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Reader Response Journals: Novice Teachers Reflect on Their Implementation Process

Janet E. McIntosh
Nipissing University
janetm@nipissingu.ca

Do novice teachers effectively use teaching strategies they learn in a preservice course? This study examines how five novice intermediate (Grades 7 -10) English language arts teachers implemented reader response journals, an instructional activity they learned about in their preservice English methods course. During interviews, they shared the challenges they encountered when using this instructional strategy for the first time. While using reader response journals in their classrooms, novice teachers provided student encouragement, thoughtful reflection on their approach, modification as needed, and a consistent positive attitude even in the face of challenges. Study findings indicated that the theory and practice acquired in their preservice course was beneficial to them, and that gaining confidence in themselves as teachers through further practice and experiences would enhance their effective use of this classroom strategy.

Introducing any new teaching strategy in English language arts is a challenge for classroom teachers. For novice teachers with limited experience in the field, learning new strategies can be an even more demanding task. Preservice education professors introduced varied strategies to them, and upon program completion, they have decisions to make about which strategies to try with their own students. Many teachers will select a strategy that has captured their attention, one with proven merits, and one that other teachers deem to be valuable for students. After a strategy is chosen, English language arts teachers determine how to incorporate it into their classroom program. Although teachers' approaches to the strategy may be individual in nature, in many cases, these approaches are influenced by prior knowledge acquired by preservice teachers in their education courses.

As an English educator, I have done extensive research on reader response journals in intermediate/senior (Grades 7 -12) English language arts classrooms and with preservice teachers (McIntosh, 2003; 2004; 2006a, 2006b). The reader response journal is a strategy used by students to record initial responses to their reading experiences. Students write journal entries immediately after they read a portion of a text, prior to sharing their ideas with peers or the

teacher. Writing response journals provides ideal opportunities for students to deepen and expand their understanding of literature.

Understanding that the response journaling strategy is a valuable one, I encourage preservice teachers to try it with students while student teaching and in their own classrooms. During the past five years, some of my former education students, now first year intermediate (Grades 7 – 10) teachers, elected to introduce reader response journals in their English language arts programs. Thinking about my own approach to sharing the strategy with them, I wondered whether what I provided had been useful. Although my success in using journals with students as a secondary English teacher was explained to preservice teachers, would my instruction on this strategy transfer into them having equal success with students in their own classrooms?

I was curious about novice teachers' implementation process and wanted to investigate further. Three research questions formed the focus for this inquiry. How did novice teachers choose to introduce reader response journals? How successful was their selected approach? How did they feel about the process of implementation and the results they noticed in their students' journals? In order to acquire some answers, I invited five novice teachers to participate in a study where they verbally reflected on how they implemented response journals. In interviews, I asked them to share their experiences with using reader response journals in intermediate English language arts classroom for the first time. I hoped to discover whether novice teachers effectively transferred theory and practice from my preservice courses into classrooms. I anticipated that these findings would provide me with the opportunity to reflect on my practice as a preservice educator.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded in literature describing reader response theory and beginning teachers' abilities to transfer theory into classroom practice. Research on reader response theory includes the work of Rosenblatt (1938, 1978), Probst (1994, 2004), and Beach (1993). Reader response theory outlines principles for the teaching of literature. It was a clear departure from the prevailing theory at the time, New Criticism (Cleanth & Brooks, 1938), which placed the text itself at the center of critical examination. According to Rosenblatt's (1978) transactional theory of reading, "the meaning of the text resides in the person rather than the words on the page; the 'transaction' or interaction between the reader and the text is different for every reader, and the text is different for every reader since each is a unique individual" (p. 16). Rosenblatt showed that "how we read a text depends upon what is in our heads, as much as the meaning or emotion we gain from reading the text" (Purves, 1991, p. 214).

Drawing heavily on the work of Rosenblatt (1938, 1978), Probst (1994, 2004) believed that the task of teaching literature was to help students to think, not to tell them what to think. Probst's practical research presented clear directions and suggestions about how response to literature can be implemented in English language arts classrooms. He encouraged teachers to provide student opportunities for "reading, responding, articulating questions and contemplating possible answers" (Probst, 2004, p. 18). Beach (1993) examined various theories of reader response, which share a concern with how readers make meaning from their experiences with text. "Textual, experiential, psychological, social and cultural theoretical perspectives" were presented in Beach's work (pp. 7-8). Anson and Beach (1995), Parsons (2001) and Probst (2004) explored how using response journals can assist readers with making meaning from the text, enhance their reflection, and result in greater engagement with texts. Today, in English

language arts classrooms, many teachers continue to embrace reader response theory in the teaching of literature.

