

## Using Dialogue Journals as a Multi-Purpose Tool for Preservice Teacher Preparation: How Effective Is It?

By Icy Lee

### Introduction

Dialogue journals, which involve teachers and students writing and exchanging their writing in mutual response, are often cited as a powerful tool for promoting reflection in teacher education. According to Bean and Zulich (1989), dialogue journal writing is a good way to model the process of reflective practice for preservice teachers. Porter, Goldstein, Leatherman and Conrad (1990) have specifically outlined several benefits of using dialogue journals in teacher preparation courses. For instance, dialogue journals help students in specific areas where they have difficulty, promote autonomous learning, enhance confidence, help students make connections between course content and teaching, create interaction beyond the classroom, and make the class more process-oriented (Porter et al., 1990).

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Although it is generally agreed that dialogue journals carry many potential benefits, it seems that this tool is not fully utilized in second language teacher education. In my previous workplace (the Chinese University of Hong Kong), for instance, I was the only one who promoted dialogue journal writing as a major activity in teacher preparation courses for

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English teachers. In my existing workplace (Hong Kong Baptist University), dialogue journal writing is not a course requirement of the teacher education programs, and to the best of my knowledge, it is not being used by any teacher educators working with preservice or inservice English teachers. It seems that dialogue journal writing is not embraced enthusiastically by local teacher educators. On the other hand, learners in Hong Kong, from my observation and experience, may not be keen on the idea of writing dialogue journals as a means of developing reflection and critical thinking. Instead they may find the idea of dialogue journal writing to enhance their English proficiency much more comfortable and welcoming. Within such a culture of teaching and learning, I was interested in finding out in what ways dialogue journal writing could work in the local teacher education context. Therefore, I embarked on the study with a view to finding out what my preservice teachers and I could learn from the process of dialogue journal writing. Simply put, the present investigation was prompted by the felt need to find out if dialogue journals work in teacher preparation courses, whether prospective teachers like or do not like the idea of journaling, what makes the process work or not work, to what extent dialogue journal writing enhances the preservice teachers' understanding of English language teaching issues, and what I myself as a teacher educator can learn from the process of journaling with my prospective teachers. The results of my study, I hoped, would provide insights as to how dialogue journals can be successfully implemented in teacher preparation programs. Before I delineate the method of my research, I will briefly review the literature about journal and dialogue journal writing.

Why is journal writing important in teacher education? According to Cole, Raffier, Rogan, and Schleicher (1998), journals are closely affiliated with three fundamental paradigms in education which focus on (1) process, (2) the learner, and (3) reflection. First, writing can activate teacher learners' thinking and enable them to make connections between issues, explore ideas, generate new ideas and discover meaning during the learning process. Second, journal writing places the focus on the teacher learners themselves, since it is based on the premise that individual learners bring their own beliefs and experience to bear on the learning process. Learners are thus actively constructing knowledge, at the same time personalizing the learning process. Lastly, journal writing makes reflection likely, because as teacher trainees write about their views of different issues, talk about their problems and concerns and share their ideas, they discover new meaning and have their horizon broadened. As defined by Jay and Johnson (2002), reflection:

. . . is comprised of identifying questions and key elements of a matter that has emerged as significant, then taking one's thoughts into dialogue with oneself and with others. One evaluates insights gained from that process with reference to (1) additional perspectives, (2) one's own values, experiences, and beliefs, and (3) the larger context within which the questions are raised. (p.76)

Journal writing is deemed to be particularly useful in preservice teacher education. One long-existing problem in teacher preparation programs is how to effect deep and meaningful cognitive changes in preservice teachers (Richardson & Placier, 2001). Preservice teachers with no or little teaching experience are naturally preoccupied with acquiring a repertoire of survival skills in the classroom. One immediate and important need for them is how to transfer the skills and knowledge acquired in teacher education courses as students to the real classroom situations as teachers. It is equally, if not more, important to develop into reflective teachers, who examine, evaluate and reflect on past experience as students and make decisions about future planning and action as teachers based on such reflection (Richards, 1991). In that respect, dialogue journals can function as a bridge to help preservice teachers narrow the gap between imagined views of teaching held by students and the realities of teaching experienced by practicing teachers. As stated by Daloglu (2001), by “asking *why*, *what*, and *how* questions, not only to evaluate certain teaching techniques but also for the broader purpose of raising awareness of other teaching issues” (p.88), preservice teachers develop a sense of ownership of and power over their future work. Through journal writing, preservice teachers become more aware of themselves as would-be-teachers and teacher learners, and of the teaching and learning context within which they operate (Burton & Carroll, 2001). Journals, quite conveniently, provide a framework in which preservice teachers can examine issues relevant to teaching, such as the nature of language and language learning, teaching methods, assessment, etc.

Dialogue journals have the additional benefit of encouraging the teacher educator to read and respond to teacher learners’ writing on a regular basis. Thonus (2001) argues that “one of the best ways to view learning from the learner’s perspective is through journals, particularly dialogue journals with the teacher” (p.101). Dialogue journal writing not only provides a means for the teacher educator to create and sustain caring relations with teacher learners (Johnston, 2000), but it also makes sure that quieter voices in the classroom can be heard outside the classroom. Through journaling with teacher trainees, teacher educators send an important message to the teacher learners, i.e., the development of each and every single individual is significant (Johnston, 2000). Indeed, dialogue journals are particularly suited for preservice teacher education because “reflecting on learning and teaching” is one of the “good teaching habits” that “can and should be acquired from the beginning of the process of learning to teach” (Santana-Williamson, 2001, p.42). If we want our teachers to engage in reflective practice, reflection as a habit should be nurtured early on. Teacher educators can have a significant role to play in fostering a good habit of reflection through engaging in dialogue journal writing with teacher learners while they are enrolled in teacher preparation courses.

