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# **Collaborative Diary-Keeping: A Tool for Teacher Development**

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Since the late 1970's, diary studies have been gaining attention as legitimate means of investigating learning and teaching processes in second language classrooms. Benefits claimed for this approach to classroom research include:

- identifying variables that are important to individual teachers and learners;
- generating questions and hypotheses about teaching and learning processes;
- enhancing awareness about the way a teacher teaches and a student learns;
- providing teachers and learners a tool for reflection;
- providing a first-hand account of teaching and learning experiences;
- providing an on-going record of classroom events and teacher and learner reflections;
- enabling the researcher to relate classroom events and examine trends emerging from the diaries;
- promoting the development of reflective teaching (Allwright, 1983; Bailey, 1990; Brown, 1985; Nunan, 1989; and Richards, 1990).

Most published diary studies in second language classroom research (for example, Bailey, 1983; Schmidt and Frota, 1986; and Schumann and Schumann, 1977) have reported the experiences and findings of individual diarists. Some of these studies, for example Bailey's (1983), have included the input of another researcher or teacher who read and commented on the diarist's entries. We are unaware, however, of any published studies in our field in which diarists kept diaries together, reading, reflecting on, and talking about their own as well as other participant diarists' entries. This paper documents such an approach to teacher development.

## **Procedures of Collaborative Diary-Keeping**

Each of the three ESL teachers participating in this collaborative diary-keeping project wrote three diary entries each week of a ten-week term. Two entries were made for one three-hour class which met twice weekly (two consecutive hours in one meeting and one hour in the other meeting). The third entry was made for one meeting of another class. Our entries concerned several different university-level language classes, including business, technical, and supplementary English classes. We wrote our diary entries immediately following the lessons so that we could remember classroom events and our responses in as much detail as possible. We also followed Bailey's (1990) advice that time spent writing at least equal time spent in class. Moreover, in keeping our diaries we attempted to combine the narration of

classroom events with our reflections on those events. We did not narrow our focus to one or even several issues.

To maximize the effects of interaction among the three diarists, our diary-keeping was combined with written responses to each other's diary entries and group discussions. These three steps formed a kind of triangulation which offered us more than one way of exploring issues related to our teaching. After writing each diary entry, we made copies and gave them to one another to read. We then wrote brief responses to one another's entries and gave copies of these responses to one another before our one-hour discussion time on Friday afternoons. These group discussions were audiotaped and later transcribed. At the end of the term, we analyzed the diary entries, our written responses, and the transcripts of discussions to determine how these three interacted and affected our development as teachers.

### **Some Effects of Collaborative Diary-Keeping**

We believe our participation in this collaborative diary-keeping project contributed to our development as second language teachers in several significant ways. Primarily, collaborative diary-keeping raised our awareness of classroom processes and prompted us to consider those processes more deeply than we may otherwise have. Collaborative diary-keeping also provided encouragement and support to our professional development; it served as a source of teaching ideas and suggestions; and in some sense it gave us a way to observe one another's teaching from a "safe distance."

#### **Awareness-Raising**

As previous research has shown, writing and reflecting on diary entries can serve as a process of discovery. Diary-keeping can prompt a teacher to become more observant and alert to some of the variables affecting classroom teaching and learning processes. Through the retrospection and introspection diary-keeping requires, teachers may become aware of some of the issues, concerns, and questions attendant to their teaching which were previously unarticulated. As some researchers have suggested, for some teachers many pedagogical issues may never be carefully considered without the discipline of diary-keeping.

This sense of awareness-raising as a result of diary-keeping was evident in our collaborative diary-keeping experience. One of Matilda's diary entries illustrates this point:

In general, I'm not at all satisfied with this class today . . . On reflection, I admit I didn't do well this afternoon; I guess I was tired as well . . . But, definitely, these students didn't show much interest in the lesson

today. To improve this, I really must consider more seriously what to include in an afternoon class so as to enliven the lesson and stimulate students in a more effective way (January 23).

Then in the following week, she reported that she was more aware of the problem with this class following the reflection she went through in the previous week:

It's an afternoon class again. I remember we had a fairly tired and lazy atmosphere last time. So this week I was determined to improve it . . . This week, I prepared to give students a video exercise which I hoped would stimulate their interest and keep them awake in a sleepy afternoon (January 30).

A growing self-awareness and the urge to improve seem to be a natural part of the reflection process. Indeed, as Brown observes, "it may be that the awareness would have come without the journals, but writing it down made it very evident" (1985, p. 131).

The process of observation and reflection can arouse a new awareness of one's teaching and of oneself as a teacher. In his first entry, Mark observed:

My mirror is clouded. I hope that by reflecting further on my teaching I can polish up my mirror and see myself clearly in the light of day. I probably won't like some of what I see. But at least I can see it and with that vision have before me then some possibility of change (January 8).

And, in another entry, he reported:

I know that I need to give more attention to my teaching. I need to consider what I do in the classroom more deeply. And, of course, through keeping this diary I'm trying to do just that. I don't know if I've found any answers. I have certainly found myself asking lots of questions, though. And maybe that in itself is a success. At least it indicates that I'm still "alive" as a teacher. I'm still considering what is going on in my classes. I'm still trying to learn and to change, to become aware (February 13).

Although diary-keeping may not yield any answers, at least at the beginning, the fact that many questions are raised as a result of the reflection diary-keeping requires is significant in itself. Thinking about and evaluating what we do in the classroom, examining whether it is effective, and considering some of the variables affecting teaching and learning processes has the potential of moving teachers beyond mechanistic, non-reflective teaching.

