

# **Appendix B.2 - Allowing Space for Not-Knowing: What My Journal Teaches Me, Part 2**

Marné Isakson

## **Results**

### **Portrayal of the Journals**

The basic format of the 1985 journal was to put the date and to write what I saw happening. I kept a separate journal for each class period in a spiral-bound 8 1/2"x 11" notebook. I wrote in ink as I do any journal or daybook, because they are who I am and I want to save them. I tried to write daily but that did not always happen. To give a flavor of that journal, I provide four complete entries:

#### **85F2-p3-9/23c:**

Tom-came tardy-his 4th. During 15 min. of SSR: Fiddled with his art supplies, pens, markers, putting them in bags. I whispered a question to him, "Do you know what you are to be doing now?" "Yes, I know." — 2 more min. of fiddling. Then he

started reading. He read 3 min. -looked around, at the clock, did not disturb others-but no reading. Got up 5 min. early to put book away. "That's stupid. I'll leave it out then," when I told him he couldn't but had to stay in his seat until the bell. — He didn't put it away either. He didn't write in his journal for the 5 min. He had made a note earlier, \_\_\_? \_\_\_ lines. Oh, the book he had selected was C. Sandburg's Complete Poems. I would infer that he wasn't interested.

Forgot to mention Yellow sheet. All Vocab. people don't have supplies.

**85F2-p4-9/24d:**

Tom read orally from Black Boy into the tape. He didn't want to do it in the hall where the others preferred to do it. He recorded right in the class — at my desk. He set it up. He thought about what to write for our classroom. He said, "You mean like the lie that guy wrote about the steer?" (I was excited. He had been listening.) During reading time — he read 13 min. and 25 sec.!

**85F2-p6-9/26a:**

Tom was reading That's Incredible. He had to tell Mark about something from it. Do I encourage or discourage this during SSR?

Semantics didn't go well because I didn't introduce it right.

**85F2-p6-9/30c:**

Tom came to tell me before being excused for a senior career day that he'd stayed up until 3 A.M. reading Rambo.

In succeeding years I kept all the journal entries together and labeled the entries according to class period. This worked

better because the overall events for the day were often similar, and I did not have to repeat myself. The format was a three-part entry: description of the overall literacy events, observations of specific students in those events, and reflections on the significance of the observations, i.e, what I was learning about the students, conditions, interactions that might help me support the learners in my classroom.

The 1989 journal could best be characterized as a notebook filled with longer, more specific observations and more pointed reflections than the 1985 journal. Also by then my reflections had become interspersed throughout the observations. If an idea occurred to me while I was describing an observation, I did not wait until the "Reflections" section because I might forget the thought. So I put OC (Observer Comment) and wrote my thoughts immediately.

To give a view of that journal, I provide an example from later in the semester than the entries analyzed:

**89F-p68-11/28:**

Literacy Events: Book share three young adult books, read literature study books.

Observations: (OC) Quite by accident I stumbled on something that I plan to try again.

5th Hour-I didn't want to take the time to write the names and authors on the board so as I finished sharing a segment of a book, I passed it to Cora; she wanted to know the names of the authors. But then she kept passing the books around. They read the jacket, flipped through, started reading parts. Jed pointed to

the song of one of this favorite rock groups. He asked how he could get the book *Rock and Roll Nights*. Terri stayed after class to talk about child abuse — *Secrets Not Meant to be kept*. Her friend had been sexually abused as a three year old by her brother and his friends — gang rape. She had blocked out the memory until her brother came back recently — the scars and memories are coming to light [as they did in the book]. Winn and Erin spent quite a bit of time looking in *Rock and Roll Nights* together.

(OC) Touching good books is a good idea it seems.

An analysis of the 1985 and the 1989 journals shows that I wrote about the same number of entries each time but that the 1989 entries were longer. See Table III.

