6-21-2014

# Don't Waste My Time; Exploring the Reflective Journaling Requirement in the Student Teaching Experience

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# Networks
An On-line Journal for Teacher Research

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For many years reflective journaling has been a required component of the student teaching experience at my university. The students I supervise are required to reflect upon their teaching experience in writing. Journaling has evolved over the past few years from a traditional paper and pencil journal to journals that allow more flexibility and choice. Students can now record their journal on a word processor or write a dialogue journal with their mentor teacher.

Students tend to view journaling with dread. They see their journal as busy work and some report fabricating entries simply to having something on paper. Very few welcome the reflection process when it is formalized into a required assignment. Most report that journaling does not feel purposeful or meaningful during a very busy semester. However, faculty continues to value the journaling process as a way to encourage student reflection and growth.

Through action research I set out to explore this perceived disconnect between what faculty desires for and from student teachers and what student teachers view as a valuable form of reflection. I surveyed all student teachers assigned to me and then worked with a focus group of five students to explore the use of an interactive online platform (Edmodo.com) to create a place to dialogue with other students and to purposefully reflect. My hope was to inform my own teaching and supervision of student teachers and to find ways to make reflection more interactive and meaningful through shared experiences and online conversations.

## Literature Review

Instructors across the disciplines have agreed that using journals for student reflection enhances critical thinking skills and encourages students to achieve a deeper level of understanding of content and context for learning (Hubbs & Brand, 2010; Lee, 2010; Mills, 2008; O'Connell & Dyment, 2010). Students profit from journaling activities because journals act as a starting point for future learning. They center student thinking within the learning process and promote creativity in reflection (O'Connell & Dyment, 2010). Journaling activities enhance the development of thinking skills (Mills, 2008). Reflective journaling can transform learning. When a student puts a thought or belief in writing they are encouraged to think deeply about this thought or belief and revisit it and possibly challenge it (Hubbs & Brand, 2010).

While instructors have agreed on the purpose and value of student journaling, students have often reported journaling activities as busy work or just a nuisance (Mills, 2008). When instructors assign credit or a score for journal assignment completion, students often reduce the activity to a simple word count. Students tend to focus on completion and the number of words appearing on the page rather than content and deep reflection (Hubbs & Brand, 2010). In addition to simply counting words and filling a page, students tend to write for the instructor rather than for their

own purposes and personal growth (O'Connell & Dyment, 2010).

Journaling is time consuming. Students often fail to set aside ample time for reflection and end up writing entries just prior to the due date. Many students have not had training and practice with journaling so they tend to be uncomfortable with the task and do not use their time constructively to truly engage in deep reflection. They focus on completion and filling a page and then become resentful of the extra time required for writing (O'Connell & Dyment, 2010). In addition, instructors must devote a great deal of time to reading and offering feedback and responding (Hubbs & Brand, 2010; O'Connell & Dyment, 2010). If scored or formally evaluated, instructors are faced with decisions about measuring quality of reflections. It can be problematic to evaluate or score individual personal reflections (Mills, 2008).

Traditional journal writing fosters the idea that journaling is a personal process and is not interactive. Because of the personal aspect of journaling it does not often allow for dialogues or the sharing of reflections among peers (Lee, 2010). However, communication between and among several students can be an effective tool for reflecting upon experiences and practice (Lee, 2010). Online learning environments can allow for interactive journaling and shared experiences and reflections. Peers engage in dialogue that can confirm or challenge beliefs and reactions in the field experience (Lee, 2010; Scanlan & Hancock, 2010). In an online journaling environment readers are also writers and learning becomes collaborative (Wheeler & Lambert-Heggs, 2009). Online interactive journaling allows students the opportunity to share experiences with others and listen to different perspectives. Online journaling

environments allow for social construction of reflections and encourage deep personal reflection (Lee, 2010). Online interactive journaling support students' engagement in higher level reasoning skills and is a popular alternative given the rise of social networking sites, online blogging, and other developments in social technology (Scanlan & Hancock, 2010; Wopereis, Sloep, & Poortman, 2010).

