



Reflective Journal Writing: Attitudes of Pre-Service Teachers

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Abstract

In teacher education, reflective journal writing is viewed as a learning tool that bridges the gap between new and existing information. A sustained reflective practice and journal writing builds the capacity of the pre-service teacher and equips them with desirable pedagogical skills and knowledge. The objective of the study was to assess the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards reflective journal writing. A total of 252 Diploma in Basic Education final year students of Presbyterian College of Education participated in the study. The journal entries written by the teachers every week were used as the primary source of data for the study. Data from the journals was augmented by an interview conducted on the conveniently selected pre-service teachers. A set of assessment criteria was used to evaluate the journal entries made by the teachers. The study found that pre-service teachers in Ghana have a negative attitude towards reflective journal writing. Pre-service teachers perceive reflective journal writing as an exercise that adds to their workload hence unable to undertake the practise religiously.

Keywords: Reflective Journal Writing, Journal entries, Teacher development, Pre-service teachers

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1.0 Introduction

Effective teachers evolve through a systematic process of planning, teaching, reflecting, re-teaching to surmount classroom challenges that hinder effective teaching and learning. Journal writing allows pre-service teachers to look back and critique their teaching strategies and make amends where necessary. A sustained reflective practice and journal writing builds the capacity of the pre-service teacher and equips them with desirable pedagogical skills and knowledge. In teacher education, journals are considered essential to improve reflection (Richards and Lockhart, 1996).

Research has shown that reflective journal writing brings many benefits (Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman, and Conrad, 1990). They intensify students' cognitive growth (Garmon, 2001), offer opportunities to access teaching and learning activities critically (Lee, 2004), ensure effecting understanding of course content (Garmon, 1998), enable the teacher educator to individualize their instruction (Bean and Zulich, 1989), and turn students into more reflective and independent learners (Farris and Fuhler, 1996; Good and Whang, 2002; Parsons, 1994)

A well-written teaching journal becomes a record of a teacher's teaching experiences, usually written while the experiences are still fresh. Constantly recording one's experiences enables them to maintain those experiences and also provide them with the opportunity to reflect and learn from them. It is very useful when the experience was unpleasant (For example, if a teaching activity did not go well). In this scenario, writing about it and then analyzing it afterwards can help you detach yourself from the experience in order to assess what went wrong and avoid making the same mistakes in the future.

Teaching journals are often written during field experiences or teaching practicum (Garmon, 2001). In teaching journals, pre-service teachers state-specific teaching competencies they wish to develop in their journals and describe how they gained those competencies. They further describe what did not work well for them and suggest ways of overcoming those challenges. They even include what they wish to vary to achieve better results.

Teaching journal writing has four sub-categories: concerns with general teaching, specific lessons or experiences, behavioural management, and so on (lesson management, content, homework). Students can ask and respond to questions in their own way (Crème, 2005). Journals can be used in the classroom to evaluate educational philosophy and teaching approaches (Hume, 2009; Lee, 2008). Despite the overwhelming scientific evidence supporting reflective journal writing, teacher education at Ghanaian institutes of education is lacking. Three years ago, reflective journals were introduced in Ghanaian institutes of education. No attempt has been made to examine pre-service teachers' use of reflective journals. It is believed that when the process of writing teaching journals is evaluated, the outcome of the evaluation could be used to sharpen the teaching skills and deepen the pedagogical knowledge of pre-service teachers. In teacher education programs, reflective practice is an important component of pre-service teachers' development (Tsang and Wong, 1996).

To reflect in education means "to examine one's own and the class's performance, and to base explanations on facts," according to Shulman (1987). (p. 15). Rodgers (2002) states that pre-service teachers gained understanding of teaching and learning to become reflective practitioners. Practice active, acute observation to grasp what you observe and process it to create conclusions based on your experiences (Rodgers, 2002). Thus, this study's purpose was to explore pre-service teachers' attitudes on journal writing.

1.1 Journal Writing in Teaching and Learning in Education

The process of documenting personal observations, thoughts, and questions on assigned or personal topics in the classroom is known as journal writing. Thoughts regarding daily current events, experiences, reading assignments, or science experiments may be included in journal projects offered in class. Journal writing exercises promote course subject knowledge construction by encouraging trainees to reflect on how they learn, what they learn, and how they feel (Garmon, 1998; Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman, and Conrad, 1990). Another benefit is that journaling helps trainees become autonomous learners (Farris and Fuhler, 1996; Good and Whang, 2002; Tsang and Wong, 1996). Also, writing journals can develop critical reflection in instruction by recording "criticisms, doubts, frustrations, questions, the joys of teaching, and the results of experiments" rather than merely focusing on mundane routines (Farrell, 2004, p. 39). Journals, a form of reflective writing promoting reflective practice, are

widespread in teacher education (Bailey, 1990; Boud, 2001; Farrell, 2007, 2008; Garmon, 2001; Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999; Richards and Farrell, 2005).

