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Student-Teaching Reflections: My Own and My Students'

Jim Woehrle

Friday, May 28, was one of the worst days of my life. Well into my overseas student teaching experience, I was struggling to survive. I had fallen behind in my marking and shown little aptitude in planning anything beyond the next day. I was in a big public school near Perth, Western Australia, and my cooperating teachers sat me down for a discussion. They wanted to see me improve in three major areas: planning, organization, and self-evaluation. That last aspect will be the topic of this article.

The theme of this edition of *LAJM* is reflection, and that as much as anything helped turn around my student teaching experience in Australia. Over the final three weeks, I developed a good way of evaluating myself and my lessons. I also instituted some reflective activities among my students. I'd like to share how we all -Australian students and American teacher-benefited from reflecting on English instruction.

The Students

As a student at Central Michigan University, I've learned a great deal about the benefits of reflective writing. Less formal and structured than traditional essay writing, reflection reduces stress and allows students to be creative. It helps them answer the popular question, "What's the point of all this?" by explaining what they learned from an activity. And it allows the instructor to see whether students benefited from particular teaching strategies. I read about these benefits in many of my CMU textbooks and heard about them from numerous instructors. But I did not immediately put them into practice. For my first few weeks of teaching in Australia, I instituted reflective writing only sporadically. I'll use my Year 10 unit on Amy Tan's *The Joy Luck Club* as an example.

This particular class was part of the Academically Talented Program. My high school in Australia had a much more pronounced sense of tracking than any school I've seen in the USA, and these Year 10s were the cream of the crop. They were highly motivated and had read *Joy Luck Club* during their two-week break between semesters. A pantomime activity is a good example of a lesson that

could have benefited from some reflective writing. I broke the class into groups of three and had each group choose two scenes from the novel. The groups had to act out the scenes without making a sound. Instead, they had to rely on gestures and facial expressions to convey the meaning of each scene. I gave them 15-20 minutes to find scenes and rehearse, then it was showtime.

The pantomimes were great. Some of the students really hammed it up. There's a scene in the novel where young Waverly Jong wins a chess tournament, and her mother brags about it to all of the neighbors, much to the girl's embarrassment. The students acted out a chess match, the awards ceremony, and a scene in which the "mother" led the "daughter" around the room, showing the girl off like a prize. All of the skits were amusing, and the students identified the scenes fairly easily. Although some students complained that the pantomiming took them out of their comfort zones, that's what I wanted. I felt they would learn more if they faced the challenge of closely reading the novel and interpreting the story in an untraditional way. Other feedback troubled me. One student said, in an evaluation of the entire unit, that the pantomiming "seemed to show little value or connection to the assessment." Another wrote that it was "harder to express opinions without the usage of sound." Still another simply wrote the activity "had no point."

That's where some reflective writing really could have helped. Looking back on it, they could have written about a whole host of issues. What embellishments did they make to particular scenes and why? How did they put themselves in the roles of the characters? How did they overcome the challenge of not speaking? What made particular scenes by their classmate easy or difficult to identify? By writing on these and other questions, the students could have learned much more. Instead, count this one as a lesson learned by the teacher.

I had somewhat better luck with a reflective activity on a different part of *The Joy Luck Club*. I read the students a scene from the novel in which one of the characters describes growing up in Chinatown, San Francisco. It is perhaps the most

vivid description of setting in the entire novel. After reading the selection, the students were to draw their own version. They could draw a single street scene or a collage of images from the passage. I had used artistic response a couple of times in my student teaching, but this was the first time I followed it up with reflective writing. The day after they drew, I had the students write what they think are the pros and cons of being a Chinese-American growing up in Chinatown. "Look at the pictures you drew yesterday," I told them. "How would you like to live in that picture?" After writing, the class had a lively discussion on the benefits and drawbacks of living in Chinatown. Some students said it would be a good way for an immigrant family to stick together and maintain their Chinese culture. This would ease the transition into American life. Others countered that living in Chinatown would isolate the children from mainstream American culture and make it difficult for them to adapt. All of these comments were very perceptive, especially coming from a group of Australians. It was one of the best class discussions I had the pleasure of overseeing, and I believe the reflective writing made this possible. It also gave them practice writing about important issues in the novel, practice they would need when it came time for the formal essay assessment.

