12-2021

Becoming a Flexible Teacher Through Critical Reflective Journaling

Marianne Young
Utah State University

BECOMING A FLEXIBLE TEACHER THROUGH CRITICAL REFLECTIVE

JOURNALING

by

Marianne Young

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

English

Approved:

_____   _____
Jessica Rivera-Mueller, Ph.D.   Benjamin Gunsberg, Ph.D.
Major Professor   Committee Member

_____
Sonia Manuel-Dupont, Ph.D.
Committee Member

UTAH STATE UNIVERSITY
Logan, Utah

2021

ABSTRACT

Becoming a Flexible Teacher through Critical Reflective Journaling

by

Marianne Young, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2021

Major Professor: Dr. Jessica Rivera-Mueller
Department: English

Because reflection through journaling allows teachers to critically analyze their teaching paradigms, this portfolio argues that veteran teachers should take time to critically reflect upon their teaching through the practice of journaling. The portfolio contains three sections: a philosophy statement on the importance of reflection, an essay created to share findings from the author's practice of critically reflecting through journaling, and a tool to support teachers' critical reflection through journaling. Together, these pieces argue for the importance of reflection and demonstrate how journaling can help veteran teachers uncover key themes that lead to becoming more flexible and adaptable in the classroom.

(40 pages)

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Becoming a Flexible Teacher Through Critical Reflective Journaling Practice

Marianne Young

This thesis project is a portfolio that advises veteran teachers on the importance of journaling and self-reflection in order to stay involved and invested in the teaching community. As a practice, journaling helps teachers analyze how they teach, why they teach the way they do, and how they can improve their classroom through adaptation and change. Therefore, the pieces in this portfolio--a philosophy statement, a pedagogical essay, and a teaching tool-- demonstrate the need for reflection, allowing master teachers to become flexible within an ever-changing field.

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This portfolio contains three sections that focus on the benefits of journaling and reflection from a veteran teacher's perspective. The need for change in an ever-changing population is necessary for teachers to continue teaching. Reflection and analysis of a daily classroom journal can lead a teacher to question why aspects of the lesson worked out the way they did and develop an acute awareness of classroom dynamics. This recognition of key aspects within a class allows a teacher to validate the progression of a class or take a closer look at adjusting elements in order for students to make impactful relationships with a text as well as each other. The process of reflection moves the teacher beyond instruction and into developing their teaching identity and pedagogy. The first piece found in this portfolio is my philosophy statement focusing on the importance of reflection through journaling. My theory of reflection changed dramatically when I analyzed my journals and found the need for change. My next piece is my essay created to share the findings in my own reflective practice when interpreting my daily journal entries. It was through critical reflection that I was aware of necessary shifts within my class as well as different approaches I could use to communicate with my students. My final piece is the tool I created to quickly journal each day and a pacing guide which other teachers can use and adapt for their own purposes.

PHILOSOPHY ON THE IMPORTANCE OF CRITICAL REFLECTION

In the teaching world, reflection is more than Google's definition of "serious thought or consideration." It is a practice for intentionally looking back on a class, a day, or even a week to better understand why we teach. Amanda Berry and John Loughran take this definition further by arguing that reflection is, "[a]ccepting responsibility for, and genuinely caring about, the interpersonal relations embedded in teaching" (27). For me, reflection is the continual analysis of content, prioritizing standards and finding ways to ignite the passion students may find in a particular subject. It is the conscious soaking in of culture, subject, skills, relationships and other aspects found within the classroom in order to promote progressive change and learning. Reflection is taking the good and the bad from a day's lesson, examining assumptions, finding the necessities you (the teacher) want to convey to your students, and evaluating your progress toward your goals. Reflection is multi-faceted and fundamental in teaching. It can liberate the power of a teaching moment and allow students to embrace an uncommon idea, turning it into possibility.

Critical reflection allows one to acknowledge that change is needed, which can be delicate when current strategies and methods have failed. Admitting the need for change, though, allows teachers to create a better way to interact with students. Reflection is valuable for all teachers, especially veterans who have become comfortable in their teaching styles. Recognizing a need for change and investing time researching new material keeps teachers aware of recent shifts in strategies, and teachers become more adaptive in classroom relationships. For a teacher to stay in the teaching field, teachers

need to continuously improve their programs and teaching strategies, and reflection

through journaling can dramatically support these efforts.

IMPORTANCE OF REFLECTION AND JOURNALING: FLEXIBILITY IN

TEACHING DURING COVID-19

The 2020-2021 school year will stand out as one filled with sanitizing wipes, the never-ending disinfecting of each desk between classes, hand sanitizer used on entry and exit of classrooms, and masked students. I tried to maintain a 'normal' classroom while ensuring clean surfaces before students walked through the threshold. I did not fully understand the barrier that masks would play, but it was profound how much I had relied on full-faced emotions while teaching. Students would play four-square or basketball during lunch recess and I had a hard time recognizing their unmasked faces whenever I frequented the playground. Their beautiful smiles and hidden dimples revealed themselves when not masked by cloth.