Teachers can improve their practical competencies by engaging in reflective practice. No correlation has been found between reflective practice skills and years of experience in Japanese public health nursing, highlighting the need to consider measures of evaluation and improvement to more effectively foster reflective practice, so that expertise can result in qualitative improvement in those skills.

Students can use reflective journal writing to respond to literature, improve their written fluency, discourse in writing with another student or the teacher, or write in the academic areas. While journaling is a form of writing in and of itself, students can use their journals to develop ideas for other sorts of writing. Teachers can employ journal-style literature by reading extracts and discussing them with their students. There are additional works that focus on the idea of writing down life experiences in diaries, notebooks, and logs (Altrichter and Holly, 2005, de la Luz Reyes, 1991; Hiemstra, 2001; Walker, 1985). Responses to students' diaries and the use of conversation journals between instructor and student can be excellent communication and assessment tools (Atwell, 1998).

1.2 Frameworks that develop reflective journal writing

Different researchers see reflective teaching as a systematic approach to teacher development. Bartlett (1994) recommends a reflective teaching cycle that includes five non-sequential and non-linear components: mapping, communicating, contesting, appraising, and acting. Each of these elements is a response to a particular query. Mapping provides an answer to the question, "What do I do as a teacher?" In personal diaries, learning logs, portfolios, and journals, keep track of observations and gather evidence. "Informing" aims to answer the questions, "What does my teaching mean?" and "What did I intend?" (Bartlett, p. 210, 1994). The teacher revisits his original records and maps, both adding to them and making sense of them. The informing phase assists the teacher in understanding the differences between teaching routine and intentional teaching action, as well as the principles that support them and the teaching theory that supports them.

"Contesting" is concerned with the question, "How did I become this way?" This phase requires us to question both our ideas and the structures that support them" (Bartlett, 1994, p. 211). To achieve this goal, teachers may share their understandings and motivations for teaching in specific ways with their colleagues. As they gain experience, they develop their theories of teaching and learning, as well as their professional histories, which include assumptions about the best ways to teach. "Appraisal" is linked to the question, "How could I improve my teaching?" It is necessary to look for alternatives. In ways that are consistent with our new appraisal concept, we begin to link the thinking dimension of reflection with the search for instruction (Bartlett, 1994, p. 213). This "appraisal" process aims to identify and evaluate alternative courses of action, such as new plans or strategies to improve teaching and learning processes. "Acting" is a command to take action in response to the question, "What and how shall I now teach?" It is concerned with putting those new teaching plans into action.

In four stages, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle encourages reflective journal writing. Learners discuss a specific event in stage one before reflecting on it in stage two. In the third stage, students reflect on the significance of the event and attempt to uncover reasons for it. Finally, learners in stage four strive to integrate prior experiences with new knowledge in order to make decisions and solve problems, resulting in improved perceptions or understandings of prior experiences. Scanlon and Chernomas (1997) use a three-stage reflective learning model to describe the stages of writing a journal:

The first stage of reflection is being aware. This could be prompted by thoughts of a successful or unsuccessful teaching experience. Stage 2 entails the individual conducting a critical analysis of the incident, elucidating what occurred and why. We think about how this experience ties to our past thoughts and practices. Based on the reflection, a new perspective arises, or prior statements are verified or reinforced. As a result of this, changes in thinking or feeling occur, as well as changes in practice.

1.3 The Reflective Journal writing process

Journal writing is one of the ways that have been utilized in teacher education to foster reflection. Journals can help teacher candidates think more clearly and make connections in the teaching and learning process (Cole et al., 1998). Pre-service teachers can use reflective journal writing to look back on their lessons and make corrections where they went wrong. It is extremely important in the teacher development process. According to Murphy (2001), teachers can become professionals in a variety of ways, causing them to become inward-looking in order to acquire knowledge about what happens in their classroom.

In their study, Ho and Richards (2008) studied how journaling facilitated reflection. The authors observed that journal writing could allow instructors to reflect on their classroom practices. Muoz et al., (2008) conducted action research to introduce new educators to the concept and practice of educational research. Most importantly, teachers could improve the research competencies while learning to teach. Ross (1989) defines reflective journal writing as a way of thinking about educational challenges which requires rational decisions. Defined as more than just thinking, reflection is focused on the teacher's day-to-day classroom teaching.

