

## From Journal Writing to Action Research: Steps toward Systematic Reflective Writing

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### Abstract

*John Dewey (1933) and Donald Schon (1987) pioneered the concepts of «reflective thought» and «reflective action» in teacher education. Since then, teacher education has combined theoretical knowledge with coaching in reflection, and student teachers have been required to do reflective writing in addition to the more traditional academic writing we usually associate with higher education. Besides reflecting on their personal, social, and ethical concerns in their journals, students need to focus on specific problems in the classroom and systematically document their practical experiences. In recent years, action research has been used as a tool to help achieve these goals. This paper will document our attempts to guide one group of student teachers going from the tentative, sometimes confused and disorganized, reflective writing in their pedagogical journals to the more systematic and focused writing in their action research projects. We believe that although every class situation is unique, the model we have developed can be adapted for different pre-service teaching programs in other contexts.*

### Introduction: Background and Purpose

#### *The Reflective Journal*

One way of encouraging critical reflection in teacher development is the requirement of writing reflective journals following observation and student teaching practice. Writing these journals should help student teachers organize their thoughts and develop awareness and conscious decision-making of ongoing teaching and learning situations. Students at Achva Academic College of Education in Israel are required to write reflective journals throughout their three years of student teaching.

Reflective journal writing, however, is more challenging than is generally recognized. As in other places, many teacher trainers at Achva are dissatisfied with the level of reflection their students reach. Some students develop a pattern of focusing on what they feel they are supposed to say in order to please supervisors and lecturers. Others describe what happened in a superficial manner. If they are able to manage the class, and their pupils seem happy, they express satisfaction without paying much attention to how much learning has really taken place. Still others seem to think that critical reflection means being critical, in a negative way, especially of their cooperating teachers. Those

students who do achieve deeper kinds of reflection often write in an indecisive and disorganized manner. Moreover, some third-year students dislike doing the same kind of reflective journal writing they have done in previous years. They perceive it as a burden and waste of time, especially since they are also required to complete a research paper by the end of the year as their final project in pedagogy.

#### *Purpose of the Paper*

In order to overcome these problems, the writers of this paper, the former head of the English department and the pedagogical adviser of the third year students, sought ways to have the reflective writing of our students become more focused and systematic on the one hand, and less superficial and more relevant to their real concerns on the other. We decided that action research would be a useful tool for integrating reflective journal writing with the more structured requirements of writing a focused research paper. This paper will document our process in guiding one group of student teachers from the tentative, sometimes confused and disorganized, sometimes superficial writing in their journals to the more systematic and focused writing in their action research projects. We believe that although every class situation is unique, the model we have developed can be adapted in other contexts.

### **Theoretical considerations**

#### *Reflective writing*

Writing is considered a particularly suitable activity to encourage reflection because it captures the original experience so it will not be lost (Hoover, 1994), thus making it available for others to read and provide feedback (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Zeichner, 1993) and opportunity for the writer to reinforce or check his/her understanding (Moon, 2003). Writing also promotes objectivity, a way of distancing oneself from the initial experience and of distinguishing between the actual experience and its interpretation. It may help clarify feelings and even provide a way to discharge obstructing feelings (Walker, 1985). Through deliberation and word choice, writing also forces a sharpened focus on explicitness of ideas. When implicit ideas become transparent, we sometimes find that they do not match the theories we say we hold (Schon, 1987). Finally, writing helps integrate different ideas by connecting a significant experience with other past experiences, old

knowledge with new, theory with practice. The active nature of writing may also stimulate other cognitive activities (Kerka, 1996) and help students appreciate the actual process of reflection within learning.

However, the features of reflective writing are the antithesis of the traditional academic genre. The style of reflective writing is necessarily personal, tentative, exploratory, and at times indecisive. Both Canning (1991) and Francis (1995) found that pre-service teachers «rambled» in their journal writing until connections and real issues were discovered. Francis also found that those willing to explore their own experience in this way raised more issues of personal significance and assumed stronger ownership of both the journal and the knowledge generated there than did those who maintained a more cautious and precise style.