In 2020, I began my 20th year teaching English. While I am an experienced teacher, I was beginning a new teaching position. I left a part-time teaching position at a local high school to accept a full-time role at a small, charter, middle school. Class sizes were capped at 20 students and, as a consequence of COVID-19, students had the option to attend classes face-to-face or remotely via Zoom. As a teacher, it is crucial to build relationships with students as those relationships are a key component in teaching, and this year it was difficult to build relationships in the same way I had in the past. The students coming to class were new to me since it was my first year teaching them; however, I didn't realize how much of a physical barrier masks played while getting to know them. The human eyes are definitely reflective of emotion, and it wasn't until I saw my students unmasked in my classroom to eat their lunch that I realized how much I was

missing their full-faced emotions. For example, J and A had known each other for more than two years and sat near each other in class. J had a small hand sanitizer that perched on his desk and as A came behind him, somehow his notebook ended up falling to the floor. Under normal circumstances, J would lend a helping hand to collect A's papers that had fallen out of his notebook, but the hesitation that hung between them when figuring out this new COVID environment was surprising. The middle-school age group's usual social interactions are filled with hugs and fist bumps, but those as well as assemblies and other gatherings were missing. This year, indeed, was an anomaly!

Throughout the years of teaching, I had never kept a teaching journal. I always figured that I *should* keep a teaching journal, but I never did. I made notes every once in a while on assignments that worked or didn't work, but most often, I found myself processing my teaching experiences by discussing them with a colleague. The school year of 2020-2021 changed my perspective on journaling since this year was definitely unique and one to remember. I had kept a journal as an emotional teenager who jotted down new crushes and friends who betrayed me, but I decided that journaling for my master's project would be a perfect way to remember, reflect upon, and analyze my teaching during a chaotic school year.

Reflection occurs through journaling is a practice that many teachers believe they should use, but many teachers rarely take the time to practice, given competing demands on their time and other priorities both personally and professionally. That being said, spending time to review after teaching a unit is a key component and significant benefit of teaching. Many times I have taken short notes, but never fully studied the *why* and

what worked with the students before closing a unit. Many times my notes were insufficient, or I was left to improvise from them when I tried to improve my teaching the next time.I taught the unit.

While researching self-reflection and journaling, I found there is limited scholarship that exists regarding the benefits of journaling and self-study for veteran teachers. Greiman and Covington admit this by stating that most of the information pertaining to the benefits of journaling is anecdotal: "only anecdotal evidence that pertains to reflective thinking and journal writing in the context of teacher development in career and technical education" (116). My project, although anecdotal, is still helpful for veteran teachers because the teaching community values experience in pursuit of education. As a result of my journaling and self-reflection, I discovered new ideas and concepts to help me adjust my teaching style. Although findings may differ, I hope future teachers can appreciate the usefulness of reflection and can use insights gleaned to continue the conversation around the benefits of reflection and journaling. Adding to this scholarship can benefit teachers who are looking to develop their teacher identity and learn how to improve their teaching abilities by examining their own teaching experiences.

In this essay, I share findings from my practice of reflecting upon a unit of instruction through journaling. Through this process, I was able to spend time reflecting on teaching aspects during the 2020-2021 school year as a whole and learned a lot more about myself and my teaching. By reflecting and studying my daily notes and lesson plans, I feel that I helped my students and myself, to gain a deeper understanding of life

experiences and encourage their interest in literature and culture. In the sections below, I describe my project and share the key findings. This new written record of my teaching experiences increased my awareness in three key areas: student engagement, emotions, and teachable time. My conclusion is that a reflective journaling practice can help veteran teachers engage more deeply with scholarship and their prior knowledge, embrace changes to their teaching, and create new understandings of their teaching beliefs and actions.

Reflection Project

In order for critical reflection to occur, one must have something on which to critically reflect and study. In this project, I wrote daily notes in a chart that I created to indicate my observations and responses. I then used my previous notes to journal about my responses to the notes, thereby engaging in critical reflection. Essentially, I reflected at the end of each school day and briefly jotted detailed notes about my eighth grade class. At the end of each week, I compiled the notes into a narrative, to take a closer look at anything in particular I noticed that was unusual or interesting. This time of journaling at the end of each week became an important part of discerning teacher identity, *why* I taught the way I did, and *how* students engaged in the classroom. My journal became a place where I wrote about and found my frustrations and where my small victories were noted and analyzed. In this project, I'm applying Kara Taczak's definition of reflection from her essay, "Reflection is Critical for Writers' Development." In her essay, Taczask defines reflection as a mode of inquiry that looks at the *why*. She states, "Reflection is a

mode of inquiry: a deliberate way of systematically recalling writing experiences to reframe the current writing situation. It allows writers to recognize what they are doing in that particular moment (cognition), as well as to consider why they made the rhetorical choices they did (metacognition)" (78). By systematically recalling the experiences and pulling together the different texts referencing the importance of reflection, I aimed to look at the notes I recorded in my chart, and a daily pacing guide, to identify patterns that other scholars had noted, allowing me to 'reframe the current' situation. During this process of journaling, I took time to recognize critical teaching moments. My journal, coupled with the professional context of scholarship available, helped me recognize key concepts found in my studies that were taking root in my journaling. My daily notes, supported with my teaching journal, helped to begin the continual process of my own self-awareness and growth that allowed me to consider the *why* noted in Taczak's essay and to make changes in my classroom, to support students to interact with the text and each other efficiently and in a more meaningful way.

