

Part 3: Inquiry into instructional practices

Critical reflection: Developing teacher and learner autonomy through journals and class newsletters



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ABOUT JODIE

I first traveled to Japan as a college student on a one-year exchange program. Ten years later, I am still in Japan and still learning. When not in the classroom, I can sometimes be found in a yoga class or exploring Tokyo on my mountain bike.

大学生の時、初めて一年間の交換留学プログラムで日本に来ました。十年後の今もまだ日本で、私は様々なことを学んでいます。教室にいないときは、ヨガのクラスにいたり、マウンテン・バイクで東京を探索していたりすることもあります。

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the ways in which reflective journals and class newsletters enhanced learning and supported autonomy in a range of university English classes over a one-year period. Students were asked to write their reflections about each lesson in journals for homework. Selected comments from the journals were compiled into newsletters and distributed to students the following lesson. Examples of incidents from three classes are used to show how this journal and newsletter system raised teacher and student awareness of obstacles to the learning process and stimulated reflection and dialogue as well as changes in attitudes and behavior. This is followed by a discussion of the benefits of the journal and newsletter system from the point of view of teachers and students. This chapter ends with guidelines for teachers who are interested in using a similar system with their students.

本論文は、リフレクティブ・ジャーナルと、授業で配布されたニュースレターを使い、一年間を通じて各レベルの大学英語クラスの学習効果を上げ、オートノミーを成長させた方法について論ずる。学生は、それぞれの授業についての感想を、宿題としてジャーナルに書くよう指示を受けた。教師がジャーナルからコメントを抜粋し、ニュースレターとして編集し、次の授業で配布した。まず三クラスからの事例を基に、このジャーナルとニュースレターのシステムが、教師と学生の学習段階における障害の認識を高め、考察と話し合いを奨励し、心境と行動の変化を起こしたことを示す。次に教師と学生の視点から、ジャーナルとニュースレターのシステムの利点を論じる。本章の最後では、同じようなシステムを学生のために使いたいと考えている教師のため、ガイドラインを示す。

BACKGROUND

“Reflection is intrinsic to learning.” (Boud, 1999, p.2)

As a teenager and young adult, I often used a journal to reflect on what was happening in my life. In it I regularly wrote about my personal goals and relationships, and the events in my life, but I never used it to reflect on my learning at school or university. And throughout most of my education, I never had teachers who encouraged me to reflect critically on what and how I was learning. This changed, however, when I was in graduate school. The tutors of a course in autonomous learning used various tasks to stimulate critical reflection. Classroom activities prompted us to reflect on our roles in the class, the nature of the learning process, and our reactions to different learning tasks. For homework, we were required to keep a reading response journal and a teaching reflection journal, and we shared these reflections with our classmates and tutors via email. This constant reflection, I believe, ultimately helped us all to learn more effectively (Kohyama, Stephenson & Jorgenson, 2002), and these experiences as a graduate student helped me to realize that not only is reflection intrinsic to learning (Boud, 1999), but reflection is indispensable if *real* learning is to occur.

In an attempt to encourage critical reflection in the classes I was teaching, I started asking students to write their comments about the lesson in journals, and I included some of those comments in class newsletters like those described by Murphey (1997). There were mixed reactions to the journals and newsletters. Some students just scribbled a few comments, some students frequently forgot to write or submit their journals, and a few students wrote pages of comments. Some students seemed to enjoy reading the newsletters, while others seemed to barely glance at them before pushing them aside or putting them away. As writing and submitting the journals required a considerable investment of students' time and effort, and reading the journals and compiling the newsletters consumed about one hour of my time for each class, I began to wonder whether the journals were really worth the effort. Did the benefits justify the time and effort put in?

With this question in mind, I set out to more deeply explore, from the perspectives of both teacher and student, the benefits of reflective journal writing and class newsletters.

What follows in this chapter are some of my discoveries from the first year of using reflection journals and class newsletters in a variety of English classes in a Japanese university.

I begin this chapter by briefly defining reflection and autonomous learning and describing how these concepts are inter-related. I then describe my teaching context, and the way in which journals and newsletters were used in my classes. Drawing on observations of three classes, results of questionnaires, and my own experiences using a journal to reflect on language learning, I next focus on the benefits of journals and newsletters. I conclude by trying to draw together the lessons learned from this research in a list of guidelines for those considering using reflection journals and class newsletters in their classes.