Because this study explored initial use of a teaching strategy, which first year English language arts teachers were exposed to during their preservice program, it seems appropriate to examine literature on novice teachers transferring theory into practice. Smith, Basmadjian, Kirell, and Koziol (2003) stated that “numerous scholars have addressed the disconnect between the perceived idealistic and theoretical perspectives of the university courses in contrast with the practical (and realistic) needs of the beginning teacher in practice” (p. 17). Harste, Leland, Schmidt, Vasquez, and Ociepka (2004) conducted a study in an attempt to “understand the relationship that exists between a person’s ability to articulate theory and his or her ability to implement a program of instruction based on that theory” (p. 9). Examining beginning teachers’ use of tools for teaching English, Grossman, Smagorinsky and Valencia (1999) stated “the need for teachers to experience a pedagogical approach from the standpoint of learner before they are able to implement this approach” (p. 20). My chosen classroom approach to introducing preservice teachers to reader response journals has been influenced by this statement.

Context

During the intermediate English language arts course, preservice teachers were exposed to reader response theory (Rosenblatt, 1978) and practical applications of the theory (Kooy & Wells, 1996; Parsons, 2001; Probst, 2004; Swartz, 2002). They read articles from professional journals, followed by discussion with peers in class-based cooperative groups. I provided mini-lessons on reader response theory and its practical applications. Particular attention was focused on the reader response journaling strategy. I explained that the strategy is an effective practice as it increases student engagement in reading. My views were supported by research I have conducted on response journals in classroom practice (McIntosh, 2003; 2004). Students chose an intermediate level book for reading and wrote a response journal as a course assignment. After writing these responses, they formed book groups and orally shared their writings.

L’Allier and Elish-Piper (2007) state that one of the most effective ways to help teacher candidates “understand, value, and thoughtfully apply research-based practices in their student teaching and ultimately in their own classrooms is to have them experience and apply strategies in the coursework” (p. 339). As an English education/researcher, I believe that a substantial theoretical component is required in teacher education programs (McIntosh, 2006b). For this reason, I have built the professional readings component into the course. Time is dedicated to preservice teachers reading, writing responses and discussing these readings. I continue to strive to achieve a balance between theory and practice in the course: this issue is a constant challenge in teacher education programs.

Methodology

The study participants were five first year intermediate English language arts teachers who introduced reader response journals to their students. As preservice teachers in a northern Ontario Faculty of Education, they were enrolled in my intermediate (Grades 7 -10) English Language Arts courses which I had taught for past six years. Upon completion of the course, I informed student teachers about my current research project and invited them to consider

participating after they began teaching. Five teachers contacted me via email and agreed to be interviewed about their implementation of response journals. All female participants taught in Ontario; three in the north and two in the south. Christine, Andrea, Amanda, and Nancy taught Grade 7 or 8 Language Arts. Vicki taught Grade 10 and 12 English.

Data were collected through interviews with participants, which were conducted to obtain in-depth responses in the subjects' own words (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). The methodology implemented entailed the study and analysis of interview transcripts. I conducted one 50 minute face-to-face audio recorded interview with each participant, which was held outside of school hours and in their home community. These interviews occurred in the second half of the school year after participants had the opportunity to use response journals with their students for a period of time. A prepared set of open-ended questions served as a guide during interviews (See Appendix). I transcribed the audio recorded interviews. Participants were invited to read the interview transcripts for accuracy. Each participant was assigned a number from one to five and transcript pages were numbered consecutively throughout. Pseudonyms were assigned for the participants' names and the Faculty of Education.

In order to analyze the data, I used the constant comparative method, an inductive process of data analysis that is often used in building grounded theory from the data (Bogdan & Biklin, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The method involved me in simultaneously coding and analyzing the data in order to develop concepts, identify their properties, explore their interconnectedness or relationships to one another, and integrate them into coherent theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). As I read and re-read the transcripts, I recorded several categories which were revealed from the data. During this process, the following themes emerged.

Findings

Common themes revealed after transcript analysis included the following: approach used to implement response journals, reference to preservice course, assessment/evaluation of journals, students' written journal responses, teacher's role, value of journals, future use of journals, and examination of self as novice teacher. Examples from the five transcripts are provided to demonstrate the nature of each theme.