#### *Action research*

As defined by Levin and Rock (2003, p. 136), action research is «*systematic* inquiry by teachers with the goal of improving their teaching practices». To do that they use research methods of the social sciences to reflect on their own practice (Ponte, Beijaard, and Wubbels, 2004). Unlike traditional research, however, action research does not begin with a research question, but with the teachers' own teaching and observation experiences. It aims to generate findings that are useful within the individual classroom and the specific context in which teachers work rather than applicable across many different situations.

Since action research does not aim to add to the general pool of human knowledge, the basis for judging validity is different from that used in traditional research. In action research validity can be measured by the extent to which the research produces findings which are useful in developing the classroom situation. Action research does not allow teachers to make conclusions about their classrooms based on subjective and intuitive impressions alone, but as with any serious system of inquiry, these conclusions must be supported by rigorous research methods, including a review of the relevant literature and documentation of all the stages followed (Finch, 2000). It requires teachers to engage in a cycle of observing and reflecting, questioning, planning action to improve what is already happening, acting to implement the plan, observing the effects of the action, and reflecting on these effects as a basis

for further planning and subsequent action through a succession of cycles (Finch, 2000).

Besides the improvement of teaching, which is its major goal, action research helps to bridge the gap between theory and practice and thus, to empower teachers. By bringing their tacit expertise to a level of awareness (Handal and Lauvas, 1987), it helps them communicate in a stronger voice (Ogberg and McCutcheon, 1987). Traditionally, theoretical knowledge was the prerogative of university scholars who published their findings in prestigious journals, and, by and large, classroom teachers felt alienated from this research. Action research serves to bridge this gap by allowing teachers to engage in meaningful research (Goodnough, 2003; Lederman and Niess, 1997; Smith and Sela, 1995, Tricoglus, 2001; Valli, 2000; Winter, 1998).

## Method

### *Description of class and setting*

The students in our study were fourteen third year student teachers who began their studies at the college during the 2004-5 academic year. They were placed in two elementary schools for their student teaching practicum. They had new student teaching partners and new cooperating teachers in the new school setting, all of which gave them a different perspective from their experiences during the previous two years at the college. Their journal writing covered many issues of concern, but they tended to ramble from one topic to another, often not distinguishing between what actually happened and their interpretations of what had happened.

### *«Sequenced, structured tasks»*

Dawn Francis, in her 1995 article on reflective journal writing, concludes that pre-service teachers need «sequenced, structured tasks» (p.240) as well as «free-focus writing» (p.240) in order to reach the levels of critical reflection desired. We planned the assignments for our students with «sequenced, structured tasks». At the same time, they were encouraged to continue their reflections and free-focus writing in their journals. We hoped that by completing the assignments, step by step, they would realize that the task was not an impossible one, gain confidence in their writing, and deepen their level of reflection.

Early in the year, they were given a semester assignment to focus on a single problem or topic in their journals.

They were asked to note anything related to the topic in their observations of other teachers and reflections on their own teaching experiences. The second part of the assignment consisted of nine specific questions that would constitute the introduction and literature review of their papers. They were asked to explain why the issue they wanted to explore was important to their pupils and to themselves as teachers, and to reflect on their own beliefs and values embedded in their focus. Other questions directed them to find different approaches to the problem in their readings, to select the approaches they preferred, and to present ideas that supported their thesis. Then they were asked how they were going to plan their lessons and document their results in accordance with the approaches they had selected.

Class sessions in pedagogy dealt with their progress in answering the questions. One session directed them to literature sources in the library and the internet as well as in their course book. They were told that they could add quotations or references to any place in their draft. The idea at this stage was to learn to connect their practical and theoretical sources. They were given instructions how to cite their references both in the body of the assignment and in the bibliography at the end. Students began focusing on the issue(s) they wanted to investigate. By mid-semester, everyone had managed to select his/her preliminary research topic. As they completed the first draft of the questions in the assignment, their instructor gave them written and sometimes oral feedback. Students who were having particular difficulties were referred to their academic writing instructor for additional help. The first drafts of the introduction indicated that the topics were well focused and grounded in specific classroom situations, and that the students were connected to their topic on a personal and professional level and motivated intrinsically to pursue the chosen issue.

The students were then directed to type the second draft using the spell check and grammar check and to correct language mistakes. They could also add any additional ideas they had to the existing draft. They were expected to add quotations from their pedagogical journals which exemplified points they had made and references to articles they had accessed that were connected to their topic. All of this was spelled out in a second assignment sheet.

