

## Teacher Diaries: Aid to Introspection and Support for Novice Teachers

Mina Westby

Nanzan University

### Reference Data

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As a novice university teacher, I wrote a teacher diary to identify the issues I faced and how I tried to solve them. Two years later, I formed a support group with 2 novice teachers. As a first step, the teachers wrote diary entries after each class. The next step involved sharing entries via email. The third step was an exchange of comments among the 3 of us. Later, during the semester, we met to discuss issues related to the entries and the functioning of the support group. At the conclusion of the semester, the novice teachers answered a questionnaire. Finally, we held a focus group meeting to discuss classroom issues, the effectiveness of diary writing, and the support group. This paper presents the classroom issues that arose and the advantages and disadvantages arising from the combination of teacher diaries and support groups.

大学で勤め始めた一年間、授業内の問題点に気づき、どのように解決を図ったかを把握するため、ティーチャーズダイアリー（教師の日記）を記した。それから二年後、他の二人の大学新任教員と共にサポートグループを結成した。まず、新任教員はそれぞれの授業に関するティーチャーズダイアリーをEメール添付で送信し、3人でコメントの交換をした。学期中、3人で集まり、授業内の問題点及びサポートグループのあり方についての話し合いをした。学期終了後、新任教員はアンケートに回答し、その後、フォーカスグループ会議で授業の問題点及び改善点、そしてサポートグループについての振り返りを行った。本論文では新任教員の直面した問題点を探ると共に、ティーチャーズダイアリーとサポートグループを同時に行う利点について考察する。

McDonough (1994) wrote, “Diary-keeping by teachers . . . is by no means unusual as an instrument for methodological reflection and professional development” (p. 57). As a novice language teacher, I too wanted to know what issues arose, which issues I took the most seriously, and which direction I was heading. A teacher diary was a good method for this type of introspection. Analyzing my diary became part of an action re-

search project, as I realized that despite my initial focus on student accuracy and fluency, the most common theme of the entries in my diary related to collaboration with other teachers. My diary was full of information about how I interacted with other, more experienced teachers who taught the same course as part of a team and about the tremendous support I received from them. The importance of teacher collaboration was the most important lesson I learned from my first year of teaching at a university.

In my third year as a teacher, I formed an online support group in order to assist two novice university instructors, and we agreed to write and exchange teacher diaries. During this process, we faced some difficulties such as language problems and lack of time. However, in the end, the participants all agreed that the process had been beneficial. In this paper, I explore the potential benefits and disadvantages of teachers keeping a diary while participating in a support group.

### Literature Review

Most of the previous research related to this project has been about either teacher diaries or support groups in isolation. In this paper, I examine a combination of the two techniques. Richards and Farrell (2005) described teacher diaries in this way: “A teaching journal is an ongoing written account of observations, reflections, and other thoughts about teaching” (p. 68). Elliot (1991) explained that teacher diaries can include feelings, observations, interpretations, reactions, reflections, hunches, hypotheses, and explanations. He viewed them as a potentially rich research tool. Indeed, teacher diaries are increasingly being used as a research tool. McDonough (1994) explained, “From a general educational perspective, [diary keeping] is embedded in the increasingly popular paradigm of ‘the teacher as researcher,’ which stresses the need for teachers themselves to formulate context-specific issues out of the reality of their own classrooms” (p. 57). Despite their popularity as a research tool, however, actual diary accounts are seldom found in the literature. McDonough, for example, noted that there are extremely few accessible records of diary keeping by teachers going about their ordinary duties even though the

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teacher-as-researcher movement has become increasingly popular and there is improved familiarity with classroom research techniques.

Bailey and Ochsner (1983) described diary studies as essentially introspective accounts in which diarists study their own teaching. As a result, diarists can report on their perceptions, language teaching strategies, and affective factors. These are aspects of the language teaching experience that are usually hidden or inaccessible to an outside observer. The benefits to diarists were further explained by Richards and Farrell (2005): “The process of writing about teaching events often leads to new insights about those events . . . . For teachers, a journal can serve as a way of clarifying their own thinking and of exploring their own beliefs and practices” (pp. 69-70).

