

Using Journal Writing to Teach

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This article describes two ways of using journal writing to enhance teaching and learning. The first method describes the use of journal writing to help students become knowledgeable about the history of curriculum development. Students write in the first person as observers of changes in a particular period of curriculum development. The second method describes how journal writing can be used in teacher education to help graduate students critically examine their teaching practices through reflection after being exposed to content.

Journaling Through the History of Curriculum Change

Stacy Compton and John Scanlan, students in Dr. Maudine Jefferson’s curriculum and instruction class at Kennesaw State, have demonstrated that journal writing can be used to become knowledgeable of the historical periods of curriculum development. Students’ familiarity with the curriculum changes in historical times and the social and political factors that influenced them enabled the students to better understand the changes that are being made in the curriculum today.

Among the historical periods of the curriculum (Before 1890; The Progressive Transformation Era, 1890-1930; The Period of Professionalization, 1930-1960; and Recent Times, 1960-Present which includes the Post-Sputnik Era), Stacy and John selected The Progressive Transformation, 1890-1930 and Post-Sputnik Eras, respectively. To identify with the events of the periods, the students related slices of their lives to them. For example, Stacy vicariously assumed the role of a school teacher from 1890-1930, and John recaptured his real-life experiences as an elementary and secondary student in the Post-Sputnik Era.

Below are examples of excerpts from Stacy’s and John’s journals, which demonstrate their knowledge of the curriculum changes in the selected periods.

September 15, 1892- (Stacy)

I am so proud. My roll has increased by two since 1890. I have twelve students now. Earlier this year a group called the Committee of Ten was appointed by the National Education Association. They have decided that all secondary subjects, the classics, science, English, mathematics, and social studies should be given the same attention. I like this idea. Until now, so much emphasis has been placed on the classics because that is what we learned from Europe years ago. Since technology is taking off, we need to redecide what is more useful in today’s world. This is 19th century America, not ancient Greece! Also, the Committee of Fifteen on Elementary Education was appointed. I agree with them in that elementary education should be more experiential and not so formal. Goodness, we need more students. These little ones are still babies. We can help them develop cognitively by sparking their imaginations, not by drilling books of trivial facts into their heads. It is no wonder they don’t want to come to school.

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October 1957 (John)

School has been in session for about a month. Sister Mary Doris is a good 6th grade teacher here at St. John's School, in Pensacola, Florida. She told us that the Russians had placed a satellite, called Sputnik, into orbit. Could that mean that the Russians are better than us? That's all I hear on the news; my friends talk about it, and I hear adults talk about it. Sister Mary Doris says that we have to learn our math and science lessons well so that we can beat the Russians in the Space Race. I don't understand how a 6th grader can beat the Russians, but I better do as Sister Mary Doris says, or she'll paddle me for sure!

As illustrated above, becoming familiar with content is a purpose for using journal writing in the classroom. Research findings support this theory as Allen and Farnsworth (1993) showed that critical examination of text on family diversity enabled students to become more knowledgeable of the subject. In the same light, according to Reinertsen and Wells (1993), analyzing text in sociology courses through journal writing facilitated students' understanding of its content.

Using Journal Writing to Enhance Reflective Teaching and Learning

Examples of entries of student's journal writing show that journal writing links concrete and abstracts ideas, which involves critical thinking. Critical thinking includes recalling, analyzing, and evaluating ideas (Garside, 1994). Teacher educators have used journal writing to encourage students to critically examine their teaching styles and methods (Pultarak, 1993). Critically examining one's teaching methods is part of reflective teaching. Reflective teaching is defined in the *International Encyclopedia of Teaching and Teacher Education* (1995) as a construct that emphasizes the need for understanding and resolution of contradictions

in order for teachers to develop professionally. It further states that a teacher is prompted to engage in reflective teaching when trying to determine the rationality and justification of ideas and actions in order to develop new understanding and appreciation of phenomena (p.178).

Journal writing is viewed as one way to promote reflection as students may use the data provided in daily records to search for patterns of meaning. In Dr. Linda Akanbi's graduate reading classes, students use journal writing to re-examine their beliefs about literacy instruction in their classrooms in view of new theoretical applications that are revealed in the course. Following are two journal excerpts which illustrate this:

The subjects which were argued in the debates (multiage grouping and ability grouping) are relevant to the teaching of reading. I feel that it is important to know the pros and cons of these subjects in order to form a solid opinion on one of the two sides. I need to be knowledgeable about such issues so that I can be a more effective teacher.

What I felt was most lacking in my knowledge/education was a theoretical base to understand how children read and write and how they learn to read and write. Our work with schema theory and its relation to reading and with the interactional model of the reading process, especially the image of working on many levels at once, does something to fill this gap. While I still don't feel that all the little things I know about teaching reading are tied together in a single system, these ideas seem central to that kind of organization. I trust that the development of such a system will help me both instruct and assess my students in ways that are difficult to measure or describe.

Two ways of using journals to enhance teaching and learning were presented in this article. However, there are many other ways to use journals in teaching. A teacher is only limited by his or her own creativity. Journal writing connects thinking, learning and reflection. •

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