

Appendix B.3 - Allowing Space for Not-Knowing: What My Journal Teaches Me, Part 3

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Discussion

Why keep a professional journal, a record of teaching struggles, observations, and reflections about what is occurring in the classroom? The preceding analysis was of only ten pages from two journals four years apart. I need to delve at length into more of my journals; nevertheless, this brief look revealed five uses of the journals for me as a teacher.

The following discussion takes another look at these five uses by going to the literature to see if there is support for these findings. Short of doing an exhaustive search, I found very little research on teacher journal keeping. What I found is conceptual or narrative rather than experimental or ethnographic. Furthermore, I admit to searching out scholars who have a similar world view to mine. Should I decide to share this study more widely, I will do a thorough search. Surely others have been interested in teachers as journal keepers trying to make sense of the practice of teaching.

1. Keeping a journal can help teachers puzzle through what they are seeing and why they are doing what they are doing. Journal writing makes it possible for me to refer back to some of the events in my classroom and my thinking about those events so that I learn from those experiences over time as well as immediately for tomorrow. "Writing about what happened each day, thinking about why I made specific decisions and responded as I did, has allowed me to reflect anew" (Newman, 1991, p. 341). Writing is a way to place hold my "kid watching" for later reflection that may lead to insights about how to support learners or to revelations about underlying assumptions that deserve celebrating or that need changing or augmenting. I know from first hand experience what Henke (1990) means about the pressures of teaching too often causing us to get through the day, sometimes mindlessly. I have likewise experienced the power of the pen in helping me reflect, conceptualize, and gain courage to experiment:

Teaching is such a busy profession that it is easy to fall into the habit of "just doing" without thinking about the doing. Active learners, however, need to reflect, conceptualize, and experiment. In order to learn about teaching, then, we needed to build in time and tools that facilitate the process& The professional journal seemed an ideal place to begin (p.283).

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A journal can be a conversation with my evolving self. Mary Snow (1990) wrote that we need to role-play ourselves into being the new kind of teacher we visualize. We need a period of self-regulated practice (p.277). A journal can help me work through my learning in these novice situations. Even though I have taught since 1968, situations occur daily where I am a novice, doing things for the first time. So learning and making sense is always what I am about. I suppose I will always be in a period of self-regulated practice—perhaps that is what being in “professional practice” should mean.

I have other compelling reasons to write. I find myself agreeing with the following authors quoted by Donald Murray (1990, pp. 4-9):

Edward Albee “I write to find out what I’m thinking about.”

Something is under my skin about a situation in a class, such as Tom’s phenomenal progress during that first month of school in 1985. I need to write about it to discover what it is about the situation that keeps stirring up my thoughts. **Joseph Conrad** “I don’t like work — no man does — but I like what is in the work — the chance to find yourself.”

Writing is a chance to find myself as a teacher, care-giver, scholar, person.

Keeping a notebook is one way to keep in touch with our past and present selves. A notebook, a diary, or a journal is a form of narrative as well as a form of research, a way to tell our own story, a way to learn who we have been, who we are, and who we are becoming. We literally become teachers and researchers in our own lives, empowering ourselves in the process (Cooper, 1991, p.98).

When I feel stretched and stressed, when I am feeling dysfunctional as a teacher because of trying events, or when I flit around not knowing my purpose, I know it is time to put pen in hand—somewhat like Ismael’s need “to get to sea as soon as I can”:

[sailing about a little and seeing the watery part of the world] is a way I have of driving off the spleen and regulating the circulation. Whenever I find myself growing grim about the mouth; whenever it is a damp, drizzly November in my soul; whenever I find myself involuntarily pausing before coffin warehouses, and bringing up the rear of every funeral I meet; and especially whenever my hypos get such an upper hand of me, that it requires a strong moral principle to prevent me from deliberately stepping into the street, and methodically knocking people’s hats off—then, I account it high time to get to sea as soon as I can (Melville, 1959, p.28).