In summary, journaling in any form allows students to transform thoughts to written word. This transformation allows for deeper thought and examination of experiences related to teaching and learning. It allows for an internal dialogue and can be shared to allow for collaborative dialogue. However, the act of journaling is rarely explicitly taught and students tend to view the act of journaling as busy work and a project for completion rather than contemplation. Traditional paper and pencil journaling has value but also has many challenges. Online interactive journaling holds promise for encouraging the deep reflection sought by instructors in a collaborative structured environment. This action research project sought to explore student feelings about journaling and to explore the use of an online interactive journaling site with a small peer group.

## Participants

I am a university instructor. In the fall I teach two sections of a Literacy methods courses to approximately fifty students. In the spring these students go out around my state to engage in field experiences for sixteen weeks. I am responsible for supervising approximately twenty students in their student teaching classrooms.

Initially I requested survey information from fifty students; forty-five females and five

males. These students were assigned to various supervisors and were placed in two different locations and eleven different elementary school settings.

After the initial round of data collection I chose to work with a small focus group of five students; four females, one male. These five students range in age from 23 years old to 26 years old. These five students were selected as a sample of convenience having been participants in a tangential study. However, the sample was representative of the population. The sections had a similar ratio of one male student for every four female students with similar age ranges. I had already developed close relationships of trust with these five students which made working with them collaboratively desirable and comfortable. Because of this relationship of trust I felt I would get honest feedback from these students and that they would be candid with their feelings and views.

## Context of Study

Student teachers spend sixteen weeks in an elementary classroom under the care of a mentor with more than three years of teaching experience. They work each week toward assuming the responsibility for all aspects of the classroom planning, teaching, and assessment. Approximately once weekly the university supervisor visits classrooms. Two of these visits are formal observations of the student teacher teaching a lesson with written feedback and verbal debrief. Other visits are informal to assess student success, discuss progress toward requirements, and to monitor the mentor/student teacher relationship.

Reflective journaling has been a requirement for student teachers for greater than fifteen years. It has evolved to a more flexible requirement with allowance for written dialogue between the student and mentor and/or use of word processors to compile a file of entries to be submitted. Currently our university is undergoing a large change in assessment of student teaching. A formal portfolio assessment, the edTPA, was adopted this year and change was implemented rapidly. Students are required to do formal journaling and reflection writings for this assessment directly related to a sequence of three to five lessons they plan, teach, and assess. Due to the requirements of this assessment, students felt burdened by a requirement to also keep a daily/weekly journal. This transition provided an opportunity to explore various ways of reflecting and journaling. The context became favorable for an action research project involving an online interactive journaling format.

Externally, teacher preparation programs are coming under increasing scrutiny. The edTPA that arrived this year is likely a result of these external forces. Teacher preparation programs are being held accountable for graduating high quality, well prepared teachers and this formalized assessment is one way to document this is achieved and to "gate keep" the profession. Faculty members are feeling more pressure than ever to closely monitor student teachers and their progress and experiences. Student teachers are feeling more pressure to be able to demonstrate proficiency in a wide array of talents and abilities. Any change to a new formal assessment can give way to stress and this transition has provided its own set of new challenges. The edTPA affords students the opportunity to think deeply about three to five lessons they plan, instruct, and assess. Students respond in writing to prompts designed to enhance this reflection. However, in the course of student teaching many more lessons occur

daily and many experiences unrelated to content take place.  Though reviewing and reflecting upon a sequence of lessons is extremely valuable, ongoing reflection throughout student teaching is vital to the growth and development of novice teachers.

The arrival of a formal portfolio assessment has been applauded by many external stakeholders.  Those outside the system welcome a formal way to measure student teachers' preparedness for the profession.  Those inside the system, however, are now faced with finding time to implement a new formal assessment while still meeting all the other requirements and expectations of the student teaching semester.  Time is limited and journaling is not something given priority.  Student teachers are left with little time to undertake journaling and faculty members have little time to read and respond to journal entries.  Because of the online nature of the portfolio assessment it was hoped an online interactive journal may be easier to "fit in" to an already busy semester.  It was also hoped that dialogue among peers would be a source of support for student teachers and would inform me as a supervisor as to stress levels and areas of need.