Research evidence illustrating the benefits of journals or dialogue journals is not lacking (see, e.g. Barkhuizen, 1995; Bolin, 1988; Cowie, 1997; Dong, 1997; Fishman & Rover, 1989; Flores & Garcia, 1984; McDonough, 1994; Woodfield &

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Lazarus, 1998; Tsang & Wong, 1996). Beau and Zulich's (1989) study has suggested that dialogue journals yield a number of benefits - e.g., helping students formulate questions about their learning, providing students with opportunities to express their thoughts, and providing teachers with windows into students' thoughts. Garmon (1998) has, similarly, reported favorably on the use of dialogue journals with prospective teachers. Less positive findings, however, were obtained from Hennings' (1992) investigation, where the undergraduate and graduate students did not find dialogue journals useful in helping them understand the course materials better. More recently, Garmon (2001) has conducted an investigation with 22 prospective teachers to find out their views about dialogue journals. His study is significant because it provides some research evidence to corroborate what has so often been said in the literature about the benefits of dialogue journals. Moreover, the study throws light on the problems that may be involved in using dialogue journals with prospective teachers — e.g., the demand on time, length requirement, and how to address individual differences. This present study follows Garmon's (2001) line of research in investigating the use of dialogue journals with a group of prospective teachers in a preservice teacher education course. It differs from Garmon's (2001) work, however, in that the students who participated in the present study were not self-selected. Garmon (2001) pointed out that one limitation of his study was that since the subjects took part in his study on a voluntary basis, it could be argued that they were already inclined towards the use of dialogue journals. Hence, the primarily favourable results of Garmon's (2001) investigation should be interpreted with caution. In this study, instead of enlisting volunteers, dialogue journal writing was incorporated into the teacher preparation program as a regular, compulsory activity.

In second language teacher education, a number of journal studies were conducted (e.g., Brinton, Holten and Goodwin, 1993; Ho & Richards, 1993; Tsang & Wong, 1996; Woodfield & Lazarus, 1998). The study by Brinton et al. (1993) focused on how teacher educators could respond to dialogue journals effectively. Similarly, the study by Todd, Mills, Palard and Khamcharoen (2001) focused on the nature of feedback and how it could be used effectively to promote trust and build relationships between tutors and participants. Tsang and Wong's research (1996), which investigated how journal writing could help preservice teachers develop reflectivity during the teaching practicum, found that journal writing could help preservice teachers develop reflectivity, and that growing experience and peer discussion could motivate reflective writing. The focus, however, was on the preservice teachers' writing journals rather than on the dialogue process with the teacher educators. Ho and Richards' (1993) study, also conducted with teacher trainees in Hong Kong, focused on how journal writing developed inservice teachers' sense of critical reflectivity over time. The subjects were inservice teachers enrolled in both teacher training programs and the MATESL program. Woodfield and Lazarus' (1998) study, similar to that of Ho and Richards (1993),

was conducted with practicing teachers. In both studies, instead of dialogue journals, learner diaries or journals were used. The current study differs from previous journal studies in second language teacher education in several ways. First, the subjects of this study were all preservice teachers with no or little teaching experience, and they wrote journals throughout the teacher education course, not just within the teaching practicum period. Second, the emphasis is on the interaction between the teacher educator and the student teachers through dialogue journal writing. Finally, this study focuses not only on how journals help preservice teachers develop reflection but also what they think of this tool of learning as well as what the teacher educator has learned from the dialogue journal writing process.

### **The Study**

At the Chinese University of Hong Kong, I taught a compulsory component “Subject and Curriculum Teaching” (SCT) for preservice English teachers in the one-year full-time Postgraduate Diploma in Education (PGDE) program. All the 18 student teachers are Chinese, 14 with a degree in English or a language-related subject (such as translation) and 4 with a non-English degree. The SCT course covered the following areas: first- and second- language learning theories; language teaching methodology; lesson planning and evaluation; classroom language; classroom interaction; language awareness; grammar; reading; speaking; listening; reading; writing; vocabulary; assessment; learning styles and strategies; information technology in language teaching; and assessment. I met with the 18 student teachers five hours a week for a total of 20 weeks in two semesters. In the first 10-week semester, I asked my student teachers to submit e-mail dialogue journals on a weekly basis. They were instructed to reflect on the ideas introduced in class, discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the ideas, ask questions, raise comments, make requests, or talk about any other things which they felt were relevant to their learning. No word limit was imposed. I deliberately refrained from giving the student teachers specific topics to discuss each week since I wanted to provide them with more freedom in the choice of topics. My rationale was also partly based on my thinking that since each week some new ideas would be introduced in class, my student teachers should not be short of discussion topics for their dialogue journals. The focus on sharing of ideas rather than language accuracy was stressed. I also told the student teachers that dialogue journals were part of their course requirements and that 20% of the overall mark would be based on the completion of the journals. Since access to computers and e-mail is not an issue among postgraduate students in Hong Kong, it was agreed that journalling would be conducted via e-mail.

In the second semester, however, I began to notice that some of my prospective teachers did not submit their journals on time. Several of my student teachers wrote to ask if they could submit their dialogue journals on a bi-weekly basis. I therefore negotiated with all the student teachers in class regarding the frequency of

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submission. Through open discussions and negotiations, it was concluded that due to heavier workload, my student teachers could send me journals every fortnight instead of every week. However, I stressed that those who were interested and could afford the time should keep sending me journals on a weekly basis.

At the end of the course, I asked the 18 prospective teachers to complete a short anonymous evaluation questionnaire (see Appendix 1). I then randomly selected five of them for individual follow-up interviews. The interviews were semi-structured (see Interview Guide in Appendix 2). In addition, I solicited my student teachers' views of dialogue journals in an extra e-mail dialogue journal at the end of the course. As the teacher educator, I kept field notes to reflect on the experience of journaling with my preservice teachers. To sum up, several sources of evidence were used in this study to throw light on the topic of investigation:

1. Data gathered from preservice teachers' journal entries.
2. Data gathered from preservice teachers' evaluation questionnaires.
3. Data gathered from interviews with preservice teachers.
4. Data gathered from preservice teachers' evaluative e-mail dialogue journals.
5. My self-reflection as the teacher educator.

