

# *Writing Response Journals: What Do Pre-service Teachers Think?*

Icy LEE

*Department of Education Studies, Hong Kong Baptist University*

*In this study, 13 pre-service teachers who were enrolled on a teacher education program wrote weekly journals in response to issues discussed in class over two semesters that lasted 20 weeks. They submitted the response journals three times in the first semester and two times in the second semester, and the instructor read and provided feedback on the journal entries each time they were collected. At the end of the academic year, the pre-service teachers completed a questionnaire and were interviewed individually to seek their views of journal writing. They were also asked to reflect on the journal writing experience in the last journal entry. The three sources of data together show that journal writing was seen as a beneficial experience, fostering reflective thinking and helping the pre-service teachers develop better understanding of teaching and learning issues discussed on the teacher education program.*

## **Introduction**

In teacher education, journals are regarded as a useful tool for developing reflection (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). Journals provide a space for teacher learners to reflect on teaching and learning, helping them bridge the gap between theory and practice. Reflection is deemed particularly pertinent to pre-service teacher education, since pre-service teachers tend to think that knowledge about teaching is acquired from external sources and experts, rather than from actively inquiring about these sources of knowledge and skills. By engaging in journal writing, pre-service teachers can think about theories, critically examine them, personalize them, and construct new knowledge about how the theories

can be used in their own situation, and as a result, develop a sense of ownership and power over their future work.

Teacher education research has suggested that journals carry a number of benefits (Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman, & Conrad, 1990). They can stimulate students' cognitive development (Garmon, 2001), provide opportunities to examine teaching and learning issues critically (Lee, 2004), help students understand course content better (Garmon, 1998; Porter et al., 1990), enable the teacher educator to individualize their instruction (Bean & Zulich, 1989), and turn students into more reflective and autonomous learners (Farris & Fuhler, 1996; Good & Whang, 2002; Parsons, 1994; Tsang & Wong, 1996; Woodfield & Lazarus, 1998).

Three different kinds of journals are commonly involved: (1) dialogue journals, which are journals written and exchanged regularly with the instructor; (2) response journals, which involve written reactions based on course content and/or reading; and (3) teaching journals, which are written reflections based on classroom teaching. In pre-service teacher education, journals are often employed during field experiences or the teaching practicum — i.e., teaching journals (Garmon, 2001; Tsang & Wong, 1996). There are also studies about the use of dialogue journals with prospective teachers (e.g., Bean & Zulich, 1989; Garmon, 1998, 2001), but less research has been conducted to investigate the use of response journals in pre-service teacher education, especially journals that involve written responses based on the content of the teacher education program (rather than course reading; e.g., Farris & Fuhler, 1996). One major difference between dialogue journals and response journals is that the former involves an ongoing dialogue between the teacher educator and pre-service teachers, whereas the latter involves occasional feedback from the teacher educator. In Roe and Stallman's (1994) comparative study, students expressed preference for dialogue journals rather than response journals, though they found both types of journal writing beneficial. Lee's (2004) dialogue journal study suggests that prospective teachers may enjoy journal writing because they like communicating with the teacher educator more than engaging in reflection per se. It would be interesting, therefore, to find out pre-service teachers' views of response journals when the teacher educator's responses are not given immediately and on a regular basis.

## **The Study**

The pre-service teachers that participated in the study are 13 female Cantonese-speaking English major undergraduates, aged 20–21. They all took an A-Level Use of English examination before entry into the university, and their grades ranged from D to E (E being equivalent to a score of 515 on TOEFL). They were enrolled on a Diploma in Education program (majoring in English) at Hong Kong Baptist University. The Diploma in Education program is based on a “2+2 model” of teacher education pioneered by the University, which provides undergraduates with teacher training at the end of their second year of undergraduate study alongside their major study. While a Bachelor of Arts (BA) in English normally takes 3 years to complete, the 2+2 students enrolled as a BA student 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 Hong Kong.<sup>1</sup>

