

The hall of mirrors: reflecting on pre-service teachers' reflections

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ABSTRACT

Undoubtedly, a focal point of teacher education courses is the practicum, and during this phase, reflection on practice is often a key component. Pre-service teachers are invariably asked to maintain a journal in which they reflect on their daily practice in schools. Many have pointed to the complexity of engaging effectively in this process and to the support pre-service teachers need to carry this out with profit. There is a danger of reflection becoming a perfunctory activity carried out mainly as a course requisite and not truly as a process of self-understanding and learning. This exploratory study focused on the daily journals kept by three pre-service teachers and analysed the content in a bid to explore how they carried out this task, and to look for signs that the process of reflection has achieved its purpose. Using NVIVO together with a close reading of the journals, the findings show that evaluation and analysis feature prominently, followed by action plans, however, the pre-service teachers do not express feelings often. A closer analysis of the journal entries suggests also that the pre-service teachers need induction into using reflective models together with support and discussions to achieve a more structured process of reflection.

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Introduction

It would be very difficult to find a teacher education institution that does not promote reflective practice among its pre-service teachers. In diverse initial teacher education settings, the reflective practice is embedded in the education of pre-service teachers (Avalos, 2011; Dumlao & Pinatacan, 2019; Liston et al., 2021; Loughran, 2013; Mathew et al., 2017; Slade et al., 2019; Yuan et al., 2022).

As far back as 1990 (Bartlett, 1990) the point was made that the goal of teacher education was to prepare reflective practitioners. It is today generally taken as a given that the reflective practitioner is the paradigm to follow, and although several models and conceptualisations of the reflective paradigm have been articulated in the literature, a feature they share is the move away from seeing teacher education as a period of training to one that prepares pre-service teachers for a lifelong process of becoming and

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evolving as teachers with self-efficacy being an integral aspect of this process. The reflective paradigm recognises that teachers are active in their own development and invites them to go beyond reproducing the pedagogical content knowledge taught on teacher education courses to applying it in contextually and personally relevant and valid ways.

The discourses around reflection and experiential learning are several and over the years have grown in breadth and sophistication and spawned an array of models stemming from early models such as those proposed by Dewey (1933) through to Schon (1983), Kolb (1984) and Gibbs (1988). The purpose of this article is not to provide a critical overview of the theories of reflective practice; this can be found in the literature such as Collin et al. (2013) among others.

The purpose is for a teacher educator to study how a small group of pre-service teachers carry out the task of keeping a daily journal documenting their reflections on their teaching. In particular, it seeks to find out whether the current practice on the teacher education programme marked by a soft approach to reflective writing and consisting of a set of questions loosely based on Gibbs' reflective cycle is sufficient to enable useful reflective practice or whether a more structured approach and explicit induction in reflective practices is necessary, as required by Gibbs. Although often reduced to a reproduction of the six-stage cycle, Gibbs' influential book contains numerous examples of how to use the six stages of reflection.

Another concern relates to the motivation for maintaining the daily journal. Do pre-service teachers see it as a chore dictated by the course requirements which soon becomes a repetitive and routine act? (Alsuhaibani, 2020). Would a systematic analysis reveal that the pre-service teachers are merely going through the motions (Hobbs, 2007) and not genuinely embarking on a journey of learning? The practice of sharing the daily reflections with others in a higher position such as course lecturers and mentors has been questioned on ethical and practical grounds and casts doubt on the genuineness of the reflective process when what is essentially a personal diary becomes the basis of discussion with others who will evaluate, and often assess, that practice.

The context

The researcher is a university lecturer in a Faculty of Education and the pre-service teachers are enrolled on a two-year, university-based teacher education course at master's level at the same university. During these two years, built on a subject-specific first cycle degree, students experience a curriculum that involves pedagogical context knowledge intertwined with educational psychology, sociology and philosophy in a format that allows space for discussion and reflection. The pre-service teachers experience two field placements, one in each year, which sees them visiting schools once a week and carrying out observations of lessons and of school life in general. This is in preparation for a five-week teaching practice during which they teach around 15 lessons a week in a secondary school in their chosen subject—in this case English—in a context where English is a second language.

The input the pre-service teachers receive in preparation for writing their daily reflective is loosely based on Gibbs' model (1988, p. 49) below, which takes the user

through a cycle of six stages: description, feelings, evaluation, analysis, conclusion, and action.