The research questions that governed this investigation were:

1. What themes emerged from preservice teachers' dialogue journals? In what ways did the dialogue journals promote the preservice teachers' depth of understanding of issues in teaching and English language teaching?
2. What are the benefits and problems of dialogue journal writing as perceived by the preservice teachers?
3. What is the value of dialogue journals for the teacher educator?
4. How can dialogue journals be effectively implemented in teacher preparation courses?

Through triangulating the dialogue journals, students' feedback, as well as my own self-reflection, I hoped to gather rich data to throw light on the benefits and problems of dialogue journal writing and to develop insights about how dialogue journals can be used more effectively in teacher preparation courses.

## **Results and Discussion**

In this section, I attempt to answer the four research questions by presenting and discussing the different sources of data — namely the preservice teachers' journal data, the student questionnaires, interviews and evaluative e-mail comments, and my self-reflection as the teacher educator.

***Themes Found in Dialogue Journals and How the Journals Enhance Participants' Understanding of English Language Teaching***

The preservice teachers' journal entries were read and re-read a number of times, and based on the "recurring regularities" (see McDonough, 1994; Murphy-O'Dwyer, 1985), the concerns raised in the entries were categorized into recurrent themes. Since the focus of the research is not on the level of reflectivity (e.g., see Richards and Ho, 1993; Tsang & Wong, 1996), no attempt was made to quantify the themes. All together, ten themes were traced from the journals; they are delineated below. Quotations (verbatim) from the journal data (presented in italics), which are selective, aim to illustrate each of the themes listed.

1. Comments on course — e.g., comments (both favourable and unfavourable) on specific concepts or strategies, adequacy or inadequacy of coverage, etc.
2. Relationship-building — e.g., preservice teachers describing own personality and interests; thanking teacher educator for advice and suggestions; sharing personal problems.
3. Seeking advice — e.g., how to improve English, how to prepare for benchmarking test (a government initiative to establish language benchmarks for English teachers); how to prepare for teaching practice.

*Can you recommend some classic comedies to me? I really want to read more. But it seems to me that there are too many books in the world. It is not easy to find a start point.*

*I want to ask you something about the preparation for benchmark exam. I have started reading English newspaper and some books about grammar. I really want to improve my writing since it is going to be the hardest part for me. Are there any tips for preparation?*

4. Asking questions / seeking clarification about points raised in class — e.g., how to teach grammar communicatively, how to conduct a reading lesson.

*As for grammar teaching, I know that it's important but I am a bit confused because someone sometime told me that task-based teaching is THE thing and not PPP. The latter is outdated. Now, I think eclectic approach should be used and grammar teaching is a foundation for more difficult tasks. But, are we now using PPP, but only incorporate an element of task-based teaching? Or are they separate things? I am a bit confused as I am trying to relate them.*

5. Expressing preservice teacher thoughts and concerns — e.g., worries about classroom discipline, feeling of inadequacy; comments on willingness or determination to try their best.

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*I feel it is quite difficult to use open questions, such as genuine questions. I have a lot of plans but I am worried about several things. First, students would think that they could not learn a foreign language unless they do a lot of drilling exercises. They may prefer being told what to memorize, what to copy down ...*

6. Discussing professional issues — e.g., whether Cantonese should be used in English lessons, how to teach reading effectively.

*Well, I'm thinking of the application. I have only got some very brief ideas: (1) pre-task to arouse their interests; (2) explicitly explain some reading strategies, such as read the title and pictures; (3) ask ss to read silently; (4) go through the text with ss, comprehending the text by thinking aloud. Guessing difficult words with them. Asking meaningful questions at the same time. (5) ask them some deeper level questions.*

7. Drawing upon personal history / Personalizing learning — e.g., drawing upon personal history to support or refute a certain approach.

*Do you know how I learned English when I studied F1? Before reading lessons, we had to check all the new words. We were forbidden to use English-Chinese dictionary. We must use English dictionary to check the meaning of new words. When we met another unknown word in checking the explanation of the original words, we needed to check for that word. At that time, checking English vocabulary was a never-ending and tedious task for me!!! Learning English was like in the hell. I cannot remember what I learned but only the unpleasant experience. When I am a teacher, I will never impose such unreasonable task for my students. I deeply believe that whenever we make a decision, we have to consider our students. My job is to facilitate their interest and motivate them in learning.*

8. Sharing ideas about English language teaching resources — e.g., using online web-sites like the Radio Hong Kong Television (RTHK) and Webster web-sites to improve English.

*I found the web-site of RTHK very useful. On that site, we can download English news for every hour. So whenever I have time, I can hear the news. What's more, I can listen to the news and read the script of the news at the same time.*

9. Self-evaluation / reflection after microteaching, teaching practice, part-time teaching — i.e., evaluating own practice.

*I was very nervous during the microteaching, even the students were my classmates. What I wanted to do was to finish the lesson as soon as possible . . . I am also worry about my classroom language. I find that I made mistake quite often.*

10. Commenting on cognitive changes.

*Last time I talked about grammar teaching and task-based approaches. After reading your reply and the article on communicative approach and grammar teaching, it is much clearer for me now. I am more convinced that teaching grammar and teaching it in an interesting way is important.*



In what ways did the dialogue journals promote the student teachers' depth of understanding of issues in teaching and in English language teaching in particular? As stated by Cole et al. (1998), reflection helps these preservice teachers "develop as teachers, bringing them to a new understanding of current issues" (p.565). Through writing dialogue journals, the preservice teachers indicated that they had developed a deeper understanding of the complexity of the issues involved in English language teaching, and of the fact that there are no quick fixes in education. The extract below shows Winifred's (pseudonyms are used in the paper) reflection after a series of lessons on the teaching of reading. She said in her journal that the lessons had enlarged her views about reading. She used to think of the teaching of reading in terms of reading a passage aloud, explaining some difficult vocabulary and getting students to answer a few comprehension questions. In her journal, however, Winifred said that the teaching of reading is much more than that:

