

## **Journal Writing as a Tool of Qualitative Assessment in a Kenyan Higher Education Context**

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*Current public university teaching in Kenya often takes the form of lecture and laboratory demonstration. Lecturing commonly portrays the teacher at the podium with students on the other side unquestioningly consuming the teacher's words. This physical divide symbolizes the authoritative teacher centered approach entrenched in a binary position of them/us. This paper reports an action research project performed at a Kenyan university. The author used journal writing to institute a culture that engaged and nurtured students' voices and experiences, and gave meaning to the relationships between students' lives and school knowledge. Excerpts from student journal writings reveal their initial reluctance, then enjoyment of the journal writing process. The author finds the journal is an effective tool for providing feedback to improve and assesses the practice of learning and teaching.*

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I was first introduced to journal writing as a student in a Canadian University where I engaged in graduate studies in the early 1990's. In the beginning, I was unsure of the professor's expectations and therefore, it took a long time for me to enjoy the writing. However, by the time I completed my degree, I was convinced that the journal is a great tool for teaching, and for enabling and nurturing pedagogical relationship between teachers and students (Khamasi, 2001). The practice also confirmed that it is only through a positive relationship with students that teachers can make curriculum come alive. My experiences in journal writing during graduate school motivated my initiative on journal writing when I returned home to become a teacher educator.

The initiative was further informed by the need to rethink my teaching approaches after graduate school, a time that symbolized change in terms of professional development. As Aronowitz and Giroux (1991, p. 103 - 104) reminded us:

Educational workers need to develop a critical language of identity and eliminate those pedagogical practices that make students voiceless, that run the risk of reducing teachers to mere technicians, and that function so as to subvert the ethical force and possibilities of educational leadership and learning.

They further advised teachers to take an active role in determining what they teach and how they are to teach it. They continue to say that teachers must take a "more critical role in defining the nature of their work, as well as in shaping the conditions under which they work" (Aronowitz and Giroux, 1991, p. 108). In so doing, teachers have to learn to criticize those forms of pedagogy that treat knowledge as fixed and deny students the opportunity to interrogate their own histories and voices.

As I searched for interesting ways to motivate and challenge my students, it occurred to me that a connection with my students was what I needed and introducing journal writing would offer the opportunity. Through the journal writing process, I hoped to nurture differences and pluralism by listening to the concerns of every student. Journal writing became both a political and a pedagogical project demanding that "educators combine a democratic public philosophy with a post-modern theory of resistance" (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991, p.82). The journal can also be viewed as a way of developing pedagogy of voice as part of a theory of curriculum that opens up texts to a wider range of meanings and interpretations while simultaneously constructing students' experiences as part of a broader discourse of critical citizenship and democracy (Aronowitz & Giroux, 1991).

Consequently, I devised a method of reaching out to students, a start of a relationship that would create the connection that I envisioned. It is my belief that students would get to know me (as much as I was willing to share) through the journal and, I, in return would know them as individuals, see their potential, and listen to their concerns. Journal writing became the avenue that was to create dialogue and the beginning of a pedagogical relationship between the students and myself (Khamasi, 2001).

### **Journal Writing as a Reflective Practice in Teacher Inquiry**

Coulter (as cited in Smith, 1996) argues that classroom research should aim at developing consciously moral teaching practices that help to positively change students and make them answerable for their understanding of the world and accountable

for their actions. My study was informed by the ideas and practices of various reflective practitioners who have used procedures and methods such as autobiographical narratives, journal writing, conversations with students or colleagues and other learning and research activities to inquire into their practice and/or as ways of recording and theorizing practice (Kuiper, 2004; Peterat, 1997; Smith, 1996).

Peterat (1997, p.103) describes reflective practice as a "means to inquire into meanings, metaphors and language, perspectives, consequences of actions, relationships between intention and effects, the 'helping' relationships we develop, and who we are as practitioners." Thus, action research as a methodology for inquiring into and learning from practice enriched this study as I set up the procedures of reviewing student journals, and as I reflected and responded to students' writings (Peterat, 1997).

Journals are widely used in a variety of ways and disciplines in developed countries. Muckfuss (2004) narrates how he used journal writing as a learning activity in a reading course. He acknowledges that reading and writing is a meaning making process and therefore a journal is a tool meant to help the student interact with and record thoughts or observations related to assignments and class discussions. Kuiper (2004) used a journal to address the difficulties experienced by nurses in transition into clinical experience. She acknowledges that promoting reflection improves cognitive thinking abilities during clinical problem solving and decision-making. In her study, reflective journals were observed to promote self-regulated thinking in graduate and undergraduate nursing students.

