

## **Journal writing as an active learning tool in history education**

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This paper reports and reflects on the use of journal writing to engage higher education students in active learning processes in history education programmes at The University of the West Indies, Mona, Jamaica. Beginning in the first semester of the academic year 2008-2009, journal writing was systematically included both as an on-going teaching/learning tool as well as a form of assessment in two history education programmes. The inclusion of this teaching/learning and assessment tool required students to purposely document, reflect on and evaluate their learning experiences. From a selection of journal writings done by students and their responses to open-ended questionnaire items, data were obtained on the usefulness of journal writing as a teaching/learning and assessment tool and in promoting active learning in history education. The main findings of this investigation showed that journal writing does facilitate students' engagement in reflecting on their early pre-teacher education beliefs about teaching. Journal writing also allows for active engagement in their learning.

**Key words:** history, higher education, journal writing, active learning.

### **Introduction**

Since the 2004-2005 academic year, journal writing has been used in the history education programmes at The University of the West Indies, Mona campus as an informal writing activity and as a formal assessment tool especially in the methods and field based courses. This form of teaching/learning and assessment tool is considered especially important in the pedagogical preparation of student teachers. At the same time, journal writing is regarded as a useful tool in enabling students to articulate and reflect on previously held and developing views about teaching as they progress through their teacher education courses, including their field experiences, and learn how to teach. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on the use of journal writing as a teaching/learning and assessment tool to promote students' active involvement in their own learning.

Journal writing as a teaching/learning and assessment tool has grown increasingly popular in tertiary education, more so in teacher education programmes in universities and colleges. Stevens and Cooper (2009) define a journal as a "sequential, dated chronicle of events and ideas, which includes the personal responses and reflections of the writer (or writers) on those events and ideas" (p.5). A number of authors (Reagan, Case & Brubacher, 2000; Doyle, 2008)

describe journals as a written form of expression, that provide an avenue through which learning can be facilitated while increasing the journal keeper's ability to develop higher order skills. Journal writing is increasingly used in teacher education programmes for these reasons since they have been found to be useful in helping student-teachers to reflect on their development as teachers while helping them to clarify the pre-existing beliefs they hold about teaching which can act as barriers to learning.

### **Types and forms of journal writing in teacher education**

Among the types of journals or journal formats which are currently used in educational settings are learning journals, diaries, autobiographies, professional journals, interactive reading logs and electronic journals (Hiemstra, in Stevens & Cooper, 2009). Not only are there several types of journal, journaling itself can take a variety of forms such as being unstructured or structured. The nature of an unstructured journal however is not clear cut since, as Moon (2006) explains, the journal does conform to some expectation by those designing journal writing activities when used in a formal learning situation. The more structured format, however, is based on the purpose the journal writing will serve. In this case the journals can take the form of autobiographical, double entry writing which involves the recording of experience in descriptive form in one column and the reflection and drawing of conclusion on the original description in the corresponding column some time later. Moon (2006) also described ways in which journals can be structured. Such structure is provided when journals are given as exercises, when questions are used to generate responses or more specifically when "A sequence of questions provides prompts that guide the learner to cover particular topics or the appropriate areas of the material" (p.53). Another way in which the journal can be structured is when it is used to accompany other learning. In this case, it is part of a programme of learning as in a field placement or is used to facilitate students' engagement in reflecting on specific course reading or on the content of lectures or seminars.

In view of the ways in which journal writing can be used in teaching/ learning and assessment, it could be assumed that this form of writing is common place in teacher education programmes in a general sense and across different cultural settings. This, however, seems not to be the case, for Stevens and Cooper (2009) noted that despite being around for over 30 years in American colleges and universities, journals as teaching and learning tools remain underused. While this observation might ring true for the American universities and the academic programmes within them, journal writings is central to teacher education programmes where the reflective practitioner model of teacher education is embraced. In these programmes, such as those based in the School of Education, Mona, reflective practice defines the approach taken to the preparation of teachers who are introduced to the concept of reflecting purposefully on their beliefs about

teaching and their experiences of teaching in their field placements. This reflection is done through writing.

Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) classify journal writing as a form of autobiographical writing. This form of journal writing is used to help student teachers to construct their personal biographies of learning about teaching beginning with their early preconceptions about teaching. Early preconceptions about what teaching is, are formed as a part of the informal socialisation into teaching when students observe and imitate teachers and develop certain ideas about what teaching is. Lortie (1977) has described this phase of prospective teachers' socialisation into teaching as the 'apprenticeship of observation.' It is from this 'apprenticeship of observation' that students who later become teachers will pick up ideas about what teaching is about. Students' knowledge about teaching formed in this way has limitations, yet what they learn at this stage can be a powerful influence on their views of teaching. It is for this reason that journal writing can be a powerful tool for allowing student teachers to articulate their views of teaching so that these can be examined and subsequently modified, strengthened or discarded.

To begin the process of journal writing Holly (1989) offered some useful starting points which resonated with how Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) have applied them in their work with students. Thus Holly (1989, p.95) suggested that the writing be done in response to questions such as:

- Why did you become a teacher?
- When and how did you decide?
- What and who influenced you?
- As you look back, possibly to your first years of schooling, what feelings and images remain?
- Which teachers do you remember, and why do you remember them?

These questions are useful starting points for student teachers to commence their journal writing, especially in getting them to consciously consider the route they took into teaching and the deeply held, often times simplistic, views they have formed about teaching through their long observation of it.

### **Purposes and benefits of journal writing**

For journal writing to have established itself within teacher preparation programmes at The University of the West Indies, Mona in a general sense would suggest that its purposes are in congruence with the philosophical underpinning of the reflective practitioner model of teacher education. This model has as its basic premise the development of teachers who can think purposefully about their practice, document their thinking and use this documentation as a basis for future actions. This requirement is well suited to journal use since among the purposes of journal writing are those which allow students to record their experiences; to facilitate learning from experience; to develop critical thinking skills and/or a questioning

attitude; to increase active involvement in and ownership of learning, and to enhance reflective practice (Moon, 2006). In addition to these purposes which are aligned with the development of reflective teachers, Stevens and Cooper (2009), citing Boud (2001), Fulwiler (1987), and Moon (2006), assert that journaling is an effective way for students to accomplish key learning objectives. Moon's (2006) discussion of journal writing also shows how this activity can enhance learning; however she noted that though journal writing enhances conditions favourable for learning it requires a considerable investment of time. This need for time arises mainly because journal writing actually slows down the pace of learning since it requires students to stop and think in order to write. Despite threats such as this to the viability if not sustenance of journal writing, it does allow students to take more ownership of their learning by providing a focus for them to order their thinking.

To provide evidence of the effectiveness of journal writing in improving students' ability to learn about their own learning process or to engage in metacognition, Moon (2006) drew on research conducted by McCrindle and Christensen (1995) which compared the writing abilities of two groups of students who had different experiences with writing activities prior to sitting their class examination. One group was allowed to keep a journal and reflect on the nature of their learning in laboratory classes, while the other group wrote a scientific report without engaging in journal writing. The results showed that those who engaged in journal writing generally performed better in the class examination than the group who wrote the report only. The journal writers displayed knowledge which was of better quality and was better structured. McCrindle and Christensen therefore concluded that "The provision of opportunities to deliberately reflect on their own learning can constitute a significant instructional innovation for tertiary students" (in Moon, 2006, p.32). Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991), Knowles, Cole and Presswood (1994) and Nilson (2003) argued that journal writing is a powerful tool for recording personal reactions to schools, classrooms, teachers and students. As such journal writing provides the opportunity for students to write down their intellectual and emotional reactions to lectures, discussions, [and] readings" (Nilson, 2003, p.142). It is significant to note that journal writing promotes active learning in that it "helps students to keep up with the course as well as to read and listen actively" (p.143).

### **Active learning in higher education**

Bonwell and Eison (1991) observed that the traditional lecture remains dominant in college and university classrooms and that the phrase 'active learning' is used based on an intuitive understanding of the term rather than a common definition. As a result of this, there is a tendency on the part of faculty to assert that "all learning is inherently active and that students are therefore actively involved while listening to formal presentations in the classroom" (p.1). Bonwell and Eison (1991) also suggest that students "must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks as analysis, synthesis and evaluation" and that "strategies promoting active learning be defined

as instructional activities involving students in doing things and thinking about what they are doing” (p.1). Lorenzen (2003) concurred with the view expressed by Bonwell and Eison when he stated that “Active learning is a method of educating students that allows them to participate in class” (p.1). He also noted that active learning “takes them beyond the role of passive listener and note taker and allows the students to take some direction and initiative during the class” (Lorenzen, 2003, p.1).

