

# Reflective Writing A Way to Lifelong Teacher Learning



Edited by  
**Jill Burton**  
**Phil Quirke**  
**Carla L Reichmann**  
**Joy Kreeft Peyton**

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## PREFACE

Writing as a means of teacher learning is the focus of *Reflective Writing: A Way to Lifelong Teacher Learning*. As the editors, we wanted to showcase writing reflectively about practice as

- A lifelong learning resource for teachers
- A powerful tool in any form of inquiry-based teaching, such as reflective practice and action research
- A flexible process, capable of providing professional support and stimulus to teachers in any teaching circumstances

We believe that writing reflectively is an enjoyable but rigorous way in which teachers can learn how to be more effective teachers in their own unique settings.

The teachers who write reflectively in this book are language learners, teachers of English and other languages, teacher educators, and higher education teachers. Their writing includes dialoguing in journals online, group journals, and using autobiography, narrative, memoir, phenomenology, and self-study. Most of the contributors use reflective writing as a class resource as well as a support for their own professional development. As practising teachers, they represent the world of TESOL in Asia, Australia, Europe, the Middle East, and North and South America. They show that reflective writing is a powerful, personal resource that encourages teachers not only to write but also to communicate about teaching outside their immediate educational settings.

The chapters comprise case analyses of teacher learning. The contexts include formal teacher education, such as short courses and graduate programs. The chapters also document professional in-service communities, informal teacher groups, pairs of teachers reflecting together, and individual teachers writing to reflect on practice at particular points in their lives, or integrating it in their daily practice.

A variety of themes is evident, such as the use of electronic technology as a writing tool, collaborative journaling, global networking, creating teacher-learning communities, and teacher-initiated research.

The first chapter provides a conceptual frame, explaining what we mean by reflective writing and the variety of ways in which it can work and sustain teachers. The following chapters offer a continuum of experience, including individual teachers using reflective writing for self-study, pairwork, small groups, classes, and finally, communities of teachers who write reflectively. Each chapter, except Chapter 1, is prefaced by a pre-reading question drawing attention to the form or aspect of reflective writing featured in that chapter. The book ends with a few suggested reflective tasks to be used for self-study or with other teachers, and a short list of briefly annotated references of resources that the editors have found useful.

We believe that, like the other writers in this book, most teachers could use reflective writing as a resource to link them with teachers in different parts of the world, to examine their own practice, and/or as a way of working with the teacher in the classroom next door. The book is thus suitable for both novice and experienced teachers to use as self-, small-group or learning-community study. It is suitable for teachers working alone or as part of pre-service education or in-service activities.

This book can be read in two ways. By checking out the pre-reading questions with Chapters 2 to 12, it's possible to read thematically, selecting according to the writing process featured in a particular chapter. Alternatively, the chapters can be read sequentially, following through the use of writing by teachers writing alone, in pairs, small groups, or in learning communities of practice.

We, the editors, write because we enjoy writing reflectively and because it helps us learn and develop as teachers. We believe this is a lifelong process—that we cannot be effective teachers if we are not

also learners. Writing reflectively has helped us rediscover how rewarding learning is. We hope that you agree, and that this book encourages you to find out for yourselves.



Jill Burton, University of South Australia, Adelaide

Phil Quirke, Madinat Zayed Colleges, Higher Colleges of Technology, United Arab Emirates

Carla Reichmann, Universidade Federal da Paraíba, Brazil

Joy Kreeft Peyton, Center for Applied Linguistics, Washington, DC

Editors

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## Chapter 1

# REFLECTIVE WRITING—GETTING TO THE HEART OF TEACHING AND LEARNING

**Jill Burton**

### Introduction

Reflective writing is a versatile resource. Writing not only supports reflection and professional learning in many teaching settings, it can also be a pleasurable and sociable activity. Many teachers are not sure what they think before they write, but find that writing about their practice brings new insights and understanding, a sense of personal and professional accomplishment, and a readiness to share insights with others.

This chapter explains and illustrates the different meanings that reflective writing can have and suggests how teaching practitioners can use it.

### Writing: Pleasure or Pain?

*Writing is hard, emotional, aesthetic labour. Sitting at a keyboard for hours on end is hard on nerves and bodies. (Kamler & Thomson, 2006, p. 4)*

*It has become part of what I do and perhaps who I am. (Burton, 2007, Response #3<sup>1</sup>)*

These quotations represent two extremes—the agony and the ecstasy if you like—of writing. How does the intense experience of writing connect with teaching? Effective teaching depends upon thinking, reflecting and evaluating, and writing can be involved in all these activities. Here are some typical examples:

Planning lessons	Designing units of work
Jotting down ideas	Note-taking
Taking messages	Recording the gist of meetings
Marking student assignments	Filling in assessment sheets
Drafting class reports	Making journal entries
Editing drafts of texts	Sending e-mails
Critiquing course books	Writing up projects... and so on

This list demonstrates several things about the nature and roles of writing in teaching. Although it can be a simple means to an end (e.g., leaving messages for others, jotting down ideas) or the focus of attention (e.g., entering report files), all forms of writing are records of some sort that are often read by others.

Second, the way something is written (a message, a reference, a journal entry or a course design) affects how it will be read and evaluated. Writing is not just a convenient tool. It produces records of activity, generates thought, and influences whether insights about teaching decisions and events are forgotten or productive.

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<sup>1</sup> A response to a survey that I conducted in 2007 with contributors to the Case Studies in TESOL Practice series published by TESOL Publications, Inc. on writing about teaching.

Third, when information and events are recorded, writers adopt a perspective. They try to be accurate or clear or capture a point of view. Since writing involves decisions about what and how to write, it also involves some form of evaluating and reflecting; writers, consciously or not, select and analyse material to some degree. Thus, writing offers teachers a way to learn about what they do.

In these three ways, therefore, a tool that teachers use every day has the potential to be a source of professional learning. But, because writing is just one of many everyday teaching activities, its importance and versatility tend to be downplayed. The writer is often “just getting something down on paper” or “maintaining a file on disk.” By contrast, writing that consciously involves reflection, such as critiquing course texts, composing reports, or reflecting on a student’s progress, may create anxiety. As a result, formal writing often feels hard to do. Teachers are probably much more aware at these times of the interplay of thinking, writing, and meaning.

Regardless of difficulty, the writers in this book seem to enjoy writing, and use it as a natural extension of their thinking and communicating with colleagues and students. They do not appear to find writing about teaching stressful—although all of them are evaluating their teaching, and evaluation is often stressful. On the contrary, these writers have come to enjoy and value writing for its central role in their teaching. In the chapters here, writing is a flexible resource and a means of collaborative evaluation, or independent reflection and learning. Demonstrating the pleasure of this for teachers new to or experienced in the classroom is a feature of this book—in fact, enjoying writing reflectively and sharing insights with colleagues directly led to its development.

### Writing Leads to Community

*We never see one another and we never speak directly, yet through the writing our intimacy is complete. (Duncker, 1996, p. 74)*

Reflective writing about teaching is a way of inviting others into our classrooms to see what is going on there and to think about the ramifications of certain problems and successes. Teaching can be an isolated and isolating experience. Reflective writing about teaching is a way of expanding our world beyond the individual classroom. (Burton, 2007, Response #50)

Seven of the 18 authors in this book have written together previously. Five of them (Rebecca Mylnarczyk, Joy Kreeft Peyton, Phil Quirke, Carla Reichmann, and Latricia Trites) answered a call for case studies of journal writing in TESOL settings for a book being edited by the other two (Burton & Carroll, 2001). When that book was launched at the annual TESOL convention in Salt Lake City, some of the seven met for the first time to give a joint presentation on writing the case studies. Thus began an annual process of colloquia presentations at TESOL conventions on different aspects of reflective writing which lasted for several years. Over that period, those seven found that they used writing in all sorts of ways to support their teaching. Through a shared interest in reflective practice and how writing could support learning as teachers, they gradually formed what might be called “a loose but strong” learning community by e-mail—to the extent that their writing, sustained by the developing efficiency of electronic communication, ultimately led to choosing this medium for publishing this book. Mirroring this, many of the chapters focus on how electronic technology can support learners to write reflectively.

You write it all, discovering it at the end of the line of words. (Dillard, 1990, p. 7)

Because the original community was scattered in different parts of the world—Australia, Brazil, Japan, the United Arab Emirates, and the United States—electronic technology proved an effective resource. But this experience is not unique. For example, one respondent to my survey reported:

Much reflection takes place in online communities of teachers—we feed off each other. This results in planned group efforts or presentations with a colleague. (Burton, 2007, Response #15)

After the seven had collaborated electronically for some time, they decided to write for publication beyond the immediate group. Recently, they had not only used journal writing but other forms of reflective writing as well. Writing for each other and together had provided the means for the group to focus on and extend the ways they wrote. They had come to see how writing functioned as a learning resource through writing reflectively.

Now through the larger audience that e-book publication can provide, feedback from outside the immediate group can grow.

Contributing to the book has given each of the writers different experiences—not least that of writing for an audience beyond the initial small group of seven—which have required them to subject their teaching and earlier reflections to deeper and wider rounds of reflection.

For example, as one of the original seven, I began editing this book with two colleagues whom I met for the first time while co-editing the earlier book on journal-writing. I subsequently met one of them (Phil Quirke) in person through conference colloquia. The second colleague (Carla Reichmann) has not met Phil, Joy, or me. We have collaborated solely by e-mail over a period of eight years. We have come to know each other and our work through our writing. The third colleague (Joy Kreeft Peyton) has been with the project from the start. First encountered in person at a TESOL convention in New York, she became a critical friend and contributor to the journal writing book (Burton & Carroll, 2001), then a member of the continuing writing community and finally an editor of this book.

For other contributors who became part of this widening group of writers (the initial group of teachers from five countries has grown to include teachers from and writing about two additional countries, Austria and Peru, and another continent, Asia), writing has enabled them to collaborate with new or different teachers in their own contexts as well. In my case, since the journal writing book with Michael Carroll, I have experimented with a model of journal writing used in the United Arab Emirates (Quirke, 2001), adapting it for use in a course in Thailand. One of the course participants and I continued to e-mail each other on teaching, and later published a piece on that experience (Burton & Usaha, 2004). This experience is typical of how reflective writing can stimulate connected, but independent lines of inquiry. So the 12 chapters written by 18 teachers in this book serve to illustrate in different ways the growing connections each has made through writing reflectively on teaching.

Trying to pin down what “a community of writers” actually means to each of this book’s contributors is impossible. Some contributors, for example, may not feel a sense of community with other writers in the book because their contact has been solely with the book editors or with a co-writer who is the direct link to the editors. Nonetheless, their chapters report the social and supportive roles that reflective writing has played for them in their local contexts (Chapter 10, written by Rebecca Mlynarczyk with Renate Potzman and Kunigunde Haigner, provides a rich example of this). Some of the writing communities described are course groups of teacher-learners (Chapter 7 by Tania Romero, Chapter 8 by Sylvia Correa and Deborah Skilbelski, Chapter 9 by Mary Jeannot and James Hunter, for example). Others fit into larger, meta-communities created on the page in writers’ analyses as they compare groups of teacher-learners they have worked with (Chapter 4 by Carla Reichmann, Chapter 6 by Latricia Trites, and Chapter 11 by Spencer Salas). In other chapters, a pair of writers examines their own teaching-learning relationship (Phil Quirke and Eberth Zagallo, Chapter 2), another pair investigates their learning of a third language through the medium of a shared second language, and the effects of those experiences on their teaching of English as an additional language (Michael Carroll and Seiko Tatsuta, Chapter 5).

Clearly, writing reflectively does not need to be a lonely experience; the sense of community and support that it provides can be as precise or as free ranging as writers wish. For the writers here,

reflective writing has not only been a personal means of teacher learning but also has been collaborative, a reaching out for conversation (Hawkins & Irujo, 2004) with other teachers about what matters to them: how they teach and what they can learn about it from writing reflectively. This reaching out became the focus of Joy Kreeft Peyton's chapter (Chapter 12), which surveyed the original group of writers from the journal writing book (Burton & Carroll, 2001) on their perceptions of the reflective writing community experience.

The community experiences of writers in this new book, although unique in themselves, are not that uncommon (see Bailey et al., 2001; Hawkins & Irujo, 2004; and Murphey & Sato, 2005, for other examples). The strength of such communities lies in their being loose yet strong; that is, they are able to adapt according to the interests and needs of participants yet maintain their core strength and meaning. For example, they enable teachers to use time efficiently because of the flexibility of the writing medium, as other writers have commented:

Sometimes I carry a notebook with me, and write when there's some kind of slot (doctor's office, in-between classes, etc.) (Burton, 2007, Response #9)

Participation in these kinds of writing communities is self-selecting, dependent on an individual's current interests or commitment. For instance, only a few participants may be able to attend a conference colloquium, whereas more than a dozen writers may contribute to a book (in this case, 18 writers have contributed).

The Protean nature of an effective reflective writing community is also reflected in the different kinds of writing interaction it stimulates. Rather like the list of writing activities that opened this chapter, the writing can be transactional, interpersonal, descriptive, reflective, or a mixture of any of these. The sense of community that writers establish may be transitory and for a specific focus, enduring, oriented to teaching processes in general, or deliberately contrived to investigate new ideas or directions. Writing reflectively, as the chapters here show, helps teachers find community and new points of departure as individual, lifelong learners; the chapters themselves show the process, and the satisfaction, of using reflective writing as a professional learning resource in a range of teaching contexts and situations.

I have so far argued that reflective writing, a flexible resource that teachers use every day of their lives, can lead to professional learning and community when it is part of reflective practice or inquiry-based teaching. However, a number of specialist writers and researchers have argued that different forms of writing can be used as learning tools.

### **Writing Leads to Learning**

*Writing is a way of sense-making. (Burton, 2007, Response #62)*

*I write because I want to find something out. I write in order to learn something that I did not know before I wrote it. (Richardson, 2003, p. 501)*

All the writers referred to in this chapter section have in common the belief that runs through this book: *Writing helps people learn and make sense of their lives.*

Two early sets of influential work on writing originated in difficult literacy experiences at school. Elbow's (1973 & 1994) work stemmed from his not liking or feeling able to do the kind of writing expected of him. When he later wrote to please himself, he found he enjoyed writing and that it was in itself a source of learning. He went on to research and teach writing. Mayher et al. (1983), whose work was connected with the writing across the curriculum (WAC) movement (e.g., Britton, 1970), sought ways

to make writing enjoyable for school learners. They found that when learners were asked to draw on their own personal experiences they became more responsive to writing tasks.

All these writers focused on writing to learn from lived experience. Mayher et al. identify three key elements in this process: writing an initial story, writing your feelings about the story, and describing where the story fits in your life experience (p. 11).

The influence of the WAC movement is still felt today. Pelz (1982), for example, describes writing that leads to learning as exploratory. She theorizes exploratory writing as

writing in which persons seek to probe their experience, to reflect upon it, with the intentions of discovering and developing their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and ideas about experience . . . . [T]he audience for such writing is the author of it, as well as trusted friends and colleagues who might be in a position to help the writer carry on the exploratory purpose of the writing. . . . Its subject matter perforce draws heavily upon the personal experience and knowledge of the writer, no matter what the nominal topic of the writing might be. . . . Thus, its form is typically meditative and associative, . . . and [its] style is, therefore, casual, adhering to the natural idiom of the writer. (p. 4)

Thus exploratory writing also begins from what writers already know. However, exploring personal experience such as teaching is challenging to do if it is to lead to learning and change, and exploratory writers need the support of “a true community of writers”, as Pelz had earlier recognized (1982, p. 6). Spencer Salas’s writing (Chapter 11) is a vivid contemporary portrayal of communities of teachers who “write to learn teaching” with and from each other.

