

Turning the L2 Writing Classroom into a Reflective Practicum

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Abstract: This is a qualitative interpretive case study research exploring the writing practices of L2 writers with specific reference to a group of university students studying at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST) who enrolled in Self-access Writing (SAW). In particular, this study has two major objectives: 1) To explore how my learners experienced the writing course that I designed for this study using learning journals as a reflection tool to help develop their thinking and writing. And 2) to explicate the concept of reflective teaching when I tried to turn this writing course to a site of reflective practicum. The findings connect in particular to the notions of reflective learning, reflective teaching and self-reflexivity.

Keywords: Journaling, reflective teaching, reflective writing, self-access study, self-access writing, self-reflexivity, teaching writing

1. Introduction

The objective of this study is to explore the development of reflective learning in the process of learning to write in English with electronic learning journals as experienced by a group of university students studying at the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology (HKUST).¹ A multiple-case methodology was used in order to examine the process of development of reflective learning in depth. The findings were drawn from data based mainly on the case participants' learning journals, and their writing assignments (see Appendix A), and for triangulation purposes, a pre-course interview (Appendix B), a post-course interview (Appendix C), my teaching journals, and research notes. A major challenge is to apply the reflection theories to help conceptualize the different perspectives of reflection tapped in the context of this research project. Overmeer (1998) once mentioned that when people approached Donald Schön about doing research on reflection, Schön would ask: "Reflection about what?" and then implored "you'd have to think about SOMETHING". In other words, Schön implies we cannot simply talk about reflection but rather we have to *engage* in it. Engaging in it perhaps is still not enough: the reflection framed needs to be analyzed and interpreted. Applying this to this study, I ask myself these questions:

How do I know the different forms of reflection in the participants' writing practice and how to connect the different forms of reflection identified to their L2 writing experiences?

The data collected were examined qualitatively for themes on reflective learning development and evidence of learning generated. The analysis of the data reveals there are close connections between journaling, problem solving and self-evaluation in the writing process. It is also found that reflective learning was developed when the participants learned to experiment with different genres, played with

¹ This report is a much shorter version of my PhD thesis titled: "A Teacher's Reflection: Using Journal Writing to Promote Reflective Learning in the Writing Classroom" (2007).

different voices, examined the problems in the learning process, and challenged their own assumptions. The findings provide support for using journal writing as a reflective tool to develop students' reflective learning and thinking in the L2 (second language) writing classroom at university level.

2. Literature Review: Reflection & Reflective Practicum

John Dewey (cf. 1910, 1933) and Jürgen Habermas (cf. 1984, 1987) are often referred to as the theorists who developed the backbone philosophies of reflection in the field of education, and have inspired many followers to elaborate and apply their theories on reflection.

Habermas inspires reflection in education to foster critical thinking and emancipation in order to bring justice to the community, based on the critical social theory by the Frankfurt School. Habermas suggests that reflection on learning is related to the three basic knowledge-constitutive interests, namely, 'technical', 'practical' and 'emancipatory' knowledge. Influenced by Habermas, scholars such as van Manen, Kemmis, Mezirow and Brookfield, in their own writing, all promote the emancipatory functions of knowledge in reflection and argue that reflection should bring forth changes and improve the community and eventually the society. Habermas's writing and attention to emancipatory knowledge has drawn a lot of attention to critical reflection and inspired different frameworks for conceptualizing reflection (for example, Argyris et al., 1985; Boud et al., 1985; Brookfield, 1987, 1990, 1995; Kemmis, 1985; Mezirow, 1991; Taylor, 2000; van Manen, 1977).

Following Habermas, Mezirow identifies critical reflection as central to adult learning and the achievement of insight and understanding. Mezirow's (1991, p. 100) theory of transformative adult learning includes reflection as "involving a review of the way we have consciously, coherently and purposefully applied ideas in strategising and implementing each phase of problem solving". By embedding reflectivity into the pedagogical process, Mezirow (1994) contends that meaningful learning occurs through self-examination of assumptions, patterns of interactions, and the operating premises of action. He also points out that a learner experiences transformative learning when s/he critically reflects on the premise or the assumption of the problem (Mezirow & Associates, 1990).

