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ISSUE 1

VOLUME 1

OCTOBER 2007

Learning Journals

REFLECTIVE LEARNING JOURNALS: A SELF-DIRECTED LEARNING PROJECT

You've started your Master of Arts in Leadership program with Royal Roads University and one of the first things you read is that keeping a reflective learning journal is "highly recommended". The advice you receive is that you can use whatever format you chose and it will help with your assignments—it is even suggested that by doing this, your assignments will 'begin to write themselves'. Sounds straightforward enough.

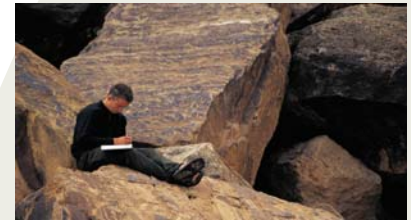
So you start your journal, right? Or do you fumble your way through keeping a journal in the pre-residence and residence only to find yourself in the first on-line course wondering "If this is so important and I'm struggling so much with it, what am I doing wrong?"

While I realize the format and content of a learning journal is personal and unique, I wanted to better understand the reasons for reflective journaling, the various strategies and formats, and then identify and develop those that would work

for me. That is the purpose of my self-directed learning project.

I reviewed the guidelines provided by Royal Roads in pre-residence and for the first online course, LEAD 535. I researched the topic through two post-secondary libraries (Royal Roads University and Grant MacEwan College) and tested various techniques and mediums including two voice recognition software programs—Dragon Naturally Speaking® and Microsoft Speech Recognition®. To incorporate an element of action research in my project, I adapted Langer's (2002, p. 351) interview guide to prepare a series of questions for interviewing current classmates, second year students, and an instructor.

Through this self-directed learning process, I explored definitions of and reasons for reflection, descriptions of reflective learning journals, studies examining the value of journals in higher education programs, and examples of



style, structure, and medium. I also sought insights on experience with keeping a journal during pre-residency, residence and the LEAD 535 online course. Finally, I looked for advice on techniques and strategies for starting and maintaining journals.

An area that I did not delve into is that of journal assessment. I would refer you to Moon (2006), Langer (2002), and Fenwick and Parsons (2000) for guidance on assessing journals. My hope is that this document gives you and understanding of the value of reflective learning journals together with ideas that you can use.

Margo Baptista MA LEAD 2007-3

What is reflection and why should I do it?



Moon (2006), Day (2006) and Grant et al (2006) describe reflection as a purposeful, conscious thinking activity through which the learner can achieve insights about themselves and their subject matter. It is a learned process that takes time and practice. Building on this, Day (2006) states "Reflective learning requires that you think through issues for yourself, ask questions and seek out relevant information to aid your understanding ... Reflective learners are more likely to develop a deeper understanding of their subject and therefore to achieve better grades. They tend to be motivated and pro-active and know what they are trying to achieve, are able to identify, explain and address their strengths and weaknesses, understand new concepts by relating them to previous experiences and use their existing knowledge to help them to develop their understanding of new ideas" (p. 1). Beyond the academic environment, Shepherd (2006) cites studies by Brubacher et al (1994), Cheetham & Chivers (1996), Osterman (1990), Schon (1983) and Peters (1991) confirming the value of reflection in the professional context (p. 334). By engaging in reflective practice, the practitioner's critical inquiry of a particular situation, problem, or behaviour can enhance individual and organizational performance.



Reflective Learning Journals: What are they and why do it?

Journals are a learning tool ... a powerful way for learners to clarify their own experiences and connect them to new concepts (Fenwick and Parsons, 2000, p. 155)

Day (2006) defines a learning journal as "a collection of notes, observations, thoughts and other relevant materials *built up over a period of time* and usually accompanies a period of study, a placement or field-work" (p. 1).

Using a journal slows the pace of thinking and focuses attention thereby forcing the learner to take time for reflection. The learner becomes aware of not only what he/she learns but how they learn: patterns of learning, strengths, weaknesses and preferences. A journal can serve as a 'self-provided feedback system' (Moon, 2006, p. 34).

