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## A Meeting of Minds : Journals

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## A MEETING OF MINDS: JOURNALS

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(Written dialogues between students; written dialogues between staff and dialogues between staff and students)

It is a circuitous and often lonely journey being educated and educating others. I have found journal writing to be a buffer against the isolation by recording moments along the path and lingering from time to time on a fresh idea or a memory. Reflective journals fill my bookshelves and feed my professional practice as I continue to map my journey.

This is why when I first heard I would be teaching a new subject entitled, 'Reflective Learning and Teaching' with a three year journal component I felt confident. I knew I could share my own use of the professional journal with these pre-service teachers, excite them with my love of writing and send them forth on their way. When I got my group I gave each student a letter of introduction and a small plant to care for which could represent their growth throughout the course. I then talked endlessly about what a journal was and how they could document their journey towards becoming a teacher. The discussion led to topics they could consider, issues they could explore, and observations they could record. I discussed the materials involved: the book, the pen, then I asked them to write at least three times a week and date each entry.

I eagerly awaited the day when I could read each reflective morsel my students had written. Yet after supping on two or three journals I felt quite parched and empty. The ideas they expressed seemed so minimal and uninspired. I understood that I had a large task before me. It was necessary to try and understand what 'writing' and 'reflective thinking' meant to my students.

I began reading all the articles I could find on reflective practice. I reviewed the notion of the Reflective Practitioner and the two kinds of action Dewey defined with regards to teaching practices. He referred to reflective action as active, persistent and carefully considered, in contrast to routine action which is guided by impulse, tradition and authority (Wedman and Martin, 1991, pp. 39-40). In routine action, pre-service teachers are trying to learn existing methods so they can teach them. In

reflective action, however, they are critically analysing existing methods in order to determine whether or not they should be continued or used at all.

Many researchers, while recognising reflection as central to practice, have noted its difficulties for teachers. There seem to be two key aspects to the difficulty. One is cognitive in nature: the ability to look back and learn from one's experience. The second is organizational in nature. Teachers lack the time and structural opportunities to reflect. (Paltorak, 1993, p. 288). Pre service teachers have an added difficulty as they are not used to having choices and making decisions. "For most students, the wish to avoid uncertainty coupled with ... an unreflective deference to authority makes it impossible to participate in such a process." (Shon in Andrews, 1990 p. 59). With this knowledge in mind, I knew I had to provide my students with the assurance that there was no 'right' way, provide clear direction as to how they might begin and allow time for reflection to surface. I also wanted to get other colleagues at the university to value reflection so that a greater number of tasks incorporated critical thought. If these pre-service teachers, could exercise reflective thinking regularly over an extended period of time there was a greater chance they would reap the benefits and continue to exercise its use as practising teachers.

I wanted my students to critically evaluate their existing knowledge and practices as well as future content and practices. I knew that by helping them learn to write from the, 'I believe' position their views and in time, their voice would ring clear. This was a tall order yet I felt certain that the journal was the place to begin. It was in the walls of the journal, where students would be seeking to explore ideas rather than blindly adopting linear methods and procedures. Finding the paths into helping my students at the beginning of journal writing was my first goal.

As well as reading about reflection, I re-read pages from my own notebooks. One entry in particular seemed significant:

"June 10th.

*My daughter is studying Beethoven's 5th Symphony and we were discussing the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment of the 17th and 18th Century. As we talked about man's faith as opposed to man's reasoning I couldn't help but draw parallels to the minds of my students."*

It seems so many people accept on faith our teachings believing that we are the experts, we have the answers and will show them the way. These people don't feel they have to think for themselves and no longer trust their own beliefs. This notion is addressed by Andrews when she discusses the difficult challenges for teachers when they embrace 'uncertain territory' where they are given choices or have to make decisions (Andrews, 1990, p. 58). The schooling process is a major cause of these feelings. Student's related that in high school they were repeatedly told that their opinions were not valid so they stopped writing them down. If these people felt disempowered I had to try and rekindle their belief in themselves before they could begin to value reflection. I also knew I had to stop being, 'the one who knows' and start listening to what my students had to say. It is true that "If you think you're better than the horn toad, you'll never hear its voice" (Graves, 1990, p. 39).