Prince (2004) provided another perspective arguing that active learning has served to polarise faculty. That is, while some faculty search “for alternatives to traditional teaching methods”, others have remained sceptical regarding “active learning as another in a long line of educational fads” (p.1). It is against this background that Prince defined active learning as “any instructional method that engages students in the learning process” by requiring them to “do meaningful learning activities and think about what they are doing” (p.1). In responding to the question, ‘Does active learning work?’ Michael (2006) drew on evidence from cognitive science and educational psychology which suggests that active learning takes place under certain conditions. When students are involved in constructing their own meaning for example, some mental activities are involved. Learning of fact (declarative knowledge) and learning to do something (procedural knowledge) involve different types of learning. It stands to reason therefore that for students to truly learn a subject both types of learning must be involved. This means that for students to learn *how* they must be provided with the “opportunities to practice the needed skills and receive feedback about their performance” (Michael, 2006, p.160). Michael asserted further that “Implementing these newer approaches to teaching requires the teacher to become a learner” (p.164). Teachers must be willing to implement approaches to foster active learning in a meaningful and well-planned way in order to achieve the intended objectives of engaging students actively in the teaching-learning process.

### **Teaching/learning strategies that promote active learning in history education**

The use of active learning strategies in history education is not without challenges. One such challenge is the availability of quality instructional time to successfully and consistently implement these strategies especially in semesterised programmes. It seems that history educators have an additional challenge in employing active learning strategies in a discipline that has traditionally been regarded as dull - primarily due to its method of teaching rather than the content of that teaching. Over four decades ago, Mary Price (1968) writing out of England had warned of the possible dangers that history as a discipline faced in being removed from the school curriculum if its method of instruction did not change. The developments which followed in the introduction of a number of initiatives to improve instruction in history were related not just to Price’s warning but also to the general curriculum reforms which were taking place at the time. The chief element in these series of reforms was the emphasis that was to be placed on the teaching of subjects in

accordance with how those subjects were studied by their practitioners. Thus history teaching for instance, was expected to be approached in keeping with the method of work used by historians. This implied active learning but as Booth (2003) argued “What happens in class provides students with their most direct insight into what is really valued as opposed to what is declared to be important” (p.87). It stands to reason, that if student teachers are to practise the use of active learning methods in their history classrooms, teacher educators must model the use of these methods for prospective teachers (Booth, 2003).

Active learning is promoted by a variety of techniques. These include “small group discussion, role playing, hands-on projects, and teacher driven questioning. The goal is to bring students into the process of their own education” (Lorenzen, 2003, p.1). Nilson (2003) contended that “The best methods permit learning by doing, by acting out, by experiencing first hand, or by thinking through to realization” (p.87). Though active learning is promoted by instructional strategies such as discussion and experiential learning activities such as role playing and simulations, the focus here is on writing activities. In this regard, Nilson (2003) identified writing as an essential activity for promoting learning. She identified a number of reasons, grounded in research, why students should be given the opportunity to write. She underscored these reasons by noting that writing activities have proven instructional value. In her discussion of the reasons for using in-class or homework related writing, Nilson noted that writing helps students learn the material better and retain it longer. Writing, she stated, enables students to think actively about the material, helps college tutors find out quickly what students are learning or not learning and provide them with the opportunity “to learn about themselves – their feelings, values, cognitive processes, and their learning strengths and weaknesses” (Nilson, 2003, p.141).

The need to enliven the teaching of history and to cater to the different learning styles and needs of students has not been lost on the professionals who teach, research and write about history as a whole. Since the ‘new history’ movement of the 1970’s, the teaching of history was guided by an established philosophy that students were to ‘do’ rather than ‘receive’ history. Drake and Nelson (2005) reinforced this sentiment when they wrote that “History teachers should know about the discipline of history and know how to engage their students in the “doing of history” (p.9). Receiving history means little active involvement since students are merely listening and taking notes which they will study for examination purposes. Doing history on the other hand, means engaging actively in finding answers to historical questions by engaging in the type of thinking that historians engage in when they work with historical sources in locating, analysing and evaluating them and writing up their interpretations.