### *The role of the second adviser*

At Achva Academic College, the custom has always been to have an additional member of the staff, not from the pedagogy department, read the final project in pedagogy, advise the student, and assess the project for a final grade. The two grades, that of the pedagogy instructor and that of the second adviser, were then averaged.

In conjunction with the new action research project, each member of the English department was assigned in advance to be the second adviser for one of the students. At a department meeting between first and second semesters, the system was explained. The pedagogical adviser reviewed some basic principles of action research and distributed a document with directions for guidance of the student and assessment of the project. Each «second adviser» was expected to contact the student with whom she was paired.

### *Second semester assignments*

At the beginning of the second semester, students were given an overview of the action research requirements for the rest of the year, including a preliminary point breakdown as to how the project would be graded. Specific questions were listed for the method, results, and reflection sections. For example, under «setting and participants» of the «method» section, the following questions about their schools were listed: «Is it religious or secular, elementary or junior high, small or large?» «What is the socio-economic level of the pupils?» The idea, again, was «sequenced, structured tasks». Without these specific questions, students might not know what to include and what to leave out.

In the pedagogy classes, part of every lesson was devoted to the progress students were making in their projects. Students sometimes worked with their student teaching partner, sometimes in groups of three or four, and sometimes with the class as a whole. Everyone had a chance to present what they had accomplished to date and any problems they were having. The feedback they received from fellow students and from the instructor provided them with guidance, support and encouragement.

When students had difficulty with a particular stage of the research, additional guidelines were presented, based both on suggestions made by the students and on the needs of the students as perceived by the instructor. The guidelines for the results section were particularly important because some students had difficulty distin-

guishing between what had actually happened (the results or findings) and their interpretation of what had happened (discussion or reflection). In the final draft, these sections had to be clearly differentiated.

### *Student teacher rubric*

How would the final action research projects be assessed and graded? One topic covered in all pedagogy classes is the use of rubrics for pupil assessment. Rubrics are useful in that they clarify the basis for assessment in activities such as written compositions, oral presentations, and group projects. We felt it was important for our students to go through the process of creating their own assessment tool which would later be used to grade their projects.

Students worked together in groups to build each of the major sections of the rubric: introduction, method, results, and reflection. Excerpts of articles describing the different parts of action research and examples of published action research articles were distributed as reference material. Group members negotiated their individual understandings of the requirements of each part until a consensus was reached. Each group presented the results of their work to the entire class and received feedback from them. In subsequent sessions, the rubric was further revised until a final version was established. It was then sent to the second advisers who were invited to provide input.

### **Results**

Twelve, out of a total of fourteen third-year student teachers, completed their projects by the deadline date at the end of the summer. This is a much higher percentage than has ever been experienced by this pedagogy teacher before.

Topics of the papers covered a wide range of subjects, all relevant to the work they were doing in student teaching. Students had selected their own topics and focus, not from a pre-selected list, but from their own concerns after reflecting on their observations and experience in student teaching and reviewing their pedagogical journals.

Most students had progressed considerably from the unfocused, exploratory writing in their journals to the clarity and confidence they now exhibited in their writing. They were able to organize their thoughts along a single topic and probe deeply into their actions and feelings. They related their own observations and

experience to literature in the field, thus connecting theory with practice.

There were two unexpected results. We believed that the instructions to the second advisers were structured and adequate enough to produce one-on-one meetings between the students and their advisers in which students could receive intensive help in accordance with their individual needs. However, we learned that this did not always happen. Both students and college staff reacted to the task in individual ways, often procrastinating and/or ignoring the deadlines. Some students were helped immensely by these individual meetings, whereas others felt they were not helped at all. In addition, we hoped that the second advisers would provide feedback on the rubric. Was it «user friendly»? Did it cover all the categories adequately? Was it too detailed? etc. This did not happen either. We were also surprised by the comment made by a number of students that too much time had been spent in the pedagogy classes on action research to the detriment of other issues in pedagogy and student teaching.

### **Conclusions and discussion**

We believe that the action research project we developed for pre-service teachers is one way of answering the dilemmas and questions we posed at the beginning of the study. Our goal was to guide our students from the sometimes superficial reflective writing in their journals to the more critical and focused writing in their action research projects. We also hoped that they would become more confident in their teaching and writing and develop a voice of their own as they met the challenge of third year pedagogy and completed their projects.