The response journals that these pre-service teachers were asked to do were part of the coursework of the “Subject Instruction” course on the Diploma in Education program, which is a compulsory course aimed to equip pre-service teachers with knowledge and skills of ELT. On the first day of the course, the student teachers were told that they were expected to write response journals on a weekly basis throughout the course and to keep them in a portfolio. Specifically, they were told to write their responses to salient issues raised in class (by commenting on issues, discussing them, expressing personal views, asking questions, etc.), which was held once a week for 10 weeks in the first and second semesters respectively.<sup>2</sup> The pre-service teachers were told to turn in their response journals on specific dates (three times in the first semester and two times in the second semester), which were assigned at the beginning of each semester. Each time the journals were submitted, the instructor read through them carefully, focusing on content and the quality of reflective thinking, rather than grammatical accuracy and fluency. Instead of awarding grades, the instructor provided personal responses to students’ entries, trying to answer questions, and asked further questions to stimulate thinking, or to provide further insights on issues raised. At the end of the second semester, the student teachers started their 6-week teaching practicum in secondary schools. They were

encouraged to continue with the habit of journal writing on a regular basis, though they were not required to submit the journals to the instructor.

The data of the study was obtained from a questionnaire administered at the end of the academic year, follow-up interviews, as well as pertinent data from journal entries (mainly the last response journals where the pre-service teachers were asked to comment on the journal writing experience). The questionnaire comprises 20 likert-scale questions (see Tables 1–4 for questions) seeking the pre-service teachers' views and perceptions of response journals. The interviews, conducted with all the 13 teacher learners, served to follow up on the major issues probed in the questionnaire. The interviews, all conducted in English, were semi-structured, and data gathered was transcribed, summarized and categorized. The response journals (the last entries) were read and re-read to identify views of response journals. While descriptive statistical data was generated from the questionnaire analysis, qualitative data was gathered from the interview and journal data.

## **Results and Discussion**

This section presents the findings gathered from the three sources (i.e., questionnaire, follow-up interviews, and response journals) to throw light on the pre-service teachers' views of response journals. Specifically, the following aspects are addressed: (1) extent of enjoyment derived from writing response journals, (2) perceived difficulty of journal writing, (3) benefits of response journals, and (4) instructor's feedback on journals. When the pre-service teachers are referred to, pseudonyms are used.

### ***Extent of Enjoyment***

The results in Table 1 shows that when the pre-service teachers first began writing response journals, they were reasonably well-motivated, since 61.6% of them liked the idea already when they were first told. The findings suggest that the pre-service teachers developed a liking for writing response journals over time, since more of them liked writing response journals in the first semester (76.9%) and even more in the second semester (84.6%). Although they were no longer required to

**Table 1: Enjoyment Derived From Writing Response Journals**

Questionnaire statements	A & SA	NO	D & SD	NA
1. When I was first asked to write journals on this course, I liked this idea.	61.6% (8)	30.8% (4)	7.7% (1)	0%
2. I enjoyed writing response journals in the first semester.	76.9% (10)	7.7% (1)	15.4% (2)	0%
3. I enjoyed writing response journals in the second semester.	84.6% (11)	15.4% (2)	0%	0%
4. I enjoyed writing the extra journals during the practicum.	100%* (11)	0%	0%	15.4%** (2)

Note: A = agree; SA = strongly agree; NO = no opinion; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree; NA = not applicable. Figures in parentheses are the numbers of pre-service teachers of respective responses.

\* The percentage calculated is based on the total number of 11 pre-service teachers who wrote the extra journals voluntarily.

\*\* The percentage calculated is based on the total number of 13 pre-service teachers who participated in the study.

write journals during their practicum, 84.6% continued with journal writing, and all of them said they enjoyed the writing. The findings are encouraging, suggesting that once the process of journal writing began, the teacher learners developed a habit of putting in words their reflective thinking, which is likely to foster in them a predilection for the process of journal writing.