# Action Research Cycle
## Identifying the Problem

Several discussions with students related to the expectations and requirements of the student teaching semester revealed an issue with journaling. When the words "reflective journal" were mentioned in several settings there were audible groans.  Students did not feel favorably about keeping a journal.  They indicated it was a waste of time and that time was a precious commodity during student teaching.  They also indicated it would get thrown away after the semester and never be viewed again.  In essence, my

gut said a majority of my students saw this activity as a waste of time.  Were there other methods to allow for deep reflection?  Could students be encouraged to take time to think deeply about their decision making in all aspects of their teaching?   Could they dialogue through writing, internally and with others, to come to a better understanding of themselves as a teacher?

## Survey of all Students

Using Survey Monkey I requested survey information from the fifty students I have access to as a faculty member.  Fifteen responses were received.  As noted, the student teaching semester is extremely busy.  In addition our university students have been inundated with online surveys and tend to become desensitized to them.  The students surveyed were no longer on campus for classes but were in different locations throughout the state.  This distance from the college classroom may have created a sense of detachment and added to the lack of response.  Even though the amount of responses was a limitation, I felt that the information I received was indicative of most student teachers in my program.

The survey instrument asked students if they kept a journal for personal or professional purposes and asked them to indicate their preferences as to preferred formats for journaling. They were further questioned as to their experiences with online journaling and what worked and what did not in these experiences.

## Analyzing Results of the Initial Survey

Of the fifteen responses, five students indicated that they keep a paper and pencil journal for personal reasons. Of most interest, though, was that only nine reported they keep a journal for reflection upon their student teaching experience even though this

is still considered a requirement.  I found this to give me a good sense of honesty in responses.  Only two students reported keeping an online journal or blog.

Regarding online discussions, ten of the fifteen students preferred a structured discussion with questions posted for response and as a discussion starter.  The biggest problems with online discussions were reported and the common denominator was time.  One student reported that they felt pressure to "respond in a timely manner".  Another reported that they felt students didn't take the time "to read and respond to my lengthy posts and really understand my points".  Students also reported that online discussions felt impersonal.

Strengths of online discussions were again centered upon the issue of time.  Students felt they could take time to respond and could conveniently respond from home late at night or early in the morning.  Students reported that they enjoy being able to share reflections and see others' opinions and concerns.  In essence, they enjoy the collaborative environment.

When asked to indicate their preferred journaling method for the student teaching semester mixed responses were given. With only one student indicating a preference for paper journals it was clear that this format was of least desire.

## Focus Group Convened

I met with my focus group of five students and had a discussion with them about the survey results. They confirmed that they did not participate in journaling regularly unless it was required.  They also confirmed liking the collaborative environment in an online forum where they could see other's responses and have time to think before responding. I asked if they would be willing to participate in an online interactive journal

in lieu of their journaling requirement.  All five indicated their willingness and indicated relief that they would not have to keep a paper and pencil journal.

## Action Proposed

Using Edmodo.com a small group online discussion was created and all five students joined.  The site was password protected to allow for honest reflections.  I posed questions or ideas for response and students were given time to respond.  Questions posed were based upon common experiences I was observing with student teachers relating to planning, instructional strategies, assessment, and classroom management.  A time requirement for response was not imposed as time had already proven to be a source of stress.

## Mid-point Check In

After several weeks of using the online discussion group I posted a question online and asked participants to provide feedback as to how they felt the online journaling activity was working.

"I enjoy this way of reflecting, but without reminders, I forget about it. I think either having a set schedule of when to respond as well as maybe a certain number of responses/posts set for the semester, would help as a reminder. With all of the other things going on, it's hard to get on here. But, I enjoy being on here and responding to everything!"  Research Participant, March 19, 2012, Edmodo.com

I met with my focus students and we discussed progress and use of the site. All five reported enjoying the following aspects of the online journal:
• Being able to respond on their own time at their convenience

• Being emailed when someone responded to a post to remind them to engage in the discussion
• Being able to see peers' reflections and experiences and to compare and share
• Being able to "talk" with student teachers in other buildings and other locations
• Having a topic assigned to guide discussion