REFLECTION AND AUTONOMOUS LEARNING

“In formal educational contexts, the most successful learners are autonomous...they accept responsibility for their learning, [and] they constantly reflect on [their learning].” (Little, 1999, p.13)

Before going into the details of the present study, it is helpful to clarify what reflection is, why it is important, and how it is connected to autonomous learning. According to Boud (1999):

... reflection involves learners processing their experience in a wide range of ways, exploring their understanding of what they are doing, why they are doing it and the impact it has on themselves and others...Reflection is intrinsic to learning and occurs whether it is prompted or not. Informal reflection...occurs all the time; or rather it is occurring if teachers manage to avoid constructing their own activities in ways which inhibit it happening. (pp.2-3)

Although learners may naturally reflect on their learning, not all reflection is necessarily helpful to learning. Successful learners are able to critically reflect in a way that moves them forward in their learning. They are able to identify and overcome problems. This is not necessarily the case for all learners. For some learners, critical reflection is a skill which has to be learned and practiced (Robles, 1998). The ability to reflect critically is also an important part of both preparation for and the process of autonomous learning.

Autonomous learners are able take control of all aspects of their learning (Holec, 1981; Benson, 2002), and in order to do this they need to develop greater metacognitive awareness (Sinclair, 2000). In other words, before students can start taking more responsibility for their learning, they need to have the ability to reflect on what, why, and how they are learning. As students become more autonomous and are more involved in making decisions about their learning, they continue to use this metacognitive capacity to help them to “step back from what they are doing and reflect upon this in order to make decisions about what they next need to do and experience” (Breen & Mann, 1997, p.135). Reflection, therefore, both helps to prepare learners to take more responsibility for their learning, and is necessary as they exercise control over their learning. This ability to reflect is especially important in formal educational contexts, as Little (1999) states:

In formal educational contexts the most successful learners are autonomous. That is, they accept responsibility for their learning; they constantly reflect on what they are learning, why they are learning, how they are learning, and with what degree of success; and their learning is fully integrated with the rest of what they are. (p.13)

Let us now go on to investigate how the greater cognitive awareness can be developed through journal writing and class newsletters.

INVESTIGATING REFLECTIVE JOURNALS AND NEWSLETTERS

THE STUDENTS

In the year that I conducted the present study, I used journals with nine classes (a total of approximately 180 students) at a private university in Saitama, about one hour from central Tokyo. All students were non-English majors, and the classes were broadly streamed based on TOEIC scores, and grouped according to year of study and, in all but two classes, major. The exceptions were two high-level first year speaking classes, which consisted of students with TOEIC scores over 600 points, from four departments. All classes were skill-based—focusing mainly on speaking, listening, or reading skills—and the total range of TOEIC scores for the nine classes was from 250 to over 700 points. All classes met once a week for 90 minutes.

THE JOURNALS

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Name: _____ • During the lesson I felt: _____ • I used _____% English. • I brought / didn't bring my textbook. • I brought / didn't bring my dictionary. <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What did you do in class today? 2. What did you learn today? 3. What was interesting or useful for you? Why? 4. What was difficult or not useful for you? Why? 5. Comments, questions, etc. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partner's name: _____ • I understood _____% of what Jodie said. • I did / didn't do my homework.
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Figure 1. Reflection journal template

For the first few lessons of the semester, I printed out the journal templates (Figure 1) on A4 paper and distributed them to students. Students completed the journals for homework, and submitted them two or three days after the lesson. With the goal of giving students opportunities for authentic language practice outside of our one 90-minute lesson per week, I asked them to write their comments in English. I read each journal before I planned the next lesson, noting common themes, and interesting comments and questions. When time permitted, I compiled comments and questions from the journals into class newsletters, which I distributed in class the following week (see Figure 2 for an example). As I did not have enough time to compile newsletters for every class each week, and also because there were often not enough student comments in one week to fill a newsletter, most classes received newsletters once every two or three weeks. However, students in the two first-year advanced speaking classes received newsletters almost every week. In general, these students wrote more in their journals than students in the other classes, and the students in one of these classes in particular took great interest in reading and discussing the newsletters.

After students became familiar with the journal format and the procedure, I no longer

prepared copies for them. Instead, they wrote their comments in a notebook, using the questions on the template as a guide. Notebooks were chosen so that students had all of their comments in one place and could therefore easily look back over them and note any significant changes over time.

I did not usually correct any spelling or grammatical mistakes in the journals because I was more interested in having students communicate their ideas than having them write perfectly. The preoccupation with university entrance exams in the Japanese education system causes many students to see English communication as “a never-ending flow of right and wrong answers. Each word out of the mouth, each word off the tip of a pen is a test” (McCornick, 2001, p.8). I did not want to promote this way of thinking and increase the “fear and negative emotions” (McCornick, 1997, p.9) that block many students from communicating authentically in English. Instead, I wanted to build students’ confidence in their ability to use the English that they already knew to begin to express their own meanings.

I was teaching at one school and had an office on campus where students could submit their notebooks, and where I could store them until the next lesson, so the notebooks were a feasible option for me. However, for teachers who are teaching at more than one school, or who do not have ample storage space on campus, a worksheet or electronic format may be more convenient (Carpenter & Stephenson, 2006).

