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Reflective Teaching Diaries for First-Year Faculty

Carolyn Gascoigne Lally

Introduction

Many practitioners believe that classroom experience alone does not provide instructors with sufficient opportunities for professional growth (Richards & Nunan, 1990; Robertson & Yiamouyiannis, 1996; Weimer, 1993). Experience coupled with reflection, on the other hand, becomes a “much more powerful impetus for [a teacher’s] development” (Richards & Nunan, p. 201).

The present article examines the role of reflection as an agent of positive behavioral change for college faculty. Specifically, this article reports on the utility and findings of a reflective teaching diary kept by an assistant professor of French during her first year of full-time teaching.

Reflections on Reflection

Maryellen Weimer (1993) believes that in order to effectively assess the impact of our teaching on student learning, input is needed from three sources: ourselves, our students, and our colleagues. Of these three sources, the most important is the teacher who is “there everyday, seeing students, responding to their questions and assessing their work” (p. 115). Efforts to increase self-knowledge and to understand our attitudes toward students can be facilitated by conscious and systematic reflection.

Certainly all teachers reflect to some extent on their teaching. Reflection can be as simple as musing to oneself about the overall success of a class period, with general thoughts such as “this was a good class,” or “things did not seem to go very well today.” However, to become a truly reflective instructor, there must be both depth and range to the questions we ask about our teaching (Robertson & Yiamouyiannis, 1996).

Donald Schön (1987) makes an important distinction between two types of reflection: reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The ability to think on one’s feet and to successfully navigate an unexpected situation is referred to as reflection-in-action. Because the classroom is an “indeterminate zone” (Schön, p. 16), that is, it is a supple, uncertain– and at times even conflictual– environment, teachers must be flexible. Indeed, each classroom is as unique as the many individuals (students and instructor) who give it life. It is therefore the instructor’s responsibility to adjust for any unforeseen

classroom situations, to improvise, and to reflect-in-action. This improvisation generally “takes place within the framework of instructors’ theories about teaching and learning, and through interpretations of the roles of students and instructors” (Schön, p. 142).

Reflection-on-action, on the other hand, is an intentional activity that occurs while disengaged from practice and is intended to “shape our future action” (Schön, p. 31). Reflection-on-action begins a “search for principles that underlie our teaching [and a] search for reasons which are the basis for our theory of teaching. It also begins the first steps toward identifying our uncertainty about our taken-for-granted and most precious held ideas about our teaching, and its broader purpose” (Bartlett, 1990, p. 211). For many teachers, in order to develop as instructors, it is necessary to move beyond a utilitarian type of reflection-in-action to an intentional, profound, and critical reflection-on-action (Bartlett, 1990; Robertson & Yiamouyiannis, 1996; Schön, 1987).

Systematic Reflection

Whereas reflection-in-action is likely to be as spontaneous and unpredictable as the classroom environment itself, reflection-on-action tends to be constructed within a more organized context. One means of structuring reflection-on-action is the use of a teaching log, diary, or journal.

For Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman, and Conrad (1990) the act of writing is a discovery process. It is a means of exploring, generating, and connecting ideas, as well as changing preconceived notions (p. 227). Through writing “we begin not only to observe, but we take the first step in reflecting on and about our practice” (Bartlett, 1990, p. 209).

Indeed, a teaching diary allows an instructor to further consider and process his or her teaching experience (Gebhard, 1990) and to raise cognitive questions about teaching behaviors. Also, this opportunity allows teachers to formulate questions they may not even know they had until given an opportunity to ask them (Gebhard, p. 126). Not only can a teaching diary help to unearth topics for reflection, but it can also help clarify issues once found. The data that are the journal entries can be reworked, reexamined, and reinterpreted over time.

A journal, often required of student teachers (Allwright, 1988) or of graduate teaching assistants (Bailey, 1990) can be a simple, yet valuable, reflective tool for teachers– especially first-year college faculty. Certainly, new college teachers have “too many immediate problems to solve to worry very much about general questions of educational theory. It is only after one has mastered some of the day-to-day problems that he [or she] is able to sit back and wonder why some things work and others don’t” (McKeachie, 1969, p. 182). The reflective teaching diary, however, encourages us all to take the time to “sit back and wonder” about our teaching.

The Reflective Diary and the First-Year Faculty Member

Reflective teaching, facilitated by a teaching diary, can empower new teachers to “manage their own professional development” (Wallace, 1990, p. 166). The pedagogical guidance and support often given to the novice teacher during pre-service orientation programs, or the occasional in-service workshop, is unfortunately a very limited commodity. The reflective diary can become a mechanism of auto-assessment that can be used throughout a teacher’s career. For

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Pennington (1990), the reflective diary study is distinctly suited to the novice teacher because it focuses on long-term professional development. It is a tool that inspires the new instructor to “continue to reach and to grow” (Pennington, p. 135) by encouraging the novice teacher to identify his or her “own attitudes and beliefs about learning [and by providing him or her] with the opportunity of identifying areas for further investigation” (Nunan, 1990, p.65).

