The research journal: a tool for promoting and understanding researcher development

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Forms of reflective writing such as diaries and journals are widely acknowledged as important tools in promoting both the development and the understanding of teachers. However, little attention has been awarded to the role these forms of writing can play in the development and understanding of researchers. In this paper I draw on my own experience of keeping a research journal during a study of language teaching to illustrate the significant contribution journal writing can make to deepening researchers’ understanding of all facets of the research processes. I also argue that such journals can provide other researchers with illuminating insight into the research process. Given these benefits to both writers and readers of research journals, I claim that the issue of reflective writing by researchers in language teaching merits much more discussion that it has been awarded to date.

I Introduction

Much has been written about the role that reflective writing – ‘diaries’ and ‘journals’ – plays in teachers’ professional growth. The uses and benefits of these forms of writing have been illustrated and discussed particularly with reference to initial teacher preparation (Bailey, 1990; Boxall, 1995; Francis, 1995; Hoover, 1994; Numrich, 1996; Porter et al., 1990), but also in the context of in-service teacher training (Jarvis, 1992), and the ongoing personal–professional development of practising teachers (Appel, 1995; Bailey, Curtis and Nunan, 1998; Brock, Yu and Wong, 1992; Holly, 1989b). The collective message emerging from this work is that reflective writing can provide much insight into the personal and often implicit processes which teachers experience in their...
work and development, and that these written accounts have benefits both for the writer, as well as – where the writing is made public – for the reader. In broad terms, by documenting and reflecting on their experience, writers benefit from an enhanced awareness of themselves as people and as professionals, an awareness which makes for more informed professional decision-making (Holly, 1989a). For readers, the benefits stem from the access which reflective writing provides into the writer’s perspective on some professional activity. For example, teacher educators read their students’ diaries and use the insights gained to inform course evaluation (for a recent example, see Halbach, 1999). And teachers who read accounts of other teachers’ professional lives may benefit from the added understandings of their own work which reading about someone else’s can bring (see, for example, Thomas, 1995b). The point I want to make here, then, is that reflective writing is acknowledged as a useful tool for both promoting and understanding teachers’ professional activity and growth.

In contrast to this interest in the role of diaries and journals in the lives of teachers, though, the contribution of reflective writing to the growth and understanding of the lives of researchers has received less attention. I am not referring here to the use of diaries and journals as a methodological tool – i.e. writing which others are asked to perform in order to generate data for the researcher – but rather as a form of reflective writing which researchers engage in during a project and through which they document their personal experience of the research process. Such writing is sometimes referred to as a research journal (Thomas, 1995b), and in the rest of the paper I will use the term ‘journal’ to refer to research-focused reflective writing by researchers.

Janesick (1998) discusses the contribution which journal writing can make to the researcher and provides extracts from her own journal to illustrate her points, but her work, which I return to below, is an exception. The role of research journals in the work of researchers is an issue we still know very little about. The potential benefits to readers of such journals is similarly unexplored terrain. My aim in this paper is to focus primarily on the first of these issues, but also to make a case for further explorations of the latter. I will first outline a rationale for
exploring the use of research journals in educational research, then illustrate the benefits to the researcher who engages in reflective writing by presenting and analysing extracts from a research journal I kept during a language teaching research project. I conclude the paper by commenting on benefits which researchers (apart from the writer) may obtain from reading research journals. From this overview it should be clear that rather than providing a conventional report on a piece of research, this paper explores processes central to *doing* research and to *developing* as a researcher. These are very relevant issues to be addressing in a journal dedicated to language teaching research.

II Rationale

The initial motivation to explore the issue of journal writing by researchers stemmed from a powerful personal experience of keeping a research journal myself. Between 1994 and 1998 I worked on a study of teacher cognition in second language grammar teaching (Borg, 1999b). From the outset, I documented my behaviour and thoughts in a journal which by the end of the project was over 160,000 words long and which included written reflections about every aspect of the research from inception to completion. However, despite my awareness of the central contribution to the project of this journal, it hardly featured at all in published accounts of the study (e.g. Borg, 1998b; 1999a; 1999c). To achieve that sense of closure which comes with the end of a project, I needed to write about the journal and to make public the extremely positive contribution it had made to my work.