In *How We Think* (1910), Dewey writes, "Education consists of the formation of wide-awake, careful, thorough habits of thinking" (p. 78), and this special kind of thinking is 'reflective thinking'. Dewey's (1933) definitions of reflective thought appeared in different places in his writing over the years and these are two often-quoted ones to represent his conceptions of reflective thinking:

Reflective thought is] the kind of thinking that consists in turning a subject over in the mind and giving it serious and consecutive consideration. (Dewey, 1933, p. 3)

[Reflective thought is] active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusion to which it tends. (Dewey, 1933, p.9).

Dewey (1933, p. 477) is concerned about 'learning by experience' via making "a backward and forward connection between what we do to things and what we enjoy or suffer from things in consequence". Dewey's theory of reflection implies that teachers should help their students learn to identify the 'problem(s)' in learning so they have a reason to reflect on the problem and solve it in the learning process.

Echoing Dewey, Donald Schön also stresses that reflection is connected to problem-solving, but adds a new dimension to Dewey's notion of reflection by saying reflection is always intimately bound

up with actions. Reflectivity, as the concept developed by Schön (1983, 1987), is the process by which an inquirer is able to reflect in and on actions to improve his/her practice: to identify problems and reconstruct the practice so as to influence and improve a learning situation, and bring out changes in the practices as a direct result of the reflective process. By characterizing the nature of thought into ‘reflection-in-action’ and ‘reflection-on-action’, Schön shows us how these two concepts of reflection can help generate useful strategies to solve problems at different stages in a learning context. ‘Reflection-in-action’ is thought and action arising from the process of making sense or complexity of any problem in the process of doing, and reflection-on-action is the reflection a practitioner does after the event. While reflection-in-action allows a practitioner to think one step ahead, be critical, store experience for the future and analyze the problem, reflection-on-action encourages critical and evaluative introspection of the work done.

Another very useful concept contributed by Schön in his theory of reflection is the necessity of designing a reflective practicum to facilitate a particular group of learners to develop their reflective learning. Schön (1987, p. 18) positions the ‘reflective practicum’ as the optimal mechanism for imbuing learners with the “kinds of artistry essential to competence in the indeterminate zones of practice”. Using models from architecture, music, psychoanalytic supervision, consulting and city planning, Schön sets out the requirements of such a reflective practicum. These requirements involve the functioning of the instructor as a coach, facilitator or a feedback provider rather than a ‘teacher’, engaging in a continuous dialogue with the student as problems are encountered, and using a combination of demonstrating, imitating, telling, listening, and strategic intervention to develop the student’s ability to reflect in actions (Schön, 1987, p. 118).

According to Schön, professional practitioners such as teachers should re-visit and reframe the often complex and ambiguous problems they encounter, test out various interpretations, and then modify their actions as a result for changes. Reflection is, therefore, seen as a process in which we structure and restructure our personal, technical and practical knowledge. Reflective teachers are thus encouraged to continue to make choices in the light of appropriateness to construct their reflective practicums rather than being constrained by a particular teaching context. Inspired by Schön’s theory, in the process of running a Self-access Writing Course (SAW), I tried to move beyond the everyday routine and began to consider the effects of my actions and think of alternatives to frame the problematic situations in the context of facilitating the participants.

3. The Case Studies: Findings and Discussion

Results from the analysis of the learning journals and writing assignments demonstrate clear evidence of reflective learning development by the case participants within the period of doing SAW. In the following section, I will briefly narrate the stories of the four case participants, namely, Jennifer, Ben, Michael and Queenie.

3.1 Case Participants

Jennifer was by far the most prolific writer, having submitted a total of 83 learning journals within the 12-week course period. Much of the writing Jennifer produced concerned the subject of ‘love’. Other participants may have taken the opportunity of journaling to ask me for advice on love issues, but not

Jennifer. She just expressed herself in her journal entries and used journaling to sort out her own feelings, and not once did she ask me for explicit advice about her personal life. The journal writing experience seemed to work as a tool for her to recall or represent certain incidents and her own feelings. Later Jennifer saw writing the journal writings as a writing project, when I suggested that she could ‘blow up’ and ‘expand’ her writings. When she tried this, she experienced a new way of expressing herself by playing with narrative styles and learning to write with much greater reflexivity.

