

Exploring the Links Between Reflective Writing and Transformational Learning:  
Applications to Portfolio Building and Teacher Education

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## ABSTRACT

### Exploring the Links Between Reflective Writing and Transformational Learning: Applications to Portfolio Building and Teacher Education

By Yosra Dali

This thesis explores the relationship between reflective writing and transformative learning. Although it is gaining popularity in teacher education programs and adult learning environments, reflective practice which aims at raising self-awareness and shifting perspectives remains an abstract concept to many learners. Engaging in reflection is complex as it involves learning how one learns, a task requiring critical thinking, self-discovery, and numerous other skills.

Exploring the links between reflective writing and transformative learning theory sets the stage for a better understanding of the ways in which writing plays a major role in self-questioning and examining widely held beliefs. Reflective writing may also elicit change by providing the learner with the tool to express a silent voice.

Each chapter aims at answering one major question:

- Chapter 1: Why and how does reflection create a positive ground for generating transformative learning?
- Chapter 2: How are reflective writing and transformative learning related?
- Chapter 3: How are reflection and reflective writing, which become transformative, beneficial to the adult learner and what does the adult learn from this experience?
- Chapter 4: How may a facilitator implement and guide learners through reflective writing techniques and activities in an effective manner?
- Chapter 5: What are the applications of reflective writing in teacher education curricula, adult learner portfolio building, and other similar learning contexts?

This thesis concludes that the presence of positive conditions and a consideration of factors such as assessment and proper guidance provide a positive support for reflection and the possibility of change.

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## DEDICATION

Cette thèse est dédiée à mes chers parents pour leur soutien et leur amour inconditionnels.

À Mimi, à qui je souhaite succès et bonheur.

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*“Better to write for yourself and have no public,  
than to write for the public and have no self.”  
-Cyril Connolly*

## INTRODUCTION

How does one reflect critically and write profoundly? How does one move from narrating events to questioning ideas and creating meaning? How does learning how to learn unfold? These are just some of the key questions that preoccupied me during my undergraduate years as I was asked to write reflective journals. This practice was used in order for student teachers and future educators to reflect upon their work, values, and philosophy. Later, as I started teaching, the same questions were raised again as I had to create a space where students would voice their thoughts in writing. In my undergraduate years, I often struggled with the reflective practice as I often felt that I was thrown into a process which I knew little about. At times, I felt that my writing did not resonate with my thinking, that there was a gap between my inner thoughts and the words I had put down on paper. There were too many wasted words. Moreover, the intrusiveness of such an activity made it so that my writing topics and content were often selective.

Reflective writing and journaling requires an eloquent expression of knowledge and the ability to make links between old and new information, theory and practice. The ability to retrospect and introspect proves effective in this process. In order to gain further insights from experiences through reflection, one must examine many aspects: disappointments, surprises, and the way one feels that his/her working theories have failed. This process calls for great self-knowledge and self-awareness which many novice educators are still developing at the undergraduate level. Self-knowledge develops

throughout one's lifetime, yet in the undergraduate years the future educator is in search of a teaching philosophy to include in his/her statement.

Teachers-in-training are often asked to reflect and write about their eureka moments without knowing what they involve. A eureka moment may not always present itself as an enlightening moment or the discovery of something new, but as the sudden realization of the significance of a given aspect, idea, or personal characteristic. It often involves an awakening about something that we know had always existed, but only in our unconscious. Eureka moments also take place with the unexpected realization that one has been painfully performing a task in a given way when he/she realizes that there is an easier and better way of doing it. That is when the first time we put an abstract idea in practice. Eureka moments may take place when we make meaning to already known notions, when we create links between old and new knowledge. Being unaware of the rationale behind reflection and change often gives the reflective learner an impression of failure.

As I attempt to understand the ways in which the act of writing reflectively leads to change, I will examine the theories and works of various adult education experts and writers. Each chapter will begin with a question and build upon concepts and theories that lead to an answer. The first chapter mainly explores Schön's and Mezirow's theories. Donald Schön's work is significant as he introduced action research-based reflection, a concept which led to the popularity of reflective practice in teacher preparation programs. The work of Jack Mezirow will be given great attention since it sets the stage for understanding both critical reflection and Transformative Learning theory. Mezirow's meaning-making theory is at the heart of both critical reflection and transformation.



Chapter two aims at exploring the links between reflective writing and Transformative Learning Theory. Mary-Catherine Bateson's *Peripheral Visions* will be discussed. In this work, Bateson uses observation to learn about new cultures. She studies the ways in which individuals gain valuable learning from being exposed to change. Bateson believes that experiential learning constantly elicits new paths of reflection, allowing for the appropriation of knowing. We learn incrementally as life unfolds.

The third chapter attempts to assess the benefits of reflective writing to the adult learner. I will devote great attention to the meaning of narrative for women as the practice for the female gender is well-established. The significance of journaling for women has already been assessed in the literature, yet less attention has been devoted to men's reflective writing. I have chosen *Women's Ways of Knowing* by Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule (1986) to examine the motives behind the reflective practice and the possibilities of change. It is undeniable that writing creates a safe space for women to verbalize their thoughts. For those reluctant to express their subjective knowledge, reflective writing serves as a substitute for public speech. Writing provides a space to discuss, validate, and internalize subjective knowing. Throughout their narratives, women make meaning from their experiences. Without writing, they would continue to live experiences for which they have yet to find a name and a sense.

Chapter four looks at the ways in which a facilitator may guide learners through reflective writing processes. Boud's models of reflection (1985, 2001) will be examined as they contextualize the reflective practice. Factors inhibiting and promoting effective reflective writing are also discussed.

In chapter five, the use of reflective writing in portfolio and teacher education curricula is discussed. Valli's typology (1990) will be examined as it proposes different levels of reflection used mostly in teacher education. Assessment issues will be reviewed in order to understand the rationale behind evaluation. Finally, Bateson's (2000) and English's applications of reflective writing in learning contexts will be considered to provide general guidance for implementation (2001).

## *Chapter 1*

### *Why and how does reflection create a positive ground for generating transformative learning?*

In adult education, the practice of different forms of reflective methods such as journaling has become a widely used learning method in faculties, service-learning, women's studies programs, and life-work planning workshops aimed at applying transformational learning theory. Stressing transformation over information, reflective writing is considered by many researchers as a way of triggering the transformative process. "The mental constructions of experience, inner meaning, and critical self-reflection are common components of this approach" (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p.2).

Schön (1987) introduced the notion of reflective practice as a crucial procedure in developing and improving one's expertise in a given discipline. He recommended reflective practice as it helps the beginners of a discipline see the connection between their own work and that of successful practitioners who possess skills to which they aspire. Although it is important to seek out models, in one's discipline, who instill beliefs for self-direction, it is crucial for future educators to make sense of their own beliefs of what constitutes good teaching. Reflective writing is a highly beneficial practice, enhancing personal growth and development, and increasing self-awareness.

#### *Action research-based reflection:*

In the learning context, "reflection is a generic term for those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations" (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1985, p.19). Throughout the years, reflective practice has taken the form of action research since

learning takes place through a mix of practice and critical thought. Widely used as a learning tool in curriculum development, action research involves a continuous feedback on a specific issue in a particular school setting or teaching experience (Hopkins & Antes, 1990). Action research-based reflection has become a standard practice in teacher preparation programs. The teacher/educator encourages students to put learned theories in practice as they teach, and reflect upon their practice in the form of reports or portfolios that will be discussed and analyzed among colleagues and educators. This practice allows educators to contextualize learning, validate its relevance, and enhance it through reflection. In so doing, students have a chance to recapture their teaching experiences, think them over and evaluate them. “Writing provides the container that captures our primary thinking, or initial reaction to remembered events, facilitates ownership of life events, and provides the distance that promotes secondary reflection” (Meyer, 2003, p.1). In teacher education programs, action research-based reflection is meant to provide a deeper understanding of one’s own teaching style and refine one’s teaching skills. It shows congruence with one’s thinking processes.

The extensive literature on the role of reflection in teacher education highlights several other compelling benefits related to the reflective practice including “the validation of a teacher’s ideals, beneficial challenges to tradition, the recognition of teaching as artistry, and respect for diversity in applying theory to classroom practice” (Ferraro, 2000, p.3). Reflection in practice is an important aspect in student engagement, the use of one’s own voice, and personal connection vis-à-vis the teaching practice. The use of one’s voice also allows for the internalization and appropriation of knowledge.

*On learning derived from meaning-making:*

Most research conducted on learning and meaning-making assumes and concludes that truths are personal and intuitive rather than fixed. Given this absence of definitive knowledge, and the constantly evolving world we live in, the human condition may be best understood as a continuous attempt to negotiate disputed and challenging meanings that may be encountered in one's life (Mezirow, 2000, p.3). Consequently, it is important that learning stresses contextual understanding, critical reflection of widely-held beliefs and validating meaning by assessing reasons (Mezirow, 2000, p.3). These reasons are often, if not always, personal and cultural because much of what one knows is context-related. The who, what, where, when, how, and why of learning may be best understood only when situated within their cultural context.

