



2015

# Teaching Reflective Writing: Thoughts on Developing a Reflective Writing Framework to Support Teacher Candidates

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## Recommended Citation

Pasternak, Donna L. and Rigoni, Karen K. (2015) "Teaching Reflective Writing: Thoughts on Developing a Reflective Writing Framework to Support Teacher Candidates," *Teaching/Writing: The Journal of Writing Teacher Education*: Vol. 4 : Iss. 1 , Article 5. Available at: <http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/wte/vol4/iss1/5>

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

Acknowledgements Funding from the Robert C. Pooley Foundation of the Wisconsin Council of Teachers of English supported this work.



# Teaching Reflective Writing: Thoughts on Developing a Reflective Writing Framework to Support Teacher Candidates

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## **Introduction**

The need for teacher candidates to develop their understanding of reflective writing practices became even more high stakes with the implementation of the various summative assessments that teacher education programs are now required to adopt. Aside from all the mercenary reasons for wanting the teacher candidates in our two university teacher education programs to do well on such high stakes assessments, the authors of this paper wanted the teacher candidates in our programs, located at a large, public urban university in Wisconsin, to use their writing to act as a “bridge between thinking and doing” (Gadsby and Cronin 2). Writing reflectively about one’s teaching practices provides a way of approaching teaching that moves theory into practice and develops a more democratic way of thinking about education (McGuire, Lay and Peters 94; Tremmel 31). We hoped that by finding more effective means to write reflectively, the teacher candidates in our programs would develop a reflective habit of mind that would support the learning of their own students once they moved into their own classrooms after certification (Larrivee 293-296).

When we examined the coursework in our teacher education programs, respectively middle/secondary English Education (EE) and Middle Childhood through Early Adolescence Education (MCEA), we learned that reflective writing is a mode often assigned but infrequently taught. This situation is not unique to our programs (Gadsby and Cronin 1; Pedro 62-63; Risko, Vukelich, and Roskos 135; Russell 203). Throughout most baccalaureate and graduate education programs, teacher candidates focus on academic writing; asking them to write reflectively for assessment purposes toward the end of their education to become certified teachers changes the expectations as to what modes of writing now have value (Jung 628). Therefore, as the key literacy faculty in our department of Curriculum and Instruction, we were moved to develop a framework for reflective writing that would support the teacher candidates to move into reflective practice as well as pass their state licensure assessments. This paper documents the

evolution of creating a framework for our teacher candidates to effectively write in a reflective mode.

### **Reflection and Teacher Education**

Experiences with the teaching of writing had taught us the value of reflection in the writing process: we recognized that it is through reflection, as both Yancey and Tremmel note in their works, that writers became aware of and could describe their growth of consciousness to become authoritative informants of their own learning. Our understanding of urban education, underscored by the works of Brookfield and Haberman, supports that critically reflective teachers are more democratic in their stances and less likely to be naïve about how race, gender, class, power, and privilege affect education. In putting our ideas into practice, we had to consider how to support teacher candidates to examine if their instruction and classrooms are socially just. In grappling with these concepts, we have come to understand that it is through the act of reflection that teacher candidates begin to realize which instructional practices support critical thinkers, persuasive writers, confident speakers, independent readers, and discriminating researchers.

As far back as 1992, Tremmel raised the question about teaching reflection in teacher education, “. . . where do we teach [. . .] education students awareness of themselves as teachers? Where do we teach them to really pay attention? What part of the curriculum refers to that ability? What is the NCATE/NCTE standard for knowing the self?” (29). The 2006 *National Council of Teachers of English’s (NCTE) Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts* calls for teacher preparation programs to provide support in the development of reflective thinking,

Teaching in general is a complex activity that requires at once both thought and action, that is based on both reflection and performance, and that is improvisational; learning to teach, therefore, is developmental, so effective initial teacher preparation programs must provide multiple, diverse, logically sequenced, and well-supervised opportunities for ELA teacher candidates to turn theory into practice and hone these abilities (NCTE 10).

