

## **Fostering Preservice Reflection through Response Journals**

By Icy Lee

### **Introduction**

Research on teachers' knowledge, beliefs, and thoughts has shown that teacher candidates approach teaching with a plethora of initial beliefs and ideas about teaching. Their knowledge, however, tends to be based on simplistic views of teaching and learning in the classroom, and hence may not be "well adapted to teaching" (Calderhead, 1991, p.532). It is only when they reflect upon their knowledge critically that they can transfer what they have learned in initial teacher preparation programs as students to the real classroom situations as teachers. Reflection enables teacher candidates to construct knowledge through asking questions, critiquing, evaluating, etc., helping them bridge the gap between imagined views and the realities of teaching. It is important, therefore, to prepare teacher candidates for teaching by fostering professional learning that focuses on critical thinking and reflection, so that their knowledge and beliefs interact with the teacher education program,

including field experiences, to facilitate development of more sophisticated conceptions of the teaching and learning process.

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*Icy Lee is an assistant professor with the Faculty of Education of the University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong, China.*

A number of approaches have been used in teacher education to promote reflectivity, one of which is journal writing. Journals can activate teacher candidates' thinking and facilitate meaning making during the learning process (Cole, Raffier, Rogan, & Schleicher, 1998), help

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them identify variables that are important to them, serve as a means of generating questions and hypotheses about teaching and learning (Richards & Ho, 1998), and increase their awareness about the way a teacher teaches and the way a student learns (Burton & Carroll, 2001). In writing reflections, learners actively construct knowledge, while personalizing the learning process. Through questioning their own assumptions, teacher candidates raise their awareness of teaching issues and develop a sense of ownership of their future work (Daloglu, 2001). Journals can also provide opportunities for teacher candidates to analyze their own learning and seek strategies to improve their learning (Vickers & Morgan, 2003). Summed up by Farris and Fuhler (1996), journals are “a birthplace for creative and critical thinking” (p.26). As teacher candidates engage in journal writing, they are able to develop a habit of reflection (Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000).

In second language teacher education, journal writing has begun to receive more attention in recent years. However, much of the research has focused on the use of journals among practicing teachers and teacher candidates to reflect on classroom teaching (see e.g., Brinton, Holten, & Goodwin, 1993; Daloglu, 2001; Richards & Ho, 1998; Todd, Mills, Palard, & Khamcharoen, 2001; Tsang & Wong, 1996; Woodfield & Lazarus, 1998). Little has been done to find out how journals can be exploited as part of the coursework of initial teacher preparation programs to foster reflection among teacher candidates. In Hong Kong, journals are under-used in initial teacher preparation (see Lee, 2004). Hong Kong learners, including advanced learners in teacher preparation programs, are used to a passive mode of learning. In recent years, however, English language education reform in Hong Kong has put a high premium on constructivist learning (CDC, 2004).

Journal writing is a kind of reflective writing that requires prospective teachers to construct knowledge through questioning their own assumptions about teaching and learning, and hence in line with the general direction of education reform in Hong Kong. This article describes a study that uses response journals as a tool for fostering reflection in an initial teacher preparation program in Hong Kong. The subjects are 13 prospective English teachers who received training to teach English (as a second language) in secondary schools in Hong Kong. The researcher seeks to investigate the use of journals with these prospective English teachers to find out what they write about, whether their journals display signs of reflectivity, and how they react to the journal writing experience.

#### **Types of Journals**

Four kinds of journals are commonly used in initial teacher preparation: dialogue journals, response journals, teaching journals, and collaborative/interactive group journals. *Dialogue journals* involve teachers and students writing and exchanging their writing in mutual response, and are found to carry benefits like promoting autonomous learning, enhancing confidence, and helping students connect course content and teaching (Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman, & Conrad, 1990). *Response*

*journals* involve students in recording “their personal reactions to, questions about, and reflections on what they read, write, observe, listen to, discuss, do, and think” (Parsons, 1994, p.12). *Teaching journals* serve a similar purpose but they are written reflections based on teaching experiences that teacher candidates keep during the practicum (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). *Collaborative/Interactive group journals* involve teacher candidates in writing and exchanging journals (Cole et al., 1998).

Compared with dialogue journals, response and teaching journals put a greater onus on the teacher candidates themselves in the reflective process, as they engage in a self-dialogue that results in promotion of self-understanding and reflectivity. Collaborative/Interactive group journals, on the other hand, focus on group dynamics and synergy created by the teacher candidates, requiring them to take responsibility for learning by sharing ideas and developing insights among themselves, not to mention considering a variety of viewpoints among colleagues, a skill that will benefit them throughout their careers.

#### **Benefits of Journal Writing**

The research literature on journal studies has indicated the benefits of journals in promoting reflectivity among teacher learners. Dialogue journal studies by Beau and Zulich (1989), Garmon (1998), and Garmon (2001) have produced positive findings to show that both teacher educators and teacher learners favor the use of dialogue journals as a tool for developing reflectivity. Response journal studies by Parsons (1994), Farris and Fuhler (1996), and Good and Whang (2002), as well as teaching journal studies by Ho and Richards (1993), Tsang and Wong (1996), and Woodfield and Lazarus (1998) have, similarly, indicated the benefits of journaling as a pedagogical tool for encouraging reflection. Interactive journal studies have shown that teacher candidates’ ideas may contribute to the teaching and learning process. Interactive group journals exchanged among teacher candidates, in particular, can stimulate interest, enhance motivation, and build the confidence of teacher candidates, as well as enrich their conceptions of a learning community (Cole et al., 1998).