CLASS NEWSLETTERS

When I read through the journals for each class, I took note of comments and questions that I thought would benefit the whole class. If time permitted, I composed a newsletter with these comments and questions, and gave this to students in class the following week (refer to Figure 2 for an example). To protect anonymity and encourage students to write honest comments in their journals, the authors’ names were not included in the newsletters. To boost students’ confidence in their ability to communicate in English, minimal changes were made to comments that were included in the newsletters. Spelling and basic grammatical mistakes were corrected, but other corrections were avoided where possible.

I sometimes included my responses to the students’ comments and questions in the newsletters, or spent time in the lesson discussing the comments with the whole class, or having students discuss the comments in small groups. At other times, I just asked students to read the newsletter on their own either in class or at home.

This particular newsletter shows the range of wide range of topics that students write about in their journals. We will focus on the newsletters in more detail below.

STORIES FROM THE CLASSROOM

The following stories, which are taken from three different classes, exemplify the ways in which the journals and newsletters can help students and teachers to take greater control of what happens in the classroom.

CLASS A — A SECOND-YEAR READING CLASS

One student in Class A complained in his journal that the classroom was uncomfortable—there were too many desks and it was difficult to move around. I had also been feeling that there were problems with the room, and was wondering what to do about it. By including that student’s initial complaint about the desks in the newsletter, a class discussion on the

Journal Jottings Comments on last week's lesson:	English 142: Speech Communication Fall Semester - Week 8
<p><i>What did you do today?</i></p> <p>Today we learned the discussion leader's job. After that we practiced discussion in small group and 3 topics. We learned some Australian English by watching "Nemo".</p> <p><i>What did you learn today?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. It's better to start discussing after we have had time to think about a topic for a few minutes, because everyone can find his or her opinion. 2. I think it is important to disagree with opinions or to have other ideas. By doing this we can discuss a topic more deeply. And also we can know different ideas or ways to think. <p><i>What was interesting or useful for you?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 3. In Ms. Y's class, we pick one person as a discussion leader, so it was very useful to learn how to lead a discussion and I'll use some phrases which I learned today in Ms. Y's class! 4. Good listeners gave me some reaction (for example, "I think so," "That's a good point," "You mean....?") <p><i>What was difficult or not useful for you?</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. It's very difficult to smoothly grease the wheels as a discussion leader because I think that most of us are not used to having discussions in English. 6. Discussion was difficult for me. Although we had thinking time, I couldn't respond to my group members' opinions smoothly. The discussion time was limited so it made me hurry. 7. It was very difficult for me to make myself understood. My tense feeling stopped me from saying my opinion in English. 8. We tended to say our opinions like a presentation. 9. I was embarrassed when listeners didn't show an understanding of what I said. Sometimes I was distressed by their expressionless faces... 10. Our group finished discussing quickly because all members' opinions were very much alike. In that case, what should we do to continue the discussion? <p><i>Other comments or questions</i></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 11. I'm glad to have a chance to study Aussie English from my Australian teacher. 12. There are many international students at this uni. I'd like to be their friend, because it is useful to talk with them in English or other languages. If you know how to contact them, please tell me. 13. I disagree with last week's comment 13! ("I can't understand what he or she said because of grammatical mistakes or lack of fluency") Sure, sometimes we have some difficulty understanding what someone said, but mostly it is because of trivial mistakes and we can understand what he meant through his expression or gesture. I think it's NOT good to be too careful about grammar or fluency. 14. Jodie, when you learned Japanese, what was the most difficult grammar point? 15. The English dictionary said that 'discuss' means to consider by talking something over, but I think in this class, we didn't discuss at all. We just stated our own opinions to each other. Real discussion is to say my ideas to other students who have different views from me, so I think discussion shouldn't require speaking equally, using basic sentences and waiting my turn. If all students are interested in the topic and have clear opinions, our discussion will heat up! 	

Figure 2. A class newsletter

issue was initiated. After considering a few ideas, we first tried rearranging the desks. In their journals that week, students commented that the new arrangement was better than the old, but they felt that the room was still too cramped, and it was bothersome for them to have to rearrange the desks at the beginning and end of every lesson. Next, we tried moving to a much bigger classroom which had desks that were bolted to the floor. Although perhaps not ideal, students agreed that the new room was much more comfortable and we decided to move there permanently.

In this case, one student's comment about a cramped classroom provided a stimulus for dialogue in class and through the journals, and then action, and finally a solution was reached. As the students had been involved in this decision-making, it was a solution that they were satisfied with.

CLASS B - A SECOND-YEAR READING CLASS

Each week there were a number of latecomers to Class B's Monday morning lesson. This was a particular problem as there were no spare desks in the classroom, and the only way to enter the room was through a door at the front of the room next to the blackboard. When students came late, they were unable to slip in unnoticed, and they disrupted the lesson as they struggled to get past other students and find an empty seat. One student raised this issue in her journal, saying that it bothered her that the whole class had to stop every time someone came in late.