Herbert Gold “I write to master my experience.”

I write to make sense of my experience and to make it serve me to improve my teaching and student learning.

Wallace Stegner “We do not write what we know; we write what we want to find out.”

True, entry after entry reveals that I write about the anomaly, the puzzle, the thing I most want to understand. For instance, I flipped open a journal to page 93. The date is January 29, 1990, and I see myself trying to deal with anomalies such as:

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-“Where had she heard it? Who? What had they said?”

-“Steve is on his second book recommended by his father. I can’t tell if he’s enjoying them or not. I hear mixed messages. The first Trump he quit. Now he’s reading Iacocca. ‘I think he wants me to be a businessman.’ But one of his letters told how boring it was. . . .He wrote flippant letters. Why?”

-“Natalie came after lunch to ask if she could check out two books for the weekend. What is her background? Why such an avid reader [and yet does so poorly in English classes]?”

-“Jennifer went to the library and checked out a new paperback. She’s enjoying it. Is this the first book someone else hasn’t recommended to her?”

These questions were nearly all addressed later, evidence that they guided my observations.

Harste, Woodward, and Burke (1984) created a theoretically based view of the language arts curriculum, rooting instruction in theory. What is known about language learning should be meshed with what is known about the language learners in order to provide instructional support for the learner. A teacher could ask, “In light of what we know and how these language users are performing, what curricular support should I provide?”

Implicit in the paradigm is a call for conscious awareness, for meta-researching and meta-teaching examinations of what one believes about language and language learning. What a teacher or researcher believes in these areas constitutes a set of relations upon which behavior is organized. . . .The paradigm argues that all research and teaching in the language arts, whether examined or unexamined, is theoretically based, and that researchers and teachers owe it both to themselves and to the profession to lay out what they perceive to be key relationships in language learning (p. 224-225).

These arguments tell me to think about and learn about the reading process, be a careful kid watcher to determine how the readers in my class are performing, and then decide how to support their learning.

This is backwards from the usual of going in with pre-set lesson plans to thrust upon kids no matter what and then test to see if they “learned.” Nancie Atwell (1987) finally gave up her lesson plans, her marvelous “creations,” and by so doing became a learner in her own classroom:

I learn in my classroom these days because I abandoned that creation. I had to. I saw that my creation manipulated kids so they bore sole responsibility for narrowing the gap, and my students either found ways to make sense of and peace with the logic of my teaching, or they failed the course. In truth, it was I who needed to move, to strike out for some common ground. I learn in my classroom these days because I moved, because the classroom became a reading and writing workshop, a new territory my students and I could inhabit together (p.4).

Oh, this is hard to do, to break away from the security of having everything planned and to take the cues from the students. The journal becomes my security. It place holds my frustrations and my anxieties and my vacillations so I can deal with them. As I go back to the entries later, a transformation has taken place—the frustrations have become fascinations.

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Inquiry supplants anxiety and off I go on the adventure of another day in the classroom. So writing about my classroom experiences extends my awareness and understanding of why I do what I do in my professional life:

This is no self-indulgent navel-gazing exercise. It is a serious exploration and examination of the roots of our beliefs and practices which has the potential to lead us to greater insight, confidence and control over our work. If we are unaware of the forces that shape our actions, we are doomed to work within them and remain without options. If knowledge is power then perhaps personal knowledge is the greatest (and most practical) power of all. (Nielsen, 1991, p.1)

Margaret Voss (1988), a writing specialist for a school district, started keeping two journals: a classroom journal listing ideas and questions, summing up feelings, reviewing past experiences, and documenting new knowledge; and a double-entry academic journal as part of a course project with field notes on the left and analysis, reflections, feelings on the right. She studied her journals to find out what she could about herself as a learner. "My discoveries not only clarified the processes and strategies that I employ as I learn, but led me toward new processes in my teaching" (p. 669). "My journal writing not only led me to discoveries about how I learn; it helped me learn" (p.672). She gave the example of how her procedures for interviewing improved because of the reflecting and analyzing she did in her journal.