We agree with the many scholars<sup>1</sup> who observe that teacher candidates should reflect for self-improvement and self-understanding to be more effective

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<sup>1</sup> See the works of Brookfield; Cochran-Smith and Lytle; Hole and McEntee; Lee; Martin; Tripp; Yagelski.

practitioners. Cochran-Smith and Lytle argue, “That only teachers themselves can interrogate their assumptions and their interpretive frameworks and then decide on the actions that are appropriate for their local contexts” (64). They observe that effective teachers reflect on the intersection of their content, their pedagogy, their classrooms, and their community to ensure students are learning. Throughout the reflective process, effective teachers evaluate not only what is included in their world view but also what is left out and silenced (Giroux qtd. in Cochran-Smith and Lytle 74), thus establishing a habit of mind that is critically reflective and valued in teacher licensure evaluation (Shoffner 123). Brookfield notes that a critical habit of mind helps teacher candidates distinguish between the successful and unsuccessful practices they encounter. It is this act of interrogation that allows teachers to know their students are learning, an idea made apparent in the reflective work of Nancy Atwell’s *In the Middle*, which is “a significant publication, showing that a well-written reflection on one’s own practice could describe and document effective pedagogy and become a bestseller” (Smagorinsky 5).

### **Reflective Writing in Our Programs**

An examination of both the EE and MCEA programs revealed that reflective writing was frequently assigned without any common expectations or scaffolded plans. Teacher candidates were assigned to write reflectively to justify group projects, to demonstrate how objectives were met in their methods courses, and to describe and document being highly qualified teachers when meeting the state’s teacher certification standards. Unfortunately, the teacher candidates were not being taught how to write in this mode or how to identify its characteristics.

While deliberating over the teaching of reflective writing, we realized that our teacher candidates would need to understand the various ways of thinking involved in writing in this mode. In deciding what we wanted the teacher candidates to focus on, we considered multiple frameworks that supported effective reflective writing that would communicate to the reader that the writer is someone who thinks critically and democratically about teaching practices.

### **Reflective Writing Frameworks**

Yancey observes that reflection is both a process and a product. Because of this, some of the frameworks we examined in deciding how to teach reflective writing describe when reflection occurs in the learning process (i.e., Schön; Yancey), while others focus on the content of the product (i.e., Lee; Hatton and Smith; Zeichner and Liston).

Schön's work on the reflection process emphasizes the importance of reflection-in-action as a means for professionals "to think on their feet" and apply learning from previous experience. Schön describes one way to conceptualize reflection as "technical reality" or problem solving made rigorous by the application of scientific theory and technique. We see this concept as a series of "if-then" problem solving conditions used when professionals make moment-to-moment decisions. While we appreciate the orderliness of this idea, we agree with Schön's critique of "technical reality" as it seems inadequate for solving complex problems encountered in an educational setting. Schön proposes that "professional education should be redesigned to combine the teaching of applied science with coaching in the artistry of reflection-in-action" (xii).

For Schön, the solution to the inadequacy of "technical reality" rests in the idea of reflection-in-action ("thinking on your feet"). It involves looking to our experiences, connecting with our feelings, and attending to our theories in use. It entails building new understandings to inform our actions in the situation that is unfolding. The professional reflects on the current phenomenon, and on the prior understandings that have been implicit in previous behavior. The professional carries out an experiment that serves to generate both a new understanding of the phenomenon and a change in the situation. While this type of thinking is highly valued, it is nearly impossible to capture and share with others. Schön's reflection-on-action, or reflection after the encounter, solves that issue. This type of reflection may come in the form of a write up or a conversation. The act of reflecting-on-action enables us to spend time exploring why we acted as we did, what was happening in a group and so on. In so doing, we develop sets of questions and ideas about our activities and practices.

Like Schön, Yancey considers the timing of reflective thought in that she applies notions of reflection to the writing classroom. She identifies reflection-in-action as the reflection that one engages in during the composing event, constructive reflection as the reflection that occurs between composing events as the writer develops a cumulative writing identity, and reflection-in-presentation as articulating the relationships between and among multiple variables of writing and the writer for a specific audience.

