

Writing as a Learning Process in Teacher Education and Development

by Alison Haill



Abstract

The article describes a teacher-training experiment in which the trainees, who were experienced teachers, were required to react in writing to their course as it progressed, that is to process the information as they received it. This writing formed the basis of a valuable tool of communication between the trainer and the trainee. The experiment is evaluated and a detailed description given so that the experiment can be copied or modified for use elsewhere.

Introduction

I first encountered journals when I came into contact with the US National Writing Project in S.E. Asia in 1983, by attending a course for teachers on teaching writing. By then, I was told, it was common practice for teachers of English as a first language to encourage their students to keep a journal: in this notebook the student would jot down ideas and observations, and write to “unwind and reflect” (Blanton 1987; cf also Walshe 1981 and Fulwiler 1980), sometimes writing in class at the teacher’s suggestion, sometimes not.

The Experiment

In training teachers of EFL/ESL, I encouraged the use of the journal as a learning log, a place for the trainees to write their own personal reactions to, and thoughts about, the subject matter of the course. The trainees knew their journals would not be marked, but read and responded to by me, so the journal served as a tool for both communication and personal reflection or processing. I had used a journal in this way myself on the teachers’ course in 1983 and again in 1986 and found it useful.

The teachers I trained were experienced Singaporean primary teachers and the compulsory course they were attending, on which I taught, was on teaching English at primary level; it was held at and run by the British Council in Singapore. Education in Singapore is through the medium of English and the teachers’ standard of English was very high. The course lasted two 10-week terms, and as an experiment I used journals with my two classes of trainees, 10 in each group, for the 20 week period. Each week the trainees attended 2 two-and-a-half hour theory/methodology sessions or workshops at the British Council (referred to henceforth as the ‘sessions’); they were observed teaching their own classes at their own schools and continued to teach alongside their attendance of the course. I taught each group for one session per week.

Rationale

I wanted my trainees to get involved in the course “to a satisfying level” (Torbe and Medway 1981, 34-5) as I had done through my journal writing in 1983 and 1981. As well, I wanted to give them the time and encouragement to reflect on the course as it progressed: to further process the ideas they encountered in it. I also hoped to discover how they were reacting to and interpreting the activities, ideas and materials they encountered during the course; this was particularly important as the course

was compulsory and some of the teachers were mature, experienced teachers, reluctant to attend it at all. Moreover I wanted feedback on the experiments they made with their own classes as a result of the ideas set in the sessions.

The setting up of journal writing with two classes of trainees

I asked each of my trainees to provide an exercise book to use as their "journal" or "learning log". In it they were to write what they felt about the course material as the course progressed, ask questions, voice doubts, make comments. When I took the books in after each session, I commented in the margin, on the opposite page or below the entry in answer to their queries and observations, or merely voiced a reaction to what they had said, sometimes at length, sometimes with a word. I never indicated or commented on language errors, focusing only on content. (Some trainees might request that errors be indicated or corrected though mine did not. The trainer would then have to decide whether to agree to this change of focus in the exercise.)

In his article on letter writing with students, Rinvolutri (1983) describes the build up of trust and a personal relationship between teacher and each individual student which are similar to the objectives of the experiment I describe here. However, among the primary aims of my exercise was to allow the trainees time to reflect on the issues of the course as well as to exchange information about their teaching problems, needs, their reactions to new methodology etc. In other words although the written communication between me and my trainees in the journals was very similar to letters, the subject matter was largely restricted by my prompts. Although trainees did feel free to write on other matters (e.g. illness which made it hard to keep up with the course) it was clear from the prompts I gave that the journals were not an invitation to bare the soul on any topic at all. In addition it would be odd to write a letter in the presence of the recipient. It seems in my case wisest therefore not to call the writing a "letter" however much the styles may be similar.