### **Table III: Contrasting Journals of Fall Semester 1985 with Fall Semester 1989**

1985-1989 equivalent number of pages 91-118 equivalent number of entries 52.7 56

number of pages with 3 or more entries (short entries) 24

2number of pages with 1 or more extended entries (long entries) 41 97

I found time to write because I came to value the process. I considered it some of the best time spent preparing for teaching. I found time to write when the students wrote in their journals, between classes, during my planning period or lunch break, after school (the usual time), and in the evenings. If I did not write the observations immediately, some wonderful stories I could feel in my bones would elude retrieval. After a while I did not let that bother me because there were plenty more

stories where those came from—any class period on any day. Since immediate recording was usually impossible, I tried memory jogging strategies with varying degrees of success: recording notes on a 3" x 5" card in my pocket, the seating chart, or in the margins of my journal; pondering the events of the day and writing what is salient; and looking at the list of names in the roll book at the end of the day to stimulate recall of events.

Three general rules of thumb for deciding what to write became:

1. Accept that I could not see everything so select something that interests me and go with that.
2. Write what I actually perceive with the senses. Concentrate on writing enough detail so the situation could be saved for future reflection and insight.
3. Try to see the situations from the point of view of the participants. This involved several procedures, namely, interviewing them, studying documents produced by them, and talking to important others (parents, other teachers, classmates).

Following these principles, I wrote the stories in as much detail as time would allow. If I had only five minutes, that is what I would spend. If I was waiting for a ride, I would write. If something happened during the day that I felt compelled to explore, I would make the time needed and sometimes that exploration for connections and insights took several pages. Sometimes I did not have time to reflect, but I did try to capture the event so I could think about it later — such as now, seven years later!

“Is it worth it? Does writing in a journal make a difference in your teaching?” my colleagues ask. My intuitive feeling is an overwhelming yes. The analyses of the fieldnotes also shows a strong case for this practice.

## **Results of Domain and Taxonomic Analysis**

I narrowed my focus from fifteen domains (see Table II) to one domain: the uses of the journal for me. Through a taxonomic analysis of the 31 included terms in this domain, I generated five main uses of journal-keeping for me:

1. DETECTIVE—to help me make sense of what I am seeing in the classroom,
2. BOOKKEEPER—to keep track of what was done and what needs to be done,
3. CHEERLEADER—to cheer me up and keep me going,
4. PEER-LEARNER—to be a place where I can record my thinking as I transact with texts as any reader might, and
5. MENTOR/FRIEND—to explore what I am learning about individual students so I can support their learning.

The initial domain analysis is in Appendix B, the focused is in Appendix C, and the resulting taxonomy is in Table IV.

## **Results of Componential Analysis**

The matrix in Table V shows the results of the componential analysis. Doing this analysis evoked some strong moments of insight for me. To show an example of what this analysis revealed, I supply a journal entry and its accompanying fieldnotes, followed by a discussion of the dimensions of

contrast in terms of that specific entry. For the discussion I focus on Domain 5, which is MENTOR/FRIEND.

Example from Fieldnotes: (See Methodology for explanation of abbreviations.)

AE (Actual Entry) - 89F-p4/a-3rdPer-8/22. Sharlene, Cal, and Brent were the drunken driving group. They decided after the whole class discussion of possibilities to find out more about S.A.D.D. Cindra had shared with the class some very strong experiences about this group's impact in Las Vegas where she had lived. Cal had also known of S.A.D.D. in Canada and had a contract he had signed there. He said he would find it and bring it tomorrow. In their group they thought they could find information about the group from Mr. McKay, Mr. Bolander, or the phone book. Brent said he'd research that out.

PP (Paraphrase/Summary) - Two boys and a girl decide to find out more about Students Against Drunk Driving. Two people in the class had personal experiences with the group in locations out of state. They thought of some resource people in the school who could give information. Two volunteered to look for information, Cal a contract and Brent some local resources of information.

PN (Personal Note) - Looking at this entry, I can see that I learned much about these students and also that I should have had focused questions about them.:

Overall — Why did each choose to join this group? What in their backgrounds led to such intense interest on their part? They are resourceful people, brainstorming some excellent sources of information.