Writing, as the end product of historians’ investigation, is an important feature of history teaching and learning, it is the chief means by which historians communicate their findings and the main means through which students of history acquire their knowledge of history. This fact is borne out by Haydn, Arthur and Hunt (2001) when they state that of “the range of activities, which take place in

the learning of history, writing is one of the most important and, at times, the least popular among pupils” (p.83).

There seems, then, to be enough justification for the use of journals in the history classroom since journal writing will likely satisfy three basic writing principles: that writing is thinking; that the practice of writing builds fluency and motivation to write, and that students will value journal writing when it is fully integrated into the course objectives (Stevens and Cooper, 2009). Journal writing can therefore be used to activate prior learning before the start of a lesson, to reflect on what was learnt and what was not so well understood at the end of a topic so that teachers can gauge students’ understanding of the topic. Teachers can use journal writing activities for students to develop their thoughts about an area of interest to be investigated based on a topic done in class and for which they will write extended essays. Journal writing can also be gainfully employed in getting students to respond to differences in historical accounts. It is for these reasons that prospective teachers should learn how to employ journal writing to reflect on historical events and to evaluate their learning after each lesson.

This paper addresses three main questions:

- 1) How does journal writing as a teaching/learning and assessment tool promote students’ reflection on their autobiographical selves and their understanding of course content?
- 2) What are students’ views of active learning and do they believe they have engaged in active learning in their history education?
- 3) How does the use of journal writing as a teaching/learning and assessment tool foster active learning in higher education?

### **Methodology**

The study is qualitative in orientation and employs a small scale practitioner action research design. This type of research is a form of applied research done by professionals interested in improving aspects of their practice or to document innovations introduced to gauge the effectiveness of the innovation and to make adjustments for the next cycle of work. Gay and Airasian (2000) view action research as a type of practitioner research which they argue is used to improve the practitioner’s practice where the ‘action’ implies doing something about one’s practice. With this understanding in mind, the study was aimed at examining the effectiveness of journal writing as a teaching/learning and assessment tool in the history education programmes within the context of higher education.

As a small scale action research study, this investigation was confined to a single context and involved students who were registered in the first semester of the 2008-2009 academic year. Data for the study were derived from samples of students’ work as well as their responses to an open ended questionnaire. The data were analysed by examining a sample of work from the different activities which

were done in the course and organized according to what students said of each piece with regard to the learning which it involved for them. The research was conducted within the confines of history education programmes for both undergraduate and postgraduate students. These programmes are based on the reflective practitioner model of teacher education. Student teachers are prepared to be reflective in their work and to engage in action research as a means of improving their current and future practice. Journal writing and active learning are therefore strongly promoted within and across these programmes.

### *The participants*

The students in this study were drawn from three separate teacher education cohorts. One group consisted of college educated in-service teachers who were pursuing the two-year Bachelor of Education programme. Another group consisted of pre-service student teachers who entered from sixth forms or community colleges with advanced level qualifications and who were enrolled in the three-year Bachelor of Education programme. The third group of students was made up of postgraduate students pursuing the Diploma in Education. The student-teachers belonging to the Diploma in Education programme are sometimes experienced teachers but sometimes come directly from a degree programme. The total number of students registered was 21; eight from the two-year B.Ed, eight from the three-year B.Ed and four students from the postgraduate diploma programme. The students were overwhelmingly female, with only one male participant.

### *Instrumentation*

Data for this research were collected from students' work samples and a questionnaire. Samples of students' journal writings provided data on how students engage in reflective journaling and the recording of their learning from independent reading and the data also obtained from the questionnaires sought students' views on journal writing and active learning. The questionnaire items solicited data from students such as their personal definitions of active learning and their comments on how the use of journal writing allowed them to engage in active learning. Not all the students who had taken the course were able to respond to the questionnaires. Of the total number of students who had taken the course only ten questionnaires were returned.

