

ELT Curriculum Development: A Case Study In Keeping A Reflective Teaching Journal

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Abstract

Volumes of literature outline the benefits of using journals in the classroom, most of which give methods on how to generate, administer and assess student journal writings. And although vast numbers of publications overflow with literature retelling theories and methods on how to engage in reflective practice, few are the submissions of concrete case studies of professional teacher diaries and fewer still are submissions made by young adult EFL teachers. This paper offers a glimpse into my genuine emotions as I experienced "feeling like a teacher" for the first time. During the spring semester of 2011 I implemented a personally designed curriculum and recorded my observations and sensations in a reflective journal. The results are offered here in an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice in the ELT.

Research issue

As our professional development, well, develops, we begin to have a sincere desire to implement theories that have crossed our path. And so it was with my experience last semester. Taking final inspiration (like receiving the “go ahead” to steal second base) from Sahota and Griffin (2010), and having a sincere desire to implement theories that I have endlessly read about, I decided to engage in action research by means of reflective practice. Two reasons propelled me to engage in this action research, namely, I wanted to:

- 1 implement a personally designed curriculum and record the experience as an exercise in reflective practice.
- 2 engage in professional development by means of reflective practice as propounded by Farrell & Richards, Holly and others (Richards and Farrell 2011; Holly 2002).

The main purpose of keeping the reflective journal was to see how things went with the newly designed curriculum. I felt like a real teacher (or at least thought it would be possible to become a "real teacher" at some point). I was experimenting, doing something I had never done before and I wanted to record the experience as an exercise in reflective practice.

Context and Participants

Information about the classroom and demographics:

- male and female freshman students
- mostly business management majors and communication majors
- age 19-23 (average age 20)
- classroom fully equipped with computer and sound system hooked up to a large

screen projector

- large projector screen drops down in front of the blackboard with the flip of a switch
- desks aligned in 5 rows facing the large screen
- used internet connection to access my website
- from the website I conducted the class
- students could see the worksheets and video, as posted on my website, on the large screen
- the class is held once a week for 1 hour 50 minutes.

Author Background and Purpose

I am a visiting instructor at a large private university in Southeast Asia (over 20,000 students are enrolled in the undergraduate program). I teach a required undergraduate English conversation course where nearly all of the students are freshman (aged 19-22).

Background Literature Review

Reflective Journals

Reflection indicates a deep thought process whereby the person involved consciously ponders on what has happened. Using a journal "allows us the opportunity to step back from the action to record our impressions, feelings and thoughts" (Holly 2002, 5). Holly's (2002) book uses excerpts from five case studies to demonstrate the impact of keeping journals and to express the potential of a professional journal as well as intricate details on how to keep one. In this paper I will not be too particular about the linguistic differences between journals, diaries and logs. For further analysis on the punctilious use of these terms see Holly(2002).

Keeping a teaching journal is a well established and respected method of reflective teaching and is supported and propounded by Farrell and others (Farrell 2008; McDonough 1994; Richards and Farrell 2005). Teaching journals assist teachers in analyzing internal and external forces that affect daily teaching experiences, thus facilitating a way to become more sensitive to interpersonal relationships with students (Richards 2005; McDonough 1994; Holly 2002).

Research from nearly every field advocates the use of journal entries, field notes or logs of some sort. The various fields of science, medicine, history, anthropology, chemistry, engineering, and nearly every field of study, encourage the use of journal-keeping. In the education sector most journal-related research literatures are either learner journals or teacher journals. Learner journals are a somewhat common instructional method used to assess students. Conversely, most teaching-journal literature usually involve pre-service educators.

The teacher journal

There are two main types of teacher journals — whereby teachers keep journals as part of reflective practice — documented in the literature. Pre-service teacher training programs often employ reflective journals as part of the experience of novice teachers (Jeffrey 2007; Jarvis 1992; Numrich 1996; Sidhu and Kaur 2010).

The other type of professional journals, and far fewer in number, involve real case studies, not just theoretical instances of non-voluntary participation in reflective practice see (McDonough 1994; Porto 2008; Genc 2010). These papers use excerpts from actual journal entries from working teachers. Porto (2008) has offered a substantial contribution to this sector.

The learner journal

The other type of reflective journal that dominates the literature is learner journals (Sá 2002; Young and Sim 2003; Simard 2004). These papers often analyze journal entries from students to discover learning patterns, perform interim assessment of students progress, offer alternative methods of in-class communication and create portfolios for summative assessment.

Authentic examples of reflective practice from literature review

Although vast numbers of publications overflow with literature retelling theories and methods on how to engage in reflective practice, few are the submissions of concrete case studies of professional teacher diaries and fewer still are submissions made by young adult EFL teachers. Fortunately we have Porto's (2008) submission as well as insights from Numrich (1996), McDonough (1994) and Genc (2010).