How they knew what to write

On the first two occasions with each group when I asked them to write in their journals, I gave full instructions so that they knew what kind of writing was wanted: viz,

"Write down your thoughts in response to the following prompts. You need not answer them all or answer them in order. Try to write continuously for 10 minutes. If you 'dry up', re-read the prompts to find something else to write about. Instead of thinking before you write, try, thinking on paper WHILE you write. Don't worry about mistakes in your English as this writing will not be marked, only read for its content. It will only be read by me".

I followed this with prompts. I always gave prompts to start off the journal entries, though with a longer or more intensive course this could become unnecessary.

On one occasion the prompt was

"Describe your feeling about the lesson I observed you give last week. Was my presence useful? Scary? Unhelpful? As a result of the lesson could you make any resolutions for your teaching in the future? Is there anything different I could do next time?"

Another prompt was

"Review in note-form what you have learnt in the course so far. Has anything been particularly eye-opening? Why? Were any sessions unhelpful to you: say which and why. What areas are you particularly interested in so far? What specific plans have you got for modifying your teaching as a result of the sessions so far? Is there any area we have covered or touched on that you would like more information about?"

These prompts all include a variety of suggestions or questions because I aimed to throw out enough ideas for each person to find not only one idea sufficiently motivating to start writing on, but other ideas for when the writer dried up. Although I made it clear to the trainees that they could choose which questions to answer, I felt it important that the prompts for the first few entries should be both plentiful and precise, remembering my own first experiences with writing a learning log when I had been unsure what kind of writing was expected of me and had found it helpful to be directed towards the specific. However, by the seventh or eighth journal entry my prompts had become much briefer. A

further point is that the trainees soon came to realize that the prompts did not have to constrain them: if they had some concern other than those elicited in the prompts they wrote about that instead.

The trainees understood that where they asked a question in their journal I would try to answer it, writing in their books when I read them at home or speaking to them privately. It was also understood that the time allotted to journal writing was an opportunity to reflect on the subject matter and methodology of the course, and that they should use this writing as a tool with which to think, as well as a channel of communication. Both the process and the product were valuable.

When I used journals

I asked my trainees to write in their journals for about 10 minutes each time I met them (once a week). This worked satisfactorily as I had a week in which to read and respond to them.

Sometimes I asked the trainees to do the writing at the start of a session. For example, at the beginning of a session on group work I gave this prompt on the OHP:

“How do your students sit in class: in single rows, in pairs, in groups? Write down how you view the benefits and drawbacks of group work for your class.”

Sometimes I asked them to write midway through the sessions, or at the end of the session, viz:

“Jot down the main points you feel were made in this session. What was the most important issue for you? Was anything new?”

On other occasions they recorded their ideas both at the beginning and end of a session, to compare the two. One trainee suggested taking the journal home to write at more length and I gave out prompts to stick in the back of the book (e.g. most interesting aspects of the course so far for them and why; problems with their own class; doubts about any aspect covered in the course; new ideas tried out with their own class since the start of the course; ideas for future lessons; etc). Trainees could be asked to take their journals home for a more extended entry, say once a month.

I did feel, however, that the fact that class time was allowed for this activity was important. It showed that the trainer valued the activity; it allowed processing time for new ideas during input sessions; it helped the trainees to establish the habit of regular writing, whether they felt the aim was to communicate with the trainer or to process the information encountered, or both. At the beginning of a session, it also had the function of allowing the trainees to reactivate the relevant schemata before receiving input: much research has revealed the importance of this as a prerequisite for the retention and comprehension of new information (cf Rumelhart 1984, Carrel 1987, et al).

How I responded

I felt it was important to be both honest and encouraging in my response to the journal entries as without this the relationship of trust which I wanted to build up with each trainee would be impossible. Thus I felt free to indicate whether I agreed with the views expressed or not. “I enjoyed reading this”, “Interesting views” or “You seem to have found this session useful” were sometimes as much as I could say. On other occasions I gave suggestions: “Have you thought of arranging the chairs differently?” or “Could you ask the children to pretend their classroom is England, so they will only be understood if they speak English?” I encouraged the trainees to respond to my comments too in their next entry.