In the case of my Year 10 unit on *The Joy Luck Club*, the best reflective activities came midway through the unit and helped propel the students into further learning. But near the end of my student teaching experience, I used reflective writing as a wrap-up for a Year 9 unit on debating. My Year 9s were also academically talented and quite boisterous. When I arrived, they were reading a fantasy novel called *Obernewtyn* by the Australian novelist Isobel Carmody. The book raises important issues about conformity, religious intolerance, and the abuse of power. After discussing the novel for a few weeks, we moved into a series of formal debates on the larger issues of power and conformity.

The debate unit took a few weeks. The class learned the roles of each speaker, the format of a structured debate, and the three main criteria for adjudication (matter, manner, and method). The students spent three class periods in the library, researching examples for their arguments. Perhaps the best lesson came when the class watched a video of a mock debate. I paused the video after each speaker, and as a class we discussed the pros and cons of their arguments and style. Afterwards, the students scored the debate on their own, and the class discussed the reasoning behind their adjudication.

When the debates rolled around, the quality varied. It became obvious that some students had hardly prepared for the debate, while others

were outstanding. On the whole, however, the debates went very well. As a final requirement, I asked the students to write a one-page reflection on the debate process. Among the topics they could address were:

- * What did you learn from the debate experience?
- * If you had to do anything over again, what would you do differently?
- * How well did you work with other members of your team?
- * What were the highlights and low points of the preparation and debate process?
- * What could the teacher do to prepare you better for debating?

The results were enlightening. It became clear to me that the best debaters were those who prepared thoroughly. Here is an excerpt from one student whose presentation was particularly outstanding:

In preparation my team worked well together. We were in constant contact away from school as well as in school making sure our stories matched our teammates. Cherie and I spent a lot of time on the phone and on the Internet discussing how we would go about rebutting and thinking of what the other team may say. We also discussed each other's speeches and made sure that my debate speech corresponded with hers. Tomas came to my house two nights before the debate to discuss rebuttal and to make sure that he included points that I thought were important to summarise in my speech. If we were to do debating again I would try to be as organised as I was during this debate.

After seeing how well Harley prepared for his debate, I could understand why he felt so confident. Not only did this reflection give him a chance to show what he learned, it gave me some insight into what makes a student successful.

Some of the most interesting responses came from students who were frank in admitting they should have prepared better. One girl wrote, "I did not practice at all and I think this was one of the problems with my speech, and that if I did so I would not worry about it so much." Another wrote, "I don't think I used the time I had to prepare to full effect. I regret that now." Another student wrote, "If I had to do anything differently, I would probably write down better points for rebuttal. When I stood up, I knew what I wanted to say, but getting it out in a proper form was a different thing." I told this student that it takes experience to learn this skill. I have no doubt that because she now can identify this challenge, she will meet it in the future.

The Teacher

After reading those debate reflections by my Year 9s, I could say with some confidence that they had learned a lot during the previous weeks. But what had I learned? That was a bit trickier, and I found that I could be just as resistant to the advice of my professors as my students sometimes were with me. As a teacher, I needed to follow my own advice, and that was a painful but eventually fruitful process.

From the first day of my 16-week student teaching experience, I kept a journal. It was required by my CMU supervisor, Dr. Mary Lou Aylor, and it was a great idea. My journal was both personal and professional, a hodgepodge of questions, comments, observations, and opinions. When I arrived in Australia, I wrote every day. I reflected on the schools, the people, my host family, and my wife back home. I wrote about the 29 other CMU student teachers with me, and our adventures in wild, wonderful, Western Australia. But on May 28, I realized I needed to organize myself better, and that included the way I reflected on my student teaching experience. "We need to see some evidence of self-assessment," one of my cooperating teachers told me. "We need to know that you are thinking about what you are doing and striving to improve. Self-evaluation is one of the most important parts of teaching."