Ben realized what he had missed by not reading anything but his textbooks when he started reading the first ‘real’ book in his life. His experience of reading a romance novel helped him see the connection between reading and writing and he, for the first time, learnt to ‘internalize’ some grammar rules in reading. And when he experienced the power of ‘passive’ vocabulary and grammar patterns, his confidence in reading improved dramatically. The use of learning journals had a major impact on him in allowing him to document his experience as a novice reader of a certain genre and share the revelation with others.

Michael expressed his feelings via poetic writings. His main concern was grammar and vocabulary and he became a little indulgent in playing with words when he tried out the new genre in his journaling. In Michael’s case, when he found that he could experiment with different genres to express what he meant, he gradually stopped worrying about grammar and vocabulary. But as a pragmatic learner, he was always in search of effective ways to help him improve the accuracy of his writing. For Michael, ‘writing like a pro’ had emerged as an important theme throughout his learning period and helped him gain confidence and motivation. It was a first-hand experience for Michael to understand why grammar and vocabulary are important when he experimented with them to really express what he wanted to say, rather than following a set format to finish an academic paper.

Queenie, the most critical of the four, brought her ‘critical mind’ to the group right from the beginning, and remained critical with herself and others throughout the course. Queenie’s writings, at times, showed her reluctance to search inside her ‘self’ when she kept examining the logic of issues and using external evidence to back up her conclusions. Queenie’s writings do not include as many narratives as others. This is partly due to her undue respect for ‘critical writing’ and her determination to learn it well. As a result, she was not very keen on trying out other writing genres apart from ‘academic writing’. However, as she opened up herself a bit more, she demonstrated reflexivity in some of the learning journals when she discussed her relationship between her and her mother. She also began to exercise critical thinking by considering other people’s viewpoints on various issues.

3.2 Emergent Themes

The case participants’ reflections on their writing experiences and other aspects were categorized into six themes, which are:

1. Participants’ experiences of writing learning journals
2. Participants’ experiences of learning writing via SAW
3. Expressing feelings/emotions in writing
4. Learning different ways of knowing
5. Reconstructing self-as-writer
6. Relationships with the course facilitator

Due to length limit of this article, I will just briefly discuss the findings derived from thematic

analysis and relate them to the questions posed above in the introduction.

3.3 Findings and Discussion

During the first couple of weeks, all the four case participants were unsure how the learning journals could be used as a tool to help them learn writing. One of the worrying aspects revealed in the case participants' learning journals was their apparent lack of motivation and direction in setting goals for their learning. Observing that the case participants expected a lot of teacher input, I deliberately asked more instructional questions to guide them through the process of goal-setting. As observed from the case participants' reflections, goal-setting did not just happen naturally in the learning process. I also found that the exchanges between the participants and myself helped clarify long-term goals and break them into appropriate proximal goals so that these learning goals could appear to be more manageable for the participants. In the process of goal setting, the case participants not only reflected on what they wanted to be able to do with English in the future, but also why they wanted to invest time and effort in it, and this helped make SAW more student-centered. By looking at the different versions of the participants' goals, I could also get a sense of the development and changes in their learner identities. The act of goal-setting or making decisions on what to read and write, like other meta-cognitive strategies, is cultural. In this case, an understanding of cultural differences related to goal-setting can help teachers interpret students' behaviors.

At first it worried me that the case participants kept asking me to recommend books to them for doing the book reviews and websites for their Discussion Forum as if I should know all the answers to their questions. Their resistance of refusing to take the freedom and autonomy puzzled me. Later, I came to understand that much of the learner resistance as perceived by me actually was not necessarily resistance: the instrumental and technical matters are often just *superficial* labels, and often there is a cause behind a particular resistance to a certain task. By reading the participants' learning journals, I could conclude that many instrumental or technical matters are issues affected by the mindset of the learners. It is therefore important that a teacher should provide a learning environment to nurture this kind of deeper understanding of the so-called technical problems. I think to a certain extent I was able to frame questions to guide the participants to think through some of these 'technical' matters in the practicum that I set up using learning journals to help the case participants to reflect and describe their problems.