#### **Content and Quality of Reflection**

In addition to the benefits of journal writing, previous research has focused on the topics that teacher candidates reflect on, as well as the reflective traits exhibited in journals. The topics of reflection appear to be wide-ranging, including theories of teaching and learning, approaches and methods in teaching, evaluation of teaching, perceptions of teacher candidates of themselves as teachers, questions about teaching, questions about students, to name a few (e.g., see Richards & Lockhart, 1996; Tsang & Wong, 1996). Gauging the quality of reflection based on the topics in journals, however, is not entirely straightforward. For one thing, the teacher education research literature abounds with definitions of “reflection,” making it hard to pin down its exact meaning. Recent frameworks of reflection, based on Dewey (1933) and Schon (1983), capture some common elements about the process of reflection. There are,

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in particular, attempts to describe the developmental or hierarchical qualities of reflection, distinguishing lower from higher levels of reflection.

In Lee's (2005) analytic framework, for instance, reflection is examined in terms of the depth of the thinking process involved. Three levels of depth are identified. The first level is the "recall" level, where one describes, recalls and interprets an issue/situation/experience based on one's own perception of experience, without looking for alternative explanations, and attempts to imitate the ways one has observed or been taught. The second level is the "rationalization" level, where one searches for relationships between different bits of experiences, interpreting the situation with reasons, and generalizing experiences or coming up with guiding principles. The third level is the "reflectivity" level, where one approaches one's own experiences with a view to changing/improving in the future, analyzing an issue/situation/experience from various perspectives, and being aware of the influences of these diverse perspectives on one's enhanced understanding of the issue or situation.

In Lee's definition of reflective thinking, the lowest level of reflection is distinguished from a higher level of reflection by a deeper thinking process that involves active interpretation of an issue/situation and the ability to ask the why question, where one explores different reasons/alternatives to an issue. The highest level of reflective thinking is characterized by the ability to ask not only the "why" but also the "so what" question, with a view to bringing change or improvement to one's practice, as well as a heightened awareness of the influences of various perspectives on one's way of thinking.

In a similar vein, Hatton and Smith (1995) identify four levels of reflectivity in teacher candidates' journal writing. The lowest level, descriptive writing, is not reflective at all, but involves a pure description of an event, a situation or an issue. Descriptive reflection provides reasons for the events, situations or issues described, based on personal judgment, experience, and/or teacher candidates' interpretations of classroom input or readings. Higher up the plane of reflectivity is dialogic reflection, which is characterized by an exploration and consideration of differing reasons. Finally, critical reflection includes not only possible reasons but also consideration of the broader historical, social and political contexts of the reasoning. Hatton and Smith's approach is similar to that of Lee, in which the depth of reflection is captured. Although different terms are used in their frameworks, similar attempts are made to capture different degrees of reflectivity on the basis of one's ability to put things into perspective.

Van Manen's (1977) view of reflection is also based on stages of reflection. The first stage involves reflection at the technical level, i.e., application of skills and knowledge in the classroom. The second stage entails reflection about the assumptions of the technicalities of teaching and the consequences on student learning. The third stage involves a critical analysis or questioning of the moral and ethical dimensions of the technicalities of teaching. These stages of reflection parallel the depth of reflectivity put forward by Hatton and Smith (1995) and Lee (2005), in

which the lowest level of reflection involves descriptive reflection, interpretation, or application without questioning, whereas the highest level of reflection entails reasoning based on diverse perspectives placed in a broader context.

### **Research Questions**

Given that journal writing is under-explored in initial teacher preparation in Hong Kong, it would be interesting to find out what teacher candidates write about in their journals when the coursework requires them to engage in journal writing, whether their journal entries demonstrate traits of reflectivity, and how they react to the journal writing experience. Research questions that governed the study are:

1. What did the teacher candidates write about in their response journals? Did their journal entries show signs of developing reflectivity?
2. What were the teacher candidates' reactions to the journal writing experience?

## **The Study**

### **Method**

Teacher candidates in this study are 13 female Cantonese-speaking English major undergraduates at Hong Kong Baptist University, aged 20-21. They all took the A-Level Use of English examination before entry into the university, and their grades ranged from C to E (E being equivalent to a score of 515 on TOEFL). They were enrolled in a Diploma in Education program at the University. The Diploma in Education program is based on a new model of teacher education pioneered by the University (known as the 2+2 model), which provides undergraduates with teacher training at the end of their second year of undergraduate study alongside their English major study. While a BA in English normally takes 3 years to complete, the 2+2 students would take 4 years to complete a BA in English plus a Diploma in Education (majoring in English), graduating with two qualifications that enable them to practice English language teaching (ELT) as a professionally qualified English teacher in secondary schools in Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup> All 13 students aspired to become English language teachers, and thus could be considered reasonably motivated teacher learners.

The response journals these teacher candidates were asked to do were part of the coursework of the "Subject Instruction" course in the Diploma in Education program, which is a compulsory course aimed to equip teacher candidates with knowledge and skills of English language teaching. Although the promotion of reflection is one of the stated aims of the teacher education program, no required subject in the program addresses the topic of reflection specifically. The researcher, being the instructor of the "Subject Instruction" course, deemed it a perfect opportunity to introduce the teacher candidates to the idea of reflection through journal writing. As a qualitative researcher, the past experience of the teacher-researcher

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had a direct impact on the approach to the study. Having used dialogue journals with teacher candidates from another teacher education course and found that, in dialogue journal writing, the teachers candidates had a tendency to rely on the teacher educator's feedback as a main incentive for reflection (see Lee, 2004), it was decided that response journals that focus more on self-reflection would be used, so that the teacher candidates' reliance on the teacher educator could be reduced. Interactive group journals, it was felt, could be used at a later stage when the teacher candidates had become more accustomed to the idea of journal writing.

