

## *The Study of Writing Cases to Promote Student Teachers Professional Growth*

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### **Abstract**

Reflective teaching is a process where teachers think over their teaching practices, analyzing how something was taught and how the practice might be improved or changed for better learning outcomes. Some points of consideration in the reflection process might be what is currently being done, why it's being done and how well students are learning. Reflection is claimed as a goal in many teacher preparation programs, but how it might be fostered in student teachers are problematic issues.

The researcher develops a six components case writing format to foster student teachers' reflections. The case writing format is as follows: (a) my teaching event (5W1H), (b) my true teaching situation, and (c) my ideal teaching situation, (d) my reflections after writing case, (e) the feedback of peers and professor to my case. (f) If I had the chance to teach it again how I will do? The purpose of this study is to explore how case writing promotes student teachers' professional growth. The data consisted of case narratives developed by six student teachers during their teaching internships. Findings indicated that First, student teachers know their own blind spots and gain a deeper self-understanding. Second, they can calmly face their true teaching situations. Third, they can gradually improve their teaching practice. Fourth, they grow both in their thinking and teaching capability.

Keywords: case writing, reflection, student teacher, professional growth

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## **Introduction**

As a Christian & professor of teacher education, I believe it is very important to enable all pre-service teachers to reach their fullest potential both as individuals and as members of educators since education is a life-long learning process and life is a learning process.

Teachers usually feel that they are growing professionally when they are acquiring experience. Experience is very important for professional growth; however, it cannot alone develop teachers' professionalism. In fact, it takes the quality of experience away where working and teaching is not growing experience, but repeating the same thing or mistakes again and again. Experience should help us to grow, but it should not fossilize us in a particular pattern of behavior. If we want to grow professionally and help our learners to learn, we need to introspect ourselves, critically examine the course we teach and our teaching and retrospect our teaching activities. Experience can either be a growing experience or a mere repetition of years without adding to it or changing it. Teachers who view experience as a growing experience reflect on their own teaching in some way, which ranges from anecdotal variety to classroom data analysis. Furthermore, they question their teaching, try out new ideas and strategies and look for alternatives to do it differently next time by using intuition and experience (Chalikandy, M. A., 2014).

According to Murphy (2001) reflection is done “(1) to find out understanding of the teaching-learning process; (2) to expand one's repertoire of strategic options as a language teacher; and (3) to enhance the quality of learning opportunities one is able to provide in language classrooms” (p. 499-500). It is to deepen teachers' understanding of teaching and learning behaviors and to improve teaching abilities and learning. For Gebhard and Oprandy (1999) teachers' reflection is to understand their own teaching practices and to know different teaching situations.

Valli (1997) defined reflective teaching as teaching with careful thought and judgment. In 1933, Dewey defined reflective thought as the “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). Valli (1997) explains Dewey's conception of reflective thought: “Reflective thought looks back on assumptions and beliefs to be sure they are grounded in logic, evidence, or both, and it looks forward to the implications or consequences of a particular course of action” (Shulman, 2002)

Reflective thought is necessary in teaching because it moves teachers from routine activities to deliberate activities and intelligent action (Dewey, 1964; Fullan, 1982, 2001). Dewey (1964) argued that teacher preparation programs historically had not provided training on reflective thinking nor modeled reflection in various forms. Dewey felt that the ‘hows’ were presented but not the ‘whys’; for example, a teacher could model an effective learning strategy yet could not explain how this had informed her practice.

Anna Richert (1987) found that the two most important determinants of the richness of reflection among teachers were the richness of artifacts and the availability of a partner in the process of recall and reflection. Valli indicated that there are five types

of reflection. They are: technical reflection, reflection-in and on-action, deliberative reflection, personalistic reflection, and critical reflection (cited from Shulman, 2002).