I tried to focus on what my students were telling me in the pages of their journals so that I could assist them. Anne Marie talked about her journal being too bulky and therefore hard to carry around in her bag. Samantha said that she bought a beautiful book to write in but felt reluctant to write trivial thoughts in it. Shaun asked me not to try and answer the questions he asked in his journal but rather to leave them for him to answer. I wrote back to each of them about these details. They were valid concerns as they had to get organised in order to become comfortable with reflective dialoguing. I asked each student how they would like me to respond to their entries. Some invited me to write around the edges, others asked me to write in pencil or on separate sheets of paper. I felt it was of utmost importance to give them ownership of their writing so I suggested they staple together pages they didn't wish me to read or write their private thoughts in another notebook. In each of their journals I tried to adjust my responses to what needs were being expressed and to start from where they were rather than where I am or where I would like them to be.

Some students complained that they didn't know what to write about. I discussed the 'language of reflection' to try and gently move them into a new way of thinking and responding. I explained that they would be working at becoming skilled

observers of their own learning and teaching and provided examples of reflective responses:

Posing concerns and offering solutions

*I am having difficulty seeing the relevance of the article by \_\_\_\_\_. Perhaps I have to think more about what ideas it supports.*

Comparing and contrasting

*The university classes are providing me with new ways of learning.  
When I was in school I learned by \_\_\_\_\_*

Joining one idea to another

*I am beginning to make links between \_\_\_\_\_ idea and \_\_\_\_\_ idea.*

Describing oneself as a learner

*I write like an old car. It takes time to get started.*

Expressing beliefs

*My classroom will be a place where \_\_\_\_\_  
I feel this way because \_\_\_\_\_*

Debating issues

*The argument posed by \_\_\_\_\_ doesn't sit right with me because \_\_\_\_\_*

Expressing changing attitudes

*When I first entered teaching I thought \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_*

Now I believe \_\_\_\_\_

Drawing relationships

*the ease I feel reading factual texts will affect how I teach them because \_\_\_\_\_*

These statements seem to help them. Student's who lack discipline in writing are advised to begin by telling their journal how they wish to use it.

*"2/2/91*

*Happy New Year! I wonder what it holds for me; perhaps some exciting new challenges.*

*A new year brings resolutions and apart from the ones affecting my personal health, I've decided to purchase this A16 page journal with the full intent to write on each page. I'm sure I've got a lot more to*

*say so I plan to use all of this book; fill it with thoughts, ideas, quotes, feelings, statements and so on as long as I get what I'm thinking on paper."*

Since I teach students from all three years of the course in the same group, second and third years often help to induct first years into journal writing. Communicating their beliefs about journal work has helped first year students accept the long term benefits.

I read and converse with each student through the pages of their journals twice a semester. The greatest pleasure I receive in working with the journals is in making my dialogue special for each individual. Sometimes I tuck a poem or quote inside where I feel it is appropriate. Many times I ask questions or share some experience of my own. I might suggest a book for them to read to further their search in some area. I see it as my role to gently nudge them towards deeper insights into their learning.

In the past several years my success rate has increased. By success I mean students are becoming more willing writers, increasingly critical in their responses. I have noticed that they are looking deeper at issues and at closer range challenging many of their past assumptions.

Two years ago I felt the need to alter my approach to journal writing somewhat. Things were niggling at me that the writing could be made more powerful. As well, the journals seemed to be moving in just one direction - forward. I wanted students to backtrack as well and discover where they had been. Once again I began reading but this time I focused on the journal and came across an article by Judith Newman that altered my thinking.

Newman discussed sharing more of her own writing with tertiary students and getting them to dialogue back to her and to peers in the group (Newman, 1988, pp. 134-155). Suddenly it hit me! I had been sharing my love of writing but not my writing. As well, the journal exchange had only gone from each student to me. Others in the group had not shared in the experience. My students had only been responding to their own ideas and I wanted them to bump into conflicting viewpoints in order to strengthen their existing beliefs or alter them.

To remedy the situation, I wrote a piece for the students to reflect upon. It was about my interest in first-hand experiences for learners and my concern that technology was taking over making people content to never leave the four walls of their homes. I handed an entry to each student and

asked them to write all over it and dialogue with me about my ideas as I had been doing in their journals. After reading the entry most group members seemed unable to respond. Eventually I got sprinkles of replies like: I agree, ... well written. Rather than panic and throw away the idea of written conversations, I persevered. These students just needed practice. I also realised how difficult they must have found it to respond to their lecturer's outpourings. I spent more time explaining to them my intentions. I wanted:

1. To get them experiencing other people's ideas and the way they write.
2. To get them responding to one another's ideas in order to look more closely at their own.
3. To build a greater community of writers.