One trainee reported in her log that she was offering sweets and other gifts as prizes to the children in her class to motivate them to participate actively in communicative activities. In the response I wrote in her journal I expressed doubts about this and suggested other ways of motivating the children without using prizes. Another trainee wrote that after trying our communicative methodology in her classroom she found

“that the children were not interested in participating. Some of them left it to the few in the group to discuss. They were just sitting there doing nothing..... they tend to be more lazy.”

Incidentally this last trainee was extremely positive about communicative methodology during the sessions. Without the journal I would have been unaware of, and unable to help with, the doubts and

difficulties which she was obviously reluctant to air in the sessions. Her first observation might then have been much more traumatic for her than they were.

The trainees had often made themselves vulnerable to considerable loss of face by writing honestly in their journals, especially when they had expressed feelings of anxiety or inadequacy either as learners or teachers. Thus I tried always to respond in such a way that they lost as little face as possible, for instance I was often able to comment (honestly) that I had experienced a similar doubt or failure in my own classroom experiments. Knowing that they were not alone in making mistakes, I feel, lessened the feelings of despondency and vulnerability.

Feedback

Comments from my trainees about the journals were positive. All seemed to find them a useful way of communicating privately with their trainer. Although only a few were conscious of the benefits of private reflection time which the journal writing provided, the majority showed in their writing that they were indeed processing the course input through it. In addition, as one wrote,

“In writing I can sometimes express myself better. While in speaking, I need to look out for pronunciation, phonics etc. which I may stumble (over) and thus make myself misunderstood. Writing also helps to break down the shyness barrier. It may encourage an introvert to say what she has in mind.”

Largely as a result of my experiment, several of my trainer colleagues also started to use journals with their trainees so that journal books are now provided as a matter of course. I noticed that those trainers who used journals on a regular basis as I did, were much more convinced of their positive use than those who only used them occasionally. Writing journals in class has both the advantage of helping to establish the habit but also the disadvantage of making it easy for journal writing time to be elbowed out where it is not considered a priority.

Another colleague who has used journals in this way but in England with native English-speaking trainees on a full-time 5 week UCLES/RSA Certificate course, gave prompts and class time for journal writing only for the first two or three sessions, thereafter allowing trainees to choose what they wrote about and write or not as they wished. This trainer reported that the writing without prompts tended to ramble, be in very general terms or merely a diary-like chronicle of events, some trainees deciding to abandon journal writing altogether. He repeated the experiment on his next 5-week course, giving specific prompts for each entry similar to those described in this article and in most cases allowing class time for the writing. This time he felt the journals were more successful both in that trainees' writing was more focused and in the fact that most of the trainees felt the journals a useful communication tool, invaluable for the trainer to wire into the individual responses of the class. Again trainee feedback centered on the practical advantages to both sides of private communication between trainer-trainee or teacher-student, seeming unaware of the advantage of the opportunity to process and reflect which the writing gave. However, the journals once again revealed that trainees were in fact using their writing for reflection, albeit unconsciously.

Problems

An initial problem was that the trainees sometimes responded to the prompts with short, even one word, answers which made no sense unless I referred back to the prompts when responding; these minimal responses had the added function of revealing almost nothing about the trainees' thoughts and reactions. This problem disappeared when I explained in the session that I read the entries almost as if they were letters to me and thus did not want to refer back to the original prompts to understand them.

Although I did not encounter the problem of entries being no more than a list of events in the session (partly perhaps because of the prompts given), I did find that some entries were extremely short for the amount of writing time allowed. To these minimal entries I responded by asking interested questions (written in their journals) which I encouraged them to answer in their next journal writing slot when I returned the books.

The extra time needed for responding fully to the journals on top of the marking of course assignments was undeniable but I found this drawback easily balanced by the information I gained from them and their usefulness in enabling me to relate to each trainee as an individual.

A slight problem for me was the contradiction between the diary aspect of the journal which needed privacy and the sharing of it with me. However this did not seem to worry the trainees and possibly by avoiding referring to the journals as diaries, the problem came to nothing.

