by using much better phrasing and pausing. By using a good phrasing and better placement of pauses I can control my speech rate much better. Though I tried to control my speech using phrasing and pausing, sometimes I still lose control of my speech rate when I began to loosen up after I am comfortable with the atmosphere. Learning something cannot be achieved instantly but it needs process to get there and this class helps me to get there.” (R#33)

“The first thing that I get from this class is I become more critical in reading the words. Since I have to perform everything by speaking performances, I have to take care and be careful with my pronunciation. Sometimes, I am too confident to pronounce the words while actually it was wrong pronunciation. That is why it also makes me check the words in my dictionary. The positive side is that I become more critical and be aware of my own pronunciation and also others’ pronunciation. I also have learnt many new vocabularies from some texts that I got in this class.” (R#42)

“Based on my experience in attending this class, my pronunciation is getting better than last year because every time I find difficult even unfamiliar words, I feel that I have to look up in the dictionary for making sure. Not only that thing, but the help from my partner in doing group works also really helped me. I was challenged to provide the creative performances in delivering certain passages and I am sure that all students were.” (R#55)

3. Micro Teaching

The last course, Micro Teaching, is a compulsory subject offered in the sixth semester. The journaling activity was done weekly; that is, the students were required to submit learning logs after they were involved in weekly four-hour learning sessions in the microteaching laboratory. They were also asked to write a reflection after their individual teaching practice in the laboratory and in the junior class. Besides, they were also asked to submit a final reflection. Thus, the reflection in this class was done in the midst of action and after events. Similar to the two previous courses, the journal writing was done outside class hours.

Reflection is deemed an essential component in teacher education and, thus, it was employed to encourage reflective teaching on the part of the teacher candidates. Such an activity helped them to become adaptive and to monitor themselves. In this course, the students who had been involved in various teaching practices were required to reflect on their experiences as well as their learning process for a semester.

From their reflective writings, it was revealed that the students became more critical of their own ability. Being reflective, they realized what they had been good at and what aspect were still lacking. They were also empowered to find solution to their problem after they reflected on it. This showed that the quality of learning was deepened because the students’ self understanding and engagement improved. This was confirmed by the students below.

“I realize that I have high enthusiasm and confidence in teaching. It is important in teaching. I see that good confidence has close correlation with good preparation. Therefore, it is important to do preparation before teaching. In the preparation time, I can design the materials based on the students’ needs and class condition. It forces me to be creative and productive when teaching. Then, enthusiasm is the best action to motivate the students in learning. When the teacher has high spirit in teaching, the students will be motivated to go deeper to the topic of discussion. It is a way to appreciate the students. Moreover, I always try to give my students opportunities in class discussions to share their opinions and to be active. It is true that every person wants to be appreciated so by building good cooperation and reinforcement, I hope my students can develop themselves better.” (R#70)

“I really feel the progress and improvement in my teaching skills. From the beginning I thought I did not have any interest and teaching skills and now at least I can be confident to stand in front of the class and talk to many people. Besides, now I dress appropriately and neatly every day.” (R#64)

“I could gain my confidence and become more relax while talking in front of the class. I often asked my friends about the materials and also the method which is appropriate with the skill. I also had watched my video of my teaching simulation. I couldn’t be brave enough to watch it, not because it was scary but because it was too bad to be watched. I often laughed when I watch my own performance, but from watching it over again I could learn something to improve in the future.” (R#73)

“My biggest problem is my ability to get rid of nervousness every time I teach. I believe this weakness causes any others because everything is related to one another. Being nervous makes me unable to make eye contact. It also causes excessive gestures and soft voice. So basically I have to solve my nervous problem and hopefully my teaching could be better. The first effort I can try is to master the material deeper. It will help much if we teach what we know much better than the students. At least, it can give us confidence if the students try to ask what they do not understand. The next effort that may help is experience in teaching a real classroom with real students. By possessing the experience, we will know what to do in front of the students. It will help much in the future. Seeing all my weakness, I think I have to work hard to improve my teaching skills.” (R#78)

In addition, by being reflective, the students found insights from their experiences and could make deep meaning of what they learned. Hence, they developed greater awareness of their lives and beliefs. It was confirmed in the statement below.

“I will always remember what I got from this class. As a teacher candidate, I have to be a good role model for my students. I have to be always more enthusiastic than my students in order that my students will feel enthusiastic in learning, too. Moreover, I have to improve my teaching practice in order to make class situation not boring and monotonous. Furthermore, positive reinforcement is really needed for students because they feel appreciated and encouraged to learn more when they get positive reinforcement such as compliment.” (R#58)

C. CONCLUSION

Journals were used variously in three different courses. Each of them served different purposes. From the analysis on the students’ reflective writings collected from those three courses, it was revealed that journal writing activities had positive effects on students. Their learning was promoted in that they became reflective learners, who could make meaning of what they learned. They were also shaped to be more critical of their own ability, and hence were more able to find ways to improve. As a consequence, their learning autonomy was developed.

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