

Email Journaling for Teacher Candidates

Geraldine Covert Jenny

Elementary Education/Early Childhood Department

Slippery Rock University of Pennsylvania

608 Stockton Avenue

Grove City, PA

(724) 458-4985

Geraldine.Jenny@SRU.edu

Email Journaling for Teacher Candidates

“What greater or higher gift can we give than to teach?” Cicero

Student Teacher Journaling

Colleges and university pre-professional field experiences usually require student teacher journaling. In dialoguing about journaling, student teacher supervisors have agreed with me that daily journal entries often become just a tedious litany of classroom activities in which the student teacher and their students have engaged. The innovative format that I have designed for journal entries has revolutionized my field experience supervision practices and those of other supervisors with whom I have shared this format. It has vastly improved the quality of the teacher-candidate's classroom experiences as well as the depth and quality of their reflections. Now, journal entries are distinguished, thoughtful, and sharply focused on the themes and domains involved in becoming an exemplary teacher.

There are continuous challenges of learning that teaching poses in the areas of leadership, diversity and technology. It is widely recognized that pre-service teachers must demonstrate necessary competencies within these themes if they are to become exemplary teachers.

The journaling format that follows is also driven by identified domains such as: becoming an instructional leader, becoming an expert in a school context, becoming a learning theorist, becoming a curriculum designer as well as becoming a master practitioner. A work sample of an authentic electronic journal entry and an accompanying rubric appear at the conclusion of this paper for readers to reflect upon how the format enhances the quality of pre-service teacher journals and empowers pre-professionals as they purposefully journey towards becoming exemplary teachers.

Teaching Domains

On the journey to becoming a teacher, candidates will meet challenges and be required to make choices. Student teaching will provide various opportunities. It is the student teacher's responsibility to learn from these opportunities. An exemplary teacher is a person who accepts the challenge of lifelong learning experiences in the following domains:

The Domain of Diversity: An exemplary teacher is an advocate of creating learning experiences that demonstrate sensitivity to others. He/she acknowledges learners of differing abilities and

demonstrates a valuing of human differences in race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and sexual preferences. An exemplary teacher understands that as human beings, we are all evolving physically, cognitively, socially, emotionally and spiritually.

The Domain of Leadership: An exemplary teacher is a lifelong learner who inspires classroom communities of learners to pursue continuous improvement and growth.

The Domain of Technology: An exemplary teacher is adept in technology and constructs learning environments that respect and integrate the power of technology where appropriate.

As student teachers work toward the goal of becoming exemplary teachers, they will need to demonstrate competencies in these identified themes:

Instructional Leader: An exemplary teacher develops leadership skills and self perception in relationship with other learners, the group, the community, and society.

Master Practitioner: An exemplary teacher develops competence in instructional strategies, reflective practice and the home-school-community partnership triad.

Learning Theorist: An exemplary teacher understands cognitive, physical, and affective development as well as pedagogical theory that address the learning needs of multi-age learners.

Curriculum Designer: An exemplary teacher bases curriculum decisions on research, theory, and informed practice.

School Context Expert: An exemplary teacher comprehends the social, intellectual, cultural, economic, ethical, political, and government influences upon schools including traditional and emerging stakeholders.

Making the commitment to become an exemplary teacher is a choice student teachers should make with care because it is a decision that will affect the way that they live their lives and the way others will live theirs. The demands of a teaching career are great. The demands of becoming an exemplary teacher are even greater. In order to lead and inspire others, student teachers will become the facilitator of their own learning and professional growth. In the process, they will become role models for others to emulate. The challenge is given, but the choice is their own.

Reflective Email Journal Assignment*

As student teachers, it is their responsibility to submit a weekly reflection to me of their learning via a reflective Email Journal. Journal entries should contain no spelling, grammar or punctuation errors.

- ◆ All email journal entries must be emailed to me at Geraldine.Jenny@SRU.edu
- ◆ The subject line of each email must read Journal Entry #___ and your full name.
- ◆ Weekly entries must be emailed by 8am each Monday throughout student teaching.

- ◆ Late entries will not receive full credit and will be an indication of performance of student teaching responsibilities.
- ◆ Journal entries provide a demonstration of student teacher learning, reflection and ability to communicate clearly. They demonstrate writing competence and must be prepared with the same care that should be shown in all other written work.

Each weekly email entry **MUST** address the four statements.

- A. In student teaching this week I learned...
- B. My new learning connects to the domains and themes of becoming an exemplary teacher in the following ways...
- C. Before my learning and reflection this week, I used to think...
- D. As a result of my learning and reflection, I now believe...

The following rubric for email entries provides useful information to guide student teacher learning and evaluate their performances. It identifies the level of excellence that is the hallmark of Slippery Rock University's College of Education. It will help student teachers to plan and evaluate the content, organization, and writing performance that is required. They are to use the rubric as they write journal entries. Notice that a high level of reflection, meaning-making and clarity is expected. After all, they are in the process of becoming exemplary teachers!