I should point out that I did not start writing my research journal with the intention of eventually writing a paper about it (i.e. it was not initially conceived of as data). However, as the value of keeping the journal became evident, I did begin to realize that it was in fact another source of data about my research. The following extract is the first time in my journal where this realization was actually articulated:

Another issue I’ve been thinking about recently is how to incorporate extracts from my journal into the re-presentation of the research. There’s just so much there I could actually write an analysis of the journal itself. So at some point I’ll need to start reading through the journal (a form of data analysis) and
identifying extracts which are significant in some way. E.g. where I made a move ahead in my thinking, where I struggled with a difficult problem, where I documented/evaluated some aspect of field work. Such extracts can, I feel, convey the personal significance which the research process has for me and the way that writing about the process has been an important part of the same process. (15 July 1997)

The initial motivation for discussing the use of research journals in educational research, then, was the desire to share a rewarding personal–professional experience and the awareness that my own journal had made an immense contribution to my work. Despite this awareness, however, I was not able to articulate exactly how this had occurred. Thus another reason for writing this paper was to engage in a form of self-inquiry, grounded in my own experience as a researcher, through which I could identify and understand specific ways in which I benefited through the journal. This understanding underpins the arguments I present here for the value of the research journal as a tool for promoting researcher development.

In analysing the benefits of journal writing for researchers, I am not suggesting that a research journal necessarily has benefits for the writer which cannot be accounted for by those broadly identified in the literature on diary or journal writing in general (e.g. heightened professional awareness or more informed professional decision making). But, just as the literature on teaching I referred to earlier has provided examples of the specific ways in which reflective writing by teachers may contribute to their professional growth, so too I want to illustrate with specific examples from my work in language teaching the benefits of reflective writing for researchers. As I mentioned earlier, this is a field of professional activity we know little about, a point also made by Janesick (1998). She views journal writing as ‘a type of connoisseurship by which individuals become connoisseurs of their own thinking and reflection patterns and indeed their own understanding of their work’ (p. 3) and argues that journal writing is ‘a tangible way to evaluate our experience, improve and clarify one’s thinking, and finally become a better . . . scholar’ (p. 24). These are but some of the issues I want to take up here and to explore in more detail with reference to my own experiences of keeping a research journal.
Finally, although my main focus here is on exploring the benefits for the writers of research journals, I also want to consider the benefits which readers of research journals may obtain. The use of narrative in understanding professional activity has gained prominence in the educational literature in recent years (see, for example, the collection of accounts in Thomas, 1995a). It is now acknowledged that human beings live storied lives, personal narratives, and that those stories are an important source of insight into professional practice (see, for example, Carter and Doyle, 1996; Connelly and Clandinin, 1990). Teachers’ stories have been described as ‘a largely untapped source of information about teaching and an opportunity for teachers to communicate about their work to others’ (Florio-Ruane, 1991: 242). The same arguments, I want to claim, apply to researchers. Thus, narratives such as research journals constructed by researchers in the course of their work can provide other researchers – novice and experienced – with insight into ‘doing research’ not available from any other source. This seems particularly relevant to the field of language teaching, where published accounts of research do not shed much light onto the subjective experiences of the researcher.

III Benefits for the writer

In analysing my research journal, I had one overall question in mind: how did the journal contribute to my work? As I read through the journal, I became aware of two broad answers to this question. Using labels common in discussions of writing, I will refer to these as benefits related to the process of journal writing, and benefits associated with the product. The benefits related to the process of journal writing are those which derive, interactively, from the actual activity of making journal entries. The journal was not just a place where I recorded events or documented existing thoughts, but more importantly, as Maxwell (1996) suggests, a forum for reflection where ideas were generated and explored and discoveries made in and through writing. The analysis below is concerned primarily with these processes. In addition, though, the journal can also be seen as a product – an ‘evidential store’ (Thomas, 1995b: 5) or ‘educational archive’ (Holly, 1989a: 71) which provides a record of the researcher’s experiences during a project.
and which can be retrospectively analysed. An analysis of my journal identifies several ways in which I benefited from returning to entries I had previously made, and in the second part of this section I provide a brief commentary on these.

