The Benefits of Dialogue Journals:
What Prospective Teachers Say

By M. Arthur Garmon

Journals, in one form or another, are mainstays in many teacher education programs across the country, being commonly employed as a means of promoting reflection among prospective teachers, especially during their field experiences and during their student (or intern) teaching. Despite the widespread use of journals, Ducharme and Ducharme (1996) have pointed out that little research has been done on how journaling is beneficial to prospective teachers or what the advantages and disadvantages of journaling are.

> Because teacher education researchers are increasingly using the journals of teacher education students in their scholarly work, we can conclude that the student journals are helpful in *their* research, but the broader questions of how they do or do not help or otherwise affect the prospective teachers remains to be answered. (p. 1039)

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Teacher educators generally seem to believe that writing journals is good for students, as numerous researchers (e.g., see Carter, 1998; Francis, 1995; McMahon, 1997; Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000) have suggested that journals are an effective means of promoting reflective thinking among prospective teachers. Nevertheless, a research base supporting the use of journals is lacking. Thus, as

Ducharme and Ducharme (1996) have suggested, additional research is needed on the benefits that journals may have for students.

One approach to journaling often used in education courses is dialogue journals. Dialogue journals have been defined as journals "in which each student carries on a private written conversation with the teacher for an extended period of time" (Staton, 1988, p. 198). According to Staton, a dialogue journal usually focuses on topics of interest or concern to the student, but either writer may initiate a conversation on a topic of interest with the expectation that the other participant will acknowledge the topic and perhaps comment on it also. Thus, through the dialogue journals, the student and the teacher are able to engage in a continuing conversation with one another about course material. In contrast, response (or reflective) journals generally involve the student reflecting on the course material by him/herself and only occasionally getting feedback from the teacher. Roe and Stallman (1994) conducted a comparative investigation of dialogue and response journals in a graduate-level reading methods course. The researchers found that although students considered both types of journals to be beneficial, they expressed a significantly stronger preference for dialogue journals on six of the eight points of comparison. Specifically, students preferred dialogue journals for (1) understanding difficult material, (2) clarifying their role as teacher, (3) increasing their development as teacher, (4) understanding the social context of teaching, (5) extending time spent with course ideas, and (6) doing a journal in another class. There was no significant difference between the two formats on the other two points—being more reflective and understanding course concepts. Furthermore, qualitative data collected in this study indicated that students valued, in particular, the feedback that they received with the dialogue journal and the opportunity to exchange ideas with their instructors.

The idea of promoting a continuing exchange of ideas between teacher and student seems to be congruent with Vygotsky's views on the role of language and social interaction in learning (Gallimore & Tharp, 1990; Gavelek, 1986; Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky believed that the learner is led by a more knowledgeable other beyond where he/she is able to function without help. The more knowledgeable other facilitates the learner's growth by identifying the learner's current level of functioning and then providing appropriate guidance and support to help move him/her along toward higher levels of knowledge and understanding. Hoover (1994) observed that

> ...while research and theory concerning language conceptually support writing as a means of promoting higher level thinking, written reflection does not necessarily lead to more analytical thought about the process of teaching and learning.... (pp. 90-91)

From her research, Hoover concluded that written reflection was most effective for prospective teachers when it was given appropriate direction or focus. She expressly recommended the use of dialogue journals as a means of challenging prospective teachers to think more critically. Similarly, Schmidt and Davison (1983), while not

recommending the use of dialogue journals specifically, argued that teachers could use journals to push their students to higher levels of cognitive development "by virtue of the challenges provided via the instructor's written comments" (p. 566). In addition, other research (Garmon, 1998; Staton, 1988; Staton & Peyton, 1988; Zulich, Bean, & Herrick, 1992) has suggested that dialogue journals are an excellent tool for helping teachers both to identify where their students are and to provide the appropriate support to promote their continued growth.