The Reflective Diary of a First-Year College French Teacher

A faculty member in French at the University of Nebraska at Omaha chose to keep a teaching diary throughout her first year as an assistant professor. Because the diary study—like most forms of ethnography—is designed to be hypothesis generating, rather than hypothesis testing, this exercise began with no other expectations than the simple belief that the diary-keeping experience would help the first-year faculty member to keep track of the importance of teaching, while facing the “many immediate problems” (McKeachie, p.182) of the new teaching environment. Not only did the diary-keeping experience force the new faculty member to reflect on each of her classes, five days a week, over an entire academic year, but the post-hoc reading and reflecting upon the diary entries revealed several previously unnoticed pedagogical strengths and weaknesses that can now be addressed in the future.

The instructor (also the present author) taught four classes during her first year as an assistant professor. During the fall semester of 1997 the courses taught were an introductory French course (French 101) and an advanced French conversation course (French 403). During spring 1998, I taught French 102 and a third-year grammar and composition course (French 304). Because diary studies tend to produce “massive amounts of data” (Long, 1983, p. 19), the entries from two courses (one from each semester) were selected for review: French 101 and French 304.

The first-year French course met five days a week for fifty minutes a day. The third-year French course met three days a week for fifty minutes a day. After each class, I returned to my office and wrote down any reactions to, or thoughts about, class. There were no a priori requirements for the format of the diary entries—only that they address the courses in question. I generally spent 15-20 minutes on each entry and wrote whatever came to mind. I was not concerned with the style of the entries. The goal was simply to reflect on teaching and to record these reflections for later consideration.

Findings

One month after the end of the academic year, I began to read the diary entries for the first time since their composition. After a first reading, it appeared as though the entries were little more than a series of reconstructed lesson plans. Many entries listed each day's activities in chronological order, supplemented by brief comments on the success or failure of a particular exercise, such as “they did well,” “this activity was fun for us all,” or “I thought this activity would have gone more smoothly.”

Initially it appeared as if there was more cataloging than reflecting taking place in the diary. Fortunately, a second and third perusal of the entries revealed more interesting and systematic information. First, in terms of form, nearly every diary entry addressed the following four points:

- 1) an articulation of the day's goals;
- 2) an identification of the techniques used to attain the day's goals;

- 3) a discussion of the perceived successes and failures for each activity; and

- 4) a presentation of my thoughts on what I would do differently.

Second, in terms of content, I was happy to find that every class began with either a brief explicit review, or an implicit review exercise, focusing on the material covered during the previous class meeting. This, of course, is something that I consciously try to do. However, it is certainly reassuring to learn that I had succeeded in my plans to consistently review material before beginning a new topic.

According to Bailey (1990), the “diary study process can be as rewarding as it is humbling” (p. 226). In my case, any pride I felt due to my consistent use of an opening review set was marred by what the diary revealed to be my inconsistent—and perhaps whimsical—use of other techniques. For example, I began the semester by giving the French 101 class three to four short dictations per week. I also told the students how the “dictée” was a useful means of showing them, and myself, how well they were assimilating new information (10-2-97). However, toward the end of the semester I was only giving students one or two dictées a month. In retrospect, I see how I might have been confusing students by leading them to believe that dictation was an important tool for the acquisition of a second language, and then ignoring this technique weeks later.

Second, as I composed the teaching diary, I recorded a variety of recommendations for future courses, many of which I had forgotten until rereading the entries. For example, after a meeting of the grammar and composition course (French 304) I wrote: “personalizing the activity made it more fun and got everyone more interested. I always thought that as long as there was a context—any old context—I would be all set. But it seems that the more I can relate the activity to the students' own lives, the more successful it will be” (3-10-98). Unfortunately, this realization seemed to end right there in the teaching journal because 1) I had no memory of it, and 2) subsequent diary entries made no mention of this hypothesis, nor of any attempts to investigate it further.

Other verbalized reflections included a recommendation to stop exercises or activities that did not seem to be working, and not to feel as though I had to do everything in my written or mental lesson plan, “. . . of the three textbook exercises that we did, two were a mess and one was average. I should have skipped the others after the first one failed. But somehow I felt as though I had to finish what I started” (French 101, 11-11-97).

Most important, while reviewing diary entries, I was reminded of how difficult the French 304 grammar and composition course was for me—something that I would much rather forget. I could see how hard I worked at improving this class throughout most of the semester, and how I had given up toward the end. A brief selection of diary entries tell the story better than I.

1-12-98 “I think I'll enjoy this class (French 304). I was nervous, of course, especially last night—It was hard to sleep ...I am really looking forward to this class.”

1-16-98 “Today we did an in-class writing exercise, but I felt like I wasn't doing my job. I didn't do much of anything. I watched them write... I just looked over their shoulders. Also, before they began to write I wanted to do a brainstorming activity, but I didn't get much participation from them. Hopefully, they will speak more in the future.”