In addition to the introspective benefits mentioned above, Numrich (1996) described how a secondary analysis of teacher diaries can be used to compare the findings of different teachers as a way of highlighting some of the common experiences shared by new teachers. In addition to the benefits that can be gained from comparison, Richards and Farrell (2005) stressed the collaborative benefits of keeping teacher diaries:

Journal writing can help a teacher question, explore, and analyze how he or she teaches and can also provide a basis for conversation with peers or a supervisor . . . . And it can provide a way of collaborating with other teachers and responding to a teacher’s journal can serve as means of encouraging reflective inquiry and can facilitate resolving problems and concerns. (p. 70)

They further explain how this practice is consistent with the goals of collegial forms of professional development, which are to encourage greater interaction among teachers, peer-based learning through mentoring, and sharing of experiences, skills, and solutions to shared problems.

Support groups also have an important function in professional development. Richards and Farrell (2005) described support groups as follows:

A teacher support group can be defined as two or more teachers collaborating to achieve either their individual or shared goals or both on the assumption that working with a group is usually more effective than working on one’s own . . . . In a support group teachers get to know their colleagues better and begin to function as a community of professionals rather than as individuals working in isolation from each other. (p. 51)

Richards and Farrell further defined the methods that can be used by support groups to include meeting regularly to discuss strategies, approaches, methods, and materials used, and later to evaluate the course. For novice instructors, support is of particular im-

portance because they typically are less familiar with the subject matter, teaching strategies, and teaching contexts (Berliner, 1987). As a result, as Brannan and Bleistein (2012) suggested, novice teachers need positive support providers in their first years of work.

### Overview

As a 1st-year university instructor, I wrote in my journal twice a week soon after teaching two oral communication classes. The classes involved 30 first-year students who studied engineering at a private university in Nagoya. Four other experienced instructors were teaching the same classes, and we met frequently to discuss the course. The format of my journal was fairly informal. Each entry consisted of a brief lesson plan, the reactions of the students, how I felt about various class activities, what to do in the future, and what was discussed during the teachers’ meetings. I spent between 30 minutes and 1 hour composing each entry, which consisted of between 300 and 600 words each. Entries were written in English. I later analyzed the entries by identifying common issues.

One year later, I and two other novice instructor participants, whose names will remain anonymous (A, a native English speaker and B, a nonnative English speaker), formed a focus group. Participant A had 5 years of teaching experience at Japanese elementary and junior high school and 2 years at a language school. Participant B had experience teaching small groups of students at a cram school as well as student teaching experience acquired while earning a teaching license for junior and senior high school. Both of them had graduated with university degrees in linguistics.

For the purposes of this research project, each participant wrote a journal entry every week soon after they finished teaching the class that they had chosen to focus on. They then shared those entries via email with the other group members. As for journal format, Participant A wrote more formal entries including timetables, lesson plans, and reflections. Participant B’s journal was more informal and included brief lesson plans as well as explanations of what had happened and how she had felt in the class. Participant A chose a writing class for 1st-year students; participant B chose an oral communication class for 1st-year students. Participant A spent about 20 to 30 minutes writing each entry; participant B spent an hour or more in writing each entry. Later, each participant provided feedback and exchanged ideas on how to resolve the issues that arose. A fourth step involved the three of us meeting in person during the semester, at which time we discussed classroom issues and the functioning of the support group. After the first semester was over, the participants filled out a questionnaire and participated in a group discussion. I analyzed the record of online interactions, the results of the questionnaire, and the recorded group discussion.

## Discussion

### *What I Learned From My Own Diary Entries*

Common issues that appeared in my own diary entries included those related to class management such as students sleeping during class, academic dishonesty, and low student motivation as well as teaching techniques such as scaffolding. I also noted difficulty supporting low-level students and reconsidered activities that did not work well. On the positive side, I learned how to conduct activities more effectively, make concrete lesson plans, teach pronunciation, provide opportunities for input, output, and scaffolding, and make handouts. Moreover, keeping a diary enabled me to see the students objectively due to the reflection encouraged by the time gap and physical distance between teaching and writing.

Among the issues and positive benefits of my diary experience, however, what I learned most was the importance of teacher collaboration. For example, working with more experienced teachers taught me how to assess collaboratively by practicing assessing speaking tests with videos of students' past performances. In addition, I practiced correcting student writing and giving pronunciation tests. The experienced teachers also supported me in dealing with problem students by talking to individual students themselves or together with me. They also helped me improve my lesson plans by considering and comparing test scores and students' levels and adjusting how much to teach in each lesson. Learning how to use equipment such as cameras, computers, and audio players was also helpful. In addition, we shared information about issues such as job hunting and research methods. As a result of this, I learned about study groups, which inspired me to form my own support group.