We found that Schön's and Yancey's discussions concerning the timing of the reflection process significant but not sufficient in answering our question, "How can we support teacher candidates to write reflectively about their practices?" We wanted our teacher candidates to reflect-in-action as proposed in *NCTE's Guidelines for the Preparation of Teachers of English Language Arts*:

Effective English teachers also regularly reflect on their teaching in order to evaluate their instructional performance *as it is unfolding* [emphasis in original]. They constantly juggle their teaching choices, their professional knowledge, student learning, and state/district standards and assessments in order to judge their success and to identify strategies for professional growth in the process of making performance decisions in the classroom. ELA [English Language Arts] teacher candidates need to develop the ability to reflect in the moment, to think on their feet in order to increase their teaching effectiveness (Costa and Kallick, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1997; Kruse, 1997; NBPTS, 2001, 2003) (40).

However, we also knew that we needed to move teacher candidates' reflective writing from personal narratives that had a limited audience to narratives that had the public audience required by the summative assessment practices being adopted by our respective teacher preparation programs. This led us to examine frameworks that considered the content of reflective thought.

Zeichner and Liston propose four levels of reflective thought: factual, one that focuses on the facts associated with an event; prudential, one that focuses on the evaluation of the experience and outcomes of it; justificatory, one that provides rationales for decisions made during the event; and critical, one that focuses on the underlying assumptions of actions that have an impact on social justice. For us, the appeal of Zeichner and Liston's framework lay in the element of critical reflection as this was one of the initial issues that brought us to this work. We wanted the teacher candidates in our programs to consider how race, gender, class, power, and privilege affect educational institutions and policies. Where we struggled in using the Zeichner and Liston framework was the absence of how multiple viewpoints might affect a teaching event.

Next, we studied Lee's conception of reflection as another framework that considers the depth of the thinking process involved in presenting reflective thoughts. In Lee's view, reflection could occur in three levels: recall level, one that describes, recalls and interprets an experience based upon one's own perception of experience without looking for alternate explanations; rationalization level, one that searches for relationships between different bits of experiences, interpreting the situation with reasons, and generalizing experiences; and reflectivity level, one that approaches one's own experiences with a view to change or improve the future, analyze an experience from various perspectives, and become aware of the influences of these diverse perspectives on one's enhanced understanding of the situation. While Lee's framework acknowledged

the significance of analyzing an experience from multiple viewpoints, we did not feel that enough emphasis was placed on critical reflection.

As we continued our search, we discovered Hatton and Smith's framework that identifies four types of writing, three of which are considered reflection: descriptive writing (not typically considered reflection), one that describes events that occurred with no attempt to provide reasons or justifications for the event; descriptive reflection, one that describes the event and makes some attempt to provide justification for the event and to recognize alternate viewpoints; dialogic reflection, one that engages in a form of analytical discourse with oneself, stepping back from the event and allowing for a discourse with self and exploration of the experience using qualities of judgment and possible alternatives for explanation and hypothesis; and critical reflection, one that demonstrates awareness that actions and events are not only located in and explicable by reference to multiple perspectives but are located in and influenced by multiple historical and socio-political contexts. In Hatton and Smith's framework, we felt as though all of the considerations that brought us to this inquiry had been addressed.

In examining these frameworks, we discussed whether one framework represented our understanding and if we should adopt it outright or if we should synthesize some of the levels to specifically address our purpose(s). We talked about these choices asking whether the language of one framework would transfer to the kind of reflection we hoped our teacher candidates would write. We discussed what we wanted our teacher candidates to produce, the different components of reflective writing, the types of writing in reflection, and whether or not it was possible to restate an event as a level of reflection. Finally, settling on the language used in Hatton and Smith, we agreed that reflection must have a factual component to describe the teaching or educational event being reflected upon as a necessary component, but it was not sufficient for our purposes. We felt that effective reflective writing had to encompass the other three types of writing: descriptive reflection, dialogic reflection, and critical reflection, writing that interwove all three types of reflective writing described by Hatton and Smith. We presumed that at the onset of the program, teacher candidates could write descriptive reflections and felt it incumbent upon us to teach them how to write dialogically and critically to succeed in communicating their teaching practices.

