

Teacher Diaries as Tools for Professional Development

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Abstract

Professional development is something that all educators should participate in continuously throughout their careers. One way for teacher to practice self-reflection in their classes is by keeping a 'teacher's diary' so that they may be able to reflect on any issues they may feel need attention or change. This paper is a personal action research project that attempts to demonstrate the importance of self-reflection tools such as teaching diaries in order to objectively identify areas that may need changing or updating during an educator's career. A journal was kept for a period of six weeks, during which time three themes became apparent and were identified as possible topics for further research, or areas within the classes that could be changed in order to enhance the teaching methods being used.

Key words: Professional development, Self reflection

1. Introduction

Throughout a teacher's career, it is important that the educator undergoes continual professional development and experiments with developmental tools. One of those tools is the 'teaching diary', or self-reflection journal. By making use of a teaching/reflective journal, educators can become more critical of their teaching styles and methods and, in so doing, can become better teachers.

Murphy (2001) states that self-reflection can assist teachers in growing as professionals in different ways and this growth enables them focus on what they are doing, both within themselves and within the courses they offer, and to access information about what happens in their language classrooms. Alirio Insuasty and Castillo (2010) also found support that self-reflection for student teacher is a beneficial tool for enhancing educators' experiences and continued growth in the profession.

With this in mind, I decided to keep a teaching diary in order to reflect on the courses I teach and demonstrate how a journal can be beneficial to professional development. "A diary study is defined as a first-person case study that is reported in a journal, an introspective account ... [that] reports on affective factors normally hidden from or inaccessible to an external observer" (Numrich, 1996, 131)

This paper will examine an action research based on those journal entries, analyze the themes that emerged, and discuss how keeping a journal can be useful as a pedagogical tool. I will first give a description of the journal itself and then identify and discuss the main themes that arose from the entries. Also, I will include an interpretive analysis and then a conclusion will follow.

2. Journal Description

Over a continuous six-week period from October 14, 2020 to November 25, 2020 I kept a journal regarding my personal thoughts and observations in an intermediate level oral communications course, the students' reactions to certain lessons, and improvements/changes I thought might benefit the overall lessons. This was done in order to identify factors and/or issues in my classes that could better aid in improving my overall teaching. In all, there were 18 entries; some of these were short in length while others were long and rather in-depth.

When I first began writing I had designated a particular time during the day of the week and a certain area that I had considered to be a fairly comfortable place where I was least likely to be disturbed. However, I found that by using this method, while providing the discipline I needed, was not suitable in providing substantial entries in terms of my ability to recall events accurately. Therefore, I decided to carry a small voice recorder with me and made use of it when I could or took quick notes when a thought or observation occurred to me. I had first noticed I was having trouble remembering events I wanted to take note of early in the procedure and mentioned the problem in the third entry; "*Well, tried to take notes this time so that I could remember.*" (Journal entry, 10/16/20) After realizing that I may not recall important considerations or observations, I found that attempting to take note of observances when they happened (or as quickly as possible) was better in terms of providing more accurate entries in the journal.

As stated earlier, there were 18 entries or dates within the journal. While keeping the journal, I attempted to stay within the framework mapped out by Nunan and Bailey (2009) even though this was not purely a 'teaching diary'. This guideline suggested that the diary be an uncensored journal, and there are many ungrammatical phrases and expression contained within. Whereas six weeks is not considered a long period of time, which is recommended by Nunan, et. al (2009) for purposes of identifying patterns and significant events, there were some issues and questions that seemed to appear several times over during the six-week period.

Some of these entries were related directly to the class for which the diary was intended, a communications class. Several of them were thoughts and reflections on my personal teaching observation from other classes I taught; and some were related to thoughts and questions about possible options for identifying long-term issues in an EMI class. There were three main themes that were identified after reading the journal, which will now be discussed.

3. Identified Themes

According to Grotjahn's (1987) research paradigms, diary studies are considered pre-experimental, and the data is mostly qualitative in nature. Also, along those same lines, this research had an exploratory, non-experimental design.

I also followed what Bailey (1990) wrote; that the diary writer's (or teacher's) experiences are "documented through regular, candid entries in a personal journal and then analyzed for recurring patterns..." (Bailey, 1990, 215) In doing so, I discovered something interesting in identifying themes within the diary. After completion of the journal, and upon reviewing it, it appeared as if only two main issues seemed to have emerged. However, after beginning to interpret those two themes, a third, more prominent theme emerged as the main issue of the six-week period.