Cindra — She can listen to several things at once. She was involved in her own group on capital punishment, contributing to that discussion, but she heard what this group was talking about and had something so important to say that she left her own group for a few minutes.

— She used to live in Las Vegas. Why the move here?

— She knew a lot about Students Against Drunk Driving. Why? What led to her involvement? She feels so strongly that maybe she has had some personal experiences. I ought to be open to her if she wants to share.

Cal — He used to live in Canada. Why the move here?

— He had signed a contract with S.A.D.D. It seemed to mean more to him than just a signature because he had brought it with him from Canada. What preceded his signing this document?

Brent — He seems to be confident in that he volunteered on the second day of class to research information that would involve interviewing people. Impressive.

Sharlene- No comment about her; however, I knew her family and thus knew her better than anyone in the class. For this reason I probably focused my observations on the unknown students first. I hope I realized the great probability that she could be very different with her peers than with her family. I should not assume I know her well.

TN (Theoretical Note) - The collaboration and intense discussion probably came about because of deep personal



concern for a problem affecting their lives directly or the lives of their friends. We do not need to contrive problem-solving exercises to get students thinking. We just need to open the doors and let their real world in. Look at all the effective language use going on in the above scenario: reading an article, relating to something they know, getting ideas from someone else, deciding where to go for information, deciding who will do what, sharing personal experiences. At this point the best support I could give would be to stand in the shadows and let them go full steam ahead, perhaps asking a question to prompt their thinking if roadblocks arise. It is obvious they have the ability to pursue their own course. The best support I could give is not to take this ownership away or dampen their enthusiasm. I also could support this effort by sorting out my own mental obstacles and being sure this is not a contrived task but a real and relevant one. I must be willing to let them take it as far as they want. — scary stuff for me at that time.

PN (Personal Note) - I respect their privacy and will not probe into their private lives. I will not press them whatsoever to share (unless I have reason to worry, then the talk should be private and probably for purposes of referral). On the other hand, it is important to build a trusting, warm relationship so they can feel comfortable sharing with me and class members if they think it would benefit themselves and others.

Example from Taxonomy:

5 MENTOR/FRIEND-help me see students as individuals so I can support their learning

5.1 record specific observations (timings, behaviors, attributes)

so I can learn about students and how to support their learning.

Example from componential analysis:

1 2 3

A in-coming purpose for discovered while discovered later  
writing writing

B obvious underlying

C puzzled, confronting celebrating hard issues

D student-centered me-centered content-centered

E describing hypothesizing categorizing

F where to start place hold for end thoughts tomorrow  
reflection

G understand to cause understand so can continued change be  
repeated

H understand teaching understand learning

I student-initiated outgrowth of situation teacher-initiated  
(intentional) (unplanned)

J forward-looking backward-looking

K overall specific

Cells	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K
-------	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

5.1	1	1	2	1	1	1	2	2	2	1	2
-----	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---	---

In order to explain the componential contrasts, I have selected on row of cells from the taxonomy, category 5.1 (record to learn about students and how to support their learning), provided a specific classroom event (in the fieldnotes given above), and then tell what each of these cells in the above matrix means given this specific context.

**Cell 5.1/A:** I usually start writing my observations of particular students for the purpose of understanding them better. The reason I did not tell anything about Sharlene, for example, is because I already knew her. However, as I wrote I also discovered some things I may not have noticed if I had not been writing. As I reread the notes later, additional insights came. Nevertheless, I have categorized this as primarily an in-coming purpose for writing (#1) as contrasted with discovered while writing (#2) or discovered at some future time when rereading the entry (#3).

**Cell 5.1/B:** What I recorded gave obvious (#1) understanding about the students — such as where they had lived, their opinions, their physical appearance. Some underlying characteristics may also have become apparent over time such as Cal's drug abuse problems. This is in contrast to something hidden or underlying (#2).