As scholars note, journaling is a place where critical reflection can occur and specific realizations can happen. Charles Bazerman, in his essay "Writing Speaks to Situations Through Recognizable Forms," indicates the importance of writing from many different perspectives: mental growth, metacognition benefits and social communication. Writing invariably benefits us by identifying:

> [H]ow we perceive the situation, what more we can understand about it, how we
> can formulate our goals, and what strategies we may take in our utterances. It

helps us put in focus what we can accomplish in a situation, how we can

accomplish it, and what the stakes are. (37)

There is a singular significance in writing that allows for critical reflection to occur and

to help answer the inquiries a teacher may have about how they can improve their own

teaching skills and foster student engagement. Granted, Bazerman's essay focused on

pre-service teachers, who may already be overwhelmed in the daily teaching schedule,

but veteran teachers can also learn through journaling by taking the time to enquire why

things are the way they are, constructing a clearer picture of their teaching identity.

Through the process of journaling, I found patterns that helped me understand

students' learning to facilitate professional growth. As Joy Ritchie and David Wilson

explain, "[s]imply 'having theories' is not enough. Nor is blind action useful. What is

necessary is reflection *and* action" (89). Through the process of creating a teaching

journal and reflecting on my journal entries, I aimed to discover the most important

actions and theories for my growth as a teacher. Stephen D. Brookfield supports the

concept of how reflection leads to informed, meaningful actions stating, "[c]ritical

reflection raises our chances of taking informed actions… those that are based on

assumptions that have been carefully and critically investigated" (80). I incorporated

Brookfield's ideas when I was planning each week and plotting my pace and organizing

activities for each day because my journal informed my teaching actions and helped my

students to become more engaged. For example, through journaling and reflection, I was

more aware of my decisions and the purposeful actions I took to maximize student

growth and understanding of a Shakespeare play. I found that my journal contained a lot

more than just teaching. I was able to reflect upon my specific engagement with the students and this sometimes weighed upon my actions. One such action was how much I had planned to cover for the first three days that didn't get completed. I hadn't allowed for much conversation between students as well as the time spent answering questions from their workbooks. It was during my journaling that I became more aware of time, the aspects of the texts I thought were necessary to cover, and the time I had left for items that were fun.

In order to understand if continuing a journal would help me to reflect and evaluate my teaching skills in a more meaningful way, I chose to keep a record of my Eighth Grade *Macbeth* unit. The *Macbeth* unit was new to me, and I wanted a unit that didn't carry the expectations and weight of past successful lessons and projects. A fresh unit, uncharted and free, allowed me to set the pace and activities that responded to student interest. I kept track of student engagement and discussions that went well, and my daily journal entries reflected on specific strategies that increased the engagement of interested students whose curiosity showed during different sections of the unit. By studying the lessons of a new unit, I wasn't looking at past experiences that other students may have had compared to this year's students; instead, I found that without previous prospects and hopes of successful past lessons, I was able to focus on my current students' performance. I also didn't have a day-by-day plan previously mapped out, so having to gauge how far our class would get within the given time showed me how far I've come as a teacher. I was able to be flexible if our class was running out of time, or if we covered the reading and the work with time left over.

To support my process, I spent time on the weekend mapping out the lessons planned for the following week. For this project, I reflected at the end of each school day and briefly jotted down the details of my eighth-grade class. At the end of each week, I compiled my daily notes into a weekly narrative to take a closer look at the information and anything in particular that I noticed standing out.

My daily journal was based upon a chart that I made for each day that was in a table format. It included four categories: Engagement, Involving Remote Learners, Lesson Plan (brief view of the lesson for that day), and Changes to Lesson. Each category included space for me to write what worked/didn't work, things I was unsure of, and questions/concerns I had for the day. Above the daily table was information that included the date, student count, if a holiday was coming up, and if there was an adjusted schedule for that day. In order to make journaling time efficient, I knew I needed to quickly organize and record each aspect of what I thought was important to note and track consistently. This compilation of daily notes and comments became the structure for my self-study and reflection that Bazerman describes as trying to understand each situation, formulate goals, and identify how I could accomplish the desired outcome.

Two of the four sections of my daily chart focused on the lesson itself and to consider whether I needed to change it. Occasionally, I wrote that I read further than I thought we would-or the opposite. These sections didn't need much space, however, since I wrote a "smiley face" if the lesson went well and stayed on schedule, or the line number where we were able to finish if we were behind or ahead. I outlined the lesson in

more detail in my weekly scheduling/pace guide that I summarized on the weekend prior to the new week beginning.

I added the category "Involving Remote Learners" to my daily journal because this was the first (and hopefully the only) year I was incorporating students via Zoom into our face-to-face classroom, and I wanted to see how effectively I was including remote learners in our classroom lessons. In my eighth grade classroom, I had between 13-15 students who were supposed to attend school face-to-face plus another five to seven other students attending virtually. Two students were continually back and forth between the classroom setting and home. We had a broadcast camera that captured our classroom in a 180-degree view that we used for our Zoom meetings to enable students to see what our entire class was doing and to help keep up with our daily interactions.