A somewhat different perspective on writing as sense-making is offered in Willis and Smith (2000), who use phenomenology as the starting point for their expressive writing method. Following their method, teachers respond to “what’s it like?” questions and are encouraged to use metaphor in their expressions of teaching events, ideas, or phenomena. Expressive writing, however, is not free writing; nor does it necessarily have a transforming function (Willis & Smith, 2000, pp. 5–6). Expressive writing concerns capturing the essence of experience. Shelley Spencer’s chapter in this book stems from an interest in phenomenology.

Writing is now also recognized as central to learning that derives from research. Golden-Biddle and Locke (1997, p. 612), for instance, describe writing as composing and identify writing “up” as an important meaning-making stage in formal research. Holliday (2002) and Kamler and Thompson (2006), however, argue that writing is central to *all* stages of research; that is, writing does much more than merely record that research was done and that learning has occurred. Kamler and Thompson (2006) acknowledge their debt to Richardson (2003), who categorizes writing as a method of inquiry that she has integrated in her teaching and researching life. She describes writing as a creative, dynamic process (p. 506) capable of evoking incidents and feelings in new, insightful ways that overcome any boundaries between narrative and formal analysis. For example, keeping a teaching journal can help teachers make sense of patterns that emerge over a teaching life so that they form “a sort of arabesque in which certain elements appear and reappear” (see Joyce Carol Oates in *Writers at Work*, 5<sup>th</sup> series [Plimpton, 1981]).

Expressive writing, inquiry-based writing, writing as method of inquiry, writing-to-learn—all entail reflection. Reflective writing therefore suggested itself as an inclusive frame. Also, reflective writing provides a direct link to reflective practice and inquiry-based teaching (e.g., Freeman, 1998); both of these forms of teaching are important in this book.

As you will see as you read the chapters that follow, reflective writing is a flexible tool, and all the writers have their own orientations to reflection and writing.

## Writing in Reflective Practice and Inquiry-Based Teaching

*Viewing teachers as reflective practitioners assumes that teachers can both pose and solve problems related to their educational practice. (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 4)*

*No matter how good a teacher education program is, at best, it can only prepare teachers to begin teaching. (Zeichner & Liston, 1996, p. 5)*

Committed teachers reflect systematically on their teaching circumstances and actions (Dewey, 1933 & 1938); reflection is a well-established tradition closely associated with teaching (e.g., Schön, 1983 & 1987; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). According to Schön (1983), explicit reflection on action helps teachers learn from decisions made while teaching (reflection in action) and, in doing so, develop teaching expertise (Senior, 2006; Tsui, 2003). Although Schön's distinction between reflection in and on action remains contentious (Burton, 2009) and other researchers have suggested that intuition may be a more insightful term (Atkinson & Claxton, 2003), reflection is a process all teachers value (e.g., Rebecca Mlnarczyk, Renate Potzmann, and Kunigunde Haigner, Chapter 10).

Through continuing spirals of reflection stimulated by questioning, teachers can move from addressing relatively simple technical teaching questions to tackling more critical issues (e.g., Hatton & Smith, 1995; Grushka et al., 2005; Reichmann, 2001). The chapters in this book flesh out how teachers as writers and inquirers move from considering technical and practical questions of what to teach and how to implement specific curricula to pondering the critical and moral meanings of their decisions and actions in their particular settings (e.g., Latricia Trites, Chapter 6). As the chapters collectively show, reflective writing is a resource that teachers can employ to support and stimulate reflection on many kinds of questions in many kinds of ways. Moreover, although all reflection is essentially reflection *on* action for further action, writing itself is reflection *in* and *on* action; that is to say, reflective writing is directly involved in the learning that leads to further action.

I now describe how teachers can use this learning process themselves.

### Reflective Writing

*A big reason for reflective writing is that it's a means of thinking for me. Writing freely, whether it's jotting down ideas on the spur of the moment or sitting down deliberately to think and work through ideas, helps the ideas to come. And beyond that, once the ideas get down on to paper writing about them helps me to clarify them in my mind. (Burton, 2007, Response #6)*

*[Writing is a means of] thinking widely and deeply about what I do, and why (Burton, 2007, Response #64)*

Reflective writing is presented in this section as a series of simple-to-follow steps addressed to a teacher who has not previously written reflectively. The steps involve writing responses to a short series of essential questions. They are "What happened?," "How did it happen?," "Why did it happen?" and "What does it mean?." Chapters in this book demonstrate (e.g., Tania Romero, Chapter 7) similar structured questioning processes that lead teachers to write reflectively. Table 1.1 summarizes what is involved in this process.

**Table 1.1. A Reflective Writing Typology**

Type	Answering Questions...	Comments
1	What happens/happened?	Recording, expressing, “getting the story down”
2	How does/did it happen?	Commenting on, attempting to explain: e.g., by adding more detail or approaching the Type 1 story from another perspective or question
3	Why does/did it happen? What does this mean outside the immediate context of action?	Theorizing on the story and reflection in Types 1 & 2, linking them to personal theories, e.g., of language, learning, and teaching
4	Are the earlier reflections credible/reasonable? Why? Why not? What do they mean now?	A subsequent written reflection in a developing sequence of reflective writing, in which writers continue to question and maybe involve others
5	Are the earlier reflections still credible/reasonable? Why? Why not? What do they mean now in the light of subsequent experience?	After longer intervals, writers use the developing spiral of reflection (which again may include other writers: e.g. as part of an interactive journal) to re-examine initial theorizing in the light of intervening events that may have changed their perspectives.

Source: Adapted from Burton (2005).

### ***The Reflective Writing Process***

The reflective writing process begins with a description of, for example, an incident, a phenomenon observed, or an unresolved teaching puzzle. Choose a simple incident or concern (e.g., use of a teaching aid in a specific lesson).

*What happens/happened?*

→ Write a description of the incident, topic or problem.

This process generates Type 1 reflective writing (see Table 1.1). Just get the basic facts down, as you know them. Write as simply and clearly as you can. Your description can be a narrative, a journal entry, an account of a conversation you overheard, for example. With this piece of writing, whatever its form, you have started the process of reflection. Although what you wrote may seem to be just a simple description of a problem or something that happened, its narrative structure and presentation and content are actually the result of decisions and preferences, whether you were conscious of them at the time or not. Another teacher would write a different account.

You now have a text to examine and have positioned yourself to probe your topic more deeply. Lu (1998), reflects eloquently on experiencing this process:

Each time I read or wrote, the stance I negotiated out of these voices [in my mind or writing] would always be at some distance from the stances I worked out in my previous and my later readings or writings. (p. 81).

*How does/did it happen?*

→ Write a commentary on your first piece of writing.

With this step, reflection begins to deepen. Writing in response to a “how” question generates Type 2 reflective writing (see Table 1.1) because it enables you to comment on what you wrote before, to revise or elaborate it. But your reflection shouldn’t finish here.

*Why does/did it happen?*

→ Writing again, try to explain your earlier pieces of writing.

Now write a response to a “why”-type question and generate Type 3 reflective writing (see Table 1.1). As you write on the cause, effect, and meaning of your incident, topic or problem, you will find that you are beginning to theorize and relate your writing to other events or reading resources.

*What does my previous reflective writing mean to me now (and later in the light of subsequent experience)?*

→ Over time, continue to write reflectively on your earlier reflective writing in the light of subsequent experience and understanding.

You can continue to write reflectively in response to questions such as “What does this mean to me now?” (see Table 1.1, reflective writing Types 4 & 5) as many times as you want. On each occasion, you give yourself further opportunities to deepen and broaden your reflections and link them, for example, to reflections on other experiences.

When following the process outlined above, *write systematically and flesh out (i.e., conceptualise) your writing*. Being systematic and contextualising what you write enable you to explain your reflections later on so that they have lasting credibility and continuing potential for further learning.

Even though reflective writing is a relatively straightforward process, it is a skill, and as with any skill or art, it can be learned and practised.

In short, the reflective writing process begins with writing what you already know, or believe, about an incident, topic or problem and then increasingly questioning the substance and meaning of what you wrote in relation to other events, resources, practices and environments. In operation, reflective writing draws specifically on the sorts of cognitive skills involved in composing (Flower & Hayes, 1980; Perl, 1979; Sommers, 1980). It thus mines a general skill that teachers have the potential to exploit. The recursive nature of writing reflectively also means that it can support cyclical processes of inquiry-based teaching (e.g., Burns & Burton, 2008; Burton, 2000; Freeman, 1998).

### **Points To Note**

Several points need to be made about Table 1.1 and what it represents. Table 1.1 is a typology of reflective writing. It therefore simplifies the creative potential of reflective writing. The typology suggests that written reflections addressing the questions in the table will form a regular sequence over neat intervals of time. However, the types of reflective writing in Table 1.1 do not necessarily follow sequentially, especially once a teacher has begun to write reflectively with some confidence. A single piece of reflective writing can contain several types of reflective writing, as you will notice in the chapters in this book. For example,

a chapter may “revert” to Type 1 reflective writing after Type 3 and then “jump” to Type 4. Potential combinations are endless—hence the flexibility of reflective writing as a means of professional support.

In addition, time intervals between written reflections will vary. For example, a writer may produce a piece of Type 1 reflective writing and immediately write a response to it in Type 2 reflective writing. Generally, though, reflection deepens with time, and the deeper types of reflective writing (Types 4 and 5) are the result of more time and more episodes of reflective writing, which allow for greater distance, increased questioning, and more interaction and reflection.

Finally, although the process described above focuses for simplicity on one teacher writing reflectively, writing with others has advantages. Another person with different experiences may make different points and thus stimulate new lines of thinking. Writing reflectively with another colleague may overcome the isolation of working alone, as this writer revealed:

[Writing] puts me in touch with others even though I work at home (Burton, 2007, Response #4)

Explaining something in writing to someone in a different setting may actually help you confront a teaching concern:

[H]aving to make sense of a teaching incident for someone outside my immediate teaching context helps me look at it anew, from a different perspective—and get to the heart of my own teaching. (Burton, journal entry, 6 November 2003)

In my interactions with Siriluck Usaha (Burton & Usaha, 2004), I noticed how over time our questions of each other changed. My questions of her quickly expanded to include “what might you do if...” type questions. Siriluck’s own questions changed from “Can I...?” and “Should I...?” (questions seeking “yes/no” answers) to more speculative questions, such as “I’m thinking of doing.... Do you think it matters if...?” and statements, such as, “What I hope will happen is...”. Our writing increasingly enabled us to go deeper in our thinking. (Burton, journal entry, 10 November 2003)

Although collaborative processes potentially offer wider, deeper reflections for all writers involved, I am not suggesting that self-reflection is less valuable than collaborative reflection, only that collaborative reflection may actually encourage more self-reflection.

To summarize, the following features are the essential strengths of reflective writing:

1. Documentation: Reflective writing creates a record, which you can use in later reflections and inquiries.
2. Versatility: Reflective writing enables you to adopt different approaches to teaching concerns—it’s up to you what they are.
3. Analysis: Reflective writing can help you see connections and differences in your teaching.
4. Self-/collaborative study: Because reflective writing is a flexible tool, you can use it for self-study or collaborative learning
5. A lifelong professional resource: Reflective writing has the potential to be a lifelong, flexible professional support.

## The Book's Organization and Content

The book is organized so that if you read straight through, you will notice a gradual shift in emphasis from reflective writing as self-study to reflections featuring pairs, small groups, and communities of teachers who write together. In reality, however, none of the experiences reported is that simple. For example, writers reflecting on communities of teachers who write together write both alone and about the collaborative writing experiences of others and themselves with them (See, for example, Chapters 4, 11 and 12). Nonetheless, the sequence of chapters will give you some sense of how applications of reflective writing can deepen and widen for teachers.

The forms and contexts of reflective writing used in this book vary, so each chapter begins with a pre-reading question that highlights the form or aspect of reflective writing featured in that chapter. The forms or aspects highlighted are as follows:

- Chapter 2: Interactive journals
- Chapter 3: Personal journals
- Chapter 4: Memoirs and journals
- Chapter 5: Dialogue journals
- Chapter 6: Small-group journals
- Chapter 7: Autobiography
- Chapter 8: Online journals
- Chapter 9: Online discussion boards
- Chapter 10: Free-writing
- Chapter 11: Local writing communities
- Chapter 12: International writing communities

In Chapters 2 through 5, the focus is on individual learning from several different perspectives. In Chapter 2, Phil Quirke and Eberth Zagallo reflect on their experiences of journaling as teacher educator and continuing teacher learner in the United Arab Emirates and derive a set of principles for journaling practice. In Chapter 3, Shelley Spencer critiques her learning about language teaching via personal journals on being a teacher who is learning another language in different settings. Carla Reichmann in Chapter 4 charts her use of journals and memoir in several South American settings in order to show the social, constructed nature of learning and its impact on her own learning as a teacher educator. Michael Carroll and Seiko Tatsuta in Chapter 5 trace the impact on each of their understandings of language learning and teaching through their shared experience as third-language learners of Chinese through the medium of Japanese, a first language for one writer and a second language for the other, through written reflections in English, a first language for one writer, and a second for the other.

Chapters 6 through 9 can be broadly categorized as referring to small-group or whole-class groups of teachers at different stages of learning to write reflectively. Latricia Trites in Chapter 6 documents her varied experiences as a teacher educator using small-group peer journals with three classes of teacher-learners in the U.S.A., concluding with a number of suggestions for their use and a belief in their importance as a means of continuing self-support for teachers after formal tuition ends. Tania Romero, a teacher educator in Brazil, analyses in Chapter 7 a course in which experienced schoolteachers reflect in writing on their teaching lives. Sylvia Correa and Deborah Skilbelski in Chapter 8 reflect on their use of journaling in an induction program for new EFL teachers in their institution in Brazil. An online discussion board is the focus of Chapter 9 by Mary Jeannot and James Hunter, who argue that it enabled teacher-learners for whom English was a second language to contribute to and learn from class discussions with native-speaker teacher-learners in the U.S.A.

The final three chapters document collaborative reflective writing among teachers, demonstrating it as a means of creating and maintaining communities of learning (cf. Wenger, 1998). In Chapter 10, Rebecca Mlynarczyk, a teacher educator in the U.S.A., and Renate Potzmann and Kunigunde Haigner, English teachers in the offshore location, Austria, chart the transformation of participants in a transnational masters program into members of overlapping communities of teacher writers who continued to write on teaching for themselves and their program facilitators beyond the formal program. The social construction of learning is further documented in Chapter 11, in which Spencer Salas reflects on teacher learning through “writing teaching” as an American teacher educator with groups of teachers in Peru; and in Chapter 12, Joy Kreeft Peyton analyses the nature of community in a small international e-network of journal writers, the journal-writing group that is associated with the genesis of this book and whose formation was described earlier in this chapter.

The book concludes with a few suggestions for reflective writing activities and reading resources.

## Conclusion

This book aims to help you visualize how teachers as reflective writers—whether starting out as teachers or seeking professional renewal—“get to the heart of teaching.” Reflective writing enables teachers to be constantly alert to the nature and implications of their practice. When teachers are reflective, they can become expert teachers; their teaching is no longer routine. Further, by using reflective writing to understand their teaching more deeply, teachers also become more open to change. Writing reflectively about teaching practice therefore helps teachers to be truly wholehearted (Burton, 2009; Dewey, 1933 & 1938) about their practice (e.g., Chapter 10 by Rebecca Mlynarczyk, Renate Potzmann, and Kunigunde Haigner).

I hope reading the chapters that follow stimulates your own written reflections and assists you in getting to the heart of your own teaching.



## Acknowledgement

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## About the Author

**Jill Burton** is Associate Professor of Applied Linguistics at the University of South Australia, Adelaide, where she works with doctoral students in TESOL education. Her recent work on reflective writing for TESOL practitioners stems from extensive editing and publishing experience (e.g., series editor, *Case Studies in TESOL Practice*, 21 volumes).

