

Writing Content: Applied Learning Journals & Writing to Think

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Abstract:

In this set of paired essays, the authors have reflected on the effectiveness of combining articulated writing strategies as a tool for cognitive development to stimulate the students' engagement with the elements of successful self-regulated learning. The program, Career Choices and Life Success, bases outcome evaluations in part on the students' ability to demonstrate realistic self-reflection. Writing curriculum designed and delivered by the Learning Centre Faculty was inserted into the sessions following a concept debrief, so that the ideas to be explored would be resonant. An initial review of the learning journals suggests that structured, articulated writing instruction and feedback has a significant effect on the development of both the writing process and the meta-cognitive tools of self-regulated learning in the students in this program.

Key Words:

Student engagement, meta cognition, self regulation, self reflection, student writing.

1. Applied Learning Journals

In participating in a Reading Circle on *The Skillful Teacher* (Brookfield) in June 2005, I decided to incorporate the Learning Journal concept as part of the requirements for self-discovery, a process essential to career direction. I continued to use this form of transformative dialogue because it gave voice to a learner's experiences, experiences that a student would not necessarily share with me, and certainly would never share in class. It became a vehicle for students to share, in an unedited way, their understanding of the learning process. In adopting this concept, my classroom teaching has taken on a greater depth because the students' experiences are taken into account. I have understood how my actions as a teacher are perceived, and what has confused, motivated or frustrated my students. I have seen patterns and themes arise in students' writings that I could then address with the student. This has, at times, facilitated students moving forward in their learning and, at times, in their lives.

When Alissa presented the possibility of a critical thinking-writing component added to the learning journals, I welcomed the opportunity as another vehicle to support self-evaluation. For although I was gleaning important information about the classroom learning experience, I wasn't happy with the lack of reflection and emphasis on reporting that crept into the journals.

I wanted students to continue to use a journal to record their learning, but also to reflect using a different voice or a different point of reference to encourage them to become more objective rather than personal in their writing. I wanted my students to see themselves in a different light and not simply report their experiences as they have been doing, as a victim, a compliant subject, or as a means to fulfill a course requirement.

I wanted my students to understand the writing process as a more complex engagement; as a tool for thinking critically.

Personal Journal Entry **September 21, 2008**

What I was not prepared for was the students' confusion and frustration over the learning journal writing principles. My set of requirements seemed doable, but when asked to incorporate the writing principles, students became overwhelmed and confused. The students complained verbally and, yes, in their journals. In my reflection, I questioned whether I should abort this exercise. Had I really given enough time to explore the ramifications of the additional expectations for the original assignment? Should the writing exercises be an added value as opposed to attached to the learning journal, and how could I clear up the frustration, confusion and general angst many students were feeling about the learning journals?

September 22, 2008

The good that has come from this work-in-progress was in motivating me to review Brookfield's book and the following five questions he recommends to invoke student reflection (Brookfield, p.35). In his book, Brookfield highlights the importance of emotions to the remembering process. I concur after nineteen years in the classroom, and I will expand on that topic in a later submission. My reflection left me with a stronger conviction to allow the confusion to continue for a while longer, as confusion can be an essential part of the learning process when contained. Finally, I was forced to submit myself to my own course and journal requirements in an attempt to think critically about the events in the classroom. Truth be told, I learned that I hated journaling.

Learning Journal Questions

1. The activity that gave you the most intense learning "high". What was it about this activity that was so exciting or pleasing?
2. The time in class when you felt most valued and affirmed and why you think this was so.
3. The activity that gave you the most intense learning "low". What was it about this activity that was so distressing or hurtful?
4. The time in class when you felt most demeaned and patronized and why you think this was so.
5. The most important insight you realized in the class about your own emotional responses and learning processes.

2. Writing to Think

Traditionally, the reigning theory in Academia denied the possibility that writing could be taught as a transformative act. Writing was thought to be representative of thought but not related to thinking (Warshauer, S.F., 1987). We could teach formal conventions and elements of style (most famously delineated in Strunk & White), but the magic of

“using written language to create and record an act of understanding” (Hull and Bartholomae, p. 44, 1986) was left to a genetic lottery, or the legacy of cultural literacy like early exposure to books in the home.

In 1980, the paradigm shifted when Flower and Hayes unveiled their model of the cognitive nature of the writing process. Writing was re-conceptualized as a behavior that engaged the individual in a very complex integrated set of planning, composing, and revising activities. This was not a linear process but a rolling back and forth over each surge of insight as waves of concepts were discovered and developed in highly random stages. Flower and Hayes were confident that these three steps of the writing process could be successfully taught through articulated instruction. As students learned to develop ideas and translate these ideas into written language, they would generate a higher level of critical thinking in the process. As such, writing could be a tool to develop thinking.

One model for the engagement of writing as a method for thinking critically is journaling. The purpose is to give the students a forum in which to reflect upon concepts introduced in the classroom in order to construct a deeper level of understanding. The journal is evaluated on two levels: one based on content analysis and the other derived from reflections on the experience of learning. Journaling becomes an exercise in meta-cognition, self-regulation, and proximal development.

The Career Choices and Life Success Program is founded on the principles of self discovery. Key outcomes depend on students expressing an awareness of their learning style, personal goals, and ethical commitments. Over the past months, Elly Morgan and I have frequently discussed the hurdle many of the women in the program faced when conforming to the rigorous requirement for self-evaluation. Yet, the program goals and objectives seemed to offer an ideal environment to test the effectiveness of structured writing instruction as a tool for reflection and critical thinking. They also created an opportunity for Elly and I to team-teach this aspect of the program, synthesizing her expertise in the techniques self-evaluation with mine in teaching writing strategies.

So far, we have addressed the issues of objectivity and voice in our writing module. Journal entries must be written from a detached perspective with an articulated analysis of recorded thoughts and feelings. The purpose of this exercise is to

- a) create distance from personal events in order to perceive patterns better, and
- b) understand the conventions of business writing.

Some of the students have experienced a kind of release stepping back from their personal thoughts; others have found it artificial and deeply unnatural. In both cases, they have had to activate critical thinking skills and use their analytic and evaluative writing knowledge to complete the assignment. Most report a transition in their understanding of their experience from reactive to reflective. All of our students have completed their writing assignments.

Currently, we are conducting before and after comparisons of entries in order to understand the transition process better.

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