### **Developing the Framework and Identifying Characteristics of Effective Reflective Writing**

As we introduced the Hatton and Smith framework in our programs, we quickly came to realize that the language they used to describe their framework confused

the teacher candidates in our programs. Although Hatton and Smith developed their nomenclature to provide clarity and avoid redundancy, it proved to do the opposite when we introduced their terms to the teacher candidates in our programs. Their struggles to distinguish the varied types of reflective thinking became evident through their questions in class and their numerous e-mail messages afterwards. What appeared as a solution to us was merely a starting point for our own thinking about reflective writing. Over the next two semesters, we critically examined the Hatton and Smith framework, synthesizing it with aspects from the other frameworks we examined, to clarify the labels and meaning used for the types of writing indicative of reflection: descriptive writing, analytical reflection, hypothetical reflection, and critical reflection. We also provided the teacher candidates with a series of workshops that included guiding questions, keywords, and sample texts making the language of the framework more user friendly for them (See Appendix A).

As our thinking about reflective writing evolved, we understood it to include what Hatton and Smith called descriptive writing, which combined with what Zeichner and Liston called factual reflection, with Lee's idea of recall writing. Because reflective writing makes thinking public for analysis purposes, description provides a context for the reader to understand the reflection that follows. When teacher candidates reflect on an actual teaching event or series of events, this type of writing reports out what happened. When teacher candidates reflect on their opinions about a topic, this type of writing summarizes opinions.

Analytical reflection asks the writer to speculate on why events happened as they did or how the writer came to think as s/he did. In other words, in writing reflectively, as Lee notes, writers interpret a situation with reasons. This closely corresponds to Hatton and Smith's concept of descriptive reflection and Zeichner and Liston's prudential and justificatory reflection, which called for the writer to attempt to provide justification for the event. Hatton and Smith's label, descriptive reflection, was easily confused with descriptive writing and, therefore, not as clear to our teacher candidates as it could have been. Within analytic reflection, writers judge how the event occurred, paying particular attention to student performance as criteria in making this determination. Additionally, writers who are engaged in analytical reflection seek reasons as to why the event happened the way it did and/or justify decisions made in the planning process.

To help the teacher candidates in our programs, we next examined hypothetical reflection, which calls on the writer to consider an event or opinion from multiple or alternate viewpoints and to speculate on how this event or opinion could have happened differently. Hypothetical writing draws upon alternate theoretical perspectives that could improve the outcome for student

learning in future iterations of the lesson, event or opinion. Hatton and Smith refer to this type of reflection as dialogic reflection. The term dialogic, while meaningful for us, did not connect with the teacher candidates in our programs. We did not feel as though Lee's terminology for this type of reflection, reflectivity level, provided any clarification. Therefore, we embraced the term hypothetical reflection to label the writing teacher candidates did when they speculated about the teaching situation they were examining, considered alternate viewpoints or outcomes, or hypothesized about an occurrence.

We drew heavily on Hatton and Smith's notion of critical reflection when asking teacher candidates to consider how events of a reflection either were shaped by or pushed against the socio-cultural-political contexts within which the event occurred. Zeichner and Liston describe this level as focusing on the underlying assumptions of actions that have an impact on social justice. For example, when reflecting on a guided reading lesson in a second grade classroom, a teacher candidate might consider how this instructional practice pushes against the existing culture in the school to engage solely in whole-class instruction and how it might impact student performance in the long-term if it were adopted school-wide.

### **Characteristics of Reflective Writing**

In creating a reflective writing framework to support our teacher candidates, we focused on how the different types of writing could push the teacher candidates to learn about what they were describing in more analytical, hypothetical or critical ways. The scholars we drew upon maintain that the types of reflection described in this paper are not hierarchical; one is not a condition for the other to occur. During this process, the best examples of reflective writing we found intertwined all three types of reflection throughout a piece of writing. Thus, during our search for a supportive framework for our teacher candidates to write in a reflective mode, we also examined which characteristics lead to more effective communication of the events they were exploring. What characteristics (i.e., stylistics) made one essay more effective than others did? Therefore, we thought learning the characteristics of effective reflective writing would help the teacher candidates compose more effectively and meet the high stakes evaluation standards for teacher licensure.

