The Role of Journal Writing in Online Learning

Thao Lê
University of Tasmania

Abstract

Journal writing provides a learning experience for students to record and reflect deeply on their thoughts and feelings on issues and events which are an essential part of their meaning making process. In a discourse of face-to-face teaching and learning, students and lecturers have opportunities to interact in class and in individual conferencing. However, on-line learning can deprive students of personal interaction to share ideas and experiences with their lecturers. This paper examines the concept journal writing (and reflective learning) and presents a teaching and learning experience in which postgraduate on-line students were introduced to journal writing as a reflective learning experience. Cognitive and affective meanings were expressively and profoundly encoded in journal writing.

Introduction

Journal writing has been long in education. In primary children are given opportunities to write about their experiences such as activities with their family on the weekend, a trip to another city, or a visit to the zoo. The main aim of journal writing for young children is to promote literacy development. Children learn reading by reading and they learn writing by writing. Journal writing is the first step for children to present their experiences in written words. It is hard for them to write about things which have nothing to do with their existence.

Recently the interest in journal writing in education has been rekindled. Its role in learning has been the interest of educators for a long time. Dewey (1938), the father of experiential education, was among the early writers who emphasised the significance of reflection in learning. In his view, individual growth and social values develop together. Individual achieves their individuality in cooperative striving with other individuals, in communication with other individuals. The private world grows out of the public domain when personal understanding emerges from shared communication. Journal writing is a genre of reflection which enables students to share their inner world with significant others. It is important in teaching and learning as journal writing encourages students to express their world views through their own lenses.
Journal writing as reflective learning

The word ‘learning’ is one of the common words in our vocabulary. However its meaning has been the centre of academic debates for many years. From the knowledge transmission perspective, learning is to gain new knowledge. This process of obtaining knowledge involves knowledge givers and knowledge receivers. In a classroom discourse, teachers are knowledge givers who decide what knowledge should be ‘transmitted’ to students. In this learning perspective, assessment and testing are important in teaching and learning as students need to be assessed to ensure that transmission of knowledge flows well from teachers to students. When learning is viewed in this way, there are few opportunities for learners to bring their experiences to make sense of knowledge. Reflection rarely occurs and it is often used to reinforce certain learning tasks such as structured question-answer exercise and summary rather than promote critical thinking.

The emergence of constructionism has given reflective learning a focus in current education. Learning involves a wide range of human development, socially, cognitively and affectively. Knowledge is important but it is the way in which learners make sense of knowledge is the key factor in teaching and learning. Thus, learning is primarily a meaning making process. In order to facilitate meaning making, learners are given opportunities to share with others their thoughts and feelings on an objects, issues or events in their world. They are also encouraged to reflect on their learning experiences through diary, journal writing, and discussion.

With the rapid development of computer technology, on-line learning has become a new discourse of learning in which learners are not strictly bound to the structural conditions of a traditional classroom. In a virtual discourse of learning, learners interact with their teachers and peers through on-line discussion, email communication, and courseware. Students can take time to reflect with e-text. Reflective journal in learning can be greatly facilitated by e-communication resources.

Types of journal writing

Learning journal is metaphorically a mirror on which learners reveal their thoughts and feelings as a form of monologue and dialogue. In on-line learning, reflective journals can be divided into four types in terms of cognitive functions.

- Event-orientated journal
- Meditative reflective journal
- Critical reflective journal
- Conferencing journal

Event-orientated journal

Students record daily events which require their attention or action. It can be personal or interpersonal. For example, students record their search and findings on the Web or their preparation for essay writing. This is not strictly about events and dates. Students may include in the journal their thoughts and feelings associated with those events.

Here is an example of an event-orientated journal:
On Sunday May 28, I spent three hours searching for articles on cultural aspects of health for my next assignment. I used two search strategies: Google search and e-journals in our university library. I found a lot of papers but most of them were commercial stuffs! Occasionally I found some interesting research papers published in conference proceedings or personal Web sites. I used key words such as migrants and health, culture and health, ethnics, culture and health. First I did not know that bioethics was an academic branch dealing with issues mutually relating to health, biology and philosophy. The e-journals available on our Library Web site are very useful. I’ll spend more time going through the listed journals.

**Meditative reflective journal**

The word ‘meditative’ here does not have any religious connotation or images of a monk chanting while mediating under a tree. Descartes (1992), known as ‘the father of modern philosophy’ wrote the *Meditations* as a philosophical text. Meditation here designates the idea of the philosopher as one who discovers truths by thinking very deeply. In literacy education, James Moffett (1968), a well-known author whose book *Teaching the Universe of Discourse*, widely read and cited throughout the English-teaching world, sets out the theory and research that has a great impact on literacy education. Moffett (1983) treats reading and writing as meditation. Similarly Le (1984) argues that reading is a cognitive and meditative process in which learners allow their thoughts and feelings to flow with words.

In meditative reflective writing, the goal is not a finished product with polished expressions and logical structure. The process itself is the goal of writing. The mind explores freely the inner world without conditions and expectations. It allows thoughts and feelings to flow in whatever direction they want to. However, it is not ‘absent-minded writing behaviour’ as cognitively it can be very active consciously and unconsciously.