Nevertheless, the essence of meaning-making cannot be dictated only based on cultural interests. Mezirow claims that humans have in common their connectedness, a common need and desire to understand life phenomena, life itself, and a spiritual incompleteness which needs to be fulfilled (Mezirow, 2000, p.7). Cultures, or the notion of cultural relativism, may facilitate or inhibit the realization of common human interests and development of learning potential as it is likely to promote segregation between people (Mezirow, 2000).

There are different levels of comprehension as to becoming aware of one's interpretations and worldview. In adult education, knowing what one knows requires an awareness of the context, nature, and consequences of one's interpretations as well as those of others. There are also different levels of cognitive processing, Kitchener (1983) highlights three: at the first level individuals compute, memorize, read, and understand

the content (Mezirow, 2000, p.4). The second level, referred to as metacognition, allows learners to monitor their personal progress as they are engaged in first-order cognitive tasks (Mezirow, 2000, p.4). The third level, called epistemic cognition, refers to the way humans use their problem-solving skills when facing ill-structured problems such as situations which have no absolutely correct truths or answers (Mezirow, 2000, p.5). This third level of cognition allows learners to make use of their critical reflection to build new understandings. It emerges in late adolescence although its form may change in adulthood. Although most educators agree that adolescents may learn how to reflect critically, critical reflection of one's beliefs and assumptions seems to occur more in adults. All the forms of learning mentioned above "...may be intentional, the result of deliberate inquiry; incidental, a by-product of another activity involving intentional learning; or mindlessly assimilative" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 5). Mezirow argues that intentional and incidental learning both occur outside the learner's awareness.

*Transformation and negotiation of meaning:*

Transformative learning refers to learning that engenders deep change or a transformation of our implicitly acquired frames of reference, derived from sets of assumptions and expectations, that determine and act upon the way we think, feel and act (Marsick and Mezirow, 2002). Transformation theory involves learning how to negotiate and act on our feelings, values, purposes and meanings rather than those aspects we have uncritically assimilated from others. This would allow us to benefit from a greater control over our lives as socially responsible citizens by promoting agency (Mezirow, 2000). It is undeniable that agency, among other factors, has considerable importance for learning in democratic societies where it is assumed that adults are autonomous citizens, able and

willing to understand various issues and make wise choices. Mezirow agrees that even partial autonomy calls for communicative competence and transformative learning (Mezirow, 2002, p.25).

In *Peripheral Visions* (1994), and many other works, Mary-Catherine Bateson recalls the importance of negotiating meaning and improvising in a society more dynamic than ever, and whenever we find ourselves in unfamiliar settings and new cultures. Her improvisations and adaptations to such settings were only approved once carefully reflected upon and tested in real-life situations. Reflection undeniably increases one's awareness of the undertaken action or response and the reason justifying it. It is the key to obtaining internalized and meaningful learning from one's lived experiences.

*Transformation and liberation:*

Over the past twenty years, adult educators have been involved in discourse regarding transformative learning theory. Transformative learning involves liberating ourselves from reified forms of thought. Yet, Mezirow highlights a difference between the tasks of education and those of political mobilization which lead to liberation. Educational tasks of critical reflection aim at helping adults become more aware of repressive structures and ways to change these (Mezirow, 2000, p.144). This would help adult learners build the confidence and ability required to work for collective change. Mezirow agrees that by helping people become better analysts, education could prepare them to organize. Nevertheless, he acknowledges the fact that sometimes the objectives of organizing stand in opposition to the educational process (Mezirow, 2000, p.144). Mezirow has stated that adult educators should be thought of as cultural activists who work towards creating and maintaining conditions that promote free full participation in

critical reflective discourse by all learners in a multitude of learning settings (Marsick and Mezirow, 2002). Mezirow sees the adult educator as a cultural mentor, willing to support and guide learners throughout the development of their autonomy and self-direction.

*Reflective discourse:*

Mezirow defines discourse, in the context of transformation theory, as a distinct use of dialogue aimed at achieving a common understanding about a belief (Mezirow, 2000). Discourse involves a critical analysis of assumptions. Goleman states that the prerequisites for effective participation in both discourse and transformative learning include awareness, empathy, and control, which constitute emotional maturity or, in Goleman's terms, "emotional intelligence" (Mezirow, 2000, p.11). Those wishing to freely and fully participate in discourse must:

- possess up-to-date and complete information
- feel no domination or unequal power relations, and possess an equal opportunity to participate in the various roles of dialogue
- be willing to hear different points of view
- have the ability to analyze and evaluate evidence
- be greatly aware of the context of both their and other's ideas and reflective of their and other's assumptions
- be willing to seek understanding and agreement

If each participant in discourse takes the above mentioned factors into consideration, consequently there would be an agreement supporting them as norms. Of course, one might question the achievability of a discourse requiring the conditions mentioned above.



Ego and power-related issues, among many others, often act upon the content of dialogue. These conditions are ideal, but unfortunately never fully realized in real life. Bellah and other educators refer to them as “democratic habits of the heart”, i.e.: respect for others and oneself, willingness to accept responsibility for the common good and willingness to appreciate diversity and approach others with an open mind (Mezirow, 2000, p.14). Obviously, discourse in the sense described above is recommended for all aspects of life.

Jane Vella’s writings on dialogue reflect its significance in the transformative process. Vella believes that the integration, through dialogue, of personal reflection and self-discovery are crucial in triggering transformation (Vella, 1995). Engaging in dialogue involves activating thought, examining one’s meaning paths and exploring new ones. It also involves being or becoming conscious of one’s contradictions and willing to confront them. The use of reflective writing, such as journaling or creating life history, is a structured form of dialogue which provides the learner with the opportunity for evaluating and reviewing ways of thinking and potentially related transformative learning (Meyer, 2003).

Meaning structures:

Mezirow refers to meaning structures as frames of reference. They constitute a structure of assumptions through which we filter our sense of impressions. Becoming critically reflective of such assumptions requires reasoning and intuition, which are both guided by conditioned emotions (Mezirow, 2000, p.21). Transformations may be purposely generated, a product of critical reflection, repetitive affective interaction or of unconscious assimilation (Mezirow, 2000, p.21). When discussing unconscious

assimilation, Mezirow refers to the example of immigrant families, moving to a different culture and uncritically assimilating its habits and norms.

*Transformation: a disorienting dilemma*

Mezirow lists the obstacles (a disorienting dilemma, self-examination with feelings of fear or anger and other) often faced by adult learners who experience transformation, and reviews other explicit changes listed by different scholars (Mezirow, 2000). Clark (1993) states that transformation may involve encountering a “missing piece” that provides the integration required for a transformative experience.

Transformation may also result in re-examining oneself in the eyes of similar others (Mezirow, 2000). In this process, the interaction with new information invites the individual to compare his/her understandings with those posed by others, see them with fresh eyes, and often break away from ‘same-old’ thinking. Going through a transformation might be a disorienting life transition since the learner questions his/her familiar and cherished ways of making sense of the world in order to make room for new meanings.

Boyd (1991) highlights two key steps involved in the transformative process: 1) making public, primarily and mostly for oneself, the historical dimensions of our conflict/dilemma, and 2) confronting it as a difficulty to surmount. Discourse is a key element in the context of transformation as the transformation itself must be communicated through dialogue. Mezirow claims that “we often become critically reflective of our assumptions or those of others and arrive at a transformative insight, but we need to justify our new perspective through discourse” (Mezirow, 2000, p.20). Thus,

discourse is imperative for the validation of one's new thoughts and transformation needs to be signified through a form of communication.

## *Chapter 2*

### *How are reflective writing and transformative learning related?*

In transformative learning theory, instrumental and communicative learning are differentiated. The instrumental approach requires controlling or manipulating the environment, while communicative learning involves "...shared meaning through interpersonal interaction" (Marsick and Mezirow, 2002). Transformative learning may be either instrumental or communicative. Its development involves four main steps:

- 1) The critical reflection of those assumptions sustaining a problematic belief, feeling or value judgment as well as a reflection on their origin, nature, and eventual consequences (Marsick and Mezirow, 2002).
- 2) The commitment to valuable discourse (one which aims at evaluating disputed beliefs) in order to arrive at a tentative best opinion or optimal response upon which to act until new perspectives and evidence are encountered and found to be more justified through further developed discourse (Marsick and Mezirow, 2002).
- 3) Taking action on the transformed frame of reference in a reflective and critical manner (Marsick and Mezirow, 2002, p.1).
- 4) Developing and initiating a habit for critical reflection of one's personal assumptions and those of others (Marsick and Mezirow, 2002, p.1). This step would eventually help sustain the practice of reflective thinking within the learner and turn it into a spontaneous learning strategy. Nurturing critical thinking, questioning of widely-held beliefs, and a continuous pursuit of inquiry generates transformative learning.

### The meaning of reflective writing for Mary-Catherine Bateson:

For many years, Bateson's work on experiential learning has reflected a long-standing commitment to understanding meaning-making and the ways in which adults learn from, interpret, and respond to life experiences and phenomena. For Bateson, writing is a matter of composing and making up herself, a way to come to terms with her different identities. Her writing has a spiritual dimension as it symbolizes a way to cope with, accommodate and understand different social phenomena and the world at large. This quest for self-understanding and meaning-making is constantly at the heart of Bateson's writing, but also at the heart of life. Her writing is an attempt to undertake a process of spiritual discovery as she makes links between her learning and the reason and meaning of her own existence, her *raison d'être*. It is along these lines that she attempts to seek truth by reflecting on the influence of her mother, Margaret Mead, on her process of becoming, investigating and always questioning different life phenomena, and linking these aspects to her process of becoming and her spiritual journey.