*Note: This assignment has been adapted and modified from an undergraduate assignment from the Duquesne University College of Education Department with the permission of Father Naos McCool.

Rubric for Reflective Email Journal Entries:

Outstanding:

- ◆ All four sections of the entry are addressed with sharp and distinct focus.
- ◆ The student teacher provides substantial and specific statements of learning supported by illustrative examples.
- ◆ Overall, the student teacher demonstrates sophisticated ideas that are well developed and result from careful reflection and personalization.
- ◆ The writing is free from mechanical and word usage errors.

Competent:

- ◆ All four sections of the email entry are addressed with adequate focus.
- ◆ The student teacher provides general support for statements of learning.
- ◆ Overall, the student teacher demonstrates basic reflection on learning and makes general connections to the themes and domains of becoming a leading teacher.
- ◆ The writing demonstrates some mechanical and usage errors.

Unsatisfactory: (An entry of this quality will be returned for further polishing)

- ◆ The email entry does not address all four required sections.
- ◆ The content of the report is superficial and merely lists ideas
- ◆ There are limited demonstrations of reflection and meaning-making.
- ◆ The writing contains repeated weaknesses in mechanical and usage errors that seriously interfere with the student teacher's purpose.

By responding to journal entries electronically, I also have more time to reflect on their content than when I am making a classroom Observation Visit. During a typical visit I must also be pre and post conferencing with the student teacher, writing an Observation Report, reading student teacher lesson plans as well as evaluative notes and reports from the cooperating teacher, checking the student teacher's Materials File, critiquing the classroom bulletin board, reviewing a thematic unit, a portfolio and/or a resume and conferring with the cooperating teacher on the student teacher's progress! I admit that in the past, I just skimmed journal entries and provided scant input to the student teacher. My classroom visits were more "hit and run" and then I was scurrying off to my next Observation appointment. By digital journaling, the student teacher and I are in continual communication and the student teacher also has time to reflect on my comments more thoroughly. I am a lifeline to each student teacher and we learn to know each other more personally as we share thoughts and ideas to improve professional practices.

Reflective Email journaling demonstrates student engagement in educational practices that are known to be empirically linked with high levels of learning, meaning-making and professional development.

Reflective Email Journal Sample

A. This week in student teaching I learned that a teacher needs to be very sensitive and aware of the background of all of their students. They need to know what goes on in their student's lives outside of school in order to be sensitive to their feelings and needs when creating lessons and activities that are done with the students. They also need to know what goes on in the student's lives so that the teacher can provide help and support to the student when they need it and may be too afraid to ask. This week in Reading class we were reading "Keepers", a story about a boy who listens to stories from his grandmother. So, for homework I had the students do the "Write About It" from the book, which wanted the students to write a story that a family member had told to them. Now, it's not uncommon for me to hear whining and complaining from the students when I assign writing work. So when one student started complaining and saying he didn't know what to write about, I just told him to sit down and think of something that his parents told him, maybe about when he was a baby or when his family did something together, etc. He went to his seat and did what he has been doing best lately. He pouted. I left him alone for a few minutes and walked around to work with other students. Then most of my students left and I was there with this boy two other students from his room. There he was, still sitting with nothing on his paper.

I went over to him to try and help him think of something. I asked him "What is something that your dad has told you? He responded, "Once a fruit loop always a fruit loop". Out of frustration I said, "O.K. then, write about it and tell me why he told you that". I walked away to let him work and a few minutes later he was still sitting there with nothing on his paper. I asked him why he wasn't writing anything because now he had something to write about. He said that he didn't so I told him to come up to where I was sitting and we'd work together. I went through every idea I could think of like, "Doesn't your dad tell you any stories about your family?" He said, "No, he works until 8 p.m. every night and doesn't have time to". I asked him about his mother telling him stories and he said that his mother works until nine.

I asked him if he stayed with his grandparents and he said yes, so I asked if they tell him any stories and he said that they didn't. I asked, "Don't you and your parents ever go on any family vacations that maybe you would like to write about?" He said that he couldn't remember the last family vacation that they ever went on. So I asked him if they ever did anything together as a family that they could write about, like going to dinner or whatever and he said that anytime that he would ask his parents to do something with him that they would just start fighting about it and they wouldn't end up going anywhere. At that point he started to cry. I felt horrible. Here I was trying to get this child to write some nice little family story when he felt like his family was falling apart. I did my best to console him and I told him that they are probably just fighting because they are stressed out and tired from working so much and it's not because they don't love him or each other. I also told him that when I was little I had to stay with my grandparents all the time because my mom had to work. I told him that I was with my grandparents so much that people used to, and sometimes still think, that they are my parents and my mom is my sister. It brought a smile to his face. However, I still felt bad about not being sensitive to what was going on in his life, so I told him that he didn't have to do the assignment and I let him draw to let out some feelings.