As stated by Risko et al. (2002), reflection allows instructors to draw the relationship between theory and practice, deepen their understanding of personal convictions while adapting to new perspectives, and use inquiry to influence instructional decision-making. Making a reflective journal writing foster critical thinking. Priest and Sturgess (2005) claim that journaling allows people to "subject their personal beliefs to critical scrutiny in an enabling environment" (p. 2). Journaling also helps teachers to keep track of their thoughts, feelings, experiences, values, and beliefs. In their words, "journal writing is the recording of daily occurrences, personal reflections, environmental inquiry, and reactions to experiences."

What's more, reflective writing allows pre-service teachers to relate with their instructors without the pressure of grading (Park, 2003). Students, on the other hand, have the ability to assess themselves and monitor their progress. Learners "need to learn how to critically examine their abilities, and applications of their knowledge and skills," according to Garfield (1994). A reflective diary encourages students to "self-assess, collaborate, reflect, and set goals," according to GilGarcia and Cintron (2002, p.1). According to Graham (2003), reflective journal writing assists students in developing confidence, competence, and a sense of self as writers.

2.0 Methodology

The exploratory research design was adopted for the study. The participants in the study were 252 Diploma in Basic Education final year students of Presbyterian College of Education who were on attachment for their practicum. Throughout the 3-year program of study, pre-service teachers are introduced to the concept and relevance of undertaking the reflective practice. Further, it is a practice required as a basic tenet of teaching intended to encourage the habit of self-critique towards self-improvements.

The journal entries made by the pre-service teachers every week were used as the primary source of data for the study. A set of assessment criteria was developed to evaluate the journal entries made by the teachers. In the first place, the researcher undertook a 'General Assessment of the Journals'. The purpose was to find out the rate or frequency at which the teachers made journal entries. Second, the quality of the entries was assessed—meant to ascertain whether the journal entries fully met supervision requirements, and there was mentor feedback and the scope of the journal entries (subjects). This was done because being systematic and contextualizing what teachers write allows them to clarify their reflections later, giving them enduring credibility and the opportunity for future learning (Burton et al., 2009). Apart from the journal evaluation criteria, 20 of the 252 pre-service teachers whose journals were evaluated were chosen for an interview. The interviews were designed to assess their general attitudes and impressions about reflective journal writing.

3.0 Results

Table 1 *General Assessment of Journals*

Assessment Criteria	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Journals that were 100% up-to-date	97	38.49
Journals at varying degrees of completion but not 100%	155	61.51
Journals 50% up-to-date	49	31.61

N=252

Assessment of the pre-service teacher's attitude towards journal writing is shown in Table 1. The requirement for effective reflective journal writing is for pre-service teachers to approach and fulfil this requirement religiously as part of their teaching practice. Table 1 shows that one-third (n=97, 38%) of the pre-service teachers had complete reflective journals written. They were implying that a total of 155 representing about 62% of the journals reviewed were at varying stages of completion. Further assessment showed that out of the 155 journals at various stages of completion, only 31.6% were at 50% completion.

Table 2 *Assessment of Journal Entries*

Assessment Criteria	Frequency (n)	Percent (%)
Journals that fully met supervision requirements	108	42.86
Journals that partially met supervision requirements	144	57.14
Journals that contained 50% mentor feedback	85	33.73
Journals that contained less than 50% mentor feedback	134	53.17
Journals that reflected all classroom subjects	166	65.87
Journals that reflected some classroom subjects	86	34.13
Journals that reflected one classroom subject only	157	62.30

Assessment of the quality of journal entries made by the pre-service teachers shows that less than half (n=108, 42.9%) of the journals assessed contained entries that fully met supervisor requirements (Table 2). Out of the 252 journals of pre-service teachers reviewed, more than half (n=144, 57.1%) were considered as partially meeting supervisors' requirements.

The researcher assessed the mentor feedback provided in the journals. The results revealed 85 representing 34% of the journals reviewed contained 50% mentor feedback implying that more than half (n=134, 53%) of the journals contained less than 50% feedback. Concerning journal entries that reflected all classroom subjects, more than half (n=166, 66%) of the reviewed journals entries had references to all subjects taught. That notwithstanding, 86, representing 34% of the reviewed journals, had entries that reflected different classroom subjects. Interest was taken in finding out how many entries reflected just one classroom subject. It was interesting to find that more than half (n=157, 62%) of the 252 reviewed journal entries reflected one classroom subject only.