## Chapter 2

### MOVING TOWARDS TRULY REFLECTIVE WRITING

Phil Quirke and Eberth Zagallo

*Pre-reading question: In what ways can reflective writing in interactive journals deepen our understanding of our effectiveness as classroom practitioners?*

#### Introduction

This chapter focuses on how teacher educators can use six principles of good journaling to encourage greater depth of reflection in teachers who are writing journals as part of a pedagogical course. We hope the chapter will encourage all teachers, whether studying a course or not, to adopt reflective writing as part of their continuing professional development. We ask you as you read this chapter to match your own reflections to author Eberth's strivings for self-discovery and share in his delight at the many insights he discovered during his reflective writing journey. By reading the chapter in this way, we hope you will be able to appreciate the six principles in action and gain some insights into the process of reflective writing.

Throughout the chapter, we have used examples from Eberth's journal and have included quotations from a few others to try to demonstrate that our interaction while special to both of us was neither unusual nor atypical. Clearly, author Phil has had teachers (and students) who have not embraced journals, but Eberth's journal is typical for those who persevere with this form of deep introspection and reflective writing.

The opportunity to learn more never stops. It is when we are in the (sometimes difficult) process of learning something new that we need focused and ongoing interaction with others, particularly with those who can lead us into new ways of thinking and expressing ourselves. (Peyton, 2001, p. 156)

#### Teaching Context

This chapter revolves around a teacher education course run in Abu Dhabi, and how one teacher experienced reflective journals in an e-mail forum during the course and beyond. The course in question was the Cambridge-ESOL Diploma in English Language Teaching to Adults (DELTA), which our centre runs from September to June, and which includes seven practical assignments, a case study, and a final exam (see Appendix 1). The centre is under the Business and Education Division at Abu Dhabi Men's College (ADM), which is one of fourteen colleges forming the Higher Colleges of Technology (HCT) that are the national tertiary vocational institute in the UAE. Apart from helping teachers achieve qualification, the aim of our course is to give teachers the opportunity to explore their teaching practice and link their language and learning theories to their classroom procedures. We have discovered that the most powerful tool available to us for exploring teachers' pedagogical theories is the reflective journal and the role this writing plays in raising our awareness (Schön, 1987; Elbaz, 1988, Bailey, 1990; Zeichner & Liston, 1996). Therefore, for the course, each teacher's reflective journal, and the way in which it is structured, is the central tool in this exploration of the unconscious links we all build between our theories and practice.

The course upon which the data in this chapter are built had nine participants, originally from Brazil, Ireland, Egypt, the U.S.A, England, and Turkey. All were living and teaching in Abu Dhabi. The

teachers did not work together, but they quickly built a strong, cooperative team ethos. Apart from being motivated to gain the qualification, many of the teachers were hoping the course would give them the opportunity to apply to tertiary institutions in the UAE. There was a wide variety of learning styles among them; this made the input session in week two particularly valuable.

The course involved two weekly input sessions on Sunday and Tuesday evenings. All the participants were teaching full loads (20 contact hours per week) while they were studying. The density of input was largely determined by the Cambridge-ESOL syllabus, details of which can be found at: [http://www.cambridge-efl.org/teaching/delta/delta\\_syl.pdf](http://www.cambridge-efl.org/teaching/delta/delta_syl.pdf).

In DELTA courses, all the input sessions act as models for their topic focus. For example, an introductory session on phonology may introduce the phonemic chart as teachers do with language learners, but focus on phonological terminology rather than general English instruction in phonology. Most teachers who take the Abu Dhabi DELTA course are experienced teachers, with over five years' experience, looking for a postgraduate level practical teaching qualification. Eberth was typical of many teachers who take the course in that he had over fifteen years' language teaching experience with adults and a preparatory certificate qualification but no graduate teaching degree. The DELTA course's main aim is to give teachers a theoretical framework for their classroom practice. Phil's use of questioning within reflective journals in the Abu Dhabi course ensures that teachers do not lose sight of this aim throughout the year.

[W]e believe that professional and profound change is only possible through introspection and reflection. This is far easier than it sounds.

## Conceptual Framework

This chapter describes our experience with journaling while providing a catalyst for the reader to explore reflective writing. We believe that teacher education concerns change and how we, as teachers, manage change in our daily professional lives. As teachers ourselves, we undertake professional development activities—including the writing of this chapter—in order to examine our teaching beliefs and practices, with the aim of improving our approaches and tightening the link between what we do and what we believe as well as changing what we do based on our more clearly defined theories. We appreciate that change is not an easy concept and we do not use the term flippantly. Change can be as much about confirming beliefs as it is about adapting those beliefs to newly acquired knowledge, but to do either, teachers must have a structure upon which to examine their beliefs of language and pedagogy. Since many of these beliefs lie deep within, they need to be able to reflect in depth about what they do, why they do it, and how this mirrors beliefs they hold (Bartlett, 1990).

Therefore, we believe that professional and profound change is only possible through introspection and reflection. This is far easier than it sounds. To examine teaching beliefs in depth requires teachers to reflect honestly on themselves. The tool that equips us to delve into our practices best is the guided reflective journal (McDonough, 1994; Shin, 2003). By using reflective writing to understand individual narratives and how they impact upon teaching practices, teachers can become more rounded, confident, and effective teachers.

The paragraphs above have purposefully used the verb “believe,” as they are at the core of Phil's theory of teaching, which has been developed over the last twenty years through a large amount of introspection, reflection, and journaling. His theory could fill a book, but he can boil the theory down to what he calls his five key beliefs:

1. Life is about change and challenge and lessons should reflect that.
2. Learning is an active process (Gunawardena, et al., 1997), so the teacher must involve the students.
3. Language is an expression of self (Elbaz, 1983), so the teacher must allow students to bring themselves to the classroom and use their language realistically.
4. The teacher is a catalyst for student learning, so the classroom should be about learning and not teaching. i.e. the teacher prepares while the students do.
5. Students are people first and learners as part of that persona, so teachers should never underestimate what students can accomplish and bring to the classroom.

These beliefs are sufficiently broad to encompass a range of various interpretations, but narrow enough for readers to appreciate why reflective writing is such an important part of Phil's teaching and teacher educating. Journals ensure that he can involve all his students as they bring themselves into the learning process and ensure his teaching is subservient to their learning.

### **Launching the Journals**

This section demonstrates, through the example of Eberth's journal, how Phil put his five key beliefs into practice in the DELTA context already outlined. In this section, we pose the same questions that were asked of teachers on the DELTA course in Abu Dhabi. After each question, Phil discusses the reasons behind it in the same way as he would in the DELTA session that introduces the journals to the course participants. Eberth's responses to each question are then presented in full before his reflections discuss what he was thinking while he answered these questions. His thoughts clearly focused on the difficulties he faced in addressing these questions early in the course. Realizing that another journal writer has struggled in this way and persevered to believe firmly in the power of journals will, we hope, encourage you to explore reflective writing, no matter what your initial reservations might be, using the same questions and guidance provided to Eberth.

#### ***Question 1:***

---

**Give a brief résumé of your teaching career with particular emphasis on the types of classes and students you have taught.**

---

*In answering this question you do not need to supply a full curriculum vitae, but a brief description of your teaching experience. Are you most comfortable with advanced or elementary students? Do you prefer teaching monolingual or multilingual classes? Focus on the classes and students you find the easiest and most difficult to teach.*

#### ***Eberth's Response:***

I've been in EFL for about 7 years and I love it. I've mainly taught in Brazil where I am originally from. I've taught all levels from beginners to advanced, aged from 3 to ... When in Brazil I preferred to teach advanced levels and exam preparation classes, I wonder if it was because I, or the students at a lower level, could always rely on our mother tongue if necessary? I've only taught monolingual classes and my first experience teaching abroad was in 1996 when I did my CELTA course in Poland, where the students were all Polish. I don't really think that there are easier or more difficult students to teach, I see it as challenges that come along in my everyday teaching. Well, the one comment I could make is that I would find it very hard to deal with obnoxious kids, though I've had no experience of that myself yet, and have taught quite a lot of kids. (Eberth 1)

***Eberth's Reflection Now:***

I found this question very straightforward although it was difficult to merge what I saw as three distinct questions. These were the resume, the types of classes and the types of students. Now, I think I should have said this at the time in my journal response, but probably I just lacked confidence at the start of the course. It wouldn't be a problem now. I'd definitely say, "Hey. There are three questions here!"

***Question 2:***

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***What are your favourite classroom activities?***

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*You can make the list as brief or as extensive as you like. As a bare minimum try to give one activity for each of the following stages: warmer; presentation; controlled practice; freer practice; production; homework, and another activity for each of the following skill areas: listening; reading; writing; speaking; study; integrated.*

***Eberth's Response:***

- Warmer: hang-man
- Presentation: through a story
- Controlled practice: cloze exercise
- Freer practice: role-play
- Production: games
- Homework: exercises in the workbook
- Listening: music
- Reading: newspaper articles
- Writing: description
- Speaking: personalized activities
- Study: developing organizational skills
- Integrated: speaking/listening leading to writing/reading (Eberth 1)

***Eberth's Reflection Now:***

This was a tough question, but I was really pleased that I plucked up the courage to say to Phil as early as my second entry, "How can anyone possibly pick their favourite activities with no structure to hang them on?"

***Question 3:***

---

***In what areas of your planning, teaching and professional development do you feel weakest?***

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*The response to this question can be as short as a couple of words. This question is really just a foundation stepping stone to deeper reflection on the areas which you want to explore in greater depth during the journal. The challenge is to ensure that you do not just look at your teaching but also at your planning, preparation, theoretical knowledge and professional development goals.*

***Eberth's Response:***

Writing lesson plans can be quite tough sometimes and linking the stages well is very challenging. When it comes to accurate timing, it can be a nightmare. Finding the right material to fit your plan is not always an easy task either and that might lead to creating your own material, which I really

enjoy. My theoretical knowledge is fairly weak as I've always found it very difficult to remember specific terminology and when it comes to pronunciation I fall in a very big hole! (Eberth 1)

**Eberth's Reflection Now:**

I could respond to this question quickly even though I felt constrained by having to merge three different areas. Once again, I felt Phil was asking three questions in one, and I should have told him. Re-reading my entries I am actually quite proud that I told Phil as early as the second entry that I had found the task quite hard really because there was no real context to it.

**Question 4:**

---

**How do you plan to approach this course and what are you hoping to get out of it?**

---

*Start with what you hope to get from the course and then, possibly based on your hopes, detail your approach. Consider reading, assignment writing, this journal and how you want to address the difficulties you noted in your answer to question three.*

**Eberth's Response:**

I really hope to be able to cope with the scope of the course. I know it is going to be very demanding and will require a lot of studying, self-discipline, dedication, motivation, background reading, etc. Being a nonnative speaker myself, though I hold 2 Proficiency level certificates, I wonder if my language will be good enough to write the assignments up to the standard required. I will do my best—which is the best one can do. (Eberth 1)

**Eberth's Reflection Now:**

This was an easy question to answer fleetingly for the requirements of the journal as I understood them, but it was an impossibly difficult question given the fact that I had no real idea what the full course would really entail. I honestly felt at the time that this was a question Phil should have answered for the teachers. I was very proud that Phil adapted his guidance comments on the following year's course based on the feedback from other teachers and myself.

**Question 5:**

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**How would you describe your theory of language learning?**

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*This is clearly a very difficult question to ask at the start of a course. However, it is also important to realise that any course or book will build upon the knowledge you possess as a teacher when you start your study. Therefore, it is equally important to try and articulate theories of language and language learning from the very beginning. These final two questions are the first steps towards clarifying pedagogical beliefs which should match teachers' practical classroom approaches.*

*So, what is your theory of language learning? How do you believe students learn a language? Think of your own language learning experiences as you approach this question. Remember your teaching and marking approaches. Do you focus on fluency or accuracy more frequently? How often do you use drills? All of these are pointers to your sometimes hidden theory of language learning.*

**Eberth's Response:**

When I first studied English as a foreign language, accuracy was much more important than fluency. Drills were based on memorized dialogues and corrections were drilled to death. We were frightened to make mistakes as we knew it would lead to an embarrassing situation and exposure to the rest of the group. I learned through a grammar-based approach, which in a way I do not regret

as I knew no better at the time. But to be very honest I really learned when I first lived abroad, in the U.K., where I was exposed to the “real language” and learned much more when I started teaching. Nowadays, I think that fluency is much more important than accuracy as being able to convey meaning and ideas come first in real communication. Learners of foreign languages want to be able to use language in everyday conversation. The ideal situation is where both fluency and accuracy are balanced and this really depends on the students’ needs. (Eberth 1)

***Eberth’s Reflection Now:***

I found this an impossible question to answer as I then felt I had no theory. I did not want to seem so incompetent, so I gave it my best try, but honestly did not feel I knew what I was talking about.

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**Question 6:**

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**How would you describe your theory of the English language?**

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*This question is tied to question five, and Phil’s comments after Question five above hold true for this question as well. When writing your response, think of both your use of English and your teaching of the language. Do you think that English is word-based? Sentence-based? Text-based? Is meaning more important than the accurate use of language? Is grammar, phonology or lexis more predominant in your teaching? What does this say about your theory of English language?*

***Eberth’s Response:***

I hope, on this course, I will find out all about it and I’ll then be able to have my own theory as for the time being I have no theory whatsoever! (Eberth 1)

***Eberth’s Reflection Now:***

Having felt the question on language learning was impossible, this question floored me totally, and I was truly relieved that I was able to admit this in my first entry.

Most responses Phil receives on both questions five and six are similar to Eberth’s “for the time being I have no theory whatsoever.” The challenge is to tease out an awareness that the teacher does, of course, have theories based on their experiences as both a teacher and a learner. The next section puts forward six principles of effective journaling, which have allowed Phil to tease out this awareness and demonstrate to the teacher-journalers that they do in fact have theories.

**Six Principles of Effective Journaling**

This section gives examples from throughout Eberth and Phil’s journaling experience and uses them to highlight the major issues and principles that they discovered were essential in their effective use of journals. Phil has developed his six principles over the last ten years and remains convinced that they are the key to creating opportunities for teachers to reflect in depth on their teaching practice and theories (Shulman, 1988a).

The section ends with the overall aim of any effective journal: depth of reflection. However, in order to attain this reflective depth the tutor must build a personal connection with the teacher which is founded in the basic qualities of all good personal relationships. These are, in our opinion, trust, respect, honesty, openness, and transparency. To that end, the first three of the following principles (rapidity of response, praise, and active listening) address the need to ensure a strong personal connection is established. Then, once the personal connection has been established, the tutor can encourage greater depth of reflection by grounding the emerging discussion in the classroom and allowing the teacher to build from the known to the unknown (Mlynarczyk, 1991; Haneda & Wells, 2000).

## 1 Respond Rapidly

One of the major features of Phil's approach to journals is the priority he gives them, and his insistence on replying to all teacher entries within 24 hours. This rapidity of response was picked up on by Eberth several times in his journals:

Hi Phil,

Gosh! That's a pretty quick reply. I had not expected to hear from you for a while!!!

Phil, how can you reply to the journal entries so quickly? In yesterday's session I talked to the other trainees and I was even more surprised when I realized that they had all got their replies as quick as me. WELL DONE! (Eberth 7)

And his appreciation was echoed by others:

Wow! You are really fast on the draw! (Tracy)

Thanks for getting back to me so quickly. (Jo)

This is the first time since I've known you that I've not had a reply to my desperate e-mail within 24 hours! (Marilyn)

Eberth noted after one of his longer entries:

I began to find at this point my answers getting longer and it was, to be honest, quite tiring. Not tiresome, but definitely tiring after a full day at work in a new job. This was also tiring because I was being pushed to go into more depth and this was definitely not something I was used to. So, the tiring aspect was as much mental strain as physical tiredness from the time needed at the end of a long working day (Eberth 10)

However, he also commented on the fact that if Phil managed to find time then he was motivated to do the same:

I have found that getting your responses so quickly is pushing me into a corner as I feel that I should do the same myself. I must admit it is a challenge as I feel I can try and cope with it as well, especially if you can with your workload. (Eberth 4)

Phil also made a point of praising teachers when they responded quickly:

Hi Eberth,

Thanks for responding so quickly on your journal. ☺ (Phil 1)

And this leads us nicely into the second principle.