On the first day of the course, teacher candidates were told that they were expected to write response journals throughout the course. As journal writing is seldom used in secondary schools in Hong Kong, a guiding sheet was provided to make sure that expectations and requirements were communicated clearly (see Appendix). Specifically, teacher candidates were told to write their responses to salient issues raised in class, which was held once a week for 10 weeks in the first and second semesters respectively.<sup>2</sup> Teacher candidates were told to keep their journal entries in a portfolio and turn in the entries on specific dates (three times in the first semester and two times in the second semester) that were assigned at the beginning of each semester. Each time the journals were submitted, the instructor read through them carefully. Instead of awarding grades, the instructor provided general responses to students' entries, answered questions, asked further questions to stimulate thinking, and provided further insights on issues raised. The teacher candidates were aware that their journals would not be assessed. To prevent undue reliance on instructor feedback, delayed responses were made to the teacher candidates' journals, unlike in dialogue journal writing where the teacher educator and teacher candidates exchange journals on a regular basis. At the end of the second semester, students started their 6-week teaching practicum in secondary schools, where they took up teaching of English independently with the support of a teacher mentor. They were encouraged to continue with the habit of journal writing, though this was no longer a requirement of the course.

To enhance the validity of the study, triangulation is used in the qualitative data collection and analysis procedures. First, data triangulation involves data sources from (1) the teacher candidates' response journals gathered from two teaching semesters, and (2) individual interviews with all the 13 teacher candidates. To moderate the potential biases inherent in teacher-research, the interviews were conducted (in Cantonese) by a research assistant (with a translation major and a Postgraduate Diploma in Education majoring in English)—after the grades were posted so as to encourage free expression of opinions from the teacher candidates. The interviews, which were semi-structured, were based on an interview guide that focused on four areas pertaining to the second research question: (1) how journal writing was received by the teacher candidates; (2) perceived benefits and difficulties, if any; (3) role of the instructors' feedback; and (4) impact of journal writing on development of reflectivity.

### **Data Analysis**

To answer the first research question (i.e., what the teacher candidates wrote about and signs of developing reflectivity), both the content and depth of reflection as exhibited in the response journals were analyzed. The content analysis is adapted from Lee (2004), who investigates the themes of dialogue journals written by 18 teacher candidates. After my first reading of the response journal data, it was found that while most of the 10 themes in Lee (2004) are relevant to the study, some of the themes could have been combined to yield a smaller number of categories—hence a higher level of abstraction—and to facilitate communication of the findings as well (Merriam, 1998). Since the journal data would be further analyzed for the level of reflectivity, with reference to the themes, a smaller number of themes would facilitate data interpretation and hence suit the purpose of the research better. Five themes were developed for the study, which was a result of combination of some of the themes in Lee (2004) and rephrasing afterwards. For example, the themes that involve interaction with the instructor (e.g., “relationship-building” and “seeking advice”) are combined and phrased as “interacting with instructor.” The themes that relate to self-development (i.e., “drawing upon personal history,” “expressing preservice teacher thoughts and concerns,” and “commenting on cognitive changes”) are combined and referred to as “extrapolating / expressing personal voice.” The themes relating to evaluation (i.e., “comments on the course” and “self-evaluation”) are broadened and rephrased as “evaluating.” The other themes that pertain to lower and higher levels of thinking (i.e., “sharing ideas about English language resources,” “asking questions / seeking clarification,” and “discussing professional issues”) are rephrased as “describing and recalling” and “interpreting, analyzing and inquiring” respectively. The five themes are defined as follows:

1. *Describing and recalling*: Describing and recalling teaching/learning issues presented in class; sharing language learning experiences.
2. *Interpreting, analyzing and inquiring*: Discussing issues related to topics covered in class / other professional issues; asking questions about ELT/professional issues.
3. *Evaluating*: Evaluating oneself, peers or different aspects of the course.
4. *Extrapolating/Expressing personal voice*: Extrapolating what has been learned—making resolutions; personalizing and sharing insights; expressing feelings and concerns; asserting beliefs.
5. *Interacting with instructor*: Seeking advice regarding personal/professional development; responding to instructor’s feedback.

After the preliminary analytic framework was set up, the researcher and research assistant categorized about 20% of the journal data independently and compared their



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analyses to find out the level of agreement, which turned out to be as high as 95%. The rest of the journal entries were then read and categorized by the research assistant.

As regards the nature of reflection, since the purpose of the study is to explore the traits of reflectivity in the teacher candidates' journals, an analytical framework that describes the developmental qualities of reflection is deemed suitable. The frameworks proposed by Lee (2005) and Hatton and Smith (1995), which characterize reflection in terms of the depth of reflective thinking, are combined as follows:

Level 1: Non-reflection / pure description level, which involves mere recall / description.

Level 2: Descriptive reflection / recall level, which is the lowest level of reflection, involving description / recall as well as an attempt at simple explanation.

Level 3: Dialogic reflection / rationalization level, which is a higher level of reflection, involving exploration of alternative explanations from different perspectives.

Level 4: Critical reflection / reflectivity level, which is the highest level of reflection, involving a critical analysis that situates reasoning within a broader historical, social, cultural or political context, with a view to changing or improving in the future.