I made the effort to try to engage with the remote students and write about them separately, this in turn meant that I was more sensitive to how I was teaching remote learners. The "Involving Remote Learners" section was the section in which most of my notes were kept. This section blended well with the notes for the "Engagement" category since it was usually a symbiotic relationship with remote learners and as I expected, engagement was a challenge with remote learners. I also included the quick yes/no response to the holiday approaching and adjusted schedule because I knew from experience that a lot of students can lose focus if a holiday is near and student engagement can be impacted if the schedule changes. The *Macbeth* unit ended up taking eight weeks, starting a few days before Halloween and ending at Winter Break. I knew this block of time would be challenging between holidays where attendance is subpar and

students' attention could be distracted with questions like "Where are you going for the break?" as Thanksgiving and the winter holidays were on the horizon. One example of loss of focus was a day our eighth graders were invited to a local high school to watch a performance of *Fantasia*. This field trip affected their behavior and engagement both before and after the performance. We didn't review *Macbeth* but discussed aspects of the play instead because of the disruption to their normal schedule.

As a full-time teacher and mother of two young children, I have very little time to journal outside working hours. The journal template allowed me to take a quick 10-20 minutes during my preparation hour to reflect on the class that was taught in the hour before without taking too much time away from grading and prepping for other classes. (The template I made follows the works cited page in this thesis.) The majority of my self-study time happened on the weekend when I reflected on the comments that were written a week before and wrote more in-depth about the class. It was during the longer sessions on the weekend that I found my observations were surprisingly not solely academic, but included my emotions of frustrations and triumphs, and the significance of relationships and interactions with my students.

Interestingly enough, I surprisingly found with my journaling that it was not just for academics and keeping track of students and lessons. I found that much more emotion was surfacing in my writing. It became a place where I could write about victories and failures where I was talking it through on paper. I wrote when a student had frustrated me or when they were enjoying things. Building relationships and interacting with them became apparent in my writing as well. Recognizing this allowed me to move beyond the

frustrations and address what was needed to progress my class and teaching. Looking over my daily entries and reflecting each week made this realization happen.

It was in my journal and reflecting over it that I constructed my views on the class environment, student learning, daily lessons and engagements. This journaling became the purpose for my project, directing my self-study into three main categories: student engagement, teachable time, and emotions.

Student Engagement

As the school year drew to a close, and *Macbeth* had been stabbed months ago, our school requested that our "at-home" learners return for the final trimester. My five eighth graders who were remote learners were failing most of their classes during the first two trimesters. Since Covid-19 numbers of new infections had decreased and the vaccine became available, our administration and teachers alike thought it would be best for remote learners to return to the classroom. We were worried about grades, learning loss, and lack of participation in their education. We hoped that the social connections we could make in the classroom would translate positively to their academic success.

A week after my five eighth grade students returned to class, I asked them how they felt about being back with their friends. I was surprised to hear how nervous they were to enter the classroom again, since they did not feel like they were part of their group of friends or the classroom environment. At the same time, they admitted to interacting more with others in the classroom and enjoying school much more, conceding that they were less engaged with their schoolwork while learning remotely at home. Two

of them openly stated they often played video games on their computer during their Zoom classes!

Another example of a poor learning environment came from a young student named "Z". She was caring for her mother while trying to balance her broadcast classes and homework. Z was constantly being interrupted with requests and demands from her mother and with silly antics from her brothers who thought it would be funny to distract her during Zoom; however, after returning to school, her failing grades improved to all A's and B's.

As I reflected upon these stories and the school year as a whole, one prominent feature that is repeated throughout this time is the importance of the relationships between teachers and students and how in-person classroom dynamics and playful banter enhance a student's education. Engagement increases when students are physically present in a learning environment. I discovered that when students were learning at home, they were usually too distracted which prevented them from learning.

There are other different aspects of student engagement for the 2020-2021 school year since there were two different categories of students: remote learners and in-class learners. I found that most of the students who came to school connected well to the literature and in-class discussions and most of my notes/reflections during this period consisted of trying to engage with the students who attended class via Zoom.

The day I opened the *Macbeth* unit foreshadowed what was to come. I thought it would be fun to bring in a guest speaker who had lived in England and was familiar with the folklore surrounding witches since he had been to places like Pendle Hill where

witchcraft trials historically occurred during the 17th century. *Macbeth* is known for some supernatural elements, and I hoped the students would enjoy listening to someone who could tell them about a place infamous for witches. The students who were in my classroom enjoyed the presentation, especially since it was on Halloween, and students freely commented and asked questions. In contrast, I tried chatting with my students on Zoom asking if they had any questions or comments about the presentation. Instead of responding to my questions and engaging with the presentation as the students did in the classroom, none of the Zoom participants responded. In fact, I could not tell if they were even behind the screen, as they did not turn on their camera and refused to do so. There was never a question asked or response that came from the Zoom chat. The silence from the computer chat screen was a constant struggle to keep at-home learners involved in our class. My journal noted the frustrations I had as well as the different strategies I tried to do to engage remote learners in our discussions and reading the play.

In the journal writing process, Shirley Rose, in her essay "All Writers Have More to Learn," says that writing is "a matter of transferring what [writers] know but also learning new things about what works in the present situation" (60). *Learning new things* is key in adapting our teaching in order to engage our students. As I reflected on my daily notes, I knew I needed to switch things around with the remote learners in order for it to "work in the present situation." Asking remote learners questions using the chat function in Zoom wasn't working, so during our first five to ten minutes of class when my in-class learners were working on their grammar, I unplugged the laptop and went out in the hallway. I addressed my three to five remote learners who were in class (on time) and

discussed with them about their day. I wanted to make a personal connection with them to see if I could relate the lesson we would be learning in *Macbeth* to their lives. It didn't always work, but it did improve my relationship with the learners at home when I spent time with them and asked them questions that allowed me to get to know them a little bit more. That said, most of these students I had not met in person, so there wasn't much of a foundation to build on for a productive exchange to take place. By using Rose's idea of trying to transfer what they already knew and being able to be flexible in trying to find what worked and what didn't; however, I felt I was improving their learning experience.