Expressions of emotions related to learning and personal matters were abundant in the learning journals. Emotions are not voiced out or encouraged in 'traditional' language courses when teachers are busy teaching all the course contents. Although I do not wish to generalize that male learners tend to express more emotions on self-evaluation and self-criticism related to self, while female participants tend to express more emotions linked to interpersonal relationships, evidence from my four cases seems to justify this observation. Another interesting observation is that when the case participants are given opportunities to express their emotions via learning journals, they are more than likely to handle them and achieve new learning from the expression of emotions.

The four case participants reflected abundantly in the category of reconstructing self-as-writer and showed some changes in constructing new identities and voices in their writing. The analysis of data has shown that the four case participants had particular conceptions about what voice they wanted to assert in their writing, and at the beginning all four case participants said that they considered 'critical thinking' a very important feature to learn, though their understanding of 'critical thinking' was quite restricted and often equal to 'logical thinking'. In terms of critical thinking and writer's voice, I

noticed these tendencies from the learning journals: 1) The use of critical thinking is a mechanical rather than a systematic way of exercising one's rational mind and making use of scientific evidence; 2) the participants had a tendency to over-emphasize 'critical thinking' and sacrifice the voice of 'connected knowing'; and 3) they assumed that certain types of writing, such as creative writing, reflective writing and narrative writing, had little importance in academia, falsely believing that these genres do not require critical thinking.

It was obvious that the case participants understood the 'rules' of the writing game so well that they kept checking with me at the beginning of the course if their critical thinking was strong enough. I had no intention to de-teach critical thinking with the case participants but I strongly believed that in order to be truly critical, one has to look at an issue from different perspectives and present the arguments in writing knowing who you are and why you presenting the writing as such.

The case participants developed both connected knowing voices and separate knowing voices (as defined below) in different writings, and it seems that the use of the voices were their own deliberations. Belenky et al. (1986, pp. 102-103) point out that a traditional education which aims to "teach their students methods of critical thinking, especially the methods peculiar to their disciplines and to provide students with regular feedback on the degree to which their work meets the high standards of the institution" tends to produce learners who adopt a voice of 'separate knowing'. Learners who have adopted a voice of 'separate knowing' tend to stress critical thinking and logic, and when presented with a proposition, would "immediately look for something wrong – a loophole, a factual error, a logical contradiction, the omission of contrary evidence" (Belenky et al., 1986, p. 104). Connected knowers, on the other hand, according to Belenky et al. (1986, p. 113) are very different from separate knowers – they refuse to judge, and are interested in other people's lives and thinking and tend to see the world from two lenses: the lens of a discipline and the lens of another person (Belenky et al., 1986, p.115).

As the facilitator, I encouraged them to develop both voices to construct a connected voice to see the various possibilities of being critical. It pains me to see that, at times, my students think academic writing is just a mechanical skill that they have to master. Therefore, I thought it was necessary for the participants to connect their 'selves' to the issue and really understand the issue before they can develop a true separate voice to sound critical and argumentative. But this kind of dialectic discussion aiming to help the participants to develop a sense of critical voice and authorship did not happen easily for at least two reasons. First, having a dialectic discussion about the content of their writing was something new to the case participants and they did not know how to handle it. Second, the case participants assumed I thought they had written badly so I kept asking them questions. Students usually did not want to discuss their written assignments with me assuming all I do as a teacher is find out what they did not know.

Sometimes I wonder if I was imposing my own epistemological preference on the case participants, which led to strong resistance to learning the kind of critical thinking I thought they should learn. I found that exchanges with the case participants made it possible for me to state clearly to them my stances about writer voices without having to do it in an authoritative manner, something which I might have done under greater time pressure or for want of a communication platform.