1-19-98 *"I tried to ease into class with informal conversation (in French) about their weekends. I can't get them to speak. Sure, they answer homework questions, or very short and specific questions, but it is so hard to get them to speak freely, or at length... I think this level is more self-conscious. They have invested a lot of time to get here so they want to do well and are afraid to make mistakes. It is different from (French) 101."*

1-25-98 *"Today we had a mini-breakfast (donuts, juice, etc.) and chatted in French for the first ten minutes or so before beginning class. It was the most relaxed French conversation we have had to date. I need to juice up the way we correct homework and make it more interesting."*

1-28-98 *"I don't know how to liven this class up. Even I wanted to look at the clock today. I don't know how to make it more engaging. I have, however, taken one small step. Today I arranged for us to move to a new room, one that is less sterile and more comfortable. Also, I have an idea. The new room has a TV/VCR. Perhaps we could identify certain target grammatical structures and then watch segments of French films. As we watch the films we could look for examples of the structures that we are studying. In this way, we would be seeing the structures in use, working on listening comprehension, and the storyline of the film might become fodder for later conversations or compositions... we will see."*

1-30-98 *"Today we discussed the room change and the use of films in class. They seemed all for it."*

2-1-98 *"Today was our first day in the new room and trying the film activity. First, we discussed our target structures and then we watched fifteen minutes of our film. After the film, instead of the students providing examples of our target structures, I was the only one who was on task! They admitted to being too wrapped up in the plot to pay attention to form."*

2-4-98 *"We tried it again today- new structures and more of the film. It is not working like I imagined, although they did a little better."*

2-25-98 *"We began putting exercises on the board. Then we went over compound tenses- there seemed to be neither problems with the activity, nor interest in it, so we moved on to the film."*

3-13-98 *"We got a late start because of several late students. This is upsetting."*

4-22-98 *"I am so happy that the semester ends soon."*

4-24-98 *"Today we discussed a short reading passage. They did not appear to enjoy it as much as I thought they would."*

In reviewing the entries I could see how my enthusiasm and energy dwindled. As the semester progressed, I began to accept the lack of class participation and addressed it much less frequently in the journal. In other words, I simply waited for the semester to end in the hopes of starting fresh in the fall. I would love to forget about the difficulties I faced in my French 304 class, or at least convince myself that things were not as bad as I remembered. The journal, however, not only reminds me of the situation, but it has encouraged me to actively address it, as opposed to sweeping it under the rug. Revisiting the journal entries has prompted me to seek assistance by joining a teaching circle and to begin reading about classroom motivation and participation.

A journal can also help a teacher to identify areas that he or she might want to research in the future. For example, while reading my teaching log, I "re"discovered an interest that I had articulated in the dynamics of classroom group activities. In several entries, I noted observing that my students seemed to speak more when broken into larger groups (4-6 students), than while working in pairs. This observation held for both classes, "They worked well together today. They seem to like big groups as opposed to smaller groups (French 101, 12-1-97), "Today we divided the class into two large groups for a comparison exercise—probably one of our better days" (French 304, 1-20-98).

The dynamics of small group work, a topic to which I had made reference several times in the teaching journal, has now developed into official research interest.

Discussion

As stimulating and revealing as the present diary experience has been for the teacher in question- 1) I am currently involved in a university-wide teaching circle to gain insights into motivational factors; 2) I am engaging in research on small group work; and 3) I am revising the syllabus for French 304- several recommendations must be made. Although diary studies should eschew absolute rigidity (Bailey, 1990), a teacher who is considering keeping a reflective teaching journal would be well served by identifying basic topics for reflection. Indeed, the "massive amounts of data" (Long, 1983, p.19) and the unruly nature of random entries can, at times, dissimulate more than they reveal. For this reason, the setting of a priori tasks, such as the examination of classroom climate, or the accomplishment of daily goals, will help the teacher to better manage and assimilate post-hoc entries.

Second, data from the teaching diary, in the form of written entries, can be complimented by information from other sources, such as outside observations and/or student comments. In the present investigation, student observations and overall scores from the end-of-the-semester teacher evaluations were revisited after examining diary entries. In this case, student reactions from the evaluation forms reinforced the observations made by the teacher in the reflective diary. For instance, one student in the French 303 course felt that the class needed "more variety in terms of activities."

End-of-the-semester evaluations, although a quick and easy source of student feedback, are generally too limited and structured to provide an instructor with substantive information. Other possibilities, such as student reaction papers coupled with external observation by colleagues, may prove to be a more revealing compliment to the reflective journal.

Conclusion

Just as first-year faculty members are required to develop, reflect upon, and improve their research agenda, so should they be encouraged to reflect upon and enrich their teaching. A teaching diary can help instructors to develop a conscious understanding of the principles underlying their teaching (Ellis, 1990) and pave the way for subsequent growth.

As opposed to relying solely upon external- and possibly incomplete- methods of evaluating teaching, articulated reflection in the form of a teaching diary has helped me as a first-year faculty member to clarify the actual teaching experience. The heightened self-awareness has encouraged me to identify aspects of teaching where I feel improvement is needed, such as classroom participation and group work. More important, this practice in self-discovery is something that I can replicate and extend well beyond the first year experience. Clearly, auto-reflection has the potential of affecting an entire career, rather than a single semester.

Note

The diary documented my first year as a full-time assistant professor. Prior to this point, I spent five years as a graduate teaching assistant teaching mainly first- and second-year French courses, and an occasional third-year conversation or introduction to literature course.

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