*From the last reading lesson, I have learned how to divide a reading lesson into pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. It is important to teach them various reading strategies in order to train them to be independent and empowered readers (not depend on dictionary or teacher's word-by-word explanation). I agree that a teacher has to activate students' schema and get their interests in the pre-reading stage, and check their understanding in the while-reading stage and further consolidate their knowledge through some post-reading exercises and work.*

Winifred went on to say:

*Actually, I found that even if a student knows how to practice skimming, scanning, reading for gist, guessing and a list of reading strategies, he may still have problem in understanding the passage.*

Indeed, Winifred became more aware of the complexity involved in the teaching of reading, and that there is much more to reading than skimming, scanning, etc. In the extract below, another student teacher, Sally, came to the realization that although the communicative approach and task-based learning are good in theory, it is not easy to implement these approaches in the local classrooms:

*Communicative approach and task-based learning are really good ideas. However, in Hong Kong, it is quite difficult to adopt in our classroom. Not all the students are interested in learning English, so if the teacher asks them to talk in English freely, they will just talk in front of the teacher. As soon as the teacher walks away, they switch to Cantonese and continue their conversation. We, as teachers, should pay lots of effort to change their attitude to learning English. Since not all the students have the 'habit' of being taught by communicative and task-based approach before, we have to try very hard to alter their 'habit'. This can be done neither by a single ambitious teacher nor by only the language teachers but all subject teachers. The whole community of teaching profession has to cooperate to help the students become better learners.*

Like Winifred, Sally developed a better understanding of the complexity

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English language teaching entails. She realized that educational change to a large extent hinges on the concerted effort of committed teachers.

The journal data shows that through reflection, these preservice teachers had narrowed the gap between reality and practice and “come to their own judgments as to what works and what does not work in their classroom” (Tsang & Wong, 1996, p.24). For example, in the extract below, Ruby recommended using an eclectic approach in teaching English:

*After some consideration on grammar-translation, CLT and TBL, I have come to an idea that it is most efficient to combine all approaches in the lesson, i.e., eclecticism. On one hand, students can hardly understand or memorize materials taught in class if there is no explanation on the subject matter, as proved by the Spanish lesson. On the other hand, traditional way of teaching grammar is boring and quite meaningless. Therefore, it is best to combine all the approaches so that the students can understand and remember the grammatical rules as well as using the language to communicate in meaningful tasks. In this way, the advantages of all the approaches can be extracted provided that the teachers handle it well.*

More importantly, through articulating their views about issues regarding ELT, the preservice teachers become more certain of their own goals and aspirations as prospective teachers. For instance, Helen asserted her beliefs about the use of English in the language classroom:

*I prefer using English all the time. The more exposure to the target language, the more the students can learn. If they come to ask me anything about English, I will definitely talk to them in English, if they talk about other matters. I may use Cantonese. Since they may not have the proficiency to talk in English about other things and it is more comfortable to express their own feelings in their mother tongue.*

Another student teacher, Carly, reaffirmed her interest in English language teaching in her journal:

*To be an English teacher need tons of bravery. But I really enjoy every step of teaching as well as learning.*

Whether their beliefs are shared, challenged or reaffirmed by the teacher educator in her responses, the preservice teachers develop a sense of ownership over their ideas through formulating and reformulating them, confirming their own principles and beliefs. As Burton and Carroll (2001) say, “Through journal writing, learners, whether language learners or teacher learners, can increase their awareness of how they learn and, hence, deepen their control over their own development” (p.1). The extract below shows how Daisy developed her renewed understanding and transformed her view of task-based learning, as well as a sense of ownership over her ideas:

*You change my view on TBL (task-based learning). Concerning about the TBL, I think that my view on it is getting more positive. Before listening to your*

*explanation on this approach, I thought that TBL is a time-consuming approach because the grammar rule is not explicitly taught. Yet, my view changed after a stage of “rethinking.” I think that sometimes students’ attention can be drawn by providing with them some interesting tasks and let them draw their own conclusion of what they have actually learned. I come to think that perhaps it is better to let students “take the stage” and let them really think about the grammar rules implicitly stated in this task. So, what should the teacher do then? I think, teacher can stand “behind the stage” and act as a “bridge-builder” to bridge the information gap between teacher and students. He or she can respond to students’ questions and let them jump to their own conclusion. With this “self-deducing knowledge”, I think and hope that students can store the knowledge in their Long Term instead of Short Term Memory. (Thanks for your explanation on TBL)*

Indeed, dialogue journal writing helps preservice teachers become more ‘professional,’ in that they become better at articulating and justifying their own practices (see Burton & Carroll, 2001) and at critical thinking.

Last but not least, dialogue journal writing made the preservice teachers realize the importance of reflection as part of their ongoing professional development. Christy said:

*The only way I can keep improving myself is to do self-reflection. Without reflection, a teacher works without changing.*

Another preservice teacher had something similar to say:

*A teacher who always does self-reflection can often think of different ways to improve his/her teaching, and hence improvement will be found ... Seeing students’ improvement will make a teacher think that teaching is a rewarding job and thus, a sense of interest will be further rooted. Once you enjoy teaching, you love your job, so as your students.*

### **Participants’ Perceptions of Benefits of and Problems with Dialogue Journals**

Students’ perceptions of the benefits of and problems with dialogue journals were obtained from an evaluation questionnaire, follow-up interviews, and follow-up e-mails.