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Table 1 Types of Reflection

Type	Content for Reflection	Quality of Reflection
Technical Reflection Reflection for practice	General instruction and management behaviors based on research on teaching	Matching one's own performance to external guidelines
Reflection-in/-on action Reflection-in-practice Reflection-on-practice	One's own personal teaching performance	Basing decisions on one's unique situation
Deliberative reflection Reflection-for-practice Reflection-in-practice Reflection-on-practice	A whole range of teaching concerns, including students, the curriculum, instructional strategies, the rules and organization of the classroom	Weighing competing viewpoints and research findings
Personalistic reflection Reflection-for-practice Reflection-in-practice Reflection-on-practice	One's own personal growth and relationships with students	Listening to and trusting one's own inner voice and the voices of others
Critical reflection Reflection-for-practice Reflection-on-practice	The social, moral, and political dimensions of schooling	Judging the goals and purposes of schooling in light of ethical criteria such as social justice and equality of opportunity

The literature has distinguished three dimensions: reflection-on-practice, reflection-in-practice, and reflection-for-practice (Killion & Todnem, 1991; Shulman & Colbert, 1989; Conway, 2001; Hatton & Smith, 1994). Reflection for practice occurs prior to the lessons as the teacher is thinking and planning. Reflection-in-practice occurs when the teacher or practitioner actually responds to those unplanned, spontaneous situations in the classroom that Schön discussed. Reflection-on-practice occurs after when looking back on decisions made in the classroom (Shulman, 2002).

Shulman (2002) found that case writing can help teachers develop a critical understanding of the nuanced relationship between student learning, teacher teaching, school-based integrated curriculum, principal's leadership, community resources, and collaborated teaching. It can also help teachers engage in the type of reflection that enables them to question fundamental assumptions, reconsider their beliefs towards teaching, and learn from their practice.

Cases are richly detailed narratives of teaching that are used to (a) guide personal reflection on their teaching and (b) inform others about issues case writers are encountering in teaching and how these issues might be approached.

Although they are ‘story-like’, cases are not simply stories that teachers tell about their work. They are crafted into compelling narratives, with a beginning, middle and end, and situated in an event or series of events that unfold over time. They have a plot that is problem-focused with some dramatic tension that must be relieved. They are embedded with many problems that can be framed and analyzed from various perspectives, and they include the thoughts and feelings of the teacher-writers as they describe the accounts (Toomey, R., 2005).

Some case writers describe problems that remain unresolved and end their stories with a series of questions about what to do. Others include solutions that may or may not have worked. They all include reflective comments about their accounts that examine what they have learned from the experience and/or what they may do differently in another similar situation (Toomey, R., 2005).

Shulman J. H. (2002) found that all the teachers benefit from collaborative case writing experiences. The case writing process had a profound impact on teachers’ professional lives. These include:

- (a) examining the alignment between student assignments and assessments;
- (b) revising classroom assessments;
- (c) influencing change in district assessments;
- (d) revising vague and incomplete rubrics;
- (e) involving students in both their own assessment and the development of new assessments;
- (f) dividing instructional methods into smaller parts so students can more readily understand concepts and tasks;
- (g) encouraging students to assess one another (e.g., using running records during paired oral reading); and
- (h) inaugurating out-of-school remedial classes for students reading below grade level.

Shulman J. H. (2002) indicated that reasons why this process prompted such a profound learning experience are as follows. 1. time for focused reflection, 2. questioning assumptions, 3. increased understanding and empowerment, 4. value of situated learning, 5. link between theory and practice, 6. collaboration in a community of learners.

Collaborative case writing experiences promote in-service teachers’ professional developments. However, there is no study focus on how case writing promotes student teachers’ professional growth. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how case writing promotes student teachers’ professional growth.

## **Methodology**

### **A. Participants**

Six student teachers during their teaching internships directed by the researcher participated in this study. They are five female, one male; two female are graduate students, the others own bachelor degrees. All have case reading and writing experiences.