There are two other difficulties that could arise but did not in my experiment that I feel it would be appropriate to mention them here. One is the sycophantic journal entry, where trainees might write only fulsome praise of the course. That this did not occur may have been due to the use of prompts which avoided asking whether the session had been useful, instead asking WHAT had been useful and WHY, or what they would have like included. I found I was more often dealing with real classroom concerns than with praise of the course and when there was a positive response it was refreshing and encouraging to read. Positive as well as negative feedback was encouraged.

Another possible danger, and one that Rinvolutri mentions (op cit) is that the relationship between journal writer and responder could get out of control in the sense that a trainee might expect more emotional involvement and support from the trainer than the latter can give. In this case I can only stress first the need for honesty on the part of the trainer so that s/he admits it when faced with a problem s/he is not qualified to deal with, and secondly, that if the trainer starts this exercise with the awareness of the dependency that could be set up s/he is in no more danger than in the setting up of any other personal relationship, whether conducted in writing or in person.

Evaluation

The exercise was useful in more ways than I expected, both for me and for those of my colleagues who conducted experiments on similar lines. The following is a summary of the benefits that I feel were derived.

The Journals

1. Allowed the trainees a tool for thinking and the chance to reflect on and process the ideas encountered in the course as it progressed.
2. Provided a private channel of communication between trainer and trainee which helped to build up a relationship of trust, through which I was able to discover which people were nervous or lacking in confidence, rather than assuming this from classroom behaviour. (See also Lowe, 1987, p.92)
3. Gave me information about the constraints and conditions in my trainees' different schools: I could then offer specific help.
4. Revealed valuable facts about the trainees' teaching during the 20-week course, only a portion of which was observed. Some of the quietest trainees in the sessions were doing wonderful things in their own classrooms.
5. Gave me further insights into the views and attitudes of my trainees towards methodology, motivation etc. I could also follow the development and change of attitudes.
6. Gave me the chance to add emphasis, encouragement, or an additional point, to the points they made, agree with their views or suggest alternative ones for consideration. Moreover, I could better angle and pace the sessions to suit the needs and interests of my particular group.
7. Allowed the trainers to remember, and be aware of, how learners feel (see Lowe, p.95).

However, there are certain flaws which I would hope to remedy in future. Firstly, I asked the trainees to consider only the new ideas and methodology presented. I now feel it would be useful to ask them too, to consider what aspects of their own teaching they feel are valuable and useful. Also to consider whether the insights gained on the course helped them in any way to understand better why certain techniques they already used were effective or ineffective. Secondly, although I wrote in my journal for the first two or three entries as a further proof that I felt the exercise was valuable, I did not continue to do so and neither did I share what I wrote with them. Blanton (1987) wrote with her students when they wrote journals but not when they wrote logs, but she makes a distinction between the two types of writing which I do not make, one (for sharing) about the course subject, the other (private) is about any

subject at all. As well as an individual response to the logs she hands out her own written "collective response" to her class's logs once a week.

Conclusion

For myself, I have used journal writing as a tool for reflection for the last five years. I clarify my thoughts as I write, consolidate them and progress farther in them. By using journals in the teacher training course, as described above, the trainees were given the chance to discover this use for writing. In addition I hoped that they could use them or perhaps modify them for use with their own students. Several trainees did start to use journals or diaries with their classes during the course and at least one is still doing so, three years later.

The following quote was written about secondary school pupils of non-language subjects at school but in my view it is relevant to all teaching and training situations:

"What pupils say and write can be particularly revealing at the stage where a new idea has been encountered but not yet completely married into the student's existing system of ideas; it is at this point that the perceptive teacher can find the clues which will enable him or her to help clear the remaining obstacles out of the way."
(Torbe and Medway, op cit)

If this is so, journals can provide a place for this kind of writing, as well as a "way in" for the perspective teacher or trainer.

References

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At the time of writing, Alison Haill was an EFL/ESP teacher and teacher trainer who has taught in S. America, S.E. Asia and the Middle East, as well as in Europe. She then lived in the UK and completed an MA in Applied English Linguistics at Birmingham University.