CHAPTER 3

Reflecting on Field Experiences: Fieldwork Logs

Experience + Reflection = Growth

As this equation suggests (and as John Dewey has argued), we do not actually learn from experience as much as we learn from reflecting on experience. Reflection on an experience, to put it simply, means thinking about the experience, what the experience means, how it felt, where it might lead, and what to do about it.

This chapter will help you to document and begin to reflect on your field experience. There are many possible ways to become more reflective about teaching. This book uses two methods: in-text questions/exercises and logs or journals. Before these methods are explained, however, an explanation of reflective thinking is necessary.

What is Reflective Thinking, and Why is it Desirable?

According to the educational philosopher John Dewey, reflective thinking means "turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration." Dewey insists that reflective thinking frees us from mere "impulsive" and "routine activity." It enables us to act in "deliberate and intentional fashion" to achieve what we need. It distinguishes us as human beings and is the hallmark of intelligent (as opposed to mere "appetitive, blind and impulsive") action.

Nonreflective teachers rely on routine behavior and are guided more by impulse, tradition, and authority than by reflection. They simplify their professional lives by uncritically accepting everyday reality in schools. They can then "concentrate their efforts on finding the most effective and efficient means to achieve ends and to solve problems that have largely been defined for them by others." In contrast, reflective teachers actively, persistently, and carefully consider and reconsider beliefs and practices "in light of the grounds that support them and the further consequences to which they lead."

Reflective thinking allows a teacher to examine critically the assumptions that schools make about what can count as acceptable goals and methods, problems, and solutions. Although we all must live within some constraints, often we accept as predetermined by authority or tradition far more than is necessary.

In your field experience, reflective thinking will allow you to act in deliberate and intentional ways, devise new ways of teaching rather than always falling back on tradition, and interpret new experiences from a fresh perspective. A reflective teacher is able to see problems from a student's point of view and tries to understand a situation as a problem that has been framed incorrectly by the learner. Because a reflective teacher treats every student's conditions of learning as being unique to that student,
the usual teaching approaches do not work. Teacher and student must work together
to reframe the learning situation.7

As suggested by the equation at the beginning of this chapter, reflection with no
experience is sterile and generally leads to unworkable conclusions. Experience with
no reflection is shallow and at best leads to superficial knowledge. If you merely “do”
your field experience without thinking deeply about it, if you merely allow your expe-
riences to wash over you without savoring and examining them for their significance,
then your growth will be greatly limited. The logs you write, the questions you try to
answer, and other activities in which you engage are all merely tools to facilitate reflec-
tive thinking about your field experience.

Is It Possible for an Effective Teacher to Reflect?

As necessary as reflective teaching may seem to some people, others are unconvinced.
They argue that there is no time for reflection if at the same time you must teach effec-
tively, that there is no point for reflection if you always have to do what you are told
anyway, and that reflection is not necessary because you can be a good teacher without
it. Let us examine these three objections one at a time.8

Is There Time? Philip Jackson9 reminds us that classrooms are busy places:

[An elementary] teacher engages in as many as 1000 interpersonal interchanges each
day. . . . Teaching commonly involves talking and the teacher acts as a gatekeeper
who manages the flow of the classroom dialogue. . . . Another time-consuming task
for the teacher . . . is that of serving as supply sergeant. Classroom space and material
resources are limited and the teacher must allocate these resources judiciously . . . .
Broken pens and parched throats obviously do not develop one at a time in an orderly
fashion. . . . Closely related to the job of doling out material resources is that of granti-
ging special privileges to deserving students. In elementary classrooms it is usually the
teacher who assigns coveted duties, such as serving on the safety patrol, or [doing er-
rands for the teacher]. . . . A fourth responsibility of the teacher is that of serving as an
official timekeeper. In many schools he is assisted in this job by elaborate systems of
bells and buzzers. But even when the school day is mechanically punctuated by clangs
and hums, the teacher is not entirely relieved of his responsibility.10

Jackson further points out that this “beehive of activity” is necessitated by the
“crowded condition” of the classroom. It is the “press of numbers and of time that
keeps the teacher so busy.”11

As if the realities of classrooms were not enough, institutional constraints further
limit the teacher’s time for reflection. Teachers are rarely granted released time for re-
fection. There is continual pressure to cover a specified curriculum and to ensure that
a highly diverse group of children—who attend school by compulsion rather than
voluntarily—attain at least a minimal level of achievement.