The critical thinking that is stimulated through articulating thoughts in a journal, can help the learner develop higher-order thinking skills: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation of information.

There is no right or wrong way to journal. A journal is an exercise of self-expression; it is personal and reflects the learner's personality and experiences. The most important aspect of creating and maintaining a journal is that it is for reflection—personal, educational, or professional.

Park (2003) states "the learning journal has good potential to increase student interest in, and engagement with course material, to encourage and empower students to take more responsibility for their own learning, to be more reflective in their study, and to allow them to have a voice and provide valuable feedback to the teacher" (p. 183).

A common mistake students make when asked to create a journal is assuming it has to be in written form. Insights into how one learns are helpful in identifying strategies and techniques for creating a reflective learning journal.

For example, a highly visual learner might use photos, drawings, or mind-mapping. A linear, sequential learner would likely take a completely different approach. Respondents to my survey demonstrated a range of options for journaling from handwriting to word-processing to photography to yoga—all of which related to their individual learning style.

Journals are tools for growth through critical reflection ... writing is a critical ingredient in meaning making, enabling learners to articulate connections between new information and what they already know.
(Kerka, 1996, p. 2)



HOW STUDENTS LEARN FROM LEARNING JOURNALS



Journals ...

- Slow the pace of learning forcing the learner to stop and think in order to write
- Increase the sense of ownership of learning providing a focusing point to order thoughts and make sense of a situation or information
- Acknowledge the role of emotion in learning
- Give learners an experience of dealing with ill-structured material of learning, writing about problematic issues or situations that are not 'straight-forward'
- Encourage meta-cognition (learning about one's own process of learning)
- Enhance learning through the process of writing, demonstrating what has been learnt.

(Moon, 2006, pp 26-35)

The purposes of learning journals ...

- To record experience
- To facilitate learning from experience
- To support understanding and the representation of the understanding
- To develop critical thinking or the development of a questioning attitude
- To encourage metacognition
- To increase active involvement in and ownership of learning
- To increase ability in reflection and thinking
- To enhance problem solving skills
- As a means of assessment in formal education
- To enhance reflective practice
- For reasons of personal development and self-empowerment
- For therapeutic purposes or as a means of supporting behaviour change
- To enhance creativity
- To improve writing
- To improve or give 'voice'; as a means of self-expression
- To foster communication and to foster reflective and creative interaction in a group
- To support planning and progress in research or a project
- As a means of communication between a learner and another

(Moon, 2006, pp 44-51)

"I view a learning journal as more than helpful in the MA LEAD program, it is an essential tool. It is essential in giving folks time to reflect. For me, leadership development and leadership start with self-understanding. So a journal can be key to gaining insights into one's own leadership. Also, writing is thinking. When you write, you organize your thoughts differently than if you are simply thinking or talking about something. The way to become a better writer is to write."
(Instructor, MA LEAD 2007-3 Residence)



Techniques and Strategies

Activities and Exercises...

- ≈ Develop a series of questions to support reflection:
 - ☞ What did I learn today?
 - ☞ What did I like or dislike about the material?
 - ☞ What did I find: New? Interesting? Surprising? Unexpected? Puzzling? Confusing? Useful? Not useful? How does it connect to something I already knew?
 - ☞ Have I experienced this in any aspect of my life?
 - ☞ If I had to explain or present this to someone else, what would I say?
 - ☞ What do I need to know more about? Are there other resources I can use?
 - ☞ How can I apply this to my other learning, my workplace, etc?
- ≈ Use the "Points to Ponder" or "Reflective Questions" from each course unit to guide your reading.
- ≈ Write a metaphor to explain a concept.
- ≈ Free-flow write on a topic
- ≈ Create a literature log of theories and quotes
- ≈ Write a poem
- ≈ Write a letter that will not be sent
- ≈ Record your dreams
- ≈ Use guided imagery and write in a stream of consciousness
- ≈ Take a sentence from the reading and write on its meaning
- ≈ Develop a concept map, mind-map or graphic representation of ideas and themes
- ≈ Have a 'critical friend' prompt you to explore an issue by asking questions that promote deeper reflection
- ≈ Hidden Language Yoga: with a reflective question in mind, assume and maintain a pose (ie. tree, cobra) for 3-4 minutes. Record your thoughts in your journal. Vary the pose each week.
- ≈ When wanting to think about things differently, try writing a question with your dominant hand and the answer with your non-dominant hand.