Pomper (1989; as cited in Muckinfuss, 2004) discusses the relevance of journal writing in classroom instruction

and argues that the journal is a useful tool for teaching and learning because it requires learners to reconstruct what they have learned in their own words. In addition, the students are able to connect cognitive with affective domains and consequently validate their feelings through the reading and writing process. Journal writing is therefore an approach that helps focus on the individual learner's uniqueness at the same time as highlighting the class as a learning community. The process of exchanging the journal between the teacher and the learner also becomes a motivating experience, especially when it includes observation, speculation, rereading, problem stating and a way of linking class activities together

### **Journal Writing as a Course Requirement**

To most students in my class, journal writing was a new activity that demanded that each student expound on matters of importance to her or his learning. In the initial stages, I took time to explain the elements of a journal and my expectations for its use in the course. Students were asked to reflect on anything that pertained to the teaching and learning of the course, with an understanding that teaching involves learning from each other.

The journal activities accounted for ten percent of each student's continuous assessment grade and had set due dates during the semester. After each submission, I read, made comments, conversed and returned the work to the student before the following class. What counted, therefore, was that the students wrote something related to their learning and were punctual in submitting the journal at the due date. Failure to submit by the deadline meant a loss of some percentage in the overall continuous assessment grade.

These guidelines were clarified when the journal writing process was introduced. This was necessary to build trust. The journal created a space where students could develop rapport with me and might view me as a person to whom they could entrust their ideas. It was also a chance for me to know each of the students individually. By providing the guidelines and due dates, I aimed to consciously develop moral teaching practices as well as to make students answerable for their understanding of the world, the course content and actions taken on that understanding.

If we consider reading as receiving, and writing as producing, then in journal writing, students become creative producers and the reader takes the role of passive consumer. As the consumer/reader and the teacher, I was challenged to develop my ability to truly listen to the students. As I responded to each student's journal, a critical dialogue developed between us.

### **Students in Action**

Kenyan students come from an educational background where examinations are externally set and moderated. The classroom teacher has little control over the curriculum because the examinations are developed and graded by an institution independent of the school system. In addition, students come to the university from an educational culture where the teacher is the authority. With that kind of background, students are accustomed to only one "right" way of doing things with only the teacher knowing that "right" way.

It therefore took time for most students to trust that I had no hidden agenda in requesting them to keep a journal. They found it difficult to believe that there was no right or wrong way of writing it. At the end of the semester, I requested that they include a summative evaluation of the journal

writing exercise as a whole. Specifically, I asked them to define what they liked about journal writing, what they did not like, what they liked or did not like about my teaching, and, in general, to give a critique of the course structure and content.

### **Moving from Resistance to Embracing the Practice**

Most students had initial difficulties with reflective writing. Searching inward is often a challenging task. Most were reluctant and expressed frustration as evidenced by the following students:

I didn't really know what to write, secondly, I had so many reflections on various subjects in life and therefore prioritizing issues was difficult. Thirdly, how to express the ideas in a most vivid and concise way was hard. Lastly, I found it time consuming and uninteresting... ..This was improved with repeated writings coupled with readings of comments from the lecturer on any particular write up. ...It became particularly encouraging when I read the comments, which enabled me to appreciate myself....(Muhuro unpublished journal entry, 2001).

At its early stages, journal writing seemed like any other academic task... (Mwangi, unpublished journal entry, 2001)

Initially I was suspicious about what the lecturer was up to in regard to journal writing. As a result, I could not put down reflections, which did not have much of personal attachment. However, with increased interaction with the lecturer I realized that she was after sincere interactions with her students through the journal, and that she was ready to share her reflections too. This gave me confidence to write

reflections on issues dear to me. ...lecturer's comments meant a lot to me and they inspired me on what to write next (Gachere, unpublished journal entry, March 2001)

After some time, students began to enjoy the journal writing process. The writings moved from the general to personal matters. My role became that of a facilitator as opposed to the judge that they had previously perceived. Such changes are evident through the comments such as the following:

I saw the journal as a conversation channel. It generated a lot of joy and motivation when the lecturer's comments were inspiring because one, it implied that the lecturer took time to read and fathom about my work and hence I felt proud to have had thoughts that would provoke others. Secondly, from the comments, I could also read the lecturer's mind concerning issues .... This enhanced my self-esteem and motivated me to be more diligent in journal writing (Gachiri, unpublished journal entry, March 2001)

Conversation is made interesting by active participation with the parties involved. When one party slackens, the conversation becomes dull and consequently dies prematurely. ... I always felt discouraged when the lecturer's comments were scanty or absent ..... (Ndung'u, unpublished journal entry, March 2001)

Rapport is one of the things that I developed with the lecturer through journal writing. This enhanced learning. This could be observed in other students too. *As a result learning became enjoyable rather than an inevitable life requirement that has to*

*be endured* (italics — author's emphasis) (Muhuro, unpublished journal entry March 2001).

