

## Using Journals to Promote Learning Across the Curriculum

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In their research investigating the effects of different types of writing on academic learning, Langer and Applebee (1987) concluded that “There is clear evidence that activities involving writing . . . lead to better learning than activities involving reading and studying only” (p. 135). This conclusion is supported by many other literacy educators (Langer, 2000; Moore, Moore, Cunningham, & Cunningham, 2003).

The special features of writing contribute to its effects on learning. For instance, Emig (1977) characterized writing as a unique mode of learning, one that allows thinking to be slowed and recorded so that the writer can see ideas and their emerging relationships. Van Nostrand (1979) described composing as “joining bits of information into relationships, many of which have never existed until the composer utters them” (p. 178). Of all of the language processes, writing is remarkable in that it allows for individual, active structuring of knowledge in a process which slows down thinking and captures it in print. Each writer is actively involved in structuring concepts according to his or her own prior experiences, knowledge, and understanding of the ideas. This active involvement allows for deeper processing than does simple listening, and captures ideas in a way that speaking cannot. Thoughts can be objectified on paper so that further work with them can take place and concepts can be developed. But, unfortunately, not all types of writing assignments allow this type of processing.

Applebee (1981) investigated writing practices in the secondary schools and defined four types: (a) writing without composing—mechanical uses, (b) informational uses of writing—notetaking and reporting, (c) personal uses of writing, and (d) imaginative uses of writing. He found that mechanical and informational uses of writing were dominant and that only 3 percent of the instances of writing required the student to produce at least a paragraph of coherent text. When the writing that students are asked to do in classes short-circuits thinking/composing, both students and teachers get an inaccurate view of how writing can facilitate learning.

The types of writing activities that students need in order to learn subject matter are those that allow them to compose and organize ideas according to their own developing understanding. For these composing activities to be most effective for learning, they should be structured to decrease the natural anxiety that is common in writers who feel their work is to be evaluated or criticized by others. Students journals allow such effective composing opportunities.

The product of journal activities can be food for thought and discussion between students and the teacher and between students and their peers. Journals are not intended to be graded for accuracy or perfection of usage and style, so they free writers to express more individually their understanding, concerns, and questions regarding the concepts being studied. When these perceptions are articulated in writing, teachers have an opportunity to see how students’ understanding is developing and can respond either

individually, through dialoguing in the journals, or with the entire group in follow-up activities designed to clarify and synthesize concepts. These types of classroom activities which spring from the students' own concerns and levels of understanding make the information more personal and relevant to students. Teachers can get to know who their students are and how they think. Therefore, studying and learning become less abstract and more relevant; students can learn at their own rate, in response to their own problems.

### **Types of Journals**

Various types of journals can be used for many different purposes at different grade levels and in different content areas. Each purpose will, of course, contribute to the type of journal assignments given and the way in which the students' journal responses will be used. The overriding goals for any activity in content area classrooms are to help students succeed in understanding the concepts of the class and learn how to learn the concepts most efficiently.

Accepting Langer and Applebee's (1987) conclusion that content area learning can be facilitated by the use of writing, a teacher's major purpose for using journals may be to allow students rehearsal time and practice with course concepts. Journals give students a place to record ideas and thoughts that occur to them as they read or participate in classroom activities. This type of journal as a jotting book would require that time be allowed for students to pause in discussion or during class activities to write. Students also need time to return to their jottings, either with or without direct teacher intervention, to structure them into developing statements of concepts. Organizational and research techniques frequently become a part of such activities in which students take their jotted down notes and attempt to compose more complete and well-synthesized statements. Such activities are the essence of prewriting in the writing process. Therefore, part of the purpose for using journals for jotting and rehearsal is to improve students' facility with composing processes.

A second purpose for using journals is to provide students and teachers with a diary or log of students' learning. This purpose can lead to types of journals which vary along a continuum from very personal student expressions (i.e., diaries) to records of a student's progress on a particular project or activity (i.e., log books). It is these types of journal writing that allow close student-teacher contact and understanding. Through the journals the teacher can see each student as an individual with different needs and concerns. Such knowledge changes the classroom environment from one in which the teacher imparts knowledge uniformly to all students to an environment in which the teacher can respond to individual student needs. It allows the teacher to let students with expertise have more responsibility and become more independent and to let students with problems receive the attention they need.

