

## “Down the Rabbit Hole”: Building Self-Reflexive Pedagogy in Writing

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**Abstract:** We undergo a certain type of “down-the-rabbit hole experience”, when we end our years as students and begin a new chapter as teachers. This process may be amplified when one is an ESL teacher, teaching English as a second language. As a former Basic English instructor at the University of Puerto Rico at Mayagüez and incoming doctoral student at the University of Puerto Rico at Río Piedras, facing new challenges, both as a graduate student and a college-level instructor, I have found the process to be similar to how Alice figures out how to fit into this new world called Wonderland, which is completely different to her home in England.

**Key words:** self-reflection, autoethnography, pedagogy, Alice in wonderland, children’s literature

### 1. Introduction

Beginning teachers are so busy and get caught up easily in their work. They rarely have time to reflect on themselves as educators. But, when teachers create spaces for them to reflect, they improve their teaching and create new spaces for students to reflect on themselves and their studying. In this presentation, then, I will be discussing my experience leading a workshop for teachers in which I used the metaphor of falling down the rabbit hole as a means of modeling pedagogical autoethnographic practices for teachers of English as a second language. I will use Lewis Carroll’s *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, as a tool to explain my analogy of Alice entering the rabbit hole as a means of explaining the new teacher experience — including teachers who are new to teaching and teachers entering new academic situations. I will then demonstrate examples of the writing activities that I designed and led at the Puerto Rico Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (PRTESOL) workshop, in November 2016. These writing activities were meant to foster self-reflection: both in our work as teachers and in our observations of our students. Participants were asked to consider, among other points: what are our strengths, as well as the areas we would like to improve; which attributes of other teachers do we admire; what do we believe other teachers recognize in us; what do you try to do that you just cannot seem to master in your teaching; and where are you vulnerable as a teacher. This project was created as a means of both supporting the school teachers of Puerto Rico and for studying the ways in which teachers self-reflect on the multiple attributes of their teaching environments within an ESL context.

### 2. Main Body

In the first chapter of *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice was sitting by a riverbank, listening to her

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older sister, whose name remains unknown, read what appeared to be something out of Alice’s personal interest. Later, she noticed a dressed White Rabbit with a pocket watch, and out of curiosity, decided to follow it. The White Rabbit “pops down a large rabbit-hole under the edge”. Down Alice went through the rabbit hole. As Alice fell down the deep rabbit hole, she noticed several odd objects, such as cupboards, book shelves, maps, and pictures. It felt like the fall was never going to end. After several obstacles, Alice finally landed and began searching for a way out of what seemed to be a tunnel. Alice finds a door, but could not enter because the door was too small for her. Alice found several keys to open the door, but none of them fit (either too big or too small). During her search, she had found a bottle labeled “DRINK ME” which made her shrink in size, and a cake with the words “EAT ME” marked in currants, which caused her to grow larger than normal (Carroll 1-14).

The same way a beginning teacher goes through a transition between being a student to becoming an educator, Alice senses the gap between her and Wonderland’s culture. The rabbit-in-the-hole experience symbolizes an entry into a new environment, where the customs, behavior, and norms are not equal as her previous environment. Chapter one describes when Alice drinks the bottle labeled “drink me”, causing her to shrink, and when she eats the cake labeled “eat me”, causing her to grow larger in size.

[...] so many out-of-the-way things have happened lately, that Alice had begun to think that very few things indeed were really impossible (9).

Alice has been facing new experiences ever since she followed the White Rabbit down the rabbit hole. Her frustration is demonstrated with her crying, forming the pool of tears. As beginning educators, or teachers facing new experiences, we go through a certain type of “rabbit hole,” where we begin putting in practice all theory learned in college, as well as facing obstacles concerning students’ well-being and psychological, social, and cultural aspects. In August 2015, being a first semester student was not an easy task. Learning to balance my graduate student life with my teaching tasks was an adjustment challenge. Also, being a young educator, teaching Basic English to freshman college students was also a challenging task, at first. Just like Alice, being “too big” means to make mistakes, or being too loud or awkward; whereas being “too small” means missing opportunities, or not trying. In order to enter a new world, she had to learn to adapt herself. During the course of teaching Basic English at the university level, as a beginner, I have felt too big in the classroom, when making mistakes, and too small when not having the courage to develop certain class activities. According to Lisa Starr, when encountering new experiences, we do our best to blend in and solve our problems. We all make mistakes, but it is how we learn from them that help us improve our teaching. At first, it is not easy to adapt into new situations; by using self-reflexive pedagogy, teachers can study themselves, providing a better learning environment for students.

In my research, I deduct that every teacher has encountered a “Rabbit Hole” moment. A “Rabbit Hole” moment is a situation where teachers face new challenges, such as changes in environment, course, school, group, grade, etc., and experience adaptation difficulties. When facing a “Rabbit Hole” moment, there are two kinds of resolutions: the short term, which means how the teacher solved that situation; and the long term, which is how the teacher could have done it better, reflecting on other ways we could have solved that situation.

