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Reflective Thinking Within an Art Methods Class
for Preservice Elementary Teachers

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ABSTRACT

Reflective Thinking Within an Art Methods Class for Preservice Elementary Teachers

Journal writing as a strategy for developing reflective thinking is often promoted in teacher preparation programs. In this interpretative study, preservice elementary teachers were assigned individual, written, reflective journals as a strategy for recording their reflective thoughts in an art methods course. On-going analysis of the journals, interviews with key informants, and video-taped observations of the class revealed that, for most students, the act of writing individual journals was personally meaningless. As a result, other strategies for reflective thinking were employed during the second half of the course. Reflective dialogue tapes, group journals, student/ instructor reflective conversations, and a final art project as well as individual journals were chosen by students as strategies for recording reflective thinking.

Reflective Thinking Within an Art Methods Class for Preservice Elementary Teachers

In recent decades there has been a growing interest in teacher preparation programs (Berliner, 1984; Beyer & Zeichner, 1982; Calderhead, 1988; Doyle, 1985; Koehler, 1985; Lasley, 1980; Stone, 1987). Much of this interest has been in reaction to a technical approach which has dominated teacher education for many years. Some teacher educators are attempting to apply reflective or inquiry-oriented perspectives to their teacher preparation programs and courses. Reflective practice in field experiences, student teaching, and seminars has been of primary interest (Gore, 1991; Maas, 1991; Noffke & Brennan, 1991), while research involving reflection and methods courses, or methods courses in conjunction with field experiences, has been conducted to a lesser degree (Adler, 1991; Gomez, 1991; Goodman, 1986, 1991; Zeichner, 1981; Zeichner & Liston, 1987). The interpretative research study reported in this paper is an investigation of reflective journal writing as a means of student reflective thinking within an art methods course for preservice elementary teachers. The possibilities and limitations of such a strategy are examined along with alternative approaches students chose to employ during the latter part of the study.

Reflective Thinking in Teacher Education

Reflective thinking has become a popular term in teacher education. One can hardly read a book or an article concerning teacher education without seeing the word reflection or reflective practice (Clift, Houston, & Pugach, Eds., 1990; Cruickshank, 1987; Dewey, 1909/1933; Ferguson, 1989; Goodman, 1984; Grimmett & Erickson, Eds., 1988; Hullfish & Smith, 1961; Jones, 1990; Kitchner, 1986; Korthagen, 1988; Posner, 1989; Ross, 1989; Roth, 1989; Schon, 1983, 1987; Tabachnick and Zeichner, Eds., 1991). In 1989 the *Journal of Teacher Education* devoted a special issue to "Critical Reflection in Teacher Education: Practices and Problems."

Many scholarly gatherings and symposiums have been held on reflection in teacher education by a variety of organizations, including the University of Houston and the United States Department of Education, and the American Educational Research Association.

This popular interest in reflective thinking began in the 1970s when a small number of teacher educators (e.g., Feiman, 1979; Korthagan, 1985; Tom, 1985; Zeichner & Liston, 1987), interested in reflective thinking and inquiry, looked to the writings of John Dewey (1909/1933). Although their views on reflection and inquiry were not incorporated within a particular research paradigm, they were based, for the most part, on Dewey's (1909/1933) concept of reflective thinking. Dewey (1933) characterized reflection as a specialized form of thinking that required three attitudes as prerequisites: open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. Other teacher educators interested in including reflective thinking in their programs have also embraced the writings of Dewey (Beyer, 1989; Calderhead, 1988; Cruickshank, 1987; Ferguson, 1989; Jones, 1990; Ross, 1989; Roth, 1989; Schon, 1983/1987; Tom, 1985, and Zeichner, 1986;1988).

Review of the literature on reflective thinking suggests that there is no consensus on how to best promote reflective thinking in teacher education. Clift, Houston and Pugach (1990) reported that at the "Reflection in Teaching and Teacher Education" conference the only thing agreed upon by those who attended was that reflective thinking was a complex topic, and deserved further discussion and examination. There was no consensus regarding definition, concepts, or ways of encouraging reflective thinking. Ross (1989), for example, stated that the University of Florida has been struggling with problems such as defining the nature of reflection, identifying strategies for fostering reflection in students, and assessing the impact of such an approach. One strategy Ross (1990) and others have found appropriate for the development of reflection is the writing of journals.