(1) *Evaluation questionnaire*: The evaluation questionnaire asked the student teachers to respond to a number of statements on a 4-point likert scale regarding the benefits of dialogue journals. The findings showed that students agreed that dialogue journal writing is an effective means to:

1. individualize learning (100%)
2. foster a personal collaborative relationship between the teacher educator and student teachers (100%)

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3. encourage reflection (94.5%)
4. help student teachers make sense of their experience (94%)
5. share experiences (88.9%)
6. build confidence (83.3%)

A full 77.8% of the prospective teachers enjoyed dialogue journal writing, and 88.9% of them found it a beneficial experience. All of them felt that the teacher educator's responses were useful. When asked if they thought dialogue journal writing should be made a compulsory component for the next batch of prospective teachers, 61%, a lower percentage, agreed. The lower percentage could be explained by the fact that since dialogue journal writing was not the 'norm' within the institution where the study was conducted (e.g., another group of preservice teachers majoring in English, not taught by this researcher, did not ask her student teachers to submit dialogue journals), if given the choice some teacher learners might not like to do it. This is not hard to explain, given that there are enough assignments in a teacher education program to keep teacher trainees busy. Also, the culture of learning among Chinese, which is often characterized as passive, may explain the result. My experience as a teacher educator has confirmed that often teacher trainees prefer to be told what they should do and it is not easy to get them to think. The results of the study, therefore, point to the dilemma teacher educators may be faced with in implementing dialogue journals. If dialogue journals are made compulsory, some student teachers may resist it, especially initially. This is especially so if there is little institutional support for the pedagogical activity. On the other hand, if dialogue journal writing is treated as an optional or additional activity, it may attract only the most motivated teacher learners, who may already be inclined towards a reflective stance in their approach to learning.

In the open-ended question students were asked to add other comments about dialogue journals. Overall, there were four different types of suggestions. First it was suggested that some topics be provided for student teachers and that they could be encouraged to talk about things other than the course work. Second, my student teachers seemed to be concerned about the workload involved in dialogue journal writing and suggested less frequent submission. Another suggestion was that the teacher educator could perhaps write a journal for the class every week. This suggestion could indicate that the prospective teachers might have found it difficult to engage in reflective dialogue journal writing because they had no idea about what it entailed. It would have been useful, therefore, for the teacher educator to provide more explicit guidelines about the writing of journals and model how reflective thinking could be realized through journal writing. Lastly, a student teacher suggested some follow-up work be done with the prospective teachers upon completion of the course, which showed that some of them might have been keen

on using dialogue journals as a means of developing and sustaining reflective thinking when they became full-time teachers.

(2) *Data from follow-up interviews*: In order to collect more in-depth data about students' views of dialogue journals, five student teachers were randomly selected and interviewed individually. The interviews were conducted in English. They were asked about the advantages and disadvantages of dialogue journals, and if they had further suggestions to make. The data was transcribed and summarized below. On the whole, the student teachers thought that dialogue journals encourage reflection and thinking, promote better understanding between teacher and students, and allow them to discuss issues not yet fully explored in class. Some benefits about dialogue journals, in addition to those covered in the evaluation questionnaires, are presented below:

◆ **Enjoyment** — The student teachers enjoyed talking about things beyond the classroom, which helped take away the tension. They enjoyed the freedom of expression and derived pleasure from the sharing process.

◆ **Getting advice from the teacher educator** — My prospective teachers thought that they could learn a lot from my responses. They thought that as a teacher educator I was resourceful, gave good advice, stimulated them to think, and was inspiring. In replying to their journals, they saw me playing multiple roles - encouraging, assisting and counselling them; instructing and guiding them; and attending to their various needs — emotional, personal, academic, etc. One student remarked:

*You are a very good listener. I can learn something from your responses. You are very resourceful and you give me some very good and useful advice. You stimulate me to think more and sometimes inspire me to think from other angles.*

◆ **Taking responsibility for learning** — They have learned to take initiative in learning, e.g., initiating topics for discussion with the teacher educator through dialogue journals.

◆ **Relevance to their future teaching** — They thought that dialogue journal writing is also applicable to the secondary classroom — e.g., they can ask their own students to write them regular journals. One student teacher said:

*I can apply this idea to the secondary classroom if I have time. Apart from e-mail journals, I can ask my student to write what they think about my lessons, what they have learned, if they enjoy my lessons, etc. in a monthly journal.*

Regarding the problems related to dialogue journals, several points were raised during the interviews:

◆ **Lack of ideas** — Some student teachers thought that it was not always easy to come up with ideas. One of them said,

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*Sometimes I did not have much to say, so I made up something and pushed myself to think. I don't think it's good. When you don't have much to say but you have to say something, it's quite meaningless.*

However, some students could think of the benefit of being “forced” to think:

*Sometimes it forced me to think about something you'd talked about in the lesson. I could clarify some minor things I misunderstood.*

◆ Lack of time — The time problem did not come as a surprise at all (see Garmon, 2001). Since the teacher preparation course lasted only one year, the student teachers often had to juggle the demands of the course. One student teacher remarked:

*Reflections are useful, but time is a problem.*

◆ Difficulty to sustain interest — In the first semester all my prospective teachers submitted their dialogue journals punctually. However, in the second semester, some of them began to slacken off. From the interviews, I discovered a possible explanation for this change. One student commented:

*We had fewer ideas and we were preoccupied with other things. We had to look for jobs.*

One plausible reason to explain the diminished interest in dialogue journal writing in the second term could be that the student teachers were preoccupied with different activities, such as job-hunting, preparation for benchmarking tests, and meeting assignment deadlines. Also, in the first term, when they were still trying to find their feet, they might have found dialogue journals a good way to ease their pressure, especially because they could ask questions and seek advice from me through their dialogue journals. In fact, it is possible that some of my student teachers were more interested in dialogue journal writing as a means of getting advice from the teacher educator than in using dialogue journals as a tool for developing individual reflection. Also, some student teachers might have had certain misunderstanding of the meaning of *reflection*, polarizing practice and reflection as if they could not co-exist. One student remarked:

*Maybe I think practice is more important than ideas in the second term. In the first term I had no ideas and no chance to practice so the ideas were useful, but in the second term I could have more chances to practice. It's more valuable to have practice rather than saying, talking, engaging in some reflections.*

According to this student teacher, she began to lose interest in dialogue journals in the second term because she had more opportunities to try out different ideas, and as a result, there was no need to engage in reflection. This comment suggests that

though dialogue journals are a useful way to promote reflection, the notion of reflective thinking may have to be more explicitly taught.