Although journal assignments from either end of this continuum may be appropriate in any classroom, common practice finds some difference in the types of journals used by different content areas. Diary-type journals are frequently used by teachers in courses where objectives require personal growth, such as English, sociology or psychology courses (Werderich, 2002). The personal material from the journals often becomes the subject matter for class compositions or reactions/responses.

Moving along the continuum toward project logs, in social studies classes (Goggin,

1985) the journal might provide a place for students to respond to the social problems and systems under study. This allows the teacher to dialogue with individual students according to their perceptions and development and also to plan appropriate classroom activities that relate to students' levels of development and understanding of concepts.

These responses also prepare students for the reports and essays which are frequently an important part of social studies classrooms. In math classrooms (Nahrgang & Petersen, 1986) logs allow students opportunities to articulate their understanding of abstract mathematical concepts and processes. If these logs are shared, each student's perception and articulation can be clarified and added to the teacher's explanation of the concepts.

The same could be said for the use of journals in science classes (Trombulak & Sheldon, 1989) where journals can be used as logs of student progress in lab experiments, projects, or simply as ongoing records of students' understanding. Although the logbook is an essential part of any scientific experiment, many science classrooms settle for allowing students to fill in worksheets on the lab work that they do, making the writing less a composing activity and more a mechanical one.

A third purpose for using journals is to provide students practice in articulating the ideas of the course before they articulate them for a grade. The process of taking in new ideas, which may be very abstract and novel, is a difficult one that takes time and much cognitive processing. For stable integrated learning to take place, most students need more time and practice to internalize concepts than a simple class lecture or reading of the text can provide. Activities such as demonstration and class discussion are important to the learning process, but many times these activities do not require or allow for full, individual student involvement. If each student is given the opportunity to write about his or her developing understanding with no pressure of evaluation, the student's understanding of the ideas are likely to develop. This type of journal provides for practice which allows fluency to develop so that students are more able to participate in classroom discussions and are better prepared to write test answers (Bean 2001).

Teachers can structure this type of journal so that students write about their understanding early in the learning and again before test time. Time can be given before and immediately after listening to a lecture or reading for students to record their knowledge of the concepts under study. This initial time simply allows for the activation and early articulation of what the students know. With these ideas in print, they can be developed and worked on in later class activities. After some class work, time can be given for students to summarize what they have learned. A final journal assignment might involve the teacher giving students a sample test item for them to answer. These responses allow both the teacher and student to know what ideas are understood and what are not. It also allows students to build their fluency in articulating ideas on the subject before they are required to do so in the high stress situation of testing.

Using journals for these and other purposes, teachers provide students with practice in writing processes, opportunities for personal involvement, development of fluency with course concepts, thinking time, and a channel of communication with the teacher.

The journal assignments that teachers choose to give are determined by the purpose for the journal is used, and the types vary according to the teacher's creativity and time commitment. The products resulting from student journal use also provide the teacher with excellent evaluative or diagnostic data on students' progress in the class.

## **Evaluating and Responding to Journals**

As mentioned above, the necessity of limiting evaluation of journals is essential to their effectiveness; however, grades and evaluation are an important aspect of a teacher's responsibility toward students. Therefore, evaluation of journals must receive careful consideration. Much advice concerning the use of journals suggests that they not be graded or evaluated at all. While this lessens the pressure on students when they write, it also tends to leave the impression that journals are not important work. Many times students feel that if work is not graded, then it does not count and is worthless.

This exerts pressure on teachers who might feel that everything must be graded. Teachers must accept the reality that grades are the currency of the school, and that they send powerful messages. What and how teachers grade greatly affect students' learning. Students learn very quickly what has to be done to receive the grade they desire. If quantity of work is graded, then students learn to produce more. If quality is determined by some criteria, then they get a sense of what the criteria are and work toward that. Teachers cannot ignore the issue of evaluation and grades and must carefully consider the criteria they choose to employ.