Jackson (among others) argues that, given these conditions, there is no time for
reflection and that reflection, if attempted, would only lead to paralysis of action and
therefore less effective response to immediate circumstances.12

The immediacy of classroom life, the fleeting and sometimes cryptic signs on which the
teacher relies for determining his pedagogical moves and for evaluating the effectiveness
of his actions calls into question the appropriateness of using conventional models of ra-
tionality to depict the teacher’s classroom behavior when a teacher is standing before his
students. . . . The spontaneity, immediacy and irrationality of the teacher’s behavior
seems to be its most salient characteristics. At such times there appears to be a high degree
of uncertainty, unpredictability, and even confusion about the events in the classroom.13
But Jackson is also careful to point out another aspect of teaching:

The fact that the teacher does not appear to be very analytic or deliberative in his moment-to-moment dealings with students should not obscure the fact that there are times when this is not true. During periods of solitude, in particular, before and after his face-to-face encounter with students, the teacher often seems to be engaged in a type of intellectual activity that has many of the formal properties of a problem-solving procedure. At such moments the teacher’s work does look highly rational.

This brief mention of the teacher’s behavior during moments when he is not actively engaged with students calls attention to an important division in the total set of teaching responsibilities. There is a crucial difference it would seem between what the teacher does when he is alone at his desk and what he does when his room fills up with students.

Research is increasingly confirming the belief that the quality of teacher planning outside the classroom (what Jackson terms the “preactive” phase of teaching) influences the quality of teaching within the classroom (what Jackson terms the “interactive” phase).

Furthermore, despite the time constraints of classroom life, a certain degree of reflection is still even possible in the “interactive” phase of teaching. There are always lulls in the action, and even the fast pace of teaching requires some self-evaluation. It is at these times that the teacher is able to find the time in the classroom to reflect on what has been occurring and what is about to occur. If it were not for this reflection, the teacher would always be in a reactive rather than proactive posture.

To consider only the extremes of too much thought and blind action is to limit our options. Clearly, there needs to be a balance between thought and action.

What’s the Point? Some people argue that there is little point in reflecting on goals and practices when all the teacher does is implement someone else’s ideas. They contend that “teachers are basically functionaries within a bureaucratic system; they have prescribed roles and responsibilities and in order to survive in that system they must always give way to institutional demands.” Furthermore, some claim, teachers inevitably conform to the norms of the school, which “washes out” any reflectiveness left over from preservice training.

Although it is true that schools do socialize new teachers into a dominant “teacher culture,” there is a wide range of viewpoints represented in that culture. Teachers within the same school vary widely in evaluation and classroom management practices, goals, political beliefs, treatment of special pupils, adherence to textbooks, and friendliness versus businesslike roles. Surely there is ample room for teachers to exercise individuality in teaching while working within the constraints of schools.

As with our discussion of time, there are two extremes on this issue. According to one view, every teacher is an individual, a person who is free to implement an educational philosophy by teaching what and how he or she wishes. Counter to this sociologically naive view is the position that the forces of bureaucratic socialization in schools are strong and efficient. As with most other extreme views, there exists a more moderate position. This view asserts the “constant interplay between choice and constraint” in teaching. As professionals working within a powerful institution, teachers have the opportunity to shape their identity, to take a stand even when they are in conflict with others, and to question common practices. Yes, teachers do implement someone else’s ideas, but there is always room for personal judgment, decision, and criticism.

Psychological research supports this view. In contrast to both a behavioristic view (see B. F. Skinner’s Beyond Freedom and Dignity) that a person’s behavior is totally shaped by the environment and a humanistic view (see Carl Rogers’s Freedom to Learn in the 1980s) that a person is free to respond as he or she chooses, a cognitive view
stresses the interplay between the individual and the environment. In particular, this view suggests that the individual monitors his or her own actions and thought processes and actively makes decisions about what, and even how, to think.

This latter aspect of mental activity psychologists term **metacognition**, which simply means thinking about thinking. Metacognition in teaching includes the ability of teachers to monitor their cognitive processes, including understanding their own concepts, theories, and beliefs about teaching, learning, and their subject matter. Metacognition also includes controlling the decisions they make about what and how they teach. In a sense, metacognition is a psychological approach to reflective teaching.

**Is Reflection Really Necessary?** Many claim that reflection is not necessary for teaching. Intuition, they argue, is more important for effective teaching than careful analytic thought. In fact, some of the very best teachers do not seem to spend time reflecting on their work.

Much of this argument, and my response to it, follows the earlier discussion of time available for reflection. But there is more: Anybody who has tried to persuade a group of teachers to implement a particular curriculum has remarked at the degree to which teachers adapt rather than adopt curricula. Some curriculum developers have even gone to the extreme of attempting (in vain) to produce so-called teacher-proof curricula, an effort I view as an affront to the profession of teaching. That such attempts have been generally unsuccessful seems to be sufficient evidence that teachers are very selective about what they will incorporate into their classrooms. Teachers work within a practicality ethic that subjects any innovation to a test of cost versus benefit, feasibility, and consistency within the teachers’ perceptions of themselves and their situations. It is no wonder, then, that most innovations are “blunted on the classroom door.” The view of teachers that emerges from studies of curriculum implementation is one of active professionals constantly making educational decisions for their particular classrooms.