1. Description: What happened?	What, where and when? Who did what? What did you do/read/see/hear? In what order did things happen? What were the circumstances? What were you responsible for?
2. Feelings: How did you feel?	What was your initial gut reaction, and what does this tell you? Did your feelings change? What were you thinking?
3. Evaluation: What was good or bad about the experience?	What pleased, interested or was important to you? What made you unhappy? What difficulties were there? Who/what was unhelpful? Why? What needs improvement?
4. Analysis: What sense can you make of the situation?	Compare theory and practice. What similarities or differences are there between this experience and other experiences? Think about what actually happened. What choices did you make and what effect did they have?
5. Conclusion: What else could you have done?	What have you learnt for the future? What else could you have done?
6. Action Plan: What will you do next time?	If a similar situation arose again, what would you do?

The model can be described as reflection on action and would typically be experienced by the pre-service teachers at the end of a day's lessons when they are required to reflect of the day's lesson and keep a daily diary. A set of questions (v. The Data below) derived from Gibbs' model is intended to help them with the process of reflecting and writing up. There is no provision for structured de-briefing that Gibbs recommends in the form of a discussion on the experiences being reflected on, as the pre-service teachers write-up their journal individually.

During the practicum, the discussion between the university examiner and the pre-service teacher on the daily journal tends to be fragmented as it focuses on a few entries relating to the time the latter is observed teaching. This discussion takes place when the University examiner visits the schools to observe the pre-service teacher and conducts a post-observation feedback session. Carrying out this study therefore afforded the researcher a closer, more coherent reading of all, and not a piecemeal reading of, the journal entries spanning the duration of the field placement. This allowed the researcher to take a closer look at what filters through for the pre-service teachers as they reflect on a day's teaching and how this is processed. It also constituted a valuable opportunity for reflection for the researcher herself.

The study was prompted by a concern that the current provision by the researcher, in her role as lecturer, for preparing the pre-service teachers for reflection is scant and as time is a precious commodity, the current provision is overshadowed by other concerns and targets that relate closely to delivering the pedagogical content knowledge.

The study therefore has implications for the quality of the preparation the pre-service teachers are given while on their teacher education course. Perhaps the ability to reflect is taken for granted (Griffiths, 2000) and not sufficiently discussed and problematised.

The data-the daily journal

The function of these daily journals is to instil a sense of professional development and growth as a lifelong habit particularly in the very early stages of one's

development as a practitioner. In addition, the journal opens for the mentor and university tutor, a window into the pre-service teachers' teaching experiences other than the observed lessons and provides a valuable basis for discussion of their development. In some teacher education contexts, the tools for writing the daily journal are quite structured, adhering to a model (Krapivnyk et al., 2021; Mulryan-Kyne, 2021; Yee et al., 2022), in others less so and pre-service teachers are asked to evaluate their day's teaching against a suggested list of aspects to look at, homing in on the ones that are most relevant in their particular context while following the cycle proposed by Gibbs. The latter approach is the one adopted on the teacher education course that the pre-service teachers in this study are following. These are some of the questions that are provided:

- What were the overall strengths of the lesson?
- What did I enjoy about teaching this lesson?
- What would I do differently if I had to teach this lesson again?
- Were any learners distracted? If so, what reasons could there be for this?

The intention is to not constrain the pre-service teachers into writing according to a formula, but to provide them with questions that underpin Gibbs' cycle while allowing them to express themselves in a natural way, allowing their voice to come through.

Writing a reflective journal is not, however, free of complications. Pre-service teachers' ability to reflect and self-evaluate is not a skill that is learnt overnight. Also, it is a solitary exercise, devoid of support from fellow pre-service teachers and group discussions—a feature which research has shown as impactful on the process of becoming reflective practitioners (Tiainen et al., 2018). Moreover, the frankness that is expected for progress to actually occur, is a two-edged sword in a situation where this practice is assessed (Hobbs, 2007). To what extent can the pre-service teacher afford to be brutally honest about the failures and disappointments in their practice with those who assess their performance? Conversely, pre-service teachers might glibly claim success and effective teaching in a bid to raise their standing in their mentor's or examiner's eyes. Notwithstanding these limitations and other issues surrounding the widespread practice of requiring pre-service teachers to record their daily reflections, these journals offer a precious insight into the life of a becoming teacher.

Design of the study

Following their five-week school placement, three pre-service teachers were requested to hand in their journals and asked whether they consented to the journals being the subject of a study. This was carried out after the pre-service teachers were told that they had successfully passed their practicum.

The daily journals were analysed to map out how pre-service teachers reflect on their day's lessons. The content of their writing was analysed qualitatively to bring

out reflective categories and also quantitatively for the frequency distributions of these categories, thereby providing a profile for each pre-service teacher. In this sense, this is an exploratory study as it is new for the context in which it is being conducted, meant to explore in a systematic manner the reflective processes underlying the daily writings of pre-service teachers on a university-based teacher education course.

