Soon we'll add to the endangered species list the elementary teacher who hasn't at some point encouraged, even mandated, that their students keep journals or learning logs. Yet, how many of us have taken our own advice? Do you keep a teaching journal?

I never did seriously keep one until I found a way to tailor it to my needs. For more than fifteen years I have been teaching fifth (and sometimes fourth) grade bilingual students in a small agricultural town of ten thousand. I teach in a large third, fourth, and fifth grade school. There are six classes at each grade, two of which are bilingual. Over the years my students (no doubt like yours) have challenged, inspired, frustrated, and delighted me. That I am always dealing with two languages just adds another layer of complexity to the already complex issue of teaching students.

I did an informal survey among the teachers at my school to see if anyone kept a teaching journal. Some teachers guiltily replied that no, they didn't keep a journal but they wished they did; others just looked at me as if I were crazy. I surveyed teacher researchers and heard more guilt, some excuses and very few who used a journal frequently. Fewer still were those who enjoyed it. Among the handful who had kept a journal the sentiment was that it had been very helpful to their teacher research, and one added that journals were a good place to vent feelings.

This is the third year I've been involved in teacher research and my own record on keeping the mandatory journal is far from sterling. In my first year this "mandatory" journal traveled everywhere with me: to school, to meetings, to conferences. Unfortunately, mandating and having a journal didn't seem to mean it was used. There are only seven entries in that journal. In my second year of teacher research I kept the mandatory journal and filled about half of its pages. In this third year I have filled the entire journal and then some. As I used my journal this year in recording observations of myself, my students and my teaching, it became more and more significant to my effort to gain personal and professional insights. I saw how helpful my journal was now and I began to delve into the question: How had I managed to make journal keeping meaningful and useful this time?

Living in this litigious age, I feel I must warn you that further reading of this article may cause you to make the same leap into journal writing, not because you have to, but because it will be useful, even fun.

Changing My Paradigm
The first thing I had to do in order to make the journal work for me was to change how I thought about keeping a teaching journal. Previously I had held these assumptions about journal keeping: I felt I should be writing in the journal daily, probably at the same time daily; I should only write about the research question I was studying; and I envisioned concise, analytical observations all directly leading to answers to my questions. Now these assumptions seem too absurd to be believed; they set me up for defeat before I had even begun.

This year, I changed my assumptions by ignoring any restrictions I had had previously. My thoughts about journal keeping became free-form, flexible, and all of a sudden it was doable; I could keep a journal. Of course, unfortunately, this did not happen overnight.

How did I come to change my thinking? Desperation. I changed it because I was having a hard time understanding what was going on in me and in my class. I was caught off guard by the unwelcome realization that after fifteen years of teaching I had more questions and fewer answers than ever. Writing down my feelings helped me to better understand and cope with them.
Nov. 10. Is all this introspection going to lead me out of the teaching field? It seems more and more impossible to do, as I learn what the ‘right’ methods are in each discipline.

By finding a way to keep a journal I also found a way to capture what was going on around me and was able to reflect back on it. One of my journal entries this year quotes Lucy Calkins: “Writing is a powerful tool for thinking, because when we write we fasten thoughts, observations and feelings onto paper.” Then I add this reaction:

Fasten is too genteel of a word for me – nail, staple, tack, carve, fit me better, that idea is pinned like a butterfly in a smelly entomology display case and no way is it going to get loose.

This nailing/stapling of thought to paper was an invaluable tool that allowed me to get a perspective that I could get in no other way. Because I write down my thoughts and observations not only am I thinking of them as I write them, but they stay there for me to reread. Rereading and reflecting allow me to get a perspective that sometimes only time can give. I admit to surprise and amazement as I read some past entries, wondering how I had missed the obvious, or the connections that seem to be so obvious in retrospect.

The New, Broader Journal Model
An entry on November 14 shows how I began to see the need to expand my idea of journal keeping:

How does one make entries pertaining to one’s teacher research question when one is an elementary teacher? … everything is important and intermixed, intermingled, and complicated by intricacies.

The new, broader journal paradigm I constructed allowed me to integrate the seemingly disparate parts of my life and to explore a variety of topics. I used it to discuss with myself various issues including time, professional growth, specific interactions with students, and non-school topics. But let me make that more concrete by sharing some of my journal entries with you.

Time
One ever-present issue for teachers is time. My struggle with this issue was a frequent theme in my journal:

Oct. 11. How does one find time to complete a thought?

Oct. 12. Where did the math period go? If you want the kids to do anything worthwhile you have to give them so much time.

May 21. Today we finally did the squid dissection … I allowed an hour and 15 minutes and I thought I would have time left over. No! … Combining science and math and Language Arts isn’t only practical and efficient (and hopefully beneficial to learning), but it’s the only way to steal big chunks of time.

Like the air traffic controllers, I am constantly juggling time schedules so that band people don’t always miss art or so the GATE (Gifted and Talented) students get some history, but time remains regimented with innumerable constraints beyond my control. I may not be able to change these factors but journal keeping did seem to help me deal with them.

Professional Growth
I also use my journal to help me grow professionally outside the classroom walls. One way I do this is to use my journal as a storehouse for other people’s ideas which I like, want to remember, or want to think about. I use my journal to capture ideas from conferences, workshops, inservices and meetings. Here are just a few of the gems I gleaned from a Randall Charles math workshop:

Feb. 2 ‘What is the reform you’re making? Cooperative groups and manipulatives? You may be confusing the goals with the tools … Teaching for understanding, complex thinking … Anyone who is warm and vertical can think … Positive attitudes … Positive actions … enthusiasm, kids will catch it. Look happy. Fake it.’