While dialogue journals have been used successfully from elementary school to graduate school in a variety of subjects in a variety of different ways (e.g., Bode, 1989; Danielson, 1988; Gordon & MacInnis, 1993; Kirk, 1989; Peyton, 1988; Peyton & Staton, 1993; Peyton, Staton, Richardson, & Wolfram, 1993; Staton, 1980; Wang, 1996), I could locate very few studies which focused specifically on the use of dialogue journals with prospective teachers. Bean and Zulich (1989) reported several benefits that derived from using dialogue journals with preservice teachers, including the fact that their use promoted students' reflective examination of their course material and field experiences, assisted the instructors in thinking about their own teaching, provided them with a window into their students' thinking, and opened a line of communication between the instructors and the students. These benefits, however, with the exception of the last one, do not appear to be unique to dialogue journals and, therefore, tell us little about the unique benefits of using them. McFarland (1992) reported disappointing results in an intensive, four-week multicultural education course, though she concluded that dialogue journals did offer many potential benefits for both students and teachers. Hennings (1992), who used dialogue journals with undergraduate and graduate students in language arts/reading methods courses, reported that the primary benefit was establishing better communication and rapport between teacher and students; however, she reported that few students felt that the journals had improved their understanding of the course content. In contrast to Hennings, Garmon (1998) described how the use of dialogue journals did appear to contribute to the learning of prospective teachers in a multicultural teacher education course. Given the paucity of research in this area, we clearly need more investigations of the benefits of using dialogue journals with teacher candidates.

The purpose of the present study was to gather additional information about prospective teachers' perceptions of the pluses and minuses of doing dialogue journals. Specifically, the research question guiding the study was what did a group of prospective teachers see as the benefits and drawbacks of doing dialogue journals in a multicultural teacher education course?

Method

At my former university, I was an instructor for one discussion section of a multicultural education course which prospective teachers were required to take as

a means of preparing them to work with an increasingly diverse student population. During the first class session of the semester, I explained to my students that we would be experimenting with dialogue journals to determine whether or not they should be added as a requirement for all students in all sections of the course the following semester. I told them that the journals would be used for reflecting on what they were learning in the course and for expressing their personal reactions to the lectures and class activities. I also stressed the fact that the journal was to be a vehicle for engaging in a dialogue with me on the issues being studied. Toward this end, I told students that I would respond to questions which they asked me in their journals, and they would be expected to respond to mine. Students were to submit two journal entries each week, on Tuesday and Friday. Each entry was required to be at least 30 typed lines (approximately one page) in length and was graded on completion, not on content, so that students could feel free to express themselves openly. Participation in this experiment was voluntary, but students choosing to write journals would have the midterm and final exam count as a smaller percentage of their course grade than would students not electing to write journals. Of the 29 students enrolled in my discussion section, 22 chose to write dialogue journals. I strongly encouraged but did not require my students to do their journals on e-mail because of the many advantages that this medium offers, and about two-thirds of them did so.

I solicited students' evaluative comments about journals on two occasions during the semester, and these comments constituted the data source for this study. Midway through the semester, students were required to write a journal entry in which they evaluated the journals. Specifically, I asked them to tell me what they liked and/or disliked about doing the journals and whether or not they found the journals valuable. Also, at the end of the semester, the students were asked to write any additional comments that they wanted to make about the journals, especially if their perception of the journal had changed since midterm. Although none of the students indicated that their perceptions of the journals had changed, about half of them offered some additional comments and/or suggestions.

I began analyzing the students' comments on the journals by looking for details related to five predetermined categories. When I originally conceptualized this research study, I had particular research questions in mind, and the five predetermined categories corresponded with these questions: the value of the journals, what students liked about the journals, what they disliked, advantages of the journal, and disadvantages of the journal. However, I soon found that it was often difficult to distinguish between some of these categories. For example, a student's statement about something that he/she liked about the journal often fit equally well in the Value category or the Advantages category, and a statement about something a student disliked could often fit equally well in the Disadvantages category. To resolve this difficulty, I decided to classify all of the students' evaluative comments into three broad categories: Benefits, Drawbacks, and Suggestions. Any passage (as short as a few words or as long as an entire paragraph) expressing a favorable

perception of any aspect of the journal I classified in the Benefits category, and any passage expressing an unfavorable perception I classified in the Drawbacks category. Students' suggestions about how the dialogue journal assignment could be improved I classified in the Suggestions category. Next, within these three major categories, I grouped similar or closely related comments into different subcategories. Through successive regrouping and renaming of these subcategories, I eventually settled on six subcategories in the Benefits category, two in the Drawbacks category, and two in the Suggestions category.