Journal Writing as a Means of Reflection

Writing about developing awareness of strategies that support the development of

reflection, Ross (1990) stated that reflective writing was an important component of programs that stress reflective thinking. Ross (1990) gave two reasons why programs emphasizing reflection should include reflective writing: “First, reflective writing provides a way for preservice teachers to practice critical analysis and reasoning (Copeland, 1986). Second, writing provides faculty with a way to challenge and support each student's reflective thinking”. (p.103) Others who have advocated the use of reflective journal writing include Comeaux (1991), Gore (1991), Maas (1991), Maher (1991), Ross (1990), Teitlebaum & Britzman (1991), Yinger & Clark (1981), Zeichner (1986), and Zeichner & Listen (1987).

Yinger and Clark (1981) argued the importance of the cognitive activity involved in writing reflective journals. They suggested that theory and research support the concept that learning is improved and memory is enhanced when the memory elaborates information. Writing can provide a way to process memories more deeply through an interaction between concept development and symbolic expression. The act of writing allows the writer to express knowledge in a form different from what was originally represented in memory.

Maas (1991) had another approach to journal writing and wrote about the limitations of a cognitive approach. Authors such as Yinger and Clark (1981), Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), and Stover (1986), Maas stated, all referred to reflective journal writing as a means to force people to think and reflect. Maas felt this reduced ownership of the journals and forced thoughts into a given form. Not wanting to force students to write, Maas set up flexible structures for journal keeping.

Roderick (1986) found that dialogue writing was a context for preservice elementary teachers to reflect on their teaching experience in the field and maintain a weekly exchange of dialogue with the professor. Writing dialogue journals, Roderick stated, enables persons to solve problems, develop a sense of audience, and share personal meanings. Roderick not only found dialogue journal writing beneficial for students but also extremely beneficial for the professor as a teacher-researcher.

Journal writing also might be found in the introductory phase of the teacher education

program. Freiberg and Waxman (1990: 123) asserted that when journals are used in this context they "allow prospective teachers to raise questions and concerns about the course material from their teacher education courses as well as their field observations." The study reported in this paper focused on journals written by preservice elementary teachers in an art methods course, a course not directly connected to a field placement or student teaching. Journal entries were to reflect students' experiences in the classroom and the information covered in the course.

The question that initially guided this study was concerned with how students made meaning out of their experiences in an art methods course. The examination of the literature on reflective thinking suggested that the best way to investigate this question was to have students write reflections on their experiences in journals, and then examine those journal entries. However, as the study developed, the actual employment of reflective journals as a strategy for reflective thinking became an over shadowing component of the research.

Setting

The setting for this study was one of five sections of the art methods class for preservice elementary teachers offered at a mid-west university. The course was one of four offered within a cluster in the two and a half year teacher preparation program and taken by students during the last semester before student teaching. Other courses in the cluster included reading methods, social studies methods, a field experience and seminar.

Five sections of the art methods course were offered during the semester of this study. The curriculum was structured so that all five sections would follow the same syllabus. Topics of the course included art making, aesthetics, art criticism, art history, child development, museum visits, lesson planning, evaluation, and resource materials. Students wrote one lesson plan as part of a social studies unit that they taught in their field placement, and then reported on in class. They made a visual file, wrote several papers, and created one two-dimensional art project and one three-dimensional art project. Preservice elementary teachers were also required to take an art making course offered by the fine art school.

Students

The art method class in this study was typical of most art methods sections at Indiana University. The class was composed of twenty females and two males. Students ranged in age from twenty to thirty-five years and were all Caucasian. During the first week of the semester the research study was explained to the class. Any student who did not want to remain in the class, because of the study, was allowed to transfer to either of the other two sections meeting at the same time. None of the students chose to transfer.

Initially twelve students volunteered to be key informants for this study. Eight students were selected. The following steps were employed to establish diversity within the chosen group. During the first few weeks of class, all class members wrote a two page reflective paper on an elementary art experience, constructed a concept map for the word "Art", made a list of reasons for the assignment "Why Teach Art?", and filled out student background information cards. Each member of the class met with the researcher for ten to fifteen minutes to discuss their childhood art experience paper, and ask any questions they might have about the course. During class time and again during these meetings, requirements of key informants for the study were explained and volunteers requested.