After reading that comment in the newsletter, other students expressed similar sentiments. Wanting to address this issue, I tried to initiate a discussion in class, but this proved difficult. Only a few students had the confidence and the willingness to express their opinions in English to the class (the class had a mostly English policy). As we were dealing with a touchy subject, I assumed that some students were also worried about offending their classmates and threatening the group's status quo. I suggested that we continue the discussion through the journals, and that week many students who had not spoken up in class took the time to write comments or suggestions. When they read these comments in the newsletter the following week, the latecomers were able to realize how their actions affected the rest of the class. One of the students who had frequently been late even apologized for the inconvenience her tardiness had caused and promised to change her ways. After a few weeks of dialogue, a solution was eventually reached when the class as a whole decided that tardy students be required to do extra homework. The number of tardy students began to decrease, and the atmosphere in the classroom improved.

Through this dialogue about punctuality, we were eventually able to create an environment that was more conducive to learning. Students who were annoyed at lessons being interrupted by latecomers felt better after their frustrations had been heard. On the other hand, complaints from their peers helped some latecomers to realize that their actions had negative consequences not only for their own learning, but for the rest of the class as well, and this was just the push they needed to make the extra effort to come to class on time.

CLASS C – A FIRST-YEAR SPEAKING CLASS

Soon after the first lesson, a student in Class C began to express anxiety about his speaking ability in his journal. He thought that his speaking ability was lower than everyone else's and that he was the only one having difficulty in the class. After reading about this student's insecurities in the newsletter, a few of the other students began to share their own anxieties about the class in their journals. By including these students' comments in subsequent

newsletters, and bringing it to the attention of the whole class when the newsletters were distributed, everyone became aware that some students were feeling insecure in class. Realizing that they were not alone, the students who had voiced their insecurities gradually began to relax and lower their affective filters.

After initially raising the group's awareness of this issue, I encouraged the class to be patient and understanding, and to think of ways in which they could help each other. Students were encouraged to recognize their own linguistic strengths and weaknesses, and to look for opportunities to both help and learn from their classmates. We also spent some time reviewing the course goals and making sure that all students had set realistic expectations for themselves. In addition, class time was dedicated to practicing communication strategies, with a focus on building students' confidence and skills in communicating with words that they already knew.

I feel that my English is better because I always try to speak with English words which I already know. Before I took this class, I didn't think I could talk in English unless I knew difficult words. (Daisuke)

The journals became a forum for students to record their successes as well as their difficulties. Some students reported that using the communication strategies we had practiced in class had increased their confidence and improved their speaking ability. Others did not necessarily feel that their speaking ability had improved, but commented that their anxiety levels had decreased and that they were enjoying communicating in English.

Some students were really trying to encourage and support their classmates and this was reflected in their journal comments. They praised each others' positive attitudes as well as their speaking skills. When students read these positive comments about themselves in the newsletters, their confidence was boosted and they were motivated to keep trying hard.

Even when students expressed frustration in their journals, there were often positive results. The following comment enabled me to identify areas of need.

My partner took a long time to tell me about his newspaper article. I wanted to help him, but I didn't know how. (Mariko)

After reading this comment, we spent some time in class practicing questioning and clarifying techniques, and reporting and rehearsal strategies to build speaking and listening skills. As they read this comment in the newsletter, anxious students may have been encouraged to know that their classmates were sensitive to their needs and were actively seeking ways to support them.

Unlike classes A and B, whose problems were not directly related to the content of the class, the problems in Class C were directly related to the content of the class. Some students were struggling to keep up, but each of these students thought that they were the only ones having difficulty. Sharing these comments with the rest of the class through the newsletter helped anxious students to relax as they realized that they were not alone. Sharing the comments also enabled us all to begin thinking of ways to build up the confidence and the skills of all students, in particular those who had voiced their insecurities. This ultimately fostered a very supportive and collaborative atmosphere in the class.

While the issues raised in the journals in classes A, B, and C were very different, the processes were quite similar. Issues were raised in the journals, discussed in class and/or through the newsletters, and eventually resolved through dialogue and negotiation. The journals and newsletters:

- Encouraged reflection on the learning process and the learning environment

- Provided a non-threatening forum for dialogue and negotiation
- Helped raise awareness, on an individual and group level, of factors that were helping and hindering learning

Once awareness had been raised, we could then begin to seek ways to overcome the problems.

In the next section, we will look at the benefits of journal writing and class newsletters in more detail.