Bateson believes that adults' experiential learning allows them to reflect critically and make changes in order to alter their often fear-driven patterns. People project their beliefs outward, beliefs that have been influenced and created by a culture of fear, which ultimately leads to a need for transformation for those individuals (Bateson, 2000). We need to change our views about differences before projecting them onto others. Given the fast changing world we live in today, we also need to nurture this willingness to learn, reflect, question, and transform throughout our lifetime in order not to become strangers to ourselves.

In *Peripheral Visions*, Mary-Catherine Bateson discusses the learning she acquired while living different life experiences, travelling, raising a child, encountering different cultural groups, and living their daily lives. In her work and findings, she concludes that life is an endless source of learning, allowing one to become wiser and to learn and change along the way. Life itself teaches all lessons, leads to new paths of reflection, and encompasses a never-ending potential for intellectual and personal betterment and transformation.

*On conscious and unconscious learning:*

Bateson claims that people are often unaware of the learning they acquire. They are often unaware of creating new meaning. Modern life is often organized in such a way that there is no awareness of novelty or connection between new knowledge and already acquired one (Bateson, 1994, p.6). Yet, being aware of one's learning transition is necessary as it prepares to cope with change. At times, new learning is apparent, while at others it is only visible to peripheral vision, out of the corner of one's eye (Bateson, 1994).

Reflection and transformation are significant as it is important not to reduce understanding to a narrow focus. The fact that issues of meaning are too complex to have unitary answers is somewhat liberating: one no longer has to look for a single answer, nor take for granted a single truth without questioning its validity, but accept the fact that some issues have numerous possible meanings. One should believe in the potential of experiential learning at suggesting ways of solving complex issues. Writing about experiential learning also helps provide answers to complex issues by providing insight. "Insight...refers to that depth of understanding that comes by settings

experiences...familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another” (Bateson, 1994, p.14). Bateson’s idea of reflection refers to the insight that one gains after living experiences, especially in unfamiliar settings, then transforming one’s beliefs or confirming them as they prove valid.

*Validating the “I” in Mary-Catherine Bateson’s work:*

For Bateson (2004), the standard format for setting up a form of speech is to use the “I”. In most of her works, she highlights the interconnectedness between the active voice (the ‘I’) and one’s personal experiences: in *Willing to Learn*, as she recalls her first writing experiences, she realizes the importance of the use of her active voice. On the other hand, as she reflects upon her use of this voice, she recalls important experiences and life episodes. The use of the “I” also validates one’s claims, which is a crucial aspect for a student, beginning or experienced educator writing about his/her experiential learning. Writing in the first person makes room for the appropriation and internalization of knowledge. Moon (1999) highlights the importance of appropriating knowledge as she lists the different purposes of journal writing. These purposes include:

- To record one’s experience(s)
- To develop learning in ways that eventually promote other learning
- To expand the quality of learning in the form of critical thinking or to develop a questioning attitude
- To allow the learners to understand their own learning process
- To facilitate experiential learning
- To promote active engagement in learning and appropriation of learning
- To enhance the ability to reflect and improve learning quality

- To promote problem-solving skills
- As an assessment method in formal education settings
- To improve professional practice or the professional self in practice
- To explore the self, personal meaning constructs and one's worldview
- To promote the valuing of oneself towards self-empowerment
- As a way of slowing down learning, taking a more careful account of a situation(s)
- To promote one's creative skills by making better use of intuitive understanding
- To offer another option, an alternative 'voice' for those not good at verbalizing and expressing themselves
- To cultivate reflective and creative interaction within a group

#### Journaling, reflection, and learning

In recent years, reflective writing and journaling have been used as a strategy to seek personal truth. Most portfolios involve the use of this method as it links reflective knowing with improved action and instructional strategies. "A journal is a crucible for processing the raw material of experience in order to integrate it with existing knowledge and create new meaning"(Kerka, 2002, p.1). Reflective knowing is about constantly exploring new layers of meaning brought to us through the different experiences encountered in our lifetime. Any ambiguous meanings are stored in order to be clarified once revisited a second or third time. It is then possible to trace back one's transition into learning: as Bateson argues, learning is a spiral involving numerous layers of meaning one only needs to spiral back and reflect upon the meanings that were then missing or incomplete (Bateson, 1994). This process is put in practice throughout reflective writing.



There are numerous purposes for journal writing, among the most important are the following: "...to break habitual ways of thinking; enhance the development of reflective judgment and metacognition; increase awareness of tacit knowledge; facilitate self-exploration and personal growth; and work out solutions to problems" (Andrusyszyn and Davie, 1997; Mitchell and Coltrinari, 2001; Moon, 1999). Moon (1999) and Carroll (1994) discuss theories and research supporting a number of assumptions about learning derived from journaling including:

- a) The fact that expressing links between new and old knowledge improves learning.
- b) "Writing about learning is a way of demonstrating what has been learned" (Moon, 1999; and Carroll, 1994).
- c) "Journal writing accentuates favourable learning conditions-it demands time and space for reflection, encourages independent thought and ownership, enables expression of feelings, and provides a place to work with ill-structured problems" (Moon, 1999; and Carroll, 1994).
- d) Reflection promotes deep rather than surface learning.

Moon draws a map of the reflective process involved in journal writing. She refers to it as a map as she believes the process is flexible and not a linear sequence of activities (Moon, 1999). The map describes:

- a) A purpose or objective for journal writing based on which the educator selects the topics.
- b) The description of events and issues: observations, comments on the context and one's feelings etc.

- c) Connection and linkage to other material: insight and suggestions from others, theory, related experience.
- d) Reflective thinking: relating to one's life, and construing meaning from other points of view - in other words examining an experience rather than just living it.
- e) Other processes: considering new ideas and testing them, representing material in the form of a dialogue or through a chart.
- f) Product: the statement of that which has been learned.
- g) Further reflection: leading to an understanding or a solution to the conflict/issue at stake.

Why is writing about one's life considered a tool for personal transformation?

Reflective writing is a way to connect our different lives and experiences across time. It is a way to make meaning out of events that, when viewed superficially, may seem meaningless. Reflective writing is mostly likely to trigger transformation in adulthood where adults are usually wiser, think more, and have more experiences or "baggage" to reflect upon and draw conclusions from. There is a range of techniques supporting or generating transformation. Mezirow et al. (1990) mention reflective journal writing, composing life histories, metaphor analysis, and conceptual mapping. These techniques shed the light on the learner's basic assumptions, bringing them into conscious awareness and creating opportunities for new understandings and therefore linking reflective knowing with improved action. It allows the learner to recreate the lived experiences, see them in a different scope, and isolate his/her behaviours and actions and clarify the deliberate ones from those culturally-influenced or uncritically accepted (Meyer, 2003).

Writing a life history allows learners to reinterpret their lived experiences in an organized and meaningful way as the data and information can be categorized, quantified and thus viewed differently. Cell (1984) highlights that both primary and secondary reflection mould the understanding of our life experiences. Writing captures primary thinking and first reactions to remembered events, and provides the distance that supports secondary reflection (Cell, 1984). Cell believes that this organization and reorganization makes it easier to isolate, identify and evaluate assumptions.

#### Journaling and dialogue

Depending on their form and purpose, journaling may be the product of conversations in print, connecting writing with communicativeness, which justifies its connection with dialogue. Focused journaling is a way to engage in personal dialogue, an intimate one. As an advocate for journal writing, Ira Progoff suggests that journaling may facilitate the access to a dialogue with significant others. He finds the act of journaling to be the possessor of an outstandingly liberating force, stressing the power of the written word (Progoff, 1975).

As she devotes considerable attention to the role of dialogue in the transformative process, Vella highlights that the integration of self-examination and self-discovery through dialogue is key in generating personal change (Vella, 1995). She argues that learners believe in self-discovered knowledge more than that knowledge presented by others (Vella, 1995). Vella also agrees that active learning, such as the kind involved in journaling, is more effective than passive learning (Vella, 1995)

### Women and journaling

Although structured journaling can prove effective for both genders, it plays a key role in women's learning as it allows helping them assert power in their own lives through the use of narrative, see their personal achievements, and seek personal truth. The literature addressing this topic focuses mainly on programs intended to empower the female gender. Thus it has to be developed in order to include research on other groups. Nevertheless, the work and research conducted on reflective journaling clearly makes the case for experiential learning and its significance in feminist educational theory. Writing mostly and almost exclusively about women's experiences, Bateson claims "Today we do well to think of wisdom as depending on the flexibility, playfulness, and willingness to learn that are sometimes lost or denied with age, the kind of intelligence that includes self-criticism and the habit of reflecting on experience"(Bateson, 2000, p.31).