Once again, the two extremes are unworkable. Teachers operate neither on pure intuition nor on pure rational analysis. Teachers neither blindly adopt the materials and methods developed by “experts,” nor insist on reinventing the wheel. Instead, teachers (especially effective ones) balance intuitive and reflective thought, using any resources they can find and adapting materials to suit their own purposes and methods.

**How Do I Become More Reflective?**

As mentioned earlier, there are two principal means used to help you reflect on your field experience: in-text questions/exercises and logs. You will find questions and exercises designed to encourage reflective thought throughout the text. If you take these questions and exercises seriously, you will find yourself engaged in an inquiry about teaching that ultimately requires a degree of self-analysis and appraisal. The questions and exercises will lead you to develop a sense of approach to your teaching, a perspective that will help you define your professional identity. If you pursue a career in teaching and continue to reflect on your professional experience, then your perspective will change over the years. These changes will constitute an important aspect of professional growth.

But because different situations require different perspectives, there is a danger in making vague generalizations about teaching. You need a way to focus a perspective on specific field experiences rather than on teaching in general. Your daily or weekly logs will help you use your field experience as a specific reference point for your perspective. When you finish this field experience, you probably will not have developed a comprehensive framework for all of education, but most likely you will have determined where you stand and what you believe in with regard to your specific situation. This will be no small accomplishment!
Daily or weekly logs, journals, or some other such method for recording events and personal reactions is one widely used method. Although somewhat time-consuming, written records and analyses provide a unique opportunity to keep track of events and to reflect privately on the personal and public meaning of those events. What happened? Why did it happen? What was my role? What beliefs did my actions reflect? Did my actions reflect beliefs and assumptions about which I was not aware? Did the consequences of my actions raise doubts or reinforce my beliefs? How should I act in the future on the basis of what happened?

When Should I Write My Logs?

A memory is most reliable if you write it down soon after the experience. Therefore, the longer you wait to jot down what happened, the less likely you are to remember the details accurately. A full description is not necessary at this point. However, if you intend to include quotations or detailed sequences of events, find a few minutes as soon as possible after an experience to note these details. This is not the time to reflect on the experience. Actually, if you allow some time to pass before you analyze the experience, you may gain insight and write a more thoughtful analysis.

The person who supervises your field experience may have a preferred or required format for your log or journal. Obviously, if this is the case, you should follow it. However, if you have a relatively free hand in terms of format, you can consider using the approach described in the following section.

What Is The Anatomy of a Log?

A lesson seeming unproblematic or even uneventful does not mean that there is nothing to observe. The essence of observation is the creation of insight out of what might seem to be routine and commonplace. Hidden beneath the surface of this lesson are unresolved issues that, when made visible, reveal possible alternative beliefs, values, and practice.

It does not matter if we call it a log or a journal. What does matter is taking the opportunity to think about field experiences. It is difficult to think deeply about all our experiences. Therefore, I suggest a format that helps to focus thoughts on particularly significant events. Focusing on one or two events does not mean ignoring all others. Instead, it means keeping a record of all events while selecting, elaborating, and analyzing one or two that represent an important development in perspective, goals, or plans. Thus, the following format is designed to help you grow as a teacher by enabling you to benefit from your field experiences.

Fieldwork Log Format

A. Heading. Name: (This is unnecessary if you keep your logs in a bound notebook.)
   Date of field experiences reported: (A log entry should cover only one day and should be written the day of the experience. Otherwise, memories tend to fade.)
   Time spent: (e.g., 1:30–3:00 P.M.)

B. Sequence of Events. Make a brief list, describing what happened. By making a list, you keep a record of what happened. This record may be useful for future reference. It allows you to mention all events, even those that seemed insignificant at the time.

C. Elaboration of One or Two Significant Episodes. An episode is an “event or sequence of events complete in itself but forming part of a larger one.” Select one or two episodes that are significant to you. An episode may be significant because what
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happened bothers you, excites you, causes you to rethink your initial ideas (e.g., your perspective, goals, or plans), or convinces you that your initial ideas were valid. Therefore, whether the episodes reflect your successes or your failures, they are significant if you learned something important from them.

Once you have selected one or two significant episodes, you should describe them in detail. When you describe an episode, try to relive it. Reliving the experience will enable you to provide as much detail as possible. Make certain that you include what people said, what they did, and how they looked. Try to be as specific as possible, including word-for-word quotations, as best you can remember. Recall what we said earlier about jotting notes as soon as possible. This type of description will provide you with material for reflection in the next section of the log.