In order for students to stay engaged during a class where we read Shakespeare, I knew it was important for students to each have a part and actively participate in our reading. I quickly found out that when I kept my class together and only a handful of students were reading, most of the others weren't following along or even paying attention. After reading about my frustrations for the first two days in my journal, I decided to change my approach. I divided my class into two sections: one where I led a section and one where my classroom aide (with my notes and lesson plan) led the other. By dividing the students into two groups, most of the students were assigned a part to read. We were in separate rooms to avoid being distracted by the other group. The remote learners were included (and earned the name 'floating head' while in our groups) in the two groups using the breakout feature in Zoom. This strategy allowed them to become more involved most of the time, and students were more comfortable to turn on their camera and participate in our groups. Reading parts was difficult due to the lag time in

the WiFi connection from time to time, but it was nice to see their faces and watch them follow along with our class in the text.

Because I was able to examine my journal during the first week, looking at how frustrated I was over the lack of participation my remote learners had, I feel that I improved engagement for them by creating smaller groups. Self-study can help teachers recognize particular themes or answers of inquiry and articulate them as reflection takes place. In Tom Russell's essay "Can Self-Study Improve Teacher Education?" he describes the process of self- study as "challenging enough to look critically at one's own teaching practices. While the obvious purpose of self-study is improvement, it is even more challenging to make changes and seek evidence that the changes did indeed represent improvement" (4). When veteran teachers are stuck or frustrated in the classroom, it is unequivocally difficult to take an in-depth look at what might need to change. If it can be shown that reflection can improve the classroom experience and a teacher's pedagogical skills, this should lessen a teacher's fear of vulnerability or self-doubt a teacher may experience during the process of journaling and reflecting. Resonating with the importance of reflection, I began to embrace change. My biggest change to the *Macbeth* unit was creating the two groups of students and recognizing that not being in charge of them both, but relinquishing one group to my aide, would increase student engagement. Because I am primarily concerned that the text is comprehended or understood, it was difficult at first to give one group of students to my aide; however, I knew this approach was helpful to the students' involvement, as the students responded and interacted better with each other and the text in smaller groups.

If the students had a choice, they usually requested to read the play with me instead of the classroom aide. That said, for the two groups to work effectively, the students did not know from day to day which instructor would read with them or which students would be in their group. I also made sure that students read with me several times a week so that I could check their understanding and comprehension of the text. I was pleasantly surprised by how well the student groups interacted when I divided them along gender lines. Another surprisingly effective approach was if I instructed a group of shy students who were usually overshadowed by their gregarious counterparts, I discovered that the shy students uncharacteristically took an active role in answering questions and volunteering to read. We even had enough time to cover the same material as the somewhat more extroverted group! My key takeaway from this experience when perusing my journal was to always be open to a new approach and change things as needed, this in turn kept students more interested and less able to predict the next day's lesson/activity. These adjustments require flexibility from a teaching perspective, including being able to change- even in the middle of a lesson- in order to increase student engagement.

Aside from the reading of the text, students kept engaged with a workbook that accompanied the different scenes of the play. I found a workbook on the website "Teachers Pay Teachers" that incorporated a lot of the things that I needed. The workbook had space to interpret famous lines from the play, it kept track of themes and symbols, compared/contrasted characters and settings, summarized scenes using one sentence, and also incorporated a modern twist that the students appreciated. There was

room to doodle a symbol that represented a theme as well as rewrite a conversation in text form. There were fun questions like what modern-day actress would you choose to play the role of Lady Macbeth well and why?

I used this workbook rather than a question/answer study guide format because it helped facilitate the students' discussion where they could work together after a reading section was completed and come up with ideas together. It did such a great job of incorporating the necessary core standards that I needed to cover, as well as including classic quotes from the play, close readings and yet was balanced with fun dialogue, #hashtags and open-ended questions. Looking back over my journal, I found that students discussed the reading critically in their small groups when they had to reflect on the day's passage and they stayed on task while they worked. Their natural discussion was more academic than I could have led.

Teachable Time

Another finding from my reflection was that of teachable time. Each class period has an allocated amount of time given for instruction. As I reflected over my journal, I found that teachable time was dependent on a few things. I have the responsibility of teaching a core curriculum that consists of skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening. While English is a subject that may feel quite overwhelming at times for students, some of the days had more teachable time than others.

Through critical reflection, I gained a clearer understanding of where time was lost and how to make the most of the time available. I realized that most of the time taken

away from class was due to incorporating Zoom and remote learners this year. Invariably the school network had connectivity and software glitches and I had to continually reopen the meeting. Sometimes students emailed to say they couldn't get into the Zoom meeting, and some students had slow internet connections which made it challenging to talk with them in our hallway conversations. The lag between speakers was also difficult if Wi-Fi wasn't working well. There were four occasions where I couldn't get my computer to stay connected to the internet, so I had to email my students from my phone to tell them we were having difficulties connecting and gave them the assignment for the class hour. All of these internet problems took place during the class hour itself, so I had to keep my in-class learners working on something while I was trying to reconnect or send my remote learners an email.

