
Writing Beyond the Form: Professional Dialogue Journals in Elementary Education Methods

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Evaluation forms. Every discipline has some. The Education course, Elementary Teaching Methods I, has used a particular observation form to record sophomore students' practicum experiences in the public schools for the past ten years. In this course, students participate as interns at local public schools where they are supervised by a cooperating teacher and PSC faculty for one morning per week throughout the semester. The students observe classroom teachers, present large and small group lessons, and develop and implement a variety of learning activities. This course is one of the major core experiences before students submit their application for teacher education candidacy.

Observation/participation forms for the Methods I course were constructed with the *intention* of helping students structure and focus their writing in reporting their teaching experiences. The form looked like this:

Observations:

1. **Participation:** Describe your interaction with particular students and teachers. Discuss activities you conducted.
2. **Application:** Explain how you might utilize the above observations/participation in your classroom.
3. **Signature of Student:**
Signature of Cooperating Teacher:
(You are encouraged to make comments on the back of this form.)

In retrospect, this structure which we (the instructors of the course) thought might facilitate students' writing seemed to *inhibit* their writing. For example, some students would actually write very large to "fill-up" the space; others would write only a few sentences; and some would attach a typed page with detailed and reflective responses.

Sample student responses:

Susan's observations: "The middle reading group is taking a break from the basal. The math group leaves to go to four different classrooms. My teacher is teaming for social studies and science. . . ."

Steve's observations: "I've conducted several special area programs which focused mainly on the holidays. I've done Columbus Day Bingo, a book on Halloween safety. . . ."

A more insightful entry reviewed a group's discussion based on a children's literature book:

Sarah's observations: "One of the books was about a very tall girl who

felt out of place because of her height. We talked about what it would be like to be an outsider. The children reacted very sympathetically. They said that they would be nice to the girl and treat her like everyone else."

Perhaps because the form discouraged them, the cooperating teachers very seldom responded on the Methods I form. Without the cooperating teacher's feedback, some students' interpretations of classroom events were inaccurate. As the instructors of the course, we found the students completing the form as a mere exercise, rather than using the opportunity to write as a tool to think, clarify, and reflect on their classroom experiences.

Course Changes and the New Form

This past September, we decided to try something new to counteract this passive, lack of ownership, and "bare-bones" reflection-type of writing by students. We modified the Methods I course to include more cooperating teacher participation in the evaluation process. We also concentrated the students at two selected schools (site schools), and did away with the observation/participation form. In place of the form, we asked the students to keep a journal of their teaching experiences. This journal would show their "response ability" to the teaching situation and their "responsibility" in keeping a log of the things they were learning about in the schools. These aspects of response are mentioned as key points in ownership of writing in the process approach described by Hansen (1987).

The students' journal assignment was to comment on "What you saw and heard" and "What you want to know more about." Weekly topics were suggested as possibilities for discussion of student's self concept as a teacher, analysis of the classroom environment, cognitive and affective characteristics of children at specific grade levels, and the curriculum and materials used in the classroom. Students turned in the journal to their cooperating teacher on a weekly basis, and the teacher responded to the questions and made comments on the observations made. The students

then turned in their journals to us for further review and comments.

Journal Results

As a result of this free-write/non-form technique, we found several changes in the interaction and communication between the student intern and the cooperating teacher. The following are some of the things we noticed over the semester:

1. The interactions between the student and the cooperating teacher improved as students used the journal as a "conversation tool" to ask about their experiences. Cooperating teachers wrote more than just their signature in the students' journals. Suggestions for alternative ways of presenting a lesson were given as well as the teacher's personal perspectives on issues in teaching.
2. The dialogue between the students and the cooperating teachers expanded to include the college instructors as well. The result was a three-way line of comments and questions.
3. Students asked more questions in their journals. They also acknowledged the value of the journal as a communication tool when time limited conversations between cooperating teacher and student.
4. The journal helped the cooperating teacher and the college instructors develop an understanding of the student's attainment of course competencies and professionalism.

5. The instructors addressed writing problems that surfaced in student journals and referred appropriate students to the Reading/Writing Center.
6. The seminar topics for classes on campus were revised to address students' questions in their journals in the order they asked them, rather than in the order we had previously outlined in the syllabus.

New Directions

As students became more comfortable with their journals over the semester, the quality of their writing continued to improve. Students wrote personal comments on their experiences and wrote to clarify events and gain insight into the how's and why's of teaching. A partnership seemed to form that allowed the reader—the cooperating teacher—and the writer—the student—to take risks and reflect. An example of one entry that illustrates this improved reflection is seen below:

Jackie's journal: "There seems to be very little off task moments in this classroom. This must say something about my teacher's directions and her class. I wonder what's her secret? I'll have to ask. I wonder how she gets the kids to pay attention without even asking them. I hope I can do this someday, but I don't know. She makes it look so easy and I get so nervous that I'll forget to do something in my lesson. . . ."

Teacher's response: "It may look easy but some days it's not. I said the same thing when I started teaching. You really have to try to develop your own style. . . ."

PSC faculty's comments: "Jackie, you are getting better at focusing on the kids and their reactions to your lesson. Don't be afraid to take the time to wait if you don't have their attention. . . ."

Overall, we found the journal to be a worthwhile experience for our student interns that helped them write about their perceptions and develop a conversational rapport with their cooperating teacher. We plan to continue the use of the journal in the Methods I course next semester. These journals will be part of the teaching experience portfolio that documents progress through the courses to the final student teaching experience. The journals have served as a dialogue for the expression of the joys and the frustrations of working with children in the classroom. We look forward to reading and sharing our students' personal journeys into teaching.

References

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