

REFLECTIVE WRITING FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENTⁱ

Rosemary Viete

INTRODUCTIONⁱⁱ

With the growth of education as an export ‘product’ in Australia (AV-CC 1994)ⁱⁱⁱ, and a rapid increase in the variety of contexts where English as a second language (ESL)^{iv} is being taught (Hawthorne 1997), ESL teachers are having to be flexible, innovative and autonomous in their approaches to teaching. In the absence of institutional support, they must rely increasingly on their ability to improve their own practice. Reflection on what happens in the teaching and learning context has been advocated by Schön (1983)^v as an important way of identifying and responding to one’s strengths and needs as an educator. This report discusses^{vi} the use of a tool for reflective thinking, a journal, to foster the professional development of teachers of ESL.

REFLECTION AND JOURNALS

Why focus on reflection? Smyth (1989, cited in Hill 1999:4)^{vii} argues^{viii} that reflection can lead to the “unmasking of the lies, myths and distortions that construct the basis of the dominant order”^{ix}. On a rather smaller scale than this suggests^x, reflection - or critical thinking – can help us to identify and adjust our assumptions about our teaching and learners’ learning. With this awareness, we^{xi} can make changes that enhance our teaching.

Richards and Lockhart (1994)^{xii} discuss the use of journals to promote reflective practice amongst teachers. They argue that writing in journals “serves as a discovery process” (Richards and Lockhart 1994:7)^{xiii}, a way of understanding better their own teaching. In their view,

teachers who are better informed as to the nature of their teaching are able to evaluate their stage of professional growth and what aspects of their teaching they need to change. In addition, when critical reflection is seen as an ongoing process and a routine part of teaching, it enables teachers to feel more confident in trying different options and assessing their effects on teaching. (Richards and Lockhart 1994:4)^{xiv}

This last point about growth in confidence and self-direction is important for adult learners. In his discussion of andragogy (as distinct from pedagogy)^{xv}, Knowles (1990:56) has pointed out the need for adults to be treated as “being capable of self-direction”. Acknowledging the ability of learners to select their own focus for reflection and explore this through writing in a journal may be one way^{xvi} of promoting self-direction. Journals would also satisfy two other conditions that Knowles^{xvii} argues are important for adult learners, namely, the need to draw on and value learners’ prior experiences, and to thus value learners, whose self-identities are closely linked with their experiences.

Journals can be seen as sites for self-discovery^{xviii}. They can be places where their writers explore the links between their experiences, feelings and observations and the ideas of others to which they have been exposed.

USING JOURNALS WITH ADULT LEARNERS

With the above principles in mind, I introduced^{xxix} the writing of journals as a work requirement (without a grade attached) in a professional development course for ESL teachers, called Teaching English for Specific Purposes. Twenty adult learners^{xx}, all qualified teachers, wrote entries at least weekly for a period of thirteen weeks. I asked them to select their own focus for discussion in each entry. The only imperative^{xxi} was that they think about their own practice in light of the ideas they had read about, and that they discuss these ideas in terms of their validity for the contexts in which the learners worked. I introduced^{xxii} the journal writing with two examples of journal entries that one former student had written. Over the thirteen weeks the journals were submitted three times. I responded to the journal entries by writing in the journals myself. At the end of the thirteen weeks, I asked the learners to comment on the value of the journal for their learning on course. Their comments and my own reflections on the whole process are discussed below.^{xxiii}

DISCUSSION: PERSPECTIVES OF LEARNERS AND TEACHER

Sixteen out of the twenty learners reported that the journal was valuable for their learning. They indicated that it “liberated” their thinking. One saw it as an opportunity to “think aloud” without having to “get thoughts in order”. Most of the sixteen expressed a similar view.

Seven commented on the generative capacity of the journal^{xxiv}. One of these wrote that the journal “drove me to invention”. In her words, it made her “addicted to exploring new

ideas, and seeing how they might work” in her teaching. It “liberated” her thinking. Another of these observed that the journal gave her great pleasure, because she could write creatively, “use metaphor and speculate wildly” in the process of formulating her ideas. She found this useful, because it contributed to the ‘richness’ of her ideas. In a similar vein, another learner felt that the journal encouraged him to think in more complex ways, to “interconnect lots of ideas, and see how they would apply to work” and to “revise what ... [he] had thought in earlier entries and progress in ... [his] thinking” (John, p.2 line 4).^{xxv}

All of these learners wrote that they had been nervous or doubtful about the value of journals at the outset. Most were unfamiliar with the genre, and were unsure of whether they could do it satisfactorily. This nervousness was in part understandable; all learners had been studying fairly recently in academic courses, where formal essays were the norm. However, I feel that my introduction^{xxvi} of the genre contributed to their anxiety. I showed them only two journal entries, both written by the same writer, whose style was very compact, abstract and concise. Not all writers want to explore ideas in this way. A greater variety of styles would have been more beneficial. Another feature of the task would also have contributed to anxiety. Despite the notion that journals are opportunities to talk to oneself, in a course they are also going to be read by someone else. Writers are more comfortable baring their thoughts to readers they know.

The four writers who did not find the journals useful fell into two categories, those who preferred other modes of reflection and those who felt they did not “really try the journal

out properly” (Jill, Young-Hee), having not devoted time to regular entries. The two who preferred other modes both felt that an ‘oral journal’ would have suited them better. This suggests that^{xxvii} learners might benefit from a choice of mode.

Interestingly, all commented on the need to preserve the status of the journal as a non-graded task. One wrote that the journal made him feel in control of his learning process, precisely because it was not being “judged” by someone else.