In reading the extracts I present here, readers may wish to make a mental note of their reactions and to consider the extent to which they feel these extracts do, as I argue in this paper, provide instructive insight into specific aspects of the research process. In addition to illustrating the benefits of the research journal for the writer, then, the extracts I present here also provide readers with the personal experience of another researcher’s journal which may assist them in evaluating the claims I make here.

Given its size, analysing the journal was a substantial task, but a detailed methodological account of this analysis is not possible here for reasons of space. In addition, such detail would be out of place in a paper of this nature where, as I explained earlier, my focus is not on reporting findings of a study as such, but on providing an account of my personal experiences of the research process. Briefly though, the selection of the extracts presented here, and the issues and themes I highlight, did emerge from a detailed content analysis of the research journal during which analytic methods commonly applied to narrative data were used (see, for example, Miles and Huberman, 1994: 9). The process involved reading the journal, identifying and labelling reflective processes occurring in the data, identifying relationships between these processes, and searching for common sequences amongst them. The examples I present below illustrate recurrent patterns of reflection occurring in the research journal and which were established as a result of this analysis.

1 Process benefits

I will now present and discuss extracts from my journal to illustrate benefits to the writer which stem from the actual process of writing itself. Each extract is prefaced by a short description of the context in which it occurred, and has a title which identifies the key aspect of the research process it highlights.
a  Extract 1 – Defining a conceptual framework  Initially, I assumed that classroom research on second language learning would provide the conceptual framework for my study. This extract documents the processes I went through in beginning to question this assumption and to consider alternatives:

As I read Ellis’s categorization of classroom research, I find it hard to relate his ideas to my plans. So far I don’t perceive my work as being an analysis of the effectiveness with which teachers teach; I’m not interested as such in SLA [second language acquisition] but rather in the manner in which teachers handle KAL [knowledge about language] in the classroom and the way this relates to their own attitudes to and knowledge of language. I want to focus on what the teacher does and says, not on the effect this has on the learners. Does this mean the notions of classroom observation I’m reading about aren’t relevant? They seem to be CR [classroom research] to study learners, whereas I want CR to study teachers. Perhaps the work on teachers’ thinking comes more closely into this frame . . . I definitely need to get hold of research on teaching and teachers, rather than language learning and learners. This is, I feel, an important realization. (9 January 1995)

This extract was motivated by the mismatch I noticed between the forms of classroom research on language learning I had been reading about, and the nature of the research on language teaching I wanted to do. I start by acknowledging and articulating this concern (lines 1–2), then proceed to elaborate on it, clarifying the purposes of my work in the process (lines 2–8). Lines 8–9 illustrate a typical feature of my journal – self-questioning – through which I encourage myself to analyse in more detail the implications of the clearer vision of my work emerging here. The answer to my question (lines 9–11) consists of a further clarifying statement about what I want to achieve. Lines 11–12 are the core of this extract. This is where, building on the prior processes of analysis I have engaged in, a major insight begins to emerge related to the conceptual framework most relevant to my work. I follow up this insight with thoughts about possible action to take (lines 12–13). The extract ends with an evaluative comment acknowledging the importance of the insight which has emerged here (line 13–14). Realizing that the literature on teaching and teachers might be more relevant to my interests than that on observing language learners had major implications for my work, which did eventually develop into a study of teacher
cognition in grammar teaching. This extract illustrates the contribution which a research journal can play in stimulating such crucial insights. I was not simply putting existing ideas into writing here; rather, I became aware of the need to explore an alternative conceptual framework through the process of articulating and examining a concern I felt but for which, initially, I did not have a response. The research journal played a key role here in shaping my thinking, enabling me to explore ideas and to make an important discovery.

**b Extract 2 – Resolving fieldwork anxiety**  
At the time of this entry, my deadline for starting fieldwork in language classrooms was approaching, yet I still had not contacted the teachers I hoped would participate in the study. Here I explore my feelings about this situation.