The mediums for journals are as varied and unique as the individual learner. Each has its advantages and disadvantages. Some are easier to communicate. Some are more portable. Some engage different aspects of the mind. Some are easier to review and search. All will evolve over time, with practice and based on the purpose. All add value to the learning experience.

Handwritten



Electronic



Voice Recognition Software



www.nuance.com

Journal Starters

(Fenwick and Parsons, 2006 p. 156)

Personal responses might use starters such as:

- ◆ A central point to remember here is ...
- ◆ An example from my own experience of one of the key points here is ...
- ◆ Some questions raised for me are ...
- ◆ A quotation that is important for me is ... because ...
- ◆ It is ironic that ...
- ◆ Some things I don't understand in this reading are ...
- ◆ A new insight I had in this reading is ...
- ◆ Some useful ideas from this material that I can apply to my own work are ...
- ◆ Some implications of this article for issues I care about are ...
- ◆ Some things I already knew that this article reinforces are ...
- ◆ A pattern I notice is ...

Critical responses to reading might use starters such as:

- ◆ A point I particularly disagree with in this article is ... because ...
- ◆ I agree that ... because ...
- ◆ The purpose seems to be ...
- ◆ The context of this article is ... which affects the message that ...
- ◆ The author's point of view is ...
- ◆ My reply to the author's point of view is ...
- ◆ One assumption the author makes is ... evident in ...
- ◆ The target audience for this article seems to be ...
- ◆ Some limitations of problems I see in this article are ...
- ◆ This material is similar to or different from ... because ...



Set aside time to reflect and 'write' or 'create' your journal

Drawings or Diagrams



Video



Photo Album or Scrapbook



Mind map





And the Surveys say...

Morrison (1997) who conducted extensive studies on the value of reflective practice in higher degree students, highlights many benefits associated with keeping a learning journal:

- ❖ increased motivation to study, learn, reflect and improve practice;
- ❖ preparedness to question matters;
- ❖ increased skills in articulating and crystallizing issues and arguments making students more ambitious;
- ❖ enhanced enjoyment of and satisfaction with the course;
- ❖ changing and widening perspectives on issues, replacing technicism with autonomous judgment;
- ❖ development and transformative reflection;
- ❖ an accretion of substantive personal knowledge and professional skills;
- ❖ development in a variety of spheres; movement toward becoming reflective practitioners and 'extended professionals'; and
- ❖ opportunity to link theory and practice as well as integrate personal, Intrapersonal, private, public, intellectual and professional aspects of themselves (pp 10-12).

In their study of student teachers, Maloney & Campbell-Evans (2002) concluded that journal writing enabled students to document events, generate solutions, release tension, and monitor their professional growth (pp. 46-46). Students used their journals as a form of conversation, a dialogue of analysis and reflection. Noting the benefits of journal writing for nursing, physical therapy, occupational therapy and teacher certification students, Walker (2006) concluded similar value for athletic training educators: enhancing reflection, facilitating critical thought, expressing feelings in writing about problems encountered during clinical experiences, and practicing writing summaries, objectives, and focused arguments (p. 217).

Through his case study of third-year undergraduate geography students, Park (2003) learned students found the initial prospect of being required to write a learning journal and maintain it throughout the course to be 'very daunting' and they expressed this discomfort in a variety of ways. As they progressed through the course, this "initial apprehension gave way to a more positive perspective, as the early experience proved not as intimidating as originally envisaged, and more useful than they thought it would be" (p. 191). These findings were born out in the interviews I conducted for this project wherein most of the respondents expressed anxiety, a sense of intimidation, and feelings of cynicism.