With the aid of computer, meditative reflective writing can flow fluently, allowing learners fully immersed in the process of writing, thinking and feeling. It enables learners to record thoughts in words without editing. Fundamentally it is a meaning making process.

**Critical reflective journal**

Critical reflective writing is a highly intellectual process which may involve hypothesis building, theorising and problem solving. In critical reflective writing, learners do not take things for granted and they reflect deeply about their experiences, question events, or challenge accepted views and ideas. For example, a student writes about her thoughts on cultural shocks that she personally experienced as a visitor in a foreign country. In stead of merely describing her cultural shock experience in journal writing, she may interpret her experience in terms of power, language, identity and acculturation. In narrative research, journal writing is a powerful data source as each treats personal notes, stories and instances of living as powerful data. According to Clandinin and Connelly (2000), human lives are woven of personal stories and events. Individuals construct their identities through their own and others’ stories. Thus, journal writing is a linguistic representation as well as an analysis of human experiences.
Conferencing journal

On-line discussion forum or conferencing is a common place for discussion that allows time for reflection. While there is a flow of discussion and it is linear, it is not subject to the tyranny of the ever present "now" of the face-to-face classroom that does not allow the participants the benefit of an "instant replay." On-line discussion board allows as many replays as a participant wants of what was said. A discussion can be revisited and commented on as long as the forum is open, while in a classroom, often the moment is lost and is difficult to revisit (Markel 2001). In a face-to-face class discussion, teachers are discussion initiators and leaders. They control the flow of the discussion and in many case dictate who can participate. Generally in a tutorial or seminar, only a few vocal students participate actively in a discussion and other students are passive listeners. Immediate responding in a face-to-face context does not work well with many students, particularly with those who need time to respond. On-line conferencing promotes interactive communication. It can be used as a reflective journal which gives students time to think and search for information to support their reflection on others’ views as well as theirs.

Theory into practice

The rest of this paper discusses a case of a learning experience which was based on the meaning making principle of teaching and learning. An on-line unit with the title ‘Teaching English as a Second Language’ was offered to postgraduate students in education. The unit was conducted entirely on the Internet. The Web and email were the two main tools for teaching and learning. Students were expected to participate in three tasks: essay writing, individual reflective journal and conferencing journal. The main feature underlying all these three learning activities

Students were required to submit a comprehensive essay for the unit. Students were expected to participate in individual conferencing with the lecturer who acted as a partner in the meaning making process. The following sample illustrates this collaborative task between a student and the lecturer.

Student’s writing

(Note - L: Lecturer and S: student)

Dear L,

Yes ... it may seem as though I had slid of the face of the earth and disappeared but it’s fortunately not the case!! I’ve been reading, reading, reading – H.D. Brown, various books by Nunan, Penny Ur, various articles and essays, Scott Thornbury’s ‘Uncovering Grammar’. I could read forever on the subject, quite honestly, but trying to put all my thoughts and ideas into coherent form is so difficult. I now really notice that I’ve been away from academic life for so long. At university, because I studied languages, I had to produce an essay every week or every second week – I was like an essay-machine. Right now, I’m struggling to put thoughts in a logical order and I keep asking myself: “What is it that you want to say??”

I started to keep a journal as part of the process and I surprisingly find that my ideas are a lot better structured in this – I wonder if I’m just allowing myself to be overwhelmed by
the thought of *Writing An Essay*? Do other students have problems starting, too? I seem to start plotting an essay plan and then get stuck …

In any case, this is where I am so far. I wanted to start with ‘Knowledge of English grammar in learning English as a second language’ from Unit ESG17 and then it kind of mutated into ‘The concept of communicative competence’ from Unit ESG21. I chose this topic because I am interested in the way teachers and students view grammar. Linguists often see grammar as being all-important, the ‘heart’ of language and whatnot; whereas students – because perhaps of previous bad experiences with language learning – see grammar as unavoidable but not necessarily connected to communication. I’ve often had students say “I don’t want to learn grammar, I want to learn to speak!” as though communication were possible without learning how to form sentences in e.g. the past tense.

I’d like to look at

- What we consider to be ‘knowledge’ of grammar – I think that there are various ways of defining how we ‘know’ a language, e.g. Wong’s idea of ‘declarative knowledge v. procedural knowledge’…

- I’m interested in this gap between what a student knows OF the grammar and what the students knows ABOUT the grammar and what influences the student’s choice in spontaneous speech. In other words, the phenomenon of the student who, after weeks of practices in for example the Simple Past greets the teacher on the corridor with ‘Hey, how are you? What do you do yesterday’!!

- I’d like to examine the necessity of fluency AND accuracy activities in language learning, because I think that Nunan (lots of name-dropping here, sorry – but it’s very exciting to have thought about something for a while and then see the same idea expressed succinctly by some guru! 😊) is right when he says that a mixture of both in a communicative classroom is the way towards successful language learning. I think – based on my own experience with German – that a mixture of both is what is needed in real-life. A student needs a certain automation, i.e. that he recognises without active thought that ‘I spoke’ is better than ‘I speaked’ but also requires the skills learned in the fluency activities – what Brown, Nunan, et al refer to as the ‘traits of a good language learner’.