Those advocates of experiential learning-based journaling believe that interpretations of women's experiences have often, and for a long time, been misunderstood, portraying erroneous theories created by men (Meyer, 2003). "Distorted definitions resulted from men seeing women as something "other" than themselves and drawing unjustified inferences from this perspective" (Meyer, 2003, p.5). Women's self-definitions are thus needed in order for their images to be created by their own definitions, interpretations, and perceptions. Journaling provides women with a way to document and validate their experiential learning first, then to engage in the reflective process in order to create knowledge about themselves by themselves.

Journaling in the form of life histories allows women to identify skills which are useful in career development settings. "This process is especially powerful for women

who see themselves as having no marketable skills or a narrowly-defined skill set” (Meyer, 2003, p.6). Life history-based journals provide the opportunity to validate and value the skills that one possesses.

### Self-reflection in professionalism

Reflective journaling has generated great interest in early childhood education, leading to the inclusion of this practice in most programs. In the eighties, many childhood education researchers were interested in blending scientific knowledge with personal one in an attempt to give this field the professional status it deserves (Bowman, 1989). “Professionalization has been seen as a way to identify, improve, and protect the quality of teaching practices and as the basis of increased status and wages for teachers” (Bowman, 1989, p.1). One of the most important characteristics of a profession is to possess a comprehensive knowledge base. Discussions about the best knowledge for early childhood education have been dynamic, but have for the most part stressed theories, studies, and statistical evidence (Bowman, 1989). Little attention was paid to the subjective, personal, and intuitive knowledge which is used in the classroom in addition to, and sometimes more than, scientific knowledge. Inspired from the Erikson Institute’s approach to teacher education, Bowman argues that early childhood education programs should consist of a combination of empirical and internally validated knowledge, i.e. personal one.

Given this view, an important question arises: Is personal knowledge adequate enough to be considered professional? Professionalizing personal knowledge is a challenging task as educators often disagree on the validity of their personal knowing and show inconsistencies about their beliefs and classroom actions. Yet, it is this personal

knowledge, the implicitly held knowledge in Bowman's terms, which directs teachers' actions (Bowman, 1989, p.1). Thus, in early childhood education programs, reflective activities have been recognized as helpful in merging the scientific and personal knowledge systems (Bowman, 1989, p.1).

### Chapter 3

#### ***How are reflection and reflective writing, which become transformative, beneficial to the adult learner and what does the adult learn from this experience?***

The advantages of journal writing and keeping are numerous, especially for educators and educators-to-be. The teacher who writes about his/her profession is prone to notice patterns, mainly instructive ones, repeating cases and cycles which might trigger corrections once the teacher becomes aware of them.

Journals share common qualities with diaries as both record experiences over a defined period of time. Yet, journals also involve reflection and interpretation, the key aspects to learning and meaning-making. Both journals and diaries possess objective and subjective dimensions, but unlike diaries, the writer becomes explicitly aware of them (Holly, 1989). The diary makes room for 'letting it out', while the journal allows the writer to make sense of and construe meaning based on what is out (Holly, 1989). The journal is a dynamic learning tool, providing one with the opportunity to express lived experiences, the experience of past life memories, and construct knowledge from them. Reflective writing also helps making sense of, and links between, thoughts, actions, behaviors, values, and belief-systems. This process involves naming or renaming the self and experience. Experience is often unstructured. The process of gathering information, identifying and reflecting on the conflict, then recommending alternatives or solutions is often a demanding task. Journaling is used as an adequate activity to do so in an orderly manner.

#### ***The learning journal:***

All journal writing must involve learning at some level, as it is the case in learning journals. Such journals emphasize the processes of reflection and deepening

understanding as learning represents a specific focal point. Moon (1999) refers to the learning journal as "...an accumulation of material that is mainly based on the writer's processes of reflection. It is written over a period of time, not in "one go". Putting 'learning' in front of 'journal' implies 'that there is an overall intention by the writer (or those who have set the task) that learning should be enhanced'" (Moon, 1999, p.4).

In the second half of the twentieth century, there was an increasing concern with journal writing as a way of developing creativity, personal growth, and promoting the competence of practitioners, mainly those in counseling and some areas of education. Different approaches emerged from this strong interest including structured journaling practices, such as the Intensive Journal advocated by Ira Progoff, where a thoughtfully constructed method is used to guide students, and the more free-flowing forms promoted by Tristine Rainer. Teacher educators also began to take interest in personal and professional journaling given the influence of Schön and others who developed the notion of reflection and the significance of reflective practice. Schön defined reflective practice as "...a critical processing refining one's artistry or craft in a specific discipline.... reflective practice involves thoughtfully considering one's own experiences in applying knowledge to practice while being coached by professionals in the discipline..."(Schön, 1987, p.6).

Sustaining transformative change in critical situations: a case study of the importance of telling one's story

Used in non-academic settings, reflection proved efficient for women undergoing transformative processes in critical life periods according to the information gathered from Dorothy Ettling's study (2002). The findings from this study result from a



collaboration involving education sessions with women in transition from situations of conjugal violence. The subjects, one hundred women coming from varied backgrounds, participated in transitional housing programs from 1996 until 1999. Data was collected during education sessions, audio and video interviews and focus groups.

In their work with women and associations supporting women in transition, the researchers based their theoretical foundation on transformative learning theory as viewed by Boyd & Myers (1988), Brookfield (1986), Daloz (1986), Kegan (1994), and Mezirow (2000) as well as feminist approaches to learning mainly inspired by the work of Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule (1986) in *Women's Ways of Knowing*, which will be discussed later in this chapter. Self-reflection was promoted in a way that develops leadership and promotes a 'Learning to Learn' methodology, as referred to by the researchers of this study. This methodology invites women to use their inner resources and transform them into learnings for life (Ettling, 2002, p. 3).

Throughout their writings and storytelling, women realize that transformation occurred as they confirm that a border has been crossed, one which limited their choices and the way they perceived themselves (Ettling, 2000). The study shows that bonding was a crucial aspect in sustaining the capacity to alter one's assumptions, and lead to change. It was obvious that women gained voice. Transformation took place within the women involved in this study as well as its researchers. Their description of transformative change itself had shifted, originally it was stated as "the on-going process of becoming fully oneself and sharing that consciousness with others through which one experientially knows connectedness and unity with all that is" (Ettling, 2002, p. 4). This description was altered for a "change that brings about a new consciousness of self and

one's relationships and thus encourages a person to think and act in new ways" (Ettling, 2002, p. 4). The former description of what transformative change was and ought to be did not integrate the action aspect, which was added in the latter definition as the researchers realized how essential it is to their understanding of the transformative process. The development of the definition of transformation was itself a process of reflection as the researchers consider continuous cycles of action-reflection as crucial in their study.

The conclusions and elements of praxis agreed upon by the researchers are numerous. The following elements consist of a comprehensive summary of a transformative learning that must inform and shape their praxis:

- "Transformative learning is facilitated within the context of relationship" (Ettling, 2002, p.7)
- "Facilitating transformative learning with women is vitally connected to accessing the other levels of consciousness beyond the cognitive. Multiple forms of knowing must be engaged" (Ettling, 2002, p.7)
- "Assisting women to access and link to their core values, however they are named, plays a crucial role in the meaning-making process" (Ettling, 2002, p.7)
- "Accessing experience through organic inquiry's story telling mode provides a rich and powerful method for inquiry and reflection" (Ettling, 2002, p.7)
- "Contextualizing the learning process is essential as regards both the personal situations of the learners and the broader socio-historical reality. Transformative Learning theory as it is presented in the literature often reflects solely the values

and experiences of an educated, middle class population and many assume certain conditions or available resources to act on change” (Ettling, 2002, p.7)

- “Maintaining an awareness of both the potential benefit and the potential cost of long term transformative change for individuals in disenfranchised or marginalized sectors of society is essential for facilitators or educators of transformative learning” (Ettling, 2002, p.7)
- “Striving to maintain a field mutuality among the group, including the facilitators, is key to preserving the integrity of the process” (Ettling, 2002, p.7)
- “Experiencing transformative change fosters an awareness of the connectedness of all reality and engenders a sense of care and concern for others and thus, influences social change” (Ettling, 2002, p.7)

#### Subjective knowing

Ettling’s study on women in transition had demonstrated that building bonds of friendship and support was an important factor in altering assumptions and eventually eliciting transformation. They realized their experiences were repeated and reaffirmed by one another, which created and strengthened their sense of connectedness. For these women, critical reflection on their life situations in a context favorable to support and challenge was basic in perspective transformation (Ettling, 2000). Reflection and reflective writing often stand out as crucial learning tools for women, and are beneficial in many ways. They provide an alternative for giving a stronger voice to those who feel silenced yet eager to express themselves. In *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule claim that women often feel unheard, whether it being in

the classroom, at work, or in everyday life. While conducting interviews with women to understand the epistemology of their ways of accessing and developing knowledge and meaning-making, they state: “One growth metaphor in particular reverberated throughout the women’s stories of their intellectual development. Again and Again, women spoke of ‘gaining voice’ (Belenky et al., 1986, p.16). Women need to create their own reality, express themselves in their own voices, and make sense of subjective knowing. They often refer to the voice metaphor to describe their intellectual development, highlighting the extent to which the sense of voice, mind and self are intertwined (Belenky et al., 1986, p.18).