The interview and data by and large corroborate the questionnaire findings. Eleven of them said they enjoyed writing response journals. Some enjoyed journal writing throughout,

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

while some enjoyed it better in the second semester:

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

In the first semester 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. (Kitty)

Some pre-service teachers particularly enjoyed writing teaching journals during the practicum:

During the practicum, I write it for myself because I want to keep a record. So I know that I enjoy it otherwise I won't write it. (Sandra)

The data suggests that writing response journals might have been painful for some pre-service teachers initially. However, once they started to put pen to paper and became accustomed to the process, the joy of journaling grew and kept increasing. Those who commented on the joy they got from journal writing in their last journal entry had a similar point to make. Despite her busy life and the "temptation" to delay writing journals, Sandra found that once she started journal writing, it was so enjoyable that the process would simply go on and on. In her last journal entry, she wrote:

Once I start writing, I will go on and on and babble all the ideas in my head which indeed is an enjoyable journey. (Sandra)

### ***Perceived Difficulty of Journal Writing***

Just as the pre-service teachers liked journal writing better and better over time, the pain of writing also diminished over time, since more of them found writing response journals an easier task in the second semester than the first semester (see Table 2). 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.

The student teachers who chose to continue with journal writing during the practicum tended to find writing teaching journals about their own teaching easier, since it was perceived as more "real" than writing about the learning that took place in the teacher education program. In the interview, Lily said:

**Table 2: Perceived Difficulty of Journal Writing**

Questionnaire statements	A & SA	NO	D & SD	NA
5. Writing response journals was easy in the first semester.	53.8% (7)	15.4% (2)	30.8% (4)	0%
6. Writing response journals was easy in the second semester.	84.6% (11)	15.4% (2)	0%	0%
7. Writing the extra journals during the practicum was easy.	90.9%* (10)	9.1%* (1)	0%	15.4%** (2)

Note: A = agree; SA = strongly agree; NO = no opinion; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree; NA = not applicable. Figures in parentheses are the numbers of pre-service teachers of respective responses.

\* The percentage calculated is based on the total number of 11 pre-service teachers who wrote the extra journals voluntarily.

\*\* The percentage calculated is based on the total number of 13 pre-service teachers who participated in the study.

... during the practicum ... most of the thing I write down is really my personal opinion or my feeling after the lesson.

The above findings suggest that as the pre-service teachers engaged in writing response journals, they found the process of journal writing easier and easier and were able to develop a better grasp of reflective thinking over time. There is no mention of difficulty associated with journal writing in the pre-service teachers' journal entries. This could suggest that the difficulty of journal writing as a written assignment might not have been an issue when the pre-service teachers reflected on it in their last journal entry.

Despite the relative ease of the written assignment, some pre-service teachers felt bothered by the lack of ideas in writing response journals. Natalie said in the interview:

I always have to think what I have to write, but not come up with ideas easily.

Another problem was the tendency to put off the writing until the submission deadline. One pre-service teacher, Betty, pointed out that

due to laziness, journal writing was often postponed to the last minute and, as a result, it was not done regularly after each lesson. She said in the interview:

I always treat it as a homework, and I normally do it right before we have to submit it.

In other words, instead of spending time to reflect on issues raised in class on a weekly basis, some pre-service teachers produced several journals at one go right before the submission deadline. This might have affected the quality of thinking and written reflections in the journals.

### ***Benefits of Response Journals***

The results about the benefits of response journals are predominantly positive (see Table 3), and consistent with the previous results about enjoyment and perceived difficulty. There is, similarly, a trend toward a greater agreement about the benefits of response journals in the second semester, since all of the 13 pre-service teachers thought that writing journals in the second semester is beneficial. They all thought that they had become more reflective through journal writing. However, some of them seemed less positive when asked about journal writing being a waste of time and if pre-service teachers should write journals. The result probably suggests that despite the perceived benefits, time was a concern for some pre-service teachers. This may be because journal writing tends to be considered a time-consuming exercise, which can be painful and draining especially when the writers do not have a lot of ideas about the issues discussed. As shown in the findings regarding the perceived difficulty of journal writing, writing journals could be particularly taxing for those pre-service teachers who had a habit of delaying the writing until the last minute, and these pre-service teachers were likely to be less positive about the worthiness of journal writing.

