Using Learning Journals with students: some guidance materials for tutors or those writing journals

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Resources

- The material in this handout is derived from my book on learning journals 'Learning Journals: a handbook for reflective practice and profession development (2006) – and 'A Handbook of Reflective and Experiential Learning' (2004), both published by Routledge. More detail on all topics is available within the books. For further resources see www.CEMP.ac.uk/people/jennymoon/learningjournals.php www.CEMP.ac.uk/people/jennymoon/reflectivelearning.php There is other teaching and learning material also on the website
- Other related self instructional material is available on reflective learning and critical thinking.

What is a learning journal?

There are many terms used to describe the thing that I have called a ‘learning journal’ (see below) Since there is no consistency in terminology, I use the term ‘learning journal’ to cover all of these.

Learning journals come in all shapes and sizes. They are for public and private reading. They include versions on paper, tape, video, graphic ‘notebooks’, and electronic forms where something that is in effect a journal might be called a blog. While the focus of this paper will be on pen-on-paper journals (but equally applies to all other forms), it is interesting to speculate on how the use of different media might influence the process of writing and the learning that results.

Generally speaking the features that would distinguish a learning journal from other writing are that it will be written over a period of time, not as a one –off effort. It will tend to focus on ongoing issues and there will be some intention to learn from it or reflect on ideas generated. It is not an events diary, a record or a log (in the ship log sense).

So we could say a learning journal is a vehicle for reflection. While I suggest that all adults and older children reflect, some do it with more awareness or more overtly than others. For some, reflection represents an orientation to the way they live their lives. Others reflect openly only when they are asked to do that (eg in the academic or professional development context). It seems likely that reflection in some form is an inherent part of good quality learning and personal/professional development. A learning journal might be seen as an accentuation of the right conditions for reflection and for learning from the process of reflection.

As I have suggested, there are many different words that may mean the same as a learning journal such as log, diary, note-book, common-place book, blog, think-place. Many portfolios include
reflective writing that is similar to the description above. There is no clear pattern in the use of the words. Sometimes it is useful to pick a particular term related to the context of a journal’s use – or naming it might be the task for students themselves.

As journal writing becomes more common in higher education, there might well be assumptions that the process should only be of interest to those working in disciplines that are, in some way, literary. This is not the case. Journal writing can be of use at most stages of education (from age five or six up), across any discipline and can benefit many different situations.

The purposes for learning journals in an academic setting

In a review of over a hundred papers on journal writing, around eighteen purposes for journal writing emerged (Moon, 1999a) – see below. Many journals will fulfill more than one purpose and the purposes set by a tutor are not necessarily those that will be perceived by a student. A different outcome may emerge than that for which the journal was set. An example of this comes from Salisbury (1994). Teaching students perceived – rightly or wrongly – that ‘self flagellation’ was valued by the tutors who directed their journal work. Salisbury says that the students purposefully set out to provide plenty of confessional and self-flagellatory material.

The following are some of the purposes for using a journal across a range of disciplines. Journals were used:
- 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 or reflexivity (critical thinking about one’s own thinking)
- 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
- To support personal development and self empowerment
- As means of supporting behaviour change
- To enhance creativity
- To improve writing
- To give or to improve ‘voice’; as a means of self expression
- To foster communication, reflective and creative interaction in a group
- To support planning and progress in research or a project

To bring this list alive, I add some quotations about the uses of journals.

‘Why write a learning journal?’: the question means both ‘What will you get out of it?’ and ‘For what purpose is it set?’ I consider the first question by providing something of the essence of journal writing, through comments of writers and the second in the section below.
In writing a journal ‘we take something from inside ourselves and we set it out: it is a means of discovering who we are, that we exist, that we change and grow. The personal journal has been used for hundreds of years to articulate the human drama of living and to explore new knowledge.’

(Wolf, 1989)

‘...that is what my journals are about to this day. Moments of being in the world that I want to save. Pictures of the world that I have witnessed.....To reread the journal is to see oneself seeing.’

(Grumet, 1990)

‘Keeping a journal is a humbling process. You rely on your senses, your impressions and you purposely record your experiences as vividly, as playfully, and as creatively as you can. It is a learning process in which you are the learner and the one who teaches.’

(Holly, 1991:4)

‘One of the most engaging uses of personal student journals is as a mirror of the mind. In this mode, journals invite learners to find language deep within self to array one’s hopes, dreams, disappointments, concerns and resolves.....The result is that students often express astonishment and delight at the kaleidoscopic self-portraits which emerge from the pages of their notebooks as they journey through a course.’

(Bowman, 1983)

‘Journal writing holds before the writer’s eye one image after another for closer inspection: is this one worth more words, more development?.... In the academic world, where we teach students to gain most of their information from reading and listening, we spend too much time telling our students how to see or doing it for them. That’s not how I would encourage critical, creative, or independent thinking. Our students have good eyes; lets give them new tools for seeing better: journal writing is, of course, one of those tools.’

(Fulwiler, 1986)

‘.I would like to recommend some specific actions that learners might take to improve their learning and studying....to keep a reflective diary, making an entry at least once a week.’


Learning from learning journals

We learn from the writing of learning journals in particular:

when we first do the writing;
when we re-read what we have written, often then writing some further thoughts (secondary reflection).

Deliberate re-reading of material in a journal is often neglected in academic situations. Not to ask students to re-read and rethink what they have written is to lose much potential for learning. Re-
reading will also help to indicate to students how much has been learnt, or to what extent they have changed or developed or in their thinking from one point in time to another.

I focus now on some specific ways in which we learn from journals. This is obviously related to the chosen structures of journals and their purposes and there is much overlap.