Study participants

The study participants—the pre-service teachers—were known to the researcher in her role as lecturer in the teacher education faculty, where they met for between two to four hours a week for two years. In addition, each year saw the pre-service teachers carry out a five-week practicum during which they were supported and mentored by the researcher who has the additional role of assessor. Their practicum was carried out in secondary schools where the learners are aged between 11 and 15.

The three pre-service teachers were all female, between the age of 22 and 23, following a master's level pre-service initial teaching education course. They started and finished the course together and for the greater part, their programme was identical as there is little room for optional study units on the programme. Their choice of dissertation topics marks the area where each student follows their own interests. To ensure anonymity they were randomly chosen from their cohort of five.

Data analysis

Using the software program NVIVO the reflective journals were read and coded for elements of Gibbs' cycle. That is, the researcher categorised the entries of the journal for elements of description, feelings, conclusion, analysis, evaluation, and action plan. NVIVO is often the software program of choice for studies involving textual analysis (Foong et al., 2018; Kim, 2018). The process was carried out by the researcher only, affording some consistency in interpreting and coding the texts. At no point was automatic coding used. The consistency afforded by the sole researcher does not rule out bias and interpretation as some degree of subjectivity remains. In all 31,000 words were analysed.

One of the several computations that are afforded when using NVIVO is the report on the percentage of text that has been coded for the categories. Personality differences in style of writing meant that some pre-service teachers wrote at great length while others expressed themselves succinctly. To compare or compute on the basis of the amount of text would not have been a faithful or accurate representation, therefore frequencies were preferred as these removed the undesired bias.

Signs of reflective practice

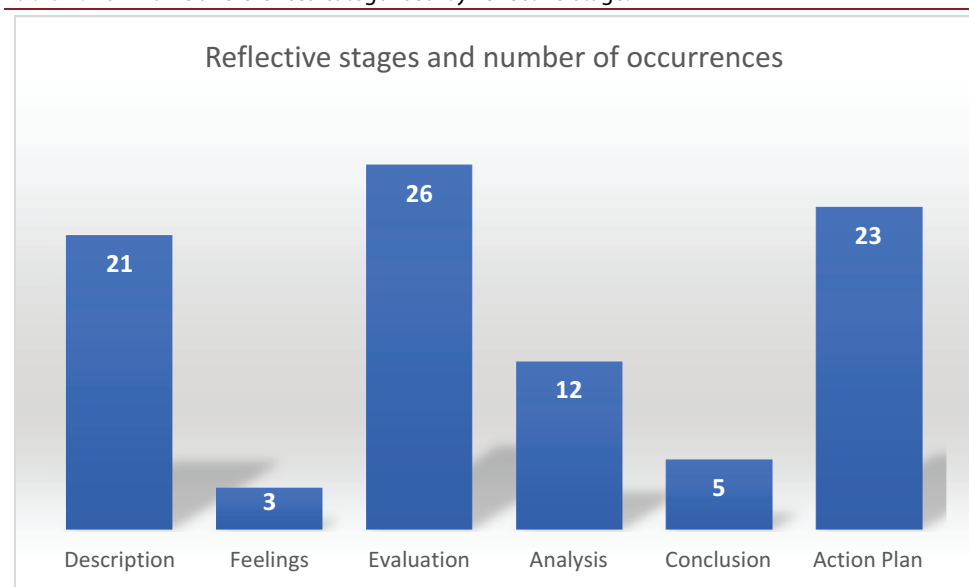
This section reports on the analyses carried out on each of the three participants' reflective journals. For each pre-service teacher, the journal was analysed in its entirety

to measure the content according to the six stages of the reflective cycle, followed by an exemplar of reflection that embodies one complete cycle of reflection.

Pre-service teacher Elaine-analysis of the complete journal

Coding Elaine's complete journal resulted in the identification of 90 distinct references; that is, the entire text was analysed sentence by sentence and coded according to which of the six stages of the reflective cycle that text belonged to. [Table 1](#) provides a breakdown of the references categorised according to the six reflective stages of Gibbs' cycle. The number refers to the frequency of occurrences.

Table 1. PST Elaine's references categorised by reflective stage.



The following are illustrations from the journal exemplifying the stages of the reflective cycle. These are then followed by one exemplar exemplifying an instance where the pre-service teacher went through the complete cycle.

Description

Describing what happened during lessons and providing an outline of the experience being reflected was generally a neutral, non-judgemental description as Gibbs' and other models of reflection and experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) recommend. Generally, the pre-service teacher described a situation singled out for reflecting upon:

- *This class in particular is rather energetic and bubbly one when compared to the other classes. These students are high ability learners and tend to participate a lot, which often results in having everyone talking at the same time.*
- *At the end of the lesson, there was no time left for the open-ended creative task or for a proper conclusion to take place, to reflect on what was learned in the lesson. In fact, the bell rang as soon as the correction of the exercises was completed.*

Feelings

It is immediately evident from the graph that few overt expressions of *feelings* were present in Elaine's journal in spite of the fact that the pre-service teachers were expressly invited to record their feelings. This is likely indicative of personality factors and not an instance of avoiding the task as Elaine's daily journal is a conscientious record of her teaching practice and efforts to learn from experience.