*Reflective writing: an alternative to received knowledge and silence*

Women who learn from listening to others are referred to as received knowers. They experience listening as a lively and challenging process as they are required to concentrate in an attempt to absorb the most out of the content being heard (Belenky et al., 1986, p.37). The ideas that these women hear based on the words uttered by others are often dualistic whereby most questions are answered by a ‘yes’ or a ‘no’ and things are seen in black or white, leaving very little room for the ambivalence and complexity involved in them (Belenky et al., 1986, p.37). Such women would greatly benefit from believing in the potential of their own words of wisdom and experiential learning at suggesting ways of solving complex issues.

Reflective writing is beneficial for received knowers as they often believe that others possess the source of knowledge (Belenky et al., 1986, p.31). Moreover “...women who rely on received knowledge think of words as central to the knowing

process” (Belenky et al., 1986, p.36). They believe in the power of words in transmitting knowing. Thus writing is a way for them to seek out and construct personal knowledge, one that reflects their thought process, experiential learning and the way they unfold to create learning instead of listening to others for self-knowledge. Received knowers need to recognize their merit, express their subjective knowledge, what they know, and how they know it.

Unlike received knowers, silent women develop language without exploring the power of words in expressing and developing thought (Belenky et al., 1986 p.25).

“Language is a tool for representing experience, and tools contribute to creative endeavors only when used” (Belenky et al., p.25). Women may hardly appropriate knowledge if they are unable to appropriate meaning in the words of others. As their voices are often unheard, or not given enough opportunities to be heard, reflective writing helps them in their process, providing them with the tools to mouth their own words. In one of the interviews conducted in *Women’s Ways of Knowing*, a young mother states: “There’s part of me that I didn’t even know I had until recently—instinct, intuition, whatever. It helps me and protects me. It’s perceptive and astute. I just listen to the inside of me and I know what to do” (Belenky et al., 1986, p.52). As we write about ways of knowing such as intuition, we come to understand the ways in which we apply intuitive knowledge and use intuitive experience as a knowledge-seeking practice.

Due to its subjectivity, it is often difficult for women to recognize intuitive experience, express, and explain their intuitive guidance. Those who experience intuition often speak of a flash of insight, a ‘gut’ feeling, a precognition, and mostly an inner voice. Validating intuition as a way of knowing is a challenging task, yet writing about it

allows for a better understanding of the ways in which inner voices and intuitive experience impel one's actions and provide another way of making sense of the world. Writing allows one to name experiences to which one has yet to find a name and a meaning. Moreover, intuition provides knowledge about oneself as it sounds like the person's own, and understanding it allows for a positive attitude towards it.

### Experiential learning as a way of knowing

The promotion of experiential learning as a valid field is meant to counterbalance the silencing impact of women's ways of knowing (Meyer, 2003). "Experience is troublesome, partial, and even contradictory. Nevertheless, its acknowledgement is essential to feminist praxis" (Meyer, 2003, p.5)

Heron's model is grounded in experiential learning as a way of knowing. He relates four modes of functioning in the psyche to four ways of knowing (Kasl & Yorks, 2002). The psyche consists of the affective, imaginal, conceptual, and practical modes of functioning. The affective mode involves feelings and emotions, the imaginal mode consists of intuition and imagery, the conceptual mode refers to reflection and discrimination, and the practical mode embraces intention and action (Kasl & Yorks, 2002). The epistemology that is developed from and linked to these modes includes experiential, presentational, propositional, and practical ways of knowing. Heron claims that experiential learning is palpable "...when we meet and feel the presence of some energy, entity, person, place, process, or thing" (Kasl & Yorks, 2002). Presentational knowing is evident in our intuitive understanding of the significance of imaginal patterns when they are expressed in graphic and verbal art forms (Kasl & Yorks, 2002).

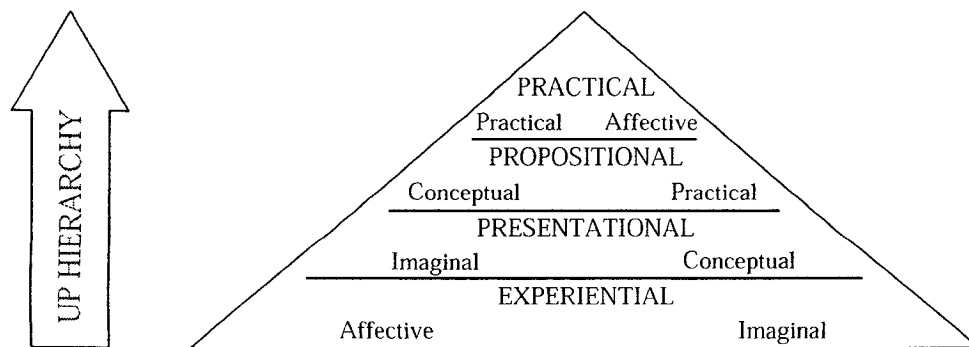
Propositional knowing is expressed in intellectual claims, both verbal and numeric, and organized in a manner which does not break the rules of logic (Kasl & Yorks, 2002).

Practical knowing is simply manifested as we know how to exercise a skill (Kasl & Yorks, 2002).

Heron outlines the four ways of knowing as a sequence whereby "...the learner *experiences* a felt encounter that is grasped and *presented* intuitively, expressed *propositionally* and finally extended into *practical* action (Kasl & Yorks, 2002). Heron proposes a relationship of "up-hierarchy" by illustrating ways of knowing as a pyramid. In his pyramid, experiential knowing, arising from the imaginative and affective modes of psyche, forms the base of all learning and sets the stage for all other forms of knowing.

This model is similar to David Kolb's experiential learning cycle which also includes four psychological modes and four learning modes. Yet, it is different from it as "Kolb creates a one-to-one correspondence between psychological modes and learning modes, whereas Heron posits that each way of knowing is situated within two psychological modes" (Kasl & Yorks, 2002).

Figure 1. Based on John Heron's (1992) Conceptualizations of Ways of Knowing as Up-Hierarchy



## Chapter 4

### *How may a facilitator implement and guide learners through reflective writing techniques and activities in an effective manner?*

In education, reflective writing may be used as a learning tool for various purposes. “It is a device for working with events and experiences in order to extract meaning from them. Writing can be used to enhance what we do and how we do it. It may relate to learning in formal courses, to our professional practice or to any aspect of informal learning” (Boud, 2001). Reflective practice is adaptable to numerous fields, contexts and purposes. Although we often think of reflection as a serendipitous act, facilitators may use various models, mainly proposed by David Boud and his associates, and procedures to guide learners through effective reflective activities.

Mezirow (1990) identifies three levels of reflectivity:

- Level 1: *Non-Reflection* simply implies the absence of reflective thought and processes.
- Level 2: *Lower Level Reflection* consists of the awareness of judgments and observations, and assessment of decisions.
- Level 3: *Critical Reflection* is the process including assessment of the desire for further learning, and consciousness that daily actions are inadequate, hence the need for a change in perspectives.

#### Models of reflective processes:

##### The work of David Boud

Journal writing most often fits in the reflection-in-action approach developed by Donald Schön. Schön suggests that all effective practitioners must possess the ability to reflect on their experience and learn from it (Boud, 2001). Any learning that is derived



from a reflective process is grounded in former experience and must take that experience into account. All learning occurs on the foundation of already existing frameworks of understanding and links must be made between new knowledge and prior knowledge and skills in order for learners to understand what is happening to them (Boud, 2001). As they are involved in a learning experience, learners bring their 'personal foundation of experience', the influence of learners' prior experiences which affect their perceptions and shapes their objectives (Boud, 2001). Moreover, both learners and facilitators must keep in mind that experience-based learning is an active process, one which requires engagement with the events in which they participate. Much of the benefit of being part of an event results from the way we adapt our participation to suit our purposes (Boud, 2001).

*Circumstances of reflection:*

*1 - Reflection in anticipation of events*

Journal writing plays a crucial role in the anticipation of events, during them, and afterwards. Reflection acts in envisaging events that have not yet occurred as it helps think about what might be taken into consideration while preparing ourselves for the next experiences (Boud, 2001). It is obvious that one may not foresee upcoming events, yet the model suggests three aspects to be considered. The first aspect implies a focus on the learner as he/she thinks of the expectations and outcomes. Journals may be used to assess one's objectives from an involvement in an activity, what one aims at learning (Boud, 2001).

The second consideration refers to all aspects of the context. We are sometimes briefed on the upcoming process of action and what may happen, but often must discover

it on our own. Journaling may help clarify questions and concerns about the situation the learner is entering, and what one needs to know in order to make the event a productive one (Boud, 2001). This is particularly applicable to work placements where the learner is expected to fit in the environment.

The third aspect to be considered when reflective practice is used in anticipation is a focus on learning skills, the need to equip oneself to maximise and enhance the use the opportunities being offered (Boud, 2001). What learning to learn strategies can we promote? What and how shall we prepare for the event?(Boud, 2001). Journaling provides the opportunity to consider the 'what if's', plan whatever need planning before the event. The crucial question a learner must consider here is: What must I do if my assumptions about the event prove faulty? Which strategies should I use in order to cope with such unexpected circumstances? (Boud, 2001).

## *2- Reflection in the midst of action*

Reflection in the midst of action aims at engaging with a situation that represents a learning experience. The model highlights three key features relevant to this reflection: noticing, intervening, and reflection-in-action. *Noticing* involves becoming aware of both the external context and the internal world encompassing thoughts and emotions.