Results

My analysis of my students' evaluative comments on the dialogue journals revealed that they seemed to hold a decidedly positive perception of the dialogue journal and its benefits. In 21 student journals I identified 141 evaluative comments about the journals, of which 114 (or 81 percent) denoted benefits and 27 (or 19 percent) denoted drawbacks. The benefits identified by students primarily related to ways in which their learning or personal growth had been enhanced by the journal, while the drawbacks primarily related to the requirements and procedural aspects of doing the journal. In addition, students offered 38 suggestions for improving the journal process.

Benefits of Dialogue Journals

Students perceived a wide variety of benefits associated with writing dialogue journals. I was able to group all of the benefits that students identified into six major subcategories. These subcategories of benefits, with their relative frequency of mention enclosed in parentheses, were as follows: facilitating learning of course material (27 percent), promoting self-reflection and self-understanding (25 percent), procedural conveniences and benefits (21 percent), opportunity to express ideas (14 percent), getting feedback on ideas and questions (8 percent), and improving the teacher-student relationship (5 percent). I will discuss each of these subcategories in turn and provide examples of students' comments.

Facilitating Learning of Course Material

The most frequently cited benefit of dialogue journals was that they seemed to facilitate students' learning of the course material. Students identified several ways in which they believed that the journal served to enhance their learning. For example, some asserted that writing the journals helped them to remember the course material, as one student explained:

> If I wouldn't have chosen the option of writing the journals, I don't think I would get as much out of the labs or lectures. The reason is that when I write the journal for that specific day I have to review pretty thoroughly the day's activities. That review helps me with remembering the more specific details. Also, writing things (or typing)

> helps me to remember things. With the journals, the main points are just driven into my head like two or three times in a day, which if it isn't I'll never remember any of the info. —Kathy

Other students described how writing the journal had led them to become more engaged with and to think more deeply about the course material than they otherwise would have. They reported being more attentive during lectures, taking better notes, and, like the following student, thinking about the material more often because they knew they would have to write a journal.

> One of my biggest problems is that I'll go to class, concentrate and participate in class and then as soon as I leave class I'll totally forget about it until the next class. What the journals do is they give me the opportunity to go back over the material we discussed in class. A lot of the times they help me to formulate my opinions about certain issues, mainly because writing these journals really forces me to think about what we've talked about in class. —Ericka

Some students thought that the journals facilitated learning because they represented a type of accommodation for individuals who learn differently. As one student explained, "some people don't test well and even may actually get more out of the journals in this type of class than they would get out of exams" (Karen). Finally, one young woman appeared to recognize that dialogue journals could also serve as a type of diagnostic tool for the teacher, enabling him/her to gauge student learning. This student observed that "the journal is a good way to classify and decide which data (information) deserves more attention than another" (Amy). Perhaps Amy had noticed how, on several occasions, I had made statements like the following: "I can tell from your journals that some of you are still confused about such and such, so I want to talk about that for a few minutes today."

Promoting Self-reflection and Self-understanding

The second most frequently cited benefit of dialogue journals was that they promoted students' self-reflection and self-understanding. Many students reported that they greatly valued the opportunity that the journal gave them to reflect on the course material. They felt that, without the journal, they would not have thought about the course material as much as they did outside of class. Being required to think more deeply about the material led them to better understanding and often to new insights. Furthermore, the opportunity that the journal provided for making connections between the course material and their own beliefs and experiences was also important to some students. They reported that doing so often helped to make the course content more real and more understandable.

> ...the journals force me to think about what I've learned in comparison to my feelings, beliefs, and experiences. When you are required to write something on how what you've learned relates to you, you are forced to think more than you normally would have about your beliefs and experiences. I think that this is a great reason why the

> journals are a good idea—I feel that I, and probably most people, would learn this material best upon relating it to themselves. —Karen

Karen's observation received a confirmation of sorts in the remarks of another student.