## 2 Always Praise

Phil's entries are peppered with praise since many teachers, as shown by their answers to questions 5 and 6 above, are not confident in their ability to express their lack of knowledge, and by praising what they do know the aim is to give them the confidence to open up and write more.

Phil always makes sure that he starts any feedback to a journal entry with a positive statement that emphasizes the supportive and constructive focus of the journal, and uses this praise as a springboard into the teacher's foundation of knowledge that is grounded in their classroom practice.

Hi Eberth,

It is fascinating to see the range of your experience, and I am sure you will have much to give on this course. Please remember that you will always take from the course as much as you give ☺

Good to see you have such a clear awareness of what the course entails ☺

I wouldn't worry about your language, just this entry demonstrates you have the ability ☺ (Phil 1)

He then continues to scatter his responses with a good dose of praise and encouragement pursuing the dual aims of increasing confidence and teasing out the theories behind current classroom practice:

OK—I see the ease of tying it all into a lesson plan, but I just wanted a quick snapshot of activities, and you certainly gave me more than I bargained for ☺ ☺ That in itself is a demonstration of the extent of your teaching toolbox ☺ and a credit to you as a creative teacher. (Phil 1)

And he takes every opportunity he can to boost the teacher's confidence with positive reinforcement.

I like your attitude of facing challenges rather than tackling problems ☺ (Phil 1)

Wow! Now that's a pretty extensive list ☺ (Phil 1)

This approach continually worked well in Eberth's case as evidenced in his responses:

Hi Phil, first of all, thank you very much for such positive feedback. It was very reassuring and boosted my confidence a bit. (Eberth 2)

It's a very nice and respectful comment from you—THANKS! (Eberth 10)

It's so real and supportive and you know the pressure we are all going through ourselves. Thanks. (Eberth 22)

Thank you very much (once again) for the psychological support. (Eberth 7)

And examples from other journals indicate that his reaction was no exception.

Thanks for more encouragement and the positive feedback. (Jo)

Thanks for the vote of confidence. (Katrina)

One of the more interesting factors is that no one seemed to take Phil's use of praise as a distancing strategy, one placing him in the position of expert, and therefore in control. Given the variety of nationalities that have taken the DELTA course, this may be surprising; Phil believes it is because the other five principles are consistently used alongside an informal tone. Eberth certainly never felt that Phil's use of praise was linked in any way to power or control. In fact, he took it at face value and appreciated the encouragement as noted above.

### **3 Listen Actively**

This is a fairly standard technique Phil uses when responding to dense paragraphs containing multiple points. It is an active listening technique (Edge, 1992 & 2002) that echoes the speaker's message in order to clarify that the listener (here the reader) has understood correctly.

Let me try and divide your response into the following areas:

Lesson Planning

Timing

Materials

Theory

Pronunciation

Is that a fair summary? (Phil 3)

Other examples from our journal include:

We could of course discuss each of these ad infinitum, but I would like to focus on four of them. (Phil 2)

and:

This is an excellent first response and takes a good first step in the definition of your theory on language learning. I would summarize the points you have made as:

- create a balance between accuracy and fluency.
- expose students to “real” language wherever possible.
- aim to meet student needs.

Is this a fair summary? (Phil 5)

Phil uses the active listening echo technique to clarify a paragraph dense with information and opinions:

Can you let me know what was the last “challenge” you faced in your teaching recently? (Phil 1)

This question asks for clarification through exemplification, a method Phil often uses to get a better image of the teacher as a classroom practitioner. He finds these queries very powerful when he has little opportunity to observe the teacher in action in the classroom.

Another active listening technique is used when he replies to Eberth’s long answer to question one, regarding which students he does not like to teach.

And finally, what makes a kid (only kids?) obnoxious from your point of view and experience? (Phil 1)

This focus on “obnoxious” is typical in that it picks up on a word that can have many different interpretations, and asks the teacher to clarify its use. This often results in the teachers having to clarify the term to themselves. In this case, Eberth picked up on Phil’s bracketed hint of “only kids?”:

A kid who comes to classes sometimes to fill in his/her mother’s hairdresser’s time, unwilling to learn because he/she hates the language they are obliged to learn, or adults who come to class, also without any intrinsic motivation, because it’s imposed on them by the companies they work for, when they would rather be learning or doing something different or that would interest them. (Eberth 2)

Further examples include:

If yes, let me ask just one follow-up question in each area. If no, please correct me and we’ll follow-up in more depth at the next entry.

Lesson planning—is it the planning itself or the lack of ideas which is the problem? If the former, what is the problem of putting down on paper the wealth of ideas you have? If the latter, I would go back to the kind of brain-storming you did when you answered question 2 J

Timing—is the problem in the classroom or making your plan fit the reality?

Materials—how often do you actually use someone else’s material without putting your own *je ne sais quoi* in it?

Pronunciation—you’ll have to be a bit more specific about the “big hole” you are falling into. Why the worry in this area? (Phil 3)

The last section of this response on pronunciation is another example of asking teachers to clarify their use of words, and the power that simple words such as “obnoxious” and “hole” can have when they need to describe why they have used them.

The number of examples given in this section is an indication of how powerful active listening question techniques are in journaling.

#### **4 Build the Personal Connection**

Starting a rapid-fire exchange of journal entries, and building up the teacher’s confidence through praise and active listening, enable a teacher educator to establish a personal connection. This is evident when both teacher and tutor entries make references outside the profession:

Hi there,  
Hope you had a good weekend. How is Emma? (Eberth 10)

And a few days later:

Phil—just to let you know that Vitor’s [his son’s] surgery was very successful. I called Brazil over the weekend and managed to speak to him. He sounded fine and is now recovering at home. Good news after all, isn’t it? You know how worried I was. (Eberth 11)

When Phil asked:

How much time are you planning to give to your DELTA studies? (Phil 4)

Eberth responded:

As many hours as will be needed. In order to do all the background reading for the assignments, prepare for the observed lessons, attend the sessions weekly, cope with my normal 20 hours fulltime teaching, being a father/husband and finding some time for myself is going to be very tough. I will need to be very organized and well disciplined to do it all.

Well, one of my main principles in life and teaching is that one should practice what one preaches, so I definitely do! (Eberth 4)

Eberth noted that he really liked his response as he saw it as more personal and found that we were beginning to create a link between the two of us. He found it fascinating that such a personal relationship could be built up so quickly via an e-mailed journal. He continued by saying that this was indescribably important to him since he is a “people person” and needs that chemistry in any professional or personal relationship. It is a sentiment echoed in the literature (Mlynarczyk, 1998, p. 55). That is what led Eberth to ask what he considered a personal question about how Phil would cope with the course:

Now, tell me how many hours are YOU going to need to dedicate to cope with this year's course, journals, etc.? (Eberth 4)

He felt that his increasing confidence came across when he asked Phil about this, and again when he could admit finding the task difficult. If this personal connection had not happened, Eberth thought that the journal could well have remained an "I do this" missive rather than a true exploration of himself as a teacher.

This statement shows how important it is for the tutor to find this personal connection. As we indicate here, this can be done through rapidity, praise, and active listening, but it also requires the tutor to be personal and empathetic:

Hey Stuart—shame that your QPR aren't as on the ball as you are ☺

Bet your weekend was better than ours! I killed a scorpion, had to face one to many loonies from Sohar and spent most of the time ducking while our friends went for it! (Jo)

Hi Phil, Today we've begun the countdown. Al Ain beckons on the 15th. After 3 hectic weekends of garage saling to entice people to buy our junk, it doesn't seem like we've gotten rid of anything!! Enough already! What's left will be picked up by Big Brothers. (Marilyn)

Once the personal connection has been built, the foundation is laid to ensure real depth in reflection through guided questions based upon the teacher's classroom practice.

### 5 Ground the Journal in the Classroom

The initial journal question (#2) about the teacher's favourite activities aims to start this classroom foundation and bring about this kind of practical discussion, which can then be linked to theory. In Phil's response to Eberth's answer to question two:

We could of course discuss each of these ad infinitum, but I would like to focus on four of them.

Phil thereby narrowed the follow-up to four activities, but he could equally have chosen all or just one. It often depends on how complete the entry is and how much or how little discussion is being generated by the other questions.

1. So, Can you give me an example of how you present through the use of stories?
2. How do you set up your role-plays?
3. In what ways do you use music in your teaching?
4. How do you help students develop their organisational skills? (Phil 2)

Phil's questioning in this way allows him to start exploring the teacher's classroom approach in depth and the exchanges following on from question #2 are often the most revealing in the journal especially when a personal connection has been built. Phil's questions above allowed Eberth to respond as follows:

1. For instance, if I am to present the past simple, I tell a story of something that happened to me so that I can be more personal.
2. By giving students situational cards (either pair/group) and they have to prepare their role themselves (within a time limit) and they then perform it. I try to relate it as closely to their reality as possible.

3. When in Brazil, I used music as a listening gap-fill exercise, e.g. controlled practice of language quite often, or ordering sentences which could then lead to a group discussion, etc.
4. Here, especially, I try to show them how important having an organized file is by teaching them how to divide their files in different sections, i.e. writing tasks, reading tasks, listening tasks, create a vocabulary record notebook in alphabetical order with example sentences, etc. (Eberth 3)

Afterwards he noted that once again, he was being asked to comment on his classes and students. This he found easier since he could picture something real and concrete that he had done before.

Can you give me an example of when you use these student prepared situational cards? How is this approach pedagogically similar to your past tense narrative stories above? (Phil 3)

Phil follows up by asking more detail on the practicalities of Eberth's approach in the classroom, which is where he is clearly most comfortable. Phil then probes further into Eberth's overall philosophy by trying to draw out parallels with other examples that Eberth gave. Once again, Phil tries to move the reflection from the practical to the theoretical with an overall aim of clarifying pedagogical beliefs, values, philosophies and theories.

Phil's response to the other classroom activities follows the same pattern:

I love the use of music in class. Are gap-fills the only way you use music? Do you see music as a natural form of language use, a kind of real language? (Phil 3)

Again, Phil moves from the practical (use of music) to the theoretical (music as "real" language). It is a recurrent theme and one that is consistent with the aim of many teacher journals (Porter et al., 1990; Wallace, 1996) in reaching a deeper level of reflection.

When teaching vocabulary, I will separate 8-10 items of vocabulary and will have the words on strips of paper. Then, I start telling the story and when I need that word I try and elicit it. If they know it, all well and good. If they don't, I introduce the word with the strip of paper. I drill it and continue through the story until all ten words have been covered. That will then usually lead into the students using these words in their own stories.

I continue the past tense lesson by eliciting one or two example sentences which then act as models for the introduction of the tense and further clarification where required.

One of the last times I used the situational cards was with a group of students on banking. The students prepared the cards from their experience of going into banks. One group prepared customer cards, one group cashier cards and another group manager cards. (Eberth 3)

Eberth stated that these last three paragraphs "flew off his pen" as all he was doing was visualizing situations that had happened in his classrooms before. He could literally see the situations happening in front of him while he wrote them. Eberth responded to Phil's follow-up on narratives and music as follows:

I agree that the two approaches of narratives and situational cards are very similar, but they differ in that the narratives are teacher led and teacher fronted whereas the situational cards are student prepared and student centred. (Eberth 3)

In answering this question, Eberth realised that he was required to look at his role as a teacher in the classroom. So although he answered very practically his thoughts were driven to his role during both the preparation and teaching stages.

As I mentioned in my previous entry, I also use music with scrambled lyrics leading to discussion on what the composer was trying to convey, and I also use this to lead onto discussing how the students felt about both the music and the lyrics. (Eberth 3)

Eberth enjoyed answering this question, as his students in Brazil always wanted to have music in the classes. So the challenge as a teacher was to find the right song for the lesson. Afterwards he wondered if this had come across in his response, but he definitely had what he would call his materials-writer hat on when he answered this question.

Most interestingly, Eberth felt that it was here he began to understand where Phil was going with this journal. It was much easier to respond to these specific questions, which related to what he did in the classroom, and he felt he could reply from a position of authority. No one knew his classes in Brazil better than he. However, the realization was dawning on him that he had specific teaching, learning, and language theories and that these were being drawn out of him through the journal, which was beginning to act as a “source of discovery” (Schön, 1983, p. 299).

## **6 Promote Depth of Reflection**

In order to get the depth of reflection aimed for, “the personal connection” (Principle 4) needs to be linked closely to “grounded in the classroom” (Principle 5), and the first couple of examples below show how “grounded in the classroom” still drives the discussion.

Just a couple of follow-on questions:

What is your position on the use of L1 in class? Your entry seems to imply that you don’t like falling back into L1 with your lower level classes. Is that true? (Phil 1)

The questions above follow Phil’s overall journal aim in that they take from what the teacher has written but ask them to delve more deeply into that particular area. Eberth replied:

I do accept the use of L1 from students when teaching lower-level classes when I myself as a teacher find it impossible after trying different ways to get meaning across to some students. That might be because most of my teaching experience was in Brazil. It didn’t matter how hard I tried to convey meaning sometimes, some students were reluctant to accept that they understood the meaning and maybe it was one kind of self-assurance they always needed, to translate the meaning into L1. (Eberth 2)

When Eberth answered this, he felt the fear of letting someone know that he allowed L1 into his classes, which he saw as a failure on his part as a teacher. This comment developed into an open discussion in the journal on the advantages of L1 use and helped Eberth feel confident that L1 can be a positive influence. He ended up with a theoretical foundation for his use of L1 and this gave him the confidence to admit it without the fear and sense of failure he had begun with.

What follows are some other responses from Phil, which he used to springboard into similar theoretical discussions.

Theory—hopefully, the course will address your worry about the lack of theory, and I hope we can use this journal to make you realise that your theories are probably fairly strongly defined already ☺☺ (Phil 3)

This is a typical response, as Phil seizes on every opportunity to sell the journal as a vocalization tool for teacher theories. So many teachers moving into further training have theories in all that they do, but they are often unaware that these subconsciously-held beliefs and the framework around them constitute theory (Johnson, 2000). Phil believes, and he is not alone in this belief (cf. Peyton, 1990; Bean, 1996), that journals are the most effective key to unlocking those frameworks—and he hopes that this chapter has demonstrated this. An example from his journal responses to Eberth follows:

I am not convinced that you “have no theory whatsoever”. Your response to the previous question already indicates you have some strong language beliefs.

You mention learning through a “grammar-based approach”, so from this statement what do you mean when you say “grammar”?

You also say that “to convey meaning and ideas come first in real communication” which indicates a belief in “real” language being primary. But what do you understand and mean when you use the word “real”? (Phil 6)

The three paragraphs above respond to Eberth’s answers to questions 5 and 6, aiming to guide teachers towards making theories explicit early in the course so they can develop and even change them during the year. The response is an example of how Phil ties comments in the journal together so that he can help the teacher begin this journey of self-discovery, one that will lead to explicit theories that support and mirror classroom practice.

The following example shows again how Phil tries to move the teacher into deeper reflection.

Assuming the above is an accurate summary, how would you respond to the following questions?