The three instances of a direct expression of feelings were:

- *I was very happy that even the shiest students participated in the lesson.*
- *With regards to the four lessons in focus, I am quite pleased with the way that they turned out.*
- *I made a decision on the spot to change one of the group work tasks into a pair work activity, with more high-ability students paired up with less high-ability students, and this worked wonders! The students cooperated perfectly as they worked on the tasks and helped each other out without any problems.*

There were eight instances where negative feelings were expressed indirectly, all prefaced with the word *unfortunately*, such as:

- *Unfortunately however, time management was an issue*
- *Unfortunately, there was only time to carry out the first lesson plan due to time constraints.*

Evaluation and analysis

Over half (49) of the 90 references were identified as being of an evaluative or analytic nature indicating a reflection on how lessons went and an attempt at analysing the reasons to support the evaluation. At times it was difficult for the researcher to distinguish between an evaluation and an analysis. Examples such as the one below, point to an ability to evaluate (the lesson moved slowly) and analyse (difficulty level of lesson):

- *Another issue which caused the lesson to have a slower pace than planned, is that the students might have found the lesson to be slightly difficult and were not very eager to participate in the first lesson when asked questions.*

Other examples indicate an ability to analyse to justify successful lesson stages:

- *The stating of the learning outcomes both at the start of the lesson and after each activity carried out during the lesson helped the learners to have a clear idea of the aims of the lessons and what is expected of them.*
- *What worked well in this lesson is lowering down my voice and speaking to the people at the front of the classroom, in order to make the students at the back of the classroom aware of the fact that if they resort to chatting amongst themselves, they will not understand what the activity will require them to do.*

Conversely, the pre-service teacher reflected on possible causes to explain what went wrong:

- *Perhaps, the learning could have been better connected by giving learners more opportunities to make use of already-acquired knowledge.*
- *One probable reason for such occurrence might have been because the questions which the students were required to tackle might have been too complex for them to be able to work on them independently.*

Some evaluations, however, were inadequately analysed and the pre-service teacher has acknowledged time management as a problem but has not gone to the root of the problem, essentially ensuring a repeat of the situation.

- *Unfortunately, time management was also an issue with this class, but this was mostly in terms of not having enough time to do a proper conclusion at the end of the lesson.*

Conclusion and action plan

Very often, the stage following the evaluation and analysis (conclusion) was skipped, and Elaine went directly to planning an action:

- *In preparation for the coming lessons, I will make it a point to wrap up activities one to two minutes before the bell rings and go through the Learning Outcomes of the lesson together with the students to reflect on the activities of the lesson and on what would have been learnt.*
- *Thus, when planning my next lessons with this particular class, I will try to minimise instances of whole-class discussion and instead opt to have more discussions in pairs.*
- *Thus, I will keep this in mind for future reading lessons with the Form 2 group and rather than assigning a long exercise of comprehension questions, I could provide reflective questions, as well as task-based activities which would most probably keep the students more engaged.*

At times, however, the pre-service teacher articulated a take-away message from the experience, reaching a stage of abstract conceptualisation (Kolb, 1984) in which she uses logic and theories to reach general conclusions. In this example, the PST reflects on the practice of differentiation and moves from the specific to the general:

- *Differentiation should not only take place in terms of the type of activities that take place, or by providing further repetition, but it should also take place in terms of the number of activities expected to be completed by the students.*

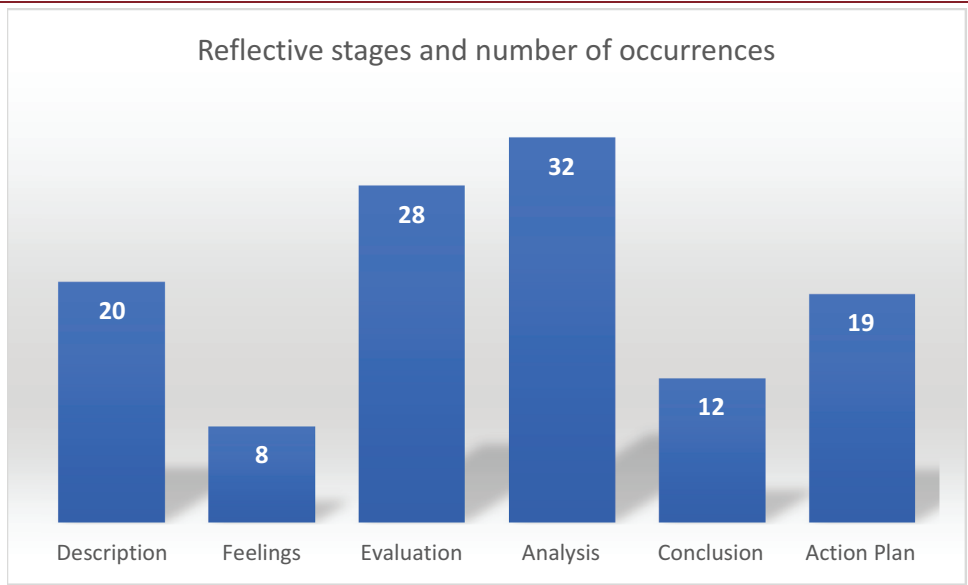
The following shows an instance when the pre-service teacher focussed on one episode from her school day, and reflected on it employing the *complete* six stages of the reflective cycle.