(3) *Data from students' evaluative comments through e-mail*: In order to supplement the data gathered from the student questionnaires and selected follow-up interviews, I also asked my student teachers to evaluate this channel of communication in their last e-mail dialogue journal by focusing on: (1) what they liked about dialogue journal writing; (2) what they didn't like about it; and (3) whether they think it should be made compulsory for the next group of full-time PGDE student teachers. Below I summarize the comments which have not been raised in the evaluation questionnaires and the interviews. Regarding what they liked about dialogue journals, my prospective teachers mentioned some additional points as follows:

- ◆ My prompt responses, long replies (longer than their messages), and “tailor-made” answers to their questions. One student teacher said,

*It's very encouraging to have your prompt reply and your opinions are the support for me when I'm in doubt.*

- ◆ Freedom to write because there was no assigned topic and no word limit.
- ◆ Developing independent learning habits.
- ◆ Building up own teaching philosophy, gaining insights into English language teaching, and co-constructing knowledge with me.
- ◆ Polishing writing skills.

What they did not like about dialogue journals mainly concerns the lack of time and lack of ideas, as already discussed in the follow-up interviews. When they were asked to give other suggestions about dialogue journals, several new ideas were mentioned:

- ◆ Asking students to print out the dialogue journals so that they compile them into a portfolio. The student teacher added,

*By reading the journals again in the future, students can easily revise what ideas of teaching English that been generated (I found this very useful when preparing for job interviews). Moreover, the black-and-white copies of dialogue journals will also increase the students' motivation to write and their satisfaction after successfully exchanging ideas with the teacher.*

- ◆ Giving student teachers some choice as to when to submit the journals instead of making it a regular weekly activity: e.g., having student teachers hand in five journal entries in a semester whenever they like; allowing them to talk about different topics in different pieces of writing, not necessarily restricted by what they have learned in the lessons; and allowing them to choose the time they want to submit the journals.

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When asked if they would agree that dialogue journals should be made compulsory for the next cohort of prospective teachers, most of the student teachers (15 out of 18) answered in the affirmative. Interestingly, when students were invited to give qualitative comments on this question, more students answered in the affirmative than when they were asked to respond to a scale in the questionnaire. One of the student teachers, however, raised doubt about making dialogue journal writing compulsory. He said,

*I think journal writing should not be made compulsory. If the student has something to say, I am sure he/she will start writing. There is no point in pushing people to do things if they don't want to, or if they don't have the mood to do so.*

Although lack of ideas is a problem raised by most of the preservice teachers, it was generally felt that dialogue journal writing is worth promoting. One of them remarked:

*If it is not compulsory most students will eventually write nothing because of laziness and busy work.*

Another student teacher said:

*Dialogue journal writing is really a good idea. I think it's ok to make it compulsory. It's a good way to let us supervise our own learning progress.*

It is possible that when my preservice teachers were asked to consider this question more seriously by writing down comments, some of them changed their mind and became more positive about whether dialogue journal writing should be made compulsory. However, it is also possible that my preservice teachers said things that they thought I would like to hear. In fact, this caveat about 'subject expectancy' should be noted for all the comments my preservice teachers made about dialogue journal writing throughout the study.

### *Value of Dialogue Journals for the Teacher Educator*

Indeed, my student teachers are not the only ones who benefited from dialogue journal writing. As the teacher educator, I have gained a great deal from this experience. First, dialogue journals provided me with a splendid opportunity to evaluate my own teaching and to find out what worked and what did not work in class (see Bailey, Freeman & Curtis, 2001). For instance, in a student teacher's journal after the first lesson, she raised a query about the focus of my lesson. She wrote in her journal:

*It seems to me that the focus of the lesson is not clear enough. I think it is better for me to follow if the topic of each lesson is clearly stated.*

Although I thought that I did explain my lesson objectives clearly in my first lesson, upon reflection I had to admit the following in my reply to her:

*Your query about the objective of my lesson is very interesting. As your teacher,*



*I feel that I've made my objective quite clear. But in reality, you as one of my students are not too clear about it. This brings home the message that what we think we have done as teachers does not always get across to our students.*

My student teacher's comment struck a chord and reminded me to make my lesson objectives much more explicit. Another benefit for me from reading my student teachers' dialogue journals was that I found out what issues they were still grappling with after my lessons. I could pick up on issues my student teachers were confused about (e.g., task-based learning, use of L1 in the classroom) and explore them in greater detail together with my prospective teachers. As mentioned by Brinton et al. (1993), dialogue journals can be used as a teaching tool to enable the teacher educator to probe issues that emerge from the journals, to give more individualized attention and direction, and to pose questions to help prospective teachers focus on salient issues. More importantly, through dialogue journals, I could create a supportive learning atmosphere, which in turn helped classroom teaching. I had an excellent relationship with this class of preservice teachers, and I felt that dialogue journals went a long way towards building our trust (see Brinton et al., 1993). Reading dialogue journals also enabled me to understand my student teachers' thinking, what ideas clicked, what ideas did not sink in, how they personalized the public theories, how they drew conclusions from what they had learned, etc. Preservice teacher preparation, as Bailey, Curtis and Nunan (2001) suggest, should focus on "how teachers think, how they conceptualize issues, how they use their beliefs, their experiences, and their pedagogical knowledge" (p.80). Besides, incidental teaching could easily take place through dialogue journals. For instance, I capitalized on a perfect opportunity to teach logical thinking to a student teacher when he argued in favour of the superiority of the traditional approach on the ground that it had produced distinguished scholars and politicians in Hong Kong. That student teacher wrote:

*If you ask me whether I buy the CLT (communicative language teaching) approach, I will say no. The idea is good, but may not work in local classrooms. One question I always want to ask is: why do we need a change? Why do we teachers always have to add so many fancy ideas into our classroom? I benefit well from the traditional Grammar-translation approach, and so do many others. And more than a few decades ago, where CLT had not been so prevalent, how did people learn English? Did Anson Chan learn English in CLT? The people in previous generation learned English far well better than we do in this generation. I really admire Anson Chan and Josiah Lau who can speak PERFECT English. In their generation, CLT had definitely not appeared in local classrooms. But is it a bit ironic that in today's classrooms, in which CLT/TBL (task-based learning) is advocated, Students' English proficiency is declining and their communication skills do not seem so impressive? Is there something wrong with the approach we have adopted?*

