

2005

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Recommended Citation

Solgot, Heather (2005) "Journaling for Personal and Professional Growth: Reflections of a Recent Student Teacher," *Language Arts Journal of Michigan*: Vol. 21: Iss. 1, Article 13.
Available at: <https://doi.org/10.9707/2168-149X.1218>

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Journaling for Personal and Professional Growth: Reflections of a Recent Student Teacher

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During my student teaching seminar, I was required to keep a journal of my experiences during student teaching. While I grumbled silently to myself [another thing to do among the special education accommodations, IEP meetings, attendance, contacting parents, actually teaching, lesson plans, grading, athlete eligibility forms...], I discovered that journaling is quite enjoyable and beneficial. I would recommend it not only to student teachers but to experienced teachers as well.

First of all, journaling is a type of reflection, one which is a growing trend in education. When we write about what we have done in the classroom, it is easier to see what works and what doesn't work. Recent research has shown that journaling has helped educators greatly, as noted by Zaida Cintron and Ana Gil-Garcia in a recent article:

By systematically writing in the reflective journal, practitioners acquire a better understanding of his/her students, their likes and dislikes, their ethnic and cultural background, their personalities, and respect and validate their language and cultures. Expressing in print that knowledge and analyzing the ideas versed, teachers and administrators could make changes, modify or preserve their teaching and administrative practices.

When I'm journaling, I tend to think more deeply about what I've done in the classroom. For example, recently I asked the students in my creative writing class to bring in songs they felt were examples of good poetry. I was surprised when they were unable to talk about the songs as poetry. They were

unprepared. I told myself I would do things differently the next time, and I even came up with a couple of ideas. But, it wasn't until later when I was journaling that I thought about the reason for students' lack of preparation. To tell you the truth, just thinking about it again now that I'm typing this essay, I'm coming up with even more ideas of conducting the lesson.

March 4th - *I asked them to bring in a song they felt was an example of good poetry. I must not have given them specific enough direction, because they just brought in songs they liked. And they weren't really prepared to talk about them. After I told the students to be prepared to speak about their songs, they did better with it. We actually had some good discussion. I think I just didn't talk about the why enough. And what I actually wanted them to do. If I were to do this activity again, I would maybe give the kids a hand out or talk more about songs that are good poetry and why BEFORE I gave them an assignment. I would definitely say that they would have to bring in a copy of the lyrics with the CD. It is much easier to talk about poetry when it is sitting in front of you. I also would not play all of the songs. Some of the students enjoy listening to all of the songs, but many get restless. I would only play them until the first chorus.*

Since I began journaling, I am more reflective in my teaching. It is now automatic. As teachers, I think we are constantly in a state of reflection. I know I am always thinking about what went wrong, what went well, how I reacted to a student, how I handled a disciplinary problem, etc, etc, etc. In fact, sometimes my brain becomes overwhelmed with all of the reflections I have. Writing about my contemplations allows me to organize my thoughts and come up with better solutions to the problems I encounter. Journaling helps teachers to efficiently deal with the everyday challenges of teaching through reflection.

Reflection is extremely important for teachers, who do not typically have supervisors constantly evaluating them like those in other careers

might have. Sure, a principal or colleague may come in to observe once or twice in a year, but for the most part we are the only adults in our classrooms. We have to be able to self-evaluate and assess our own performances so we can grow in our chosen field. Journaling allows the reflection necessary to grow as educators.

While reflection is vital to successful teaching, it is not the only reason for journaling. Teaching has the potential to be an all-consuming profession. Like most teachers, I am constantly thinking about my students, what I did in class today, what I will do tomorrow, next week. It is pretty much all I talk about with my friends, family and boyfriend. I feel badly for loved ones who regularly receive a minute-by-minute recaps of my day, including the reflecting I mentioned earlier. Journaling is a way for me to “let it all out.” I do not feel the need to tell my mother or best friend exactly what happened or how I feel about the day because I’ve already talked about it and put it to rest—in my journal. I can leave my day behind and actually enjoy a movie or a good book without thinking every minute about what I’m going to do Monday.

~

February 7th - *Another thing happened today too. I read the William Carlos Williams plum poem, “This is Just to Say,” because I thought it was a good example of an epistle poem. One of the students went on a rage about how he hates the poem because every teacher loves it and uses it as an example. Things like that really get to me. It makes me wonder if I’m too sensitive or don’t have thick enough skin to be a teacher. I want to have meaningful connections with students, but it is so hard to when they’re condescending.*

Teachers have their share of good days and bad days, just like any other profession. I have had my share of bad days already; it seems it’s just a part of the job. However, when I start to feel defeated, I look back in my journal to some of the “good days.” I read about what I felt like, or what the students did that was funny. We are sometimes less likely to write when things are going well, but the benefits are

amazing. I do not know how I would have gotten through some of my bad days without being able to reflect on the successes recorded in my journal. The following are two of my favorite entries. I like to read them when I start to feel down or begin to doubt myself.

~

March 7th - *Today I had the freshmen work on poetry for [a student’s] brother, who is in the military. They wrote poems collaboratively. This connects to the standards in so many ways. The students really enjoy it as well. The only thing I would have changed about this lesson is I would have talked to [the student] about what her brother likes, so I would know for the 2 hours of English 9 when she is not in the class (if that makes any sense) 1st and 2nd hour had more difficulty because they did not know what [her brother] liked. Once again, 1st and 2nd hour get the short end of the stick. But in 3rd hour, [the student] told us [her brother] likes Nascar and golf and he worked at Taco Bell. We had several poems about Nascar, golf and tacos from 3rd hour. It worked really well.*

March 8th - *It is so funny how something so small can help so much. [One student] is such a doll. She was always a good student, very bubbly, but a little chatty with her neighbors. She volunteered sometimes, but not very often. What a difference today! I held her attention the entire hour. She smiled at me several times, and nodded while I was talking. She fully participated in the discussion about Romeo and Juliet, too. I attribute the sudden change in her behavior to the poetry we wrote yesterday. Knowing that we care about her must help her to concentrate.*

Journals are a good way to record events and lessons as well. Joellen Killion writes,

Unlike ‘thinking about’ ideas, which eventually evaporates, journals are permanent records of those thoughts or ideas. The process of transferring an idea into language forces the mind to process and clarify the idea. When a learner is required

to apply language to an idea, the idea takes shape and form.

I remember those events that I wrote about more than those I chose not to include in my journal. I plan on pulling some excerpts from my journal and using them in a portfolio during the search for a full-time teaching job. Reflective journals can be a great place to brush up on past experiences before an interview or before teaching a unit. (On a side note: We need to remember to keep the “personal” and “professional” parts of our journal separate.)

Not only do journals document successes, but they also record what I do with my students. If a concerned parent or administrator were to ask me about an incident with a student, I might be able to pull out my journal to use in a parent conference or in a meeting with a principal or special education coordinator. Of course, it’s important to date our journals if we want to maintain accurate accounts of our teaching lives.

As a final point, I journal because I like it. I often look forward to writing at the end of the day. My journal is a patient ear; one that will let me rant on and on about my successes and mistakes as a student teacher. We often ask our students to keep learning logs; shouldn’t we be keeping them as well? An educator meets new challenges each day, and as students and standards shift and change, we must adapt our teaching strategies. Keeping a journal helps me sort through all of the chaos that can happen in any one school day. I am grateful for the chance to reflect in writing, and I plan to continue to journal throughout my teaching career. I hope I have encouraged other teaching professionals to do the same.

Works Cited

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About the Author:

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