

Title:

**INNOVATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

Theme:

Augmenting student participation through reflective writing and communication

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## **INNOVATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **ABSTRACT**

The 90-minute workshop *Innovations in Higher Education* facilitated by David E. Walker, Ed.D., Assistant Professor of Early Childhood and Elementary Education at Bloomsburg University of Pennsylvania, was intended for educators who aspire to add classroom-learning devices that increase student motivation, interaction, and confidence. This workshop demonstrated two constructivist practices that assist students in reflecting upon the learning that has occurred in the classroom and has been gleaned from their textbooks. Students are asked to summarize text in their own words, to expand upon a meaningful quote utilizing higher-level thinking skills, and to develop reflection techniques by realizing the connection between assigned text and their individual lives. Highlights of these innovations are the establishment of a dialogue between student and professor, a networking from student to student, and an acknowledgement of students' insights and expertise. This workshop showed actual student work as demonstration models and provided workshop participants with opportunities to interact with the innovative approaches to learning incorporated within class journals and Reflective Dialogue Entries.

## **INNOVATIONS IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The 90-minute workshop *Innovations in Higher Education* explained two unique approaches to teaching students who are enrolled in university courses. After receiving Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval from Bloomsburg University, I asked my students if they were willing to share their submissions from their class journal. This document is used to begin each class and incorporates the students' recollections and impressions of the learning that has transpired during the previous class and from their textbook readings and field experiences. McGlamery and Harrington (2007) support the premise of this proposal when they state, "Through reflective journaling with the college instructor, teacher candidates engage in thoughtful and critical thinking about best practices" (p. 33). The student authors read their written entries aloud, and discussion inspired by these insights frequently ensues. Pewewardy (2005) states, "Journal writing can serve as a sounding board for students who may be reluctant to express themselves in open classroom discussions" (p. 42). After questions, commentary, and discussion have concluded, a student volunteers to author the next class-journal entry. McGlamery and Harrington (2007) further promote the use of journaling when they note, "When teacher candidates are asked to write reflectively about each of their field experiences, they begin to develop problem solving strategies and plot methods for successful instruction" (p. 34). Each student writes one or two entries per semester, depending upon the number of students in the class. Although my current class sizes are under 20, a larger class may need to include two or three class journals to accommodate enough participation opportunities for every student. Carter (2005) believes "...a learning environment that allows participants to reconceptualize their roles and responsibilities in learning is one which creates the conditions for transformative learning to occur. The higher education sector optimally provides such an environment" (p. 461).

### **CLASSROOM JOURNALS**

This workshop highlighted an autonomous approach to learning that is significantly supported by current research. Thorpe (2004) believes that "reflective action can also be explained in terms of three component parts: content, process, and premise" (p. 330). I have utilized and elaborated on her ideals of reflective action by requesting that my students summarize the *what* of their text learning, analyze and explain application of the *how* of their learning to their field experiences, and justify the *why* of learning in its importance to their growth and understanding. Werderich (2006) supports the development of a "literacy conversation between teacher and student as conceptualized as an ongoing scaffolding process within dialogue journals" (p. 47). She also promotes a strong driving force of the dialogue journal in the premise of "reading is thinking" (p. 55). Every educator wants his or her students to experience reading as a vehicle for expanded thought and, conversely, to engage in deep thinking while reading. I agree with Hahnermann (cited in Thorpe, 2004) when he states, "...reflective learning journals provide an effective strategy for positive change in learners" (p. 331). In numerous entries, my students have written that they attribute a change in their motivation to read and a better understanding of the material to their compilation of journal responses. According to Bloem (2004), "...many U.S. teachers find themselves, perhaps only a few years out of college, using canned writing programs and canned prompts designed to increase the likelihood that their students will pass the writing section of any of the subject

areas” (p. 550). Teachers must return to educating and need protection, as noted in Bisplinghoff (2002), “...from the ever-impending insults of prepackaged programs” (p. 127). Speaking as a National Writing Project Teacher Consultant, I encourage students to develop their critical thinking skills. Smith, Rook, and Smith (2007) concur and declare, “To help students become critical thinkers willing to set aside their own personal views and become open to others, teachers must first provide a means and motivation for discourse in the classroom” (44). The verbalization of the classroom journal encourages students to engage in dialogues and to view their learning in a holistic way.