I know that I can't know everything, but I should have asked my cooperating teacher who knows more about the kid's backgrounds, before I gave an assignment like this. I know that the kids in my room don't all have the best home lives; I just didn't think that it would provoke such emotion from my student. I am glad though that he was able to share his feelings with me and that I was able to find out what had seemed to bother him lately.

B. My new learning connects to the domains and themes of becoming an exemplary teacher in the following ways:

Diversity: An exemplary teacher is an advocate of creating learning experiences that demonstrate sensitivity to others. He/she acknowledges learners of differing abilities and demonstrates a valuing of human differences in race, nationality, ethnicity, religion, and sexual preferences. An exemplary teacher understands that as human beings, we are all evolving physically, cognitively, socially and emotionally. I see now how important it is going to be for me, as a future teacher, to communicate with my students and make sure that they always feel comfortable in talking to me. For the past couple of weeks this student has seemed out of sorts and I couldn't figure out why. I just thought that he was being difficult and didn't like school anymore. If I would have just sat him down and asked him what was going on, maybe he could have opened up to me before I gave that assignment that made him break down. I know that one of my students lost his mother in the second grade, so I am very aware not to say things to him like "Why don't you have your mother help you with your homework" or "Don't make me call home and tell your mother about this". I also didn't have any assignments that would have to do with mothers. I would be mortified if I didn't know this student lost his mother and I did something like that. I don't want to stir up sad feelings or make my student feel left out because everyone else has a mother and he doesn't. That's how I felt about this child. Here he is feeling like his family is falling apart while everyone else is able to sit down and write nice little stories about their families. That is why when I'm a teacher I want to know all that I can about my students so that when I assign something or do activities

in class I don't upset my students and make them feel badly. I want them to feel happy and comfortable in my classroom. I think that when I become a teacher I am going to do a few things to make sure I know about my students. I am going to go to their previous teachers and ask about their backgrounds. I am going to have Open House as early as possible so that I can meet parents and caretakers. I am also going to have my students come in on the first day and have them write me a few paragraphs that tell me all about them. Lastly, I would make it clear to my students from the start that I care about them and I want them to succeed and if there is ever a time that they need to talk to someone that they can come to me and I will listen. Teachers aren't just there for children's educational needs, they are there for their emotional needs as well. Children are very sensitive and delicate and teachers can't do things in the classroom that might affect them negatively.

Curriculum Designer: An exemplary teacher bases curriculum decisions on research, theory, and informed practice. I think teachers need training in child psychology. That way they can create lessons and activities that won't just benefit children educationally but emotionally as well. In Special Education I see that most of my children are dealing with a lot of emotions and struggles. They are dealing with problems at home, problems with fitting in with others and problems with staying on top of all of their work. As a teacher, I want to be able to address all of their needs through the curriculum that I use. If I am aware of their needs and aware of what works well with those needs, I can create a curriculum that not only boosts them educationally, but emotionally as well. At the school district I am in, there is only one guidance counselor for all three of the buildings. The elementary school only gets the counselor for one day a week, if they are lucky. That means that teachers are depended upon to help a student when a crisis occurs in their life. I need to equip myself with the skills to be able to help my students with things that are occurring in their lives. I think that I can best do that through the lessons that I teach. I want to integrate life skills into their basic skills. I need to do my research, take classes, get to know my students, and do all that I can to create a curriculum that addresses their emotional and educational needs without making them feel worse than they already do. I'm going to need to be a very sensitive and aware person so that I can benefit my students.

- C. Before my learning and reflection this week, I used to think that the school guidance counselor would be the one dealing with the students emotional problems and would be the one to fill me in on what is going on in the child's life. I didn't expect to give an assignment and then end up having a student break down because it affected him so personally. I also thought that if something like that occurred, I could just send that child down to the counselor and it would be out of my hands. However, it was in my hands, I needed to make my student feel better, to talk him through his problem and let him know that everything was going to be all right. I also had to make the executive decision that he could do the assignment in an alternative way because it brought up bad feelings and thoughts to do it as originally planned. I never thought that having a child write a family story would bring up such emotion. I thought there had to be at least one family member, whether it be a sister, mother, aunt, or grandpa whom they could write about without getting upset. I was wrong and I need to be more aware of my own classroom community.

- D. As a result of my learning and reflection, I now believe that every student need has to be addressed by the teacher. There isn't going to be someone that a teacher can just dump a child on when he/she feels unable to deal with the situation. Teachers need to be educators, supporters, listeners, mentors, counselors and whatever else falls under that umbrella. A student's welfare is the teacher's first responsibility. Becoming a teacher means more than just writing lessons and grading papers. There are children with lots of problems that need the love and support of a teacher to help them just get through. They need teachers who are going to be sensitive and aware of their needs and who are going to create classroom environments where they feel comfortable, safe and able to learn.