... the journal enabled me to interact more freely and closely with my lecturer ... it also made me appreciate the course ... (Njoki, unpublished journal entry, March 2001).

From experience, I can confidently say that the distance between lecturers and students is too wide and it negatively affects learning. Students view their lecturers as 'Lords' , ... tanks of knowledge with no regard for their students. .... Most lecturers make hurried technical appearances to their students, release whatever they feel the students should know and fail to linger for a while to see the students' reaction. This is particularly incapacitating for student teachers... It is common in lecture theatres to hear lecturers say: 'I am paid to lecture not to teach' (Maina, unpublished journal entry March 2001).

The students who shared these summative entries had been in my class for two consecutive semesters. There is no doubt we had established a relationship of trust and confidence and by the end, they had realized that I had no hidden agenda. In summary this is what the students had to say in their unpublished journal entries about the journal writing process:

- Journal is a tool which lecturers could use to foster individualized instructional approach (Gachiri).
- Lecturer is able to listen to every student through the journal (Kagwiria).

- Students feel appreciated especially from the comments made on one's writings/entry (Muhuro).
- Journal allows sharing of what could be considered confidential information between a student and a lecturer (Ndung'u).
- Sharing freely between a lecturer and student can be fulfilling for students and positively influence learning (Chepkoech).
- Lecturer has an opportunity to learn and understand her/his students better, an opportunity that would not occur in a lecture situation (Munio).

### **Insights from the Process**

This study was a challenge and an inspiration communicated by the insightful evaluations provided through the journals. Despite the fact that students came from a learning culture where teachers are not challenged, the two semesters I worked with them changed their perceptions of teaching and using journals.

The process of journal writing transformed students and me into creative producers of knowledge through thoughtful and honest exchanges. The political value of such a model is that students felt a sense of control – a space they rarely occupy in a lecture setting. Journal writing was therefore an attempt to initiate students into a different culture. I did not want to deny them the opportunity to express their own voices, and interests. Doing that might have obscured the wider social inequalities that, in part, construct who they are and how they live their lives. Journal writing became a multi-faceted way of understanding the students' world as well as mine. It was through such intricacies that we nursed each other: the students with their need to be heard and considered in various pedagogical decisions and I with the need to be challenged.

Onchari, a reserved male student, had observed some unfair practices and had this to say:

I have been wondering all along since first year why most of the lecturers, especially ladies, have a negative attitude towards men ... many of them will normally take for granted questions asked by male students ..... men's argument or suggestions ... are hardly considered (Onchari, unpublished journal entry, March 2000).

In the context of a lecture, Onchari's voice would not have been heard and this issue would never have been raised.

It's within this premise that I suggest that journal writing could be used to develop student-lecturer relationships, which could build a favorable climate for lecturer evaluation in higher education. Most of the assessment tools used in institutions of learning are quantitative in nature. The journal creates room for qualitative information to be gathered over time, which allows for subjective knowing and constructs a friendly interactive environment for both students and lecturers.

With an interactive environment in place, the resulting course evaluation would be comprehensible and informative rather than victimizing, as is illustrated by the satisfaction felt by students who shared:

For once I was taught not for exams but for life (Chepkoech, unpublished journal entry, April, 1999).

... personally I enjoyed the journal ... Through the journal most of us were able to express ourselves better than if made to speak out ... (Gachiku, unpublished journal entry, April, 1999).

## Lessons Learned

Throughout the study, I found the journal writing process empowering for both students and myself. It meant working with students' experiences and enabling them to examine both their abilities and responsibilities. Journal writing helped achieve this by providing feedback needed to improve my practice and make teaching meaningful to my students. I realized a number of things that enriched and continue to enrich my teaching and learning:

- Through the journal, students were not only dealing with cognitive knowledge but were also engaged in narratives that were empowering and comprehensive. From the students' comments, one hears them celebrating the freedom to speak their minds.
- As pre-service teachers, the students were exposed to the language of social criticism. They developed moral courage. They also found limited strategies for connecting with their inner-selves.
- Journal writing was a response to the assumption that in the universities, lecturers are not to be challenged. By introducing reflective practice, journal writing became a way of interacting with students and making it possible to reconstruct my theoretical frameworks and solicit feedback on teaching.

### Note

Students' names have been changed to protect their privacy.

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## *SUNY-Oswego Onondaga Nation School Partnership*

A graduate level reading diagnosis course is taught annually at the Onondaga Nation School. Participating graduate students are paired with students at the Onondaga Nation School for tutoring in literacy, providing a rich experience for teacher candidates.

A faculty member from the Department of Curriculum and Instruction was in residence at the school during the 2003-2004 school year and continues this year, providing on-site professional development opportunities for the school's faculty.

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