Approach Used to Implement Response Journals

Novice teachers initially combined oral and written instructions to implement response journals. Christine's students "pick a couple of lines from a novel, say why they picked the quote, connect the quote to a theme, event or character." Andrea modeled response writing by reading aloud to her students and asking questions. During a class novel study of The Giver, students responded to a teacher prompt: "I had them pretend they were Jonas and share a personal memory of their own." Amanda, Nancy and Vicki provided an introduction to response journals through oral and written statements. Like Andrea, Amanda provided teacher modeling by reading aloud and stating how she might retell a passage. Students silently read their books for 15 minutes in daily language arts classes, then recorded responses. As Nancy read Treasure Island aloud to her class, students listened; at the end of each chapter, students would be given five minutes for recording their response in a selected character role. Vicki's class used journals for their biography/autobiography independent study unit. After orally defining response journals, she distributed a student handout. "The important thing was that they were writing it

right after they had finished reading; it was immediate.” Data reveals that the five novice teachers immersed their students in the journaling process by asking them to write responses after in-class reading; time was allotted for this activity. Their classroom actions demonstrate that they were influenced by the approach which was reinforced in the preservice course; the professor stated reasons for its effectiveness and this information had an impact on their practice.

Reference to Preservice Course

All five novice teachers made direct reference to their preservice English Language Arts course. Christine’s desire to use journals is revealed as she stated, “the merits of response journals, I learned at Northwood. I remember us talking about it’s a chance to share their feelings...we read a really good article...I know I wanted to implement them [reader response journals].” She further explained, “I have them respond in the novel study that they were doing...trying to get them to do it like what we were hoping when we were at Northwood.” Christine seems to model in her classroom what she learned in her course. Andrea referred to the textbook used throughout the course, where she first heard about response journals. “Even the level of familiarity coming in...what I have heard about them so far...helped a bit in terms of a decision to use them or be aware of using them at all.” Amanda recalled how her peers in the course presented on chapter books and re-tell as a strategy and she decided to try these classroom strategies. For Christine, Andrea and Amanda, their understanding of appropriate journal use was acquired in the preservice course.

Vicki used what she learned in her preservice English course when she created expectations for response journals. “I had them read, sort of like you did, I really did draw upon what you taught us.” When students questioned the validity of response journals, Vicki explained, “I’d have to clarify a lot...give them that kind of support to let them know that this is valid...I would back up with things we learned in your class about why this is important, for them to connect to what they are reading.” Her knowledge of Reader Response Theory is evident in these statements. She uses this information to convince her students of the journal’s value. In Nancy’s words, “that’s the only reason why I used reader response journals actually was because you suggested it and because of the articles and research you had done on it.” Nancy wanted to use journals with students based on her course experiences. “As a professor of English, I trust your opinion and your judgement.” I had shared my response journal research (McIntosh, 2003) with preservice teachers during the course; this approach seems to have contributed to Nancy’s decision to use journals. All five novice teachers chose to implement response journaling with students thereby demonstrating their willingness to apply a strategy they were exposed to during the preservice course. Perhaps the course assignment of writing a journal themselves instilled a certain level of comfort in their choice to try out the strategy with students.

Assessment and Evaluation of Journals

The five novice teachers discussed the issue of assessing and evaluating response journals. Christine stated her uncertainty: “Initially, I wasn’t marking (grading) them because it’s their place to respond... then I started levelling them, and now, they don’t know, I put a level in my marking book, and comments on their response journals”. (Levels from 1 - 4 are currently used in Ontario schools for evaluation; a level 1 is below 50%, a level 4 is above 80%). When she first used journals, Andrea felt that there was no right or wrong and that she wasn’t actually

grading in terms of a mark. She was concerned about “responding to them all, in addition to everything else”. Conferring with her principal, who had used journals, she asked, “how did you manage it?..she had a sort of rotating schedule...she cycled and took a third at a time, so they knew that once every three weeks that they would expect their stuff to be looked at.” Both Christine and Andrea question *how* to evaluate the journals.

Amanda collected journals “once a week, on a Friday; after about four weeks of responses, (using rubric), then I give them a level...so that next week, they can work on some things to improve”. She indicated that she was more comfortable with the comments, but felt that she needed to put a mark on them, too. As Amanda’s preservice professor, I assisted her with assessment tools: “I had that rubric, I had about five you gave me, I picked one that I really liked and I’ve used that consistently because I think it makes sense to stick to one and I don’t want to start changing now ‘cause I have a system that’s working for me”. For Vicki’s students’ journal response project, they were “writing a total of 10 response journals that are due at two separate points, one half-way through the semester and the second closer to the end”. Vicki explained: “I really like rubrics...I found it extremely time-consuming to read all of their response journals...but by using the rubric, as I’m reading them, I’m looking for these things.” Nancy’s students responded after listening to her read aloud. Like Amanda and Vicki, Nancy assigned levels on a rubric; some criteria, students didn’t meet. “Primarily it was detail. I find that they are not giving me enough”. Students were required to demonstrate a “close, careful reading of the text, making personal connections, beyond plot summary, reflection on significant issues or themes of concern...a perceptive reading of the text.” Aspects of our preservice course discussions and resources seem to have had an influence on the novice teachers’ assessment decisions in their intermediate classrooms.