3.1 Pre-service teachers' perceptions towards Reflective Journal Writing

The pre-service teachers were asked to give their opinions about reflective journal writing. Responses to the effect have been presented below;

When asked about what they thought about Reflective Journal Writing, most of the respondents believed that the practice is not necessary since they consider other avenues available for them to conduct self-evaluation of their teaching daily. Additionally, some indicated that the practice is not necessary because it has not been that long since its introduction into the education service. Selected responses have been given below;

PST1: "Oh, I am of the opinion that this particular thing is not that necessary because if I want to evaluate my teaching, I can do that at any time, not necessarily every day as soon as I am done with the teaching, I have to do it...."

PST6: *“It’s a tedious exercise to undertake since we have many things to do. You have to build your portfolio, write long essay, set and mark questions. Though we are service teachers, our responsibilities are in equal standing as permanent teachers.”*

Moreover, the pre-service teachers were asked about their opinions about the benefits of writing reflective journals. The responses suggest that despite their belief that it is too much work, they still recognize the relevance of reflective journal writing to their professional development. Selected remarks have been provided below;

PST2: *I’m wondering if keeping a reflective journal helped me improve my teaching. Yes, I believe it is. When I look at my weekly writing paper, I can see how far I’ve come, particularly dealing with class management issues.*

PST7: *I believe that journal writing is very crucial for me because I get to evaluate my own teaching methods. As I had discovered my teaching weaknesses and strengths on my own, I am able to accept them more easily.*

PST10: *Reflective journal writing was beneficial to me because it assisted me in dealing with a problem in one of my classes. At the start of the semester, I had trouble getting some of my students to understand their English homework assignments. I had to go over the concepts I had previously taught and explain the assignment once more. I discovered that I could write their homework assignment on the board to avoid any confusion through reflective writing.*

Based on the teachers’ perceptions of reflective journal writing, it can be resolved that most of the teachers regard the practice as burdening. However, most also believe that it is a practice that comes with many benefits because of its self-improving effects.

3.2 Discussion of Results

The study showed that most 38% of the pre-service teachers had their journals up to 100%—implying that almost two-thirds of the pre-service teachers are either not writing the reflective journals or at varying levels of completion, as evidenced in Table 1. The outcome implies that pre-service teachers’ attitudes towards journal writing are negative and unexpected of students being prepared to become certified teachers. The pre-service teachers are expected to make daily entries in the reflective journals. The entry for a particular day must indicate specific teaching competencies the student-teacher learnt. It must also show the factors that aided the development of the competency indicated in the journal and factors that hindered the competency development. The finding is consistent with the findings of Soodmand-Afshar and Farahani (2018), who found the perception of 304 Iranian EFL teachers about reflective journal writing to be at the minimum level.

The study observed apathy towards the practice because the pre-service teachers perceive the exercise as too much work and also unnecessary to bother themselves. Of utmost importance is when the student-teacher indicates what they will do differently when they get the opportunity to re-teach the topic. The journal must also reflect different classroom subjects. The journal finally sought to have the mentor’ feedback concerning the lesson taught. A reflective journal that has all these is deemed to have satisfied the requirements of supervision.

On assessing the “Journals that fully met the supervision requirement,” the results showed that less than half of the journals assessed fully met the supervisor’s requirements (Table 2). With approximately only 43% of pre-service teachers, meeting the requirement of supervision is a cause for concern. It meant most of the journals were not up-to-date and lacked most of the other requirements for supervision. The best time to reflect and make entries in the journal is after the mentor’s feedback, which follows the lesson immediately. “It is not sufficient to have an experience to learn”. Without reflecting on this experience, it may quickly be forgotten, or its learning potential lost (Gibbs, 1988, p 9).

Furthermore, the study found that more than half of the Journals written partially met the supervision requirement. This is equally a cause for concern. When student teachers fail to meet supervision requirements fully in huge percentages, as shown in Table 2, it creates a negative image for the entire practicum.

More so, the results showed that about one-third of the journals contained 50% mentor feedback. Feedback from mentors is critical in all practicums (Hascher, Cocard and Moser, 2004; Martinez, 2016). Several researchers have found out that high-quality feedback in teacher education programmes plays a fundamental role in helping pre-service teachers grow professionally (Hattie and Timperley, 2007; Snead and Freiberg, 2017; Lizzio and Wilson,

