I have been using journals in the School of Education at Flinders University for many years now as a way of helping students to develop the self-reflection skills that are so crucial to effective learning and teaching. I have also used this reflection tool with students from other disciplines to help them develop greater self awareness and control over their topic content, as a tool for self assessment of their clinical practice and also to help them develop effective study strategies such as research, critical thinking, time management and essay writing.

It is my belief that reflective journals are extremely valuable learning resources for students. They are a safe place where students can identify and work through specific issues, either on their own or with the support of the feedback they receive. A reflective journal is different from a descriptive diary or factually based daily log in that it encourages a deep exploration of learning experiences – both good and bad!

**Journal keeping throughout history**

Gillian Bouras (1999), a contemporary Australian writer who keeps a journal to record and explore the complexity of her personal experiences, reminds us that the words ‘journal’ and ‘journey’ have the same Latin derivative, coming to the English language from the Old French. She mentions the rich history of journal writing and lists famous and infamous people who have used journals for personal and professional insight.

Journal writing for self exploration was formalised in certain countries at least by the tenth century. According to Rainer (1978), female courtiers in Japan at that time developed the art of journal keeping in order to explore their inner world, as opposed to the recording of outer, daily events. Since then, there has been a rich tradition of journal use by males and females needing a place in which to process their personal and professional growth as educators, therapists, scientists, artists and writers.
University students might agree with Boswell, an 18th century diarist, who wrote, ‘It is unpleasant to observe how imperfect a picture of my life this journal presents. Yet I have certainly much more of myself thus preserved than most people have.’ (as cited in Bouras, 1999 p.20)

**Journal use and higher education**

Students in a wide range of disciplines find themselves being asked to keep a journal for reflection on some aspect of their university career. Nursing and education students are encouraged to use them as part of their practical experiences in order to develop the critical reflective skills which are integral to their development as a professional. It is common also for social work and law students to keep journals as a way of exploring their connections between theory and practice. Engineering students these days use journals in order to record the progress of their design projects.

Peter November (1996), a lecturer in commerce in New Zealand, takes up the metaphor of a journey to explain the reflective process of journal writing to his university students. He suggests that the final academic product (i.e. essay, project) does not adequately reflect the journey experienced by the student and that the journal process ‘with its trials and tribulations’ (p.116) is an effective tool which encourages deeper learning. November believes that ‘What you need in your journal are the things that caused you to be different person. The essence, the spirit of your journey.’ (p.126)

Bouras (1999) also explores the idea that a journal can be an important bridge between the known and unknown. She suggests that

> A journal, in particular, provides some sort of link between inner and outer worlds, both of which can be very frightening landscapes. Charting them, in a kind of geography of the emotions, no matter how unsatisfactorily and inexpertly, helps to reduce the terror, and enables us to go forward, because a journal provides us with at least a dim idea of where we have been. (p.26)

**Initial reactions**

Developing the skills of reflection as opposed to description is not an easy task and not all students welcome the idea. Some students are openly resistant. They may have had negative experiences in the past or feel uncomfortable writing in the first person and do not see the point of keeping a journal.

For instance, one student wrote,

> I also have to say that I hate writing journals. I thought that Year 12 saw the end of such silly talks ... I really do not know why I hate writing journals, but I do. I’m not the type of person to reach out emotionally to others, no matter what the problem. I guess that journal writing makes that trait vulnerable. I have to adjust to this as well. Oh, well. Life goes on.

Over the period of a semester, this student identified her struggles openly and honestly, writing in her final entry.

> I know that without these journal entries I probably would never have seen my transition. I can’t believe this is my last entry.
On the other hand, a school leaver who arrived from Greece the week before university commenced wrote about the value of having a journal in the first, lonely weeks of adjustment to a new culture and learning environment.

I’m really enjoying journal writing. It’s a good idea. It gives me a chance to practise my English and to express myself. It’s really helped me to try to find myself. It hasn’t happened yet, but at least I know how I feel and I can talk to someone about it. Even if this someone is created by me, and even if it doesn’t respond, it’s letting me bring it all out. Thank you journal for listening.

Usually, students write excellent journals once the process is explained, as long as they feel comfortable to explore their objections and difficulties.

Taking steps together
McInnis, James and McNaught (1995) identify university students’ need for support, encouragement and access to staff for out of class time consultation. Therefore, the journal, and especially the dialogue journal between student and lecturer, becomes a rewarding and unique experience, and one which validates the student’s need to have individual access to staff in the university environment where increasing class sizes and teaching loads often makes such access difficult.

The experience of sharing learning through the journal process can be a powerful one for both academic and student and often this concept is explored and appreciated in the journal. The level of dialogue can vary from regular exchanges to a final unmarked submission.

Staton (as cited in Fulwiler 1987) describes the power of dialogue journals and their ability ‘to reach out to others, to turn the keys of their cells, and release them through dialogue so that together we can begin learning’ (p.60).

Teaching practice
In the Practicum setting, journal dialogue for beginning teachers can become a tool that the student and mentor teacher use comfortably. The confidence to enter into dialogue is reflected in the following excerpt from a student.