As I write about my experiences in the classroom, describing the situations and the students, the transactions come into focus, take on added meaning, and become the object of thought. "When a practitioner becomes a researcher into his own practice, he engages in a continuing process of self-education" (Schon, 1983, p. 299). Through reflection in my journal I can evaluate the events of my classroom and learn from them so I can better support learners:

...such evaluations should be providing continual feedback to the teacher's construal of the situation which, ideally, will result in modification of that construal in ways which will permit ever more successful teaching acts. This process of feedforward and feedback is characteristic of what Donald Schon (1983) characterizes as "being in conversation" with the situation "so that his own models and appreciations are also shaped by the situation. The phenomena he seeks to understand are partly of his own making; he is in the situation he seeks to understand" (p. 151, his italics). . . &What we did think we could identify. . . was the one essential ingredient they [new teachers] would need to keep on getting better: the capacity to learn from their teaching by being in continual conversation with it....Teachers can continue to grow by inquiring into their own practice....Teachers will never be sufficiently autonomous to free ourselves from the packagers and the testers until we can demonstrate to each other and to the public that we know what we are doing. Reflective practice involving inquiry can provide the strongest possible basis for such an assertion (Mayher, 1990, p. 283).

Writing in my journal often helps me see the need for more information which at times only

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students can provide. (Notice how that is true for the questions I listed from my journal above- 1/29/90, p.93). "Often teachers are curious, wondering about things for which they have no immediate answers. Those answers often lie with the students — if only we'd ask them" (Huntsman, 1990, pp.40-41). Writing about answers I need often gives me the courage to be the learner and ask students to be the teacher, teaching me about them. Courage? Indeed, for I must give up "the rewards of unquestioned authority, the freedom to practice without challenge to our competence, the comfort of relative invulnerability, the gratification of deference" (Schon, 1983, p. 299).

In my reading class I desire so much to help these often reluctant readers come to the joys of books that I can become overzealous or forceful. The journal is a place to reflect upon the best way to be a subtle influence which, of course, must be an invitation and not a manipulation:

Motivation for growth and the direction of growth are the responsibility of the individual teacher/learner....What we recommend is a cycle of reflection, planning, action, and observation, which may begin with any one of these stages and continue indefinitely (Jones, 1990, p. 56-57).

2.Keeping a journal helps teachers keep track of what has been done and what needs to be done — BOOKKEEPER.

Though important for orchestrating events and bringing about order, this is the most mundane and an obvious use of the journal³ therefore, it will be skipped as part of this discussion.

3.Keeping a journal helps keep teachers fired up and trying-CHEERLEADER.

Self-talk helps a lot. Some of my journal entries are pure pep-talks, to gear myself up for what lies ahead or to keep myself going when the going is tough. Notice the coaching and cheerleading in the self-talk of this journal entry:

89F-p2-8/21c: I'm starting this year out feeling nervous because more than ever before I'm determined to move with the students, grab unscheduled opportunities, and follow their lead. I'm also committed to more "authentic" reading and writing. It's scary because each day is an unknown. It also hold the most exciting possibilities. -Go for it, Marne'.

Sometimes things happen that I want to share, but doing so might be too strong for the delicate relationship with a particular student and an outside colleague probably wouldn't understand or be interested, so I talk it through in my journal. Joanne Cooper (1991) expresses this use of the journals for me:

Journals allow us to examine our own experiences, to gain a fresh perspective, and by that means begin to transform the experiences themselves. I was startled by the power of this process. . . .It is through telling our own stories that we learn who we are and what we need (p.99).

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It is interesting to me that I gain sustenance from rereading my journals. I am not sure why. Perhaps the stories remind me what I have been through and that I can continue with renewed vigor and confidence.