Where does accuracy become more important than fluency and vice versa? (Phil 5)

Accuracy becomes more important when my aim is to focus on the production of a particular language point through controlled practice activities, whereas fluency is more important when giving freer practice. (Eberth 5)

When can we expose students to real language and how? (Phil 5)

Students can be exposed to radio news, newspaper articles, story telling, interviews, etc. How? Giving them specific tasks to go with the activities. (Eberth 5)

How do we discover what student needs are? (Phil 5)

It can be done by drawing up a questionnaire, interviews, etc. (Eberth 5)

Are these three areas the only important areas in language learning? What others do you consider? (Phil 5)

Developing study skills, general knowledge, etc. (Eberth 5)

Eberth noted later that these were nice questions to respond to since he saw that he could respond practically to an initial question that had asked about his theory. Phil’s strategy was to ask the teacher to develop in more depth areas they have mentioned and ask them to try to extend their thoughts beyond that initial response. This is a first step in an ongoing quest to make teachers delve deeper and reflect on

how their experience has informed their teaching and learning theories—often subconsciously. Eberth also stated that he began to feel like a learner again, where there was a distinct dichotomy between how he learned English and how he taught it. He wishes now that he had said this to Phil in the journal.

The earlier example on narratives continued:

Your example on the past simple through personal narrative seems to be typical of your approach—the personalization of language in context. Can you give me another example of when you do this? How do you continue in the lesson on past simple once you have told your story? (Phil 4)

This is only the fourth entry, but Phil is already trying to prompt Eberth to think beyond the activity to his theories that are becoming more evident in his journal as he verbalizes and makes conscious his teaching beliefs. This probing to link practice to theory is a recurrent theme in Phil's journals.

As a final example, here is a realization from Eberth as we continued to discuss the use of music in the classroom:

Music is definitely a form of real and natural language use. In Brazil, this is always true as we play with the lyrics often using the language inaccurately to create rhyme and reason. In songs the composer always has a major role in linking rhymes not worrying about grammar. (Eberth 5)

This was not hard to answer, because music *is* a natural form of language. In retrospect, maybe this just brought out a strongly held language belief that neither of us realized was a “language” belief.

## Reflective Development

So, what reflective development did we see in ourselves over the nine months of the DELTA course? How did we change as tutor and teacher learners?

Eberth's completed feedback form at the end of the course reads:

- 1 The journal helped me to think in more depth about my teaching practice as questions drove me into a deeper level of reflection and thoughts before answering them.
- 2 I learned and developed a lot, broke barriers, shared my weaknesses and strengths with other trainees, listened to colleagues, made friends.
- 3 Academically, I polished some old theories and learned a lot more. It also made me re-think and analyze my teaching principles.

And Phil wrote in an e-mail to his Director when asked why he insisted on tutoring on the DELTA:

This past year has confirmed to me why the DELTA is such an essential part of my yearly plan despite my new administrative and strategic planning duties and responsibilities as Head: It is the DELTA and my interaction with the teachers on this professional development course which keeps me up-to-date and fresh when it comes to language, teaching and learning. The interactive journals that I run force me to reflect on my pedagogy, clarify my beliefs and ensure that they are compatible with my executive decisions and planning. They mean I maintain the respect and trust of my staff as a practitioner and am not seen as a remote figurehead. I am not sure that I could maintain my principles of language teaching and learning without the constant reflection generated by my interaction on this course.

Needless to say, Phil continued to tutor on the course without further questions.

The greatest pleasure we have had in writing this chapter together has been the renewal of a professional discourse from four years ago, and the way in which this has succeeded in making us reflect on both our previous and current classroom practices. It has brought to light areas of teaching, learning, and language that we have let lie for too long--for example, Phil's use of narratives and Eberth's use of music. Both of these are standard classroom approaches, and the chapter has made us discuss and reflect on these in far more detail than is possible to write about here. It has allowed us to once again confirm and challenge the theories behind what we are doing in our classrooms daily. These experiences have helped us since journaling together, too. Phil was Section Editor for "Out of the Box" in the TESOL journal *The Essential Teacher* for three years, and became Director of the new Madinat Zayed Colleges, Higher Colleges of Technology in the Western Region of the UAE. Eberth has become a regular presenter at conferences in Lebanon, Dubai, and Spain.

## Conclusion

We hope we have demonstrated above how the experience of writing this chapter and reflecting together on our journaling experience has created new avenues of self-discovery. We have seen how the teacher-educator benefits as much as the teacher in this reflective relationship, and how our work and professional lives have developed since we shared this journal five years ago. Phil and Eberth continue to work in the UAE for the HCT where Phil is a Director and Eberth continues happily in classroom teaching and to use journaling with most of his classes.

Interactive journaling works when it is reciprocal (see other chapters in this book), when each writer has something to give and learn, and when there is enough common ground to make sharing possible and worthwhile. Our interactive journal has grown out of a relationship that was essentially teacher (Phil, as teacher trainer) to learner (Eberth as teacher learner). We hope that this chapter has demonstrated how we have each used this opportunity to learn and teach. We have used the journal interaction to shift the relationship, which was initially one-way (teacher to learner) to an open relationship in which the roles shift back and forth. We have succeeded in doing this by following the six principles of journaling above.

The writing of this chapter has been in itself a continual process of reflection for both of us. Phil has revisited the DELTA course he runs and added a discussion forum through the online content forum he has created for his latest course. He has found that many of the questions he poses to the teachers on the course have been influenced by the exchanges he and Eberth have had as they have discussed this chapter and their experiences. Eberth found the writing of the chapter different, as he felt he was not simply addressing Phil but opening up to an untold number of his peers. He felt that this influenced his reflection more profoundly and has generated changes in how he uses journals now in his classroom. He has begun opening his student journals up to peers and encouraging his students to develop their entries to a wider audience such as the college newsletter and local papers. So, while seeing the journal exchanges detailed in this chapter as effective, the writing of this chapter has extended that reflection for both of us and shown how the depth of questioning we can pose can always be continued and add to our expanding knowledge.

The exchanges we chose to use in this chapter are revealing not only in what they tell us but also in what is missing. What opportunities for reflection have we missed? This could well be an end-of-chapter task for readers. It is one that will ensure the professional discussion between the two authors continues.

Finally, we return to our title, "Moving towards 'truly reflective' reflective writing." We have chosen the word "truly" to mean depth of reflection. If you look at the typology in Chapter 1 (p. 7 of this volume, Burton), you can see how the types suggest ever deepening kinds of reflection. We hope this chapter has given you a practical example of how one tutor and teacher operated across these types. We leave you with

a final question and our response: *How deep can we look at ourselves and our approaches to teaching, learning and language?* The answer to this must be different for every individual, but it is always a beginning, it always needs to be sustained (as the two of us have done during the writing of this chapter). It is always maintained by the trust built over time between peers, a trust that is begun by following the six principles detailed in this chapter.



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### **About the Authors**

**Phil Quirke** is Director of the Madinat Zayed and Ruwais Colleges, Higher Colleges of Technology in the UAE. He has been in ELT leadership positions for over a decade and professional development has always been one of his key areas of interest and research. He has published on areas as diverse as face, action research, appraisal and journaling.

**Eberth Zagallo** has been teaching English for twenty years primarily in Brazil and the UAE. He currently teaches at Abu Dhabi Men's College, Higher Colleges of Technology and has always worked with journals, which he believes give us greater insights into our students than almost any other medium.

**APPENDIX 1—DELTA COURSE OUTLINE**

<b>Week</b>	<b>Seminars</b>	<b>Assessments</b>
1	Introduction to course & History of EFL	
2	Intro to Language System Theories of Lang. Learning & Learning Styles	
3	Lesson Planning & Evaluating Your Teaching Alternative Practices	
6	Intro to Phonology Intro to Skills - Receptive V Productive	
7	Grammar 2 - Tense, Time and Aspect Methodology & Learning Styles	Written Assignment 1 Experimental Practice
8	Course Planning	
9	Lexis 1 – Introduction & Syllabus Types	
10	Listening 1 Syllabus - Design Principles	
11	Presenting Language Speaking 1	Written Assignment 2 Course Planning
12	Phonology 2 & Classroom Management	
13	Reading 1 & Writing 1	
14	Grammar 3 - Form, Meaning & Function Lesson Planning 2 & Classroom Activities	
15	Discourse Analysis 1 - Intro Grammar 4 - Narrative Tenses	Language Systems or Skills Assignment 1
16	Materials 1 - Authentic V Non-authentic Grammar 5 - Futures	
17	Skills Review & Lexis 2	
18	Phonology 3 Discourse Analysis 2	Language Systems or Skills Assignment 2
19	Grammar 6 - Conditional Meaning Materials - Accuracy V Fluency	
20	Writing 2 Speaking 2	
21	Phonology 4 & Intro to Case Study Materials 3 - Evaluation of Materials	Language Systems or Skills Assignment 3
22	Error Analysis 1 & Lexis 3	
23	Formal & Informal Evaluation Error Correction	External Assignment Language Systems / Skills
24	Testing - Public Exams and Design Exam Practice 1 - Practice Questions	
25	Phonology 5 - Contrasting L1 & L2 Independent Learning	

<b>Week</b>	<b>Seminars</b>	<b>Assessments</b>
26	Grammar 7 - Relative Clauses CALL	Resources and Materials Assignment
27	Language Systems Review General Review	
28	Exam Practice 2 - Text Analysis Exam Practice 3 - Evaluating Materials	
29	Mock Exam + Q & A Session	Extended Assignment - Case Study
30	Exam Practice 4 Theory and Practice	WRITTEN EXAMINATION

## Chapter 3

### THE LANGUAGE TEACHER AS LANGUAGE LEARNER

Shelley A. Spencer

**Pre-reading question:** *How has your language learning experience influenced your language teaching? Consider how you might write reflectively about some of your critical experiences as a language learner.*

As an English language teacher working in foreign countries, I also have the opportunity to assume the role of language learner. However, what I experience as a language learner sometimes proves disturbing, and causes me to change my teaching practices and relations with my students (Spencer, 2003). As an expatriate, though, in sometimes isolated circumstances, with limited access to colleagues, compatriots, literature or other resources, I have no ready means of exploring my concerns or validating my practices. I need a way to make sense, on my own, of my teaching and learning experiences, as well as of daily life.

To this end, I have borrowed some techniques from phenomenology to develop an approach to processing my experiences and deriving and validating my new teacher knowledge. I keep brief diary entries of my ongoing German self-study experience, as well as records of classroom-learning experiences. From these notes, I have ready access to my learner-self thoughts and problems, which provide a source of reflection for my teacher-self. When moments as a teacher intersect with my learner experience, I take particular notice and process the event with a specific set of steps, beginning with a descriptive narrative based on the techniques of phenomenology (Van Manen, 1990). I then process the narratives according to hermeneutic phenomenology (Van Manen, 2002a) so that I can identify pertinent themes, process them in turn and arrive at my new teaching knowledge. The same approach applies in my learning role or my expatriate role, leading to new working knowledge to cope with learning and life.

#### Phenomenology

Phenomenology is still an evolving research method developed by philosophers such as Husserl (1931), Heidegger (1982), Merleau-Ponty (1964), Gadamer (1976), and Ricoeur (1981). Its development can be traced through several movements, namely, transcendental, existential, hermeneutic, linguistic, ethical, and experiential phenomenology. The basic idea is that one examines a particular event, experience, or phenomenon to determine what its characteristic features are and thus arrive at some new knowledge about this moment that has appeared. According to Moustakas (1994), “in a broad sense that which appears provides the impetus for experience and for generating new knowledge” (p. 26). That is, by taking the opportunity to examine an experience and derive new working knowledge, we become “experienced.”

In addition to philosophers, practitioners in other fields have found a use for phenomenology. The nursing field has adapted it in order to understand patients’ experiences of illnesses. More recently, Van Manen (1990, 1991) has adapted experiential phenomenology to the field of education, coining the term “Phenomenology of Practice” (Van Manen, 2002b). He has reworked the form applied by professional philosophers to a form more workable by professional practitioners. Van Manen (1999) believes phenomenology can take the reflective practitioner to otherwise inaccessible depths:

[T]he theory of reflective practice seems to underestimate the complexity of the organization of ordinary teaching practices, and the incredible intricacies of practical

actions in teaching-learning situations. I would argue that the practice of teaching is so challenging not only because it is cognitively complex but also because the knowledge that inheres in our practices is in part noncognitive—and it may be this noncognitive dimension of practice that continually challenges us in our efforts to provide for quality teacher education or teacher professional development. (n.p.)

Phenomenology, therefore, creates a further form of reflection, adding to the repertoire of possibilities available to reflective practitioners (Tripp, 1993; Clandinin & Connelly, 1995; Schön, 1983; Zeichner & Liston, 1996; amongst others). The appeal of phenomenology to me, then, is that it is a creative writing activity that one can carry out primarily alone, but with some unusual and unique disciplines:

- The writer must empty their mind, “suspending” all beliefs, and so enter a mental state called “*epoche*” (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, 1990), in order that
- An experience or moment be described as if for the first time, without judging, analyzing, theorizing, or allowing any other interference from the intellect (*reductio*), but vividly capturing its “essential constituents, variations of perception, thoughts, feelings, sounds, colours and shapes” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 34), and then
- The writer, upon examining their work, must “intuit” the themes, that is, allow the themes to “suggest,” “present,” or “reveal” themselves.

Phenomenological writing, then, means first recollecting certain phenomena, or experiences or moments, and writing vivid descriptions of them in the form of narratives, which may or may not be anecdotal in nature: To follow Van Manen’s intention, (1990, p.19), “The aim is to construct an animating, evocative description (text) of human actions, behaviors, intentions, and experiences as we meet them in the lifeworld.” The purpose of creating such narratives, in phenomenology, is to get to the essential meaning of an experience, which Husserl (1930) and Heidegger (1982) describe as *Zu den Sachen selbst* (‘to the things themselves’). That is, through narrative, the phenomenologist identifies the key themes and arrives at the essence, or core, that gives the experience its particular quality. The information provided may produce a resonance with others undergoing a similar experience. Basic phenomenology ends with this list of themes and reference to the essence of an experience. A complete working of a narrative will be given in the next section, but as an example, themes emerging from a narrative of a classroom moment could be: the power of the teacher, the silence of the learners, learner confusion about an activity, and the influence of prevailing teaching methods.

As a practicing teacher and learner, I want to extract more than these themes and essence—I want to determine their significance for future teaching and learning. I need to process the themes further in order to convert them into new teacher knowledge. What exactly is my position on “the power of the teacher” or “learner confusion about an activity” or “the influence of prevailing teaching methods”? How will I process these themes in order to arrive at my new working knowledge and inform my practice? I have thus continued the phenomenological process by drawing from the “interpretive” concept of hermeneutic phenomenology to propose six additional steps:

- Engage in additional reflection on each theme, which should be done first, and alone, to avoid the influence of other sources
- Extract related notes from personal diaries or journals, (e.g., my German self-study diaries, my German classroom journals, and my teaching journals)
- Seek other narratives on these themes in the literature, which highlights the importance of making narratives available to others

- Seek other references to, or discussion of, these themes in the literature
- Attend to any relevant passing comments or other auspicious sources—the “intuiting” process at work again
- Collate all these sources to arrive at my current working knowledge of that theme, in the form of a guideline, theory, philosophy, belief, or approach

The process is, however, cyclical. In an ideal world, I would diligently record, collate and track my musings. In reality, with a hectic teaching schedule, I often rely on memory of my learner-self preferences and “mental narratives,” that is, those narratives we create in our minds after a significant moment as we repeatedly relive it—an activity the expatriate may often engage in due to the inability to share experiences directly with significant others. Regardless, the critical step is to extract and name the emerging themes, because then we bring them into conscious awareness. Future contact with these themes—and I encounter many moments where my teacher-self and my learner-self intersect—trigger further input for working knowledge. This process encourages an open mind, with ongoing reflection and intuiting, and discourages one from forming dogmatic or unexamined beliefs. The whole process from identifying a “trigger moment” to arriving at new working knowledge is summarized in Figure 1.