By examining the participants' reflections as categorized in the six themes identified above, I witnessed resistance, negotiation, doubts, worries and changes in their learning journals, and these instances, I believe, would probably have turned the case participants into L2 users as they were using the English language to communicate rather than to demonstrate their learning results. The effects that the journal writing process had on the case participants are intriguing and complicated.

In this research study, the students situated their reflections in a writing course and shaped their own learning experiences; the reflections are not only self-evaluation in this case but take up the role of a complex construct of individual learning and constructivist learning.

One of the revelations for the case participants involved using “the story to make sense of their practice or of the educational issues that are important to them” (Chapman, 2004, p. 100). Using the learning journals as part of a critical practice (as for Queenie and Ben), or a reflective practice (as in Jennifer’s case), or a personal expressive practice (as sometimes in Michael’s case), the participants discovered how to become critically aware of their writing problems through self-understanding and self-monitoring. For the case participants, it was the first time they had to be completely honest with their learning experiences, and to probe into the cognitive and meta-cognitive aspects of learning.

While the goals of learning journals might not have been to provide solutions to learning problems, the participants found that talking about their writing problems in the journals often led to discovery of solutions. Many of these problems and solutions are related to the meta-cognitive processes in writing, for example, planning, monitoring and evaluating outcomes. The fact that the very act of defining problems in journals is already part of the writing encouraged the participants to write in a relatively stress-free and penalty-free environment, and the re-reading of journals helped the participants to engage in constant revisions of their writing.

The findings of this study show there were some changes in the case participants’ attitudes towards writing over the 12-week period of the course. The case participants all expressed serious concerns about grammatical accuracy in their writing, but it seems that their worries were gradually eased as they were busy experimenting with new genres of writing and began to write with different motivations. They were able to think through some of the affective factors through the writing of learning journals. All the four case participants viewed the journal process as motivational, agreeing that it spurred them to write more often with greater confidence and less apprehension.

Reflection in this study is also framed as a social practice as students mediate their learning through reflection in the learning journals and other artifacts, such as the websites they chose for others to read, the book reviews that they shared and the discussions in the Discussion Forums that they chaired and participated in (cf. Appendix A). The reflections in the Discussion Forums were not just for individual learning, but also for sharing and influencing. The participants could decide whether to share learning journals with the whole group or just the facilitators. This kind of reflective learning, I think, is beyond the traditional meta-cognitive activities which aim to help individuals to set goals and evaluate their learning in their private zone.

I also found that the case participants responded positively when I explained to them what ‘reflection’ and ‘learning journals’ meant, and provided examples for them. At the beginning of the course, I let the participants know how I myself understood ‘reflection’, and how much power I would give them to experiment with learning journals. Knowing these basic requirements made it possible for the participants to know what to expect from the teacher and themselves. When the participants gradually accepted that the learning journals were a means to help them create conversations with themselves, and with other learners and the teacher, they would start opening up.

Indeed, when the participants found out from their own experiences that the journaling is part of a continuing dialogue, they would make sense of it and then different aspects of learning might happen. It is therefore important that the coaching from the teacher is there at the beginning of the learning period, so that the students can be taken through the ‘journaling’ expedition in relatively risk-free conditions.

The design of SAW made it possible for the participants to take part in several Discussion Forums chaired by other group members. So if a participant was not sure what to write in some instances they could simply observe how other participants presented their ideas; they could choose to join the discussion or not.

There is no direct evidence in this study to show that the participants' language competency was improved in terms of vocabulary size, accuracy or grammar. However, comparing the contents of the learning journals produced at the beginning of the course and those produced at a later stage, I can see that the latter were lengthier and much richer in content, in which learners used expressive language to describe their learning problems, and reflect on possible solutions to overcome them.

My experience with SAW convinced me that it is important that the teacher discuss with the learners why exploring different writing genres can help them become more competent writers. While I fully anticipated that my students need hands-on practice to experiment with genres that they seldom tried (such as expressive writing and reflective writing), they actually explicitly sought clear guidance from me. It is no use simply telling them that reflecting on the writing process is useful – they should discover this themselves by actually doing it. The participants' writing assignments show a variety of writing genres as evidence of the participants' making sense of and experimenting with different genres. The four participants explored different genres including argumentative essays, critiques, narratives and poems.