Despite these positive benefits, there were some disadvantages to teacher collaboration, including its time-consuming nature, overreliance on others, not knowing what to say during discussions, and feelings of inferiority. In addition, the experienced instructors' responsibilities were burdensome and included planning, printing, and bringing copies, which sometimes added to the difficulty of providing support. Furthermore, individual teachers have different beliefs about teaching, and active discussions sometimes led to arguments stemming from different pedagogical perspectives. For example, we argued about whether to focus on fluency or accuracy, how to teach grammar, and how to assess students.

### *What I Learned From the Support Group*

Some common issues arose from my online interaction with the two support group participants. The following is a list of the eight most common:

- (a) unresponsive students;
- (b) how to give simple and clear directions;
- (c) too much material to cover (in a coordinated class);
- (d) teacher collaboration;
- (e) time management, feedback, class planning;
- (f) class management (especially disruptive students);
- (g) student motivation; and
- (h) technical problems.

The lack of experience of the support group participants played a role in these issues, as the novice instructors began teaching without knowing what problems might occur. As Participant A commented during the group discussion, "I did not know what problems to expect." Many of the issues they raised were quite similar to what I myself faced during my first year of teaching; other issues were common for even experienced teachers. Sample 1 below is an example of our online interaction around the issue of unresponsive students. It begins with Participant A's statement of the issue, and my and Participant B's comments follow.

#### *Sample 1*

- A: The fourth period class was quite difficult to go through this because of their shyness. I feel my approach was not very good and could have been handled much better.
- MW: Could you explain your approach? Did you feel that it became teacher-centered instruction with the students' weak responses? Do you have any idea how to improve it?
- B: I don't know if my approach works, it's nothing to do with teaching English, but, whenever I feel the students are too shy and not ready to communicate or participate class activities yet, I use before and after the class time effectively. Before the class, I chat with my Ss, anything is okay just to show that I'm interested in them very much. Or, ask some of the Ss to open up the window or help passing

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out worksheets etc. Also, after the class, I ask some of the Ss if the speed and the explanation was okay for them. This kind of approach worked for my classes. The atmosphere changes and Ss become more GENKI [energized].

Regarding issues common to both novice and experienced teachers in particular, my feedback was limited to what I attempted to do in order to address these problems on my own. Sample 2 is an example of our interaction around the issue of class content in lesson planning. Sample 2 begins with Participant A raising the issue and concerns his dilemma at having to teach all the materials that were required in his coordinated writing class.

*Sample 2*

- A: I packed too much content into this class due to the semester syllabus. I think for next week, I will start with some kind of review activity that makes them use adjectives and prepositions.
- MW: I often pack too much content as well but find it better than having too little to do in case we finish all the activities too early. For the students, it may actually be better to have delayed output activities the following week rather than right after the input. Some research shows that Ss learn better when there is some period between learning.
- B: I think reviewing is very important.

As can be seen above, online interaction can serve to both identify issues and assist novice teachers in dealing with them. During our later discussions, the support group participants described the support they received in various situations, and their stories helped enliven our discussions. Many of the issues, including management of unresponsive students and enhancing student motivation, were still far from resolved when the project ended, and optimal approaches may have taken time for the teachers to discover.

**Feedback From the Questionnaire**

After a semester of teaching, the support group participants were given a questionnaire. The responses were largely positive. Participant A agreed and Participant B strongly agreed that their fellow group members were very supportive of them and their teaching and that they had provided guidance and suggestions to help them in addressing issues

in their classrooms. Participant A strongly agreed and Participant B also agreed that their fellow group members were approachable and that they listened to their concerns without being judgmental and were a pleasure to work with. Both agreed that the support group experience and keeping a diary were beneficial.

In addition to the responses above, the participants also provided some positive comments on the benefits of experience, the value of the support group, and the new perspectives they had gained. Some examples are in Sample 3.