I really need to get some things off my chest as far as access and starting the fieldwork is concerned. I should be starting in less than two weeks, but I haven’t spoken to anyone other than Therese. What am I waiting for? Why the delay? I guess I need to get my feelings out in the open before I can proceed here, so here goes. I seem to feel a kind of fear of being refused, of asking teachers whether they would be willing to cooperate and getting a ‘no’. That’s kept me back. But why do I feel this way? You’re held in good esteem by everyone at the school, and the experience I recorded in the previous entry seemed to indicate that if for nothing else, teachers would say yes out of their respect for me as a professional in their field. This makes sense, and I really need to make a move. . . . So let’s make some decisions:

1. tomorrow I phone Mick and ask him about Teresa . . .
2. find out when Martha and Tim will be available at the school . . . and go and speak to them personally. (22 March 1995)

[Note: The next day I did contact a teacher who did agree to participate in the study.]

Through this extract, I rationalized a situation which was causing me frustration, alleviating the frustration and opening the way to positive thinking and action. Once again, I start by acknowledging and articulating a concern (lines 1–3), then asking myself questions to prompt an analysis of the problem (lines 3–4). This leads me to acknowledge the cause of my delay (i.e. pent-up anxiety) and to identify the immediate action needed – bringing my feelings out
into the open (lines 4–5). In lines 5–7 I describe my anxieties, and follow this up with another question to force me to probe even deeper (line 7). My response to this question is a reassuring one, informed by reflections on an experience already recorded in the journal (lines 7–11). I conclude by evaluating my analysis of the problem (line 11), acknowledging the need for action (line 11), and making and expressing decisions in writing (lines 12–15) (as Holly, 1989b notes, making promises in writing may make them harder to break).

This extract provides further evidence of the contribution journal writing can make to the research process. In this case, writing about my anxiety provided an outlet for it. Once the anxiety had been articulated, I was then able to analyse, understand, and react to it. Working through these processes allowed me to move ahead at what was a crucial stage of my work. Diamond (1993) discusses the manner in which academic writing subdues the researcher’s personal voice, Measor and Woods (1991: 59) refer to the ‘antiseptic’ nature of much published research, while Florio-Ruane (1991: 243) also comments on the absence of the personal element in reports of research:

... fields such as ... education have sought ‘professionalization’ and have become more technical in their orientations, they have tended in their reporting to leave out practitioners’ stories and silence their voices rather than to feature them.

Consequently, we rarely hear about the emotional side of doing research, and the implicit message researchers may derive from this silence is that emotions have no role to play in their work and perhaps even that these should be denied and suppressed. Emotions, though, are an undeniable part of the human researcher’s work, and the research journal can assist the researcher in acknowledging these emotions, expressing them, and, particularly where these emotions threaten the progress of the research, analysing and reacting to them. The much-discussed therapeutic function of journal writing does have a contribution to make to the work of researchers too:

Writing in a journal is thus a way to attend to the self, to care for and feed oneself. It can be a place to dump anger, guilt, or fear ... It can be a place to clarify what it is we feel angry or guilty about. It can be a place to encourage
ourselves, to support ourselves, in working through that anger or guilt, and it can be a place to transform silence into language and action.

(Cooper, 1991: 105)

Extract 2 shows how the research journal allowed me to move from fear to language and hence to action. The psycho-emotional support my journal provided was also particularly important given that I did not form part of a research community where I could discuss anxieties. Thus, entering into a therapeutic self-dialogue through the research journal – what Thomas (1995b) calls intra-communication between self and writer – provided an effective way for me to handle the affective side of the work.