This study shows that reflective learning journals could help student writers with their development in the cognitive and meta-cognitive aspects of writing. The cognitive aspects stimulated by the learning journals include: experimenting with different genres, exploring expressive and reflective writing, and asserting a voice in writing. The meta-cognitive aspects evidenced in the learning journals are: setting a learning goal, monitoring progress, noticing one's own learning styles, and being aware of one's assumptions. For example, Michael admitted that he enjoyed collecting his writing and compiling a portfolio of journals and other writings, as he wanted to 'write like a pro'; Ben found that he could write better after midnight. These are illustrations of how learning journals helped the participants develop the meta-cognitive aspects in learning to write.

All four participants agreed that it had taken them a while to know how the learning journals helped their learning. In the post-course interviews (cf. Appendix C), they all alluded to the value of my answering their questions in the journals and my asking more questions in my replies. And they all indicated that they enjoyed reading their journals and noticed the changes in the learning processes.

I see journal writing as a "pedagogy possibility" (Norton, 2000) through which an L2 writing teacher can bridge the gap between teaching the students to write, responding to the student writing and co-writing with the students. By encouraging the students to articulate and reflect critically upon their interaction with the teacher-researcher, I could empower the students to position themselves as writers rather than just learners and also to reframe my relationship with the learners in order to help them to construct new powerful identities for themselves.

Many educators have pointed out that thinking reflectively can be a risky undertaking as we actively challenge ourselves on familiar values and beliefs. The four case participants all realized the risk-taking factors in SAW but saw the writing of learning journals as a low-stakes activity, and did not seem to mind plunging into the deep end. Ben once commented on the risk-taking factors of journal writing: "It is not easy to keep asking questions and doing reflection. Sometimes you want to forget about all the things you can't do well. But I am beginning to feel that I can get use to asking questions. So this become a habit and not so feary." [sic]

For all the four case participants, the experience of using the learning was evaluated favorably and was considered to have contributed positively to their personal development as learners as well as to their development as writers. In particular, the maintenance of learning journals aided reflective and meta-cognitive thinking as well as providing opportunities for the reconstruction of writing experiences.

The case participants also showed some changes in their beliefs and knowledge relating to learning, writing and interpersonal issues. It could be seen that the Discussion Forums encouraged the participants to lead and exchange view points in a critical and interactive manner. This provided positive support for the learning experiences presented from a constructivist perspective. Entries in the participants' journals indicated deliberate attempts from the beginning to connect learning problems to solutions. When at times some reflections on problems seemed like monologues, the case participants were simply mediating on the learning problems. In cases like these, I, being the facilitator, had to ponder when and where to come in to help. This tug-of-war between coaching and not coaching was an interesting site in the reflective practicum.

While the participants' beliefs appeared to change during the time of the course, I cannot of course claim that these changes are solely attributable to the writing of journals and my coaching. Although the learning activities were designed specifically to facilitate constructivist approaches to learning, other variables in their learning processes are likely to have had some influence. Furthermore, even though the participants' beliefs about learning have changed and evidence of their attempts to translate these into writing is provided in their learning journals and in the post-course interviews, I realize the reconstruction of authorship and learner identity is fluid and subject to further changes.

The discussion of the participants' reflections suggests that by introducing learning journals in a writing course, the participants' beliefs, worries, problems and learning strategies about writing can be captured as reflection perspectives and analyzed. And it is these subtle, complex and sometimes unexpected reflections that make the tasks of writing teachers challenging and yet rewarding. The reflections are not solutions to all the learning problems that the participants voice out, and will not automatically provide insights for the teachers. However, if we wish to create a conducive learning environment to generate inner and inter- 'talk-back' which comes as "the form of unanticipated meanings, problems and dilemmas" (Schön 1983, p. 347), observing and analyzing reflection perspectives in the participants' writings provides a good channel for doing this.