All the journal segments that fall under the five themes are tabulated and read by the researcher and research assistant together to discuss and decide on the level of reflection. Analysis of the entries shows that the first theme "Describing and recalling" exclusively illustrates Level 1 of reflection. It is often followed by the other themes that exhibit higher levels of reflection, such as "Interpreting, analyzing and inquiring," "Evaluating" and "Extrapolating / Expressing personal voice." The last theme "Interacting with instructor" does not fall under any level of reflection. Instead, the teacher candidates' attempts to interact with the instructor are seen to emanate from their description, discussion or reflection that belongs to one of the four levels of reflection. Table 1 below summarizes the themes and their levels of reflection.

As for the interview data, they were translated and transcribed by the research assistant. The interview transcripts were subjected to member checking (Brown & Rodgers, 2002)—i.e., having the teacher candidates read and verify their truthfulness. The interview data were then coded and summarized according to the four areas of focus—i.e., how journal writing was received by the teacher candidates, perceived benefits and difficulties, role of the instructor's feedback, and development of reflectivity.

### **Journal Data**

This section addresses the first research question—i.e., *What did the teacher*

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Table 1. Themes of Journal Entries and Levels of Reflection.

Theme	Level of Reflection
1. Describing and recalling	Level 1
2. Interpreting, analyzing and inquiring	Level 2/3/4
3. Evaluating	Level 2/3/4
4. Extrapolating / Expressing personal voice	Level 2/3/4
5. Interacting with instructor	Not applicable

*candidates write about in their response journals? Did their journal entries show signs of reflectivity?* In the following, selected segments from the teacher candidates' response journals are used to demonstrate the five themes delineated in the analytic framework in Table 1, each with reference to the level(s) of reflectivity evident in the journal data. The journal segments are presented verbatim, and pseudonyms are used throughout.

#### **Describing and Recalling: Level 1 of Reflection**

The first theme, *describing and recalling*, can be considered to be the precursor to reflectivity, forming the basis on which further reflections are made. While the teacher candidates are describing and/or recalling an issue or experience, they stay at Level 1 of reflection, i.e., non-reflection/pure description level. In one of Kitty's journal entries, she summarized what had been covered in class by *describing a teaching/learning issue*:

On Wednesday, during the lecture time, we talked about language competence, namely linguistics competence, pragmatic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence ...

In Lucy's segment, she *shared the experience* of a teacher friend, trying to show how disrespectful students can be:

That day, she taught students to use Chinese dictionary. Her students were so curious that they tried to turn to some other pages filled with pictures. And suddenly, one of her students asked her something about a picture showing an ancient container. She actually didn't prepare herself for this kind of question and she just replied frankly by saying, "Sorry, I don't know either. Would you like to find us something about it later?" However, her student responded, "You, as our teacher, don't know either; then how could I know it?" in a playful tone.

Both segments demonstrate a non-reflective trait, as they involve mere description and/or recall.

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#### ***Interpreting, Analyzing and Inquiring: Level 2/3/4 of Reflection***

In the journals, description and recall were often followed by discussion and/or questioning, where the teacher candidates engaged in *interpreting, analyzing and inquiring*, which is the second theme that emerged from the data. This theme illustrates higher levels of reflection, including Levels 2, 3 and 4. When engaged in the *discussion of teaching and learning issues raised in class*, Natalie attempted to explain why most teachers in Hong Kong focus on developing students' linguistic competence:

What are the difficulties in teaching language competence? . . . after the task-based approach in 1999 English language syllabus has been proposed, not many teachers pay effort evenly to teach grammatical item, and language needed for different situations and communication. I think the main problem is the school teachers are bound by the text book. They will just teach what the text book has and teach all the chapters in a rush in order to let their students to have a look of all the chapters which are in the scope of examination. . . . As these examinations are mainly focus on linguistic competence, teachers may just concentrate on teaching more about linguistic knowledge in order to let their student have a good mark in the public exam.

The above segment demonstrates Level 2 of reflection (i.e., descriptive reflection/recall level), where the teacher candidate attempted to explain why English teachers in Hong Kong do not adopt task-based language teaching but instead rely heavily on the textbook to help students pass examinations.

*Asking questions about ELT/professional issues* also provided opportunities for teacher candidates to engage in a higher level of reflection. In her journal, Kitty began by asking a series of questions about language competence and then broadened her discussion to include other aspects of competence, highlighting the importance of critical thinking in the language classroom:

So, the question left now is how much should we teach in elementary education? How can we balance the basic linguistic knowledge and the other essential competence in language teaching? . . . Critical thinking is so much emphasized nowadays, but I used to doubt that how can this be taught in all subjects? . . . Now I believe teachers in all subjects can do it as you have proved this in your teaching. I guess teachers can train students' critical thinking skills by asking them more open questions or asking them to comment or judgment. Teachers should also tell students not to accept everything blindly without really thinking about them.

The above segment illustrates Level 3 of reflection (i.e., dialogic reflection/rationalization level), showing evidence of the teacher candidate's attempt to search for relationships between different pieces of experience and to develop some general principles for teaching critical thinking.

In another example, Sandra's attempt to *discuss professional issues* (i.e., innovation) provided her with an opportunity to engage in critical reflection:

Very often, people tend to support 'new' ideas blindly. They think that everything

'new' is 'creative,' 'up-to-date,' and 'better.' However, this is absolutely not true. I strongly believe that the existing language teaching methodology could be improved. But this does not mean that any change or any new methodology would help. . . . We have to think carefully if the new methodology is better than the existing one or not. . . . Then it's the idea of suitability. When this idea is from the west, it may not suit the cultural background of Hong Kong students. And we should not overlook this cultural thing. Learning English is not just learning a language but learning a different culture. And why do so many students dislike learning English? It's because they don't like the feeling of being imposed with a different thing. Therefore, we should also consider the feeling or the attitude of students. As after all, this change is not only for the English language teachers, but also the students.