Students’ Written Journal Responses

Novice teachers shared observations about what they read in response journals. Christine stated “sometimes they catch me by surprise, and it just blows me away by what they’ll write”. She explained, “They won’t interact with the text unless it’s something that they are really interested in. But, if it’s something that we did, that they just loved, I will get great responses”. Andrea indicated that some students were surprisingly more articulate with their ideas than others: “Sometimes the more personal it was, the easier it was for them to write”. When reading *The Giver*, she had them pretend they were Jonas and write about a memory. “It was probably the best thing they did”. She noted ‘the moment’ in their writing when they wrote “the one response they gave that was like wow”. Amanda felt her students’ responses were getting better as the year went on and that the more they are enjoying the book, the deeper their responses were. Amanda shared an example of a student who is “enjoying his book, relating to it, being inspired and recommending it to me”. Christine, Andrea and Amanda’s statements reveal how they immersed themselves in reading the journals; they were able to highlight the stronger responses of individual students.

Vicki commented that some of her students “naturally embraced it and did an excellent job.” She faced challenges when she discovered that they didn’t give the response journal strategy “enough credibility.” By providing encouragement, she saw “progress over time. By the end of the process, they had started to embrace it a bit more.” One of Vicki’s students was “a bright kid but not really interested in school, more in socializing but with the response journals, he was one of the students that just immediately embraced it. His response journals were

excellent. Vicki's recollection of one student's responses reinforces the positive impact journal writing can have on students. Nancy was initially "a little bit disappointed. I had been talking to them about detail, supporting what you say...so I was disappointed with the amount of elaboration they were giving me in that first set." Later on, she was "pleasantly surprised with many. They are reading into the text a lot more deeply, picking up on things that I don't think they would have been had they not been practicing, just trying to think, there was definite progress for most with their ability to respond." Data indicates that all five novice teachers saw growth in student responses over time. This observation provides evidence that when teachers provide consistent opportunities for students to practice the journaling strategy, written responses will be enhanced.

Teacher's Role

All five novice teachers mentioned the role that teachers play in implementing response journals. Christine explained that "when I didn't see what I would have liked from the beginning, I just tried to be encouraging and hoped they would just improve. And some of them have". She viewed herself as a guide: "I know that when I'm telling them to respond to an activity that we did, I said to them, don't tell me that you loved it if you don't. You're not going to get a good mark because you're saying 'Oh Yeah, Mrs. L., we loved what you did. I want you to tell me how you felt about it and why". Andrea questioned her own approach: "had I been responding to their journals on a regular basis, for a number of them, I would probably see more now". She later wondered about having to "caution myself, making sure that I don't respond so much so what they had written starts to become mine..like taking it over. I think that they would appreciate that you identify with what they have written but you don't want to write so much that it is no longer their special thing". Both Christine and Andrea acknowledge the importance of teachers limiting their intervention as they encourage student writing.

Amanda provided daily opportunities for writing. "I do English for an hour with them but about 15 minutes of the first hour I have them is for response". She guided student book selection. "In my class, some of the students, it's mostly the boys who have trouble finding novels that they enjoy...it's a challenge trying to find out what they are interested in, sports or whatever". She believed that "they need to enjoy it, I think, if you're not enjoying it, then you're not going to be responding". Amanda links engagement in reading with immersion in written response. By helping her male students select books they are interested in, she believes that she can assist them with textual engagement.

Vicki discovered that "some students really struggled with it...I would just coach them through it, I would have to clarify what I was looking for and sort of give them that kind of support to let them know that this is valid". She explained that "I would back it up with what we learned in your class and why it is important for them to connect to what they are reading and that they all have prior knowledge about topics and subjects they are reading about". Vicki's points reveal that the teacher's role is not simply to implement the journals but to help students understand why the journal approach is appropriate. She said: "I believe, you know, when I was trying to convince them of why it was valid, I truly believed it". As a Grade 8 teacher, Nancy felt responsible for preparing her students for secondary school. "It's a good starting point for them, to be delving into the novel and studying it and I wanted to hopefully give them a tool so they would be at a greater advantage in high school". Some students "are not comfortable writing what they feel. Some said 'what do you want me to say and what do you want me to put in this?',"

and that defeats the whole purpose of a personal response...so it's actually teaching them how to respond". Data reveals that these novice teachers act as guides in their response based classrooms but they must consciously allow students to develop individual responses to text. They caution that teachers must avoid taking ownership away from the students.