One hour personal history interviews were conducted with the twelve volunteers. From those interviews, informal, general impressions of the students' attitudes, and insights into their beliefs and assumptions were gained. The interviews helped clarify what students had written in their reflective papers, on concept maps, and on information cards.

Criteria for choosing the eight key informants included the students' differing previous education, beliefs, assumptions, and knowledge of art in education and society; their interest or lack of interest in art; demographic considerations such as age and gender differences; and their ability to be articulate. Of the eight students selected to be key informants only one dropped out of the study. This student withdrew from school several weeks after being chosen as a key informant.

Instructor as Researcher

Galbraith (1990: 56) suggested that one method of conducting research on art teacher preparation classes would be to conduct studies

as teacher-researchers, thereby keeping track of our personal teacher-education practices.

We can develop research methodology that can become an integral part of our courses, for example, in the form of instructor/preservice journals, case studies, written materials, and exams.

This interpretative study involved the instructor of the course as the researcher. However, key informants were considered not only subjects of the study but collaborative researchers as well.

Data Collection

Strategies as discussed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), Hitchcock and Hughes (1989), Lincoln and Guba (1985), Spradley (1979), Stake (1978), and Stenhouse (1975) were employed to collect and analysis data in this qualitative, interpretative study. Three major sources of data were chosen: interviews, observations (video tapes), and written artifacts.

One and a half hour formal interviews were conducted on alternating weeks with key informants. These conversations were audio taped and later transcribed. Informal interviews were held before and after class. Since the researcher had the dual role of both teacher and observer, observing all students while teaching was difficult. In response to this limitation, the class was video and audio taped. These tapes were transcribed, and notes were made. Written artifacts included class assignments, reflective journals, instructor's journal and notes, audio tape recorded transcriptions of interviews and observations, and correspondence with key informants after the semester was over.

Data Analysis

Based on a constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) each incident in the data was coded. Coded data were placed into tentative conceptual categories as they emerged.

Incidents of coded data were compared with incidents in the same and different categories and/or sources. Questions often arose which guided further investigation. For example, field notes reflected students' dismay toward the initial individual, reflective journal writing assignment. Review of the video tape of the class session in which the assignment was given showed that students' physical mannerisms and verbal statements confirmed interpretations of their feelings, as did written statements students later made in their reflective journals. Analysis of key informants' interview conversations also reinforced these interpretations. Statements made during these conversations lead to asking key informants questions concerning the employment of reflective journals in their previous classes even though such investigation was not envisioned in the proposal of this study. Further review of the literature offered possible reasons for why students responded to the journal writing assignment as they did (Maas, 1991; Yinger & Clark, 1981). Comparing and cross-checking data from various sources, a constant review of the literature, and the researcher's reflections on teaching previous preservice elementary teachers helped confirm or refute earlier formulated categories and themes. Throughout the analysis attention was given to data that challenged initial conceptions. Colleagues in the curriculum and instruction department, and in art education department of the university examined categories, sub-categories and themes as they emerged.

At the end of the semester all documents and transcribed materials were again reviewed. Coded information was reconsidered in regard to themes that had emerged. Some incidents needed re-categorizing. Properties and concepts of some categories were redefined, better focused, and compared. As uniformities in the original set of categories or their properties were discovered the number of categories were reduced to a smaller set of higher level concepts. Several categories were joined to make broader categories, others were eliminated, and still others were abbreviated for this research study.

As analysis continued and patterns, linkages, and interpretations were considered, tentative conclusions concerning themes and concepts emerged from the data. Beyer's (1991) six types of reflections and Surbeck, Han, and Moyer's (1991) three categories of student responses

in journals (reactions, elaboration, and contemplation) were employed in the analysis of students' group journals, reflective dialogue audio tapes, and key informant interviews. Beyer's (1991) six types of reflections include (1) escapist reflection, relating to daydreaming, amusement, entertainment, (2) therapeutic reflection, pertaining to self-analysis, getting in touch with oneself, which may produce personal understanding but not social understanding, (3) commonsense reflection, utilizing accepted themes, categories and frames of reference that have developed within a particular profession, (4) procedural/technical reflection, emphasizing judgments regarding the success of curricula in such things as raising student test scores, the degree to which students acquire the appropriate work and study habits, whether students are achieving up to grade level in various subject matters, whether social relationships are formed within accepted parameters of the institution, etc. (5) ameliorative reflection, suggesting teachers who practice this sort of reflection recognize the physical, psychological and bureaucratic constraints with which they must deal, and critique those constraints, and (6) critical reflection, dealing with educational issues conjoined with economic, political and social issues, which work toward overcoming social inequality.