In this segment, Level 4 of reflection (i.e., critical reflection/reflectivity level) is evident, where Sandra examined the question of "innovation" in relation to ELT methodology. In reflecting on the issue, she considered the wider context including the cultural and the affective factors in language teaching and learning.

#### **Evaluating: Level 2/3/4 of Reflection**

In the third theme, *evaluation*, higher levels of reflection are also evident. In the journals, the teacher candidates gave their *evaluations of different aspects of the course*, including the instructor's teaching style. Catherine commented:

. . . when I am having your lesson, I feel good that you always ask us questions. This can raise our interest and at the same time, paying more attention to what you teach. I think in the supervised teaching practice, I will ask more genuine questions to elicit my students to speak up. Actually, I think during a lesson, if students can participate and get involved, the feeling is quite good.

This segment demonstrates Level 2 of reflection, where the teacher candidate analyzed the teacher educator's teaching style and stated her intention to imitate such a style in her own teaching practice.

In another example, Level 3 of reflection is evident as Beatrice evaluated one of her peers' microteaching performance:

Today I was impressed by Ivy's microteaching on listening. What I appreciate was that she exposed students to different materials. For example, the English version of the Mulan poem and the theme song of the movie. . . . I think a good teacher should not only expose students to academic knowledge but also things around us and around the world. Besides, if I can design lessons as interesting as that one, students would be eager to attend lessons because each time they know that they can learn some interesting things from the lesson.

At this level of reflection, Beatrice attempted to interpret the peer's performance, explained why she liked it, and generalized it to other teaching situations.

In one of Natalie's journal entries, critical reflection is demonstrated as she *evaluated her own performance* in microteaching in the teacher education program:

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I remember that my teachers didn't teach any listening skills at all. They would simply use the tape which is provided by Longman or Oxford, etc. what I usually heard was not English but the sound of 'beep.' My classmates and I were all rushing to choose the correct answers after the beep sound. I felt not good and didn't enjoy it. And I made a big mistake in my microteaching. I've put too many things in the listening comprehension exercise. I am sure that my students felt pressure too! Though they did enjoy the video, I think they also felt bad about the exercise. I start to know why I have pressure all the time. It is because I see everything as 'homework' and I focus too much on the final product. As a result, I neglect the needs of my students. I should have a broader perspective—that is, my job is not only to provide interesting materials and detailed worksheets, but also to let my students enjoy their class and to learn without feeling threatened.

Reflecting on her own language learning and microteaching experience, Natalie realized the importance of de-emphasizing the product of learning but emphasizing learning for enjoyment in a non-threatening learning environment. She was able to examine teaching in a broader context that takes into account the teacher role, the student role, teacher-student relationship, and the use of pedagogical materials. This journal segment is a good example to show how the teacher candidate moved from a lower to a higher level of reflection, and in the end she was able to engage in Level 4 of reflection (i.e., critical reflection).

#### ***Extrapolating/Expressing Personal Voice: Level 2/3/4 of Reflection***

In the fourth theme, teacher candidates were seen *extrapolating* from what they had learnt, at the same time *expressing a personal voice*. In so doing, they engaged in higher levels of reflection. Some teacher candidates *made resolutions* in their response journals, asserting what they planned to do in their future teaching, while others *personalized learning and shared their insights*. For instance, through the journal writing experience, Kitty had developed a great interest in using this tool as a springboard for reflection. She decided to verbalize and record her thoughts after each of her teaching practicum lessons:

I plan to bring along a mp3 player with me so that I can record my feelings, my comments and my reflection soon after the class. I am sure that this would be very useful for my growth as a teacher.

Sophia, after watching her peers' microteaching on grammar teaching, recalled her own experience as a student and shared her insight about how grammar could best be taught in context:

When I was in primary and secondary school, my teachers taught me grammar, they liked to separate the context and the target language; therefore, we may not have a clear idea about how to use the target grammar. It's a very common way of teachers teaching grammar. Students have to do the exercises (separate sentences) which can reinforce the form of the target language but not the function of the

language. It's the thing that I have to pay attention to when I am teaching. . . . it's a good start to teach the relation between form and function!

Both journal segments illustrate Level 2 of reflection, where description is accompanied by simple explanation.

In Beatrice's journal segment below, she moved from Level 2 to 3 and then 4 of reflection. She first *expressed her feelings and concerns* after a lesson that introduced students to language games. As she described her learning experience and explained her feelings, she engaged in Level 2 of reflection:

Today we learnt some teaching skills in the class. I was impressed by those teaching skills. I didn't think of teaching can be that much fun. If I were still a secondary student, I thought I would love this kind of teaching. However, as a perspective teacher, I felt a little bit stressful as I knew that I would be the one who design those funny games and play with my students. I was afraid that it would spend me so much time preparing for those games.

From there, Beatrice went on to *assert her beliefs*:

As I have had more thoughts on it, I thought it's worthwhile to spend that much time preparing for my students because this can help cultivate their interest in English, I fulfill my role as a teacher because English is a big field that one can even spend one's whole life to learn it. In this sense, how much I teach them is not enough, but then if they have the interest in English themselves, they can take the initiative to learn English, and I think it's the only way for them to acquire good English.

Beatrice's further thoughts moved her up to higher reflective planes, i.e., Levels 3 and 4. Despite the worry Beatrice had about having to spend a massive amount of time preparing for good English lessons, she considered different perspectives (Level 3) and she asserted that it would be worth the while, since what matters most in language teaching is the ability to arouse interest in the learners. Indeed, she examined the issue of language games from different perspectives and approached her own experience with a view to bringing improvement to her teaching in the future (Level 4).