### *Data analysis*

Data analysis themes were derived from both a *priori* and a *posteriori* coding since some were predetermined based on the items used in the questionnaire while some emerged from students responses to both the journal writing tasks and from their responses to the questionnaire items. Johnson and Christensen (2000) explain that *a priori* codes are those that are developed before or at the very beginning of a research study or they may be established before data collection based on their relevance to the research questions. More typically in qualitative type investigation

is the inductive generation of codes arising from the data during the analytic process. As such the codes which are arrived at inductively are referred to as *a posteriori* codes and represent the theory which “emerges’ as the data collection progresses and is firmly ‘grounded’ in it, and derived from it” (Wellington, 2000, p.29).

The themes which were developed from the analysis of both the journal writing tasks and the questionnaire included: (a) *early views on teaching*, (b) *admirable qualities of former teachers*, (c) *qualities disliked in former teachers*, (d) *influence of former teachers on personal teaching styles*, (e) *changes in views on teaching*, (f) *meaning of active learning*, (g) *active learning strategies*, and (h) *benefits of active learning*. These themes were grouped into two main categories; the role of experiences on views of teaching to subsume themes *a* to *e*, and active learning in higher education to subsume themes *f* to *h*.

#### *Ethical procedures*

Conducting practitioner research invariably means the involvement of students. As a form of insider research, practitioners do not have to deal with matters of entry and access in the same way that an outsider conducting research would need to. It is for this very reason that the ease of access to students as research participants should not be taken for granted since it can give rise to ethical dilemmas if students feel pressured to participate or if the practitioner-researcher makes unauthorised use of students’ work. In view of the purposeful nature of this investigation, students were verbally informed of the intent to track their experiences in engaging in journal writing activities through their informal journaling of their daily class sessions and their written work.

Students were provided with some orientation to journal writing through a teaching session and reading materials which both outlined the purposes and benefits of journal writing before they were required to engage in journal writing. The readings had the additional benefit of providing samples of journal writing by teacher education students that they could relate to. Their journal writing task was designed to assess the extent to which they were able to use journal writing to ‘discover’ their unstated assumptions and beliefs about teaching, the sources of these beliefs and the extent to which they experienced the benefits of journal writing as expressed in the literature.

Attention to ethical issues in the conduct of practitioner research becomes important when the roles of the practitioner and researcher are in danger of becoming blurred. In the case of higher education, students are at the age where they can freely give their consent to have their work used as evidence in a research project or to respond to a questionnaire administered. Students were made aware of the possibilities of their work being used for illustrative purposes either with future students, for conference presentation or for publication. The real names of the students in question were not used but a general acknowledgement given

in identifying the cohort from which the participants were drawn as done in my explanation of the context of the study.

### **Presentation and discussion of data**

This section of the paper presents and discusses the findings from the analysis of the journal writing tasks based on samples of students' work and their responses to the open ended questionnaire. The findings are presented in keeping with the three research questions which this paper set out to address.

#### ***Research question 1: How does journal writing as a teaching/learning and assessment tool promote students' reflection on their autobiographical selves?***

In keeping with the empirically tested claim that students of teaching, take into their preparation programme, pre-existing beliefs about teaching which can act as barriers to learning, the journal writing assessment task provided students with the opportunity to articulate their early experience of teaching which revealed some positive and negative experiences as the entries below attest. The views of two students, Sandy and Kellie are used primarily because they exemplified the general views held by most students about their early experiences but also because through their writings they demonstrated that they understood fully how to reflect on their early experiences and to attempt to pinpoint the source of their beliefs about teaching.

Sandy and Kellie on their experiences of teaching:

*As a teacher I realized that my early years of teaching were a reflection of some of what the two high school teachers of whom I have vivid memories [,] use to do. During my years ... I found myself modelling the same type of behaviour in the classroom by reading from textbooks and giving a lot of notes... I just could not see teaching and learning in any other light than to give the students information that they are expected to take and reproduce in exactly the same words that it was given. (Sandy)*

*...Despite my boredom and wretched confusion at times, I never failed a history test or examination. This led me to believe that despite the method used by the teacher, once the students had the information at hand they would learn. I also developed the view that teaching was easy, believing that all teachers had to do was read their textbooks, write down the information found, come to class and present it to the students in a logical manner.*

