Using Critical Incidents in Journal Writing

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Teaching practice plays a pivotal role in the pre-service preparation of teachers. In some programmes such as the UK Post Graduate Certificate in Education, school placement has become the dominant element, with very little time spent on theoretical study in higher education institutions. The main arena of development for the pre-service teacher is thus the classroom. In Singapore, although trainees spend less of their time in the classroom, the Teaching Practicum is nevertheless a major element of the teacher preparation programme. It is seen by both teacher educators and trainee teachers, as the crucial site for learning about teaching.

Given the importance of the Teaching Practicum in the training process, it is important to select methods that can maximize the learning potential of the teaching placement. This article will examine the use of a particular technique, critical incidents, within the wider process of journal writing, itself a major method of learning and assessment used in Teaching Practicums worldwide. The article will provide a theoretical framework for effective teaching practice; it will evaluate the use of journals in general and critical incidents in particular within this overall framework.

Reflective practice has long been accepted as the model for effective teaching. Deriving from the influential writings of Schon (1984, 1987), the reflective practitioner model has dominated thinking about teacher professional development (Hughes, 1991), teacher education (Calderhead and Shorrok, 1997), mentorship practice (McIntyre and Haggar, 1994, Tomlinson, 1995) and foreign language teaching (Wallace, 1991, Richards and Lockhart, 1994). This model sees effective teachers as professionals who are able to develop their ideas and professional practice through the process of reflection on their performance in the classroom, i.e. through...
"reflection on action". Schon sees the learning of a professional (and in this he sees teachers as being similar to many other professionals, such as architects) as being different from other fields in that professional practice involves a fusion of both theory and practice — theory in practice. Thus, the professional setting, be it the classroom or the architects drawing board, is the crucial site for learning.

Another powerful model of learning, Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle (Kolb, 1984), also proceeds from the premise that experience is essential to learning. This model explains the process of learning from experience. The cycle entails four stages, Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation, each working in a cyclical process:

The Experiential Learning cycle starts from the experience of the classroom and asks the trainee/teacher to reflect on this experience and to draw conclusions from this reflection, and then to begin to theorise from it. To do this the trainee/teacher will begin to integrate the theoretical knowledge from the methodological courses into their own developing understanding of teaching. From these insights, the trainee/teacher will then formulate plans for future actions (for example, decide on other ways to approach the teaching of something). Through Active Experimentation they will try these out in the classroom, thus generating more Concrete Experience, which will be evaluated in the same way. In this way, Kolb's model provides a learning process to complement Schon's Reflective Practice.
If we accept, as many do, the efficacy of these models, both for the trainee and for the kind of autonomous professional teacher we want to produce in teacher education, then the problem becomes how to instill such habits of thinking into the trainee, and, as a supplementary issue, how to assess whether the trainee has reached the stage of being able to operate as an autonomous professional at the end of the period of training.

One of the roles of the cooperating teacher, mentor, or teaching practice supervisor is to help the trainee to "see" their teaching and to scaffold their understanding of the teaching process. Through this scaffolding the trainee can be led to an understanding of the experiential cycle and reflective practice process (for a discussion of this see Randall & Thornton, 2001). However, trainees are not always going to have an outside mentor to help them see, and one of the ways that are used both to develop trainees as reflective practitioners and to assess their ability to reflect on practice is to ask the trainees to produce a teaching log or journal during the period of the practicum.

Diaries have been much used both in research into teacher thinking (for a review see Bailey, 1990). Such studies provide a useful anthropological approach to understanding teacher thinking. Similar approaches, involving the use of journals or logs, have also been enthusiastically adopted in teacher preparation programmes (Bailey, 1990; Porter et al., 1990; Thornbury, 1991). The proponents of such methods emphasise that journals provide a framework for training in reflection. Journals can also provide an opportunity for the trainer to assess the development of the trainee and also to assess the effectiveness of other aspects of the teacher training programme. Thus, for example, the effectiveness of a methodology programme can be assessed through the references made in the diary/journal entries of the trainees on teaching practice. Mace (1996) used diary studies to show how teacher trainees developed over a training programme in Rumania and how ideas permeated from the training programme to the teacher's practice.

However, the expected benefits from journal writing are not always achieved. The trainees often do not produce work which is truly reflective and very often a teaching journal becomes a chronological story of the lesson with a series of comments on "what went well" or "what went badly". The observations are often not closely related to the detail of what happened in the classroom, and the rationale for these observations is often very superficial and at the level of classroom procedure, rather than exploring or developing models of teaching and learning at a deeper level (identifying Stone's (1984) "deep structures" of learning). Jarvis (1992), in a study of in-service journal writing, reports on the difficulties that journal writers
have in moving beyond the descriptive to the reflective. Similar problems are reported by Spilkova (2001) who reports that *many students remain at the descriptive level or cling to simple value judgements .... without substantiating why and without any deeper reasoning* (Spilova, 2001: 64). Richards and Ho (1998) examined the journal entries of teachers following an MATESOL programme in Hong Kong and found that in the questions that teachers asked about their teaching only 19% seemed to go further than discuss superficial technicalities of teaching procedures.

Another problem is that some trainees only work from theory and fail to apply theory to practice. The type of teacher who is more interested in citing theories than in trying to apply them to the classroom is one that is also identified by Richards and Ho (1998).