There are numerous reasons to write reflectively to communicate one's teaching practices and each of these reasons take different forms: talk-backs, dialog journals, reflective letters, learning journals, introductory essays, concluding essays, critical incident questionnaires, self-evaluations or

assessments, anecdotes, autobiographies, and such. According to Yancey, the content of a reflection,

. . . can mean revision, of one's goals, or more often, of one's work (Camp 1992; Weiser); it can mean self-assessment, sometimes oriented to the gap between intention and accomplishment (Conway); it can mean an analysis of learning that takes place in and beyond the writing class (Paulson, Paulson, and Meyer); it can entail projection (e.g. Goal-setting) that provides a 'base-line' against which development can be evaluated (Sunstein); and it can mean all of the above (Black, et al. 1994a) (6).

We learned that effective reflective writing is recursive, much like the experience that generates it, so it requires a "looking forward" and a "casting backward," a process by which the writer articulates the "relationship between and among multiple variable[s]" (Yancey 13-14).

Reflective writing adheres to certain characteristics, employing similar strategies and stylistics<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, in addition to teaching our teacher candidates a frame with which to organize their reflections we also provided them with suggested stylistics to enhance their analytical, hypothetical and critical observations (See Appendix B).

## **Conclusion**

The instructors in the EE and MCEA programs now teach a reflective writing framework to their teacher candidates to support their writing in this mode, because:

Effective professional English language arts educators do not come to pedagogical content knowledge by osmosis, but rather they develop that knowledge base by reading about, reflecting on, and practicing strategies and techniques as described and refined by many scholars, researchers, theorists, and other practitioners in their particular field (NCTE 43).

Time will tell if our efforts make a difference in the teacher candidates' analytical, hypothetical and critical reflections as we analyze the data from a longitudinal study of their writing. Early findings indicate that after being taught the framework, the teacher candidates in both programs are more aware of the kinds of reflection they want to include in their narratives and how their narrative might

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<sup>2</sup> See the works of Hillocks; Jones and Shelton; Palmer; Smagorinsky; Yancey; Yagelski.

be affected by the different purposes for their writing. When asked in what ways her reflective writing might have changed after being taught the framework, one teacher candidate observed,

I would just say by making us aware of what good reflective writing looks like. When you're asked, just write about what you learned about this, it's kind of—you don't really know what to say. Knowing that there's criteria that you can follow kind of changed the way I looked at it.

Similarly, another said, “I guess I feel like I understand reflective writing more concretely than I did at the beginning of the semester.” When asked what the role reflective writing plays in the life of a teacher candidate, another explained that it helped her think more critically about her teaching practices,

I think it's critical to her understanding of her students and her lesson plan and her curriculum. I mean, everything, because when you reflect, you try to take in what's happened around you objectively, and then say, okay, let's focus on these two or three things and prove what were my strengths and what were my weaknesses. How does this impact others culturally or historically or socially, or any of the isms we've studied in school . . . I think it's vital to thinking, as well. If you want your students to be able to think productively, you have to do it, too. I think that's most important, thinking and articulating those thoughts.

As the framework continues to evolve, comments such as these reinforce the value of its development and the necessity to revisit and reteach it throughout the course of the programs. Initial findings prompt us to consider program consistency and how we construct reflective writing assignments across it, giving us both much to reflect upon; and, as we do, we invite other teacher educators to consider how their teacher candidates have learned to write reflectively.

## Appendix A

### Reflective Writing Framework

- ❖ **Descriptive Writing** - This is the camera's eye. Describe objectively the events that occurred without providing reasons or justifications. Although this kind of writing is typically not considered reflective, it is a necessary part of reflection in order to provide context for the writer and reader.
  - **Guiding Questions:** What actually happened? What is my opinion?
  - **Keywords:** I believe..., I think..., I felt..., I saw...
  - **Sample Text:** 1) "As an observer, I stayed with the children every step of the way. I participated in various activities, including attending their lunchtime in the cafeteria, accompanying gym teaching endeavors, reading to the class, and aiding in science lessons." 2) "It wasn't until several years later when I became a teaching assistant for summer school did I know that I wanted to pursue education. Initially, it was the joy of working with the youth, but as I learned more about classroom pedagogies, professional development, [Wisconsin's] Ten Teaching Standards, and many more educational topics, I knew this was my calling."
  
