

Modeling Reflective Writing for the First-Year Physical Education Student

Irene Cucina

As a learner, I have always grasped new ideas and concepts by observing others. This technique has followed me as a teacher. As part of Foundations of Physical Education, which is required of all first-year physical education majors, students begin a portfolio. The portfolio is a collection of work that documents the growth and development of the student as a person and professional. Additionally, reflective statements are included for major pieces of work. The reflective statements emphasize what the student learned during the process of the assignment. The reflective statements were taught through modeling and freewrites at the Writing Center.

The portfolio process has been developed over the past three years by Dr. Joy Butler and a committee of professors in the HPER Department. The emphasis of the physical education portfolio during the first two years is on the physically educated person. Assignments in Foundations of Physical Education are based on self-discovery and an understanding of physical education as a profession. The reflective writing is essential to the portfolio process because the process of completing the assignment as well as what was learned is examined. Students find this aspect difficult to do.

Reflective writing requires the student to examine the process by verbalizing feelings and making connections with other subjects or areas in his/her life. Many students write reflective statements in the form of summary statements. Reflective statements should help the student make connections with other areas. As students begin to make connections, higher order cognitive thinking occurs.

One of the self-discovery assignments was to make a list of major life events beginning at age one to the present day. The events were categorized into the three domains of learning: 1) cognitive; 2) social; and 3) motor. Students were encouraged to contact parents and/or family members for help if necessary. Once the list was developed, I planned to have the students write a reflective statement about one vivid memory.

As the first writing assignment approached, I scheduled a class meeting at the Writing Center. Initially, students were not happy about having to go to the Writing Center for a class. Years of tracking in public school have put writing centers in a bad light. For many students, the writing center is seen as a place for remedial writers. The students said that going to the Writing Center indicated to others that you might not be able to live up to the standards of being a college student. I talked with my students about sharing drafts of my dissertation with the Writing Center staff. I explained that the feedback I received helped me to clarify my writing. I also shared my discomfort the first time I decided to ask for help. Sharing writing with another person is difficult and uncomfortable at times. Attitudes softened; however, I think they were not totally convinced of the benefits of attending the Writing Center.

The day of the scheduled visit, I was unsure of where I was going with the assignment, but hopeful that the experience would place writing in a favorable light. As the students arrived and chose an area to sit in, I talked about the importance of a comfortable

writing environment. Personal preferences were evident in the seats that were chosen. Students who work on couches and beds at home chose to sit in the soft chairs with notebooks as table rests. Students who need privacy hid behind the dividers. The students who work on desks and tables moved to the larger tables and spread themselves out.

I began the class with a 10 minute freewrite exercise. Each student was asked to write about one vivid experience while growing up. For many this was their first experience with a freewrite. As the students wrote, I joined them. Students were then asked to exchange papers with peers (if they felt comfortable sharing) for a peer review. I moved around the room and listened as students talked with each other. The majority of the writing covered sport experiences and included statements such as:

“I remember scoring my first soccer goal at 8. Then I played soccer until I was 12. At 12 I started playing football. I played on the high school team for four years.”

“I have been doing gymnastics since I was five years old. My parents drove me to the gym three times per week.”

“Soccer was very important to me growing up. My parents were supportive of all my activities.”

Many of the students had no problems writing general statements about their experiences but the writing lacked reflection. Without thinking, I volunteered to read my freewrite out loud. I was nervous about sharing my reflections with the class; however, I knew that the students would be more successful with an example. In my freewrite I explained how I felt scoring my first goal in field hockey in the eighth grade. I vividly recounted the smell of the grass, the color of the leaves, and the temperature of that afternoon. I fondly remembered my mother sitting on the sidelines and cheering louder than any other parent. The exuberant feelings of seeing the ball go into the goal made me swell with pride. I recounted the beating of my heart and how proud and confident I felt

while my teammates congratulated me. I connected my experience with witnessing the first soccer goal my son scored, and reflected on how my mother must have felt when I scored my first goal. I read the following:

As Jonathan began to run toward the goal, my heart started pumping louder and faster than I thought possible while standing still. I held my breath, as he pulled his leg back and kicked the ball; time seemed to stop. As the ball went into the goal and I began jumping up and down, I heard in my cheers my mother's voice from years ago. My heart swelled with love for my son's achievement and for my mother at the same time. I knew what he was feeling when his teammates were pounding him on the back. I was back in a 1970 kilt in middle school with teammates jumping all over me. I remembered the beating of my heart and the joy when I glanced at my mother: This time I was not only on the field but was standing in my mother's shoes. I wanted to immediately call my Mom and share this moment. For the first time, I realized the pride and joy my mother must have felt on that fall afternoon almost 20 years ago. I felt closer to her at that moment than at any other time in my life.