In particular, we will look at three elements which we introduced into our action research project: sequenced, structured tasks, the work of the second adviser, and the student-instructor created rubric to see how they impacted on our original goals.

#### *«Sequenced, structured tasks»*

It was in our students' action research projects that the potential inherent in reflective writing was finally realized. The permanent nature of their journals enabled them to review what they had written and select a topic significant to themselves. However, there is no doubt that Dawn Francis's sequenced, structured tasks were essential in order to build their confidence so that they would not feel overwhelmed by the task ahead. While e-mail and some on-line learning was an asset

in communicating with the students, action research, at this beginning stage, required class discussions and face-to-face contact with the instructor as well as with fellow students. The sequenced, structured tasks served as guidelines, both for the e-mail correspondence and the face-to-face discussions and enabled the instructor to give encouragement and feedback and to clarify in case of misunderstanding.

Besides building confidence, the sequenced, structured tasks helped students organize their thoughts. Even those students who had achieved deeper kinds of reflection in their journals before they began their action research project needed a mechanism to organize their writing better without sacrificing the issues of personal significance they had raised. By providing them with a detailed list of questions that needed to be answered, they were able to do this. By providing specific tasks related to the results and reflection sections of the paper, all our students were able to make the distinction between findings and interpretation of the findings, between facts and opinion, which we felt was essential.

#### *The second adviser*

Because instructors coming from different disciplines are not all familiar with action research, we provided them with an introduction at the beginning of the second semester. Clearly this was not sufficient for some instructors. Just as students need structured, sequenced tasks, so do instructors, and in the future we will try to provide them with further guidance and feedback throughout the semester and encourage them to take a more active part in the guidance of the students in writing their projects, and in the formative assessment process as well as the grading of the final paper.

#### *Student-instructor created rubric*

Working on the rubric for assessment gave our students an added sense of ownership as it became clear that the final grading of the project would be done according to the standards that they had suggested, and not imposed externally by the college staff. In addition, this process served to clarify even further what the final product should include and how to proceed in the writing. Working on the rubric in groups, and negotiating their individual understandings of the requirements of each part until a consensus was reached helped them organize their thoughts.

### *In summary*

By focusing on one topic clearly related to their own individual concerns in their own classrooms, observing other teachers, consulting other people, examining literature in the field, and probing their own ideas, our students were able to assess their own actions better and achieve a deeper level of reflection. The feedback they received from their instructors and peers enabled them to clarify their ideas and state explicitly what they truly believed. Writing the drafts and final papers enabled them to connect what they had learned in other courses, and integrate different ideas from their practical experience and theoretical knowledge as well as from the literature listed in their bibliographies.

The fact that the topics the students were working on were initiated by themselves and not suggested by some outside source added to their motivation and their commitment to complete the projects. This, in turn, added to their sense of ownership and provided them with the possibility of recycling and probing even deeper into their feelings and actions. The writing of the projects has not only provided the challenge the students needed in the third-year pedagogy class, but it has also given them an opportunity to conduct research of their own, thus empowering them in the academic world.

In essence, we have conducted the first cycle of our own action research project, as we continue to reflect on what we have accomplished and what still needs to be done as a basis for planning for the future. The present third year student teachers are also doing action research for their final project in pedagogy, and hopefully, what we have learned from last year's project will be reflected in our guidance of the present students.

We will try to be more sensitive to the needs of our students in regard to their student teaching and provide more balanced pedagogy lessons, integrating guidance for the final action research projects with other important issues in pedagogy. This is in accordance with our underlying assumption that the process and writing of action research can serve as a useful framework for more effective teaching and learning of all the issues of pedagogy and student teaching. We will try to provide more effective guidance for the second advisers and guide all the students in accordance with their special needs.

We believe that the model we have developed is an appropriate one for pre-service teaching situations.

Although action research does not produce generalizable results, we believe that what we have learned from this project can be applied to other teacher education programs. We know that each class is special, and that what works with one group of students may not necessarily work with others, but we believe that all students can be guided to progress from disorganized and often superficial reflective writing to deeper, more focused reflection by following the steps we have outlined in doing action research.

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