The most important aspect of evaluating student journals is the manner in which the teacher responds to students' entries. The teacher's response guides further journal work and helps to open the channels of communication with each student. In order to accomplish the purposes described earlier, the teacher must give adequate time and consideration to students' entries and respond to them in such a way that allows progress toward the desired objective. Responses must be genuine and not simply cookie-cutter phrases like, "good" or "interesting." If students are expected to share their own personal perspectives on the issues under study, then teachers must be willing to do so as well. Personal insights and stories of pertinent experience from the teacher in response to students' shared ideas bolster students' confidence that their responses are valid. Such teacher sharing supports and directs future student responses. These, too, are the types of responses which allow teachers and students to see each other as individuals; such sharing opens lines of communication and changes the classroom environment to a more comfortable and secure place. When teachers and students know more about each other, studying and learning become more relevant, and opinions and ideas can be shared with greater understanding and less fear of reproach.

As teachers read and respond to students' journals in this manner, they gain insight into who the students are and what their needs might be. It is this level of communication that makes journals a diagnostic device. It becomes evident when reading a group of journals which ideas were clearly understood by which students and which ideas are still confusing to some. This is why teachers should develop some system for noting the diagnostic issues that arise as journals are read. The easiest procedure is to keep a checklist of the ideas that need to be revisited and those that have been mastered either by individual students or the group in general. This can allow for more relevant teaching and review. Another possibility is for teachers to keep anecdotal progress summaries on each student. After reading a student's journal, the teacher can make a simple entry regarding the student's progress on a card or in a notebook. These summaries can provide valuable insights into how students are progressing and can identify problems before they get out of hand.

A frequent argument against the use of journals is the increased amount of time needed for evaluation. It is much easier to check correct and incorrect multiple choice answers than to carefully read and respond to students' sometimes lengthy journal entries.

The advantages of using journals must be kept in mind to weigh against this disadvantage of increased teacher evaluation time. While there is no way to totally collapse this time and still provide the responses that make journals valuable, there are ways to make it manageable.

First, if journals are to be used in an ongoing manner, teachers must be sure to set up a manageable schedule for students to follow in turning in their journals for teacher response. Don't make all journals due at the same time; rather, stagger the due dates by grouping students into different groups with different due dates. In addition to this, though, teachers should consider making group membership and due dates somewhat flexible so that students' needs are met. Some students feel a need to get teacher response more frequently than the schedule might provide, and these students should be allowed to turn in their journals more frequently.

Secondly, don't allow so much time in between journal collection dates that each student has numerous entries to be read. This is sometimes a difficult balance to achieve, but one that is important to consider when making schedules. There is little worse than having to take stacks of journals home every day unless it is having to take a truckload home only at mid-term and at finals time. For journals to be most effective, both students and the teacher need to keep up with them.

A third consideration might be to allow students to share the responding load. After some initial responses are modelled by the teacher, students could be allowed to respond to each other's journals. Such responding is sometimes more meaningful than the teacher's response because students can understand the problems their peers are having more clearly than the teacher. Follow-up sessions in class after peer responding can bring problem areas up for discussion and allow for teacher evaluation of the class's understanding. Such peer response should not replace teacher response, but it can reduce the load somewhat. Additionally, it allows students to see other opinions as well as the different types of responses that students give in their journals. One important caution here is that students must be informed from the beginning that peer sharing of journals will occur so that they do not include anything in their journals that might be embarrassing to them or to others. In the case where students are using journals as personal diaries, peer responding might not be appropriate. When students include personal thoughts and experiences in journals, they should always be given the option of not sharing those entries with even the teacher. They can fold them over or in some way indicate that they do not wish for the particular entry to be read, and the teacher must honor their wish.