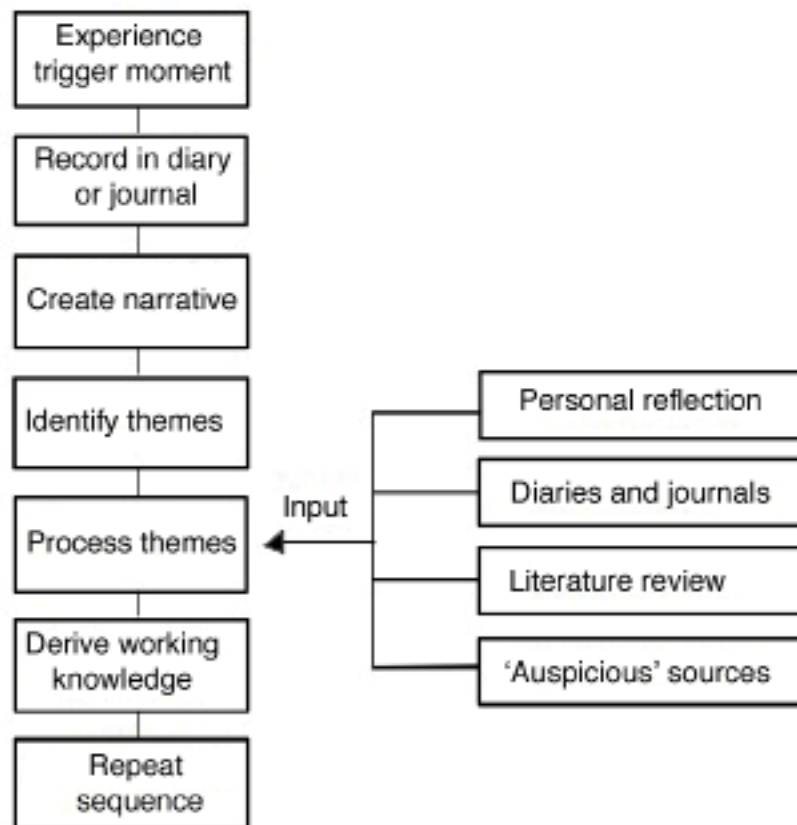


Figure 1. Reflective processes resulting in new working knowledge

## Narratives from Expatriate Experience

In this section, some narratives are presented and the themes extracted. One theme is then chosen for more detailed development according to the model shown in Figure 1. As I generally teach outside of my culture, I have first selected some narratives that will help convey my circumstances and need to derive teaching knowledge from my own reflections. These particular narratives helped me understand and prepare for the experience of entering a new culture. In one particular post in rural China, I was the only foreign English teacher on campus, and one of few foreigners in the region. Many locals had never seen a foreigner before and would stop and stare; the students expressed a desire to physically touch me. Through narrative, I try to recapture the “lived experience” of my first few moments upon arrival at the airport:

### Narrative: First moments in a new country

As I walked across the tarmac to the terminal, shifting the weight of my backpack and trumpet case, my focus locked on the surreal mountain formations embracing the runway, but I couldn't assess their height because of a grey-white haze. Mist or pollution? A feeling of “strangeness” began to settle upon me, accompanied by heightened sensory awareness; my brain began frantically processing the new signals; my head seemed to have become the focal point of my body. As my gaze swung around to the terminal, my attention was caught by the strange characters of a foreign language painted on the buildings. I then scanned the buildings themselves to assess their condition, looking for hints of the standard of living I could expect here. From behind, I heard some people calling out “Hallo!” and giggling. I turned to check if they were addressing me and noticed all the foreigners watching me, except that I realized I was now the foreigner. I smiled and nodded self-consciously, hoping they weren't being derogatory, and walked quickly on, trying to appear confident. As I heard outbursts of laughter, I wondered again with misgiving if it was directed at me, and glanced sideways to check, but no, the people just seemed to be loud and noisy and sharing jokes amongst strangers, just as the flight attendants had noisily shared jokes with passengers. Maybe it's just their way. I felt some relief. I'm still safe. Everything is still alright. I'm still in control. I prayed that I hadn't made the wrong decision in coming here, and my mind played through the scenario of attempting to catch the next flight back home, except that home didn't feel like home anymore. I pressed determinedly on.

In writing the narrative, I try to relive the moment and describe everything I sensed at the time, without engaging in any superimposed judgments or critical reflection. The use of metaphor is another literary device to describe what an experience is “like.” By capturing the lived experience of a significant moment through vivid description, the writer creates a resonance with potential readers (Geelan & Taylor, 2001) with sufficient detail to enable the reader to draw from it according to their particular focus, perspective or life experience. Phenomenologists therefore consider that there is never a “single interpretation of human experience” (Van Manen, 1990, p. 31). A piece of text can therefore be revisited over time, and further insights drawn from it, or additions made in the light of later knowledge. This is one validating possibility for the reflective teacher in reviewing teacher knowledge they have developed from their own experiences.

Having created a descriptive narrative, the writer must then extract the themes. The phenomenological approach is to adopt an intuitive state of mind, in order to allow the themes to present themselves (Moustakas, 1994). Van Manen (2002c) suggests either contemplating the text as a whole, or perusing each sentence and naming the themes that “suggest” themselves. The reflecting teacher is not trying to engage in comprehensive, detailed analysis, which is a useful tip for the busy teacher. For example, by quickly regarding each sentence of the previous narrative, the themes that suggest themselves

could be: feeling of “strangeness”, scanning surroundings, sights and sounds, foreignness, filtering information, puzzlement, assessing, forming opinions, self-consciousness, trepidation, misgiving, prayer, relief, safety, control, humour, and decision-making.

As phenomenologists do not ordinarily attempt to theorize or present conclusive arguments, this list, with some elaboration to create the essence of the experience, could represent the answer to a phenomenological question such as, “What is the experience of entering a new country?” The findings can be compared with those of other people, and a comparison of themes may result in the formulation of theories about such experience. However, with even this skeleton list, I have a greater awareness of my world and can monitor and exert some control over it.

Particularly with narratives drawn from teaching and learning, I have a need to process these themes to a greater degree, so that I can arrive at my new working knowledge, which might take the form of a new belief or theory, a set of guidelines, or a change in practice. To aid in this task, I have created the six steps presented earlier. For example, to process the first theme “feeling of strangeness,” I engage in further reflection and write down my thoughts (step 1):

#### Reflections on “feeling of strangeness”

I’ve come to expect, and even look forward to, the feeling of “strangeness” that enshrouds me in the first few weeks, as I become the “foreigner”, trying to make sense of an unknown world, and wondering how long it will take this time to acquire that familiar sensation of feeling “at home”. I notice again, that I’ve left my “personal baggage” behind and begun life with a clean slate. No one knows me. I don’t have a past history, which can be problematic because no one appreciates my prior achievements, and I don’t have the language to enlighten them. I have to construct a new identity. I want to feel respected. However, there is nothing I know how to do in this new world. Nothing is familiar.

I become keenly aware of decisions and their subsequent outcomes—of cause and effect, of fate and destiny—since every day brings new challenges to be addressed. Without the support of significant others, I am forced to rely on myself for strength—to confront my real, naked self, with all the layers peeled back. Without the familiar foundations that supported my character and built confidence, I have nothing to hold my sense of self together. In a world that has different values, I even have to consciously review my prior values and ethics and consciously decide how to proceed. Confronted with an unpleasant problem, and no support to talk it over, one may reach the limits of coping. Collapse may follow, marking the turning point: return home, relocate, or persist.

Over the weeks, I consciously notice the “strangeness” subsiding, replaced with a feeling familiar from my previous life: “at-homeness”. However, my difficulty is no longer dealing with “culture shock”, for I’ve learnt to take life moment by moment, one step at a time, arresting judgmental thoughts. It’s about dealing with all the “unnecessary” issues arising during the settling-in phase, the bureaucratic processing, the establishing of accommodation, and so on; because during this phase, I must commence my teaching. I must be fully functional to design curricula, build a rapport with students, ascertain their goals, establish how they have learnt English, how they view education, how their primary language(s) interfere with their English, and how I can best help them. There is actually now more distress in going home (“reverse culture shock”), because my new identities must learn to adapt to my old world. Friends struggle to reconcile the new arrival with the person that left. The feeling of “at homeness” is not immediate, and perhaps not reclaimable, replaced again with that “feeling of strangeness”.

Such reflections also produce text that could be intuited to provide further themes; so the cycle could be repeated. Nevertheless, following this reflective step, the phenomenologist explores further afield for additional insights, which I have broken down, for my purposes, into steps 2–6 (refer to the earlier list). Van Manen (2002d) terms this process “exegetical reflection.” He encourages the researcher to work not only systematically through obvious sources (my steps 2–4) but to be led by chance meetings or fortuitous “stumbling” across things (step 5).

For step 2, I would extract pertinent references from any personal journals or letters about life abroad. This step is very important when dealing with teaching or learning narratives, as the comments in one’s language-learning diaries or teaching journals give direct access to the learner or teacher mind—a privilege not all language researchers have.

Steps 3–5, in this case, evolved through stumbling across some relevant material. As I was searching online for unrelated information, I came across an article that triggered a connection with my narrative and themes above. There is a certain fascination in reading other narratives and finding points of resonance, so I allowed this fortuitous distraction and extracted some information that resonated with my experience (steps 3 & 4). Even the title begged a perusal: “The Lived Experience of Being a Foreigner” (Wu, 2002):

What really makes me feel being foreign is the constant awareness of self.

I need to know who I am by figuring out what image I have left in other’s eyes. I cannot even make good judgements about myself. I need to get this sense from others.

The stepping back from ‘me’ and recognition of ‘me’ does not only create self reflection, but also self-conflict ... The process of inner conflict may lead to great distress ... To regain peace and confidence, a re-organization or reshaping of self is needed. This process is threatening, as one has to alter one’s own identity, in order to accept this reincarnation. (Wu, 2002, n.p.)

The themes that strike a resonance with mine include issues of self, identity loss and reformation, inner conflict, threat, and peace. The reading and identification of themes gave me further insight into my own experience, making it relevant to review my own narrative for validation and for deepening of thought and understanding.

Another chance encounter after the discovery of Zhou’s article provided more input and further opportunity to collect my thoughts (step 5 again). I was able to connect with such auspicious moments because my reflective musings had raised my awareness and sensitivity to the themes:

Anecdote: Expatriate panic attack

In the dead of night, there was an urgent knocking on the door. With beating heart, I rushed to open the door. A figure was standing there in pyjamas and dressing gown. I peered at the face in the darkness, which looked gaunt and strained. I recognized the only other expatriate in the area and invited him in to sit down. He said he was suffering a panic attack, and cried that he couldn’t go on. He explained that nothing in life had prepared him to live in this culture and under these conditions. He said he couldn’t find suitable food and had lost an excessive amount of weight. He added that his students weren’t behaving according to his expectations. Above all, he just needed to hear a western voice. I quickly consolidated some of my recent musings and tried to offer and share constructive advice. He expressed surprise and relief at the intimate knowledge of his plight. Finally, as we began to shiver in the cold night air, he apologized profusely and departed. I sat back in quiet contemplation for a while, reviewing the incident, and nodding to myself as I noted the

value of my reflective writings in helping me process and cope with my world, as well as support others.

While working through the six interpretive steps, an intricate interplay of texts and themes begins to occur, with input coming from a variety of sources. As a result, I constantly feel in the midst of ongoing and interesting dialogues, thus removing some of the isolation from my expatriate environment with its lack of available cohorts and professional advice. So far, my original narrative has taken me to some intimate, revealing depths. In the expatriate's isolation of always being an outsider, one engages in a lot of introspection, but phenomenology has provided a clear direction for that inward turn. However, the reflective process is both humbling and threatening, yet ultimately strengthening. As Van Manen (1990, p.12) has pointed out, "So phenomenological research has, as its ultimate aim, the fulfilment of our human nature: to become more fully who we are."

In order to address step 6 (arrive at new working knowledge), I review my material on my chosen theme, and may include related themes that became entwined. For example, I now know what feelings or moments to expect when I enter a new culture and I might even group these features into labeled stages, which become part of my new working knowledge in the form of a theory. Although articles are available on culture shock and reverse culture shock, my intimate personal experience and reflection provide an intricate input that helps me move beyond common labels and prevailing thought to produce a set of guidelines applicable to me. Rather than referring to culture shock, which describes an emotional reaction to an intense and perhaps negative first experience, I need to talk about "entering a new culture," which is an ongoing lifestyle matter. As I have dealt with the issues of identity crisis and have a stronger sense of who I am, no matter where on this planet I find myself, it is no longer a question of shock, but of expecting and identifying other ways and devising coping mechanisms. For example, to counter the issues raised in the narratives and to preserve health and sanity when entering and adapting to a new culture, I have been building some guidelines for myself:

- Avoid judging and comparing guest society with one's own.
- Monitor one's internal "chatter" and rework negative thoughts.
- Purposely create happy moments to maintain balance of negative and positive.
- Keep some common threads running in life to retain a sense of normality.
- Judge neither disappointments nor successes—keep a neutral mind.
- Cherish acts of kindness and simple pleasures.
- Keep a pleasant, contented mien.
- Empty the mind of worries about the past and future. Stay in the present; engage all senses; allow space for ideas to enter that improve the present.
- Be receptive to life lessons.
- Make the most of opportunities life presents.
- View food and exercise as medicine and work at each daily.
- Learn a new skill or try a new activity.
- Remain professional and handle difficult situations with grace.

The generating and processing of narratives may therefore lead to different forms of working knowledge and numerous applications. It is a humanizing force, which sensitizes me to the plight of others. The distilling of my experience in this exercise resulted in several applications: it prepared me for entry into other cultures; it helped me to empathize with and assist other expatriates; it enabled me to give advice to students leaving for study abroad; it helped me to engage with students newly-arrived in my own country, and it enabled me to advise local staff about issues faced by new arrivals, developing a greater compassion.

This highlights again Van Manen's claim that the aim of phenomenology is "the fulfilment of our human nature: to become more fully who we are" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 12).

### Language Teacher and Language Learner

Having embarked on a TESOL career while living abroad in unfamiliar cultures has sometimes made the task of making sense of the TESOL profession rather arduous. Whilst coming to terms with other cultures and languages, I am also coming to terms with other educational institutions, from language schools that dogmatically insist on teachers obeying their teaching methods to the minute, to institutions granting total freedom with little feedback whatsoever ("As long as the students aren't complaining."). The greatest influence on my teaching has been my own language and classroom learning, precisely because my learner beliefs at times conflict with my teacher beliefs (Spencer, 2003). Significant moments, or even thoughts, both positive and negative, for my learner-self subsequently connect with my teacher-self, and so trigger episodes worth capturing and processing by narrative.

Besides the two key personae, teacher-self and learner-self, other personae also appear: "learner from teacher," when I am a learner drawing on my teacher knowledge; "teacher from learner," when I am a teacher drawing on my learner knowledge; and "teacher and learner," when presenting both perspectives with colleagues. The various personae are usually summoned by "trigger moments": flashbacks to a moment in the other persona's world, or an inkling that something significant is occurring relating to another persona. Each persona has a different perspective on the teaching-learning issue, and I employ my phenomenologically-based methods to try to reconcile them.

[T]he experience of being both language learner and language teacher has greatly changed my relationship with my students, which I describe as a more humanized, sensitized approach.

Other teachers who are language learners have intimated similar experiences. McDonough (2002), referring to her teacher and learner persona, summarizes the phenomenon: "[T]hese are very different worlds that do not necessarily meet" (p. 404).

Gower (1999, p. 7) also recorded "disturbing personal experiences" in the classroom as he switched from language teacher to language learner. In addition, he looked at studies of other teachers, mostly undertaking short-term experimental language courses, and found that their writings "contain more than the odd hint that one of the surprises was that what they wanted as learners was not what they gave as teachers" (p. 8).