Value of Journals

All five novice teachers articulated the value of response journals. Christine noted "when I see the spots, you know really great insight coming in, I feel that maybe more of them are capable of that if they had the chance to write more often". Students benefited from daily writing. Christine thought the journals were important and they would help students write better essays and opinion pieces. Andrea observed that "I could get more information from looking at their journals and reading them than they were prepared to give...sometimes it gives me what they don't give me orally". Recognizing that there is emphasis on having students make personal connections, she found that response journals were a natural way to help them make those connections.

After a few months, Amanda's students exhibited greater engagement. "Sometimes they say they need more time, when I say in a few minutes we are moving on to Geography, their hands go up that they need more time so they are writing more". She believed journals were a "valuable part of the Language Arts program because it teaches students to take responsibility for their own reading, to find things that they enjoy to read, and hopefully instills the love of reading in them". Vicki valued students using journals to "connect to what they are reading...when prior knowledge is activated, and that's where the meaning of a piece of literature comes from". She explained the 'act of reading' to her students and encouraged them to see this as "an opportunity to write about things that are leaving an impression on you". Nancy told her students, "your opinion is what matters to me and I want to know what you think about this". She summarizes the value of response journals: "It's validating a person's own response to text, and to me, that's the best place to start creating with the text as opposed to what does the teacher think, because it's a never ending battle where you are trying to decode." Data reveals that the five novice teachers see the value of using response journals. They take their beliefs a step further as they devote in-class time to orally explaining the value of response journals to their students. Articulating their commitment to the strategy seems to provide greater possibilities for English language arts students to embrace response journals in classroom practice.

Future Use of Journals

Five novice teachers voiced a desire to use response journals again. Christine stated "I definitely want to use them again...I think they are valuable. I want to try to find a way to get them (the students) to use them more regularly though". She said, "I think I can get the Grade 8 teacher for next year to use them; he's new, too and he'll be doing my seven's for Language and I'm sure he'll carry on with it". By choosing to share the strategy with another teacher, Christine's commitment to using response journals is revealed. In the future, Andrea would like to provide more response to journals and she wants to "collect them more often, and probably on a rotating basis". Andrea considered other stimulus for responses. "There are so many things to have them respond on. I always thought of but haven't done much of it this year, to do more of a

current events kind of thing...". Amanda stated "I would like to try maybe more of a friendly kind of journal where you (the teacher) respond back and forth, with comments and questions".

Vicki stated she would "probably start by expecting that they know nothing about response journals in the form that we are teaching them and then go from there". Having used the journaling strategy with Grades 10 academic students, she said, "I guess my next step would be to implement it in an applied or maybe a Grade 11 College class". Vicki had no hesitation in using journals again; "I think it's great...I believe in it, for sure, I'd use them again". Nancy explained, "it forced the students to pay attention to what was their response going on in the text...in order for them to pull a quote, they had to know what was leading up to and coming after that quote". Her approach was beneficial and when using journals again, she stated, "if I was teaching at this level, I would still keep them structured; I found that worked to my advantage and to their advantage". Based on their classroom experiences, all five novice teachers decided to continue using journals with language arts students. Although they faced challenges, they readily presented specific ideas about how they planned to vary their classroom approaches when using response journals in the future.

Examination of Self as Novice Teacher

Christine, Andrea, Amanda, Vicki, and Nancy examined themselves as novice teachers in many statements. Seeing themselves as learners, they questioned aspects of their programs and practice. Christine said "I don't have my program working well enough so that I can get them to use them (journals) as often as I would like". Christine felt she needed "to get a lot more comfortable with it. As a first year teacher, I believe in it and will still continue to believe in it but really, you doubt yourself, you wonder whether it's something you've done that isn't making it right...you know, it's a matter of time". Andreas's statement, "I haven't done it, mostly, you know being a new teacher, I haven't learned yet" reveals herself as a novice. She asked: "Am I not doing it right? Is there a right way and should I be doing that all the time?" Andrea thought about her process. Considering her students' experience with journals, Amanda said, "I think it becomes more clearer once they started doing it...I have more knowledge of how to do it, too so it was my first time with it, teaching the response journal, ever, so I probably could have been more clear". Voicing their views as novice teachers, Christine, Andrea and Amanda indicate their wish to spend more time practicing using response journals with students.