The interview data shows that response journals were generally favorably received by the pre-service teachers. Some mentioned the benefit of developing and crystallizing their thoughts through writing:

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

**Table 3: Benefits of Response Journals**

	Questionnaire statements	A & SA	NO	D & SD	NA
8.	I found journal writing in the first semester a beneficial experience.	53.8% (7)	30.8% (4)	15.4% (2)	0%
9.	I found journal writing in the second semester a beneficial experience.	100% (13)	0%	0%	0%
10.	I found writing the extra journals during the practicum a beneficial experience.	90.9%* (10)	9.1%* (1)	0%	15.4%** (2)
11.	I think journal writing is a waste of time.	0%	23.1% (3)	76.9% (10)	0%
12.	I believe journal writing has had a positive impact on my teaching during the practicum.	76.9% (10)	23.1% (3)	0%	0%
13.	I feel that I have become more reflective through journal writing.	100% (13)	0%	0%	0%
14.	I believe it is a good idea for pre-service teachers to write journals.	84.6% (11)	15.4% (2)	0%	0%

Note: A = agree; SA = strongly agree; NO = no opinion; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree; NA = not applicable. Figures in parentheses are the numbers of pre-service teachers of respective responses.

\* The percentage calculated is based on the total number of 11 pre-service teachers who wrote the extra journals voluntarily.

\*\* The percentage calculated is based on the total number of 13 pre-service teachers who participated in the study.

... without writing down maybe I'm just aware one or two things that I get in the lessons. But if I write it down, I will get some more idea[s] and the ideas will be much more organized or better ... and I can learn from my own experience. (Catherine)

Journal writing was found to provide a splendid opportunity to further learning beyond class time:

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

... class time is too short that I can't express something or discuss with her [the instructor] for what I do not agree with her, then I jot it down and put it to the journal writing. (Kitty)

Some thought it was a good way to improve their writing:

It can improve my English because journal is something to express ourselves. (Natalie)

The following selected journal segments also demonstrate the pre-service teachers' positive attitude toward response journals as a tool for developing reflection:

Through writing the journal, I get to know the subject and myself more. Since we cover so many things in the lecture, sometimes I have some ideas during the class; we do not have time for everyone to express their opinions. Or maybe sometimes I was still thinking during the class, and only after class will I have enough time to think it through. So writing the journal gives me the room and the time to recall my opinions I have during the class. (Sandra)

Sandra's reflections show that journals provide a space for reflection so that learning can continue to take place beyond the classroom. Moreover, through journal writing, pre-service teachers can develop a voice and understand themselves better as prospective teachers:

Journals can let me think back what has happened around me. They can help me reflect my belief in teaching also.... maybe journal is like a reminder for me about what kind of teacher I actually want to be through criticizing or judging some current educational issues or things that I have learnt through lessons. (Ida)

Through writing journals, I can consolidate the knowledge I gained during lessons. At the same time, I have a better understanding of

myself. I know better my strength and also my weaknesses. Writing journals is really a great way to improve. (Helen)

The journal data suggests that journal writing enables learning to continue outside and beyond the classroom, better equipping pre-service teachers for autonomous learning.

### ***Instructor's Feedback on Journals***

The pre-service teachers' response to the instructor's feedback is overwhelmingly positive. They enjoyed reading the teacher's feedback and found it useful. The findings also suggest that the pre-service teachers felt that getting the teacher to read their journals is important, and they seemed to prefer having all their journals read by the instructor. Interestingly, when asked if it is important that someone reads their journals, fewer of them agreed and/or strongly agreed. This could suggest that they preferred their journals to be read by a teacher rather than someone else (e.g., a peer).

The interview data supplements the questionnaire findings, indicating that the instructor's feedback played an important role in the journaling process. All the pre-service teachers found the feedback provided by the instructor very valuable:

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)

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

The results may suggest that had the teacher educator not provided feedback on the pre-service teachers' response journals, the quality of their journals (and hence reflective thinking) might have been different. When asked about the possibility of getting no feedback from the instructor, one pre-service teacher said:

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

**Table 4: Instructor's Feedback**

Questionnaire statements	A & SA	NO	D & SD	NA
15. I enjoyed reading the teacher's responses to my journals.	92.3% (12)	7.7% (1)	0%	0%
16. I found the teacher's responses to my journals useful.	92.3% (12)	7.7% (1)	0%	0%
17. I would prefer my teacher to give responses to ALL my journals.	69.2% (9)	23.1% (3)	7.7% (1)	0%
18. I would prefer my teacher to give responses to SOME of my journals.	46.1% (6)	30.8% (4)	23.1% (3)	0%
19. It does not matter whether my teacher gives responses to my journals.	7.7% (1)	30.8% (4)	61.5% (8)	0%
20. It is important that someone reads my journals.	38.5% (5)	61.5% (8)	0%	0%

Note: A = agree; SA = strongly agree; NO = no opinion; D = disagree; SD = strongly disagree; NA = not applicable. Figures in parentheses are the numbers of pre-service teachers of respective responses.