Good descriptions should address all four common features (see Chapter 1), or at least you should have considered each. There is a tendency to provide descriptions that are too narrow, focusing only on what the teacher did or said. What we are looking for is a more complete description. Regarding subject matter, if the learner is working on a math problem, include the problem itself in this section. If not, at least describe the content of the “lesson” and the materials with which the learner is working. Regarding the learners, describe what they are saying and doing. Regarding the context, describe the surroundings including any relevant features, such as possible distractions or factors that may contribute to or detract from the teaching atmosphere.

In this description, try to avoid inferences about how people felt or what they thought (including your own feelings and thoughts). Save these inferences for your analysis.

D. Analysis of Episode(s). An analysis of episodes includes an interpretation of what feelings and thoughts may have caused the episodes to occur, why they were significant, what questions they raise, and what you think you learned from them.

Try to figure out what you accomplished, identify problems that emerge and how you plan to follow up, and distill from the episodes what you learned. This last point is the most important. You may have learned what does and does not work in this situation. If so, describe what you conclude. But you may also have learned something about your philosophy of teaching (your perspective). Does the episode confirm your ideas or force you to reconsider them? Maybe some initial ideas you held rather dogmatically depend, to a large extent, on the situation in which you apply them. If so, what was it about the situation that affected the applicability of the ideas? Perhaps the episode relates to something you read or learned about in this or some other education course. This would be the place to discuss it. In addition to describing how you felt, you should use the analysis section to discuss what you can say about yourself as a teacher and/or about teaching in general as a result of the experience. Many experiences raise more questions than they answer. You might use your logs as an opportunity to note questions arising during your field experiences that you want to discuss with your supervisor or bring up at a field experience seminar.

This suggested format requires you to distinguish between description and analysis, each with its own section of the log. When students begin writing logs, they typically have difficulty distinguishing between these two sections. When they do, they run the risk of undermining the use of their logs for reflection. Some problems include:

1. They add so much analysis to their “Episode” section that they neglect a full description of the episode. Or they add so much description of episodes to their “Analysis” section that they never get a chance to analyze the episode.
2. They make unexamined assumptions in the “Episode” section without giving themselves the opportunity to reflect on those assumptions critically.
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Note: Log writing in many ways resembles the data collection method used by many qualitative researcher practitioners. In research with human subjects, it is imperative to protect the confidence, trust, and safety of the subjects. Therefore, anonymity is required. In responsible research, many steps are taken to conceal the identity of the subjects, so in your logs, you should at the very least use pseudonyms when referring to individuals.

Criteria for Evaluating Fieldwork Logs

When I read students’ logs, I use the following criteria in evaluating them:

1. Are all the parts there?
   a. Heading
   b. Sequence of events
   c. Episode
   d. Analysis

2. Episode description
   a. Are all four common features noted? Learners (what they said and did), Cooperating Teacher (when appropriate), Subject Matter (content of the lesson), Context (surroundings).
   b. Is it detailed? Use of quotes, rich description.
   c. Does it stick to description, (note taking) rather than confounding description with analysis (note making). Look especially for instances where the writer attributes (a) a particular motivation (e.g., “trying to please”), (b) a trait (e.g., “lazy”), (c) capabilities (e.g., “a good reader”), or emotional states (e.g., “angry”) to the learners.

3. Analysis
   a. Does the analysis focus on the episode described earlier (rather than adding additional episode descriptions)?
   b. Does the analysis go beyond simply describing how the writer felt about the experience to include why he or she felt that way?
   c. Does the analysis include any conclusions from the experience? Conclusions may be in the form of questions that the writer is left with, or dilemmas that the writer realizes, rather than just hard-and-fast principles.
   d. Does the analysis draw on past experiences, readings, or exercises from teacher education coursework?
   e. Does the analysis lead to any plans? Will the writer do something as a consequence of this experience the next time he or she teaches?

Keep in mind that these are only guidelines; they should not be considered a formula for writing logs. Every teaching situation is different.

By reading some actual logs written by my students, you may get a clearer idea of how a log looks and what you might include in your own. For this reason, sample logs are included in Appendix B.

Toby Fulwiler’s Introduction to The Journal Book is an especially useful resource on using logs for reflection.

NOTES

2. Ibid., p. 17.
3. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
8. I am indebted to Grant and Zeichner (ibid.) for the main points of this section.
10. Ibid., pp. 11–12.
11. Ibid., p. 13.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid., p. 11.
20. Ibid., p. 11.
27. Family Life Development Center, Depositing Data with the National Data Archive on Child Abuse and Neglect (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University, 2002).