### **ASSESSMENT**

How are student responses in the classroom journal and in their Reflective Dialogue Entries assessed? My students earn a classroom-expectation grade for their efforts in completing both of these journal assignments. Following is the assessment rubric that is included in my syllabus and posted online in Blackboard (a technology tool used for managing classes online).

## Classroom Expectations – 25 Points (on-going assessment)

The following rubric provides criteria for classroom expectations and for your success in this course.

<b>Grade Requirements by Category</b>	5 Points	3 Points	1 Point	No Points
<b>Contributions to Class Discussion</b>	Constantly offers rational, research-based comments during class discussions; is open-minded and shows initiative	Occasionally offers comments and takes risks; frequently contributes to class when called upon by the instructor	Rarely contributes to class discussions	Never contributes to class discussions
<b>Attendance</b> (see class policy included in the syllabus)	Does not miss any classes, or misses classes because of an excused absence approved in advance by the professor	Misses one class	Misses two classes	Misses three or more classes
<b>Attitude</b>	Demonstrates a positive attitude and exhibits an eagerness to learn	Displays a somewhat enthusiastic attitude, but is not fully open to suggestions	Demonstrates little general positive attitude, with little acceptance of feedback	Demonstrates no positive attitude and does not accept feedback
<b>Work Ethic</b>	Is consistently observed working diligently in class and by evidence of preparation; helps others in group projects; displays initiative	Is mostly prepared for class, but leaves early when offered class time to collaborate on assignments	Is rarely prepared for class or observed working; leaves class early and is tardy for class	Is never prepared for class; does not participate in discussions; turns in late or no assignments; is often tardy for class
<b>Reflectivity/Self-Criticism and Criticism from Others</b>	Consistently seeks critiques for self-improvement; often critiques self; not defensive	Occasionally seeks critiques for self-improvement; somewhat defensive	Rarely seeks critiques for self-improvement; defensive	Never seeks critiques for self-improvement; very defensive

## **REFLECTIVE DIALOGUE ENTRIES (RDES)**

Students also write Reflective Dialogue Entries (RDEs) that are a part of some of my classes. The RDEs are composed of three sections: (1.) a summary of a chapter reading; (2.) a self-selected quote with an accompanying analysis and justification for its selection; and (3.) three reflective statements from the learning that has developed from the text readings and class discussions and/or activities. Format for the RDEs directs students to write on the left side of a piece of lined paper. I, as the professor, write responsive commentary on the page's right side. Some students choose to use notebooks, while others use a Word template that they either submit to me as an email attachment or print out. The RDEs are collected during the first class of the week and are returned to the students during the next class. Vacca and Vacca (1999) support these two-way vehicles of communication when they state, "When teachers integrate writing and reading, they help students use writing to think about what they will read and to understand what they have read" (p. 261). These documents allow students to share their inner thoughts about their learning with their colleagues and to incorporate additional insights from my comments. Students can elect to read from their RDEs; and frequently, I will "star" a well-written summary, superbly analyzed quotation, or astute reflective statement that I encourage to be shared class-wide. Kasten (1997) reinforces this collaborative practice when she states, "Peer talk in the process of reading aids and broadens comprehension" (p. 99). I have also found that, aligned with the National Writing Project's mission of improving writing skills, these journals promote communication between the students and me. These opportunities not only encourage social interaction but also, as Regan, Mastropieri, & Scruggs (2005) note, "...the written interaction between teacher and student provides opportunities for development of reading skills and modeling of correct English usage and for the encouragement to write in a nonthreatening, more personal, enjoyable manner" (p. 34). As support of this notion, my students have responded willingly in both written and verbal form. I have witnessed drastic improvements in sentence structure and grammatical consistency since implementing these teaching/ learning strategies.