BENEFITS OF THE JOURNALS AND NEWSLETTERS: THE STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVE

The events in Classes A, B, and C, combined with numerous other incidents in other classes, convinced me that the reflection journals and newsletters were useful, for both teacher and student, but I wanted to know what students thought. Ultimately, if students did not think that writing their reflections and reading the newsletters were worthwhile, then they would not put much time or effort into those activities, and would not reap the benefits. I decided to use questionnaires to find out students' attitudes towards the journals and newsletters. Did students think these things were useful, and, if so, in what ways? Could they offer any suggestions for improving the journal system?

THE QUESTIONNAIRE

The questionnaires were administered to two first-year advanced speaking classes. These two classes were chosen as they had received the newsletters regularly. The questionnaires were handed out at the end of the academic year, and students were asked to complete them at home and to submit them with their final reports. It was made clear that what students wrote in the questionnaires would in no way affect their final grades for the class. Out of a total of 40 students in the two classes, 30 students returned the questionnaires.

THE RESULTS: JOURNALS

The first five questions in the questionnaire focused on the journals. In Question 1, all 30 respondents said that writing reflections about the lesson was either useful or very useful.

Q1. Do you think that writing your comments about the lesson in a journal is useful?	
A. Very useful	13
B. Useful	17
C. Not very useful	0
D. Not useful at all	0
Total	30

After selecting the benefits of journal writing in Question 2, students were asked to choose the biggest benefit in Question 3. For more than one third of the students, the biggest benefit of writing journals was being able to tell the teacher their opinion. The two next popular answers, with almost half the number of respondents, was reviewing the lesson and thinking about behaviour respectively.

Q2. In your opinion, what are the benefits of writing your own journal comments each week?	
A. No benefits	0
B. I can review the lesson	22
C. I can improve my writing skills	17
D. I can ask the teacher questions	14
E. I can tell the teacher my opinion	21
F. I can think about my behaviour	15
G. Other	8
Total (multiple answers accepted)	97

Q3. In your opinion, which is the <i>biggest</i> benefit of writing journal comments?	
A. No benefits	0
B. I can review the lesson	6
C. I can improve my writing skills	4
D. I can ask the teacher questions	2
E. I can tell the teacher my opinion	11
F. I can think about my behaviour	5
G. Other	2
Total	30

Questions 4 and 5 focused on problems. In Question 4, students indicated any problems that they had experienced with writing or submitting journals, and in Question 5 they selected the biggest problem. For seven students, there were no problems with writing journals. For 10 students, the biggest problem was not in writing the journal, but in submitting it. These students often forgot to submit their journals by the deadline, or found it bothersome to make a special trip to the teacher's office to submit their journals. Eight other students felt that it was difficult to write in English or that it took too long to write their comments.

Q4. Do you have any problems with writing journal comments each week?	
A. No problems	8
B. It takes too much time	5
C. It's troublesome to go to the teacher's office	5
D. It's difficult to write in English	6
E. I sometimes forget to write my journal	5
F. I sometimes forget to submit my journal	9
G. Other	5
Total (multiple answers ok)	43

Q5. What is the <i>biggest</i> problem for you?	
A. No problems	7
B. It takes too much time	3
C. It's troublesome to go to the teacher's office	1
D. It's difficult to write in English	5
E. I sometimes forget to write my journal	1
F. I sometimes forget to submit my journal	9
G. Other	4
Total	30

THE RESULTS: NEWSLETTERS

The next two questions focused on the class newsletters which were compiled from journal comments. In Question 6, all students responded that they thought reading the newsletters was either useful or very useful. The most popular benefits of reading the newsletters, in Question 7, were being able to read the opinions of other students, learning new words and expressions, and learning new ways to study.

Q7. In your opinion, what are the benefits of reading everyone's comments about the lesson each week?	
A. No benefits	0
B. I can review the lesson	5
C. I can improve my reading skills	6
D. I can read other students' opinions	28
E. I can learn new words and expressions	22
F. I can learn new ways to study	21
G. I can get to know my classmates	8
H. Other	0
Total (multiple answers ok)	90

Q6. Do you think that reading everyone's comments about the lesson is useful?	
A. Very useful	18
B. Useful	12
C. Not very useful	0
D. Not useful at all	0
Total	30

This overwhelmingly positive reaction to the newsletters was surprising. I had thought that writing the journals was beneficial for students because it allowed them to review the lesson

while communicating authentically in English. I had not realized that the newsletters were so interesting and valuable to students, allowing them not only to review the lesson again, but to exchange opinions, ideas, language, and learning strategies. Although I had not compiled newsletters each week for all nine classes, after seeing the results of the questionnaire, I resolved to make newsletters regularly for all classes.

“I’d like to keep this system.” (student comment)

Most students were satisfied with the journal and newsletter system as it was, but a few made suggestions on how things could be improved. As was mentioned above, some students felt that the biggest problem was forgetting to write or submit their journals. To help avoid these problems, a few suggested that time be allocated to journal writing during the lesson, or that students be allowed to submit their journals by email.