Noticing shapes the extent to which we are actively involved in the process, whether this is overtly observed by others or not (Boud, 2001).

*Intervening* refers to the actions taken by one to alter the course of a process. The conscious decisions not to speak about one's actions, or concentrate on thoughts and feelings rather than external factors, are also considered forms of intervention (Boud,

2001). Such interventions in our internal learning processes often lead to transformation within the learner.

*Reflection-in-action* is the process of working with noticing and intervening to make meaning out of the events and outcomes of one's interventions. This process is often unconscious and, as Schön states, is often part of the craft of an effective practice (Boud, 2001). Yet, while developing expertise, it is often useful for the learner to develop consciousness of the process and decisions being made. "It is through exposing these decisions to scrutiny that the assumptions behind them can be identified and a conscious decision taken to act from a new perspective" (Boud, 2001), hence the use of reflective journaling or other reflective tools.

### *3- Reflection following events*

Much important reflection can occur after the active involvement in an event. Some learning takes time and the skill to view some aspects and situations in a wider context (Boud, 2001). Facilitators and learners must understand that reflection following events does not only involve a thinking process, but also one that includes feelings and decision-making. "We can regard it as having three elements: *return to experience*, *attending to feelings* and *re-evaluation of experience*" (Boud, 2001). The following features are also applicable at earlier stages of reflection. The base of learning lies in the learner's lived experience. *Returning* to it and capturing it allows for further and deeper reflection. "Mentally revisiting and vividly portraying the focus experience in writing can be an important first step. The role of journal writing here is to give an account of what happened and retrieve as fully as possible the rich texture of events as they unfolded" (Boud, 2001).

*Attending to feelings* is crucial as emotions may create barriers to or promote possibilities for further reflection and learning. In their writing, learners need to release negative feelings in order for them not to alter other perceptions and obstruct understanding and meaning making. Positive feelings may be celebrated as they promote the need to pursue and seek learning (Boud, 2001). *Re-evaluation of experience* proves effective as it prepares the ground for the evaluation of experience. The process of re-evaluating experience involves making links between new knowledge and that which is already known, searching for relationships between new and old ideas, assessing the authenticity of the resulting ideas and emotions, and finally adopting the resulting knowledge and making it part of one's common ways of operating (Boud, 2001).

These reflective processes often lead to the reinforcement of already existing perceptions. Transformation also includes a deeper assertion and validation of existing ideas. Boud agrees that in the reflective writing process, perspective transformation is also likely to occur when reflective leaning is shared with a peer or a group. Although the writing aspect is often accomplished in solo, reflective practice does not need to be a solitary activity. He believes that only give and take with others makes room for challenging old patterns and critical reflection (Boud, 2001). In order to accomplish such activities effectively, "...we have to understand how we can learn from one another" (Bateson, 2000, p.18).

*Inhibiting reflection:*

Reflective practice needs to take place in a non-threatening environment, where learners feel free to express themselves. Facilitators must develop and retain an environment free from intrusion. Nevertheless, even the most unfavourable conditions

may also elicit reflective writing as testified by prison, wartime, and domestic violence diaries. The course of action used to pursue writing in such circumstances seems unclear, yet there is often a need to reflect in writing whenever one faces a new challenge, change, or even crisis. The conditions of present-day journal writers in learning environments are often democratized, yet may hinder reflection. The more critical the learner is required to be about the reflective process, and the more he is asked to question widely-held beliefs about oneself, one's group, or the conditions in which learning occurs, the more important it is for the facilitator to consider his/her inhibiting looks and those of others. "The more that journals are used to focus on those characteristics of reflection such as ... 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow, 1990), the greater the account which needs to be taken of the interventions of those who may read one's writing (Boud, 2001).

Having another person, whether it being a facilitator or a peer, read one's writing is a major inhibitor. Writing for an audience often shapes the content and form of that which is written. In journal writing, self-censorship creates a barrier to creativity and suppresses learning. Yet, for assessment purposes, journal writing is often read and evaluated by the facilitator. Prior to the development of reflective activities, facilitators must decide whether they would assess their learners' writings, and if so, choose the evaluation methods deemed appropriate. Types of assessment will be discussed in the next chapter.

*The aims of journal writing:*

Despite the circumstances and learning environments, whether in a formal classroom or a training program, it is important that facilitators inform the learners about the objectives of their reflective writings. Reflective writers are often confused about the

undefined nature of what their finished product should look like, and the kind of meaning they should extract from it. Learners are often eager to meet assignment requirements, whether it being due to the desire to benefit as much as possible from their learning experiences, receive a good grade, or please the reader. However, when asked to write journals, they are often puzzled as they are not properly guided and carefully oriented towards the objectives of their reflective practice. They often ignore what journal writing really entails, the benefits that it can bring, and the way they can go about writing it. It is only once they realize the virtues that learners may delve into and cultivate this reflective practice to make use of it the best way they can.

John Cowan proposes various forms and purposes of reflection and provides numerous suggestions to those engaging in reflective practice. Among his suggestions, he states that:

- Facilitators "...should ...concentrate on those forms of reflection whose occurrence, purposefulness, and outcomes we can influence through our facilitative teaching" (Cowan)
- " 'Reflection' is a concept with which many learners are unfamiliar. Consequently they find it helpful to be given questions which they will find it useful to answer (Cowan, 1998, p.35), instead of simply being asked to reflect.
- "Different purposes for reflection call for different questions" (Cowan & al., 1999). "Different types of questions and tasks then lead to differences in the thinking and in the outcomes from the reflection they provoke" (Moon, 1999, pp.39-48).

- Facilitators may ask learners to review a puzzling incident, one which challenges their way of thinking, and consider the following question: What should I take from this incident? The result of this reflection should be an incident analysis which raises general issues and possibilities (Moon, 1999, pp.209-10)
- “Focusing on particular and open-ended questions of immediate importance to the writer is the most self-directed form of reflection that a teacher can structure and facilitate. Such questions are likely to be central to progress for a particular learner; and hence they can lead to dramatic changes in ability, attitude and values (Cowan, 1987).

Facilitators are free to adopt any of the suggestions mentioned above based on the nature of their learning activity, its objectives, and the learner’s needs. Yet, in all circumstances, it is important to remember that if the depth and breadth of reflection develop, so will the depth and breadth of learning and meaning-making.

*Bateson’s reflective writing environment:*

In order for the environments, in which reflective practice takes place, to be unthreatening and to encourage progress, a relationship of confidence between the facilitator and the learners must prevail. In *Full Circles*, Mary-Catherine Bateson (2000) writes about her experiences as a leader of a seminar free from power relationships. The result was a tacit agreement that all learners would learn from one another, including Bateson as she often considered herself a learner in this seminar. Her participants learned from Bateson as much as they taught valuable lessons to one another and Bateson herself.

Facilitators are free to criticise, but not undermine the writings of their learners. Bateson believes that facilitators must spread the seeds for the realization of unbounded

possibilities and alternative ways of thinking and perceiving oneself and others. “We need a new definition of the self: I am not what I know but what I am willing to learn” (Bateson, 2000, p.19). It is important to encourage learners to respond to one another’s journals and work towards the free pursuit of learning in reflective writers.



## Chapter 5

### ***What are the applications of reflective writing in teacher education curricula, adult learner portfolio building, and other similar learning contexts?***

#### Applications of reflective writing in teacher education curricula: Valli's typology and Spalding and Wilson's study

Before using reflective writing as a tool in teacher education, educators must consider whether they systematically and uncritically accept reflection as an effective method and whether the cultural environment in which they teach supports it (Conway, 1999; English 2001). Educators should not use reflective writing simply based on the notion that it has become a widely used classroom practice in other faculties and education programs. Stephen Brookfield refers to the uncritical acceptance of the value of certain strategies as part of *hegemonic assumptions*. An assumption becomes hegemonic when it exercises control over one's practice as it is accepted in an uncritical manner (Brookfield, 1995). It is crucial that educators question the use of their reflective writing methods and that these meet the course objectives assessed by the educator and the expectations of the learners.

Educators must also decide on the types, purposes, and use they wish to make of reflective writing and explicitly express these to the learners. In her typology for teaching reflection, Valli (1997) has combined the work of Schön and that of others to develop a hierarchy of five different levels of reflection. The lowest level, technical reflection, requires "...directing one's actions through a straightforward application of research on teaching" (Valli, 1997, p.75). Valli identified this level as a form of technical rationality and not reflective practice.