4. Issues Arising From the Present Study

While looking for evidence of the participants' developing reflections on their English writing experiences, as their teacher I was hoping that the case participants would, right from the beginning of the course, reflect on a variety of matters and reveal what concerned them critically in the writing process. I felt disappointed at first when I scoured through the case participants' journals and could not find too many critical reflections which showed that the case participants were able to reconstruct their learner identity and challenge their own assumptions about learning writing. In other words, I was assuming that as the case participants got into the habit of writing the learning journals, the critical reflections would follow automatically. I was also assuming with all the questions that I planned to ask 'at the right time', the case participants would show dramatic improvements in their ability to engage in reflective learning. Why then were the results so disappointing, I asked.

I can think of two explanations. One, I believe I did not do enough to generate critical reflections in the case participants. On looking back, a lot of my so-called planned questions were just questions

challenging a choice that had been more or less made by the learners. For example, I asked Ben why he thought reading a romance novel was useless, hoping that he would admit that he was making an assumption to justify his resistance to English reading. I also wanted him to investigate why he had that assumption. Was that challenging a taken-for-granted assumption? I am not sure if I had done enough to make Ben realize that he held a lot of assumptions about learning English and examining these assumptions would certainly help him understand more about his learning. But this kind of critical thinking was not exactly the kind of emancipatory reflection proposed by Habermas or Mezirow. When I first planned SAW, I had very little intention to foster the particular kind of critical reflection which aims to develop “a democratic, critical, analytic discourse” (Newman, 1997, p. 358).

I stated I would allow the participants to have freedom to explore their own writing problems and focus on them; in other words, achieving critical reflection was not a planned objective. So the second reason is that SAW, being a self-selected writing course scheduled in the summer vacation, was not designed to promote the kind of learning to ‘liberate’ the students to ‘re-see’ the world themselves. It was just a writing course to help my students to experience an alternative way of learning or of doing writing – the course aim, the course materials and the tasks were not operating at the critical socio-cultural levels to promote the learners to challenge a lot of their taken-for-granted assumptions. It surprises me to realize that I was so taken by an epistemological preference that I had developed during the process of doing this study that it probably affected the way I looked at the data. So was I asking the participants to do an impossible task and steering myself to disappointment? Another question is: In such a writing course, was it necessary to encourage and promote the kind of critical or emancipatory reflections from the learners?

So does it matter that these students were not developing reflection to liberate themselves to re-see the world? In order to answer this question, I have to challenge myself to answer another question: How is the reflective practice of the learners learning to liberate themselves to re-see the world related to the learning of writing in an L2 language? Norton (2000) has argued that it is important that in teaching a second language, the teacher can help the learners build optimal identities so that these students would not get deprived in using the L2 language. Is it liberating? I do not know and cannot answer the question at the moment. It seems that I shall have to explore this issue in future studies.

I have to admit that it has taken me a long time to admit that developing this kind of critical reflection takes time and depends on practice of critical reading by the participants. Despite the logistic constraints, the participants did demonstrate the development of critical reflection when they began to challenge some of the assumptions they had been carrying for years. For example, Queenie began to see that not all women in Hong Kong were in the ‘comfort zone’ that she was in and she began to ask *why* questions, and later she even asked if she was situated in a ‘comfort zone’ as she always thought she was in. Ben did not feel comfortable when other participants challenged his views about the biological differences in the genders and got him to think why such uncomfortable feelings existed. These reflections may not have caused any immediate changes to ‘liberate’ the case participants to reframe their values toward the world, but I think that they constituted the first step towards raising the case participants’ awareness of the values and assumptions that they had been carrying for a long time.

Another issue arising involves giving feedback to learners. It was never in the design of SAW that I would be grading the learning journals, but still the participants asked for comments. While Chapman (2004, p. 100) admits this problem by saying that she found commenting on or marking someone’s life stories or personal writings ‘unethical’, the case participants’ suggestions that they wanted the learning journals to be assessed and graded is definitely an area worth exploring.

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Author Note

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Appendix A

Self-Access Writing Summer Course (SAW)

Course Outline & Assignments

Dear Students

In this email, I am going to describe to you what this self-access writing course (SAW) is like and how you can benefit from it.