#### ***Interacting with Instructor***

Finally, in the last theme, the teacher candidates engaged in *interacting with the instructor*. Laura attempted to *seek the instructor's advice* on the issue of medium of instruction:

But if the students could not understand my English even I spoke slowly and used simple English, what could I do?

Some students *provided responses to the instructor's feedback on their journals*. For instance, Carly responded by directly addressing the instructor:

Thanks a lot for your response. Actually I totally agree with you that education is a helping profession.

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Attempts to seek advice or ask questions are not classifiable into different levels of reflection, but they generally continue from the teacher candidate's discussion or reflection, such as Laura's question above, which sprang from her reflection on the use of L1 (i.e., Cantonese) in the second language classroom.

To answer the first research question posed earlier (*What did the teacher candidates write about in their response journals? Did their journal entries show signs of reflectivity?*), the samples above demonstrate that the teacher candidates' thinking did not simply stay at Level 1, i.e., the lowest level of reflection. Instead, journal writing provided them with opportunities to engage in higher levels of reflection at different times and as different issues were described or discussed. They interpreted, analyzed and inquired about teaching/learning or other professional issues, resulting in an increase in knowledge and self-understanding, and developing a critical stance regarding teaching/learning and professional issues at the same time. Through evaluating themselves, their peers and different aspects of the course, they were able to gain insights about how they should go about teaching.

They also extrapolated from the input obtained from lessons, both from the instructor and their peers, personalized learning by making connections between what was observed and theorized in class and their own personal experience, and as a result developed a better understanding of English language teaching and teaching in general. All in all, response journals enabled them to develop their professional identities by sharing their private voices, shaping their understanding of pertinent issues and preparing them for the realities in the classroom (Farris & Fuhler, 1996; Good & Whang, 2002).

### **Interview Data**

This section attempts to answer the second research question—i.e., *What were the teacher candidates' reactions to the journal writing experience?* Relevant interview data are extracted (and cited verbatim) to illustrate the four major aspects, including (1) how journal writing was received; (2) perceived benefits and difficulties; (3) role of the instructor's feedback; and (4) development of reflective thinking. Again pseudonyms are used throughout.

#### ***How Journal Writing Was Received by Teacher Candidates***

Out of the 13 teacher candidates, 11 said they enjoyed writing response journals. Some enjoyed it throughout the period, while some found greater enjoyment in the second semester. This could be demonstrated by the fact that six teacher candidates continued with journal writing during the teaching practicum even though it was no longer a requirement of the course, whereas one of them (Kitty referred to earlier) did oral journals by audio-recording her after-lesson thoughts during the practicum. Teacher candidates' reasons for enjoying journal writing are extracted below, citing the students verbatim:

In the first semester, I don't really understand how to teach and I faced many difficulties and doubts, and I can get many advice from my lecturer. (Lily)

Because I can write about my feelings and difficulties. Yes, and it is quite useful for me to reflect and to be reflective. (Lucy)

Enjoyment was found to link with students' perception of the nature and purpose of journal writing. A few students considered journal writing to be a kind of homework in the first semester, but gradually when the purpose became clearer, they found journal writing easier to manage and hence more enjoyable. Kitty said:

In the first semester I think it's kind of homework, and I don't want to do it. It's not practical for I just wrote something to share my feelings. . . . But then in the second semester, I find it good because I really know the purpose and I believe this is a good way to achieve that purpose, and it's also good for myself and also my teacher.

Another reason why some students enjoyed journal writing less in the first semester is the lack of ideas. Catherine said:

Writing journals in the first semester is more difficult because I didn't have any idea what kind of writing should I write because we just refer to the lesson like the concept or the theory during the lesson, so I can say I don't really enjoy journal writing.

Most teacher candidates felt that journal writing became easier in the second semester, and hence more enjoyable. Kathy said:

For the first semester, it's a pressure. In the second semester, it's a pleasure writing to the teacher.

For this teacher candidate, once she started to put pen to paper, the joy of journaling kept growing.

Only one student maintained she did not enjoy journal writing at any time, and the stated reason was her laziness:

I'm too lazy to do that. I normally do it right before we have to submit it.

### ***Perceived Benefits and Difficulties***

All 13 students confirmed journal writing as a beneficial experience, including the two who did not enjoy it. The only problems raised pertains to time management and lack of ideas initially. The teacher candidates valued the opportunity to communicate with the instructor, evidenced from the quote below:

. . . she will try to answer me and then give me some response. It's more like a communicative way so I learn from her. (Lily)

A student pointed out that there simply was not enough time in class for the kind of sharing and discussion made possible through journal writing:



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It's a good way to discuss something with the professor because during class time you won't have much time to share. (Carly)

Lucy pointed out the advantage of written journals over face-to-face meetings:

I think it's difficult to knock on her door and talk to her. Well, it's strange. I can go to her every day. . . but I don't know whether they are busy or not so I cannot really talk directly or go to them. So I think writing journals, yes, they can read the journals when they have time. (Lucy)

Students also found that journal writing provided good opportunities for them to practice and develop reflective thinking. Sandra said:

I get time to really, you know, to rethink what I've learned in class.

Without writing response journals after class, teacher candidates might have adopted a learn-but-forget attitude to learning. Having to reflect on what they had learned in class, however, may have prompted teacher candidates to rethink the issues covered in class, express their views, and ask questions. Learning became more real and more personal.