A few students indicated that the system could be improved by incorporating more teacher feedback, either in the form of grammatical correction or more global feedback on students’ performance in the lesson. One student commented that providing individual feedback might serve as an incentive for students to submit their journals.

I think if you have a time, you should write comments for each journal. That way, probably people can communicate with you and maybe won’t forget to turn [their journals] in.

Other students suggested that the journal questions be changed or that new questions be added. As the journal questions were the same each lesson, some students found themselves writing basically the same answers each week, and not really reflecting on each lesson. To combat this problem, one student suggested that questions be changed each week to match the content of the lesson. Another student suggested that new questions be added to help them reflect on different aspects of the lesson, or on their participation.

I think this journal system is very useful and help us to review [the lesson]. I think it’s better to add more questions. For example, “How did you take part in today’s class?” or something.

The students have raised some valid points with these suggestions. While I had been receiving a lot of useful feedback from students in their journals, it seems I had not been giving them enough feedback in return. Although time restraints prevented me from correcting every journal each week, I now make it a practice to let students know that all of the comments that are included in the newsletters have been corrected. As I try to include at least one comment from each student in the newsletters each week, this allows me to give some feedback to each student regularly. This method also encourages students to be autonomous in finding their own mistakes.

BENEFITS OF REFLECTION JOURNALS AND NEWSLETTERS: THE TEACHER’S PERSPECTIVE

BENEFITS FOR STUDENTS

The journal and newsletter system that I have described here potentially has incredible benefits for students.

- 1. Journals and newsletters give every student the opportunity to voice their opinions and concerns in a non-threatening way**

In some classrooms, only the voices of the most outgoing, confident, or opinionated students are heard. Reflection journals provide a regular opportunity for all students, including those who may be verbally reticent in class, to give the teacher feedback, ask questions, make suggestions, or voice complaints. Moreover, the journals and newsletters are much less face-threatening than addressing the teacher or the class directly.

2. The journals and newsletters provide a forum for ongoing dialogue and negotiation

Once an issue has been raised in a journal, the class can continue to discuss that issue through journals and newsletters. As the journals are done as homework, students have ample time to think about what they want to say and how to say it.

3. Journals and newsletters help lower affective filters

Writing a journal can have a very cathartic effect. By venting their frustrations or anxieties about the class in their journals, students can begin to feel more comfortable in class. Affective filters continue to lower as students realize that they are not the only ones experiencing difficulties, and that their teacher and classmates are truly interested in what they write.

In addition, because the newsletters do not contain the author's names, students can be assured that they will not be ostracized because of any comments that they have made. This is perhaps especially important in cultures like in Japan where importance is placed on group harmony.

4. Journals and newsletters facilitate positive relationships in the classroom

In just one 90-minute lesson a week, it can be difficult for teachers to get to know students on a more personal level, and likewise, it can be difficult for students to build relationships with other students in the class. The journals and newsletters provide both a forum for the sharing of ideas and opinions (between all participants), as well as content for meaningful and authentic discussion about the class. As students can share their anxieties, opinions, difficulties, and successes with teachers and their classmates, the journals and newsletters help create a supportive group dynamic. The newsletters also expose students to different opinions and different ways of looking at the world, and help them to realize that often there is not just one right way. Students begin to appreciate difference more.

5. Journals and newsletters help build language skills and reinforce lesson content

The results of the questionnaire showed that through reading the newsletters, students learn new words and phrases, and new ways of studying English. In other words, students become near-peer role models for each other (Woo & Murphey, 1999).

Furthermore, as students write their journal comments, they are reviewing what they learned in the lesson and reframing that knowledge (Woo & Murphey, 1999). As they read the newsletters, they again recall what they did in the lesson, and their knowledge is reshaped by the comments of their peers, allowing them to come to a deeper understanding of the content studied.

6. Journals and newsletters are forums for authentic communication

When writing their journal comments, students are formulating sentences which communicate personal meanings. With the focus on drills and translation in many secondary and tertiary English classes in Japan, students often don't have many opportunities to use English for their

own authentic communicative purposes. However, with the journals, students are writing and reading (and sometimes also talking) about issues that are directly related to them, and their comments influence what is done in future lessons.

BENEFITS FOR THE TEACHER

1. Journals allow teachers to know more about students

Journals allow the teacher to get to know the students on a more personal level. This can be difficult when you only see students for 90 minutes once a week, as is the case in many universities in Japan. In particular, the teacher can discover the successes, difficulties, and questions of each student, and can then decide how to respond accordingly.

2. Journals help instill teachers with confidence and motivation

As the teacher receives positive feedback about the lesson in the journals, it increases their confidence that what they are doing is interesting and useful for students. As the teacher becomes more aware of how hard students are trying, it motivates and energizes the teacher to continue his or her hard work.