Commenting on the value of reflective learning for U.K. undergraduate medical students Grant et al. (2006) observed:

- ◆ There is no substitute for keeping a learning journal for developing a sense of what is useful to write. It will probably take a while to really feel the benefit of keeping [one] .
- ◆ By being more aware of what they were learning and of its importance, participants had more control over what they learned and thought about learning priorities, rather than trying to learn everything in their lecture notes.
- ◆ Participants were better at integrating learning from different sources.
- ◆ Students gained confidence in their own knowledge as a result of reflection and said that they learned better as a result.
- ◆ The reflective process provided emotional support.

(pp 381-388)

The Many Benefits of Reflective Learning Journals ...

Park (2003) references Hedlund (1989), Croxton & Berger (2001), Connor-Greene (2000), Hyers (2001), Hettich (1990), Lohman & Schwalbe (1996), and Yinger (1985) to provide a list of benefits for students using a learning journal. Among these are:

- ◆ Making sense of personal histories
- ◆ Assimilating and integrating new information
- ◆ Learning to think more about the knowledge they have or are acquiring
- ◆ Learning to use new knowledge
- ◆ Long-term retention of course concepts
- ◆ Stimulating critical-thinking amongst students
- ◆ Opportunities for students to express themselves and develop effective means of self-expression
- ◆ Understanding their own learning processes and 'how to learn'
- ◆ Providing developmental feedback on their learning
- ◆ Helping with cognitive and affective development
- ◆ Improving writing by focusing on processes rather than on products, emphasizing expressive and personal aspects, and serving as a record of thought and expression that is available for rereading (pp. 185)



The Positives and the Negatives ...

Ownership of the learning process, increased self-awareness of *how* they learn (as well as *what* they learn), growth in self-confidence, more time than normal spent on reading (across the whole range of material covered in the course rather than just for a specific essay), a focus on the whole course (facilitated by virtue of reading more regularly, writing down reflections on lecture material and readings, reviewing the range of material so as to prepare essays), more active engagement with course material, and a much more reflective attitude—these are the positive aspects that Park (2003) noted from his research (pp. 192-193).

On the negative side, Park (2003) reported:

- ~ Difficulty of task because of the need for focus and commitment at lectures and for reading; challenges in expressing thoughts and ideas clearly the experience of writing in their own voice was new and at times uncomfortable for students;
- ~ Constraints owing to the word limit assigned for the learning journal;
- ~ Uncertainty over whether their journals had been properly done and met the requirements; and
- ~ Concern that the learning journal is formally assessed. (p. 194)

In summarizing the findings of the study, Park (2003) observed that some of the students "found the experience so useful that they intend to adopt the journal approach voluntarily in their future courses (even without the incentive of gaining marks for work done) (pp. 196-197).



STRUCTURE OF JOURNALS

Moon (2006) offers an extensive list of structured forms of journals (pp 52-55 and pp 133-140)

- ♦ **Autobiographical writing**—relating previous events to current time
- ♦ **Double entry journals**—the experience is first recorded in a descriptive manner. Later the writer reflects and writes further on the initial entry, drawing conclusions from it or at least 'moving it on'.
- ♦ **Activities and exercises** (similar to those listed here)
- ♦ **Profiles or portfolios**—commonly used in professional development settings, accreditation of prior learning, fieldwork and placements, and discipline-based higher education
- ♦ **Dialogue journals**—sometimes called a 'collaborative journal' it is used to communicate between writers who are exchanging and/or developing ideas
- ♦ **Web logs or blogs**—an internet site on which the written work and editing work of an individual or group is managed through a web browser
- ♦ **Short course journals**—guides the sequence of reflection during short courses of study
- ♦ **Project journal**—a notebook that accompanies a distinct project or event
- ♦ **Professional development Master's programme journal**—supports reflective practice over the period of study; particularly relevant in the potentially fragmented learning environment of a modular programme

Progoff's Intensive Journal

The writer starts writing in one section, moves to another, guided by emerging themes and what they want to explore. 19 sections, each associated with a particular type of subject matter and/or method of writing. Writer moves back and forth between each section, cross-referencing entries. Based on the concept of 'flow' between past, present and future and across different sections. Writer integrates various elements of his or her life and develops greater sense of self. Examples I include:

Daily log = record daily events

Dream log = record dreams

Life-history log = material related to writer's previous life story

Intersections = relates to 'roads taken and not taken' - decision points in life where one course of action is taken as opposed to another. There can be value in examining the decision not taken as there may be matters yet to learn.