I asked for a volunteer in the next session to write an entry or find an existing entry to share with the group. Several student's volunteered and we were on our way. The shared entries are raising important issues, providing models of journal writing and using the written word to converse. It runs like this: At the start of each session the student passes her entry to each class member and the first ten or fifteen minutes are spent responding to it. Then all papers are returned to the writer. As a group we decided not to discuss the entries afterward. They wanted the conversations to be through the written word.

For some students journal writing remains a struggle and they don't always see the long term benefits. For others, the journal provides a forum to bring out their inner selves and explore their past, present and prospective path. It takes time, but once they feel safe with the knowledge that their thoughts will be accepted and safeguarded, some spill forth.

*One said:*

*"I carry this journal around with me and try to analyse it- I can't What is it? It's full of everything and anything- all of me.*

*Some of my mates have known me for over ten years but they don't know anything about me. If they read this journal at least they'd have an insight."*

This statement is significant because it expresses a commonly held view that somehow, in the writing, students can reveal things kept hidden in their public life. Working with journals is a slow process but I feel my students and I are making progress and beginning to understand how to deal with our thoughts and ideas. Many take comfort in the

realization that others share similar concerns and dreams. Each semester we re-read our past offerings before beginning anew. We look in the mirror of our learning seeking patterns, growth and direction. The journal serves 'To mirror the mind, to see and confront the self as well as to surface academic considerations related to course work' (Bowman, 1983, pp. 25-27).

An entry is made in response to the re-readings, for example:

"I guess in a certain way, the journal has been a mirror to the attitude I had to my own learning. I came to the university with a history of not being a very good student. I've spent years trying to discover why I am like this."

"I am overly critical of myself and others. I keep referring to what I'm not able to do and what I'm not being given. I'm going to try and change this."

"I'd like to revise my response to the article ... I've altered my view since then."

It helps on the often lonely journey to being educated to have a journal at one's side. I have never questioned its value. The long search however, is to help others recognise its worth. I have learned that I have had to make the journal processes I found intuitive, explicit for my students. I have also learned that I have to be patient in all things related to change.

Thirty-three staff members teach the subject Reflective Learning and Teaching. Most teach it willingly but some question the purpose in the journal as a way of learning. As well, many struggle with a subject far removed from their discipline area, that focuses on the learner rather than the content. The subject also changes the balance of power with the suggestion that the students take responsibility for much of the content. Staff travel a lone road as well as students and are in need of support. Last year I decided to circulate a staff journal to help provide that support and further the notion of written conversations. Many staff did not keep a journal and so this book was my attempt to get them to experience journal writing first hand. On the inside cover I wrote:

"This is a public journal as we all share joys, concerns and learning about R.L.T. Read others thoughts and feel free to respond to any entry you'd like or generate a new idea."

I placed the journal in a staff member's pigeon hole and waited.

The response to the staff journal has been an extremely positive one. I think many lecturers welcomed the opportunity to read others views and be offered the opportunity to openly express their feelings. Through the pages of this one book we cross a wide variety of disciplines yet join together in a spirit of shared learning. Faculty members have been able to express their insecurities as well as share their successes. Some staff are recognising change in their own teaching style as they seek more critical thinking from their students.

Several common threads can be found amongst staff responses:

1. A renewed faith in our students and a deeper understanding of where they are on the journey.
2. The need for greater staff support.
3. The belief that we all need time to probe beneath the surface to arrive at deeper understandings.

One lecturer posed the question, "Why is it the older we get and the more we know, the more we realise we know so little?" I feel staff and students are made to stand quite bare in the pages of their journals. We are without our armour (the textbooks and lecture notes holding our knowledge). It is frightening for some but at the same time quite exciting. Journal writing allows a meeting of minds as we join forces with the community of travellers.

'I know what I think when I see what I say.' The journal is a document we can all return to in order to see where we have been. It is the place where we can ask the questions in order to one day travel toward the answers. It is also as one lecturer described it, "a good graffiti board!" We needn't travel the lonely road alone. There is real purpose in the shared dialogue with self and with others.

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