3. Journals provide regular feedback from multiple perspectives

Rather than wait for course-end evaluations, by which time it is too late for teachers to change anything about the class, journals give teachers feedback that can be used almost immediately. This regular feedback from multiple perspectives (Woo & Murphey, 1999) is of immense value to the teacher. Instead of relying only their own observations and interpretations of what happened in the lesson, or falling back on their own cultural assumptions, journals allow teachers to see the lesson through students' eyes (Carpenter & Stephenson, 2006).

4. Journals stimulate teacher reflection

Reading the journals helps the teacher to both reflect on past lessons and to plan future lessons. Sometimes comments in journals may point the teacher in new directions. Reading a comment may also inspire teachers to try something new or different.

5. Journals help teachers develop their autonomy and continue their own professional development

Reading students' journals and compiling the class newsletters can ultimately help the teacher to develop their own autonomy. Two characteristics of autonomous teachers are that they use learner needs as the basis for teaching and they are reflective (Hedge, 2001). By reading journals, the teacher can identify the students' needs and tailor their lessons accordingly. And reading the journals and compiling the newsletters stimulates teacher reflection about the lesson. Being aware of students' perceptions of the lesson enables teachers to monitor their own performance, and ultimately develop their own professional expertise (Nunan & Lamb, 1996, cited in Graves & Mackenzie, 1997).

LESSONS LEARNED: GUIDELINES FOR JOURNALS AND NEWSLETTERS

Although I have only begun to scratch the surface, this study has convinced me that using reflection journals and newsletters can have enormous benefits for both teachers and students.

I continue to use journals with all my classes, having already made a few adjustments based on the feedback I received in the questionnaires. I offer the following guidelines to any readers considering using or already using journals and newsletters with their students:

1. Allow students time to complete their journals in class, especially at the beginning of the semester. This lets students know that the teacher feels that reflection and the journals are important, and allows the teacher to help students who seem to be having trouble.
2. Ask for students' permission before using their comments in class newsletters or research papers.
3. If possible, to lessen anxiety about the task and to encourage a focus on communication rather than correctness, let students write in their first language if necessary.
4. Consider accepting journal submissions electronically. This is especially convenient for students who have left their journals at home, or for students and teachers who are not on campus very much.
5. Make it a priority to regularly compile newsletters. The results of the questionnaires indicate that students feel reading the newsletters is at least as important as writing journal comments. If it is not feasible to compile newsletters for every class each week, newsletters can be compiled once or twice a month (Bray & Harsch, 1996).
6. Regularly change or add questions to the journal to focus on different aspects of the lesson. Using the same questions each week, for a long period of time, may hinder real reflection as well as some students feeling bored. Change or add questions periodically to help keep students and the teacher fresh.
7. Include a question about the journals and newsletters in the journals. To promote reflection on the reflection process itself, include journal questions which ask students for feedback on writing journals and reading newsletters. To promote dialogue between students, include space in the journals for students to respond to comments in previous newsletters.
8. Find ways to incorporate feedback on the journals. While much of the feedback that students get on their journals will not be individualized, but in the form of changed teaching (Woo & Murphey, 1999; Carpenter & Stephenson, 2006), some students may request individualized feedback, either in the form of grammatical corrections, or global comments on their performance in the lesson. One practical way of including grammatical feedback is to only correct all comments that are included in the newsletters.

FINAL REMARKS

The present study represents an initial attempt at exploring the benefits of reflection, class newsletters, journals, and to investigate the connection between metacognitive awareness and autonomous learning. While much has been written on the subject of reflection journals (e.g. Matsumoto, 1996; Bray & Harsch, 1996; Peyton & Staton, 1991; Casanave, 2001), sharing students' comments through class newsletters is an area which has not really been explored.

The journals described in this chapter ultimately enable teachers to become aware of social, cultural, and political contexts in which we are working, so that we can avoid inappropriate pedagogies and cultural impositions as we seek to foster autonomy in our classes (Pennycook, 1997). Furthermore, through journals we can get a clear picture of "the implications that [our] choices have for the learners, academically, personally, culturally and politically" (Sinclair, 2000, p.13). When students' comments are shared with the class through newsletters, it helps to build

up a common understanding of the learning context, and can stimulate student reflection on implications that their own choices have — for themselves, their classmates, and their teacher.

Finally, if, as Little (1999) states, successful learners are autonomous and they constantly reflect on their learning, then as teachers, we are doing our students a great disservice if we not are actively seeking ways to promote greater metacognitive awareness in our classes. Stimulating critical reflection through journals and class newsletters also promotes dialogue, fosters a positive group dynamic, and ultimately helps both learners and teachers to become more autonomous.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 1

BARBARA SINCLAIR

Although the notion of developing critical reflection through the use of learners' reflective journals is not new to language teachers and language teacher educators, there are, I think, three issues raised by this paper which deserve special attention: the importance of varying prompts for reflection in journals; the usefulness of sharing of the learners' reflections in a public forum (the class newsletters); the outcomes of the reflections and discussion in terms of learning to learn and developing autonomy.