When I enter the classroom as a student, it is not my intention to judge the presiding teacher. I do not even enter the classroom as a teacher. My learner-self is totally engrossed in the role of learner; my mind is preoccupied with learning—indeed, I have been surprised at the busy activity going on in my learner's mind, although as a teacher, I had imagined there was little going on in the students' minds! This learner focus corresponds with the experience of McDonough (2002).

Before presenting the following narratives, it must be stressed again that "A phenomenological description is always one interpretation, and no single interpretation of human experience will ever exhaust the possibility of yet another complementary, or even potentially richer or deeper description" (Van Manen, 1990, p. 31). That description may actually take forms other than narrative, for example, poetry, music, dance, or film. As an example, the classic Japanese film *Rashômon* (Kurosawa, 1950) is regarded as an interesting phenomenological study. The film presents visual and verbal narratives that relive a murder scene from the perspectives of all witnesses and participants, including the dead man's spirit (through a medium). It shows how reality can be perceived differently by each person. The viewer attempts to determine the truth of each flashback and narrative, but cannot, as each portrayal seems both plausible and unreliable. Film director Kurosawa highlights "the inability of any one man to know the

truth, no matter how clearly he thinks he sees things. Perspective distorts reality and makes the absolute truth unknowable” (Berardinelli, 1998, n.p.). It would therefore be interesting to create narratives from the perspectives of others involved in my experiences; however, time and practicality mean limiting my interest to examining only my own perspective. Nevertheless, the intricate interplay of narratives and themes causes me to continually examine my beliefs.

### **Narratives from Learner and Teacher Personae**

After a few years of TESOL teaching in my first overseas posting in Japan, I was still struggling with basic Japanese for numerous reasons including the habit of the Japanese to use foreigners for English practice. Finding this beginner struggle embarrassing as a language teacher, I decided to take up German, a language I had studied in school but forgotten, and attempt to “master” it. Following several months of daily self-study, in Japan, with the aid of a radio course, I enrolled in an intensive German course in Germany. It was here that the phenomenon of my dual, or multiple, worlds and personae finally dawned on me, and on my return to Japan, I recorded my classroom learner experiences in a journal (trigger moments, thoughts, lesson content, issues arising). I also began a daily diary recording my German self-study (what I was studying, when, how, accompanying thoughts, problems, and solutions). More German courses followed in Germany, Japan and Australia, providing more material for my classroom journals.

The following narrative was created by my learner-self after attending my first month-long, intensive course in Germany, at high-intermediate level (an ambitious decision by the placement tester, considering I had just started teaching myself German several months previously!). The narrative was prompted by a trigger moment alerting me that something significant was taking place regarding the use of dictionaries. The episode left vivid images in my mind, with a mental narrative forming, but as a busy student and then teacher back in Japan, I had no immediate time to process it thoroughly as reflection on action (Schön, 1983).

Back in my role as teacher, situations concerning dictionaries arose in different places and times that caused flashbacks to my learner experience, resulting in some spontaneous reflection in action (Schön, 1983). Mental narratives formed around some of these episodes, but I felt somewhat distressed that I had no time or means for really processing them until discovering phenomenology. I then converted the mental narratives into more detailed vivid accounts. The initial trigger moment about dictionaries is here converted into an anecdotal narrative. At the time, I was employed as a visiting professor at an exclusive Japanese university, but now on holiday in Germany with little language skill, my teacher only knew me as another struggling learner, which truly opened my eyes to the potential of the “language teacher as language learner” experience:

#### Anecdote: The pocket dictionary

I had strategically placed my beloved, dog-eared and ink-stained German–English pocket dictionary prominently on the right hand corner of my desk. As the teacher began to talk, I reached for the dictionary and rapidly flicked through, chasing unfamiliar words. When the teacher eyed my dictionary, he launched into a fury about pocket dictionaries (trigger moment) and stormed over toward me. As I sat with hand on opened page, eyes bulging, but then narrowing below a deep scowl, my mind recoiled at the affront to my person and preferences; my mouth flapped but no words formed. He grabbed the book and waved it in the air as he continued his tirade, then strode to the window, flung his arm outward and angrily pretended to launch the little book out. All students quickly slid their dictionaries onto their laps. I saw a flashback to my own students in Japan with their sophisticated L1–L2 electronic dictionaries, which I hadn’t objected to. The teacher now strode to his desk, slammed the dictionary down and sat down.

As the lesson continued, I discreetly scribbled down every new word in tiny print on the bottom of my page, glancing at my dictionary on his desk, wishing I could consult it, and playing an image in my mind of marching up to him, snatching my dictionary back and angrily cursing him in like fashion. At the end of the lesson, the dictionary was tossed onto my desk, and I spent the break looking up my list of new words.

After the break, I defiantly placed the dictionary on the right hand corner of my desk, adamant in my desire to learn as I wished, by checking all unfamiliar words as they occurred. Again, my dictionary was confiscated and I was made an example of in an angry tirade to the class. After that, my classmates tried to censure me and keep me under control if the dictionary appeared, although I also noticed that they secretly referred to their dictionaries under their desks.

Weeks later, the teacher gave us massive German–German tomes to consult, which looked threatening enough by their sheer bulk. The contents overwhelmed us, as each entry contained new words that meant embarking on a continual trail of cross-referencing. Eventually the teacher noticed that the great tomes lay idle, the class silently preoccupied and everyone sitting well back in their chairs with downcast eyes. In a sudden outburst of raucous laughter, the teacher realized that we were all covertly consulting our L1–L2 pocket dictionaries under our desks.

To process this narrative, I peruse each sentence for emerging themes, listing the following:

dictionary use, vocabulary development, power wielded by teacher, student compliance or defiance, learner preferences at odds with teacher's beliefs or current teaching theory, emotionally charged atmosphere, (male) teacher allowing his personality to unfold vs. learners restraining theirs, learners' limited vocabulary and slowness to formulate verbal response

Once again, by naming these themes, I have brought them into conscious awareness, allowing future moments to connect with them and so form part of my growing teacher knowledge on these topics. As a busy teacher, I may exit the process at this stage, storing the themes in the recesses of my mind, or I may work on them further by applying my six interpretive steps.

As an example, the first theme of “dictionary use” will be processed in more detail using the six steps. For step 1, I engage in further reflection on the theme of dictionary use and write down my thoughts about the subject. In this case, I revisited my writing at a later date and added ongoing thoughts.

### Step 1: Further reflections on theme

#### ***Reflections on “dictionary use”***

The incident essentially portrays the teacher's disapproval of dictionaries, especially of the pocket L1–L2 variety. At the time of the incident, there was certainly a school of thought that did NOT encourage the use of dictionaries, demanding learners get the gist of a text, or occasionally permitted L2-only dictionaries. In the students' defence, we were mostly visitors and travellers from abroad, and the little pocket dictionary was the most practical to carry in our luggage.

These bilingual aids were a well-established part of my formative school language experiences. I hadn't seen or used an L2-only dictionary in this language context before, but subsequently took the opportunity to look at one, only to reject it because the explanations didn't give me as clear an

understanding of a word as the English definition. I could more easily digest the English definition and store it in memory; whereas the L2 definition remained inaccessible for recall. Furthermore, the L2 definition introduced more unfamiliar words, requiring further cross-referencing. It was much quicker and more reassuring to look up the L1 definition in my pocket dictionary.

Addendum: since graduating to the “advanced” class, I still prefer to consult my L1–L2 electronic dictionary. When that doesn’t suffice, I cross-reference with my L2-only dictionary, but am not ready for it to be my main learning aid yet; I find condensed L2 “dictionary speak” tiring to process, and each entry has a long list to wade through, giving overwhelming shades of meaning.

### Step 2: Refer to personal diaries and journals

In this step, I refer to my self-study diaries, which record my thoughts in each German study session. I search for references to dictionaries. In the narrative below, I have summarized my findings, but an alternative is to record exact quotations and dates. I also combine this step with step 4 at times (i.e., refer to the literature):

#### ***Referencing personal diaries and journals***

I discovered that, as a learner, I wasn’t satisfied trying to guess the gist of unfamiliar words or sentences as teachers in my world often recommend students do. This just didn’t work for me. If I guessed wrong, then I just didn’t make sense of further utterances, and my focus was distracted in trying to access the word and establish the correct meaning. My motivation and self-confidence plummeted and I sat and frowned. Also, I hadn’t “learnt” the word, and felt uncomfortable with it. If I looked it up in my dictionary, I felt I had “learnt” it, or at least, was beginning to “own” it—it was like making a new acquaintance who would soon become a good friend, rather than an anonymous passerby.

McDonough (2002) concurs: “I’m not satisfied with getting the gist. I want to understand every word” (p. 405). Gower (1999), another teacher-learner, also experienced strong emotions: “faced with a teacher’s or course book’s refusal to help me understand everything, I was outraged and frustrated” (p. 12). I had an overwhelming desire to look up every unfamiliar word, just as McDonough (2002) reports from her own experience. I also enjoyed perusing the various accompanying meanings, phrases and examples. I repeated them in my mind trying to lodge them firmly in place. If reading from a textbook, I would underline the unfamiliar word, look it up and write the English above it. If listening to the radio or TV, I would write the word in my vocabulary book and either look it up immediately or wait until the end of the program to check new words. Looking up immediately gave me immediate reference to the context, which was forgotten by the end, but unfortunately prevented me from following the ensuing utterances.

I didn’t try to review my word lists. I find this unproductive and boring as there could be 60 words for every 30 minute news broadcast, and there’s simply not the time to keep up with it. However, the act of writing down and then consulting a dictionary gave me more meetings with the unfamiliar word, and over time, it was no longer unfamiliar. Although I didn’t like studying my word lists, I did enjoy reading sentence dictionaries, particularly those with translations into L1, and at one stage would go to sleep at night reading pages from the dictionary.

I tried storing new words into the memory function of my later-acquired electronic dictionary, intending to review them every day, but that also proved a tedious exercise for me. Yet my various

students in Japan had been educated to use vocab cards (small cards on a metal ring) with L1 on one side and the L2 on the other. They sat on the train reading through and trying to learn them. They said it worked for them. When I revealed it didn't work for me because I found it tedious and boring, they grinned and agreed.

Nevertheless, their teachers persisted in giving them lists of words to memorize, and after the college's poor performance on a vocabulary test, it was decreed that the students study the 2000 most common words, write out the Japanese meaning with a sample sentence, and learn them. This horrified me, as from my learning experience, I found that each word had many contradictory meanings depending on context. For some words, not even a dictionary with one example in each context was enough to give me confidence that I understood and could use that word.

During my 5th German course, I queried the teacher about a word persistently confusing me even after consulting several dictionaries and meeting it many times, but she could only shrug and respond that it depended on the context. This highlighted the difficulty of acquiring the meaning of words, and I therefore consult the dictionary sometimes even for familiar words, finding that they are being used in a sense I hadn't been aware of— I've learnt not to take even the familiar words for granted. Gower (1999), stated: "I couldn't memorise words when I didn't have a full sense of their meaning" (p. 11).

The key to my own vocabulary development came after reading my first graded reader in the L2. Although it was, at first, an absolutely terrifying prospect to read a book in the L2, I discovered that this was a better way for me to meet words in their various contexts; by checking them in my dictionary as they occurred, my repertoire increased. At the same time, I met patterns of words, was exposed to the German way of conversing and communicating, and obtained insights into the national consciousness of the German people. If I ignore an unfamiliar word, I feel that I am missing an opportunity to learn.

### Step 3: Locate narratives by others

Here, I search books and databases for narratives about dictionary use:

External source narrative on dictionary use

Clandinin and Connelly (1995) present a teacher's narrative:

An instructor had complained more than once that much to her despair, her students wouldn't stop using their bilingual dictionary in class. I listened to her and expressed appreciation of her attempt to wean the students from relying almost totally on their first language. We both accepted the conceptual notion that ESL learners should be encouraged to use their first language to facilitate their understanding of difficult English concepts. Meanwhile, I pointed out that there was nothing wrong with using a dictionary. What was important was to offer them a good alternative and to guide them to the right track to promote growth and independence. So I recommended a couple of good English dictionaries suitable for ESL learners. (p. 147)

The author then visits the instructor again and reports with a proud smile, "They use their little (bilingual) dictionary much less often now. Of course, her openness to change made me feel good

too!" (ibid.)

Realizing I can also extract themes from such narratives, I now scan each sentence for themes that suggest themselves, arriving at a quick list:

one teacher's "despair" at bilingual dictionary use; another's disapproval of bilingual dictionaries, disapproval of L1; "conceptual notion" of using L1 for difficult concepts; bilingual dictionaries not the "good alternative", not on "right track", not seen as promoting "growth and independence"; teacher "proud" that students use bilingual dictionary less often; teacher regarded as "open to change" for forcing students to deny their preferences

This list provides a wealth of input for further reflection, and highlights the intricacies of acquiring teacher knowledge. Here, I have an opportunity to examine the working knowledge of others and compare it with my own. There are some points of contention, and I find myself leaning towards the beliefs gained from my learner experience. I feel the teachers are repeating dictionary dogma passed around in the profession, but my learner-self doesn't want my teacher-self to accept it. I exit at this point to work on the next step.

#### Step 4: Locate other references to dictionary use in the literature

Referencing the literature on dictionaries

McDonough (2002, p. 405), a teacher-learner, also found that, as a learner, "small bilingual dictionaries are not encouraged" and "one evening in class, in a reflective moment, I scribbled a short note in my copybook to the effect that I was depending heavily on my pocket Greek-English dictionary. I assume this was an intuitive expression of a teacher's surprise that a small bilingual dictionary could be such a dominant learning aid." After distributing a questionnaire to 44 teachers and 19 students, McDonough found that 63% of teachers believed pocket bilingual dictionaries should be discouraged, yet 71% of students depended on them.

While reflecting on these references, some themes automatically suggest themselves: bilingual dictionary as "dominant learning aid" for teacher-learner, teacher's surprise at learner-self preference, majority teachers discourage dictionaries, majority students depend on them.

These extracts indicate a certain position in the field, as well as the dilemma faced by other teachers in reconciling ESL theories with their realities. My literature search continues as time and resources permit, but having named a theme, I am more receptive to further input and insights.

#### Step 5: Attend to passing comments and auspicious sources

In this case, I also include trigger moments for my other personae, creating narratives from their perspectives. The first narrative is after my return to Japan from Germany as I teach an English class. The second narrative occurred some months later.

##### Anecdote 1: The electronic dictionary—Teacher-self connecting with learner-self

I stood erect before my class in professional attire, speaking carefully in English. I looked down upon the students, sitting erect in their fashionable clothes as they looked up at me, eyes reflecting minds busy trying to make sense of my words. Some students suddenly started, grabbed their electronic dictionaries and keyed in a word. I had a "trigger moment" and flashbacks to the

dictionary incident in Germany. I stopped speaking and offered everyone in gentle tones some time to consult their dictionaries, make notes and ask questions.

All students opened their dictionaries and began typing and I looked around the room surveying the sudden activity and preoccupation. They conferred with one another, tipped dictionaries toward one another, and leaned over one another's shoulders to read the little screens. Hands went up and voices beckoned me to come to them ("Sensei! Sensei!"). I moved amongst them. They showed me their screens and with long manicured fingernails studded with imitation diamonds (elite women's college), they pointed to entries and asked questions, looking up at me with quizzical faces. I bent nearer to look, then straightened up to explain to the group who were listening in. A voice in their L1 rose above the murmur throwing a question to someone. Several voices answered excitedly from several directions and with rising volume, as they seemed to try to explain and give examples. After all the commotion and activity, a sudden silence fell. Surprised faces looked up and around to me. I raised eyebrows at them. They smiled back at me. I walked back to the front, turned and continued my speaking.