As unstable network connections were causing problems for my remote learners, the time I was spending trying to connect and reconnect, restart my computer, or waiting to add my students to the Zoom meeting was during my face-to-face classroom time. This meant that all my students sitting in class, waiting for class to start, were now off task while I was trying to work around connectivity and software issues. In the first days, when difficulties arose, I would spend 10-15 minutes during classroom time trying to fix the Zoom and connectivity issues while keeping my in-class students engaged. It never really worked well and as problems continued, I found myself spending less time troubleshooting while in class and quickly sent emails to remote learners to work alone as we conducted class. When these issues would arise, I tried connecting with my remote learners either via phone or email to see if they had questions regarding the day's tasks.

These phone calls and emails weren't always answered. In my journal I noted how quickly I learned to move past the internet problems to begin the lesson. If in five minutes I couldn't figure it out, then I just began the class and sent the email at the end of the lesson. When the internet was working fine for me, it was sometimes a problem for my students. My journal had comments like "Vikki wrote an email today saying she couldn't get into my Zoom, but everyone else was there???" and "Matthew said he was kicked out of Zoom and couldn't get back in." I began to wonder if students were being truthful or using it as an excuse to avoid class.

Upon reflection, it is unfortunate and disappointing that remote learners rarely made the extra effort to read or do the worksheet when left alone without their class or me, their teacher, to engage and discuss the assignment together. At the time, there did not seem to be a solution, and so I made an extra effort to contact them at the end of the school day. Their grades reflected their lack of assignments, and unfortunately one student had a zero in the class due to the lack of graded materials. Sadly, this student was just a name on my gallery view of students, the student never turned their camera on to participate in class.

Another aspect of teachable time that stemmed from Zoom was the effort I put into creating chats with the students and asking questions to help them engage. Invariably, whenever I tried to attend to them with questions and wait for a response, I realized it wasn't quick enough for the in-person learners to stay engaged. On rare occasions, a remote student was able to comment on what we were discussing in our groups, but most of the time when I would wait for a response, it was not forthcoming. I

wrote on a few days that I would ask questions in the chat (taking away from my face-to-face class discussion) and waited for two or three strained minutes for a response as I carried our discussion of the same question in class, only to be let down with no one responding.

That said, over the course of time, I noticed how I progressively gave up a bit easier with the remote learners as I ran out of patience to try to engage them. Pulling the laptop into the hallway to have a short discussion with just them (without the classroom broadcasting) I tried to see where they were in the reading and their understanding. As they continued to not respond and not turn on their cameras, I realized how much time I was spending with them while at the same time my class full of students were waiting to start our day together. After threatening with a participation grade, three of the five remote learners started showing their faces and started to interact, but two of them never did. After emails and one-sided chatting on Zoom, I found the time I put in lessened. It is hard to show an eighth grader how important it is to actively participate in their education. The three students who turned on their cameras during our conversations in the hallway took an interest in our class, but their interest faded. Within a few days, they were not turning on their cameras nor responding to questions when asked directly during class.

Another aspect of extra time spent on the students who chose to stay home was connecting with parents: sometimes in the form of a meeting, and other times extra emails or phone calls home checking on student's work. I left the week's packet of work we were covering at the front office, hoping a parent or guardian would come to pick it

up. Extra time spent making those packets would occasionally be wasted since most of them were not picked up. I even went as far as taking work to a student's home in order for her to stay up with the class, but it didn't make much of an improvement.

As stated earlier, students engaged more when they participated but the remote learners had a difficult time participating in the reading of the play. When looking at teachable time, there is a natural flow or cadence that occurs when reading a play aloud in class. This flow includes a real-time discussion about lines and impactful word selections that Shakespeare uses to bring a play and its characters to life. I found that this flow and teachable time was disrupted when I specifically asked my remote learners to be a part of the group's reading and assigned them a part. There was such a delay in waiting for them to read their part that sometimes consisted of just a few words that it took away from the play as a whole. I watched time ticking away as I asked the students if they knew where we were in the reading and if they wanted someone else to read their line for them.

Through reflective journaling, I was able to see the common threads of where my time was lost, mostly through teaching both in-class students as well as remote learners. I also realized my teachable time was intense and inspiring with students actively excited about our reading and fully engaged in a discussion. I adapted to situations where wasted minutes ticked by to troubleshoot computer problems and made more informed decisions about where I wanted to spend my time, thereby acting upon my findings to better help student learning. Going back to Kara Taczak's definition of reflective writing, it is a deliberate action that reframes situations. I looked at my journals and recognized a

change was needed and opened up to other aspects that needed revisions when the flow

of the classroom ceased. When studying my journal, I was aware of teachable time that

was being lost, and I decided to change and give more time to the student engagement

within my classroom to help them find the depths and joys within Shakespeare's play.

Emotion

I realized my journal was more than just a place to keep track of daily lessons and

feedback, it also coincided with being able to vent frustrations without articulating them

directly to my students or parents. This is a significant takeaway that journaling offers

focusing on the benefits of the act of journaling being more than just critical reflection.