Below I extract part of my response:

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*I'm afraid I don't entirely agree with your views. In fact, your arguments don't sound logical. Let me respond in the following ways:*

*1. In HK CLT has not really been successfully implemented. It has virtually existed in name only. How can we blame students' decline in English standards on CLT then?*

*2. The question 'why do we need a change' is a good one. Innovation per se may not be a good thing, and not all innovations lead to desirable outcomes. However, should we also ask: why not change? Why not change to see if things may work better? This inquiry spirit is crucial to educators who strive for excellence. The assumption underlying this attitude, however, is that there are things we are not happy with, and there are things we want to improve.*

*3. Anson Chan and Josiah Lau may be your idols, and they might have benefited tremendously from some specific teaching approaches in vogue in their generations. However, it is not logical to say that when method A works with X and Y, then method A works with everybody and at all times.*

Through challenging my student teacher's assumptions, I attempted to help him explore and discover new alternatives hoping that cognitive change might result (see Yost, Sentner, & Forlenza-Bailey, 2000). Overall, as the teacher educator, I found dialogue journals a very expedient tool through which I could help individual student teachers build confidence, encourage them by providing extra support, and personalize my teaching, all of which I could not have done so well within the classroom, given the time constraint.

#### ***Ways To Make Dialogue Journals More Effective***

My student teachers' feedback on dialogue journals, together with my own reflection as the teacher educator, has provided some insights as to how dialogue journals can be implemented successfully in teacher preparation programs. In order to make dialogue journal writing a beneficial experience for both prospective teachers and teacher educators, the following factors are crucial:

◆ Promptness and thoroughness of the teacher educator's responses: From reading my student teachers' comments, my responses to their journals, which were often prompt and thorough, is a crucial factor in reinforcing them as they engage in the dialogue and in keeping the momentum of the whole enterprise. One of the most skeptical student teachers in my class had the following to say:

*I was impressed by your prompt response. I believe every student would like to share more with the teacher when given quick response.*

Another prospective teacher said:

*And every time I write a piece of dialogue journal you almost reply me immediately*

*and often your reply is longer than what I have written. This makes me feel that my writing is read seriously and it reinforces me to write more.*

In retrospect, whenever my student teachers sent me something, I read and responded promptly and thoroughly. This encouraged them to write me another entry. I believe this is a significant factor in explaining why my student teachers were enthusiastic about writing dialogue journals and were so co-operative with me. Being prompt and thorough in our responses to student teachers' dialogue journals may be crucial to the successful implementation of dialogue journals.

◆ Flexibility in negotiating topics and number of journal entries with students: In my teacher preparation course, I asked my preservice teachers to submit dialogue journals every week in the first term, but I negotiated with them and reduced the requirement in response to their increased workload. This is sensible and students appreciated my understanding and support. One student said:

*I like the system we used in the second term. We reached an agreement that we should hand in, for example, at least 5 or 6 dialogue journals and we can choose which week to hand in our dialogue journal. Then, we can flexibly arrange our time and discussion topics.*

As suggested by some students, it may be beneficial if certain topics are provided for the student teachers or if questions, especially the more controversial ones, can be posted to stimulate discussions, or if they are allowed to decide when to submit the journals. A certain amount of flexibility, therefore, could be useful.

◆ Providing support and structure to facilitate reflective dialogue journal writing: Some student teachers seemed to be unclear about what reflection involves. In fact, there has been no consensus in the research literature as to what reflection exactly means (Farrell, 2001). As suggested by one prospective teacher, perhaps the teacher educator can write up some reflective journals and share them with the student teachers. In addition, it may help if more explicit guidelines are provided as to how reflective journals can be written. As Richards (1998) says, "Some initial training in reflective writing may well be necessary as a preparation for journal writing" (p.167). A macrostructure or general framework could be provided to facilitate reflection in journal writing, especially when the idea of dialogue journals is first introduced, e.g. giving student teachers some pointers or guiding questions like: What do you think you have learned about the teaching of writing? How were you taught as a student? Will you teach your own students differently? Why? Alternatively, as suggested by Santana-Williamson (2001), the teacher educator could read journal entries critically and discuss with teacher learners what is and what is not reflection. For example, a pure description of a teaching method is not

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reflection, whereas grounding what they say about a teaching method on concrete evidence counts as reflection. If we guide teacher learners to engage in real critical reflection, dialogue journal writing can become “an effective tool in teacher education” (Santana-Williamson, 2001, p.43).

◆ Using class time to make connections between issues addressed by different student teachers: In this study, interaction was facilitated through dialogue journal writing between the teacher educator and individual student teachers. In fact, the data-rich journals could also have provided extremely useful resources for classroom discussions. Student teachers could have exchanged their journals from time to time, given responses to each other’s journals, and discussed interesting issues in class. This could have made the student teachers less reliant on the teacher educator and exposed them to more voices other than that of the teacher educator. In using dialogue journals the teacher educator could encourage student teachers to make connections between what they observe in classroom practice and the theory they have learned, and generate rich and stimulating discussions in class based on the journal entries. In this way, the journals can be used as a springboard for professional interactions not only between the teacher educator and the student teachers but also among the teacher learners. As suggested by Barkhuizen (1995), journals among preservice teachers can also be exchanged, which can enhance the active construction of new knowledge for all those involved.