Exemplar complete cycle of reflection on one episode from the school day—Elaine

Pre-service teacher's diary entry	Analysis
<p><i>This class in particular is rather energetic and bubbly one when compared to the other classes. These students are high ability learners and tend to participate a lot, which often results in having everyone talking at the same time.</i></p>	<p>Description The situation is described, and the PST has noted the key points for reflection.</p>
<p><i>The reason behind such actions is purely because they are full of energy without any bad intentions in mind. Therefore, during the activities in which I planned to have a whole-class discussion, I found myself in a situation where I had to quiet some students down in order to listen to the others. During one instance, there were around 5 students talking at one go, each wanting to share their opinion. Thus, I had to stop everyone from talking and nominate students myself to talk in order to lesson such excessive participation in the lesson. However, during the pair work exercises throughout the lesson, the students cooperated perfectly as they worked on the tasks and helped each other out without any problems.</i></p>	<p>Feelings Although there is no explicit reference to how the PST felt in this situation, it is evident that she highlighted it for reflection because she was not happy about it.</p> <p>Evaluation and Analysis The PST has evaluated the situation as a problematic one. The underlined parts hint broadly at dissatisfaction with the situation. The analysis takes place when she identifies the reasons for the rowdy class—the students talking over each other. There is also evidence of reflection in action when the PST changes strategy and nominates students herself. This is followed by another evaluative stage followed by analysis – the pair work which was successful.</p>
<p><i>Thus, when planning my next lessons with this particular class, I will try to minimise instances of whole-class discussion and instead opt to have more discussions in pairs. Alternatively, more classroom nomination during whole-class discussions is necessary, as well as adopting other means through which students can give feedback in the classroom—for instance, through the use of Mini Whiteboards in groups.</i></p>	<p>Conclusion and Action Plan A clear example of experiential learning. The PST has reached the conclusion that whole-class discussions tended to unravel and she is planning action for future lessons by mapping out alternative strategies.</p>

Pre-service teacher Irene—analysis of the complete journal

Coding this pre-service teacher's journal resulted in 119 distinct references. The general picture for Irene suggests that she too is processing the learning from the daily teaching experience in ways that exhibit elements of reflective practice, with a prevalence of references to evaluation and analysis—almost 60% of the writing. Table 2 provides a categorisation of these 119 references according to Gibb's stages of reflection.

Table 2. PST Irene's references categorised by reflective stage

Description

As expected, Irene's daily reflections contained descriptions of specific episodes or of lessons that she taught. Generally, this is recorded in a non-judgemental manner. The following is a small sample:

- *I did not manage to conclude the lesson.*
- *I explained to them that I am going to be taking a different approach and introduced the point system.*
- *During this lesson, the focus was on using the relative pronouns 'who', 'which' and 'what' by asking questions.*
- *The student who was going to leave school came back to finish the scholastic year. He seems to have given up and is distracting some other students.*

Feelings

Irene too seems to hold back from expressing feelings although when she does, these are more occurrences of positive feelings than negative ones.

- *I feel as though I am building a good rapport with the students, and I am not finding particular difficulties with managing the classroom. I was also further encouraged when the students said that they cannot believe the lesson was already over because they had enjoyed it.*
- *I had to remind them to speak in English all the time.*
- *The fact that I have to keep telling them to speak in English is just as frustrating.*
- *I was very impressed with them as they actually did the role play without complaining.*

At times, the feeling is immediately supported by an analysis.

- *I was pleased with the outcome of this lesson however they work at a much slower pace than I had thought.*
- *I was very impressed that with the timer set, some managed to skim through the text for a prediction instead of reading the whole text.*
- *I was very pleased with the outcome of the speaking lesson as the students are much more fluent in speech than in writing.*

Evaluation and analysis

Over half (60) of Irene's coded references were analysed as being of an evaluative and analytic nature. Given that also when expressing feelings about her teaching, some instances contained analysis, the picture that emerges is of a pre-service teacher who is striving to learn from her daily teaching experience.