*.... I entered the classroom with the same view of teaching and learning that I had left high school with and as a teacher of history began imitating my high school teacher. However, I realized that although I was able to teach a few students through chalk and talk, many remained outside my grasp. (Kellie)*

It is evident from Sandy's account that she had experiences of a specific model of teaching – the transmission model - on which she based her own teaching. Perhaps if she had not consciously reflected on her learning experiences as the journal writing task allowed her to do, she would not have realised that she was perpetuating a model of teaching to which she was exposed. She also came to see teaching as something done by the teacher to the students. Kellie also came away with a similar view of teaching but thought in addition that it was an easy job based on the obvious tasks that teachers performed in front of the class. The apprenticeship of observation is limited in that it fails to provide student-observers with other aspects of teaching such as the preparation and complex web of knowledge which teachers carry to the task (Lortie, 1977).

In the two extracts below Sandy and Kellie described the qualities they admired in their former teachers:

*The qualities that I admired most in my [English] teacher were the strong motivational force that she possesses. She executed her duties in an impartial way. She tried to bring out the best in all her students. She never demoralized any of her students. She also knew her subject area well. (Sandy)*

*...I was awed by my history teacher's unlimited knowledge and I wondered if I would ever be able to have such command of the information as she did. The methods she used to disseminate information were lecture and dictation, but her main method was dictation... Although I admired my teacher's knowledge I found her method of dictation to be very boring and tiring at times, especially when I was unable to see the relevance of certain aspects of the syllabus. (Kellie)*

The ability to admire former teachers but also to analyse the effectiveness of their approach to teaching is one way in which journal writing allows the journal keeper to learn from experience by reflecting on those experiences. It is likely that the ability to see the qualities which motivated Sandy to learn might be used by her to motivate her students. At the same time shortcomings identified can be looked at dispassionately as in the case of Kellie to inform her future teaching practices with respect to the overuse of any one method of teaching.

Sandy provided this description of the quality she disliked in a former teacher. It seems that this experience overshadowed those of other teachers because of the disposition that the teacher displayed:

*The teacher I disliked was my English Literature teacher. She was a very insulting and uncaring teacher... As a student I never knew about intrinsic motivation. Therefore whenever my teacher wasn't a motivator, I would not do very well in that subject...I do not pick up new concepts very fast. My English teacher understood me very well but my Literature teacher did not. (Sandy)*

The purpose of getting student teachers to articulate views about teachers who stood out for them is to allow them to be aware of qualities which they seek to perpetuate and improve on and those which they need to discard. Journal writing as Holly (1989) explained tends to be therapeutic whether or not it is intended to be so. It allows the journal writer to 'exhale' and to articulate views hitherto unarticulated. This therapeutic aspect of journal writing can be the basis for personal and professional growth.

These next extracts document the changes which took place in Sandy's and Kellie's views of teaching based on journal writing activities done in the course:

*Being a current student at the University, and especially since I have started this course I have been seeing teaching and learning in a different light. Going back into the classroom now I have been empowered to do better. Learning about the different learning theories and their implications for teaching, and also the effects of early socialization, I am compelled to reflect on my own life as a teacher. Doing an auto critique allowed me to see clearly my own practice in terms of my weaknesses and strength. (Sandy)*

*This course of study that I have embarked on has truly been an eye opener for me. No longer do I hold the view that teaching is an easy vocation, but I now understand as Lortie (1975) states, that I was unable to make an informed assessment of the profession due to my limited empathetic capacity as a student. I have learnt the importance of planning for learning, as each student is different and thus learns differently, and at different paces... The teacher must also make the subject interesting for students which can only be achieved as Palmer (1998) notes through the teacher's ability to connect self to subject and students. Make allowances for discussions, do not view students as blank slates, be vulnerable, something that I now understand after reading Palmer's chapter (1998) that my history teacher in high school was afraid to do. (Kellie)*

Sandy's account is illustrative of how journal writing allows student teachers to reflect on their learning and how this learning will be carried out in the classroom including the habit of reflecting itself. On the other hand, Kellie's account informed by the course readings provides some support for the argument of teacher education researchers such as Knowles and Holt-Reynolds (1991) that journal writing has value and potential. In this case its value is in helping students to recognise the unarticulated views they carry into teacher education about teaching while providing the opportunity within the context of teacher education for these views to be surfaced, interrogated and be informed or discarded. The entries above illustrate how the use of journal writing enabled the student teachers to understand the relationship between beliefs about teaching; what informed those beliefs, and the likelihood that these beliefs can influence their future classroom practices. The entries are typical of the reflective journal responses that students gave.