Other benefits may include (a) physical written record of how a lesson went and (b) a

place to vent frustrations and relieve stress (Greiman and Covington). I found that my

journal definitely had sections where I was able to work through my concerns and

annoyances as I wrote, rather than having it impact my teaching and relationships. It was

a place where I could write about the irritations I had at a specific time. It was also

helpful to have a physical journal to continually study, a finding that resonated with my

own journal. "Journal writing [w]as a means to express feelings and relieve stress…

somewhere to complain about things" (Greiman and Covington). This was emulated in

my own writings as I found countless situations where my journal became reminiscent of

the journal I had kept as an emotional teenager. There were sections that showed how

well a lesson went and conversely some of the draining days where frustration won. From

comments about my remote learners, "Zoomers don't want to read a part and hardly

participate when asked to do so", "Called Sarah today because stuff isn't turned in", and "Huge learning gap! I've tried to get them to read parts and they won't participate" to my fairly positive comments regarding my face-to-face students of "they really loved the viewing of it-Folgers" and "students loved splitting into groups today and collaborated well with their workbook questions" along with "I split groups into boys and girls and it worked well!"

I found my daily notes consisted of quick phrases and comments so I could remember the important things and expanded those concepts on the weekly reflections. Over the course of the unit, which consisted of eight weeks, I noticed that my journal included mostly negative comments for the first two or three weeks when I spoke about my remote learners. I had already been teaching to both types of learners since the beginning of the school year; however, this was the first time I was writing and keeping track of my day and I felt that being able to verbalize and articulate my situation allowed me to assert my frustrations on paper. Students who chose the option to attend school at home rarely turned on their cameras or responded in chat, and when I graded their work it was far below the standard of what the class was achieving-if they turned anything in at all. I think I repressed how I felt, since I viewed it as unprofessional to unload these irritations and grievances to my aide or my principal, and I finally had a place to 'discuss' my frustrations in the form of a journal.

After finding this negative pattern, I took a step back, discerning *why* I got so frustrated and moved into wanting to see *how* I could connect with this group of students. That is when I shifted my class around into the different groups and talked with my

remote learners without the class as an audience in the hallway with the laptop to find out how they were doing. In my journal for the day, I implemented these changes, I wrote, "They responded to questions!" and "They showed their faces to let me know they were there when I asked them".

As a class, we kept track of different themes from the play, and at the end of the unit, I asked students to analyze one of their own themes in a paper. I navigate the classroom well during writing classes and peruse their paragraphs or read over their shoulders, commenting on "great word here" or "why do you think…" By this time, my remote learners were submitting their first and second paragraphs to me via Canvas, and I would talk with them individually in breakout groups (one per group) to discuss their paragraphs. Their cameras were on, and they were engaged in conversation as to their paper topic. I wrote, "I was able to talk with them via Zoom after they sent over their essay starts. Really productive!" Not only was I able to see progress in their work, but they were engaging and interacting in class.

By journaling each day, I allowed myself to express emotions along with the lessons and engagement in class and I was able to target common patterns and threads of my written dialogue to see that I needed to work with my remote learners. I needed to strengthen the fragile relationship I had with those five students and put more effort into understanding things from their perspective and help them feel like they were a part of the class and that I cared for them. Granted, I didn't reach all of them; I had one student who never did anything for this class and whose name was the only thing I saw. Another student was in and out of detention and hardly attended our Zoom class, but for three of

the five, I think I helped them appreciate *Macbeth* and become an active participant in their learning.

Conclusion

Brookfield states, "Critical reflection is not a remedial tool; it's a stance of permanent inquiry" (80). A teacher can use journaling as a way to inquire about the features of teaching and become the teacher learner. I've found that I'm more of a learner than I have ever been as I continue to research, journal, and prepare for daily lessons. As teachers develop their teaching identity, it is critical to reflect on the many facets of teaching to see what type of a teacher they aim to be, "our sense of who we are as teachers in an examined reality" (Brookfield 81). It is through journaling and reflection that purposeful actions are made. The idiom "Knowledge is power" rings true; the more we as teachers know about ourselves, our students, the curriculum, and our teaching relationships with both students and colleagues, the more in-tune we are with our teaching identity and can gauge the classroom successfully. Our students can become more confident when we are able to centralize our teaching to best practices, and critical reflection allows us to do that. We can utilize journal responses to articulate what is needed and then investigate opportunities to maximize student understanding and growth. It keeps our classroom engaged instead of falling into the trap of mundane monotonous lessons throughout the years or unhelpful practices in unprecedented years. The more we can connect with our students, the more they're willing to learn. As Ritchie and Wilson write, "These caring relationships suggest, instead, that learning occurs in complex self-

other relationships, not formal, bureaucratically defined or authorized relationships" (85).
Through journaling and reflection, I learned that I needed to build a relationship with my
at-home learners and I tried to connect with them, not with a demanding, authoritative
voice but with inquiries as to how they were doing. Trying to see common ground with
their lives and my own or *Macbeth's* characters allowed me to make stronger impacts in
their learning.

Through journaling, I was able to inquire about the areas in my teaching that
needed improvement as well as reflect on successes. If more teachers had an open mind
to journaling and reflection as part of their daily routine, I truly believe more teachers
would stay in the career and become more invested in their work. Teaching is a highly
stressful job where juggling different tasks is commonplace, but writing down
frustrations and accomplishments in a journal can help steady the roller coaster of
emotions and can allow you to slow down to try and figure out the why.

