

CHAPTER EIGHT

Journal Writing to Aid Reflective Practice

Reflective practice means taking the time to think about what we do as teachers. We can reflect simply by questioning ourselves about our work, by talking to other teachers about teaching (see Chapter 6), and by observing our classes (see Chapter 7). This chapter outlines another method we can use to reflect on our work: writing about it in a diary or journal. Writing about teaching in a diary or journal can help organize our thoughts into more systematic reflections about our work, especially if the journal writing is linked to other reflective activities, such as group discussions and classroom observations. By writing about our group discussions and classroom observations and looking for patterns from these activities, we can obtain more insight into who we are as teachers, allowing us to make more informed choices about our teaching.

Regularly writing in a journal can be a cathartic experience, especially if the journal is used to let off steam about frustrations encountered during the teaching day. It is also advisable to write about our successes in the classroom. By writing about what went wrong and what went well, we can look for patterns in both to understand why we perceived these classroom events as successful or not. This kind of analysis leads to further reflection on the beliefs we bring into the classroom and how we teach with or without them in mind, as the case may be. A teaching journal is a tool for us to use to explore our teaching beliefs and practices. As such, journals help us to be more systematic in our reflections.

Reflection Break 56 Writing About Teaching

- Have you ever written any kind of diary or journal? If so, what kind of experiences did you write about?
- Have you ever written a journal exclusively about teaching? If so, what kind of experiences did you write about?
- If you have never written any kind of diary or journal, do you think it would be useful for a teacher (or student) to write a journal? If so, what kind of entries would you expect to find in such a journal?

KEEPING TEACHING JOURNALS

Make writing a social activity. It does not have to be an isolated act in which we lock ourselves away in a room. Marcel Proust (as quoted in Rodby, 1990) may have viewed writing as a "secretion of one's innermost self, done in solitude, for one's self alone" (p. 42), but he does not speak for all. In teaching journals, we are in actuality *interacting* with the text, as we can "see" in writing what we are thinking.

Writing is a process of discovery for the writer. By writing down our thoughts about a topic, we come to know ourselves better, allowing us to shape and reshape ourselves. Over time we can see patterns emerge in the writing. By recognizing and responding to these patterns, we grow and develop professionally. We may then choose to share our writing with other teachers to make the social cycle complete. Keeping a teaching journal can be as easy or complex an activity as we want: from simply writing about what happened during class to a more systematic analysis of what happened and why, as in an actual diary study.

Why Keep a Teaching Journal?

First, take a look at Reflection Break 57.

Reflection Break 57 Why Keep a Teaching Journal?

- List as many reasons as you can for wanting to write about your teaching.
- Would you share your writing with other teachers? Why or why not?

By writing in a teaching journal, we freeze our work so that we can reflect deliberately on it. Holly (1989) has pointed out that reflective journal writing can give us time to think about our work “long enough to reflect on it and to begin to understand it” (p. 78). Writing can be used to collect data about topics we want to reflect on in the form of an action research project. Journal writing can also help us look for patterns in our teaching over time. By discovering these patterns, we can find areas of our work we may need to change, or we may discover that we are happy with what we have been doing in the classroom. The point is that we can become more aware of what we are doing by writing about it.

Through different forms of journal writing—individual writing and writing for a peer or group—teachers can step back from their experiences and reflect on them. By analyzing these experiences, teachers give interpretation and meaning to the events and emotions they have chosen to document. In addition, journal writing can be an activity for teachers to collaborate with one another on projects such as action research projects, new innovations in teaching, and opinions of new curriculum initiatives.

How Can I Start a Teaching Journal?

Consider the questions in Reflection Break 58 before actually beginning a teaching journal.

Reflection Break 58 Starting Your Journal

Now would be a good time to begin your teaching journal. To start, you must consider the following questions:

- Will you use a computer or an ordinary notebook?
- Will you organize your writing or will you just free write your thoughts and rearrange them later?
- Who is your audience: yourself, a peer, a group, or an instructor?
- What will you focus your writing on: a lesson, a technique or method, a theory, a question posed, or some aspect of your job outside of the classroom?
- How regularly will you write: after a lesson, once a day, or once a week?
- How regularly will you review what you have written: every one, two, or three weeks?

The questions posed in Reflection Break 58 are all very important for each teacher to consider before actually beginning the act of writing. For example, some teachers may want to write their journal entries in a notebook after each class, while others may prefer to word process at the end of each day or during the week for a specific period of time. Teachers must make these decisions based on their individual writing objectives and preferred styles.

A teaching journal can be written alone in the form of a diary for private use, not to be shared. Journals can also be written as part of a critical friendship (see Chapter 6), writing to and for each other, or in a group, writing to and for each other. In addition, teachers can collaborate on writing journal entries if they want to share constructing the actual journal as an interactive group (like writing a group essay). In this technological age, journal writing can be done on a computer word processing program (individual) and shared through E-mail. Last, teachers can speak or talk their journal entries into a tape recorder for later analysis. The teacher can decide whether to transcribe all or parts of the tape.