Porto

Porto's (2008) in-depth 35-week-long study involves massive amounts of raw data taken from journals of herself and her students. Porto deviated from the standard university curriculum and attempted to encourage and foster student autonomy in the EFL classroom. In an exposing statement, Porto demonstrates that reflective journal keeping is beneficial, if not painful:

"Reading and rereading my teaching diaries has been an incredibly painful experience, if not one of the most traumatic of my professional life so far" (p.195). Like Porto, I felt inspired to do action-research because I had a desire to deviate from the standard textbook-based, teacher-centered curriculum; however, I was too insecure and intimidated to get my students' opinions.

Numrich

Numrich (1996) analyzed a 10-week semester of diary entries from a sample of 26 novice

student-teachers enrolled in a master's TESOL program. Her data included diarists' analysis of their own diaries. By analyzing novice teacher diaries, Numrich discovered ways to improve teacher-training programs. She found out what teachers value most and discovered hesitations teachers have and why they avoid some tactics while clinging to others. She presents profound theories on why teachers stay in the profession. Her work is meant to improve teacher training programs by offering insight into the needs of novice teachers and offers suggestions to teacher educators.

McDonough

McDonough (1994) looked at the diaries of four experienced teachers (as opposed to novice teachers in Numrich above). McDonough propounds that diaries "help us document and formalize the everyday working experience that might otherwise be lost" (64). I am taking the advice of McDonough and other research predecessors and engaging in action research for the purpose of professional development.

Genc

Genc's (2010) overview of four in-service teachers' diaries offers a glimpse at real-life teaching by using excerpts from participants. By analyzing the journal entries of the in-service participants in his study, Genc derived four major categories of interest. Teachers focused mainly on classroom management, interaction (with students), learning/teaching processes and lesson planning.

Procedures

The procedures for this action research project were very simple: every day after class I

would write about the days' events, giving details about what happened and telling myself what I want to do for the next class. However, the surrounding circumstances are what makes this action research less likely to be replicated. Last semester I engaged in something beyond the necessities of my allocated duties; I implemented a personally designed curriculum using original lesson plans consisting of customized rubrics, worksheets, homework assignments and classroom activities. After class I would write about the days' events.

Results

The results of my experience in reflective journalism are given below in the form of raw data entries that have been edited for grammatical errors and abbreviated for space limitations. Reading the entries will reveal the procedure as well as the results.

Journal Entry (1) March 7, 2011

Today was the first full class in which I used the worksheets and website I have developed to teach English using music. There were 36 students in the class and I asked them which song they wanted to do from the list on my website and they chose "Let it Be."

Using the worksheets I developed, we began class with the vocabulary section. As a class we wrote sentences for each vocabulary word. I walked around the room as they wrote their sentences, reading out loud ones that came to mind as well as exemplary sentences from various students. After we finished the vocabulary section we listened to the song once with our eyes closed. Next, students copied the lyrics of the song, in the form of a CLOZE exercise, from the large screen into their notebooks. Then we did the CLOZE section as a class. After each stanza I played the song and we filled in the blanks as a class. We proceeded through the song in this manner. After this exercise we sang the song together. All of this took about 1 hour 20 minutes. I

had an amazing experience. I was happy and I felt satisfied with my job and with my life.

Journal Entry (2) March 14, 2011

Last Thursday I did "The Rose" by Bette Midler with the first class and "Desperado" by the Eagles with the second class.

Also, on Friday I did Simply Red's "Holding Back the Years" with the first class and "Right Here Waiting For You" by Richard Marx with the second class.

All of the songs so far have been very simple and easy ballads meant to encourage the students and give them confidence. So, this week we will move to more complex songs.

Journal Entry (3) March 15, 2011

Today the lesson plans went great! Today we did "Hello" by Lionel Richie. So, this went very well actually, despite my original frustration this morning with the sound not working. The students really got into "Hello." We all sang quietly. They got the tune after only hearing it 3 times.

We sang R Kelly's "I Believe I Can Fly" in the next class (1:00 p.m. - 2:50 p.m.) by suggestion from one of the students. This also went great! R Kelly's song is very inspirational.

Journal Entry (4) March 17, 2011

I had two classes today, Thursday. The first class did Bob Marley's "Redemption Song" and we did "Closer to Fine" by the Indigo Girls in the second class.

The hairs on body stood on end and I had shivers as the first class whispered "Redemption Song." This is a very powerful song.

With the second class, I think "Closer to Fine" was a little to fast but it is good to have a

challenge.

Note: In the second class one student sat in on the class, even though she was not officially on the roster.

Journal Entry (5) March 20, 2011

This Friday I had two classes. We did "Sunday Bloody Sunday" by U2 with the first class (1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.) and we did "Let It Be" with the second class (3:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.) upon student's request.

The sound quality is very bad in the first classroom; "Sunday Bloody Sunday" did not have the same feeling. This is a very large class, about 40 students, so it is somewhat difficult keeping everyone focused. Next week I will do a song called "Dancing Queen" by ABBA.