Several students also commented on the valuable outcome of self-development through practicing reflective thinking. Writing response journals helped them make decisions through introspection. The journal writing helped to clarify their confusion, promote self-evaluation and suggest ways they might improve themselves:

Through journal writing, it helps me to make up my ideas. It helps me to make up my mind. Everything is so simple after writing journals. (Sandra)

Every time I look at my journals, I can think of . . . how to improve (Helen)

Indeed, the journals provide a window into teacher candidates' innermost feelings and thoughts and are an expedient tool for achieving personal and professional development:

I look back my first few journals, I found like maybe if found I've already grown up. When I look back my first few journals and compare it with the latter one, I find the difference between . . . like it isn't myself. (Kitty)

Another beneficial aspect of journal writing, as indicated by Natalie, is the development of writing fluency:

It can improve my English writing because journal is something to express ourselves.

When students looked back on the whole experience of journal writing, 4 students pointed out that they could appreciate the benefits only after they had got used to writing journals and when they became more reflective in the second semester. Natalie said:

In the first semester I can't find any thing to reflect . . . I just sit in the lesson. I don't think I have something to improve.

This shows that reflective thinking, when first introduced to teacher candidates, may be a totally alien idea and may not be particularly well-received. With more practice, however, teacher candidates can develop a liking as well as a disposition for reflective thinking.

#### ***The Instructor's Feedback***

All the 13 teacher candidates found the instructor's feedback useful, encouraging and valuable:

The most important thing, I think, is to get the feedback from the lecturer. (Kathy)

The instructor's comments makes me so comfortable. (Sandra)

I always wrote something about my anxiety, and you know, reading her words could comfort me. (Kathy)

I think that she is very experienced and she inspired me a lot. (Ida)

Twelve of 13 students valued the teacher's written feedback on their journals, and stated that without the feedback they would have liked journaling less. From their comments, it can be concluded that the teacher candidates expected the instructor to answer their queries, stimulate their thinking, point out areas for improvement, etc.:

I really like to have the teacher's feedback. You know, as long as the teacher is present, it makes the homework meaningful. (Kitty)

I will be less motivated to write anything because I think maybe I need some guidance. (Lucy)

One student held a different view about instructor feedback to the journal writing:

I think it's ok even without feedback because I really enjoy reading my own journal . . . I explore more during . . . explore more on myself during the process of writing. It really helps, but not only product, but also the process of writing the journal. (Lily)

The quote suggests that the student was intrinsically motivated, enjoyed writing, and hence was less reliant on the teacher for comments and suggestions. Overall, the teacher candidates' views indicate that the teacher educator has a significant role to play in the journaling process.

#### ***Development of Reflective Thinking***

All of the teacher candidates reported that they had become more reflective through journal writing. Verbalizing thoughts in writing increases their understanding of the issues discussed in class and develops their professional identities as prospective teachers. Through practicing reflective thinking, the teacher candidates gained a deeper understanding of what reflectivity entails:

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Every time I write I first jot down details of what happened that day and when I will look at it like a third person, like self-evaluate myself as if I'm the third person. (Sandra)

When I first wrote something, maybe I share a problem in the journal. I usually thought of everything like, the reason of such a problem and what I should do next time. Usually I will make a conclusion like this. I won't just describe. I won't just describe the problem in the journals. (Lucy)

The teacher candidates appeared to appreciate the importance of thinking that transcends pure recall or description and felt they were able to develop a stance that incorporated objective analysis (like a third person), evaluation, problematizing and problem-solving. What's more, tracing their own development through reading and re-reading their personal records would provide a precious opportunity for further reflection:

I think writing down into words can help and one thing which is good is that I can read it again later. I think this process is another kind of reflection. (Kitty)

By relating what was taught in class to their personal experience, by questioning pre-conceived ideas about teaching, and by projecting these thoughts into their own future as practicing teachers in their response journals, the teacher candidates were becoming reflective practitioners:

I started to relate my past experience to my own teaching and on my future career . . . as for my past experience, I know what my teacher had put effort on. I try to assess their own skills or teaching and from that assessment, I know what I have to do in the future. (Natalie)

To answer the second research question (*the teacher candidates' reactions to the journal writing experience*), data show that the teacher candidates welcomed the use of response journals as an instructional tool for developing a reflective stance towards teaching and learning. Although some did not react to it positively when the tool was first introduced, all teacher candidates were gradually able to see the benefits and appreciate the importance of developing a reflective disposition while they were learning to teach. In particular, they treasured the opportunities to communicate with and learn from the instructor outside the classroom, and they valued the instructor's feedback and considered it a useful impetus for deeper reflections.

### **Implications and Recommendations**

The study suggests that response journals are a useful instructional tool that enables teacher candidates to express and assert their personal voice, to be more in touch with their feelings and thoughts, and to develop their professional identities. Through writing response journals, teacher candidates enhance their self-understanding and develop the professional characteristics they will need when they become practicing teachers—e.g., ability to question their own practice, to explore into alternatives,

to problematize, and to self-evaluate. As indicated by Cochran-Smith and Lytle (2001), “an inquiry stance” is crucial to teachers’ professional development, and it is important for teacher candidates to learn to “pose problems, identify discrepancies between theories and practices, challenge common routines,” etc. (p.53).