- ❖ **Analytical Reflection-** Analyze, explore, and speculate on why things happened as they did or why they are the way they are.
  - **Guiding Questions:** Why did it happen? How did you come to think that way?
  - **Keywords:** because, perhaps, as a result of, which
  - **Sample Text:** 1) "I think sometimes we hold too much back from our students – as a survivor of sexual abuse, I feel like I would have related to and benefited much more from reading Dorothy Allison than I did from reading Charles Dickens. Hers was a voice I needed to hear, and when I did, it changed my life." 2) "It was through these explorations that I gained the most from this course, which will help me not only in my teaching career, but in my further math education as well."
  
- ❖ **Hypothetical Reflection-** Predict how the event might have turned out differently. Take into consideration multiple/alternative perspectives.
  - **Guiding Questions:** How might it have happened otherwise? What are alternate ways of thinking about the issue?
  - **Keywords:** perhaps, maybe, wondering, curious

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- **Sample Text:** 1) “Sometimes I wonder if I might have been more successful at math if [teacher’s name] had taught me that subject, too.” 2) “I should focus on working harder to understand the actions of young girls, and why they chose to act in certain ways at different times, and maybe I will become more understanding.”
- ❖ **Critical Reflection-** Explain how the events were shaped or impacted by the socio-cultural-political contexts in which the events occurred.
  - **Guiding Question:** What is the significance or implication of what happened?
  - **Sample Text:** 1) “The social issues surrounding urban schools (such as poverty, crime, and violence) are also much different from what I had experienced in my primary and secondary schooling, and I know that my teaching should understand and reflect these surroundings.”

Adapted from

Pasternak, D.L. & Rigoni, K. (2010). Reflective writing, reflective practitioners, effective teachers. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Writing Project, Invitational Summer Institute.

## APPENDIX B

### Characteristics of Effective Reflective Writing

The following characteristics of effective reflective writing were synthesized from the following sources Smagorinsky, 2006; Hillocks, 1995; Yancey, 1998; Yagelski, 1997; Palmer, 1998; Jones & Shelton, 2006.

Effective reflective writing:

- Describes in detail an event or memory.
- Details an anecdote told in story format.
- Is recursive and generative; ideas are rethought and reconsidered, producing new ideas.
- Allows the persona to take control of her/his learning – supports agency.
- Sets goals and projects those goals into an attainable future.
- Revises one’s knowledge through self-assessment or evaluation (reviews, projects, revises).
- Acknowledges accomplishments or analyzes learning with a critical eye.
- Is “Dialectical, putting multiple perspectives into play with each other in order to produce insight” (Yancey, 1998, p. 6).
- Discovers what we know, what we have learned, and what we might understand.
- “Call[s] upon the cognitive, the affective, the intuitive” (Yancey, 1998, p. 6).
- Brings practice and theory together.
- Calls into question what we know (beliefs) and what supports it (them); is retrospective and theoretical.
- Solves problems.
- Is discursive and epistemological.
- Works from the particular to the general and back, “moves from inside personal experience to outside personal experience and back” (Yancey, 1998, p. 83-94).
- Focuses on shaping the self.
- “Draws [occasions, ideas, concepts, understandings] together for review, to discern patterns, to synthesize, to recognize gaps and make sense of them and explains observations and makes them public” (Yancey, 1998, p. 73)
- Satisfies the writer and the reader; there is awareness of audience and of the voice of the writer.



- Answers the question “what have I learned” as a starting point or “what did I learn” as an ending point.
- Draws on multiple variables, contexts, or narratives to explain the learning.
- Invokes metaphor as a journey and as a means to explore relationships.
- Points out contradictions and complicates dilemmas.
- Speaks of the past self to understand the present self.
- Personally addresses the reader (as in a letter).
- Overviews the content of a portfolio.
- Is analytical and interpretative, formal and academic (as in an essay).

Adapted from:

Pasternak, D.L. & Rigoni, K. (2010). Reflective writing, reflective practitioners, effective teachers. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Writing Project, Invitational Summer Institute.

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