**Cell 5.1/C:** The act of recording the information for this entry was an act of celebration(#2), one of appreciating each person's unique qualities and contributions. Notice how much happened that was worth celebrating: the collaboration, the sense of community, the willingness to share, the brainstorming, the decision-making, the volunteering, and the evoking of prime resources to answer group-generated

questions. This is in contrast to my being puzzled or confronting hard issues (#1).

**Cell 5.1/D:** This entry involved close kid-watching and was therefore definitely studentcentered (#1). I was trying diligently to see the situation from their point of view and to obtain a feel for their backgrounds and skills as contrasted to my being introspective (#2) or being mostly concerned with the specific content (#3) of the article they were discussing.

**Cell 5.1/E:** The mental process used in this journal entry was the process of describing(#1). Notice the descriptions: focus of study (drunken driving), decisions made (find out about S.A.D.D), experiences shared (by Cindra and Cal), make-up of group (the three members + Cindra), and volunteered assignments (by Cal and Brent). Distinguish this from hypothesizing (#2! or categorizing (#3).

**Cell 5.1/F:** The main use of the information was to decide what to do tomorrow in class(#1), how to support the learners, as opposed to placeholdering for future reflection (#2) or to looking at the events with interest and then being done with my involvement (#3). The type of information given in the entry would be noticed day by day throughout the year and would often have immediate impact on my interactions with students the next day. In this particular case, I changed my entire plan for the next day, which had been to play a get-acquainted game and to discuss the purposes and expectations of the course. Instead, their excitement and involvement deserved to be nourished and set free. As it turned out, projects developed and evolved into much authentic language use: letters to the mayor, phone calls, surveys, library research, and interviews.

**Cell 5.1/G:** The purpose for understanding these events was to supply data from which future instructional decisions would be made. I wanted to understand what was going on with

Sharlene, Cindra, Cal, and Brent so I could think about the conditions that nurtured this quality encounter; I wanted to orchestrate such conditions again so that this type of engagement would be repeated (#2). If I could understand this, perhaps I could position myself to be of service to the learners. This is in contrast to understanding it so I could change something that needs changing (#1) or to continue something without attempting to orchestrate events or change anything (#3).

**Cell 5.1/H:** The focus for understanding these events was to understand learning (#2). The quality of this collaboration and the degree of interest was far beyond what I had hoped or had planned for. Something about the situation was ripe for learning. I wanted to probe the implications of this event for what it said about language learning. This is opposed to my trying to understand what my teaching (#1).

**Cell 5.1/I:** The immediate cause of the event was an outgrowth of the situation (#2). It was unplanned. Certainly I had initiated the process (#3) by my brief sharing of enthusiasm for their letters the day before and suggesting that they take their ideas beyond the classroom to make a difference. But these instructions could not account for the snowball effect that grew from that little suggestion. Furthermore, the students did not plan that this would happen either (#1), but were captivated by a concern important and timely for them. The situation grew out of hand quickly in a very positive way.

**Cell 5.1/J:** The predominant direction of focus of my writing this event was forwardlooking (#1). I was wanting to keep the magic, yet learn how to support the learners tomorrow. Of course, I would have to look backwards (#2) for data to try to understand the situation in order to offer effective support, but the purpose is forward-looking.

**Cell 5.1/K:** The scope of this entry was specific (#2). I was focused on four kids around one table for a discussion on S.A.D.D. I am not looking at an overall, general picture (#1). Nevertheless, my probing this story for implications for instruction should certainly impact a larger audience of my students. But that is true for everything I do, i.e., I hope I can learn from each specific incident so I can be more effective as a facilitator of learning overall.

The above insights came to me as I used Componential Analysis to make sense of the journal entries.

## **Results of Theme Synthesis**

The three procedures described in the methodology section under Theme Synthesis helped me discover the belief statements or assumptions in Table VI.