I do not want to imply that researcher isolation is something to be encouraged, or that research journals are only beneficial in situations where researchers have limited opportunities to talk to others about their work. Research journals can play a central role in collaborative research contexts by providing all participants in the process with a means of expressing, recording, and sharing their experiences of the process. The reflective processes I highlight in this paper are very relevant to such research communities. However, the research experience reflected in my journal was one where I was not surrounded by others involved in research of their own and with whom I could discuss my work on a regular basis. The teachers I worked with, as I have explained elsewhere (e.g. Borg, 1998b), were involved with me in discussions of their work and in reading and commenting on the accounts I wrote, but their commitment to my work did not extend beyond this. So although I am not promoting researcher isolation, my experience does show that in the absence of adequate opportunities to engage with others in discussing their work, researchers can find the journal to be an extremely important form of support.

c Extract 3 – Dealing with negative feedback I wrote this extract during what was for me probably the most difficult phase of the whole project. I had received negative feedback on the work and was questioning the value of what I was doing.

Over the last two days I haven’t been feeling at all good about the work. I realize I’ve been a bit misguided in the direction I’ve invested effort in over the last few months. I’ve tried to write papers without having done
enough analysis of my data . . . and in doing so I’ve lost sight of the larger picture . . . I fell into the novice researcher’s trap of getting so excited about writing and publishing that I’ve selected data which gives a neat picture of things and ignored anything which tends to make it messy. Now I can see this is a contradiction in terms for any qualitative researcher, because the reality I am investigating is messy, and it is not my job to explain away that messiness but to attempt to present it and to understand whether there are systematic patterns of thinking and behaviour underlying it. That’s what my research is all about. So my decision here as I move on is to stop writing and to continue analysing . . . I guess this is kind of a turning point in my work. I’ve become aware that I had developed a distorted view of what my work is all about . . . I know I’ve got good data which have the potential to tell us something about teachers’ work in the classroom. It’s just a question of me getting rid of this misguided desire to publish and to focus on the really rewarding task which faces me, that of coming to terms with my data. (6 November 1996)

The entry was prompted by strong feelings of uncertainty about the value of my work. These are perhaps the most crippling of feelings to a researcher – the suspicion that what you have been working so hard on is in fact of no consequence to the field. After a couple of days of inactive sulking though, it was through my journal that I was able to examine this situation and to try to understand where I had gone wrong. The processes of articulation, analysis, and decision-making illustrated earlier are once again in evidence here. Thus I start by stating the motivation for the entry (line 1), then describing the nature of the problem and what I had done wrong (lines 1–7). Lines 7–12 articulate my new awareness and understanding of my problem, supported by helpful reminders on the nature of qualitative research, and this is followed by a brief statement of the action I needed to take (lines 12–13). Lines 14 onwards are an evaluation of the early part of the entry in which I acknowledge the importance of the realization I had made, restate where I had gone wrong, remind myself of what I need to do, and reassure myself that there will be time for writing – more effective writing – later on.

Here, my journal provided immense benefits. I was able to accept responsibility for my situation and to develop a deeper understanding of why I had lost my way. Beattie (1995: 61) says that ‘biography, autobiography, and narrative have all been used to study the question of how particular people are the way they came
to be and the way they are’. Extract 3 suggests that the research journal, particularly at critical junctures in our work, may allow us to analyse how we have come to be the researchers we are at that particular time. In this case, I was able to understand how I had come to lose my way and to end up in such a demoralized state. Central to this process of understanding was the manner in which the research journal allowed me to distance myself from my experience (according to Holly, 1989b, achieving such distance is an important element in professional growth) and to gain a fresh perspective on the experiences which had led to my disillusionment. Through writing, I was also able to make explicit unproductive tendencies in my work which I was subsequently able to keep in check. This is a good example of how researchers can learn about their own working habits through a research journal, of how journal writing ‘introduces the writer to the writer’ (Ferrucci, 1982 in Holly, 1989b). By working through the reflective processes captured in this extract, I was able to identify appropriate action to take in order to put myself back on the right track.

d Extract 4 – Writing up One of the issues I agonized over at length during my study was the format in which the work would ultimately be written up. The main dilemma was between writing a case study of each of the five language teachers in my study or writing chapters according to themes in grammar teaching which cut across the work of the five teachers (e.g. a chapter on presenting grammar, one on practising grammar, etc.). This extract made a key contribution to this debate.