There are probably almost as many methods of assigning grades to journals as there are teachers using them in their classes, but a few general types of procedures can be described. The most common is probably a system of credit/no credit which is given according to some prearranged system of student response. The criteria might include a certain number of pages, entries, or responses to specific assignments given. When the teacher responds to the student's journal, a "C" or "NC" is given as the grade. A modification of this system is to award some kind of hierarchical mark for the entries

evaluated. Some teachers use systems of stars, checks, pluses and minuses, or some combination of these. All of these allow more distinction between differences in quality of performance than does the simple "C/NC" system. A further modification which meshes well with common point-averaging grade systems is to assign a specific number of points to either the journal as a whole or to particular journal assignments. These point totals should not be so large that students feel anxiety over losing points for insignificant aspects of their responses; rather, they should allow the students to feel pride in easily accumulating points for contributing to their journal. It is vitally important to the success of journals that no credit be awarded or subtracted for spelling, usage or other mechanical aspects of writing! One of the major purposes of journal use is that students are given a stress-free place to articulate their ideas without fear of critique or evaluation of their writing.

An additional use for journals which is tangentially related to evaluation and grading is the use of a journal by the teacher him- or herself so that progress in individual classes and courses might be kept in perspective. After responding to students' journals, the teacher is frequently full of ideas for responding to student needs and ideas. There is no better way to keep up with these ideas than to keep a teaching journal. It can be a place for recording diagnostic and planning concerns as well as a place to evaluate your own teaching progress. As more and more teachers become involved in action, or classroom, research, the teaching journal is becoming a more common tool for classroom decision making and data collection. Teachers also find the journal to be a recordkeeping tool that allows them to evaluate and plan for classes confidently. In addition, the process of keeping your own journal enhances your perception of what the process is like for your students. When students become aware that the teacher also keeps a journal, then the validity of their journal writing is increased.

### **Cautions and Concerns When Using Journals**

The first caution about the use of journals is that it takes much teacher time. Be prepared to spend several hours with journals when you have collected them. Rushed skimming does not adequately meet the needs of the students and might completely short circuit any appreciable progress journals could produce. Students have a right to expect that if they are to spend time writing in their journals they can look forward to a well-considered response from the teacher. For this reason, many teachers begin their use of journals with project or short-term journals for different classes at different times so that they do not immediately become overwhelmed by the time involved. However, after some successes with these journals, many teachers feel that the advantages of using journals outweigh their additional evaluation time, and they begin to use journals on an ongoing basis.

A second caution is that journals can easily cause students embarrassment if journals are not dealt with responsibly. Anything a student writes belongs to him or her, and authority over how that material may be used rests with the student. Even when the teacher finds a perfect summary of a concept in a journal and wishes to share it with the class, permission must first be obtained from the author. Similarly, if journal material is to be used as early drafts of compositions or examples of pieces for revision, permission must be obtained before the material is used. No student should be forced to share journal material, and if journals are used as places for personal confidences, security of privacy

must also be considered. Once something is put into writing, it can be seen by others and distributed unless security is maintained. Both the teacher and students must be aware of this and take the precautions necessary.

A final caution concerns the possibility that the teacher may be responsible for acting on some information that might be shared in student's journals. Issues of drug use, child abuse, or other illegal activities are likely to come to light when an open and trusting atmosphere is created by sharing and responding to personal journals. Teachers must be prepared to take steps that they consider necessary in such cases. However, even if the information that comes to light in journals is not so dire, teachers must be prepared to take on the responsibility of responding appropriately to the needs that become evident in students' journals. Carefully prepared lesson plans may have to be scrapped if the teacher learns previous classroom activities have not been effective. The teacher must be open to the necessary changes that will become evident in journals.

Rather than considering this a disadvantage to using journals, though, teachers should consider it a positive avenue for communication so that planning and evaluation of students is better informed by information from the students themselves.

### **Summary**

Journals are a flexible and effective teaching/learning tool for all content areas. The opportunities for composing which they provide allow students the active involvement with content area concepts that is necessary if stable integrated understanding is to develop. Such composing practice can increase students' fluency in articulating ideas and, therefore, increase their confidence with material under study. The sharing and responding from journal use helps to shape the classroom into a secure and relevant learning environment where students are known and treated as individuals whose needs are considered as class plans are made. These and other advantages of student journals outweigh the time disadvantages for most teachers who, once they have tried using journals, continue their use.

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