The essential principle to surface from this list was this: **TEACHER AS LEARNER**. This is the core of what my journal signifies for me. This, I decided, was the overriding theme of the present study.

### **Table VI. Assumptions Surfacing because of Theme Synthesis**

- Respect the learners in my classroom, including myself as a learner of how to teach.
- Teach people not subjects.
- Make collaboration an integral part of the classroom process.
- Write to learn to teach.
- Use reading as a tool for students to meet important personal needs, interests, goals, rather than as the subject of study

-Foster the learner stance in students through choice and ownership — force and manipulation, if they work at all, dissipate after a short term impact.

-Realize that good teaching is a never-ending journey.

-Probe why I choose to do what I do in the classroom.

-Be in a constant mode of inquiry and encourage such in my students.

-Recognize that learners have to find their own way, although teacher instigated experiences, demonstrations, and expectations can help.

-Reduce my controlling behaviors in favor of behaviors which liberate students.

-Realize how much better students learn when the reasons for doing so are authentic rather than contrived

-Take cues from the students rather than strictly adhering to the expectations of tradition; I need to find my own way, too.

-Facilitate learning in others rather than making decisions they could be making on their own.

-See myself as a mentor rather than as a director.

-Realize that real learning is a generative process rather than stenciling someone else's learning into the mind.

-Share the stories of my own learning and solicit such stories from other learners in the classroom.

-Use "child as informant" to see individual personalities rather

than a class conglomerate.

-Realize that learning is messy not orderly.

-Give up wanting to feel comfortable and accept the frustration of uncertainty.

-Do more researching for truth with the students than disseminating of it.

## I

A. The quest is to discover the right way to handle every situation (go to experts to find out)

VERSUS

B. The quest is to act ethically and responsibly (go to the participants' hearts, values, and experiences to find out)

## II

A. The quest is to find the right techniques to make good things happen

VERSUS

B. The quest is to uncover assumptions and theory so these can be thought through and accepted or rejected and then because of this process of significant change, good things will happen

## III

A. My lived theory VERSUS B. My espoused theory



The answer to my colleagues' question now becomes clear: "Is it worth it? Does writing in a journal make a difference in your teaching?" Most certainly, but not in finding the one right answer (which was probably my purpose in starting the journals). Remember all the questions I was throwing at Marjorie Siegel in 1985? Remember Frank Smith's refusal to give me the answers but his "you can figure it out for yourself"? I discovered that the act of struggling with these issues through writing was helping me realize that **teaching is a transaction with unique people resulting in change of both student and teacher**. The teaching/learning paradigm is a generative, caring act by both participants. Looking for a set answer for dealing with that delicate, unique learning moment is the antithesis of the real answer. What is the real answer? An uncomfortable, messy one: Do a "close reading" of the student and the social/psychological/physical context. From heartfelt information generate the supportive action to take.

The overall theme of TEACHER AS LEARNER has two features which seem to fit as underlying themes in nearly all the journal entries:

THEME ONE: A reflective teaching journal can help me learn how to teach better by making visible my assumptions, thereby helping me close the gap between lived theory and espoused theory.

THEME TWO: A journal of observations and reflections of what goes on in the classroom and the meaning of those events can impact instructional decision-making and my ability to nurture the learners in my care (including ourselves).

I have selected two examples from the fieldnotes to discuss in light of these two themes, one entry from the 1985 journal and the other from the 1989 journal.

85F2-p6-9/27b:

AE (Actual Entry) - **Smooth day. They [Tom] wanted me to keep reading. Tom, "Why not keep reading? It's Friday!" Tom read the entire 15 min. + more during SSR. Had written in journal earlier. We did a +, -, & wish.**

PP - "Smooth day." I read aloud to the class and Tom wanted me to keep reading when I stopped. "Why not keep reading? It's Friday."

THEME ONE (My assumptions)

Reading aloud even to seniors in high school can be a pleasurable activity. Reading aloud has enormous benefits for building reading proficiency: enjoying the reading process, seeing good oral reading demonstrated, using the same comprehension strategies as during silent reading, having a shared experience for later reflection and connection.