While reviewing the entries of the journal, it was necessary to find a paradigm, or road map, in identifying and analyzing any themes that might arise. Before deciding on any definite issues or questions I might have had about teaching or research prior to keeping the diary. I used a naturalistic form of qualitative data collection, looking for naturally occurring themes within the journal after the data collection was complete. Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zibler (1998) explained in their steps to identifying patterns in qualitative data that it is necessary to read the material several times until a pattern arises. Also, they advise following a theme throughout the data and take note of changes.

The first theme that seemed to have taken form was concerned with what to research for a possible paper discussing student participation in class and how to go about writing said research paper. This was centered on what types of research I could carry out given my particular teaching situation that might be directly beneficial to my teaching, and then focusing on the practical side of research for the classroom. The second theme was that of motivation, its definition and what/how to motivate students. The final issue that arose was one that came out of direct observations from my own classroom teaching and thoughts about how I might be able to change or reorganize certain tasks and activities to improve my personal teaching style.

3.1. Research questions

From early on in the diary, there were many entries which mentioned possible research topics and what I might wish to study. In fact, in the first entry of the journal I wrote in regard to trying to clarify what I was looking for that may assist my students; *“This put ‘research’ into an actual context for me... What to show, how to look for answer.”* (Journal entry, 10/14/20) Again, on the second day, I wrote, *“...the research question process is WAY more complicated than I ever imagined. I am going to have to narrow, shape, reform... Going to be a lot of work...”* (Journal entry, 10/15/20) This issue continues throughout the diary.

On several occasions mention is made of wanting to use portfolios as a more permanent factor in my communication classes. On October 15 I mention that I want to make use of portfolios; *“The portfolio thing may change from a tool for motivation to a tool for SLA...How can I use portfolios here to prevent or encourage ... Must look into sources B gave me.”* (Journal entry, 10/15/20) The theme comes up several other times.

*“[R]egarding my possible research question that I may have to completely rethink it. I really want to do something with portfolios linked to motivation... But how the **** can I do this? How can I make it work?...But, if I choose this type of question, am I going to have to have a control group of students NOT using a portfolio?”* (Journal entry, 11/10/20)

By November 25, the date of the last entry, there seems to have been a conclusion to the portfolio question;

“Well, out of the blue while I was in class this thought came to me how I can use portfolios effectively for a research base again...See if this goes...Then I can fit this into their portfolio, perhaps use prior thoughts of students in portfolios to foster stimulated recall, giving them ownership of their English improvement... would this work?” (Journal entry, 11/25/20)

Within this theme there seems to be a definite transition. The first time it appears, the idea of portfolios as a research topic is merely mentioned as a possibility. However, over the duration of the six weeks, the idea of ‘portfolio’ begins as a mere possibility, and then how I would carry out research based on that topic is discussed, and finally a decision seems to be reached on how I could carry out

research in this area. This progression of the theme follows what Lieblich, et al (1998) advice for analyzing naturalistic, qualitative data: “Be aware of where the theme appears first and last, the transitions between...the context for each one, and their salience within each one.” (Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach, and Zilber, 1998, 63)

3.2. Student Motivation

The second theme that emerged after review was that of student motivation. Again, early on in the diary the question of how to motivate students is brought up; “...*a tool for motivation...*” (Journal entry 10/15/20) However, the theme goes from being mentioned only briefly to being a main factor on most of the final entries. On November 11 I wrote, “*My thought on the whole situation is that if students can take some kind of control over their own learning, then they will be more motivated to learn.*” And again, within that same entry; “*How can I show motivation? What is motivation?*” (Journal entry, 11/11/20)

Motivation as a theme is not only related to possible research, though.

“*Now, on the other hand... I'm having the same group create commercials. This project has had pretty good results in terms of effort and motivation from the Ss (even lower level) in the past. However, the same group mentioned above is showing almost no motivation for it.*” (Journal entry, 11/10/20)

On November 13 I began to take a more practical look at how motivation is directly related to my teaching; “*So, this brings to mind my questions concerning motivation. What kind of motivation do I want to study/encourage for my classes?*” (Journal entry, 11/13/20) In the diary there are questions about certain classes not being motivated by certain activities, while in other classes other students seemed to enjoy the task. “*Do Ss attitudes/motivations change? How could I set this up? Would I use senpai/kohai [to foster motivation]?*” (Journal entry, 11/24/20) This question is never resolved in the diary, nor is there any real evolution or epiphany about how I can go about motivating my students.

3.3. Classroom observations

The final theme that arose in the journal was that of how my current research and studies are related to my teaching style can possibly be improved. This issue was not immediately noticed due to it being tied directly in with the other two themes; research and motivation.