*Sample 3*

- A: Now that I have experienced a semester, a lot of my worries are gone and I feel more comfortable leading the class.
- A: I really liked some of the advice on classroom management and answering questions about my methods. It made me stop and consider why I was doing what I was doing, which is a skill that helps during the lesson planning phase.
- B: As we shared our journal entries, I felt a positive kind of tension. When I had trouble with class management, I could change the way I looked at the issue after talking to my collaborators in person, and I could solve the problem. (translated by the author)

As the comments in Sample 3 suggest, experience alleviates some measure of anxiety among novice teachers. However, support provided by a support group or by other experienced instructors can help provide an objective perspective from which to view and solve extant issues.

There were also comments that suggested potential improvements to the support group process as well as others suggesting hurdles encountered (see Sample 4).

*Sample 4*

- B: It all depends on the person, but in my case, I could have continued more easily if I had written simpler journals each week, and met with the other members once a week, to discuss issues more deeply. I wanted to get together at least once a month and talk about our experiences as we drank tea together. We could have built our relationships and understood more about the class situations. (translated by the author)

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B: I was surprised to get all the serious, professional feedback on the smallest topics that I mentioned. However, I'm not sure if I could give such comments because of my lack of professional knowledge, and I felt sorry for not being able to do so. (translated by the author)

As the comments above illustrate, a better prior understanding of the participants' needs and expectations on my part could have resulted in an improved support group process, which would have heightened participants' confidence by enhancing their ability to comment on issues and potential solutions.

### Feedback From the Focus Group Discussion

Following the questionnaire, the participants took part in a 30-minute group discussion that I recorded. The topics the participants discussed were as follows:

1. Classroom issues
2. Did writing their teacher diaries help address these issues?
3. Would they continue in a support group?
4. What did they learn after one semester of experience?

During the focus group discussion session, the participants talked freely about their experiences during their first semester of teaching at a university. First, they talked about the main issues they faced in their classrooms and how they responded to them. Second, they commented on their individual diary writing experiences. Neither participant wanted to continue writing a diary alone. Participant B explained her motivation as follows:

Because English is not my mother tongue, I had to work hard and it was time consuming. I was frustrated by not being able to express my feelings . . . For the reasons above, I could not submit my journals as often as I wanted to. If I wrote in my native language, we could not have shared our ideas, so it was difficult. (translated by the author)

Third, they talked about their impressions of the support group process. Both participants agreed that they would like to join a focus group again. They preferred working collaboratively either on a written basis or by actually meeting. Participant B commented, "I enjoyed meeting the group members in person the best . . . I had a great time talking about our classes, discussing the issues, exchanging feedback even though we had only one opportunity to do so" (translated by the author).

In sum, even though the participants were not interested in continuing to keep a diary, the collaborative benefits of the support group were acknowledged by both participants, and one of the participants and I were persuaded to continue the group after the conclusion of this project. Moreover, both participants talked about their improved confidence after one semester of teaching.

### Conclusion

Although the participants chose not to continue keeping a diary, the combination of diary keeping and the support group had its benefits. My own experience with diary keeping as a novice teacher had led me to reflect on my own teaching and look at what was happening in the classroom more objectively. The diary entries that the support group members wrote provided the basis for conversation about a range of issues. As the foregoing sections indicate, the support group helped them as well as me to become more aware as teachers.

Despite the potential for combining diaries and support groups, there were some significant challenges. Because one of the participants was not a native English speaker, she found writing journal entries in English every week difficult. Unlike keeping journal entries for herself, the content had to be written clearly enough for the other members to understand. Even though frequent interaction with the group was desirable, the weekly schedule was quite challenging for her. Despite this difficulty, however, she was convinced by the support group experience to continue her involvement even after the conclusion of this project. The other participant decided to discontinue his involvement due to its time-consuming nature.

One lesson I learned was that more planning by support group organizers may be necessary to address this as well as other challenges. As Richards and Farrell (2005) commented, "Successful collaborative learning cannot be taken for granted, however, and must be carefully planned and monitored" (p. 12). Despite the problems involved with utilizing diaries in connection with support groups, I found both techniques beneficial for instructors. It seems that support groups enable teachers to discuss and resolve ongoing issues in the classroom. They function to reassure novice teachers that their teaching will improve through collaboration and experience.

## Bio Data

**Mina Westby** is currently a part-time lecturer at Nanzan University and the Nagoya University of Foreign Studies. Her research interests include communicative language teaching and sociocultural theory.

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