THEME TWO (Learning from the events to nurture learning)

The Friday part interested me. Had he been read to by teachers on Fridays? Did he view Friday as a day to kick back and relax. Whether or not, I infer he saw "reading" as a way to kick back and relax. Was this a new insight for him? or was he being put back in touch with pleasant memories listening to someone else read?

PP - Tom read the entire SSR time and through the journal writing time. He had written in his journal earlier.

### THEME ONE (My assumptions)

Providing class time for pleasure reading is vital for introducing the reluctant to the joys of books. They certainly won't find time to read at home if I can't find time for them to read at school. Besides, my allocating this time shows how much I value reading, letting it take precedence over most other activities. Choice is important. Whenever possible, I should let students have free rein to find their own way to be successful readers and writers. The purpose of the class is not to see how well they can follow my specific instructions but how far they can come in becoming proficient, self-confident readers and writers.

### THEME TWO (Learning from the events to nurture learning)

Things are really starting to happen for Tom. Sustained reading behavior beyond the "required" time is evidence that he is coming to enjoy reading. It is also evidence that he is a proficient reader, at least in this context. What was he reading, *That's Incredible*? If so, that fits what I was thinking about "the lie" earlier. (See entry 85F2-p4-9/24d discussed in "Portrayal of Journal" in this article.) I think he would rather read non-fiction rather than fiction.

What are the conditions that could help Tom find the reader within? Some possibilities: abundance of good books from a wide variety of genres, free choice, time to read in class, expectation to read at home, sharing of books and the pleasure of reading, being in charge of his reading, freedom to express his confusions and favorite parts, demonstration of other's engaged reading behavior, sharing of good books through listening to segments, discussion of reading strategies so he could learn how to deal with frustrations while reading, and his giving a good book a chance to hook him. Maybe he found out that he was smarter than he thought and that he could read

better than he thought he could.

As much grief as Tom causes by his behavior, he is willing to try. The evidence for this is that he wrote in his journal early in the period. If he had not cared, he would have ignored the assignment.

Tom wants to do things his way and on his time schedule; he wrote before reading instead of after as suggested and that he continued reading after everyone else had quit.

PP - "We did a PLUS, MINUS, WASH."

PN - A PLUS, MINUS, WISH is a means of soliciting feedback from kids about any topic. I asked for reactions about the class as a whole. I probably gave these instructions: "PLUS — What is something you really like about this class? What is helping you be a better reader and writer. MINUS — What is something you really do not like about this class? What do you feel is a waste of time or detrimental to your becoming a better reader or writer? WISH — What is something you wish we would do in here that would help you with reading or writing?" I wonder if I have their responses stashed in some file folder at school.

THEME ONE (My assumptions)

Soliciting feedback from students helps me facilitate their learning. They need a voice in the planning and implementation of instruction and in the evaluation of their learning. Voice breathes life into a class. Negotiation means respect. If students feel ownership in the activities of the class, they are more likely to engage fully and to bring their best effort to the task. All of which results in a more successful learning experience for them. The discomfort and uneasiness I feel in giving up power is worth it because the payoff can be so much

greater than if I manipulate everything.

THEME TWO (Learning from the events to nurture learning)  
PLUS, MINUS, WISH gives a feel for the underlying current of feeling in the class. I think good teaching requires a feel for that. Over the years some responses have been hard to take and painful, but I'm tough. Besides from this easy survey I obtain valuable information use in instructional planning.

## Suggested Citation

Isakson, Marné (2018). Appendix B.2 - Allowing Space for Not-Knowing: What My Journal Teaches Me, Part 2. In D. D. Williams, *Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/qualitativeinquiry/appendixb2>



Williams, D. D. (2018). *Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/qualitativeinquiry>



**CC BY:** This book is released under a CC BY license, which means that you are free to do with it as you please as long as you properly attribute it.