From the feedback^{xxviii}, it would seem that reflective journals can play a valuable role in adults’ learning, with some provisos. I set out below what I see as important conditions for the use of journals^{xxix}.

IMPLICATIONS/RECOMMENDATIONS

1. There should be^{xxx} a choice of modes for journals: written or oral. All should attempt the written mode, however, before deciding on the mode of choice.
2. Journals should be introduced with reference to the functions they are to perform. If samples are used they should represent a range of styles and fulfil a range of functions.
3. Responses to journal entries should be genuine responses to the thinking and queries in the journal rather than evaluative. Thus the learner remains in control of his/her learning agenda.
4. In courses, learners could talk during the course about what their journals helped them to think about. In this way, those who are not writing may see the value of the

task.

5. Journals should be introduced after students are a little more familiar with the reader of their entries.
6. Learners should be permitted the option of 'sealing' a part of the journal they do not want read, so that they remain in control of their thinking.
7. The focus of the reflection should usually be decided by the writer.

CONCLUSION

Trying out journals with my adult students was enlightening for me. The learning benefits of this reflective tool were certainly evident for the group of learners I worked with. It also taught me more about what learners value in their learning experiences. As with every learning task, however, I would monitor its use carefully in other groups.

REFERENCES^{xxx}

AV-CC 1994 *Code of ethical practice in the provision of education to international students by Australian higher education institutions*. Canberra: Paragon Printers (e-mail: <publications.avcc@avcc.edu.au>).

Hawthorne, L ^{xxxii}1997 The changing work of ESL teachers^{xxxiii}. *TESOL Quarterly*, 73^{xxxiv} (2)^{xxxv}, 153-170^{xxxvi}.

Hill, R 1999 Notes for Bachelor of Adult Learning and Development, 22-2-99. Melbourne: Monash University, Faculty of Education.

Knowles, M 1990 A theory of adult learning: Andragogy.^{xxxvii} In^{xxxviii} R J Smith (Ed), *The Adult Learner: A Neglected Species* .43-63. UK: Routledge.

Richards, J and Lockhart, C 1994 *Reflective teaching in second language classrooms*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.^{xxxix}

Schön, D A 1983 *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books.

- ⁱ Note that the title of the paper is descriptive, and your name as author is on the first page (and also in a header on every page)
- ⁱⁱ The section title is in smaller letters than the paper title
- ⁱⁱⁱ Referencing (information prominent); author and date appear in brackets
- ^{iv} Write the full name of a term first, then its abbreviation in brackets. Thereafter in your report/essay you can just use the abbreviation
- ^v Author prominent quote. Date appears in brackets immediately after the name
- ^{vi} By the end of the introduction, your reader should know what you are going to write about (aim and focus)
- ^{vii} Smyth's quote was taken from Hill's work – the report writer did not read Smyth's original work. Note that Smyth does not appear in the reference list at the end
- ^{viii} note the variety of words we can use to tell about what others have written
- ^{ix} See how the quote fits grammatically into the report writer's sentence
- ^x See how a critical comment has been introduced. This indicates the report writer's input
- ^{xi} Note the "us" and the "we". This invites readers to identify with the writer
- ^{xii} When there are two authors and you use their names in the sentence, you must write the word "and".
- ^{xiii} Note also that the page number is given when there is a direct quote. The page number comes after the date and is preceded by a colon.
- ^{xiv} A quote that is more than 40 words does not appear in quote marks. Instead, it is downspaced, indented and single spaced.
- ^{xv} Words that are of common use in your field may sometimes not be quoted, though sources are still referenced
- ^{xvi} The use of may can mark your own ideas
- ^{xvii} Knowles has been referenced enough in this paragraph, so the reader can assume the writer is still speaking about the same source
- ^{xviii} The first sentence in a summary section tries to capture the main idea of the section/ paragraph
- ^{xix} Note the use of the past tense when 'telling' what you did
- ^{xx} You need to specify the characteristics of the people you talk about
- ^{xxi} You need to specify conditions in the learning/teaching environment
- ^{xxii} You need to say what you did
- ^{xxiii} This sentence links the two sections of the report (it is a signpost for the reader)
- ^{xxiv} Note the ways numbers are specified or not
- ^{xxv} Note the changes in square brackets – these are words the writer has inserted to make the sentence flow grammatically. The three dots indicate that a word or phrase has been omitted from the original quote
- ^{xxvi} Note how the writer's own perspective is marked as different from the learners'
- ^{xxvii} Another marker of the writer's own interpretation
- ^{xxviii} A signpost for a summary
- ^{xxix} Another signpost to tell the reader what to expect next
- ^{xxx} Note the language of recommendations
- ^{xxxi} The reference list contains ONLY works you have referred to specifically in your writing
- ^{xxxii} Surnames appear first in alphabetical order. Initials come after surname and the date of publication follows (Note where there is punctuation and where there is none)
- ^{xxxiii} The title of an article from a professional journal is in plain print, lowercase.
- ^{xxxiv} The title of the journal appears in italics, with main words capitalised. The volume number appears in plain print
- ^{xxxv} The issue number is in plain print in brackets
- ^{xxxvi} The page numbers for the whole article are given
- ^{xxxvii} The title of a chapter in a book is written in the same way as is the title of a journal
- ^{xxxviii} This word "In" introduces the name of the edited book in which the chapter appears. Note that the Author /editor's name appears with the initials first.
- ^{xxxix} Note how place of publication and publisher are specified.