Figure 2. Valli's (1997) Typology and Illustrative Journal Excerpts

Type of Reflection	Definition of Reflection	Illustrative Journal Excerpt
Reflection in/on action	One's own personal teaching performance	More than anything else... (Students' evaluation of <i>Macbeth</i> teaching unit) helped me realize that I have a long way to go as a teacher. First of all, I learned that I must plan ahead and be better prepared. Although I had lesson plans every day, I wasn't always prepared with handouts and rubrics. Once or twice, I had planned to make copies when I arrived at the school. When I got to school, however, the copier was already being used or it was out of order. (Ella's journal 11/38/99)
Deliberative	A whole range of teaching concerns, including students, the curriculum, instructional strategies, the rules and organization of the classroom	Technology along with savvy textbook materials certainly has facilitated the English teacher's desire to contextualize literature for students. Mrs. Z used the laser disk that came with the textbook she uses to show students American Romantic artwork. She opened class with a mini-lesson on how to analyze art and then she reviewed the characteristics of Romantic literature. From there, she turned on her TV and used her remote control to show different pieces of artwork. Students were able to transfer the characteristics they learned about literature to the artwork they were viewing. Mrs. Z was adhering to Maxine Greene's views that "the symbol systems we associate with several arts ought to be included in attempts to make meaning." ... However, upon reflection, there was little room for divergent meanings or constructed knowledge.... The activity served merely to reinforce the themes... that were already taught to the students. (Kate's Journal 11/26/99).
Personalistic	One's own personal growth and relationships with students	I spent my time this week in the ninth grade school. It seems quite strange to have one grade level so completely separated from everyone else. I started thinking about how it would be to go through this process. One of my best friends in seventh grade was an eighth grader by name of Jason ... He was my best friend in high school and I would have missed having him to look up to when I got to high school.... It seems like it would be hard (for ninth graders) to meet people in the upper grade levels.... At least, this is my opinion. (Grant's Journal, 9/9/99)
Critical	The social, moral, and political dimensions of schooling	I am very patriotic and feel proud to stand for my flag .... but I disagree with the principal's action... What message does it send to young students learning about our liberties, when they are forced to stand for the flag? (Maurice's Journal, p/24/99)

Reflection in/on action consists of pedagogical activity in context. It links reflective knowledge with improved action. Deliberative reflection refers to the act of "...weighing competing claims or viewpoints" (Valli, 1990, p.221). Personalistic involves a narrative approach to teaching, whereby the future educator expresses voice and personal growth vis-à-vis the profession (Valli, 1990). The fourth level, critical reflection, involves considering the political and social implications of teaching and education. Facilitators must choose a level of reflection proper to the desired outcomes of the learning activity.

Spalding's and Wilson's study of pedagogical strategies that promote reflective journal writing

Valli's typology was used in Spalding's and Wilson's study of pedagogical strategies that promote reflective journal writing (2002). The study aimed at identifying pedagogical methods that prompt reflective thinking, growth, and journaling within secondary teacher education students. The rationale behind this action research lies in the attempt to demystify reflection, and propose a model that helps students distinguish between telling and reflecting. The researchers were also hoping to trigger new paths of reflection and research after conducting this study.

Studies have shown that most teachers-in-training have difficulty achieving higher levels of reflection, i.e critical reflection as described in Valli's typology. Many preservice teachers also have difficulty differentiating between telling an experience and reflecting on it or reflecting on topics that move beyond issues of classroom management and control (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). Perhaps classroom management concerns create a barrier to critical reflection. Much of the teaching routine is organized in such a

way that teachers often find themselves caught up in the immediacy of technical and practical tasks at hand, leaving very little room or time for distancing themselves from the events and experiences in order to reflect.

*Can reflection be taught?*

The reflective process is mainly mysterious due to the complexity involved in understanding its origin and emergence. Is reflection considered the outcome of a learning process by which the mind is trained to think in a specific way or the mere result of serendipitous learning moments? Both processes are lengthily discussed in the literature, yet educators are more interested in researching facilitated reflection as opposed to serendipitous one because the former reflection type calls for facilitators' agency and implication whereas the latter is difficult to trigger. Facilitated reflection implies a holistic set of attitudes and factors that may be influenced and controlled in a way which develops reflection to its fullest possible potential. Educators are thus more concerned about facilitated reflection as they are, and should be, aware that a positive learning environment leads to valuable reflection. It is their duty to set and constantly work towards ensuring a positive learning context and a suitable general setting.

Reflective thinking starts with a state of doubt or confusion and moves towards a search process that will lead to a solution, clarification, or else tackle the doubt itself in an attempt to understand its grounding and meaning (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). Dewey believed that thinking comes naturally while reflective habits of mind need to be taught (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). Attitudes such as open-mindedness, whole-heartedness, and responsibility are considered important to cultivate in order for learners to attain reflective practices (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). Maintaining such positive attitudes

towards thinking highlights the learner's and facilitator's crucial role in shaping the learning process. Reflection would thus be the result of a process of adaptation of the mind, whereby the facilitator is responsible for gaining knowledge about his/her students' habits and the environment affecting them in order to select educational experiences that cultivate and maintain reflective learning.

Serendipitous reflection and learning lead to accidental and unexpected learning. It is agreed that, by nature, serendipitous reflection may not be purposefully engendered. Nevertheless, educators must welcome it when it manifests itself in the hope that questioning and reflecting in other forms of facilitated reflection will bear a positive effect and result (Moon, 1999).

Like many facilitators of teacher education, Spalding and Wilson support the belief that reflective writing can promote reflective thinking. Although educators share different views on the value of reflective journals, Spalding and Wilson agree on the following purposes and benefits:

- 1) 'Journals serve as a permanent record of thoughts and experiences'  
(Spalding and Wilson, 2002, p.1396)
- 2) Journals constitute a way to establish and maintain contact with  
instructors (Spalding and Wilson, 2002)
- 3) Journals provide a space for expressing concerns, doubts, and  
frustrations (Spalding and Wilson, 2002)
- 4) Journals give support to internal dialogue (Spalding and Wilson,  
2002)

Being entirely devoted to one's personal work, journal writing allows the learner to give value and legitimacy to his/her knowledge. It constitutes a process by which the learner gives himself permission to write, reflect, and make connections while mentally recreating experience. Some educators question the value of reflective journals and highlight the lack of credibility established by the peer-review process. However, it is important to bear in mind that reflective journals primarily serve the purpose of the learner: his or her acceptance of responsibility for his or her personal learning. Reflective writing is meant to develop and guide the learner's thinking skills by allowing internalized speech and thinking patterns to surface. As patterns of thinking surface in writing, learners detect them and become more consciousness of them. The uniqueness of individual creative response to lived experience, set of values, context, and meaning constitutes a pivotal asset for the development of one's profile not only as a teacher, but also as a learner. In light of this, the learner writes primarily to connect with himself, his inner voice, and his world as reflective writing is driven by a desire to make personal meaning out of experiences and perceptions. It also allows the writer to question and assess the validity of shared meaning. For educators, the development of a professional knowledge base starts with the creation of personal meaning and learning.

Spalding and Wilson agree that facilitators also benefit from the use of reflective writing in more ways than one:

- 1) Reflective writing provides facilitators with a tool to access their learners' 'black box', (i.e.: their thinking and learning schemes) (Spalding and Wilson, 2002)
- 2) Journals allow to develop and maintain contact with students (Spalding and Wilson, 2002)

3) 'Journals serve as dialogical teaching tools' (Spalding and Wilson, 2002, p.1396)

Although they agree on the benefits mentioned above on behalf of the learners and the facilitators, Spalding and Wilson are mindful of the fact that reflective journal writing is not necessarily and systematically beneficial to all students.

Spalding's and Wilson's teaching of reflective writing was well-structured and divided into many steps. As they realized that many students narrate while they are asked to reflect, they first started by distinguishing narrative from reflective writing style. They used a section from a Barbara Kingslover essay where the author reflects upon her schooling in a small town. The students were assigned various activities that aim at clearly differentiating narration from reflection. The second part of the process involved introducing Valli's typology to guide students through the various types of reflection. Throughout the semester, Spalding and Wilson asked their students to demonstrate reflection in all the categories included in the typology, keeping in mind that '...the boundaries between categories were permeable and open to interpretation.'(Spalding and Wilson, 2002, p.1399). The typology was used as a reference point throughout the semester. Some of the journals were shared between peers. The facilitators gave students freedom of choice to select topics while assigning the midterm topic. They provided students with feedback in various forms: they used marginal general and positive comments, questions to arouse greater development and reflection, and made personal connections with the student's writings. They also encouraged creativity in a response type whereby they invited students to respond to metaphors in a poetic style etc.

*The results of Spalding's and Wilson's study:*

The results of this study reveal that all four participants learned how to reflect incrementally, throughout the semester (*data was collected from 34 students, yet the work of four learners was selected for portrayal in abridged case studies*). The facilitators also agree that reflection must be taught, and not assigned. Thus, allocating time to defining and discussing reflection and reflective models may improve the quality of preservice teachers' reflection (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). Only one student provided a clear definition of reflection at the beginning of the course. Throughout the semester, all the participants learned how to differentiate reflection from stating events and experiences, which the facilitators considered a fundamental criterion for growth in reflection (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). Grant, one of the participants in this study, demonstrated a problematic growth in reflection, student teaching, and had difficulty defining the concept of reflection itself. He stated that his lack of self-confidence often created an obstacle to reflective writing and voicing uncertainties. From Grant's case, Spalding and Wilson conclude that '...willingness to sustain and protract a state of doubt, though uncomfortable, may be critical to growth in reflection' (Spalding and Wilson, 2002, p.1412). Moreover, Grant might have been more comfortable using technical reflection, a type that the facilitators did not experiment nor even introduce to their students (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). He might have benefited a lot more from an approach whereby his actions are guided by someone else, or his reflections structured differently. Grant's case caused the facilitators to reflect on the ways to meet the needs of students like him, hence their acknowledgement of the fact that not every learner benefits from reflective writing (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). The next step in research on reflection should focus on



students who resist or struggle with reflection. It is important to understand the cause of their challenge and elaborate strategies that would guide them.