#### **Provision of Prompts**

Based on the findings of the study, several recommendations may be made to enhance the effectiveness of response journals as a tool for developing reflectivity. First, since teacher candidates may tend to resist journaling in the initial stage, perhaps due to inexperience and unfamiliarity with this pedagogical tool, the teacher educator can initially provide prompts to guide students’ journal writing (see e.g., Good & Whang, 2002), especially with more dependent learners and in the beginning stage. To provide for greater flexibility and to cater to individual differences, students can opt for either responding to the prompts or writing their own ideas. With a topic on communicative language teaching, for instance, the prompts could include the following: *In your opinion, which English language teaching method(s) would suit Hong Kong learners most? Which method would you be most comfortable using?* The teacher educator can monitor students’ progress and assess the need for providing prompts, and decide accordingly to either continue with the practice or phase this out gradually.

#### **Journal Keeping during the Practicum**

Journal writing should be encouraged during the teaching practicum for teacher candidates. The study shows that even without making journal writing a compulsory requirement of the initial teacher preparation program during the practicum, about half of the students took it upon themselves to keep journals, and they all reported feeling enthusiastic about it. Once teacher candidates are adequately prepared to write reflective journals, they should be encouraged to carry on with the reflective disposition during their teaching practicum, and more importantly, be supported during the process. For example, the teaching practicum journals can be collected and read by the instructor, who can then give feedback periodically or at the end of the practicum. Also, the journals can be kept in a portfolio electronically together with students’ lesson plans and teaching materials and contribute to the overall assessment of the teacher education course.

#### **The Teacher Educator’s Role**

The role played by the teacher educator in providing feedback on teacher candidates’ response journals should not be under-estimated. These data have suggested that teacher candidates valued the instructor’s feedback as a powerful incentive to encourage them to engage in reflection through journaling. Withholding feedback altogether, especially at the beginning, may have a negative impact on the teacher candidate’s motivation to write in response journals. It would help, however, if the

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teacher educator's presence could be gradually made redundant, so that the teacher candidates develop a habit and willingness to reflect even without having an audience to read their journals. Lee's (2004) dialogue journal study has found that some teacher candidates may actually be more interested in using journaling "as a means of getting advice from the teacher educator" than in using it as a "tool for developing individual reflection" (Lee, 2004, p.86). To enable teacher candidates to engage in reflection autonomously during the learning-to-teach process, the teacher educator has to be careful in deciding when to give feedback to stimulate thinking and to provide incentive and when to reduce the amount or even withhold feedback. For instance, the teacher educator can start with exchanging dialogue journal with the teacher candidates, and after they have gained familiarity with reflective writing they can be asked to exchange journals within a small group or with a journal partner/buddy (see Good & Whang, 2002; Grisham, 1997), whereby they exchange journals regularly, respond to their peers' journals, supporting each other in their development of reflective thinking. The instructor's role could then be gradually reduced, since the teacher candidates would be taking greater responsibility to use journals as a tool for stimulating thoughts and for developing and sustaining reflective thinking.

#### ***The Teacher Candidate's Role***

Finally, the role played by the teacher candidates in developing reflectivity and bringing about their own professional growth can be further utilized. Aside from asking them to keep their journals in a portfolio and submit it to the instructor from time to time, the teacher candidates can be asked to revisit their journals at different points of time (e.g., at the end of each semester, and at the end of the teaching practicum) and to write about the changes, if any, observed in their own development. In fact, the data in this study indicate that without being asked to, four students developed the habit of re-reading their own journals to look for areas of improvement as well as to ponder on issues related to their personal growth and professional development. This suggests that written journals can naturally provide personal records for students to trace their evolving thoughts and changing perspectives on specific issues, making sense of the complexities inherent in teaching and learning. The engagement in active learning, where teacher learners track their own knowledge development, underlies the constructivist approach to teacher development (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2001).

#### **Conclusion**

The study suggests that journal writing is a potentially powerful tool for fostering reflection in teacher candidates, preparing teachers who "recognize the complexity of teaching, are thoughtful about their teaching practices, question their own assumptions and consider multiple perspectives in order to make informed decisions about the learning needs of their students" (Schulz & Mandzuk, 2005,

p.315). Reflection as a habit, if successfully instilled in teacher candidates, can prepare them to cope with the daily issues that arise from their future teaching with a creative and critical stance. Reflection could then become a major part of their teaching repertoire to enable them to engage in reflection with a high comfort level. Given the potential benefits of journals in initial teacher preparation programs, how to make journaling more writer-friendly, manageable, and useful for teacher candidates would provide avenues for further research.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>The Hong Kong Government's new requirements for a professionally qualified English teacher are: (1) English subject knowledge, (2) an ELT teaching qualification, and (3) a proficiency level that meets the language benchmark stipulated by the Government. The graduates of the 2+2 teacher education program would meet the first two requirements, which would automatically exempt them from the third, i.e. the language benchmark requirement.

<sup>2</sup>The topics covered in the 20-week course include: English language teaching methodology, communicative language teaching and task-based learning, curriculum, syllabus and techniques, teaching of pronunciation, speaking, listening, reading, writing, vocabulary and grammar, reflective teaching and classroom inquiry, assessment, lesson planning and evaluation, individual differences and learning strategies. It was emphasized that the journals would not be marked for written accuracy, and that the focus was on the quality of reflective thinking rather than writing competence.

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## Appendix

### **Response Journals**

The purpose of response journals is to provide opportunities for you to reflect on your learning experiences, to express opinions, to clarify ideas, and to personalize learning. You are to write response journals, on a weekly basis, to *reflect critically* on salient issues raised in class.

To help you understand what ‘critical reflection’ means, it is a 3-way process focusing on:

1. The event itself —e.g., a teaching / learning episode, a lesson.
2. Recollection of the event —a factual account of what actually happened.
3. Review and response to the event—review and question the event with a view to processing it at a deeper level.

I look forward to reading your response journals.