> [The journal] is also worthwhile because we have a while to think about what has been said in lab or lecture and when I think about what was said, sometimes I can find something to relate it to and it helps me understand it better. —Judy

Another way in which some students found the journal valuable was as a place to reflect on themselves as future teachers. For example, one student commented, "I think that the journals have been worthwhile because it allows me to think about myself more as a teacher in the future and the types of things that I would do with my teaching (activities, etc.)" (Laura). My students' evaluative comments further indicate that engaging in self-reflection also helped some students develop greater self-understanding. Linda provided a good explanation of this benefit.

> The reason I think the journals are important for this class is because they kind of help a person do some soul searching and to examine their feelings about certain people or situations. Sometimes people have to almost be forced to take a little time to think about their feelings and attitudes or it's possible to actually not even realize that you have these feelings. It also helps to think about where the feelings come from and why we have them. That is a very positive aspect of the journal. —Linda

Finally, a few students felt that the journal was valuable as a record of their thoughts and feelings that they could revisit later to determine whether and how they had changed.

Procedural Conveniences and Benefits

The third major subcategory of benefits reflects primarily how students felt about the way in which the journal assignment was structured moreso than how they felt about actually doing the journals; therefore, I will discuss this subcategory only briefly. Many of the students appreciated the fact that the journal writing was informal; they considered it advantageous that they did not have to be concerned about grammar, spelling, punctuation, or sentence structure. In addition, a few students perceived the length requirement of the journal as appropriate and beneficial. Other aspects of the journal assignment that students appreciated were having two journals due each week, having considerable freedom in the topics that they could write about, and having the option of writing by hand, typing, or e-mailing their journals.

Opportunity To Express Ideas

A fourth benefit was that dialogue journals provided a regular opportunity for students to express their ideas about the issues being dealt with in the course.

Students differed, however, in how they perceived this benefit. Some explained that, because there was never enough time during class for everyone to say all that they wanted to, the journal provided a place where they could say what they did not have the chance to say during class. Others who were less outspoken in class saw the journal as their opportunity to express ideas that they were reluctant to express orally in class.

> This journal is also good for people who are shy and don't speak up in class. The journal is a way to say how you feel without stuttering or feeling embarrassed. I know that sometimes I want to say something in class and I either can't think of the right way to say it or there isn't enough time, so this journal helps me say what's on my mind. —Mary

In addition, there were some students who valued the opportunity to express in their journals ideas which were confidential or otherwise inappropriate for sharing orally. Holly's comments illustrate this perspective.

> The journals really gave me a chance to reflect on myself, who I am, and what I believe. I like the openness and honesty I can express in the journal most. I can be completely honest without worrying about offending anyone. I really like being able to be so open. —Holly

Finally, one student explained that expressing her ideas in the journal allowed her more time to think about what she wanted to say.

> A lot of times in class, I'm focusing so hard on what other people are saying that I don't have the opportunity to say anything. With the journals I can respond to what my classmates have said in class because by then I've had the opportunity to think about it. —Ericka

Getting Feedback on Ideas and Questions

A small percentage of students considered the feedback which they received on their ideas and questions as another important benefit of doing dialogue journals. I regularly commented on some of the ideas that students expressed in their journals, sometimes agreeing with what they wrote, sometimes disagreeing, sometimes questioning them, and sometimes clarifying or correcting what they said. Mary explained why she thought this kind of feedback was beneficial.

> I do think these journals have been worthwhile because it does sometimes help me understand some of the things in the lecture and what we talk about in the lab. I respond to these two things and your responses back are a lot of help. Like if I was to say something about what we talked about in either the lab or lecture, if I somehow interpreted it wrong and received the wrong point you or the speaker was trying to make, then your response to my journal would really help. If we didn't have these journals then I might be telling people about what we discussed and I'm relaying false information. —Mary

The journal was also a place where the students asked me any questions they had about the material being covered, and Jane's comment illustrates how some students found my responses to their questions beneficial.