A final review of literature was conducted to substantiate or refute the categories and the findings. Again colleagues in the curriculum and instruction department, and in art education department of the university examined interpretations and results in the study.

During the summer, key informants were asked to review data and negotiate meanings and interpretations. Four students chose to respond with suggested changes and additions.

Results: Individual, Reflective Journal Writing

Analysis of class journals and conversations with key informants lead to the following conclusions concerning the use of individual, reflective journals as vehicles for recording students' reflections. First, students demanded set guidelines for writing in their journals. Examination of student responses to the reflective journal assignment in this study revealed that guidelines included subject matter, frequency, and amount to be written. Possible reasons for

this demand emerged from analysis of conversations with key informants concerning their previous experience in reflective thinking and reflective journal writing. Reasons students gave for needing guidelines included lack of education in how to think reflectively and write reflective journals; belief that journals were kept for the instructor and a grade, and not for learning more about themselves and their own reflections; and belief that the subject matter of the journals was determined by the instructor in order to find out if the students were doing their assignments, paying attention in class, and attending their field experience.

Second, students stated that they had limited time in their busy schedule in which to write in journals, and that the great number of journals they were required to keep in their college careers made the writing in reflective journals meaningless.

Third, all students wrote in their individual, reflective journals about topics listed in the syllabus of the course, because this was what they had come to expect as the subject matter for their journals. Several students, however, did write about a few other topics. These topics were the importance of teachers modeling what they taught, the usefulness or value of an activity or event, the need for establishing ownership, and the difficulty of evaluation.

Fourth, students' journal entries were considered in light of Surbeck, Han, and Moyer's (1991) three categories of student responses in journals: reactions, elaboration, and contemplation. In this study students reacted to their experiences in the art methods course and, at times, included warrants and justifications on a personal level as elaboration. However, students seldom contemplated their experiences from a broader perspective outside their personal contexts.

Fifth, student reflections in individual journals, for the most part, included Beyer's (1991) first four types of reflections teachers and students might employ (escapist reflection, therapeutic reflection, commonsense reflection, and procedural/technical reflection). They did not, however, use Beyer's last two types of reflections (ameliorative reflection and critical reflection).

Sixth, some students in this study appeared to be more naturally reflective, and older

students seemed to have had more information and experience on which to draw. These two factors are characteristics of reflective students (Korthagen, 1983; Kitchener & King, 1981).

Employing a constant comparative method of data analysis in this interpretative study allowed for some of the above findings to be tentatively made early enough in the study for alternative reflective thinking strategies to be offered to the students. The following section looks at some of the reflective strategies that were employed during the second half of the course.

Alternative Reflective Thinking Strategies

Four types of alternative reflective thinking strategies were selected by students during the second half of the semester: 1) group or revolving reflective journals, 2) reflective dialogue tapes, 3) one-to-one conversations with the instructor, and 3) a final reflective art project. Each of these alternative strategies was chosen by the students rather than assigned by the instructor. A few students chose to continue keeping individual, reflective journals.

Students joined other students in keeping revolving, small group journals. Analysis of these journals showed that students seemed to use these documents as vehicles to show support for one another. They were extremely interested in peer reflections, and, for the most part, students expressed greater pleasure and reward from keeping small group journals than they did from keeping individual reflective journals.

The biggest problem with small group journals, for the instructor, involved finding a good first writer. If the first person wrote only one, brief statement which basically included complaints, then the following two writers often fell into the same mode of writing. If, on the other hand, the first writer enjoyed writing and sharing reflective thoughts the following two entries reflected the first person's efforts. Offering students examples of well written reflections might have helped beginning writers.

Two students found keeping reflective dialogue tapes an appropriate strategy. Schon (1988) suggested that through reflection-in-action one can call attention to assumptions and look

for themes in one's stories. These two students seized the opportunity of telling stories in their dialogues which the students in the individual and group written reflective journals did not employ. By relating stories of their experiences they were able to explain their beliefs and understanding, and make connections between new and old information and experiences. They made meaning out of their art methods experience employing all the strategies other students used in writing their reflective journals. The reflections made in the dialogues included not only Beyer's second, third, and fourth type of reflection (therapeutic, commonsense, and procedural/technical), but also Beyer's fifth and sixth type of reflection (ameliorative and critical).