They reported the following concerns:
• Time- even with reminders it was easy to forget to check in regularly
• Posting response times- One student may post a reflection and then have to wait days for any type of feedback or dialogue
• Feeling overwhelmed with all requirements, not wanting to participate at times
• Not wanting to let me down

## Adjustment

After the midpoint check in we decided to set up weekly topics and ask each other to respond within the week. However, with the deadlines looming for the formal portfolio assessment and its demands there was little interaction on the site and participation dropped off drastically. For two weeks I stopped posting discussion starters to alleviate some stress for students. After the deadline for the portfolio assessment I posted one discussion topic and four of the focus students responded and commented on each other's responses.

The online site remains open to these five students and I check it weekly. At the end of the semester I posted a discussion topic to ask about job searches and next steps. This post received two responses. There has been no activity since the students graduated

despite two email reminders that the site was still available to them for dialogue. One participant recently shared that she had simply forgotten the site was available and felt overwhelmed by the new demands and online data recording requirements for her new position. Her reflection now takes place with her teaching team and at her desk during planning times. Now that students are facing the demands of the first year of teaching they may turn to their mentors and colleagues at a time of need rather than needing a connection to their distant peers. Logging in to the site and continuing dialogue is not seen as a need now as these new teachers are dialoguing with teachers and administrators at their schools. Accessing the site takes time and all report that time is a precious commodity during this transition.

## Evaluating, Reflecting, Next Steps

This action research without the arrival of a large formal assessment may have had very different results. Students, in the midst of a large change, were overwhelmed and they participated in the online discussions but I believe it was out of loyalty to me and not really heartfelt. They were quick to comply but their responses lacked depth and each student responded but rarely dialogued with each other or fed from others' responses. Students reported that they reflected more upon their practice with the online format than they would have on paper this semester. Most likely they would not have written any entries. The Edmodo.com site did allow for nine response cycles that may not have happened otherwise.

I plan to keep the site open this year and send one additional reminder to participants that it is available. As these five students settle into their first teaching positions they may find a renewed desire to "meet" and

share experiences.  I want it to be left open as an option for them through this first year of teaching.

## What Did I Learn?

Journaling is viewed by students as a personal experience.  In order for it to be meaningful it must be flexible according to student needs and preferences.  By adding opportunities for dialogue related to reflection there is potential for deeper growth.  Students enjoyed the process of the online journal format.

> "I like the questions you post for us instead of posting our own questions and creating our own journals." Research Participant, February 3, 2012, Edmodo.com
> "I'm sorry I haven't replied but I have been super busy and we just got internet access at our house back! I think that this format is great. I like that we can get feedback not only from our professor but also from our classmates. I like that you are asking questions and that we have the freedom to ask them too." Research Participant, February 7, 2012, Edmodo.com

The student teaching experience is overwhelming to even the strongest students.  I thought I understood this but watching my students struggle to balance it all made a great impression upon me. Journaling aside, I think I have learned ways to better support my students in all aspects of student teaching.  I think online journaling has the potential to be part of the solution.  It can be a place for students to reflect honestly, share frustrations and stresses, and get support from me and their peers.  Just as instructors differentiate classroom instruction, online journaling options can meet the needs of some students

who prefer not to keep a paper/pencil journal or who prefer the social aspect of ongoing dialogue.

As a supervisor I enjoyed the online format because I could check in with students regardless of my location or schedule.  It allowed me to communicate with student teachers regularly.  If not for the Edmodo.com site I may have not talked with these five students on a regular basis aside from formal visits.

This action research is not over.  It will be a continuous cycle of adapting and changing the online format and participation to perfect the experience for all involved. Now that I have navigated a change in formal assessment with the edTPA and I am more comfortable with the requirements, I will be better equipped to align online discussions with the components of edTPA and create discussions that can enhance reflections on all aspects of student teaching. Online dialogue journaling has promise as an alternative to the journaling requirement that will allow for collaboration and social construction of knowledge and practice.  It has promise in informing my own practice. This project has generated many more questions and many more avenues for exploration and this to me indicates success.

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