In her journal entry, similarly, Carly wrote about the benefit of getting the instructor's feedback:

Getting the response gives me a chance to perceive an event in another aspect, or even seeks for the advice, in which it is very important to my teaching.

Overall, the pre-service teachers' views indicate that the teacher educator's feedback has a significant role to play in the journaling process.

Despite the small sample and hence limited generalizability of the findings, the study has demonstrated the various benefits of response journals as a tool for fostering reflection among pre-service teachers. Indeed, journal writing need not wait until the prospective teachers start their field experience or teaching practice. Response journals can be

employed as early as the teacher education program commences. Since some pre-service teachers commented on the difficulty of journal writing in the first semester due to the lack of ideas, the teacher educator could consider giving them more guidance initially, for instance, by providing a list of focused questions based on course content, or asking them to respond specifically to course readings based on some prompts. If possible, sample response journals could be provided to give pre-service teachers an idea of what a response journal may consist of.

Second, since journal writing is considered a time-consuming exercise, and some pre-service teachers may tend to put off the writing instead of attend to it right after class, the teacher educator may consider letting pre-service teachers start writing the responses in class 10–15 minutes before class finishes, and encourage them to continue with the writing after class. The teacher educator can also require journals be submitted on a more regular basis (e.g., weekly), which could prevent some pre-service teachers from delaying the writing until the submission deadline. This could also help pre-service teachers keep the momentum of journal writing throughout the teacher preparation process. But then the teacher educator would have to consider the issue of how often to provide feedback on journals, which we will next turn to.

Pre-service teachers value the teacher educator's feedback on their journals and feel that it is an important incentive for journal writing. Naturally, one would conclude that teacher educators should consider ways to fully utilize the feedback as a means of stimulating reflection. An argument against the teacher educator providing constant feedback on pre-service teachers' journals (as in dialogue journals between teacher learners and teacher educator), however, is that this may render the pre-service teachers too reliant on the teacher educator, making use of journaling primarily or solely as a means of communicating with the instructor, getting answers to questions, seeking advice and so on instead of using journals per se as a springboard for developing reflective thinking. In order to reduce prospective teachers' dependence on the teacher educator and to put a greater onus on pre-service teachers to engage in reflective thinking, the teacher educator can find ways to gradually make his/her role redundant so that without giving feedback, the pre-service teachers would still be interested in journal writing as a tool for reflection. In this connection, the teacher educator can think of asking pre-service teachers to write dialogue journals with peers, letting them take greater responsibility for learning. They can also make use of

class time to let pre-service teachers read journals written by their peers, engage in discussion, and write further reflections on the sharing and discussion. Teacher educators can consider combining different methods throughout the duration of a teacher education course so as to add variety to the potentially mundane journal writing assignment.

## Conclusion

Reflection as a habit, if successfully fostered among pre-service teachers early in the teacher preparation process, would facilitate reflective thinking in the classroom both as an intern and as a practicing teacher. Since reflection is difficult to teach, pre-service teachers should be given plenty of hands-on practice in reflective thinking as early as possible; that is, before the practicum or formal teaching starts. As Segall (2001) says, “without interrogating the relationship between what prospective teachers learn and how they come to learn it, indeed, without implicating the two, teacher education has little transformative impact on students teachers’ existing understandings of teaching and learning” (p. 232). Through writing response journals, pre-service teachers learn how to learn to teach, develop a reflective stance toward teaching and learning, and are better prepared for reflective practice.

## Notes

1. The Hong Kong Government’s new requirements of 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).
2. 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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