Both Richards and Ho (1998) and Spilkova (2001) suggest that the trainees need to be trained in reflecting. They need training both in what to look for and what questions they need to ask about the experience. Students “*must be helped by way of targeted questions to think more deeply*” (Spilkova, 2001: 64). The questions on the experience are provided in the normal teaching practice feedback conference by the cooperating teacher/mentor/supervisor. In the journal these problematising questions will need to be supplied by the trainees themselves. One of the ways to solve the problem of what and how to observe and what questions should be asked is to structure the journal round a “critical incident”.

Critical incidents have long been used as tools in the social sciences, management and education (Brookfield, 1995). Subjects are asked to write a detailed account of an incident in their lives or their professional setting which is of importance to them. They are asked to very specific about:

- the location of the incident,
- the people involved,
- their own particular views of why the incident went the way it did,
- their feelings about the incident.

By getting them to be as specific as possible about the incident, their feelings and beliefs about the incident can be explored. They can be encouraged to empathise with the participants and to come to some understanding of their own feelings and beliefs and of the reasons that the incident proceeded in the way that it did.
This process of selecting a critical incident and then discussing it has been used within ELT as part of a group action research project (Nunan, 1990). Tripp (1993) and James (2001) also suggest using a critical incident methodology as part of a process of getting trainees to investigate their teaching. They both make the point (as does Calderhead, 1990) that teachers often have a rich episodic knowledge of the classroom and that this knowledge should be exploited for professional development. They also point out that the incidents used by the teachers may be quite mundane and need not be the deeply meaningful and highly charged incidents which form the basis of their use in social sciences and management training. By asking the trainee to select an incident or incidents to reflect on, we are trying to get the trainees to understand what is happening in their classes from the point of view of experience. We are trying to ask them to look at things anew, to “make the familiar strange”, and through this refocusing of experience, to try to discover underlying principles which can be applied to their professional practice.

James (2001) suggests a number of questions that can be used to structure thinking about such a critical incident:

What happened?
Who was involved?
What/who made it happen?
What did it feel like? For whom?
What does it mean? To whom?
Why did it happen?
Did I like it?
Was it a good thing?
Why?
What is it an example of?
What do I do as a result/should I do as a result?
How?
When? Where?

As an example of the use of such a procedure, the following reflections were written in response to a small incident that happened in a lesson with some pre-service trainee teachers in a Singapore classroom. The incident was quite small, quite mundane, but the use of the critical incident procedure allowed underlying feelings and perceptions to be translated into principled reflections on the practice.
Reflection on Monitoring Student Work

Three boys were sitting in a row working on their written recount of a personal experience. The teacher was moving around the rows looking over the students’ shoulders and trying to see what they had written. As she approached the boy at the end of the row of three, she leant over to look at what he had written. They boy sensed her presence and stopped writing and leaned back in his chair. As he did so he looked downwards and passed his hand over his eyes.

His body language signalled embarrassment about what he had written and he steadfastly looked away from the teacher.

The teacher read what he had written and leaned forward and pointed to something on the page. The boy, still leaning back away from his desk, made a correction on his paper. The teacher moved on round the class.

I felt the incident indicates some important points about the relationship between the teacher and the student. I presume the teacher’s purpose in monitoring the work was to see what the students were writing and to help them to express themselves clearly. By pointing out the error and getting the student to correct it himself, the teacher was fostering a self-correction attitude in the student, which is a positive thing. She was engaging in “scaffolding” the student’s understanding. However, the body language of the student indicated that he felt he was being “assessed” by the teacher, that he felt embarrassed by what he had written and was perhaps reluctant to share his work with the teacher. There was no indication that he welcomed the help of the teacher and there was no indication that the teacher was reading his work to find out about what he had written. The monitoring seemed to concentrate on accuracy and not on communication.

Perhaps this situation may have been made worse by the general atmosphere of this section of the lesson — the students sitting writing and the teacher “patrolling” the class like an examination invigilator. It was also emphasised by the seating arrangement and the position of the teacher. By having the students sitting in rows, the only option for the teacher is to look over the shoulder of the student. From this
position it is impossible for the teacher to have eye contact with the student and thus to talk to him and ask about the writing. The teacher is also “looking down” on the student, which again creates an atmosphere of superiority and “assessment”.

If the students had been sitting in groups, or even in pairs, it may have been easier for the teacher to talk to the student and to have some eye contact, thus stressing that the teacher is interested in what the student is saying. This interest could also be signalled if the teacher had been to the side/in front of the student and had squatted down to bring her face at the same level as that of the student. Perhaps the student would then feel less intimidated and it would also be easier for the teacher to collaborate with the student in scaffolding his understanding and developing his written ability. It is important that the purpose of such sections of the lesson should be on developing and helping the students to communicate effectively in writing, and not on testing their written ability: thinking about the seating and the positioning of the teacher and the student is an important element in attaining this aim.

What are the implications for teaching/learning? What alternatives are there? When/how can they be applied? What theoretical background is there for my opinions?

Implications for Training

1. There is almost universal acceptance within the field of teacher preparation of the concept of Reflective Practice and it is important to produce teachers who can reflect critically on their teaching.

2. There is almost equal unanimity over the utility of teaching diaries/logs/journals as a means of both developing and assessing the trainee/teacher as a reflective practitioner. Thus, journals should be used as an important component of the Teaching Practicum.

3. However, a number of studies have indicated that journals do not always produce the required depth of reflection from trainees. Research has suggested that trainees need to be trained in reflection.

4. This article suggests that the Critical Incident model can provide training in reflection and is one that could usefully be employed to provide a focus for trainees to reflect critically on their teaching.
References