I encourage all teachers to use this process of journaling, reflection, and self-study
to continue to improve their teaching instruction. Through this process, veteran teachers
can become adaptive to their classroom needs, finding the courage to break out of routine
structures and embrace the changes that continually occur through school learning. This
creates a new understanding of their teaching pedagogy and allows them to make
meaningful, informed actions to increase student learning and relationships within the
classroom.

It is through contemplation of inquiry where connections from prior experiences
and knowledge bring about new findings with innovative scholarship. Since little is found

in the genre of reflection and self-study for veteran teachers, teachers could articulate

their own insights and add their content to the growing discipline.

WORKS CITED:

Bazerman, Charles. "Writing Speaks to Situations through Recognizable Forms." *Naming*

    What We Know: Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies, edited by Linda Adler-

    Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State University, 2015, pp. 35-37.

Berry, Amanda and John Loughran. "Developing an Understanding of Learning to Teach

    in Teacher Education." *Improving Teacher Education Practices Through*

    Self-Study, edited by John Loughran and Tom Russell, RoutledgeFalmer, 2002,

    pp. 10-29.

Brookfield, Stephen D. *Becoming a Critically Reflective Teacher.* 2nd ed., Jossey-Bass,

    2016.

Greiman, Bradley C. and Holly K. Covington. "Reflective Thinking and Journal Writing:

    Examining Student Teachers' Perceptions of Preferred Reflective Modality,

    Journal Writing Outcomes, and Journal Structure." *Career and Technical*

    Education Research. Vol. 32, no. 2, 2007, pp.115-139.

"Reflection." def. N.2. *Google*. 2021, Accessed 21

    July 2021.

Ritchie, Joy S. and David E. Wilson. *Teacher Narrative as Critical Inquiry: Rewriting*

the

    Script. Teachers College Press, 2000.

Rose, Shirley. "All Writers have More to Learn." *Naming What We Know: Threshold*

    Concepts of Writing Studies, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth

    Wardle, Utah State University, 2015, pp. 59-61.

Russell, Tom. "Can Self-Study Improve Teacher Education?" *Improving Teacher*

Education Practices Through Self-Study, edited by John Loughran and Tom

Russell, RoutledgeFalmer, 2002, pp. 3-9.

Taczak, Kara. "Reflection is Critical for Writers' Development." *Naming What We*

Know:

Threshold Concepts of Writing Studies, edited by Linda Adler-Kassner and

Elizabeth Wardle, Utah State University, 2015, pp. 78-81.

Dear Teachers:

This document can be a tool to help you use journaling as a reflective practice. The tool includes two parts: a pacing guide and a chart for observational notes. The pacing guide allows a teacher to prepare a rough schedule of what he/she would like to cover for the upcoming week. The components can change; for instance, in my lessons, I separated my grammar lessons that I used to start each class from my lessons on the text of *Macbeth*. Within the lesson section, I kept track of where I wanted to be at the end of each class with reference of the act, scene, and line. I also wrote down if we were working on questions or watching the play. It is a quick reference to stay on track as well as one of reflection where one can jot down notes about a class's pace, allowing a teacher to make adjustments the next time the unit was taught.

The second part is a daily chart that assists in a quick journaling of how the class hour went, so reflective practice is easier at the end of the day or week. It is a place to keep track of the different aspects in teaching, quickly jotting down the lesson feedback and student interactions from the class period. This can be a concrete document articulating the observations within the hour that could offer context when analyzing the different days at the end of a school week. This reflective action allows for movement of skills or changes within a classroom when necessary. Both documents are tools for reflection and can develop sustained thinking where teaching pedagogy surfaces and informed actions occur.

Both parts became instrumental for me in finding better ways to teach while making the effort to actively, critically reflect on being a teacher and the takeaways my students took out of the unit. It is adaptable to different lessons and their segments.

Pacing Guide

Week #, Day #	Instruction
Week 1	
Day 1	
Day 2	
Day 3	
Day 4	
Day 5	
Week 2	
Day 6	
Day 7	
Day 8	
Day 9	
Day 10	
Week 3	
Day 11	
Day 12	
Day 13	
Day 14	
Day 15	
(continued)	

Example From My Pacing Guide

Week	Grammar	Lesson
Day 1	Grammar unit 5: semicolons. Introduce them.	Introduce James I and Shakepeare's time. (Guest presentation for witches and England)
Day 2	Work on worksheet semicolons/colons	Students go over an aspect of Elizabethan life ready to present it in partners to the class.
Day 3	Continue with colons/ semicolons	Continue with their research and slide show.
Day 4	Turn in worksheet for colons/ semicolons	Students begin their presentations

Week 2		
Day 5	Punctuation/edit marks	Finish presentations- Go over packet of Macbeth and discuss a little about it. Go over scenarios (Green book guide) and famous lines students can try to decode.
Day 6	continue punct. edit	Read the opening scene (Act I Scene I) and show the different versions of it. Discuss why there are so many interpretations. Journal: which did they like most and why?
Day 7	continue punct. edit	Read Act I Scene 2 and have students work in their workbooks. Watch the Folger and two river company through the first two scenes of the play.
Day 8	Turn in wksht punct/edit	Catch up day

Chart for Teaching Notes

Date: _____ Student Count: _____		Holiday coming up: Y/N	Adjusted schedule: Y/N
Things that worked	**Didn't work**	**I'm unsure about**	**Questions/concerns**
Engagement:			
Involving remote learners:			
Lesson plan:			
Changes to lesson:			