## **PROMOTING DEEPER COMPREHENSION AND BEST PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICE**

A worthwhile sharing activity in which the students have expressed an interest is a think-pair-share. In this activity they read to a partner, receive verbal comments from that person, and then listen to their partner's entries. This strategy promotes solid pedagogical practice by having students review and interact with previously covered content. Hurst (2005) supports my practice by stating, "A written learning log, followed by student sharing is one way I've found to encourage my students to read and learn from textbooks and one another" (p. 45). I have found, and my students concur, that they are retaining course content in long-term memory much more effectively by utilizing RDEs in their class preparation and participation.

A social aspect of both of these innovative practices is that students tend to comprehend the ramifications of the learning that emerges from texts, classroom activities, and discussions. Marchel (2004) notes two concluding themes from her study entitled *Evaluating Reflection and Sociocultural Awareness in Service Learning Classes*: students reported a clearer focus on their "learning about (their) biases and learning to accept others" (p. 123). The students and I find ourselves more deeply committed to a learning collaboration that we think enhances our comprehension through hearing the insights, confusions, and "aha" moments of others. As their professor, I can assess applied understanding; when I perceive misconceptions, I am

able to retool my instruction.

### **RENOVATING THE RDES WITH A TECHNOLOGICAL CONNECTION**

A plan to revise the RDE approach from using notebooks and/or email submissions developed from my own reflective realizations. Who was receiving the bounty from reading and responding to all of the entries? The answer was I. Who should have been receiving the rewards of reading and responding to the various entries? The students themselves need to be reaping the benefits from the critical readings and dialogues related to the same texts and similar learning. Recently, I created a blog connected to a summer course entitled *Teaching Language Arts in the Elementary School*. This blog will encourage students to post their RDEs using the following numerical designations: (1.) Summarization of the reading; (2.) A selected quote and analysis; (3.), (4.) and (5.) all include reflective statements that connect to the text and/or classroom learning experiences. As the instructor, I will continue to dialogue with the students. However, all students may now view their colleagues' work and my commentary. They will be required to select two students' work to read and respond to with their own insights. Opening dialogue within the class is a constructivist tenet and will assist all students in discovering a deeper comprehension of the course's content and beneficial pedagogical practices.

### **CONCLUSION**

Utilization of these two aforementioned approaches develops a sense of classroom community that promotes social learning. Beilke (2005) encourages this dialogical approach when she says, "By communicating in an authentic way – *truly* relating – students are able to participate in the decisions made in the class" (p. 4). The written word is then honored by the viewing of many eyes, not solely the teacher's. Communication is an expectation that drives the content into clearer realms of thought. Students believe that their voices are being heard by their professors and colleagues. Everyone grows within this community of reflective practitioners.

Akin to Leshem and Trafford (2006), I too have "...illustrated how telling stories which are familiar to the teller represents an often-unrecognized potential for learning" (p. 23). These journal-voices inspire everyone who reads them. All build upon their schema and discover similarities and differences that transpose thoughts to greater heights of understanding. "Personal stories demonstrate that this source is never-ending since it is a route to meaning making from tacit knowledge held by everyone as life experience" (Leshem and Trafford, 2006, p. 23). I agree with the concluding statement of Uline & Wilson (2004): "Teacher-preparation institutions may improve the quality of professional development by adjusting the syllabuses of methods courses to more-adequately address the concerns of practicum students' most-significant learnings" (p. 459). This reasoning reflects my impetus for designing an interactive workshop for the Improving University Teaching's 33<sup>rd</sup> International Conference held in Glasgow, Scotland, in the summer of 2008. Professors must be diligent in their pursuit of best practices that will prepare pre-service educators for careers of successful teaching and learning.

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