Another important question was raised following the study. The authors agree that some students might have been prone to reflection by personality and possibly by academic preparation, which raises the question: Is there a link between reflection and subject area? (Spalding and Wilson, 2002). Those students specializing in languages and especially the social sciences might have developed reflective practice in their subject areas. Yet, it is important to study the ways in which students in other areas, such as mathematics or the sciences, respond to the reflective process.

*Individual versus peer reflection:*

Another important challenge to consider while developing a teaching strategy involving reflection is isolation. In some cases, being alone is no guarantee of growth in reflection or high quality work. When alone, concentration is likely to wander or individuals may feel trapped in a rut as they keep following the same thinking patterns or visiting the same dead ends. In light of this, many facilitators use peer editing of reflective writing. Some individual reviewing and editing methods may be effective, but the best way to make a breakthrough is reviewing with another peer.

In *Women's Ways of Knowing*, the authors believe that for writing to be meaningful, it must be shared and discussed. 'In order for reflection to occur, the oral and written forms of language must pass back and forth between persons who both speak and listen or read and write-sharing, expanding, and reflecting on each other's experiences' (Belenky et al., 1986, p.37). The authors argue that such exchanges contribute to the individual's participation in community life.

### Applications of reflective writing in adult learner portfolio

Most teacher education programs implement the use of portfolios as a way of assessing the work and teaching philosophy of pre-service teachers. The portfolio is defined as “a systematic and organized collection of evidence used by the teacher and student to monitor growth of the student’s knowledge, skills, and attitudes in a specific subject area” (Blake et al., 1995). Contemporary views consider the portfolio a purposeful, focused, and self-reflective collection of a learner’s work. The contents of a portfolio depend on that which it aims at demonstrating and to whom. They may include a combination of reflective entries, audiovisual sources, teaching reports, artwork, letters etc. The portfolio is differentiated from a scrapbook as it includes the reflection the learner makes regarding what each component reveals about his/her educational philosophy, learning, and professional growth (Takona, 2003).

Portfolio development is a dynamic process involving four stages: collection, reflection, reduction, and display. At the collection stage, learners are to select term papers, journal entries, projects, and sources which provide an accurate picture of the learner’s development (Takona, 2003). Learners may also choose to show their worse and best pieces in order to demonstrate the growth that has been accomplished from one source to the other.

“Reflection” involves the ability to take distance from the immediacy of the activity and consider knowledge, beliefs, skills, values, and actions in a detached manner. Learners select artefacts which demonstrate that they have met the portfolio objectives and link each component to the specific standards with a brief written abstract or entry. In these abstracts, learners may justify their choices of particular artifacts, and what these

suggest about the need for improvement. When learners use their reflections to set objectives for future learning or visions, the portfolio takes the shape of a lifelong learning tool (Takona, 2003).

In the “reduction” stage, learners focus, select, abstract and adapt the documents to meet the portfolio objectives. Since the portfolio serves the purposes of self and collaborative assessment, it is essential that the selected artifacts provide personal meaning for the learner. Learners must review the portfolio and learning activity mentally and reflect about the portfolio-building process and product (Takona, 2003). Learners must also provide a rationale justifying their choices, and explain why their pieces were selected, the learning they gained from them, and the goals which they had set for the portfolio as a product (Takona, 2003).

The final stage of the portfolio development, “display”, consists of the organization and montage of the selected artifacts in a visually appealing fashion to provide a comprehensive review. Research shows that learners who develop portfolios benefit from a greater self-understanding as learners when they see the need and seek guidance from their facilitators (Gomez et al., 1991). Peers may also contribute in the portfolio building process by being partners in reflection and providing different possibilities and perspectives. Again, facilitators must guide and carefully orient learners towards the still unfamiliar tasks of portfolio building. This practice is relatively new, and facilitators must demystify and explain the rationale of such an activity and provide clear guidelines for its development.

Assessment issues:

In addition to issues of intrusion to learner privacy and confidentiality, facilitators are often concerned with issues of what is to be assessed and how: the process or the product?

Should facilitators evaluate the learning that has been achieved or the quality and breadth of the reflection? Arguments favouring assessment include:

- 1) If there is a common agreement about reflection being highly necessary and significant for development, we must be able to set criteria (Moon, 1999)
- 2) Individuals who tend to use reflection as a common approach may take this process for granted. Therefore, defining assessment guidelines and criteria would help facilitators guide learners in reflection (Moon, 1999)
- 3) Review of journaling provides the facilitators with valuable information about reflective writer's learning and thought processes (Moon, 1999). This may help them adjust and adapt their teaching
- 4) Assessment may be necessary to encourage and maintain participation (Moon, 1999).

To resolve this debated issue, Moon suggests reframing assessment not as evaluation, but as a review of journal writing by the facilitator, oneself, or peers, to determine its worth as a learning strategy (Kerka, 2002). Carefully chosen criteria may include: Adequacy of entries (i.e: length, presentation, organized and chronological documentation); formative comments (i.e: avoid judgement making, use a questioning approach when further clarification is needed), and indirect assessment (i.e: "Evaluation of work based on the journal, not the journal itself") (Moon, 1999 and Orem 1997).

### E-Journaling:

Many learners prefer e-journaling to the traditional reflective activities mainly due to the fact that it provides a less-threatening environment compared to the classroom. However, e-journaling also involves issues of anonymity, netiquette, mastery of computer skills, technical support, and barriers to personal communication even though most e-journals are created to alleviate psychological distance in online courses (Parkyn, 1999).

### Applications of reflective writing in learning contexts

Bateson claims that learners of different ages and cultural backgrounds make for a livelier and more enriching environment. She believes that much of modern life is organized in a way which enlarges the inter-generational gap. Modern life "...puts generations out of step with one another" (Bateson, 2000, p.33). Yet, we highly benefit from including learners from different ages, letting each generation speak to one another, reflecting with, and learning from the carefree vision of some, and the wiser perceptions of others. "Difference of age sets the stage for learning in classroom environment" (Bateson, 2000, p.6). Learners from different age groups may share more diversified issues, whereby the younger ones often gain great insight from the elder learners who already gained valuable knowledge from their experiential learning. The learning environment, where reflective writing is used, is a scene for bridging the age and knowledge gaps. "Age should be a model for understanding ..." (Bateson, 2000, p.10). Bateson encourages faculties and facilitators to consider and promote age difference in the composition of their classrooms and seminars.

English (2001) suggests the following guiding principles to those facilitators putting journals into practice:

- 1) *Respect*: ensuring confidentiality and boundary setting are crucial (English 2001)
- 2) *Justice*: providing fair feedback (English, 2001)
- 3) *Beneficence*: maintaining privacy and focusing on learning rather than therapeutic benefits (English 2001)
- 4) *Self-Awareness*: practicing the type of reflection that ones preaches, congruence between what one says and does (English, 2001)
- 5) *Caring*: guiding learners carefully, and providing them with clear expectations (English, 2001).

All the values listed above constitute the basis for creating and maintaining a supportive environment. The context in which reflective writing is practiced and discussed must encourage experimentation. The disadvantages of writing for an audience may be resolved with the use of a method combining both individual and group journal activities (Williamson 1997). In Williamson's courses, future adult educators developed a common research including records of the groups' experiences and achievements as well as a personal journal for reflective writing and critical thinking (Kerka, 2002).

## CONCLUSION

This thesis explores the significance of reflective writing and its links with transformative learning. Throughout the literature, it is clear that reflective writing may be a significant tool for personal transformation in educational and learning environments by helping the learner revisit and see experiences in a new light and raise awareness of tacitly accepted beliefs. Reflective writing offers a way of making thinking visible, engaging in meaningful learning, and allowing for shifts imperceptible to the writer. In order for transformational learning to occur, new knowledge must be mingled with old one as reflection involves thinking about the ways in which new learning fits into what one already knows. Reflective writing is a tool for meaning-making and knowledge creation, whereby the writer internalizes learning. Research on the significance of reflective writing for women is rather extensive. However, visions for future work must consider the role of such a practice for men. Moreover, further research needs to be conducted on the development of the portfolio in order to provide clearer guidelines about its creation and criteria for its assessment.

On a personal note, the work encompassed in this thesis reflects my internal deliberation and the links between my initially scattered thoughts on reflection and transformation. My interest in exploring the links between the act of writing and transformation was initiated by a number of questions I asked myself on the matter. Thus, I decided to keep the question approach in my thesis, forming one major question per chapter.

This work also demonstrates the personal work that I did on the concept of reflection and transformation during my graduate studies and while reading various sources for this

thesis. It is with great enthusiasm that I realize that some personal transformations occurred or were confirmed while writing this work:

More than ever before, I am now aware of the importance of giving everything and everyone the benefit of the doubt, or at least a few minutes of reflection. Also, I understand that the meaning of my work and research on reflection and transformation aligns with a personal search for authenticity. Finally, I realize that reflection and transformation result in valuing the multiplicity of the self.



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