Telling our own stories is a way to impose form upon our often chaotic experiences (Grumet, 1988) and, in process, to develop our own voice. Listening to our own stories is a way for us to nourish, encourage, and sustain ourselves (Howe, 1984), to enter into a caring relationship with all the parts of our self (Noddings, 1984) (p. 97).

Writing in a journal is. . . a way to attend to the self, to care for and to feed oneself. It can be a place to dump anger, guilt, or fear instead of dumping it on those we love. It can be a place to clarify what it is we feel angry or guilty about. It can be a place to encourage ourselves, to support ourselves, in working through that anger or guilt, and it can be a place to transform silence into language and action (p. 105).

In regard to this last point, I would like to share a poem from my journal. In it I vent my anger, my frustration, my concern, my wanting out of this situation. But, of course, I stuck it out. I submit that writing this poem helped. Through writing it, I discovered how to handle the situation for the month left of school, and it worked.

Crowther

Crowther
tears me apart.

*He shouts his profanities at me
while screaming inside
at his car accident,
"This is a bull-shit class,"
"You're not fair,"
"You should do this and this
not this and this."*

*He's on the brink
of violence, wrath,
a semiautomatic gunning the room
and all of us.
He seethes.
He festers.*

He's going to show US though
(or himself).
He'll be vastly wealthy someday
and then...
I'll regret

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asking him to remind me that he rereads,
asking him to tone down his blue language,
walking away when I can no longer take his abuse.
I'll regret all that.

*I must learn not
to take him on.
It only enlivens his explosion
and upsets me for HOURS,
DAYS.*

*I must try
to let him be invisible,
to understand his white hot bitterness
and not shovel in fuel,
and not give him one more thing to dislike about himself,
but give him a cool drink, even a doughnut of goodwill.*

*Or just let him be
because he'd probably throw the water in my face
and mash the doughnut to crumbs
with a thousand pounds of his rage,
"Don't touch me!"
Crowther
tears me apart.
When will it end?
How can I help it end?*

Another month of this seems an eternity.

This poem, written when I was feeling crushed by frustration, helped me understand what I had to do (I had exhausted most other options). I asked him where he would most like to sit. He chose the corner of the room, off by himself. Of course, I tried not to let him see how pleased I was with that choice. Then I let him vegetate. I did not initiate any dialogue with him; I avoided eye contact; I let him be invisible, requiring nothing of him. If he made a derogatory remark, I did not hear it. He did remarkably well under these conditions, so foreign to my usual ways. He turned in his weekly reading logs, brought his book and journal daily and used them faithfully, and was always on time. Furthermore, the next fall he made a special trip to my class to show me a letter he had received from Lee Iacocca because of a letter Crowther had written to tell Iacocca how much he had enjoyed reading his book and to ask him some questions. I guess I learned that sometimes the best thing to do is go against my principles. Yet in this case my overriding principle besides self-preservation was to move with the kid, to help him to good works.

4. Keeping a journal helps teachers to react to their involvement in the language processes

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in the classroom and to provide a demonstration for other language learners-PEERLEARNER.

If I wanted students to write, I needed to be writing. "Something was immediately apparent: the writing [of Newman's students] was guarded and cautious. Their brief synopses lacked spontaneity and offered little insight into any connections they might be making....Something was lacking — I wasn't writing" (Newman, 1988, p.134). Part of my role as a teacher trying to increase literate behavior was to demonstrate such behavior myself. Something interesting happened. What started out for the purpose of demonstration, became me, not something I was performing for the benefit of my students, though they probably did benefit even more so. Shirley Brice Heath suggests that the single most important condition for literacy learning is the presence of mentors who are joyfully literate people (1983). "Adolescents need teachers who demonstrate that reading and writing can bring tremendous joy to life" (Calkins, 1986, p.103).