In my workshop, entitled “Down the Rabbit Hole”: Building Self-Reflexive Pedagogy in Writing, I first explained my analogy of Alice entering the rabbit hole as a means of explaining the new teacher experience. I, then, demonstrated examples of writing activities in which both teachers and students can foster self-reflection. My colleagues were amazed by the way the message was conveyed, as well as the idea of using a metaphor from a piece of children’s literature as a medium for promoting self-reflection in teachers and students.

One of my favorite pieces of children’s literature, Alice in Wonderland entails the story of an English girl

entering Wonderland, experiencing situations and mishaps as she tries to blend in with the rest of the inhabitants. This text has also been well-known as an animated version, among children, teenagers, and adults. Teaching using a familiar children’s book is very useful so that the teachers who will then be asked to discuss difficult issues within their classrooms are somewhat disarmed and relaxed in order to reflect, write, and discuss. Using the “Rabbit hole” metaphor can be used to discuss several topics in the classroom, as well as to reflect different situations we have encountered where we experienced troubles blending in.

After retelling this scene from *Alice In Wonderland* and drawing correlations between Alice’s rabbit hole and the rabbit holes that we sometimes fall into as teachers, I asked my colleagues to write their “Rabbit-Hole” moment, an experience where they had trouble adjusting to a new environment, or dealing with a new situation, planning a new class, teaching at a new school, etc. After reflecting on that specific event, they had to describe it, write what they did at the moment, what they might have done differently, and what they might do next time.

The activity lasted approximately twenty minutes and, the participants were very amused after reading aloud their “Rabbit-Hole” moments. One of the participants, a student completing his teaching practicum in an elementary school, described the first time he assigned a project to his students, but did not specify a date in particular, telling the students they could hand their projects in whenever they wanted. As of the last day of class, none of the students had done their projects, and the student-teacher did not know how to react. He decided to cancel the project. He said he learned that, next time, he had to assign a specific date for the students to hand in their projects, to prevent that situation from happening again.

Another elementary school teacher, also a former middle school teacher, had planned a teaching strategy to use on sixth graders, using standards and expectations from ninth grade. The teacher thought that her students would have reacted the same way her former ninth graders have reacted. However, things did not turn as expected. The teacher did not specify what exactly went wrong; but, she had learned that activities have to be planned with standards and expectations according to their grade level, in order to provide a more effective learning environment. After the activity, many colleagues have walked up to me and expressed their amazement of the *Alice in Wonderland* analogy with self-reflexive pedagogy, and how they will apply that analogy in their classrooms as well.

In this workshop, I have shared an anecdote where, in my first semester teaching college freshman students, I have decided to pair my students with diverse talents and interests. The categories were the following: athletes, musicians or singers, artists, gamers, and bookworms. I have forgotten that most of my students were athletes, and when I called on everyone who practiced a sport, half of my students stood up. In my classroom I had very few musicians or singers, and one artist, gamer, and bookworm. After that experience, I decided to let my students pair with whomever they wanted, and continued with class. After reflecting on that activity, I have learned that, in order to conduct those types of activities, I had to study my students first, getting to know their talents, strengths, and areas of improvement.

Self-reflexive teaching and autobiographical autoethnographies have served as an instrument to introspect on my strengths and areas of improvement, planning, and taking in consideration students’ needs. Having teachers write autobiographical narratives was a valuable experience, for they have learned to reflect on diverse aspects of their teaching. As teachers, it does not matter how many years of experience, but what have we learned based on those years. Having a busy schedule is not enlightening, but taking a moment to reflect on our past experiences enhances our effectiveness as educators.

The activity concluded with a final thought on introducing similar self-reflexive activities with students, to

create critical perspectives on themselves as students and human beings. Various writing activities can be used to create awareness on introspecting ourselves, as teachers, students, or human beings. Using Alice in Wonderland as a tool to create self-reflective pedagogy in the classroom is an essential idea to understand the analogy among Alice crawling in the rabbit hole into a new world, beginning teachers crawling into their rabbit holes into the teaching experience, and educators going through their rabbit holes into new challenges they must face.

According to Fernanda Duarte, when discussing self-reflexive pedagogy, we are studying ourselves as teachers. In order to provide a more effective learning environment, one must engage in continuous self-study to heighten awareness. Self-reflexive pedagogy provokes educators to engage in critical reflective teaching. Examples include modifying teaching strategies, planning classroom activities, and taking in consideration students' needs. For the purpose of the workshop that I am discussing, the shape of this self-reflexive pedagogy was in the form of autobiographical narratives that I am now looking at as examples of pedagogical autoethnographies.

### **3. Conclusion**

Promoting critical thinking and self-reflection in students in order to improve themselves as students is essential to develop the teaching-learning experience. Creating a study where the self is center of the investigation is of great importance to progress as a teacher, and a student. Duarte defines autoethnography as “a writing genre in which the researcher “becomes” the phenomenon under investigation”. When discussing the concept autoethnography, we are reflecting on challenges, events, situations, and experiences to be encountered. It also serves as an aid to discover ourselves as teachers, students, and human beings. We all know that teachers have occupied lives, and have tight schedules. However, we have to recognize that it is important to take time and reflect on what we teach our students, and how they react to what we teach them. It is of great importance to take into consideration students' needs, their different abilities, and how can we modify our activities to improve themselves as students, as well as to improve ourselves as teachers.

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