The evaluative stage of the reflective cycle invites the user to make a judgement about the situation or the experience. In the examples below, Irene evaluates an experience and backs up the evaluation by giving reasons to justify that evaluation:

- *On the whole, I managed to keep track of time. What helped me keep better track of time was writing the actual time on the clock for each stage as the lessons at this school start and finish at odd times and calculating the time an activity should take is very confusing.*
- *I used different methods of assessments and varying so much seemed to make them even more focused because they would not know if I am nominating at random, or whether I am asking what their partner has said or if I am choosing volunteers.*
- *The learners were engaged and motivated to participate throughout all stages of the lesson. I used the concept of quiz and competition to make them even more engaged.*
- *I started this lesson with an activity, and this engaged the students. I showed them images of different facial features of famous people and used images of celebrities they knew.*

Conclusion

This stage is indicative of a learner's—in this case the pre-service teacher's—emerging ability to make general statements about a situation. However, based on the quality of her evaluations and analyses, Irene was in the right position to reach more conclusions than she actually did.

The following are some of the 12 examples that were coded in her journal.

- *With them I felt the need to change from one activity to the next quickly so that they will not lose their concentration.*
- *When including Malta or other interesting facts, the students seem to really enjoy it and they also appreciate that I prepare such things for them.*

- *I realised that whenever I show them a model, even implicitly, they managed to meet the learning objectives.*

Action plan

Reading this pre-service teacher's action plan showed that she was struggling with a particular situation—classroom management—and she was planning actions to tackle it. Plans that were put in action were later revised as Irene battled on trying out different plans to improve the learners' attitudes showing that writing a daily reflection helped maintain the issues alive and followed up.

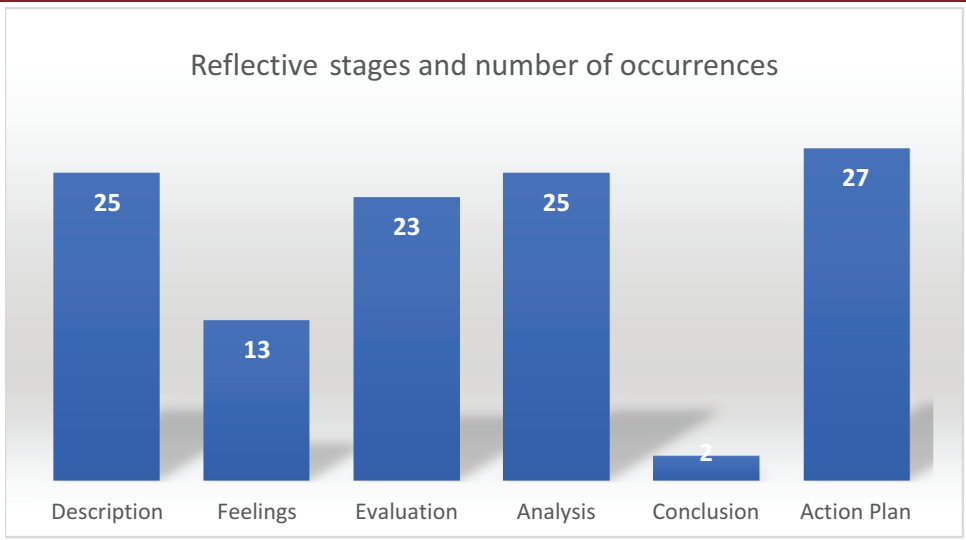
- *I intend to adopt different measures. I will start telling them that I may take a speaking assessment at random and that it will be part of their final assessment.*
- *I have to start using different tactics for them to stop speaking. I have tried keeping my voice at the same level rather than raising the volume because they keep raising theirs.*
- *Tomorrow I will try to stop talking completely till all students stop talking.*
- *However, next time I will shuffle a few places so that maybe they work better with other students.*

Exemplar complete cycle of reflection on one episode from the school day-Irene

Pre-service teacher's diary entry	Analysis
<i>During this lesson, the focus was on using the relative pronouns 'who', 'which' and 'what' by asking questions. The learners were engaged and motivated to participate throughout all stages of the lesson.</i>	Description of a successful lesson, with elements of Evaluation as the pre-service teacher judged the learners' response to her lesson as a positive one.
<i>I used a quiz and a competition to make them even more engaged. The students were also very interested in the topic tackled</i>	Analysis – making sense of the situation and analysing the lesson activities which had the most impact on the learners.
<i>I have often observed that such visual resources work well with the students ...</i>	Conclusion – reaching a specific conclusion about her particular situation, that is, her learners.
<i>and I will include them whenever I can during my future lessons.</i>	Action plan – on the basis of what was learnt, the pre-service teacher plans the steps she will take.