If we accept that the acquisition of greater learner (and teacher) autonomy depends on the development of a body of metacognitive knowledge about 1) one's self as a learner and practitioner, 2) the learning context, 3) the subject matter to be learnt, and 4) the processes of learning (Sinclair, 2000, 2006), it can be seen that reflecting in a journal, with the appropriate prompts, can be a useful means of focusing on and extending these areas of knowledge. Of course, simply having knowledge about (or the capacity for) autonomy does not ensure that a learner will take responsibility for his/her own progress. In addition, a willingness to do so is necessary. This willingness will vary from time to time and according to a range of variables affecting the learner. One of the problems with asking learners to keep reflective journals is that they quickly tire of making the effort and become bored, or they write the barest minimum only to appease the teacher. The real value of the journal is easily lost. I, therefore, agree with the author that it is vital to keep motivation and interest high by varying the kinds of prompts given to the learners.

A very interesting and important aspect of the author's practice concerns the sharing of learners' reflections in the class newsletter. In my own experience, sharing in this way allows the participants to 'own' their opinions and, therefore, to take greater pains to articulate their metacognitive knowledge about learning. It breaks down barriers, demonstrates that everybody is different, that all views are to be respected, and treats the learners as mature, thinking individuals within a social learning community.

Finally, in developing learner autonomy, it is important that learning to learn activities have an outcome that is useful. The class newsletters provide a stimulus for further group discussion about learning. In this way, learners are able, in Vygotskian terms, to practise the articulation of their opinions and experiences in a social setting, learning from each other and considering solutions to problems. Such social learning provides rehearsal for individual reflection and experimentation, allowing the learner to develop the ability to think and reason more deeply and act with more confidence, ready for the next cycle of reflection, and for taking greater responsibility for their own learning.

All in all, I believe this paper has a great deal to offer the teacher who wishes to support learner autonomy, and to learn from his/her learners.

CRITICAL READER RESPONSE 2

AMANDA BRADLEY

I was immediately drawn into Jodie's chapter because of her topic, "journals," which is also central to my MAYA chapter. Yet our approaches, procedures, and reflections on the same topic are quite different, as are the teaching environments we work in. So, much in the same way as Jodie's students value "being able to read the opinion of others," and as Jodie mirrors her students' process, and is motivated and energized by it, as a critical reader, I too have been stimulated to reflect on my journals by reading the details of Jodie's project.

Jodie's clear, simple, and direct style makes reading and retention easy for me and incidentally invites me to bear my own readers in mind in the future. There is an appealing freshness in her treatment of her topic, and her inclusion of templates immediately enables me to grasp the specific nature of her project and its scope.

Throughout her chapter Jodie mentions time constraints she is subordinated to in her teaching. She also has non-specialists and unmotivated students in her class, among others. This environment is not ideal. In the circumstances, she has decided to help students and teachers "take control" of the classroom by using a prescriptive medium of feedback templates. In my own chapter, I made the point that "there can be no templates for feedback." However, I believe Jodie has carefully thought out her own criteria for choosing the materials she creates for use in her teaching, based on her particular context and approach.

I have occasionally used questionnaires in class, and find it so difficult to create the appropriate questions that I needed to ask the advice of a specialist in research methods. The crucial question is, "What is the purpose of the questionnaire?" Jodie states that the goal is "giving authentic language practice" outside of the weekly class. I would invite Jodie to further reflect on this goal, on what "authentic" means and on the extent to which authenticity, as she defines it, is achieved through that medium. What comes to my mind are affective considerations, such as whether a student questioned about doing homework will be honest, feel shame, or other emotions; also, what is actually meant by "difficult" and whether it means the same for Jodie as for her students, and to what extent responders might feel obliged to please the teacher, as is often the case.

I am intrigued as to how Jodie's method encourages students to be autonomous in finding their own mistakes. An explanation here would help. And I would also like to know more about the relationship between harmony and the need for anonymity. But I am inclined to think they are complex issues that might merit another chapter on the separate theme of culture.

That being said, Jodie gives her students a second chance to develop their skills autonomously by reading and discussing the newsletter that she has painstakingly compiled for them. Most teachers would not make that effort. This example of cooperative learning, in which the heat is taken off the individual, appears to be generative, with the students' wisdom shining through as they assert their autonomy in the specific suggestions Jodie cites at the end of the process.

I would like to finish by thanking Jodie for her thoughtful work, for the reflections she has inspired in me, and for her bibliography. I hope my comments will also further Jodie's continuing journey along the same road as mine, towards pedagogical autonomy.