Recalling a discussion in her pre-service course about the usefulness of rubrics, Vicki honestly reflected: "I think you can evaluate with them, you know, so I kind of shifted my opinion on that, I used to be somewhat sceptical". Vicki used journals with one class but "if I were teaching 2P again, even if it was a struggle for them, it would be worth taking the risk, even if it didn't work exactly. I think in my first year teaching, I wasn't maybe willing to take as much of a risk, now that I've gone through it, I am willing to do it". Vicki exhibited an increased confidence in this passage. Nancy revealed that she was a learner, as a novice teacher. She noticed that "not all gave exactly what I was looking for but I find that as a new teacher, that's something I am learning". Nancy read aloud to her students because "I loved being read to as a child and I find that the reality is a lot of students aren't reading whenever you are assigning reading to them, so I read to them, yes...I took it as an opportunity for them to hone in on their listening skills". It is interesting that Nancy personalized her view as she compared her own experience as a student reader, to that of her students. "It's OK to have a personal response...that's OK that you hate the book but tell me why you hate it..I remember growing up

and studying books and thinking you have to like it because your teacher told you to study it but in my opinion, that's not necessarily true". Nancy showed empathy for students. Her experience using reader response journals with her students was "a learning process for me".

Vicki and Nancy repeat comments about being "new teachers" and in their "first teaching year". They state their willingness to spend more time on practicing the response journaling strategy to enhance their classroom implementation. Data reveals that all five novice teachers indicate the belief that if they take time to practice a classroom strategy with students, they will develop confidence in themselves as teachers and that the strategy will be more effectively incorporated into their programs.

Discussion

When novice teachers used reader response journals with their students, they were presented with some challenges. Both teachers and students seemed to be learning together. Students were aware of journals but not reader response journals and the act of using this strategy with Grades 7 to 10 students was a new one for their teachers. I can see a parallel situation as I recall the time when these former preservice teachers used response journals in my course. They had verbalized uncertainty about the process and at times questioned the value of the strategy. When these concerns surfaced, we discussed them in our course. I believe that we were also learning together.

Novice teachers' comments revealed their commitment and positive attitude toward using response journals. Each recognized that this attitude was only a starting point, which was necessary to begin the process of implementing this new strategy. As a preservice educator, I believe I assisted in their formation of a positive attitude toward using response journaling with students. I articulated my belief about the value of this strategy through sharing my own successful experiences using journals with secondary students. I can see from the study findings that their course experiences provided a solid foundation to assist novice teachers with making appropriate choices for their classroom programs.

The teachers in the study were conscious of the need to focus on an effective approach to bring about desired results based on their understanding of the strategy. Although findings indicated that their approaches differed, what they had in common was their decision to use response journals with students. I believe they were influenced by the fact that they had learned about the journaling strategy in our course.

Student teachers need opportunities for discussion of a theory's practical implications; these should be embodied and modeled in the program and so experienced first-hand by the student teachers (Beck, Kosnik, & Roswell, 2007). New teachers' views on the preparation they most needed in the first year of teaching were the focus for Beck et al's study; participants reported "acquiring many useful teaching strategies, activities and materials" (p. 59) in their program. Britzman (2003) stated that "prospective teachers want and expect to receive practical things, automatic and generic methods for immediate classroom application" (p. 63).

With regard to this study, the reader response journal was practical in nature. Teachers referred to course discussions on theoretical readings, handouts provided and journal writing they completed in their preservice course at Northwood. But what they were given wasn't prescriptive, or step-by-step, like a "recipe" (p. 65) which Britzman indicates new teachers search for in teacher education programs. Christenbury (2006) writes that "no class or book can teach a beginner or novice what to do and how to do it in every specific instructional incident"

(p. 44). Novice teachers in this study revealed that they needed to try the journaling strategy on their own. They also decided to modify it and each teacher had a willingness to meet challenges as they arose. Personal classroom experiences with their students helped them assess the effectiveness of their approaches. Upon reflection, I see that this aspect is one which I need to emphasize in my course sessions. The findings are a reminder that novice teachers do need sufficient time to practice a strategy with their own students before it is internalized and effectively incorporated into their own classroom repertoire.