I have read through your comments. My last entry answered one or maybe a couple of your questions. I did mention exercise, but unfortunately my enthusiasm for that does not quite fit in to my schedule as yet. It is the wrong time, as I feel I have so many obligations, that I am tired....I guess, I will rest my tired body for now until it becomes so adjusted to this workload, I can fit it in.

Developing the skills of reflection
Writing reflectively can be time consuming. Admittedly, it is quicker and easier to keep a diary where we simply note what happened, without pausing to ask questions such as ‘why?’ or ‘how could I do this differently or better next time?’

Students sometimes need assistance to write more deeply about issues and require support if their journals remain reading like entries from ‘Dear diary’.

The distinction between reflection and description becomes clearer as they are challenged to regard their writing as a piece of critical analysis rather than a factual portrayal of an issue.
Students of reflective practice are then more likely to weigh up both sides of the issue, compare and contrast, find evidence, explore alternatives, ask further questions and suggest to themselves a course of action.

For example, an education student on his teaching practicum asked,

Am I a mean red dragon? I must get over feeling “mean” when I discipline children. Children know what is appropriate and inappropriate behaviour. Children choose how they are going to behave – they make a choice and as such are responsible for making that choice. If a bad choice is made, I must manage that behavior accordingly.

My study skills students are asked to write an overview of their learning journal at the end of their first semester at university. The following excerpt from one student mentions the difference between description and reflection and the advantages of the latter.

Many of my entries have centred on the main theme of the heavy workload. Throughout the twelve entries my journals became less descriptive and much more reflective on these issues. The first two entries were basically describing the beginning of my university life. I then began to go into issues more deeply and gain a greater benefit from them.

When I had a lot of work to do I would continually find myself writing a journal entry. It allowed me to logically think through the work I needed to complete for other topics. On many occasions I found myself writing out a basic study plan. This enabled me to set goals for myself. Through writing the journal I realised I still had plenty of time and that I just had to stay calm and visualise the order I would complete the work.

Another student wrote in his journal overview about the connection between personal and academic learning which can occur during the journal writing process. He reflected,

My journal has helped reinforce this knowledge. In that respect it has been an invaluable study aid. It has also allowed me to realise the importance of development and self-awareness. In that respect it has been an invaluable personal aid.

**Reflection for professional development**

The discoveries we can make through the process of reflective journal writing, about our own practice and those we work with, are crucial to our ongoing professional development – whatever our profession, although it is easy to identify with the teacher who claimed ‘But how can I write about teaching? Teaching is like breathing – you just do it!’ (as cited in Holly, 1997 p.22). If we take the time to seriously reflect on our practice on a regular basis, ‘we can see flows, patterns, and changes, and can thus connect events.’ (p.23)

Students in the School of Education at Flinders University are asked to keep a reflective journal about the learning that occurs during an optional placement at the end of their pre-service training. The emphasis for their journal is similarly on developing the skills of reflection rather than description.

One education student who was in a health setting for her placement was required to write a report on the graduate nursing program for a regional health service. Initially in her journal she wrote of her concern about her lack of nursing background.
However, as she processed these issues and explored the advantages of being objective and able to offer a fresh perspective, she realised that writing the report was ‘beneficial to my professional development.’

Through the process of reflection, she was able to identify the connections between the project and teaching. In the conclusion to her journal she wrote,

I think that having completed this report will allow me to move into a school setting and be more critical not just of the content of my lessons but of overall structure and organisation. I hope I can better prepare a course so that it identifies the needs of the individual learners, the context of the learning environment and the support systems in place.

Another excerpt from a final year professional journal shows how a single issue can be explored through the use of examples, supporting evidence and connections, which lead to a new insight. According to this student,

The first thing that struck me in relation to the school was the friendliness and closeness of the staff. Because it is a relatively small school all the teachers knew each other well and were really up to date with all the happenings around the school. This “togetherness” of the staff created an extremely comfortable and enjoyable atmosphere to work in and from my point of view made it easier for me to become settled in. A simple but poignant example of this was the staff room during lunch-time.

At most schools the staff room is divided into small groups with teachers separating themselves from other staff and only talking to particular people. At School X, the staff usually all sit around in one big circle … From the first day onwards I felt not only comfortable but also felt I belonged.

The end is the just beginning

The final journal entries from students often indicate a sense of loss that the journal experience is over and that it has been valued and will be useful for the future. One student asked herself,

Did my journal become a tool I could use to improve my learning by identifying the areas that needed improvement? Or did it become another piece of writing to be handed up at university?

Her entry explored these questions in detail and concluded with,

I can turn to my journal for the already tested solutions and try them or find new ones. I will be able to look back at the recurring problems and laugh at them as they no longer exist. Most importantly I can read it when I need motivation or inspiration.

Yes, my journal did become a tool I could use to improve my writing and learning skills. It would be an insult to call it just another piece of work.

In conclusion, I would like to quote an education student who summed up the purpose of the journal ‘and acknowledged that her learning journey was worthwhile by writing,

That is the purpose of my journey, not only to be educated but to get in touch with myself in a more soulful and enriching manner to achieve my goals.
References


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Marigold Francis
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