(Moon, 2006, pp 133-134)

Provide Learners with Guidelines ...

Recognizing that some students struggle with journal writing and some have not been part of a 'reflective culture', Maloney and Campbell-Evans (2002) suggest that "opportunities for reflection need to be introduced early ... [and] a skilled mentor can encourage, model and support the reflective process" (p. 48). A similar observation is shared by Langer (2002) suggesting that guidance and formal instruction of a teacher aids students in developing self-reflective critical thinking (p. 341). Langer goes on to note that "existing literature ... indicates that [a learning journal] can be an effective learning instrument ... the use [of which] facilitates critical reflection, particularly as it assists students in conceptualizing abstract meaning and relating it to practice" (p. 341).

Kerka (1996) suggests instructors...

- ♦ Have learners use one side of a page for observations and descriptions and the other for thoughts, feelings, related experiences, and images stimulated by the description.
- ♦ Suggest a theme or perspective to be explored such as 'my role as a professional'.
- ♦ Propose experiments with various styles: writing letters to a friend or to yourself when older or younger, record dreams, drawings, doodles, make lists, write dialogs between yourself and someone no longer in your life, etc. (p. 5)

Sources of further information:

- ♦ Day, H. (October, 2006). *Reflective journals*.
- ♦ <http://www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/class/cie/ceth/files/TeachingReflection.doc>
- ♦ Fenwick, T., & Parsons, J. (2000). *The art of evaluation: A handbook for educators and trainers*. Toronto: Thompson Educational Publishing, Inc.
- ♦ Grant, A., Kinnersley, P., Metcalf, E., Pill, R., & Houston, H. (2006). Students' views of reflective learning techniques: An efficacy study at a UK medical school. *Medical education*, 40(4), 379-388.
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- ♦ Shepherd, M. (2006). Using a learning journal to improve professional practice: A journey of personal and professional self-discovery. *Reflective Practice*, 7(3), 333-348.
- ♦ Walker, S. E. (2006). Journal writing as a teaching technique to promote reflection. *Journal of Athletic Training*, 41(2), 216-221.
- ♦ Personal Communication: Baptista, T.M. (2007). Self-directed learning project on reflective learning journals: four interviews conducted between October 4 to 11, 2007.

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Advice received from other MA LEAD 2007-3 and 2006-3 learners and an instructor in response to interview questions:

- Try not to think; just type the date and what pops into your head. Don't try to be perfect. You don't have to concentrate on the typing, it just flows.
- Make time to make an entry. When it comes time to write papers, with the first one I had an opportunity to return to the journal and include points in my paper. For this SDL paper this won't happen. I need to make a conscious effort to put aside 15 minutes. I'm discovering it is one less resource to count on as part of reflective and critical thinking.
- Have a purpose. Find a way that works for you. When you have a purpose and methodology, develop some kind of pattern or habit such as set aside time to actually do it, go for a coffee break and take your journal, write in it for half hour before bed or when you get up in the morning. Create that discipline. The mistake we make in residency and in the program in general is we tell learners to journal and assume they will work it out. Because it needs discipline there need to be some guidelines.
- I found it helpful when I needed to produce competency evidence. It was an integration process for me. I valued the chance to experiment with different styles and formats. My style of journal was more visual (graphics, photography, metaphors, painting, etc) and I appreciated that the instructors were supportive of my different approach. As well, when you do your research for the major project, it is essential that you keep a critical research journal. It is referenced by outsiders and serves as 'evidence in proof'. Although I prefer a more visual approach, it is best to be logical and sequential to record what you did when and why—reflection is important.

(Personal Communication, Baptista—Interviews held between October 4-11, 2007)