In addition to keeping diaries as tools for reflection, the additional experiences of reading and responding to one another's diary entries and then discussing what we had read served to enhance this awareness-raising process. Receiving responses from one another and seeing ourselves through another's perspective at times helped us discover what we might have otherwise overlooked.

## Encouragement

The sharing of feelings and opinions through responding to one another's diaries and discussing classroom experiences provided us a sense of encouragement and support. The responses and comments sometimes served as possible suggestions for problems posed in diary entries. More often during our project, the responses and comments we received provided encouragement, especially in those times when we were frustrated, wondering whether we were proceeding in the best direction with our teaching. In one instance, Mark responded to Matilda's experience of feeling defensive in class:

It seems to me that, as you point out, you are feeling defensive or at least uneasy this term. And, believe me, I understand how you feel and how that can affect you. We all experience this at times and sometimes I really don't know what answer there is to it. It must drive a lot of teachers from the profession. What do we do (January 17)?

This kind of understanding and expression of empathy provided an atmosphere in which we could share our failures and successes. Our responses and discussions were often punctuated with expressions of support, solidarity, encouragement, and praise for ways in which particular teaching situations were handled.

By reading one another's diary entries, we were able to share our teaching experiences, and we often felt that we were learning as much from one another's entries as we were from our own. Reading and responding to the entries led us back to our own teaching to consider how and why we taught as we did. In one of our weekly discussions (Week 6), we considered this result of keeping and sharing our diaries:

**Matilda:** I also feel that our discussion is helpful. I think I get a lot from our discussion as well and from your responses.

**Mark:** I get a lot too. I learn a lot from reading both of your entries. I mean, I learn; I get some ideas for my own teaching but I also learn . . . It makes me reflect back on my own experiences and maybe realize something that I haven't realized, to pick up something that I haven't picked up (February 22).

Through this diary-writing and -sharing experience, we gained new suggestions and ideas from one another and discovered new options for approaching particular teaching tasks. In response to one of Mark's diary entries, Matilda observed:

After the two Friday discussions we had, I've thought about this point again and I've actually tried not to intervene at all in some cases this week when students are doing their group tasks (February 8).

Through the experiences we shared in this project, our perspectives were widened and we discovered new options for our teaching.

## Observation

Keeping diaries, reading and responding to them, and discussing classroom experiences in some small way opened a window on our teaching, allowing us to observe one another from a "safe distance." As Fanselow (1987) suggests, observation is a way of seeing teaching differently, and reading, responding, and discussing one another's entries gave us a way to see our own teaching from a different perspective. Occasionally, a reader's observation of a seemingly insignificant event yielded deeper insights into what was actually happening in class. After reading one of Matilda's entries in week 5, Mark commented that he "was struck by the incident before class began when the student in your class asked permission to eat an orange." This seemingly minor observation was discussed in the weekly group meeting and developed into a serious consideration of the issue of student respect for teachers and the issue of "face," as well as some of the cross-cultural differences between Chinese and American classroom behavior.

In sum, the experience of collaborative diary-keeping not only challenged us to look closer at our teaching but provided support, encouragement, and solidarity. As teachers of approximately the same professional level, our relationship was not marked by the discomfort that can attend relationships of power, such as that of a supervisor and teacher or that of a master-teacher and novice-teacher. As Mark expressed during one group discussion:

**Mark:** I think We've come at this not as experts who tell people how to teach, "I'm going to tell you how to teach and you're going to tell me how to teach," but more as people trying to learn and be supportive of each other (March 15).

## Conclusion

Throughout our collaborative diary-keeping project, we have sought to see our "teacher-selves" more clearly and to understand our classroom behaviors more fully. Our hope has been, as Bailey (1983) has suggested, that diary-keeping would raise our awareness of what we do in the classroom and help us understand some of the reasons and consequences of our actions.

Through keeping diaries, making written responses to one another's entries, and discussing our experiences, we were able to focus on several issues that are important to us as teachers. Our diary-keeping project did indeed serve as a hypothesis-generating tool (Bailey, 1990), and our lists of issues, questions, and concerns generated during the project could serve as a rich agenda for our future classroom research. Collaborative diary-keeping gave us each a sense of encouragement, a forum in which to relate experiences and pose questions, and an opportunity to gain an inside perspective on other teachers' experiences.

Along with these positive reactions to collaborative diary-keeping, there were some negative sentiments as well. Our enthusiasm for the project dimmed as the term neared its end, and at times we saw the discipline as much a burden on our time as a tool for our development as teachers. It is possible that collaborative diary-keeping would be a less time-demanding and more effective tool for teacher development when the scope of issues considered is focused more narrowly. We suggest that teachers undertaking collaborative diary-keeping consider narrowing their focus to a few salient teaching issues. Such an approach would allow participants to investigate in depth two or three issues of common interest rather than attempting to explore many issues at one time.

These caveats notwithstanding, each of us believes that collaborative diary-keeping can serve as a useful tool for teacher development. This sentiment is reflected in our final entries in which we summarized our experiences. In his entry, Mark recollected, "Overall I think that our project has been worthwhile. I think that I have learnt something about myself as a teacher. I really have enjoyed our discussions and I've enjoyed hearing particularly about the teaching experiences of Bart and Matilda." Bart expressed that "through diary-keeping, we raised our consciousness of what happened during our teaching and for the first time I began to be aware of many of the interesting points during the class flow." Matilda stated that "on the whole I think diary keeping enables me to clear some of my doubts through getting responses from my partners . . . sharing diaries with the others . . . widens my vision." It is with this widened vision that possibilities for teacher development come into clearer focus.

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