Because I did not feel comfortable having my cooperating teachers read my personal journal, I created a form called "Lesson Plan Self-Evaluation." It was pretty simple, actually. At the top, it had lines for the date, class period, year, and lesson focus. Underneath, I filled out three areas:

- * What worked well in this lesson?
- * What did not work well in this lesson?
- * What can I do to make this lesson better?

I made about 100 copies of this form and filled one out for each lesson I taught. I had tossed these questions around in my head every day during student teaching, but this was the first time I formally put them to paper.

I usually filled out my forms at the end of the day. I made photocopies to give to my cooperating teachers, so they could see what I was doing, where I felt I was successful, and where I was struggling. Sometimes I asked questions at the bottom of the form. Other times, we used ideas from my writings to adjust our teaching from day-to-day. For example, during one of my Year 9 lessons, I gave the students most of the period to work in groups on debate preparation. On that day's self-evaluation form, I noted how difficult it was to keep them on task: "For the final 15-20 minutes of groupwork, I spent a lot of energy circulating around the room getting people back into their groups . . . [Many

students] had a bad habit of straying from their group. Some kids did nothing for 40 whole minutes."

Based on this experience, my cooperating teacher and I came up with a better way of checking their progress. The next day, we explained to them that in-class preparation was an important part of the debate unit. During that day's class, we circulated among the groups while they were working and asked each student to show us what they had done so far. We recorded our observations on a checklist. We felt it was a good way to show them we expect them to work in class, and the students generally seemed more focused. On that day's self-evaluation form, I wrote: "Next time, I might make it more clear to the students why I'm doing it and why it's important. They might realize that group work is not a license to goof around but an important class activity that still requires effort on their part." This self-evaluation form allowed me to reflect on the good experiences, hash out the bad, and keep looking for ways to improve. Even my best lessons had some rough spots, and it helped me immensely to take some time—every day—to write down what happened.

I cannot say enough how much my simple self-evaluation form helped in my overall student teaching. At the time I created the form, I was under-utilizing my organization and planning skills. I like a little looseness and spontaneity in life, but I was probably too loose at this moment. My "Lesson Plan Self-Evaluation" forms forced me to be more organized and disciplined. I sat down at certain periods in the day to fill out the forms. With that day's triumphs and tribulations fresh in my mind, I moved on to upcoming lessons. Reflecting on good and bad points of past lessons helped me plan future activities in a better way. The forms also forced me to develop a more efficient system of record-keeping and paperwork management. In the past, I had seen teachers go by the seat of their pants, but as a student teacher I needed to be as organized as possible. My self-evaluation forms allowed me to institute professional reflection in a more structured fashion.

The results were wonderful for me. For the final three weeks of student teaching, I felt like I finally had my workload under control. I was able to enjoy the many social activities that accompanied the overseas program, as well as confidently manage my teaching responsibilities. Thanks to encouragement and feedback from my colleagues and supervisors, I felt like a true member of the profession. My cooperating teachers noticed a difference as well. On their evaluation of me, my teachers wrote, "Towards the end of his practice he developed effective planning and evaluation skills and

produced some excellent lessons. James is often too self-critical and must understand that learning is a continuum and concepts take many attempts before success is realised."

Conclusion

Perhaps my most valuable lesson in student teaching was one I learned about myself. Although some people can teach on the spur of the moment, and organize thoroughly. Good organization was not possible for me until I was able to reflect on what I was doing.

The responsibilities of a teacher are many, and it was a tremendous challenge to meet them while adapting to a foreign country. But the challenges made my successes all the more sweeter. I would not trade my experience in Australia for anything. I reflected on this during a discussion with my supervisor two weeks before my student teaching ended.

I told her that I finally learned that the success of my lessons was directly proportional to the amount of time I spent planning them. The more thoroughly I prepared, the more confident I was-and the better my lessons went. She smacked me on the forehead and said, "Yes! He can be taught!"

About the author

Jim Woehrle is a student at Central Michigan University. In the Spring of 1999, he student taught for eight weeks at Chippewa Hills High School in Remus, MI, and eight weeks at Governor Stirling Senior High School in Midland, Western Australia. He will graduate in December, 1999.