#### Anecdote 2: Discussing dictionaries and L1 with colleague—Summoning both teacher-self and learner-self

From the other side of the partition in our shared office, my colleague began ranting about her students and their persistent use of their L1 in the classroom (trigger moment). I walked around the partition to engage in further dialogue. She was slouched over the desk, hands holding her head. Near her was a plastic white cup with silver coins in it. She pointed to it and sobbed that she had resorted to fining the students whenever they used their L1. I had an image of her enacting this procedure in the classroom. She said she found it very annoying when they consulted their dictionaries; more so when they stopped speaking mid-sentence to do it. She appeared very angry and distressed. I spoke of my desire as a learner to use my L1 at times and consult my dictionary when I felt a need. She paused for a moment to digest that. We exchanged a few more thoughts on the issues but soon ran out of words. We parted with unresolved questions floating in the air, our focus redirected to preparation for the next lesson.

#### Step 6: Derive current working knowledge

I now need to formalize my current position on dictionary use by reflecting on the information I have gathered. For example:

All of the above anecdotes and thoughts emphasized to me the complexity of language learning, and in particular, vocabulary and meaning acquisition. My learner experience revealed the value of the dictionary as a learning tool, with the bilingual dictionary being a primary aid at all levels of proficiency, and the L2-only dictionary gradually being utilized at the advanced level. My electronic dictionary, in particular, with its grammar explanations, verb conjugations, sample phrases, and word games, has been a major learning tool. My teacher-self had little appreciation of the intimate relation a learner might have with words and their dictionary/ies or the complexity of establishing the meaning of words. Because of my learner experience and reflections, my stance is to encourage students to regard dictionaries as a valuable tool, both in and out of class. I will encourage them to check all new and unfamiliar words and to note down their L1, but adding more L2 synonyms at the higher levels. I will encourage them to think about shades of meaning and check ongoing meetings with words to determine which shade of meaning is inferred. My

learner-self is definitely a strong force with a great vested interest in mastering a language. I feel inclined to work with its requirements and adopt them in my teaching practice.

Because my phenomenological approach is cyclical and I want to remain receptive to further moments related to my named themes, I soon encounter more input. In the ensuing move to China, my dictionary recommendations are met with shock by my university students, because they have been indoctrinated to believe dictionaries “waste time” and that learners must “guess the meaning” of words. Instead, their teachers give them specific word lists to memorize, but because of my learner dissatisfaction with memorizing vocabulary lists, I am therefore wary of asking learners to do likewise. I suggest they purchase dictionaries, read extensively (I introduce them to Graded Readers) and consult their dictionaries frequently. One by one, the students purchase dictionaries and after some initial fear, announce that dictionaries are “fun.” I encourage them to branch out and explore their own best ways for acquiring vocabulary and meaning.

Importantly, the class and I have created open dialogue to discuss and share learning issues and ideas, because we share the same journey of language acquisition. However, as a Western individual learning to live in a group society, I also worry that I am undermining local authorities, and therefore need to be continually alert for trigger moments and monitor my beliefs in my current context. Gaining teacher knowledge from my reflections is an intricate process that generates confidence but also unearths niggling uncertainties.

### **My Changing Attitude toward Learners**

My learner experience in and out of the classroom has given me more intimate knowledge of the learner’s private and public world. I have a better appreciation of the effort required by each individual to acquire another language. As a classroom learner, I am privy to the relationship between students, to the fluctuating mood, to the feelings induced as a result of the teacher’s words or actions, and to personal views about the teacher. My learner-self has revealed quite an emotional battleground being enacted in the classroom, which I consider disturbing; yet as a teacher, I am oblivious to this internal world. The following narrative captures my learner experience of this inner turmoil in 1999 in a Japanese class for foreigners in Japan. Such experiences make me more sensitive as a teacher in considering the effect of my words, attitude, behaviour, actions, requests and demands.

#### Narrative: The Japanese lesson

The matronly teacher stood commanding from the front, in a smart black outfit with big shining brooch, and a beaming face that seemed to radiate confidence and power. Nearby were a number of assistants, similarly beaming. The class of adult foreigners sat in regimental rows. As the class progressed, the beaming continued, despite the anxieties I was experiencing. I was riding an emotional rollercoaster: I recited a list of verbs, overjoyed at the new vocabulary; then I began to panic as the teacher expected us to apply them in sentences in various forms before I had memorized their meanings. My shoulders drooped and the energy dissipated from my body. Half listening to the teacher, I furiously studied my list of verbs, trying to commit them to memory. I lost my grasp of the lesson.

I stopped to stare at the teacher as she raced on, with her smiling face that I now found annoying. I stared around at the assistants, who busied themselves peering at other students’ books. The thought occurred to me that they weren’t sincere; they were performing a role called ‘community service to the foreigners’; I screwed up my nose, stared dejectedly back at my page and wondered what to do. I looked around at the rows of students across the aisle: some also seemed to be

playing their roles as dutiful students. The classroom began to feel artificial. I was thinking how much I had looked forward to these lessons, and now I was losing heart. As the teacher quickly launched in a new direction, the student behind me (a professional musician) muttered: “What the hell is that woman going on about now?” Expletives issued from his neighbours. I realized that other students were similarly suffering in silence. I gave up all attempts to follow the teacher, and started my own self-study.

Processing this narrative, one can distill potential themes: for example, the power of the teacher, emotional rollercoaster, artificial behaviour, different perceptions of reality,, teacher’s quick transitions, teacher’s distance from students, student reluctance to seek help, lack of opportunity to seek help, giving up, and self-study. Having named these themes, and even without processing them further, I am already more conscious of my actions when in my teacher role, and so become more “sensitive” and “humanized” as a teacher.

The following narrative, created from a later experience in China, shows how the above experience and narrative, as well as the earlier ones, connect with my teacher-self and influence my philosophies of teaching:

#### Anecdote: Student request

As the new foreign teacher, I stood on the dais introducing myself to the assembled student body. Dressed in a new suit, I smiled broadly at the sea of faces in tiered seating and hoped to create an image of confidence and control. When I finished speaking, a student near the front stood up and asked: “Will you get to know me?” My eyes widened and I stared at her. There was a murmur and shuffling amongst the students and faculty. She looked around, then repeated her question. I smiled as my mind captured images of my learner-self also struggling with issues of teacher power, distance, and identity. I felt my stiffness melt away and I blurted out in simple English: “Of course. My classroom is my family. I am like Mama.” The students and faculty looked at each other, laughed, and clapped.

Without my learner experience and the subsequent naming of themes, I wouldn’t have understood nor appreciated the poignancy of her plea. Thus, my dual roles inform my practice, and also seem to have a humanizing effect on my teacher-self. I later received a delightful card from a student who remembered the “Mama” speech and liked the class atmosphere: “You are a very kind ‘mom’.... Love you, my mom!”

## **Conclusion**

This chapter has emphasized four main themes: the benefit of reflective writing for teachers; the value of the language learner experience for a language teacher; the application of phenomenology to education and teacher knowledge; and the plight of the expatriate TESOL teacher making sense of teaching, learning and life. The thread linking these themes is an adaptation of phenomenology to produce vivid narratives and elicit themes, bringing them into conscious awareness for further reflection.

The keeping of personal language learning diaries and journals provide material that feeds into the reflective process, either in the creation of narratives or in supporting the emerging themes. The insights revealed are invaluable material for questioning and informing beliefs about teaching and learning, thus providing a means for teacher development, particularly for isolated teachers. The expatriate teacher also has cultural issues to deal with, not only in life but regarding local teaching and learning philosophies, where the application of this phenomenological approach can assist in the clear identification and monitoring of issues.

Most significantly, the experience of being both language learner and language teacher has greatly changed my relationship with my students, which I describe as a more humanized, sensitized approach. For example, I have reduced the distance between me and each student; I regard and treat students as humans first, and students second; the classroom has more of an atmosphere of working together around the kitchen table (even when in rows), with all members expressing and sharing their worries, ideas and, in particular, personalities. I try to connect with my students' experience of my lessons; I imagine myself as a learner in my own classroom, and imagine what effect my words and actions have on them.

I recall even the slightest issues that gave me grief as a classroom learner, and try to avoid creating them in my teaching role. For example, I "sign-post" the lesson by informing the students what I'm doing and why; I use more repetition, particularly with lesson or segment introductions; I offer more summaries of teaching points, and I give students thinking time to digest work. I also write all page numbers on the board, as well as tasks, explanations and homework requirements. In addition, I consider if homework tasks truly provide value for the time required. I make myself available during breaks and after class. I do these things not because of professional training, but because my learner-self has given me the teacher knowledge. I do these things because I enjoy being with other language learners.

Even if a busy teaching post doesn't allow me to engage in much physical writing, I have my mental narratives and the training to identify trigger moments, elicit themes and bring them into conscious awareness. I may be isolated from teaching colleagues, but these trigger moments and narratives intertwine in an intricate interplay of themes and thoughts to create a sense of ongoing professional dialogue, which greatly influence my teaching, learning, and expatriate life.

How valid is my teacher knowledge formed from my own learner experience and narratives? I would argue that, unlike some teachers, writers and researchers, I have direct access to a long-term learner's mind, and although there may be learner differences according to learning styles, age, gender and so on, my greater sensitivity to learner issues combined with my reflective program will, in the absence of professional dialogue and feedback, effectively guide my teaching practice.

Finally, phenomenologists may use means other than pure narrative to capture and convey a phenomenon, for example, poetry, painting and music. The following poem expresses the various personae resulting from my dual teacher and learner experiences:

### **Language Teacher as Language Learner**

I, who am teacher, am master,  
Aloof in my wisdom and years,  
Solemnly posing and drawing,  
Tho' hiding my lack in my fears.

I, who am student, am shadow,  
In darkness, half-formed yet aflame,  
Peer out, reach out for the candle,  
Then cower and blush at my shame.

I, who am teacher and student,  
Look down from both sides of the wall,  
Speak of my view overwhelming,  
Defending and judging them all.

I, who am teacher as student,  
Look, question, demand and endure,  
Fear not the thoughts of my fellows,  
In knowing the truth am secure.

I, who am student as teacher,  
Watch over my neighbours unsure,  
Filling the gaps of omission,  
And guiding them safely to shore.

I, who am teacher from student,  
Search deep in each eye to the soul,  
In knowing, nodding and sharing,  
More human to nurture our goal.



### **About the Author**

**Shelley A. Spencer** is a doctoral candidate at the University of South Australia in Adelaide. She has taught in Australia, Japan, China, The Czech Republic and Germany. Her particular research interest is issues in language learning from the learner perspective.

## Chapter 4

# CONSTRUCTING COMMUNITIES OF PRACTICE THROUGH MEMOIRS AND JOURNALS

Carla L. Reichmann

*Pre-reading question: Considering texts in broad terms, that is, including written texts such as articles, books and reflective journals, as well as audio/visual texts such as photographs, paintings and movies, which texts have had a vital impact on your teaching practice and on yourself? Why?*

### Introduction

This chapter is based on these underlying assumptions:

1. Language shapes and is shaped by social processes, construing social identities, relationships, and systems of knowledge and belief (Fairclough, 1992)
2. Learning to construct texts and familiarity with genres requires social experience (Hasan, 1989)
3. Reflective writing is a professional action (Burton, 2004)
4. Teacher development and school reform are conceptualized as processes of restorying practice (Elbaz-Luwisch, 2005)

Echoing these ideas, I will discuss the empowering effect that a specific reflective writing genre—dialogue journaling—has had on my professional practice in different contexts. Roughly following a chronological sequence, I will analyze various journaling situations I have experienced, focusing on professional challenges and teacher learning. I will contrast two dialogue journal projects with EFL teachers—a successful one versus a fiasco (or at least as I saw it then). Most importantly, this chapter highlights the relevance of narrative research, reflective teacher collaboration, and a professional network on my own learning process as a language teacher and teacher researcher over time.

Narrative research and reflective writing can take place through different formats, such as autobiographies, life histories, reflective feedback, dialogue journals, audio and video recording, portfolios, webfolios, and weblogs. Personally speaking, I started writing more reflectively and systematically about my language learning and teaching experiences while attending the MAT program at the School for International Training: The collaborative context for reflection and meaning-making definitely shaped my professional identity and social practice as a teacher. On reconstructing my life history and educational experiences through my memories, on making sense of the present, and on signaling professional possibilities, reflective writing, and group discussions were a breakthrough. I became more aware of my position as an educator and was exposed to critical tools for lifelong learning. My experience is confirmed by Freire and Freeman: Freire (1996, p. 80) pointed out that “in truth, professional development takes place in existential experience, conceived in and influenced by it”; and Freeman (2002) has written about the importance of teacher education aiming to make sense of experience, collaboratively, and in a context-sensitive manner.

Likewise, the notions of action research (Kemmis & McTaggart, 1982), teacher research and evolving discourse (Elbaz, 1991; Freeman, 1996), critical reflection (Bartlett, 1990; Freire, 1970, 1997; Liston & Zeichner, 1987; Smyth, 1992), reflection-in/on-action (Schön, 1987), text-making (McDonald, 1992) and narrative inquiry (Connelly & Clandinin, 1999) have also shaped my practice deeply.

Another important construct underlying my current work is Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory. Through interaction with more capable peers, the individual progresses from what Vygotsky called an actual development level to a potential development level. Between these two levels is the ZPD, "the interpersonal space where minds meet and new understandings can arise through collaborative interaction and inquiry" (Cummins, 1994, p. 45). In other words, the ZPD is a dialogic, discursive space, *a construction zone* (Newman, Griffin, & Cole, 1989), constituted by the "specific ways that adults (or peers) socially mediate or interactionally create circumstances for learning" (Moll, 1989, p. 59, in Cummins, 1994, p. 45). Vygotsky was convinced that learning itself is a dynamic social process, and that high-order cognitive functions originate in the social environment. Following this framework, dialogue journaling is in line with ZPD theory, forging construction zones.

In sum, this chapter will cover my use of journal writing for myself and with teacher-learners over my professional career. The next section addresses the moment I joined my professional journal network—a group of teachers scattered around the world, connected by their mutual interest in journal writing, language learning, and teacher development (see Chapters 1 and 12). I then go back to my first dialogue journals, produced in the U.S.A. before I joined my journal network. Then, I will address an insightful experience—a dialogue journal case study I conducted in Brazil—whereas the section after that addresses a complicated experience—a dialogue journal project I tried to implement in Bolivia. The final section addresses my ongoing practice, and my journal network.

### **Constructing (Con)texts—The Online Journal Group**

*Learning is not so much acquiring particular skills as it is increasing participation in a community of practitioners. (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 90)*

In this section, I relate how I joined my professional network in the middle of the professional experience I focus on in this chapter.

The setting: New Year's Eve, Florianópolis, Brazil. I log on for the last time that day. An e-mail message informs me that my chapter proposal for the *TESOL Journal Writing* book (Burton & Carroll, 2001a) has been accepted. The chapter would address the Brazilian dialogue journal that turned out to be the core data for my doctoral dissertation; I was then wrestling with academic discourse having just finished a couple of pilot studies and a research paper—or "interim texts," in line with Clandinin and Connelly (2000). These explorations dealt with teacher discourse analysis from a systemic-functional linguistic perspective (Halliday, 1994). I would soon take the plunge and start writing my dissertation. But not right away. Now I had another text to write, another reader, another social interaction, pushing me to review the dialogue journaling experience.

In line with the unpredictable projects my professional journal writing seems to trigger, the impact of this particular discursive practice was then still unclear. The focus of my dissertation served as an entry to an ongoing network of teacher-writers-under-construction, namely, an open-ended collaborative project construing a learning community of practitioners focused on reflective journal writing and professional renewal. The developing e-mail network, and the underpinning concept for this book, has led me to go







































































































































































































































