Pre-service teacher Janet-analysis of the complete journal

Coding this pre-service teacher's journal showed that her writing contained characteristics of all of Gibbs' reflective strategies with the exception of the Conclusion stage. It appears that Janet equates the stage where she decides on an action plan as a conclusion to the issue she is reflecting on. In all, 115 references were coded, spread as [Table 3](#) below shows.

Table 3. PST Janet's references categorised by reflective stage

Description

Janet's journal contained sufficient information at the descriptive level for herself and any reader to understand the situation described. This information is generally expressed in neutral, non-judgemental ways as the first two examples show.

- *The objective for the lesson was for students to be able to write a picture story. One of the activities included putting in order a story which was cut-up and jumbled up. To check if they put the story in the right order, I played a suspense tune in the background with some scary sound effects and read the story aloud myself, using different voices and gestures.*
- *Today lessons were designed in such a way to bring out student's creativity. I started by correcting a reading comprehension worksheet which students had to for today. Then students were put into groups and put together information and pictures which they looked up at home.*

At times, the description merges with an action and the reflection comes to an abrupt stop.

- *I also noticed that amongst all three classes, students were very talkative, and this also took time out of the lesson as I had to stop each time and redirect students' focus to the lesson.*

Feelings

There were thirteen distinct references to feelings in Janet's journal, nine of which recorded feelings of happiness and satisfaction, and four described anxiety or disappointment. In each instance the feelings were qualified as the following sections on other reflective stages will show.

- *On the other hand, I am quite satisfied with regards to lesson content, student performance and participation during the lessons.*
- *Today I was quite pleased with how the lessons went.*
- *Other than that, I came out of the lesson with a huge smile on my face*
- *I am very pleased with how students are reacting to the content of the lesson as I have noticed from their work and feedback at the end of each lesson.*
- *However, I was really disappointed during one of the lessons as accidentally, I missed one of the stages and realised this after I had given instructions of another task.*
- *At first, I was a bit anxious as to how students will respond to the traditions of different religions in one of the classes.*

Evaluation and analysis

Forty-five (52%) of Janet's references were coded as being evaluative and analytical in nature. The evaluations make value judgements, which are immediately backed up with reasons—analysis.

- *I believe that during today's lessons I gave a more motivating and interesting introduction than in previous lessons. Being aware of sharing learning outcomes with students at an age-appropriate manner such that I am able to 'sell' the lesson to the students, helped engaging my students better and motivating them even further.*
- *While one (lesson) was carried out smoothly as planned and the lesson was very successful as students really enjoyed the play, the same cannot be said for the last lesson.*
- *However, not only was this the most interesting lesson of the three as it incorporated a lot of diversity within the work, but it was very informative to students as they all learnt something new about other cultures and religions.*
- *The lessons were very satisfactory overall, the topic of mysterious events seems to be very much liked by the students because it gives them the opportunity to discuss (on) relatable subjects.*

Conclusions

This pre-service teacher seldom drew conclusions about her practice, which is not to say that experiential learning was not taking place as the Evaluation and Analysis section above shows, but this was not crystallised in a clear conclusion.

An example of a conclusion is the following:

- *Today I noticed how the same activity needs to be approached differently depending on the students' ability levels in order for the same learning objective to be reached.*

Action plans

Janet's daily journal contained a healthy number of plans for action following the evaluations and analysis.

- *I would like to give students more autonomy in the classroom and allow them to pick the peers they would like to work with themselves.*
- *I realised that I need to work a bit on clarifying my instructions. Rather than giving them in chunks, instructions should be divided step by step in order to avoid confusion amongst the students.*
- *Another alternative I can opt for is to not use the video and do two brainstorming sessions instead by eliciting structures and terminology used in debates, together with pros and cons about the topic chosen (in this case, hunting).*

At times, however, the plan is somewhat vague as the how and when is not clear:

- *I will need to work with him more closely in the hope of creating less difficulties that interfere with the lesson.*