Reflection Break 59 Types of Teaching Journals

- Which of the following types of teaching journals appeals to you most?
 - A hand-written notebook journal?
 - A word-processed journal?
 - A private journal?
 - A journal with a critical friend?
 - An electronic mail (E-mail) journal with a peer or group?
 - A group journal constructed as a group?
 - A spoken journal (audio recorded)?
- Think of another type or format of teaching journal.

The main goal is to write about teaching experiences as regularly as possible over a period of time and then to analyze the entries for patterns and insights. Alternatively, the teaching journals need not be analyzed. If they are not analyzed, then they serve as a history of what the teacher is doing and has done.

When teachers are both the writers and the audiences of the journals, they should not worry about spelling, grammar, style, or organization. They should just free write about whatever issues are important for them within their work. However, to make these journal entries meaningful, they should be examined after some time and analyzed for recurring patterns of events or themes. This way, teachers can become more aware of themselves; their teaching behaviors; their students; and their beliefs, values, and practices.

Teachers can also write for other teachers so that they get feedback, as in critical friendships or with a group of teachers. In critical friendships, this collaboration offers opportunities for teachers to support and, at times, challenge each other, along with evidence from classroom observations. This type of journal may require more formal entries, in that the organization (and grammar) must be clear to another reader. It is the writer's responsibility to make the entries clear, not the reader's responsibility to have to make interpretations

about what the writer may be trying to say. Teachers must also decide if they want the reader(s) to make comments about what was written (orally or in writing—E-mail communications are good for this).

Reflection Break 60 Finding a Focus for Your Writing

This activity will help to focus your writing.

- Write a journal entry for yourself, a peer or critical friend, or a group using the following guidelines:
 - Focus on a recent issue you found important in your teaching or an actual problem you encountered in your teaching. Now analyze that problem in light of your beliefs about teaching and learning.
 - Interpret what you have found (if you are writing for a critical friend or a group, ask them for feedback on the analysis and interpretation phases).
 - Last, ask yourself what all this means to you as a teacher. Do you need to change anything?
- Do you think the foregoing format for formal journal writing is helpful or not? Explain.

Teaching journals that require other teachers to read them usually require the audience to respond to the author.

Reflection Break 61 Responding to Journals

- If you write a journal for a peer, what type of response would you like to see from him or her?
- Would you like the reader to challenge you? Why?
- Would you like the reader to make judgments or not?
- Would you like the responses orally or in writing? Why?

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- Would you respond to the feedback you'd received?
- What cautions would you give a peer about how to respond to a teacher's journal?

Make up a list of rules about how teachers should respond to each other's journals.

I cannot say how teachers should respond to another teacher's journal, as each entry will most likely be specific to the context. However, I would suggest that each teacher use nonjudgmental and supportive language when writing a response to a journal entry.

Writing Topics—Examples

Experienced teachers may use a teaching journal for concerns such as how to keep students working while also controlling discipline in the room. For example, I used teaching journals with a group of experienced language teachers (Farrell, 1998) and discovered that these teachers wrote about similar topics over a sixteen-week period. The most frequent topic in their journals related to their approaches to and methods of teaching (fifty-six references), followed by evaluations of their teaching (forty-nine references), their theories of teaching (thirty-nine references), their levels of self-awareness (fifteen references), and various questions they raised about teaching (five references).

The teachers wrote most frequently about their methods of teaching, the procedures they use in their classrooms, and the content of their lessons. They rarely wrote about the theories underlying these approaches and methods. Their source of knowledge was mostly traced to their classroom experience. Although they mentioned their students in broader school contexts, the major focus remained in their classroom experiences. The teachers evaluated their teaching more negatively than positively and primarily in terms of the problems that occurred. They generated few solutions of their own.

On the topic of theories and beliefs, the teachers wrote about their personal beliefs (personal opinions) and justifications. There

were no references to actual theories of teaching or learning. The last two categories consisted of references to perceptions of themselves as teachers and the infrequent asking of questions seeking advice. What was striking about all these entries was that the teachers never wrote about the successes or joys of teaching. In fact, they saw the teaching journal primarily as a place to let off steam.

Reflection Break 62 Topics to Consider Writing About

As mentioned in the text, experienced teachers in the reflective journal writing study wrote about the following topics (in order of most frequent references):

1. Approaches to and methods of teaching
2. Evaluations of their teaching
3. Theories of teaching
4. Self-awareness as a teacher
5. Questions about teaching

Now consider the following:

- Which of the foregoing five topics would you write about in a teaching journal? Why?
- Think of other topics to write about in teaching.

A teaching journal records what happens in a teacher's life, both inside and outside of the classroom. Teachers should revisit these events later to make sense of them so that they can better understand themselves as teachers. Interpretations based on patterns noticed in these journals will help teachers make more informed decisions about their work. Keeping a journal can also be a first step in compiling a teaching portfolio, which will be discussed in the next chapter.

Reflection Break 63
Reflecting on Practice

Here are some questions that teachers can consider answering in their journals as a means of reflecting on practice from a general point of view. Rather than focusing on a particular problem or issue, look at teaching from a broad perspective. Teachers may want to use the feedback from classroom observations to help them answer these questions. When teachers have written answers to these questions, they can share with other teachers in order to get more feedback.

- Describe what you do, without judgment.
- Why do you do it?
- What do others do?
- What was the result?
- Should you continue to do this or change it?
- What change will you make?