> I feel like I can ask you questions if I don't understand things, and you correct me if I say something wrong in my journal and that ends up helping me on the exams, too. —Jane

Being able to ask questions through their journal was especially helpful to students who were shy and less inclined to raise a question before the entire class.

Improving the Teacher-Student Relationship

A few students regarded improved student-teacher relationships as another important benefit of keeping dialogue journals. These students seemed to value the teacher-student interaction that took place through the journals. They apparently felt that building a good, personal relationship between teacher and student was important, and they saw their journal as one means of doing so. Carol, for example, asserted that "[The journal] also puts us on a more personal basis with you which helps us get more out of the class and lecture." Although she did not explain her comment, she seemed to believe that having a better relationship with the instructor would lead to her getting more out of the class. Finally, one student stated that she considered my comments on her journal as an indication of my interest in helping her earn a good grade in the course. In this regard she apparently saw the journal as a benefit because through it she felt cared about.

Drawbacks of Dialogue Journals

I was able to classify students' comments about the drawbacks of dialogue journals into two major subcategories. Approximately 85 percent of all students' comments fell into the first subcategory, journal requirements and procedures, and about 15 percent fell into the second subcategory, time demands.

Journal Requirements and Procedures

The vast majority of the drawbacks that the students identified fell into this subcategory. One of the most frequently cited drawbacks was that students had to submit two journals each week. These students felt that submitting one journal each week should be sufficient, as illustrated by Connie's comment: "I think that the journal entries could be cut down to just once a week, but make the requirement a little longer." A second frequently cited drawback related to the days and times that the journals were due. For a number of different reasons, some students indicated preferences for submitting their journals on different days and/or at different times than those I had assigned. A third drawback of the journals was that several students questioned the length requirement for the journal, indicating that sometimes they had difficulty writing 30 lines. On this point, Carol offered the following sugges-

tion: "Sometimes there is just not enough to write about. I feel that if a person can say what they want to say and it is short then that is OK as long as they say it good." Another related drawback in some students' perception was that they would sometimes find it difficult to write a full journal on one lab or lecture session. As Andy explained, "sometimes the journals for the lecture are dry and empty. It is really hard to write and elaborate on something that doesn't interest you all the time." These students suggested that they should be given optional questions or topics to write about in case they did not have enough to write on that week's lab or lecture session. One student questioned the value of doing journals, stating that in her perception they seemed to be "busywork." There were two students who felt that the directions and reasons for doing journals had not been made clear enough. Finally, other aspects of the journals that were each mentioned by one student as drawbacks were sometimes having limited access to e-mail terminals, having difficulties using e-mail, and being given directions that were unclear.

Time Demands

The other subcategory of drawbacks mentioned by my students related to the time demands of doing journals. Several students observed that writing journals was very time consuming. One student, for example, reported spending from 45 minutes to one hour writing each journal entry, and this was a lot to ask on top of the other requirements for the course. Linda's comment below indicates, however, that a student could observe that writing the two journals each week was time consuming but at the same time consider doing so as valuable and worthwhile.

> On the down side, doing the journals took a lot of extra time. I tried to think about what I wanted to say, and then had to find the time to actually write it. When I look back on the semester, I'm glad I did them. Initially, my only thought was that by opting to do the journals, I could get a better grade because exams were worth less, but I also benefited personally from doing the journals. Spending the time reflecting on my feelings about many different issues really helped me grow as a person. —Linda

Suggestions for Improving Dialogue Journals

The participants in this study were generally supportive of the idea of continuing the journal assignment with future classes, and they offered a total of 38 suggestions for improving the journal process. I was able to group students' suggestions into two subcategories: journal requirements, and concern about individual differences.

Journal Requirements

The vast majority of students' suggestions (82 percent) related to changing the requirements for the journal assignment. Most of the suggestions within this subcategory proposed changing the dates and times that journals were due, with

many recommending that journals be due only once each week. Most of the other suggestions in this subcategory related to the topics for the journals. Students generally seemed to want more freedom in selecting the topics for their journals, while others wanted to be given topics to write about. Finally, there were a few who suggested that there be no length requirement for the journal and a couple of others who recommended more clarity about and guidance in how to do the journals.