Another aspect of journal writing included getting students to reflect on, and respond to, literature. The response below provides evidence of how the assigned reading helped students to reflect on what they understood from the reading and the impact it made on them:

*The chief impact that Palmer's article has had on me, in particular, is that in order to be a good teacher, one must have a strong sense of identity which is consistent inside and outside of the classroom. A good teacher possesses an undivided 'self'. The teacher whom the students observe in the classroom teaching in front of them can have profound impacts on them. However, the 'teaching' which they receive has a far greater impact when it is done by the real person – the teacher at heart, with a sound identity and integrity – and not just by a face or mask put on to meet the students. Good teachers are not actors, as many of my co-workers believe; but are just simply being themselves when they stand in the classroom. (Nadine)*

In this entry, Nadine comments on her teaching context which she often did during the sessions. Nadine struggled to comprehend the nature of her teaching context in relation to what she was then learning about teaching given the fact that she was then teaching without professional certification. The learning experience caused her to be very critical of her colleagues and the ways in which they treated the whole business of instruction.

Students not only cited benefits mentioned in the literature, they were also able to relate some of these to their own experiences. Two diploma students - one female and one male - who were both full time teachers and part time students showed how they infused journal writing into their professional lives and the benefits they experienced:

*The benefits of keeping a personal journal are many and I have benefitted immensely from doing so. After a long day at school I now find a quiet place to sit and reflect on the events of the day, be they in class or within the school environment. Through my reflections, I am able to identify my weak points as well as my strengths in my lessons and I work continuously to try to improve on the weakness. My journal also provides me with the opportunity to off-load, where I am able to release pent up emotions and this purges my soul. In addition for every lecture that I have attended for this course, I have recorded what I learnt, the significant things that happened and things that I do not agree with. (Nadine)*

*At first, I was a bit hesitant about keeping a reflective journal since I am aware that, 'men do not readily express themselves neither verbally nor in writing'. However, I have come to appreciate its principles and I have benefitted a lot from keeping one. Upon keeping this journal, I have come to learn the importance of critically analyzing daily occurrences... In keeping*

*this journal, I have also come to realize that 'mi chat nuff! [I talk a lot] I will say a lot if given the chance. This journal gives me that opportunity without having to offend the male ego. (Mark)*

In the entries above, students were able to explain the benefits they experienced of engaging in journal writing. Whereas, Mark felt initially that journal writing was something that men do not engage in readily, he was able to learn something about himself from the process in that he did indeed have a lot to write. In discussing the initial response to journal writing and the benefit the student might later experience, Stevens and Cooper (2009) reported how one male student revealed that he initially dreaded writing his first journal entries but then reflected on the readings and his feelings about the class. It seems that this reflection helped for he later admitted that "I surprisingly discovered how valuable my journal became in enhancing my learning abilities toward the class" (p.56).

***Research question 2: What are students' views of active learning and do they believe they have engaged in that type of learning in their history education programme?***

While the activities were designed to engage student teachers in the performance of authentic tasks, it is useful to get from the students themselves the benefit or lack thereof that they derived from these activities; therefore the data for research question 2 and 3 were drawn from the questionnaire. The students gave their personal views of active learning and then indicated the extent to which they thought they were engaged in that form of learning through the activities they were required to do in the course. A sample of the views on active learning saw students demonstrating that they had a very good understanding of the type of learning which is best described as active:

- *Active learning entails learning by doing. It is being engaged in the activities that you are being taught under the supervision of a teacher or lecturer. It is also learning about yourself through reflection on practice as well as taking note of how daily experiences affect or influence you.*
- *Active learning is where students become more than listeners as in a lecture where information is transmitted. During the process of active learning students interact with the subject matter at hand. This means that students will be involved in discussion, doing presentations, writing and reading.*
- *Active learning is engaging in tasks (activities) which provide some form of practical experience within your field of study. You are exposed to things you will be carrying out on a day by day basis in your profession.*
- *Active learning is when the learner is able to participate fully in the teaching/ learning process.*