After reading my freewrite, the students were quiet. I felt an immediate sense of panic. I had shared a private moment with a group of students and was unsure if I had made the right decision. I shared an experience that was a part of who I was and I feared ridicule. I also feared the class would not respect me for opening up to them. Of course, memories of high school English assignments came flooding back to me. The fear of people laughing or thinking I was stupid. After what seemed an eternity, the group responded with smiles and memories of their own that resembled mine. At that moment I felt complete and total relief. In my head I began to think, "this lesson might work." My apprehension began to decrease and I felt a little more confident.

I directed the class to expand on their most vivid memory and

to set the stage for the reader. Students wrote frantically. The lack of hesitation was exhilarating. I reinforced the rules of the freewrite; to not stop and correct spelling or grammar, to let the pen just write. After 10 minutes, students broke up into small groups. Students were encouraged to exchange papers if they felt comfortable doing so. Peers read the drafts and after reading the “vivid memory” they were asked to share their impression of the experience to the writer. Feedback was positive and insightful. I heard questions that were reflective and probing. One student wrote:

“One memory that stands out the most is the first time I rode a dirt bike. This memory stands out because I loved the exhilarating feeling of rolling the throttle back and accelerating so fast that the trees around me blurred together and the wind blew so fast that it was deafening.”

The student who read this response asked the writer what it felt like to go that fast. The writer added the following to his final draft:

“This memory also stands out because I remember vividly how the bike felt under my control, how it bobbed and jerked as it skipped over rocks, how the smells of the forest whipped past my nostrils, and how the heat of the muffler scorched my un-panted leg. I remember how it felt to control such a powerful piece of machinery. Lastly I can recall overcoming my fear of dirt bikes.”

The feedback provided during the sharing session helped the writer to reflect on an aspect that was not explored.

The one or two sentences regarding past sport experiences were expanded. The writing was expressive and substantive. One student wrote:

“Past experiences come and go, but what separates the events from the memories is the impact that something has on you for years to come. When something that happened years ago still has an affect [sic] on you, then you know it is worthy of being called a memory. Some memories have a bigger impact than others do,

and some are so influential that they are still affecting your life presently. I have had several memories that have impacted my life, but there is one special memory that outweighs all the rest. The moment in time that had the most effect on me was the many years in which I was in gymnastics. The coaches and teammates were like family to me. . . . This experience taught me strength, courage, independence, how to cope with failure, and a sense of pride. It taught me sportsmanship, and it gave me a sense of stability in my life.”

The student, who had previously handwritten one sentence, expanded her thoughts to include what she had learned from her sport experience. This is exactly what I was looking for in the reflective description of work included in the portfolios.

Students were sharing information with each other that was at times very private. I was surprised how open and honest many of them were. One student shared her fear when her dad left for the Gulf War:

“He was gone almost a year. I remember that the whole year I was scared and worried. Everyday I woke up not knowing whether my father would ever come home. The kids at school would tease me and say awful things. The only thing I could do was cry and look at a picture of him on my desk. The day that he came back was one of the happiest days of my life. I realized then that I should never take advantage of anything in my life. I learned to make the best of times I share with those I love.”

When I read the final papers from the assignment, I sometimes felt the pain and worry that was shared. Students were able to write about a vivid memory and connect the memory with lessons learned.

When final portfolios were turned in at the end of the semester, each sample was prefaced with a reflective statement that was insightful and connected. Brief summaries were replaced with analysis and synthesis of work samples. Reflective writing is one

method used to explore connections with other subjects as well as with professional experiences. Too frequently, students compartmentalize learning, keeping course content in separate boxes. Reflective writing is a process that encourages broader thinking as well as the interconnectedness with not only the physical education core and option classes but also with material learned in General Education classes.

I continued asking students to freewrite during the course of the semester. Students looked forward to issues and topics that were integrated into the course designed to encourage writing. I offered incentives when students used the Writing Center for assignments. Grading was made easier by the many trips my students made to the Writing Center during the semester. The final product that the students have in the portfolio is an excellent foundation to build on during the next three years.