The dialogue tapes were kept by two students who had known each other before the art methods class. They felt comfortable talking and reflecting with one another. Two strangers may not have had such in depth conversations. Also one of the students was an extremely knowledgeable individual and seemed to be naturally reflective which added to the complex dialogue woven between these two individuals. More research needs to be conducted involving the employment of dialogues recorded on audio tapes.

Although one-to-one conversations with the researcher took time, key informants stated that they found this form of reflective thinking value. Key informants stated that interview sessions provided them with insights into their own thinking, better understanding of the instructor's views, a different means of expression not normally offered in a college classroom experience, an opportunity to explain their views and to go beyond statements made in class, and a safe environment in which to express themselves.

Besides the benefits key informants mentioned in regard to one-to-one conversations with the instructor, analysis of the reflective conversations revealed the following three features not seen in the reflective journals. Students discussed the concept of art and the teaching of art to a far greater degree than was seen in students' written reflective journals. Some students who found it almost impossible to reflect on their own were able to reflect with one-to-one guidance. And, as was discovered in examination of students' reflections concerning group journal writing,

many students found reading other individuals' reflections and interpretations of experiences a valuable means of initiating their own further reflection. Several key informants also stated that reading transcriptions of their own reflections made during our conversations and sent to them during the summer, were more valuable than keeping written reflective journals.

One student chose to make a final reflective art project representing different areas of art and art education she had learned about in the course. Mounted on a 24" X 36" poster were photographs, drawings, three-dimensional objects, and a small bound collection of papers containing the student's reflective thoughts written throughout the semester. This self-directed project was well thought out and executed. Much of the beauty of the product was the creative imagination that went into it. The student reflected on what she had learned in class, and devised her own strategy for reflecting on her art methods experience. By combining both the strategy or process of reflection with the substance of her reflection, this student had made the experience of reflection personally meaningful employing a visual format.

The last assignment in the class was to write a paper on the value of reflective thinking and reflective journals, and to offer suggestions for alternative ways to record reflective thinking beyond what had already been tried in class. Students all thought reflective thinking was valuable. Many thought individual, reflective journals were more valuable for the teacher than the student, and all students offered thoughtful alternative strategies for reflective thinking beyond individual reflective journal writing.

Conclusion

Reflective thinking has become an important component in many teacher preparation programs today. At the present time, however, no one is sure of the best way to incorporate reflective thinking within existing programs. One strategy for including reflective thinking in teacher preparation programs involves the employment of reflective journals.

Students in the art methods course for preservice elementary teachers reported in this paper were given some information concerning reflective thinking and were assigned writing in

individual reflective journals at the beginning of the semester. It was assumed that since students had kept reflective journals in many of their previous teacher preparation courses, they knew how to think and write reflectively. Analysis of individual reflective journals and discussions with students revealed that this was a false assumption. Due to the structure of the course there was no time to adequately address this problem. However, during the second half of the course, students were given an opportunity to choose a strategy for recording reflective thinking. Taking ownership for the strategy in which reflections were made seemed to influence the personal involvement and quality of students' reflections.

Dewey (1933) characterized reflection as a special form of thinking that requires three attitudes as prerequisites: open-mindedness, responsibility, and wholeheartedness. I believe that this study helped preservice elementary teachers develop these three attitudes in regard to reflective thinking and strategies for recording reflective thinking. Students and teacher and became open-minded about alternative strategies for recording reflective thinking besides writing in individual reflective journals. Students and teacher took responsibility for their thoughts and actions regarding the keeping of individual reflective journals and alternative strategies. And after working together, students and teacher wholeheartedly embraced reflective thinking and the recording of reflective thoughts through a variety of strategies.

Writing individual, reflective journals is one strategy for recording reflective thinking. However, it is not the only strategy, and should not be the only one, offered to students as a means of recording their reflective thoughts. Educators interested in promoting reflective thinking in teacher preparation programs should help students not only learn how to think reflectively, they should also invite students to participate in choosing the manner in which they wish to record their reflective thoughts. Multiple strategies for reflective thinking need to be researched and made available to students.

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