◆ Using dialogue journal writing with other reflective activities: Although the results of the study have appeared to be positive overall, one could easily doubt whether my preservice teachers really liked writing reflective journals per se, or whether they simply enjoyed communicating with me during the dialogue journal writing process. The issue at stake, therefore, is: without the teacher educator’s input, responses and stimulation, could these student teachers have written reflectively on their own? Would they have done it? And would they have done it after they finished the course? Would this reflective habit be carried into their first years of teaching? To help make sure that the answers to all these questions are positive, it is crucial that apart from dialogue journals, student teachers are engaged in other reflective activities. For example, they could be asked to write reflective journals during their teaching practicum, where they do not necessarily get instant responses from the teacher educator. This could also help student teachers develop independent writing habits. Reflective writing could be used in other ways: e.g., journals could be exchanged among peers for responses, and in-class discussions about issues raised in reflective journals could be held in class, as mentioned above. In order to promote reflection, dialogue journals should be used in conjunction with

other reflective activities, such as peer observations, using audio and/or video recordings, and action research (see Richards & Lockhart, 1996).

◆ Commitment of the teacher educator: Last but not least, I believe that what makes dialogue journal writing work hinges to a great extent on the commitment of the teacher educator. During the course, I spent considerable time reading and replying to my student teachers' journals each week, which could amount to 8 to 9 hours per week for 18 of them (assuming I spent about half an hour reading and replying each message). As admitted by my colleague who taught the other teacher preparation class, time was a real issue for her:

*I did not insist that everyone does that (i.e., hand in dialogue journals) because I don't want to be loaded with too much work.*

In a similar vein, another colleague working with full-time prospective teachers said that he did not ask them to submit dialogue journals because he "couldn't find sufficient time to respond individually." Indeed, time is a problem not only for prospective teachers but also for the teacher educator. Finding time to read and respond to journals largely depends on the commitment and the conviction of the teacher educator. The importance of teacher commitment is echoed by Zeichner (1992), who thinks that teacher educators should be committed to "helping prospective teachers internalize the dispositions and skills to study their teaching" (p.297).

◆ Institutional support: Integrating dialogue journal writing into teacher education programs as a major activity: Teacher commitment alone, however, does not suffice if the institutional culture does not support dialogue journal writing as a useful pedagogical activity in teacher education. If dialogue journal writing is used as a peripheral activity by a small minority of teacher educators, for example, it is hard to convince teacher trainees that dialogue journal writing is a worthwhile activity that helps develop their reflectivity. In the study, although some student teachers identified the lack of time and lack of ideas as things that they did not like about dialogue journals, the overall feedback was favorable. Many of the student teachers were aware of the fact that if dialogue journals had not been compulsory, they would not have done them. If dialogue journal writing is treated as an optional activity, it is very likely that only those enthusiastic prospective teachers will do it, and normally they are in the minority. Even if lack of time was not a factor, journals would tend to be treated as peripheral and less significant than other course assignments. They would tend to be considered an extra dimension that could be added or deleted, based on the preference of individual teacher educators. Therefore, it is suggested that dialogue journal writing be integrated into

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teacher education programs as a major activity, i.e., being treated on par with other course assignments.

### **Conclusion**

In my teaching context, perhaps as in many others, there exists a culture of passive learning. Learners in general do not appear to be interested in grappling with the issues they study and observe in the classroom. They need a great deal of help and they need to be pushed to think and reflect. However, as the findings of this study suggest, once the process is begun, they can do it and some of them may find that they enjoy writing reflective journals. This investigation shows that dialogue journals can be used as a multi-purpose tool in preservice teacher education. They can serve as a teaching tool for the teacher educator and provide a venue for developing reflection skills that are crucial to teacher development. A reflective approach to teacher preparation, as suggested by Williams (1994), should emphasize reflecting on experience and theorizing from it, valuing trainees' experience, as well as trainees and trainers learning from each other. Indeed, my own dialogue journal writing experience with the 18 prospective teachers has demonstrated that both the teacher educator and student teachers benefit considerably from the process. The ultimate goal of dialogue journals is to enable preservice teachers to reach higher levels of thinking and to produce teachers who will engage in critical reflection independently. Sze (1999), however, warns that journal writing per se may not necessarily lead to critical reflection. Ways have, therefore, to be sought to promote critical reflection in dialogue journal writing. It is also important that dialogue journal writing be used together with other activities that enhance and sustain critical reflection in teacher preparation courses. Although dialogue journals can create habits of mind that are conducive to reflective practice, it is crucial that reflective habits be carried into prospective teachers' first years of teaching and foster continuing professional development (Lyons, 1998). How institutional culture can support or impede this particular pedagogy of teacher education is interesting and warrants further research.

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## **Appendix 1**

### *Dialogue Journal Writing*

This questionnaire aims to find out your views about dialogue journal writing. Your responses will be treated confidentially.

1. Based on your dialogue journal writing experience on this course, to what extent do you agree with each of the following? Circle the relevant box with reference to the scale below.

<b>Dialogue journal writing is an effective means to ...</b>	<b>Strongly agree</b> <b>4</b>	<b>Agree</b> <b>3</b>	<b>Disagree</b> <b>2</b>	<b>Strongly disagree</b> <b>1</b>
individualize learning	4	3	2	1
foster a personal collaborative relationship between the teacher educator and student teachers	4	3	2	1
encourage reflections	4	3	2	1
help student teachers make sense of their experience	4	3	2	1
share experiences	4	3	2	1
build confidence	4	3	2	1



2. Answer the following questions by circling the relevant box according to the scale below.

To what extent do you	To a large extent 4	To some extent 3	To a small extent 2	To a limited extent 1
enjoy writing dialogue journals?	4	3	2	1
find dialogue journal writing a beneficial experience?	4	3	2	1
find the teacher educator's responses to your dialogue journals useful?	4	3	2	1
think dialogue journal writing should be made a compulsory element of the SCT (English) component of the full-time PGDE program?	4	3	2	1

3. Are there any other things about dialogue journal writing you would like to add?

## Appendix 2

### Post-Study Interview

Interview Guide:

- ◆ How did you find the dialogue journal writing experience? (Did you find it boring or did you find it enjoyable?)
- ◆ Can you think of some advantages and disadvantages of writing dialogue journals?
- ◆ What roles do you think the teacher should play in giving responses to students' dialogue journals?
- ◆ In what other ways could I have responded to your dialogue journal entries? (i.e., did you find my responses satisfactory? Anything which I should have done but I haven't done? What other things should I bear in mind when I give students responses?)