Have an idea about structuring the work which might be worth pursuing. I write up the data case by case but at the end of each case I include a discussion section for that case in which I map out the main themes and identify emergent questions . . . At the end of the five cases, I present a cumulative discussion of the analyses which maps out in a more definite manner the findings of the study and relates these to the literature. Of course there are questions to address here: in what way do the intermediate discussions differ from the cumulative one? Must make sure I haven’t said everything by the time I get to the end of case 5. Let’s say the intermediate discussions are summaries of the main issues in each case . . . with interim ‘conclusions’, and further questions. The final discussion compares all five cases, presents the cumulative findings of the
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study and frames these within the literature. Does this mean I don’t review the literature earlier on? I don’t think so; I need to do a review before the data to show how my work fits in and the inspiration for it. Having said that, I think the way I used the literature in the TQ [TESOL Quarterly] paper worked well; I referred to enough at the start to frame and justify my work, then drew much more heavily on specific studies to discuss my findings once these had been presented (rather than before I had done so). This approach makes a lot of sense actually – why review heaps of literature before the reader can relate it to your findings? Good . . . this is starting to sound practicable. (1 October 1997)

In this extract the focus of my reflective writing was the format for writing up my work. I start quite typically by stating why I am making the entry (in this case, to explore an idea), then I articulate my ideas as best as I can (lines 2–6). This is followed, once again typically, by a series of questions which force me to explore my initial ideas in more depth (lines 6–13). As I proceed through this analytic process, another question comes to mind (lines 13–14) regarding the role of the literature review in my work which leads me into an consideration of this issue (lines 14–19). This analysis leads to an important insight – that I might not need to review the literature exhaustively at the start of my work (lines 19–21). My concluding statement is a positive evaluation of the greater understanding of writing up my work which has emerged from this entry.

Clearly, the outcomes of this extract – particularly the insights on how to use the literature – are a product of the actual processes of thinking and writing I engaged in. I did not set out to discuss the literature, but rather to ‘pursue’ an idea which I had about formatting my data chapters. When I started writing, this idea was still undeveloped and unstructured, yet writing allowed it to assume a concrete form which was then available for further analysis. This is thus a good example of the manner in which journal writing can allow researchers to transform inchoate thoughts into concrete action which may have great significance for a study. This was certainly the case for me with this extract, for the model I articulated here, both for presenting the case studies and for using the literature, was very close to the one I eventually adopted. The central role of self-questioning in research journal is also highlighted again here. Brock, Yu and Wong (1992: 299) comment on the manner in which reflective writing ‘has the
potential of moving teachers beyond mechanistic, non-reflective teaching.’ The same, I believe, holds true for researchers, and the research journal can play an important role in promoting less mechanistic, more reflective research.

**Summary** The four extracts I have presented here illustrate some of the process benefits which researchers may derive, interactively, through writing a research journal. To summarize these, Extract 1, showed, with reference to the conceptual framework of the research, how the journal can assist the researcher in exploring concerns and identifying ways of addressing these. Extract 2 illustrated how the journal allows anxieties (in this case related to fieldwork) to be aired and examined, hence opening the way to possible solutions. In Extract 3, the journal provided a medium through which I was able to distance myself from a difficult situation, to make explicit the problems I faced and to gain a fresh perspective on these which allowed me to overcome them. Finally, in Extract 4, the benefit of the journal was evident in the manner in which it allowed undeveloped thoughts to be transformed into a tangible form amenable to further analysis and development. All four extracts also showed how journal writing can be an effective means of pursuing thoughts, discovering insights, and making decisions.

I have no doubt about the contribution the research journal can make in enabling researchers to reflect more effectively on their work and hence to experience the process benefits I have described here. However, it should be acknowledged that the writer needs to approach the task of journal writing with some initial awareness of the nature of reflective writing and a willingness to adopt a reflective stance to research. In particular, an awareness of the kinds of reflective processes which may enhance researchers’ thinking about research would seem a particularly useful starting point. A more global consideration of my research journal suggests that the following reflective processes have a particularly important role to play here:

- articulating and rationalizing concerns and exploring solutions;
- acknowledging, expressing and examining feelings;
- describing events and procedures;
establishing goals, formulating plans, and deciding on actions;
• describing and evaluating progress (or lack of it);
• clarifying concepts and their implications for the research;
• capturing, exploring and pursuing ideas;
• structuring thoughts.

