

Teaching Journals

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What is a Teaching (and Learning) Journal?

Teaching journals, also sometimes called teaching logs or teaching diaries, can be an aid to reflection on practice. They provide a way of recording and studying teaching activities, thoughts and ideas, so they are not simple logs or diaries that say 'I did that' or '2pm: meet so-and-so'. They are more elaborate than a simple diary and often more systematically written. Importantly, they are 'reflective' and so they become 'learning journals'.

Why use a journal?

Reflective journals provide an informal place where you can write your own reactions to your experiences, for example, in your teaching, or in a course you attended. They have been used in teacher and nurse education for a long time and are now increasingly encouraged for tutors in higher education.

A principle of this type of journal is that it can enhance the 'conversation with oneself', which often goes on inside the head. Writing down your thoughts can make them more concrete and visible by getting them out of your head and onto the page. The phenomenon of 'I don't know what I think until I hear what I say' becomes 'I don't know what I think until I see what I write'. The journal can be a tool to help us make better sense of our experiences by summarising them and actively trying to understand them.

Another great value of a teaching journal is that it enables us to go back and 'see' our thinking. We have a lasting record of thoughts that provides evidence of our own development.

How do journals work?

The processes of writing a journal can be linked to a three-stage reflective learning model described by Scanlon and Chernomas (1997):

- Stage 1 of reflection is **awareness**. This could be stimulated by thoughts about an event in teaching that went well, or seemed problematic.
- Stage 2 involves the individual in **critical analysis** of the event, exploring what happened and why. We consider how this experience relates to previous ideas and practice.
- At stage 3, a **new perspective** emerges, or previous ideas are confirmed or reinforced, based on the reflection. From this, developments occur, in thinking or feelings, and sometimes there will be changes in practice.

In summary, learning has taken place.

How to write a journal

The following questions might help to guide the writing of a reflective journal.

- What was the event?
- How do I feel about it? (Describe both good and bad feelings.)
- What could I have done differently?
- What will I do in a similar situation next time?
- What have I learnt?

You can use other frameworks of questions to write your journal, for example, you can simply ask:

- What worked well in this class? Why?
- What did not work well? Why?

'Why?' is, of course the critical element that leads to reflection.

In setting out the journal, you could draw a line down the page and use one side for descriptions and observations of events and the other side of the page for comments and reflections.

Using a journal as part of training and development courses

Short (and longer) training and development courses can often be stimulating but, back at work, it is easy to forget them. During the course, there is rarely much time to reflect, so a journal can help to bring the learning from a course into everyday practice. Moon (1999) suggests a sequence of four phases to facilitate reflection:

- Think about your current practice in relation to the subject matter of the course.
- Clarify any new learning.
- Consider the learning in relation to your current practice.
- Think 'What will I now do differently?'.

Reflection can continue longer if you choose to keep the journal going to remind you how your practice is developing.

Other ways of recording reflection

There are other ways of recording thoughts and reflections in addition to traditional writing. For example, you may be familiar with Mind Mapping®, a technique developed by Tony Buzan (1993). Also called 'radiant thinking', this visual approach can be used to assist problem-solving by associating ideas and representing them, often colourfully, in webs showing the links between

them. There are thousands of websites devoted to Mind Mapping®, with software to help the process. Just two have been selected here:

www.jcu.edu.au/studying/services/studyskills/mindmap/

<http://elc.polyu.edu.hk/CiLL/mindmap.htm>

Other graphic approaches can be used if they are helpful in reminding you of what happened and how you reacted to it. Sketches and cartoons can provide good reminders of what you were thinking.

There is also a useful summary document on journal writing and adult learning in Kerka (1996) and at

www.iml.uts.edu.au/assessment/types/journals/index.html.

References

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