I had an amazing experience in the second class. Maybe I am just sentimental, but I felt chills when this class sang "Let It Be." After hearing this song only 3 times, they could sing it with the volume turned down.

Journal Entry (6) March 24, 2011

Last Monday we did "Let It Be," by request of the students, with the first class (11:00 a.m.-1:00 p.m.) and Roberta Flack's "Killing Me Softly" in the second class (1:00 p.m. - 3:00 p.m.). With both classes the time seemed very busy because the entire 1 hour and 50 minutes was filled with writing, speaking, listening and reading.

Today we did "Stairway to Heaven" in the first class and "Free Bird" in the second class. With the first class, they could not decide which song they wanted to do. So, I played a few to give them a choice and they decided on "Stairway to Heaven".

In the second class we did "Free Bird." Instead of using time to ask them which song they

wanted to do, and since most other classes have no response, I just started with "Free Bird."

Journal Entry (7) March 26, 2011

Today, Friday March 25, 2011, we did ABBA's "Dancing Queen" in the first class and "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" (Guns N' Roses version) in the second class.

The first class did "Dancing Queen" very well. There was not very much time, so we could only sing it twice before class was over.

In the second class we again had lots of time. This class is much smaller than any of my other classes, in addition, "Knockin' On Heaven's Door" is a very short song. But they sang this song well too.

Journal Entry (8) March 28, 2011

Today was a review day. Thank goodness I did not plan on using the screen today because in both classes major technological issues prevented me from using the computer. In the first class, the computer worked but the projector would not turn on, thus rendering the computer useless.

In the next class the computer completely died. Luckily, one of my students had his laptop, and he also had the songs we needed for the day on it. So, that was cool; so I was not too embarrassed.

I was really impressed, especially with the second class. There are a few really good singers in there who naturally lead the entire class. Because of them I think the entire class benefited.

Journal Entry (9) March 31, 2011

Today's class was a review class. Today several students were sleeping. I don't know what it was but maybe they were just exhausted, sick or hungover?

So, I am trying to make everything very clear. The midterm is in two weeks and I have never done anything like this before. We will see what happens.

Journal Entry (10) April 4, 2011

Friday, as with the other classes, I had students write down which song they will do for the midterm exam (in two weeks). They gave me these little papers and we then reviewed, or practiced, the songs that we had done for the past three weeks.

Journal Entry (11) April 4, 2011

Today, April 4, 2011, went well, but I learned something about being a teacher. I realized that I need to write more often on the blackboard. I should especially write important things on the board that students must not forget. That way I can say, "I even wrote it on the board."

So, today I spent the first 20 minutes going over the rubric for next week's midterm. I did this to try to make sure they understood the grading criteria. Then I wrote on the board, "Now study your song".

Journal Entry (12) April 7 2011

Today, April 7, 2011, was a great and busy day. The time went by fast as both classes repeated the procedure I did with Monday's classes.

But this time I wrote more details on the board. I am going to get in the habit of writing more details on the board.

We went over the rubric for next week's test by assigning groups of four to explain one

section of the rubric to the whole class. This took about 20 minutes.

With the remaining time I went around the room and had students practice their songs, first alone and then by singing their song to their neighbors.

Next week is the exam!

Journal Entry (14) April 11 2011

Wow! So, today was the day we were all waiting for! Action day! Moving day! WOW! What a great time! Everything worked out well in today's classes.

So, I went shopping yesterday (Sunday) and got snacks and drinks for the test-day party. Students had snacks and drinks while I did role call, checked their papers and took photos.

Procedure: I called each pair of students to the front of the class. They sang their song without looking at their papers. I sat in the back and circled rubric points on their sheets. All pairs of students did their best and as they sang the other students in the "audience" were clapping along as they sang their song. It was awesome!

So, today was honestly the best day of my career. I felt so natural. I felt like this is the best thing in the world.

Journal Entry (14) April 16 2011

Thursday and Friday were a great success (I think so, and I hope my students think so too)!

As I did for Monday's classes, I went shopping at a nearby grocery store for drinks, cups, plates and snacks. So, the Thursday class was a little disappointing but the 1:00 o'clock Friday class was great. It is surprising how well many of the students sang. One student did "Yesterday" and it was flawless. Several students did the same song, namely "My Love" by Westlife. This

Friday class is my biggest class, about 40 students, and it was a vibrant experience. Two students were there just to sit in and have fun with their friends.

The second Friday class, 3:00 o'clock, is my smallest class and they also had a good time. I distributed the snacks as in the other classes.

So, this has been an amazing experience.

Reflection

I kept this journal during the first half of the semester. During the second half I did traditional dialogues and for the final exam students had to recite answers to pre-determined questions. As expressed in the entries above, I felt ecstatic during this experience. In future exercises, I should get students' opinions by taking a survey at the end of the semester.

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