When I present workshops I try to make entries before and after to help me with future presentations or just to deal with what happens:

Oct. 10. … what a day! Here I prepared and prepared and was still unprepared for what happened. Picture 50-60 people in a sunny multipurpose room on metal chairs on a hot day, with no air-conditioning from 2-4:00 p.m. when they did not choose to come … although someone in the front seat fell asleep, there were some attentive faces …

Oct. 16. Is it me or what? I figured after last week’s fiasco it had to go better … [but] the staff is setting up for a [surprise] party … Will this workshop start? Can I go home?
Oct. 18. I just received a lovely thank you note from the curriculum director [from the last workshop]. What a first!

This year I also used my journal to write down notes, quotes, and my reactions as I read books by Calkins, Atwell, and Heard, and others.

Nov. 15. How did this Frank Smith come to be so smart? 'Written language is for stories to be read, songs to be sung, newspapers to be shared, letters to be mailed, jokes to be told ... recipes to be cooked, messages to be exchanged ... it is not for having your ignorance exposed, your sensibility destroyed, or your ability assessed.

The emphasis is mine, and I try to remember this quote when I am dealing with my students. To me it speaks to the idea of communication being the primary goal of written language. It also reminds me of the fun that language can bring in its sharing as well as the touching of hearts it can bring in more serious ways.

Interactions with Specific Students
Interactions between students or between myself and a student are also included in my entries.

Dec. Rosa came up to me and said, 'Maestra, como se dice me lo prestas?' 'May I borrow it, borrow,' I answered and she ran skipping off. She leaned over close to Sharon and said it, and Sharon, immersed in her art project, just handed over the glue, not realizing the effort that Rosa had gone to just to talk to her.

It touched my heart and I wanted to remember the effort and bravery of shy Rosa so I recorded it in my journal.

Manuel also made an impression on me one day during Writer's Workshop. We were all having a silent writing time and I felt empathy for Manuel as I watched him shifting around uncomfortably in his chair, grimacing up at the ceiling, seemingly at a major loss for words. I wrote a poem as I watched him:

December 13, 1992. For Manuel, who also wasn't sure what to write about:

Go ahead
      just try to
      pluck a
      poem out of
      the air

Go ahead
and may
you be
more successful
than
I.
I who sit here,
 struggling,
 squirming,
 searching,
 scratching
For a poem
while my neighbor
busily
writes.

Maybe I
should sit
in his
chair
where the air
seems to be
more full
of words.

Then I shared my poem with the class. I noted:

Nov. 14. Yesterday I wrote a poem and dedicated it to Manuel, but I'm not sure the class totally got it.

Upon reflection, I think my students were in shock that a teacher would write a poem, share it with the class, dedicate it to a person in the class and empathize so with a student (after all, I knew what Manuel was going through because I couldn't think of any burning issue either until he showed me our mutual problem of writer's block). If I hadn't been keeping a journal I probably would have lost the valuable lesson that this experience gave me; I would not be able to reflect on it and remind myself to continue to model being a risk-taker.

Gaining Perspective: Permission to Write About Things Other Than School
Like many teachers I am always striving (unrealistically) to be the best teacher I can, in all things, at all times (only I try to do it in two languages since I teach a bilingual class). Everyone's life is complicated and mine is no exception because I am also trying to be the best wife, mother of two toddlers, daughter, teacher researcher, teacher consultant, and voter that I can. It was all these things that I was attempting to deal with that stopped me initially from keeping a journal. How could I write about thematic math while visions of

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forgetting to leave out the diapers for Tidee Didee Diapers danced in my head? At first, I avoided this reality clash by not writing many entries. Now in my journal, sandwiched in between waxing philosophically about how to provide the richest math environment might be ponderings about our adopted, supposedly-fixed, pregnant-looking cat, are entries such as these:

Jan. 28. Georgina [our two-year old] climbed into our bed at 2:30 a.m. (again) and kept me awake until 6:30 (again).

Nov. 27. Stuck in the dealership with lots of things to do — will they let my cargo without bankrupting me? Unlikely. I did not come to spend my morning here ...

I always knew that I took my “teaching” with me everywhere: picking up menus at restaurants to use in math, finding postcards while on vacation for social studies, bugging unknown people for freebies to use in my classroom, are all facts of my life. Now I was accepting that things outside my teaching life affected my teaching just as teaching affected the rest of my life. By writing about them I was able to acknowledge these other things and then go on to what I needed to deal with right then.

Three Years in the Making

The three years I have been doing teacher research have made me look at my teaching, my students and their learning, in a different way. As I question more closely what I do as a teacher and its effect on student learning, keeping a journal helps me to dialogue with myself about what is going on in my classroom. It took three years of “messing around,” free exploration if you prefer, to develop a style and a way of thinking about journals that was truly useful to me. In this new journal keeping I have given myself: the permission to write about both teaching and non-teaching issues; the freedom to struggle with any questions on paper without worrying about solutions; the time to wonder/ponder/reflect; and the space to capture and collect ideas and incidents to think about later. I hope that my paradigm invites you to feel the same excitement as I do, because in truth, the variations are only limited by how we think about them.

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