Concern about Individual Differences

The remaining comments (18 percent) in the Suggestions category all related to students' concerns about individual differences. Several students argued that the journals should not be required for all students in the course the following semester because some students may have difficulty with writing or may not like expressing their ideas in writing. Gloria's comments below were similar to those of several of her classmates:

> As much as I like the journals, though, I would not make them required. Some people have a hard time writing, and may actually dread this course as a result of the writings; therefore, those who like writing would be able to, but those who don't would not be required to do so. —Gloria

Along a similar vein, two other students voiced concern that writing journals may not match some students' learning style and, therefore, should not be required for all students. One of these students observed,

> It all depends on the individual's preferences, in my opinion—after all, isn't a lot of what we learn in this class based upon individual differences and the fact that some people learn better than others when faced with different methods of learning? —Karen

Discussion

Because of the small sample used in this investigation, the results have very limited generalizability. In addition, the fact that the sample was self-selected represents another major limitation of this study because the students who volunteered may have been the ones who liked to write and who were, therefore, predisposed to respond favorably to journaling. Nevertheless, these results do seem to suggest that the use of dialogue journals in teacher education courses may offer a number of important benefits for some prospective teachers. First, the use of dialogue journals may serve to enhance students' learning of the course material. Of the 21 participants in this study, 14 reported that the journals had contributed to their understanding and/or remembering of the course material. Second, dialogue journals appear to promote greater self-reflection and self-understanding by the students. Once again, 14 of the 21 participants reported that the journals had pushed them to think more deeply about the course material, and this self-reflection had often led them to new insights and new understandings of themselves and others.

These findings appear to support my hypothesis that students may derive some of the same benefits from dialogue journals as they would from being interviewed in the manner that participants were during my dissertation research (see Garmon, 1996). Third, the use of dialogue journals provides students with another medium for expressing their ideas, a medium which may be especially important for students who are less inclined to express their ideas verbally in class. Although students indicated considerable satisfaction with some of the procedural aspects of the journal, this finding seems less noteworthy because these variables (i.e., credit for the journal, required length, etc.) are likely to change from teacher to teacher, course to course, and semester to semester. However, it is worth noting that students felt that not having to worry about grammar and mechanics in their journal facilitated their writing. This may be one procedural feature that should remain constant.

I believe that the two lowest-rated subcategories of benefits are also important. I am surprised that getting feedback was not mentioned more frequently as a benefit of the journals. I would argue that the low rating it received belies its true significance. I routinely attempted to push my students' thinking through the questions and comments which I wrote in their journals, and I am convinced that my questions and comments stimulated much good thinking on my students' parts. However, in writing their evaluations, perhaps they did not consider my questions and comments as feedback. In future evaluations I may need to define for my students what I mean by feedback. Although I am not surprised by the low rating that the teacher-student relationship received, I believe the importance of this area tends to be overlooked. Other research that I have done (Garmon, 1997) has suggested that developing good relationships with students is a key factor for effective dialogue journal communication. Most students will probably not engage in open and honest communication until they have established a trusting relationship with their teacher.

Conclusions

The fact that my students identified far more benefits than they did drawbacks is indicative of their very positive response to the dialogue journals. From writing the journals, they reported learning more of the course material and more about themselves. The students did identify a number of drawbacks relative to the journal requirements and procedures, but I would say that they clearly relate more to the form of the journal than to its substance. As I mentioned earlier, many of the procedural aspects of the journal are likely to change from one setting to the next. Nevertheless, in response to my students' comments, in subsequent instantiations of dialogue journals I have given particular attention to the amount of writing that students are required to do and have been sure to provide students with a set of optional topics. In the Suggestions category, my students' observation that some students may have difficulty or prefer not to write journals is worth noting. Probably because the

participants in this study were all self-selected, none of them reported having writing difficulties. This study would seem to provide useful information about the potential benefits of having students do dialogue journals. It suggests that teacher educators can use dialogue journals in their courses as a means of enhancing student involvement with and learning of the course material. More research is needed in this area, however; in particular, we need studies which, along with students' self-reports, employ objective measures of whether students' learning from a course is related to the use of dialogue journals.

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