2008; Akcan and Tatar, 2010). For this critical role, mentors communicate through feedback to the mentees. Mentors ought to be experienced to provide sound professional and pedagogical support to developing teachers. Turning now to the journals containing less than 50% mentor feedback, the result showed that about half of the journals contained less than 50% feedback. Still, relative to the mentor feedback, the less feedback a journal contains, the more professional and pedagogical support the pre-service teacher loses. The consequence is certification of pre-service teachers who are not well-versed in the act of pre-service teachers teaching. Al Sohmani (2012) posits that feedback is essential to the growth of pre-service teachers for them to become professionally and academically qualified teachers. Moreover, feedback is deemed to provide a two-directional professional dialogue that results in meaningful interaction between pre-service teachers and their mentors, which, in the end, bridges the gap between teacher education theory and practice in a simple, meaningful and practical way (White, 2009). On whether the journals were all subject-inclusive (Journals that reflected all classroom subjects), the study found that over 60% of the journals reflected all classroom subjects. Even though 66% is not too discouraging, getting all pre-service teachers to reflect on lessons in all classroom subjects will be the best. It indicates the pre-service teacher's versatility in teaching. In most Basic School Classrooms in Ghana, the class teacher teaches all the classroom subjects, so it is very important to expose them to teach as many classroom subjects as possible.

4.0 Conclusions and Implications for Teaching

This study explored the attitudes of pre-service teachers towards reflective journal writing during practicum. Many pre-service teachers perceive journal writing as unnecessary because it is a recent introduction to Ghana's teacher education programme. An equally substantial number of pre-service teachers perceive reflective journal writing as additional work. Reflective journal writing as a framework for pre-service teachers' reflection during practicum focuses on developing teaching competencies. In the process, pre-service teachers explicitly select a competency and then determines activities that lead to the acquisition of that particular competency. At the end of the lesson, the pre-service teacher looks back and appraises their work. Of particular importance is the pre-service teacher's ability to identify the flaws in their teaching using Zalipour's (2015) reflection questions (what was I thinking?) and (could it be different?) and ascribing causes and suggesting pedagogical strategies that could be used to resolve the challenges encountered to bring about improvements in teaching and learning outcomes. In addition to the pre-service teacher's observations, the mentor also provides feedback that the pre-service teacher is supposed to capture in their journals. Mentor feedback constitutes critical professional comments that shape the pre-service teachers' lesson delivery. It is expected that as pre-service teachers continuously write a reflective journal, their classroom teaching will be improving systematically. By the end of the practicum, the student-teacher would have built a professional dossier on their teaching.

The results revealed a lackadaisical attitude on pre-service teachers, leaving several implications for pre-service teacher education. First, a general format for writing a reflective journal could be developed for all pre-service teachers during practicum. This will guide them to make the appropriate entries. The absence of a reflective journal guide resulted in pre-service teachers including things like time of reporting for school, sweeping of classroom, and morning devotion and excluded the very things that build teachers' competencies. A reflective writing guide will also ensure uniformity.

Second, reflective journal writing should be reinforced during microteaching. By doing so, pre-service teachers will evolve by the time they are ready to commence practicum. The results revealed that even though some of the reflective journals were up to date, most of the activities pre-service teachers wrote did not match the competencies they chose to develop. Smyth (1992) suggests sharing the experiences of reflective practitioners as an example via collective support devices such as discussion seminars, group learning activities, and e-forums (Collin and Karsenti, 2011). Paek (2008) mentions some essential areas that pre-service teachers can focus on during microteaching to develop their journal writing skills and knowledge: class activities; class interaction; class management; correction; instruction; lesson contents; monitoring; planning; questioning and responding; teaching materials; visual aids; and emotions.

Third, assigning a percentage of the assessment procedure to reflective journal writing would make pre-service teachers attach some level of seriousness to reflective journal writing. Once the score for reflective journal writing can affect their overall grading for the practicum, pre-service teachers will change their negative attitudes towards reflective journal writing.

The results portend a not-too-good future for the practicum programme. The benefits of journal writing are immeasurable. School-based practicum feedback offered in teacher education programs helps student teachers learn to teach (Al Sohmani, 2012). Reflective journal writing has become a critical component of many professional programmes. The pre-service teachers' ability to reflect on their teaching will hone their teaching competencies. Reflective journal writing promoting reflective practice abounds in education (Bailey, 1990; Boud, 2001; Farrell, 2007, 2008; Garmon, 2001; Gebhard and Oprandy, 1999; Richards and Farrell, 2005). In this respect, no effort should be spared in developing the journal writing skills of pre-service teachers. Being pre-service teachers with the wrong attitudes towards reflective journal writing is most unbelievable. Their attitudes may stem from improper orientation on what it takes to become a well-trained teacher. However, the vital point is that the issues are not insurmountable once the appropriate measures are effected and monitored to ensure that the desired outcomes are attained.

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