Arguably, these are skills which any competent researcher can be expected to possess. At the same time, however, we must accept that ‘systematic reflection is a learned activity’ (Schön, 1987: 160). Thus, I would suggest, as Janesick (1998) does, that the regular engagement in utilizing the thinking skills which journal writing calls for can – perhaps assisted by feedback from a supportive reader – enable researchers to develop greater levels of metacognitive awareness and reflective depth. Although this will not be an immediate benefit of the process of keeping a research journal, it is worth highlighting here as a potential longer-term benefit to the researcher of engaging in this process.

Finally, although I have chosen four specific research issues (one per extract) to illustrate the process benefits of journal writing, these are just some of the many aspects of doing research which the journal allowed me to address and deepen my understanding of. Journal writing provides researchers with an effective way of writing about, engaging with and developing a greater understanding of any aspect of the research process.

2 Product benefits

My primary focus here has been on benefits which researchers may derive through the actual process of writing a journal. Researchers, though, may also benefit from a retrospective analysis of the journal, and here I would like to comment briefly on this. In doing so, I am viewing the journal as a record of the researcher’s experiences – what one teacher in Holly (1989b: 6) calls ‘a great pulp memory bank’ – and my aim is to highlight ways in which this record can deepen researchers’ understanding of their work. Drawing once again on my own experiences, below I list seven ways in which I benefited from a retrospective analysis of the database my journal provided.
1. *It served as a reminder of past ideas and events which guided subsequent action.* The journal provided a database from which precise information could be retrieved at a later date. I often went back and re-read earlier entries as a means of reminding myself what I had done at an earlier stage of the study and using this information as the basis for subsequent action.

2. *It provided a record of plans and achievements which facilitated evaluation.* The journal documented both plans and actual achievements throughout the research process. This written record facilitated my task of evaluating progress and, in the case of lack of progress, of reviewing possible reasons for it.

3. *It supplied an account of events and procedures which allowed a more detailed write up of the study.* A record of specific information about events and procedures during the fieldwork and in analysing the data was particularly useful when I wrote up the study because it enabled me to fill in what would have otherwise been gaps in my description of what I had done.

4. *The journal allowed me to recall and to reproduce the thinking behind key decisions in my work.* The detailed record of experiences captured in the research journal was a powerful form of data which I drew on in my thesis to convey to readers how specific decisions were made, particular problems overcome, or specific events perceived.

5. *The research journal comprised an instructive narrative of my professional growth.* The journal provided a detailed account of my changing perspectives on the research process throughout the project. Reading through it, as I did at various stages along the way, and as I still occasionally do, is a source of instructive insight into the development of my understandings of the research process.

6. *The journal provided physical evidence of progress which gave me a sense of achievement and motivated me.* Blaxter, Hughes and Tight (1996: 49) write that as the research journal (or diary, as they call it) grows, ‘it will serve as a physical (but hopefully not too embarrassing) reminder of just how far you have progressed’. My experience supports this assertion. In regularly reviewing my journal, I found that the mere activity of reading through it and acknowledging the work I was doing was motivating.
7. The journal provided an account of experiences and ideas which, when returned to, often sparked off further insights. I have already referred to the role the journal plays in providing a record of events and procedures. It also captures and freezes thoughts which, when revisited, may in turn provide the springboard for further ideas. Reading past journal entries often sparked off new avenues for me to pursue.

The product benefits I have described here stem from the manner in which the journal provides a permanent account of all aspects of the research process which can be returned to at any time. This database of experience greatly enhances the researcher’s ability to make informed decisions about the research process, provides a global picture of patterns and themes in the researcher’s work and thinking, and also allows for both greater precision and wider use of the researcher’s voice in the reporting of the study. In conjunction with the process benefits I discussed earlier, these product benefits are further evidence of the contribution that a research journal can make to promoting researcher development.