## B. The Format of Case Writing

The case writing format is as follows:

- (a) My teaching event (including who, where, when, what and how)
- (b) My true teaching situation (including dialogues, detailed descriptions of what happened in a certain teaching situation)
- (c) My ideal teaching situation (including a general description of one's ideal teaching situation)
- (d) My reflections after writing case (describing one's reflections after writing case)
- (e) My reflections after reading feedbacks from peers and professor to my case.
- (f) How will I do if I had the chance to teach it again (My new understanding and action plan to my case)

According to the above case writing format, all participants were required to write one case per month. Each participant wrote four cases during their internships.

## C. Data Collection and Analysis

There are 24 cases collected and analyzed by content analysis. The steps of content analysis used by the researcher are:

- 1) Copy and read through the transcript - make brief notes in the margin when interesting or relevant information is found.
- 2) Go through the notes made in the margins and list the different types of information found.
- 3) Read through the list and categorize each item in a way that offers a description of what it is about.
- 4) Identify whether or not the categories can be linked any way and list them as major categories (or themes) and / or minor categories (or themes).
- 5) Compare and contrast the various major and minor categories.
- 6) When the researcher has done the above with all of the transcripts, collect all of the categories or themes and examine each in detail and consider if it fits and its relevance.

## Results

1. Student-teachers know their own blind spots and gain a deeper self-understanding

Wen and Ru described her self-awareness of teacher's roles, behaviors and blind spots as follows:

Writing case was not easy, I usually spend a lot of time to select the theme and concept of the subject, hoped to describe the teaching events and actual situation of teaching in detail to be able to discuss with teachers and partners, and then build up my own belief and practical knowledge. In the process of writing case, I ceaselessly inspected my own thinking, roles, teaching behavior and relationship building, etc., with both rational and emotional. In fact, this process was such painful, just like a sharp knife further cut the old wound (Wen).

I saw my own teaching shortcoming and the other five partners also gave me a lot of suggestions although I did not think there were so many questions on my teaching. I thought this was the reason why my case needed to be discussed. We all had our own blind spots, but through others' viewpoints, we could more clearly see our own blind spots and tried to improve them (Ru).

## 2. Student-teachers can calmly face their true teaching situations

Rou indicated:

I didn't like to write case since I needed to reflect on my teaching action which I had made mistakes. I didn't want to go back and thought about my teaching mistakes because I needed to work hard overcoming my sadness then had the courage to face it. The beginning of the recall was painful so I wanted to package it in words and weaken my mistakes though I was absolutely clear what the fact was. After writing cases for two to three times, I was gradually able to honestly face my own teaching. When I could face my teaching shortcoming, I could further try to correct these shortcomings. After reflecting on my teaching action many times, I might not be able to correct them immediately, but I was brave enough to try, break through, and with a positive attitude to accept this shortcoming. I no longer escape.

## 3. Student-teachers can gradually improve their teaching practice

Rou described how he improved his teaching practice through case discussion as follows:

Each discussion, not just two hours of brainstorming, I still thought of the advices given by partners even returned to the school and made adjust my teaching method. The flow of Chinese lesson was disrupted due to my consideration with assignment. However, after reading partner's Chinese lesson plan, I learned the first lesson should help students to know the main idea of the lesson instead of deeply investigated the content and answer questions.

## 4. Student-teachers grow both in their thinking and teaching ability

Jun vividly describes her growth both in thinking and teaching capability as follows:

After case discussion, I got not only my teaching questions answered, but also better ways of thinking. Case discussion broadened my vision and thinking dimension of teaching. In the past I only knew there was wrong with my teaching procedure, but had no idea of how to improve it. So I just skipped the problems, and jumped to another method. But after my teaching case was discussed, there were always great solutions to my problems. In addition, I also learned a different way of thinking.

I realized that this case can be solved as this problem or the other problem. For example, at first, I thought the problem is in my teaching process. However, the key issue turned into my assignment of homework. Besides, the homework includes exercises, practice books and learning sheets. That's really a sharp warning to me when I did not know what to do with assignment and my peers asked what is the

purpose of assignment? Is it for preview or for review? I never thought there was a goal in the assignment and it should coordinate with the design of teaching activities. In this way, the assignment broaden and reinforce learning. I never thought in that way.

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