Novice teachers faced the challenge of evaluating the journals. I was not surprised by this finding. Over the course of the 15 years I have conducted research on reader response journals, this issue is one that many teachers, both seasoned and novice ones, state as a concern. Many see journaling as merely a reflective tool and believe that teachers should not evaluate response journals. I have shared my own views with preservice teachers. Their statements about evaluation in this study may have been influenced by our course discussions. Findings revealed that through using rubrics or comments, novice teachers were determined to make the assessment authentic but knew that it could be somewhat subjective. They experimented with varied techniques and selected one which worked best for their students and themselves. Having been exposed to assessment tools in my preservice course, they had resources, but like new teachers in the Beck, Kosnik, and Rowsell (2007) study, they still had some uncertainty. One participant in that study spoke of “the challenge of the regular first-year teaching load, keeping up with the marking, trying to avoid marking too little but also marking too much” (p. 68). Novice teachers made similar comments in this study. Their decision to evaluate the response journals may have been influenced by my belief which was shared in our course. My research (McIntosh, 2003) revealed that for journals to be an integral part of the classroom program, they need to be assessed. Students do not have the same commitment to writing them if they are simply assigned a ‘complete’ or ‘incomplete’. Based on the findings related to novice teachers’ uncertainty about evaluating response journals, I see the necessity of providing further guidance on this aspect for preservice teachers in my course.

Another challenge related to the fact that response journal content was not what the teachers expected. Prior to assigning journals, novice teachers had a view, in their own minds, of how response journals would look. In practice, students didn’t always meet these expectations. Sometimes teachers questioned themselves about whether instructions were clear or whether they were using the strategy right. Christenbury’s (2006) research supports this characteristic of novice teachers. “Another aspect of teaching, especially beginning teaching, is the seductive – but false – idea of teaching as correct and incorrect. Beginning teachers...tend to think in terms of right and wrong when it comes to classroom practice” (p. 73). Data revealed that when teachers provided consistent encouragement, allowed time for students to practice and gain confidence in their response writing, the result was more effective journaling. This finding is one that I want to share with future preservice teachers.

Although novice teachers faced challenges in their implementation process, they had a clear view of their role. They consistently set out verbal expectations and some gave students handouts. Throughout the journaling process, guidance was provided. When journals were evaluated, teachers gave student feedback to support improvement in written responses. All novice teachers had a positive attitude about using the journals which was displayed in their desire to implement them in classrooms. The journal’s value was conveyed to students. Reader response journals did provide ideal opportunities for student writers to engage with text. Glenn (2007) stated, “asking students to participate in reader response to literature through writing has

been shown to further support comprehension by allowing students to reflect carefully and deliberately on the meaning they might derive from a text” (p. 11). Effectively integrating reading and writing experiences is a goal in language arts classrooms; writing a response journal while reading a text is an ideal way of achieving this outcome. “The act of writing responses in a journal invites students to become actively involved in their reading; teacher-created questions are not the focus” (McIntosh, 2006a, n.p.)

Voicing a desire to use reader response journals with future classes, novice teachers had suggestions about possible changes in their approaches. Although they clearly conveyed the demands of initial implementation, they weren’t willing to abandon this classroom strategy. I admire the novice teachers’ persistence and recognize the realities of our classrooms. I think of my own struggles as a beginning teacher when I used reader response journals for the first time in 1990. My Grade 9 students weren’t sure about this new strategy and were hesitant to write responses. After encouraging them and providing time for practice, I noticed gradual growth. This experience and its positive outcome conveys the message that persistence is necessary when a teacher believes in the value of a classroom strategy. I share this story with preservice teachers in my course as it may inspire them to stand firm when they are committed to an approach.

Examining self as a novice teacher was an intriguing theme. Each teacher honestly shared their feelings about being new to the teaching profession. At times, they questioned their approach to implementation; when the results weren’t exactly what they expected, they wondered whether they were using the strategy correctly. Their uncertainty came through in statements about “being new” and “needing time to practice” which indicated some self doubt. Novice teachers had definite views which were likely acquired in the preservice English language arts courses and which influenced their classroom approaches. Daily challenges were often associated with how to begin and sustain the implementation process. With limited classroom experience, time required to gain confidence in their ability to use the strategy effectively was less than one year in duration. Time is needed for a novice teacher, or any teacher for that matter, to use a particular strategy for the first time. Wilhelm (2008) wrote: “What is true of all learners is true of teachers - we need to take risks, make mistakes, have help, reflect and we need to give ourselves the time to do this and we need to do all of this over time” (p. 59). Feiman-Nemser (2001) stated that “no matter what kind of preparation a teacher receives, some aspects of teaching can only be learned on the job...novices [need] to figure out what works for them as they construct their own professional practice and identity” (pp. 18-20).