Exemplar complete cycle of reflection on one episode from the school day-Janet

Pre-service teacher's diary entry	Analysis
<p><i>I believe that during today's lessons I gave a more motivating and interesting introduction than in previous lessons. Being aware of sharing learning outcomes with students in an age-appropriate manner such that I am able to 'sell' the lesson to the students, helped engaging my students better and motivating them even further.</i></p> <p><i>However, following a brief discussion with my mentor, I realised that I need to work a bit on clarifying my instructions. Rather than giving them in chunks, instructions should be divided step by step in order to avoid confusion amongst the students.</i></p> <p><i>Lessons tend to be thirty-five, if not thirty, minutes long. For this reason, I need to plan the right amount of activities and leave out activities that students can do without yet at the same time reaching the learning outcome successfully just the same. In so doing, I would be using time more effectively rather than rushing through the lesson to do all that is planned.</i></p>	<p>Evaluation: This example of a diary entry is typical for this pre-service teacher who often starts her reflection with an evaluation (more motivating and interesting introduction). This is soon supported by an analysis justifying her evaluation.</p> <p>Next, there is a Description expressed in neutral terms followed by an Action Plan.</p> <p>Conclusion – after some days of teaching, the PST reaches a conclusion regarding the actual length of lessons as opposed to what the timetable says. A conclusion which is useful as it extends to the rest of the teaching practice duration. Following this, she plans for action.</p>

Conclusion

This study set out to find out whether the soft approach adopted by a teacher educator to prepare pre-service teachers to reflect on their teaching practice experiences is enabling them sufficiently to maximise their learning-by-doing (Gibbs, 1988). An additional question asked whether this reflection in the form of a daily diary read as a genuine attempt at experiential learning or whether it came across as an exercise in fulfilling the course requirements.

With regard to the first research question, a number of conclusions were reached. The data analysis of the journals found that the pre-service teachers reflected on their teaching using all the stages of Gibbs' cycle, however this was not carried out in a structured way by adhering to the logical sequence that Gibbs himself recommends. This can be the product of the soft approach adopted or it could indicate that the stages of

the cycle are not intuitive and the PSTs approached the reflection depending on what was most relevant for them at the time of writing. At times they were compelled to start with a conclusion regarding the episode they were reflecting upon, and then working backwards to describe the circumstances that lead to that conclusion. Similarly, in some instances the PSTs started their reflection by expressing an action plan, followed by a description of what led to it. In addition, the data analysis showed that within each daily entry one or more of the stages of the cycle of reflection might be missing—an action plan might be missing, or an analysis stands in for an action plan. The data analysis also showed few instances of PSTs reaching a conclusion as one of the stages of the reflective cycle. Moreover, some journal entries zoom in on an evaluation (such as problematic classroom behaviour) without sufficient analysis, and rush to an action plan. However, all Gibbs' six stages were evident in the PSTs' journals. These findings strongly suggest first, that familiarising the PSTs more formally with Gibbs' cycle is necessary if the value of a systematic and full reflective experience is to be had (Hojeij et al., 2021) and secondly that the PSTs are indeed able to work through the six stages of the reflective cycle.

Other findings showed some planned action (one of the six stages) repeated in almost every daily journal entry right through to the end of teaching practice indicating that the cycle is being interrupted or broken and that the learning from doing remains a plan on paper. Other concerns relate to the feelings stage. The data from the three graphs showed few occurrences in which the PSTs expressed how they felt about the matters they were reflecting on. It seems that in the absence of direct guidance for expressing one's feelings, the PSTs refrained from doing so in their daily journal.

Similar findings are reported (Yee et al., 2022) where it is also reported that providing PSTs with opportunities to project their feelings and receive peer feedback resulted in deeper levels of reflection.

It is here again hypothesised that a logical approach to the stages of reflection would minimise similar occurrences, that is, if the cycle of reflection is modelled for the PSTs, then perhaps they will acknowledge and reflect on how they felt.

The soft approach adopted so far, in which pre-service teachers work with a set of questions based on Gibbs' reflective cycle was intended to allow space for self-expression in a non-prescriptive way. However, this study has shown that the soft approach adopted needs to be replaced with one that includes specific induction into using a reflective model; one that includes structured debriefing under the guidance of a mentor or university tutor for a more systematic and collegial reflection (Le Cornu & Ewing, 2008; McGarr et al., 2019). To develop reflective practices PSTs need to be supported in a systematic and structured way (Abdullah et al., 2023; Hashim et al., 2023; Mulryan-Kyne, 2021). It would therefore be advisable for the teacher education course to trial an approach that is faithful to Gibbs' recommendations for using the experiential cycle of learning.

With regard to the second research question, a close reading of the data indicates that the PSTs wrote their daily reflections in a bid to understand their practices, embark on a journey of self-discovery and meaning-making, and link theory and practice (Shavit & Moshe, 2019). It was evident that they were expressing their experiences of the teaching and learning process in a frank and open way and seemed to feel safe enough to open up to their examiners—an aspect reported in the literature as a possible limitation of

mandatory reflective diaries (Alsuhaibani, 2020; Hobbs, 2007), and which this study has not corroborated.

In conclusion, while there is undoubtedly much value in the way the PSTs are currently reflecting on their practice, a more systematic, structured approach, with greater opportunities for discussion might resolve some of the issues that were brought to the surface in this study.

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