Nunan and Bailey (2009) offer tips in keeping a language learning diary. One of those recommendations states; “Each time you write an assertion, ask yourself, ‘Why?’ Why did you write that? What evidence do you have for the statement...?” (Nunan, et al, 2009, 303) Even though this diary was not one for language learning, I found this advice to be relevant to the purpose of what I was doing. Therefore, while I was taking notes, or writing in the journal I tried to reflect on why I was writing about one thing or another.

On October 16 I wrote, “...*going to try it out in class – really may come in handy for Kodomo to Eigo!! Comprehension based approach... How would that affect the work? I need to keep that in mind.*” (Journal entry, 10/16/20) I originally had considered this entry to be pertaining to motivation, not about what to do in my class, as it was a topic that I had previously considered a few years earlier, but had decided not to pursue at that time. However, again, I noticed this entry; “*Would that generate more fluent, spontaneous conversation and ease the atmosphere and general attitude toward the materials?? 2) How could I go about figuring this out?*” (Journal entry 10/26/20) I had

also considered this to be regarding a possible research topic until I noticed the context in which it was stated; a prior task that seemed to help some students retain a grammar point.

On November 11, I wrote about a task I had used in communication classes before but had changed somewhat after having read over one or two previous entries from the journal. I had remembered that I was hoping to foster more oral communication from one class that had been rather quiet up until that point. On October 26 I wrote.

“However, when the partners would get off-track, or talking about a topic that they hadn’t rehearsed, the conversation pace began to pick up. It wasn’t just the pace, however, that began to speed up, but the fluency of the utterances as well... They didn’t seem so concerned about making a mistake but were (genuinely?) interested in the subject being discussed. Their whole attitude went from, “Gee, I need to get a good grade on this,” to “Oh, wait, I have something to add to the conversation.” (Journal entry, 10/26/20)

After reviewing this entry in context, I went back to my lesson plans and revised a task that I had used before but changed it for the lower-level class based on those thoughts from the diary. On November 10 I wrote the following entry about the results from the revised plan; *“I even heard one [student] (KM) exclaim to his partner: ‘That was really fun!’ [translated from Japanese] I haven’t had a moment like that in the classroom in months... Have got to continue with this sort of task with this group (info gap and sharing information).”* (Journal entry, 11/10/20)

Other entries also contained similar comments. What I thought to be entries about research questions or motivational tools turned out to be personal introspection about my own teaching and what I could do to foster learning for my lower-level students.

“So, after the task was complete I asked the whole class (8 Sts) what type of game...I had no idea they enjoyed this game so much...The Ss here get so sick of questionnaires... should I simply ask them face-to-face from now on, or would that mess my chances for honest answers from them (which is what I really want)...” (Journal entry, 11/13/20)

This entry is based on an observation made directly from interaction with students in class.

Numrich (1996) explained that diary studies can; “...provide a rich source of data for understanding how teachers develop. The diary study, too, can provide a documented account of novice teachers' experience.” (Numrich, 1996, 132) This is apparent in how, after further review of the entries I was able to identify this final theme.

Conclusion

Having kept a journal was a new experience for me. Even though the diary was only kept for 6 weeks, I was able to identify three themes which emerged over that short period of time after reviewing the entries. In one of the themes, that of questions/ideas concerning a research topic, there was a steady evolution, or transition of the topic. It went from a simple idea for a possible topic, to several questions about how it could be done, and then finally turning into a definite option for a research question.

The second theme was that of motivation. This issue was one that continued from the beginning to the end and was related to several ideas/themes within the journal, both in regards to classes and research. Although no answer about how to foster motivation evolved, certain ideas did begin to emerge and deserve further thought.

The final theme was that of real, practical applications of how what I am learning can be used for my classes. This theme was not immediately apparent, as were the other two main issues, but were only revealed after careful review and introspection of the entries.

Where many questions may remain unanswered (of which there were several within the entries), review of the entries can hold possible topics in which research might be carried out, or deeper introspection can occur regarding personal teaching style and where improvement can occur. This kind of introspective analysis of qualitative data can, as Bailey (1985) explained, start to answer questions about our own teaching such as, "How and why do language teachers . . . decide to do just what they do in language classrooms?" (Bailey, 1985, 115)

Teaching Journals can be a positive influence on, not only personal teaching and planning, but also for students who are undergoing teacher training. Given the opportunity for introspection on what student teachers observe and experience during training could have a positive impact on their future as educators.

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