Final Reflections

Findings revealed that novice teachers seemed to be particularly demanding of themselves. They set high expectations in their determination to make the response journals work effectively in classrooms and for their students. In reviewing this finding, I think they valued reader response journals and wanted their students to embrace the commitment they had to the strategy. As a teacher, when I believe in the benefits of a strategy I can become frustrated when my students are hesitant to engage in it. As a preservice educator, I am reminded of times within my own course when I introduce new strategies and sometimes encounter resistance. I have learned that some preservice teachers will change their views and acquire new understandings. For others, it takes more time than the duration of our course. I must continue to be patient as I believe we will all experience growth at our own rate.

Although my study focused on the implementation of response journals, on a daily basis these teachers used many new strategies. Being a novice in the teaching field was a challenge in itself. Novice teachers had the opportunity to reflect on their classroom practice through interview questions. Although many teacher education programs like my own introduce the concept of teacher as reflective practitioner (Schon, 1987), the reality is that for most teachers in the field, time for reflection is quite limited. Penso, Shoham and Shiloah's (2001) study examined the ability of novice teachers to reflect on their practical experience. Their results "emphasized the need to consider ways of creating opportunities to develop reflective thinking among novice teachers to promote their professional growth" (p. 323).

I believe my interview questions provided a chance for reflective thinking as novice teachers were asked to articulate their classroom practice. It's possible they were critical of their actions in the classroom since their own preservice professor was asking them to share their thoughts. As I listened to their honest responses, they explained what worked well, the various challenges they faced and possible ways they might change their approach with future classes. I thought of how my former students were now developing as teachers, with their own students to guide. While transcribing their interviews, I heard their individual voices; they were articulating theoretical knowledge and how they had applied it in a practical way in classrooms. Following the interviews, they mentioned that they appreciated the opportunity to talk about their use of response journals. Even as novice teachers, they saw the value in such a practice. Wilhelm (2008) perceptively explained:

Theory is involved in all that we do; theory can inform all that we plan to do so that we can do it better. So it is of vital importance to articulate our theories, to test them against our classroom experiences, to revise and use them in wide-awake ways. (p. 111)

I believe his words speak to me. Even as an experienced English educator /researcher, I still view myself as a learner. Conducting this current study has allowed me to reflect on my practice. It has reminded me that the way I teach is as important as what I teach in the preservice course. Beck, Kosnik, and Rowsell (2007) stated that such a study "suggests lines of thought and practice for teacher education...helps us to understand the challenges new teachers face and do better what to a large extent we are already doing to assist them" (p. 55).

As I prepare the course syllabus for the Fall term, I consider my role in preparing preservice English language arts teachers for classrooms. Study findings reinforced my belief that theory and practice should be provided in a balanced way so that novice teachers can effectively apply them beyond the Faculty of Education program. Engaging former preservice teachers in discussion about their practice provided me with an inside view of what they were taking from my course into their own classrooms. It would be valuable to share the findings of this study with future preservice teachers in order to increase their awareness of authentic challenges novice teachers face in the field. Through exploration of selected findings in our course, I could guide preservice teachers to an enhanced understanding of classroom practice.

Although my preservice course provided the groundwork for building successful classroom experiences, I recognize that confidence increases as teachers expand their knowledge, skill and expertise in the early years of teaching. Growth over time is the desired outcome. I consider the possibility of tracking these novice teachers into their second or third year of teaching, asking them about how their implementation of response journals has changed and the reasons they considered in making these changes. Future research might clarify this issue. Or perhaps, it will reveal more questions for me to ponder. As Christenbury said, "teachers, in order to teach, really must continue to learn" (p. 123). This is a belief I share.

Janet E. McIntosh, Ed.D. is an Associate Professor who teaches intermediate/senior English language arts methods courses in the Faculty of Education at Nipissing University in North Bay, Ontario, Canada. Her research focuses on response to literature, preservice and novice teachers' implementation of reader response journals, and response strategies in classroom practice

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Appendix

Questions used during interviews

1. When did you begin the process of implementing reader response journals in your classroom program?
2. What process did you use to implement reader response journals in your intermediate Language Arts classroom this year?
3. State the strategies you used and comment on their effectiveness.
4. Were any of these strategies ones you were introduced to in last year's Language Arts course at the university? If so, which ones and why did you select them?
5. Which one strategy was the most effective and why?
6. Were you satisfied with the students written results – the response journals? Explain further.
7. Comment on the content of the student response journals.
8. When introducing this strategy to the students, what challenges did you face? How did you deal with them?
9. If you were to implement response journals in your classroom next year, what would you do differently? Explain why.
10. Reflect on what you learned during the process of implementation.