Duration of the course: June 3 - end of August (~12 weeks)

Features:

- ◆ Mainly self-access writing work: you decide what you want to read and write.
- ◆ Extensive journal writing (send to me via email) - at least 5 times a week, continuing for 12 weeks.
- ◆ Optional weekly meetings with Elza to discuss the writing process and your writing experiences.

Course requirements:

- ◆ THREE pieces of writing assignments. The first one should be submitted by end of June, the second one by end of July and the third one end of August. But these are not 'deadlines' - feel free to negotiate the due-dates with me.
- ◆ Daily submission of a learning journal via email to Elza for you to clarify, discuss and reflect on any learning issues related to your learning or the written assignments.

Course contents:*Group work*

- ◆ Read a self-selected book and share your reading journals with your group members via email.
- ◆ Each one of you takes turns leading a Discussion Forum for two weeks. You can decide the topic, the content and the style of the discussion. During the two weeks, you participate actively in the Discussion Forum and explore the issue with your group members.

Individual work

- ◆ Write and post your learning journals on email.
- ◆ Participate in Discussion Forums.
- ◆ Plan and write the three writing assignments and submit them in accordance to the deadlines set by yourself.

What you may get from SA W 2000

While there's no guarantee that you will gain something, I think you may

- ◆ fall in love with writing when you complete the course;
- ◆ learn how to overcome the writer's block;
- ◆ have a portfolio of writing produced by yourself.

* Those who have fulfilled the course requirements by the end of the course will be awarded a certificate by the Self-Access Centre of the Language Centre. The certificate will not automatically come to you BUT HAS TO BE RECOMMENDED BY ELZA depending on your participation in the course.

I'd like to stress again - this is not a conventional course but a course to help you:

- * think critically
- * write fluently
- * reflect on your writing process
- * read critically
- * reflect on cultural issues
- * relate writing to the society and yourself
- * help yourself to learn in a self-access way

So please ask yourself:

- * Will I benefit from a course like this?
- * Will I be committed?

- * Will I really have time?
- * Do I enjoy writing?

If the answers are 'yes', please send me a reply before next Tuesday. There are only 15 places.

And don't forget to come to the Orientation Meeting next Thursday at 10.30. Information about the venue will be sent to you later after I've received your application via email.

Elza

Writing assignments:

<i>Task title</i>	<i>Writing assignments & description</i>
Book review	Read a self-selected book and share your reading journals with your group members via email. Write a book review as one of the writing assignments.
Essay (Discussion Forum)	Each one of you takes turns leading a Group Discussion Forum on email for two weeks. You can decide the topic, the content and the style of the discussion. During the two weeks, you chair and participate actively in the Discussion Forum and explore the issue with your group members. Write an essay of your Forum topic as one of the writing assignments.
Self-selected topic	You have full autonomy to decide what you want to write in the third writing assignment.
Daily learning journals	Daily submission of a learning journal via email to Elza for you to clarify, discuss and reflect on any issues related to your learning of writing.

Appendix B

Pre-course Interview

These are some of the questions I asked at the semi-structured pre-course interview:

- ◆ Why do you want to take this course?
- ◆ Tell me how you see ‘writing’?
- ◆ Can you share with me some interesting experiences about your learning of English/writing?
- ◆ Do you know anything about learning journals?
- ◆ Do you write diaries? What do you think of this kind of writing activity?
- ◆ Do you have a reading habit? What do you like to read during your free time?
- ◆ Have you got any questions that you would like to ask me?

Appendix C

Post-course Interview

These are some of the questions which I asked the participants in the semi-structured post-course interview:

- ◆ Can you tell me what you think about this learning experience (writing learning journals, having freedom to choose your writing assignments, etc.)?
- ◆ What did you like most about taking *SAW* ?
- ◆ Can you tell me how you used the learning journals to help you write?
- ◆ Do you think you’re becoming more reflective now? Why?
- ◆ Do you think you have improved your writing skills? Which areas do you think you’ve improved? What made you say that?
- ◆ Can you tell me what you think about me as the course facilitator?