The common understanding which runs through the personal definitions that students gave is that which demonstrates that active learning is learning which entails some doing on the part of the learner (Lorenson, 2003). This definition also acknowledges that the activities have some relevance to real life practice as in the case of reflections that teachers are expected to do regularly as a basis for improving practice as well as the requirement to plan for teaching. The definition which acknowledges that “You are exposed to things you will be carrying out on a day by day basis in your profession” could be interpreted to mean not just the task of writing lesson plans but of writing lesson plans based on curricula which are used in the schools.

***Research question 3: How does the use of journal writing as a teaching-learning and assessment tool promote active learning in higher education?***

Students’ responses to the questionnaire items that asked them to explain how the different activities in which they were engaged were examples of active learning also provided some insight into how students interpreted and understood the nature of the teaching and learning strategies to which they were exposed. With respect to how keeping an informal journal was an example of being engaged in active learning one student noted for example that:

*Keeping a journal was a form of active learning as I was compelled to keep a daily record of my learning experiences. This helped me to realize how much I have learnt as well as what I had thought about teaching/learning before being enrolled in the program.*

Two other students wrote:

*Reflective journal encourages active learning. It also allows me to reflect on what I have learnt in the course.*

*I had to keep a journal for three of the courses done. This allowed me to become a reflective teacher and made me attempt to improve on mistakes made or to try to understand why certain things happened during my lessons. This is definitely a part of active learning as we shared our experiences and got feedback or advice from our lecturers as well as peers on things we could try to improve or to make our classes more student centred.*

The responses above indicated that the student teachers understood that journal writing required them to participate in teaching/learning activities that gave them the opportunity to think about their learning and to engage in self-assessment. There were a few responses however which indicated that journal writing was time consuming although it should be noted that the respondent who stated this qualified her response by stating that engagement in the field experience

and attending classes at the same time made this requirement difficult. Another student wrote that journal writing was too repetitive. Despite these shortcomings, journal writing was generally reported to be beneficial to students and to provide opportunities for active learning. As Stevens and Cooper (2009) asserted, reflection, a main component of journal writing, is active, involving as it does the examination of prior beliefs and assumptions and then engagement in action.

Table 1 captures the responses given by the 10 respondents to three of the checklist items on the questionnaire. These items aimed at getting students to indicate their agreement or disagreement on certain statements relating to their entry into teaching and their learning experiences as they relate to the reflective practitioner model of teacher education; surfacing entry beliefs about teaching so as to inform and expand those beliefs (Knowles & Holt-Reynolds, 1991).

**Table 1.** Students' responses to checklist items

Statements	Agree	Disagree	Comment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I learnt how my early experiences influenced my ideas and beliefs about teaching</li> </ul>	10	-	-
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I have learnt what it means to engage in reflective practice</li> </ul>	10	-	-
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>I intend to use a personal journal to document my classroom teaching on a regular basis</li> </ul>	10	-	One respondent stated "I enjoy writing especially in diaries so this requirement of the profession seemed somewhat easy."

## Conclusion

This study suggests that journal writing can foster active learning in history education and students showed some evidence of the personal benefits of engaging actively in their learning. At the same time, some students complained and lamented the time-consuming and repetitive nature of writing a reflective journal. However, most students reported that journal writing though time-consuming allowed them to connect their past experiences with their current views about teaching; to reflect on classroom discussion, and to record and thus retrieve learning experiences/ events that might otherwise be forgotten.

Not everyone will be convinced of the place of journal writing in learning to teach if they are not gradually weaned from their traditional orientation to learning which entails receiving knowledge rather than contributing to the generation of their own knowledge. This, will be a work in progress given that students generally come to higher education with a long history of teaching, learning and assessment which is generally based on the traditional approaches to knowledge acquisition through lecturing, note taking, whole class instruction and paper and pencil testing which involves comparatively less student involvement than when they are actively reading, discussing, writing and reflecting.

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