IV Benefits for the reader

After discussing the benefits for the writers of research journals, I would now like to conclude this paper by considering the potential benefits which readers (other than the writer) of journals may obtain. Earlier I referred to the educational literature which argues that teachers’ stories of their experience – communicated through diaries, journals, autobiographies and other forms of narrative – provide insight into what being a teacher means which is instructive for other teachers, teacher educators, and researchers. Carter and Doyle (1996) explain that this biographical perspective in the study of teaching acknowledges and is a reflection of the central role of the personal in understanding human action. From this standpoint, Thomas (1995b: 4) argues that

much of value to the educational community can be learned by conversing with, and listening attentively to, what teachers have to say . . . about their classroom practices, their experiences of schools and of the formal and informal relationships within them, their insights into pupils as learners, and the corpus of professional understandings and craft knowledge that derives from experience.
From a similar standpoint, language teaching has in recent years seen an increase in the number of studies of teacher cognition which encourage teachers to describe and talk about their work and which use these accounts to develop our understanding of what it means to be a language teacher (for examples see Bailey, 1996; Borg, 1998b; Burns, 1996; Golombek, 1998). Given this acknowledged power which narrative has for communicating and providing access to human experience, the research journal would clearly seem to have the potential to provide insight into what doing research in language teaching means and what being a language teaching researcher involves.

The full text of my journal would, I believe, provide ample support for these arguments. Readers who have reflected, as I earlier suggested they might, on the extracts presented here, might at this stage want to assess this claim by considering whether they felt these extracts were insightful in some way. Even such brief extracts, I would argue, do begin to shed light on diverse aspects of the research experience, from practical matters such as writing up, to affective issues such as dealing with disappointment, as well as highlighting the role of reflection and metacognition in researchers’ thinking. One reader of an earlier version of this paper also wrote that

[I] found myself noting that the journal was particularly rich in exemplifying the uncertainty and complexity (including the non-linearity) of the research process. I found this of obvious potential value, perhaps partly because in research methods courses . . . this is a point I have frequently wanted to bring out to novice researchers.

These observations highlight the role which the reading and analysis of research journals can play in the training of researchers. Novice researchers typically turn to textbooks on research methods (e.g. in language teaching: Nunan, 1992; Seliger and Shohamy, 1989) and accounts of research methodology in published material for guidance on how to do research. Writing about educational research in general, Walford (1991: 2) argues that these forms of knowledge about research often provide idealized models of research bereft of the complexities, ambiguities, unanticipated difficulties, personal struggles and conflicts which doing research involves. When novice researchers
encounter such undocumented aspects of the research process, they ‘tend to see these as personal deficiencies arising from insufficient preparation, knowledge, or experience’. Thus the insight into the personal side of research which journals can provide can be seen as an important addition to existing forms of knowledge about language teaching research which can also provide particular support to novices in the field. The knowledge about research captured in a research journal may also be appreciated by research supervisors wishing to discuss with their supervisees some of the less well-documented, but nonetheless no less real, dilemmas they should expect to encounter, and possibly to illustrate ways in which other researchers have approached these challenges. In the training of researchers, journal extracts can provide the basis of fruitful analysis and discussion of issues in research. Elsewhere I have argued that language teacher development can be promoted through tasks where teachers study transcripts which document the thinking behind other teachers’ classroom practices (Borg, 1998a). Similarly, I believe that the professional preparation and development of researchers in language teaching can be enhanced by tasks involving the discussion and analysis of other researchers’ journals. Thus in addition to the benefits for the writer of keeping a research journal, such journals, when made public, can enable readers – novice or otherwise – to gain insight into the inadequately explored domain in language teaching of what it means to be a researcher and to do research.

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Notes

1 This paper develops and explores in more detail ideas first presented at the 4th Teachers Develop Teachers Research Conference, CLT, Catholic University, Leuven, Belgium, 2–4 September 1999.

2 Diamond (1993: 512) quotes Pessoa (1991) in noting that writing for academic publication is like ‘knitting to the intentions of others’. A perceived need to conform to academic conventions was undoubtedly one reason why the experiences of research captured in my journal did not find their way into published accounts of my study.
V References


Connelly, F.M. and Clandinin, D.J. 1990: Stories of experience and