In 1987 I had been reading *Last of the Breed* by Louis L'Amour while my students were reading silently. When it was time to write about their reading, I felt an overwhelming desire to write about what I had been reading, and I did. Up until that event, I had written with the students during that time but about my observations and reflections on the class. This time I wrote as a reader. I wrote in the form a letter to several students who were fans of L'Amour. They wrote back. The experience was so enjoyable that I began writing regularly to students in a separate journal about my reading (Isakson, 1991). I was glad to discover this naturally from a authentic need as a reader. Atwell (1987) shows herself as a reader and a writer to her students:

I put my true authority on the line from the very first day of school: 'I'm a writer and a reader. Writing and reading and teaching them to you are my life.'....My reputation as a teacher depends on the importance I place on writing and reading, how my passion informs my teaching, and how I invite kids to share that passion" (Atwell, 1987, p.48).

Reacting authentically to my personal reading and writing can have a strong effect on my students, I believe. So does Frank Smith (1990):

The development of thinking depends on the company we keep.... The development of how we think is affected by how we see people around us behave, and by the role we see for ourselves in their activities....People become thinkers who associate with thinking people, including the thinking people who can be met through literature and art (p. 125).

If they see my thinking, if I engage them in thinking with me and with the community of thinkers in the classroom, they will be affected for good by this company they keep. Furthermore, I need to see what my students are going through from the inside out. I need to be reading the kinds of books they are, writing in genres my students are, and pondering the processes I go through in order to talk about reading and writing with insight and credibility. "The quality of teaching can only be enhanced when teachers think through the question of the nature of the learning process they want to promote in students" (Blue,

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1981, p. 20).

The journals are tools for making visible my processing as well as the joys and challenges of my reading and writing.

5. Keeping a journal helps teachers see students as individuals so they can support optimal learning—MENTOR/FRIEND.

I wrote in my journal to learn from my students by trying to make sense of what I was seeing in my classroom. I had heard of Lucy Calkins who had done an ethnography studying one child (Calkins, 1983). I had heard of the Graves, Sowers, Calkins NIE project where they observed sixteen children for two years in classrooms in the process of writing in order to discover how children develop as writers and how schools can help (Graves, 1983). These folks were actually watching students and learning how to teach from them. Yetta Goodman's "kid watching" has had a big impact on me (Goodman, 1978). The notion that I could learn how to teach by watching the kids instead of leaning on "experts" or finding "programs" was an empowering idea for me.

"When I stopped focusing on me and my methods and started observing students and their learning, I saw a gap yawning between us — between what I did as language teacher and what they did as language learners" (Atwell, 1987, p.4). I discovered this also. Moreover, writing down observations helped individual kids jump out of the crowd and into my focus. Insights would come or sometimes the opposite would happen, and I felt uncertain and confused about what to do to support a learner. I kept thinking about the situation, however. The only things I could think to do at times were to "interview" the student to try to understand events from his/her perspective and then to collaborate in coming up with an answer. Perhaps this was the best thing to have done:

We have much to learn by using the child as our theoretical and curricular informant. "The Child as Informant" is our call to the profession to go beyond kid watching to the active examination of current assumptions about language learning and instruction" (Harste, Woodward, Burke, 1984, p. xvii).

Voss (1988) learned about the learning of her students by writing down her observations of their learning. "When most of the first graders in one class suddenly began collaborating with each other on original stories, I wrote about it in my journal and discovered some of their discoveries — and became more aware of the kind of help they needed from me" (p.673). Likewise, my journals are filled with narratives about my students. Quite often these stories result in discoveries about how to support them, but always such entries help me see a real human being worth knowing and caring about—a valuable accomplishment given that I face well over a hundred students a day.

The above detailed discussion explicated the five uses I make of my journals, weaving in the experiences shared and the opinions expressed in the professional literature.

Suggested Citation

Isakson, Marné (2018). Appendix B.3 - Allowing Space for Not-Knowing: What My Journal Teaches Me, Part 3. In D. D. Williams, *Qualitative Inquiry in Daily Life*. EdTech Books. Retrieved from <https://edtechbooks.org/qualitativeinquiry/appendixb3>



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



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