- Perhaps what has given me most to think about is Newark’s quote in Penny Ur’s ‘The Practice of Language Teaching’: “the study of grammar as such is neither necessary nor sufficient for learning the language.” And this is, I believe, connected to the points above: that the study of grammar is often treated as something separate from actually knowing – i.e. being able to achieve this communicative competence – in English. I personally believe that language learning is an organic process, (something Brown and Thornbury express with different garden metaphors - ) I’d like to examine the idea that, just as a child learns a language in this “organic” way, so do adults and they constantly fall back on what they already know of the grammar to propel them forward. In other words, whether a student knows it or not, what he already knows or has already learned is what he draws upon to help him to deal with the new language and structures he encounter.
And that’s it so far. It’s a bit vague, I’m sorry, but I hope you can see some sense in it. Am I on the right track or have I left the track completely and am floundering in the woods somewhere?!

I hope this electronic letter finds you well and not too stressed by the beginning of the semester and all the tasks it brings!

Best regards,

Lecturer’s writing

Dear S,

It is a wonderful morning here (in the middle of winter) but certain parts of Launceston’s hilly roads are filled with sunlight and the other parts are full of thick fog! I am living in the top part of the valley. In this wonderful context, I write this email to you as I don’t want you to wait.

It is so lovely to read your note. I enjoyed reading it. It gently gives me some insights into your world of learning. What a nice way to start for both of us!

Yes, S, a number of my postgraduate students feel the same: not so much inspired by essay writing, perhaps they start to realize that essay is rather restrictive for expressing their ‘real’ thoughts and much more restrictive for expressing feelings. They believe in emotional intelligence and that is why journal writing appeals to them. For me, each genre has a role to play in an academic discourse but we have to be careful in an academic discourse where a few educational autocrats can be a nuisance as they want to reinforce their own sense of ‘academic rigour’.

About grammar teaching, it is a controversial issue. I am not keen about the idea ‘teaching grammar for the sake for teaching grammar’. Your suggestions for the assignments look quite logical and interesting. Please go ahead and if you need further discussion, please talk to me again. I am keen to share my thoughts with you.

You may want to read something about Systemic Functional Linguistics which attempts to deal with language in social context (a different view on grammar), which is different from the traditional grammar (TG). In my view, TG is very much (a) code or structure - orientated (noun, past tense, infinitive..) and (b) prescriptive (e.g. it is wrong to say “it is me” . It should be “it is I”). Thus, when we discuss whether grammar should be taught, it is relevant to discuss what grammar is, e.g. traditional grammar, genre etc.

Halliday mentioned somewhere about the relationship between language and learning:

- learning language
- learning about language
- learning through language

In the past we tended to focus so much on grammar in ‘learning about language’ and it is obvious that we can include so many other interesting aspects and features such as words with their cultural meaning (e.g. family, teachers, addressing), how to give and take compliments (it is now referred to as pragmatics).
It is interesting to explore this in the context of your current and future units if you like. Now I must look out at the river to see the sun wakening it up! (My office is on the top floor of the building overlooking the river). I look forward to hearing from you.

**What has changed?**

When students started the unit, conferencing was very procedural. Students wanted to make sure that they were on the right tract. Most of them were reluctant to reveal about their backgrounds except a brief introduction. For example:

*My name is xyz. I enrol in two units with you this semester. I am working full time at a local English centre in South Korea. I have taught English for three years and intend to go back to Canada next year. I look forward to studying with you in this semester.* (Student 1)

*Thanks for the study guide, I understand that we can write a journal as a short assignment. Please tell me how many words a journal should have. Is it acceptable if I do not use citing and referencing in my journal?* (Student 2)

In the initial phase of communication between students and the lecturer, students tended to address the lecturer by the last name. When initial relationship between students and lecturer turned into learning partnership, the tone of journal writing changed from procedural function to interpersonal function. Students started to share more about their personal stories and views on teaching and learning.

*I arrived in Japan last month. It’s very cold here at this time of the year. My class has about 30 students. I teach oral communication. The first week was a real challenge as students sat quietly waiting for me to tell them what to do. Communicative language teaching is needed here as students know so much about grammar but it is hard form them to involve in a basic conversation. What they have is a textbook with a focus on English conversation and I am expected to use it for the whole term.* (Student 3)

Student-lecturer conferencing was predominantly procedural at the beginning. However when interpersonal relationship has been established, reflective communication became more cognitively orientated. Intellectual curiosity, theory building and problem solving were present in conferencing.

**Conclusion**

Journal writing plays an important in teaching and learning. It has become an essential feature of communicative interaction which enhances learning as a meaning making process. With the rapid development of computer technology, the discourse of teaching and learning can be extended to students in remote regions of the world. Their communicative interaction is no longer confined to local participants. On-line learning in this extended discourse has a multicultural dimension which is often absent in traditional face-to-face teaching.
References


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