Firstly **journal writing encourages reflection.** Reflection is associated with deep approaches to learning. In deep learning, the intention of the learner is to develop a personal understanding of the material and to relate it to what she already knows. The freedom of journal writing can support the learner’s attempt to understand. The material on which we reflect might be new material of learning or a reordering of what the learner already 'knows'. More detail on this is present in my books (especially Moon 2004).

Secondly, we learn because **journal writing is a process that accentuates favourable conditions for learning.** It provides intellectual space for thought, exploration and deliberation. It encourages independent learning. The writer writes her own journal and the sense of ownership makes it more likely that it will be meaningful to the person (Rogers, 1969). Writing a journal also provides a focusing point, an opportunity to order thoughts and to make sense of a situation or of information. Learning from a journal enhances learning skills because it forces the learner to cope with ‘messy information’, ideas that are not straightforward morally or ethically, or thinking that is not sequenced. Journals might be said to counteract the ‘spoon-feeding’ of handouts and the posting of lecture notes on the web.

Thirdly, **writing in a journal encourages metacognition.** Metacognition is the understanding of a person about her own mental processes. There is evidence to suggest that the learning of those who are more aware of their functioning is generally better (Flavell, 1979), though of course this could be read in reverse too. Better quality free writing in journals will tend to display metacognition and if journals are structured, then metacognition can be deliberately enhanced (eg ‘Write a note of what you have learnt as a result of reflecting in this journal’ etc)

Lastly, **the act of writing is associated with learning or the enhancement of learning.** There is a considerable literature on the relationship of writing to learning, how writing forces a learner to clarify her thoughts, how it is a powerful form of feedback, how it focuses attention and tells the learner if she does or does not understand. An interesting consideration relates to the language that tends to be used in writing journals. People use expressive language in journals, more like conversation, and possibly more like the language of thought. We may be able to learn better from this form of language than the formal academic language of advanced education. Elbow (1981) tries to get at the meaning of this. When his students are working on journals, he describes them as working with power or voice –

‘I like to call this power “juice”. The metaphor comes to me again and again. I suppose because I am trying to get at something mysterious and hard to define. “Juice” combines the qualities of magic potion, mother’s milk and electricity. Sometimes I fear I will never be clear about what I mean by voice. Voice, in writing,
implies words that capture the sound of an individual on the page...Writing with no voice is dead, mechanical, faceless. It lacks any sound’.

(Elbow, 1981:286-7)

The processes of writing reflectively and of improving the quality of reflection

If we set reflective writing as a task within a journal, it is important to have some understanding of ‘reflection’. There are several reasons. One is that it is well recognized that some students do not find it easy to write reflectively – perhaps either because they have the notion of academic writing so ingrained as a habit, or because they are simply not used to expressing reflectively. Many people find it hard to use the word ‘I’ as they have long believed that there is no place for ‘I’ or the personal in academic situations. In addition, there is an issue of assessment (see later). Can something be assessed properly if there is not and established understanding of what is to be achieved? To teach others to write reflectively, we need an understanding of reflection for ourselves as tutors.

I have developed a method of introducing and deepening reflective writing in the form of an exercise called a ‘graduated scenario’. This can be used by tutors and students and is presented in two self-help handouts (Supporting Reflective Learning 1 The Park and 2, the G.P’s story – that are/ will be available at www.CEMP.ac.uk/people/jennymoon.php). These exercises are better worked through in groups but the self-instructional materials enable them to be used by individuals working alone. The first – The Park - is probably the best exercise for less advanced students. I have added the text of The Park to this handout for duplication and direct use with students (Appendix 1).

In addition to the graduated scenario exercise, I present a series of shorter exercises below to be used as further support for the kind of thinking and reflective writing that is often required in learning journals. These tend to focus on specific aspects of thinking / writing and expand understanding of the purposes for journal writing. The exercises are in two groups starting with more elementary / introductory exercises and progressing to those that deepen the quality of writing once students are actually using journals. More exercises are given in Moon, 2006.

Initial reflective writing exercises

What is reflection?
Students need to know that they all can reflect, but that it may not be a habit that some use in a conscious manner. It can be helpful to give them a simple definition or description of reflective writing in contrast to essay writing (see Moon, 2006). This might suggest, for example, that reflection is a form of thinking that deals with more complex or unstructured issues in a considered manner; it can be a process of ‘making sense of ideas, or ‘re-ordering thoughts or ideas that we have already’. It can be helpful to almost trick students into being reflective by asking them, for example, to think and talk about what they have learnt most from recent experiences – such as from the past year of being in higher education. They are likely to respond reflectively.

Consider why reflection is being used to facilitate this area of learning/discipline
The response to this issue will depend on the purpose for the work in which reflection is involved. The answer might
include the following ideas:
- that we use reflection in order to learn from situations in which there is no curriculum – but where we have to make sense of diverse observations, ideas and data as well as personal research (eg by asking questions).
- that reflection is used to make sense of unstructured situations in order to generate new knowledge. It is important to be clear that the activity might be introducing the skill of reflective learning or generating knowledge by using reflection to make sense of something.

Generate discussion of students’ conceptions of reflection
It is useful at some stage (perhaps as a spin-off from another activity) to encourage students to talk about what they think reflection is. This will provide an opportunity for misconceptions to come to light (eg due to cultural differences). For example, some students will consider that they only use reflection when something has gone wrong – deciding what could be done better next time. Some students from overseas will not have a word for ‘reflection’ in the sense used here, in their first languages and may need much more thorough discussion. In my view it is important to recognise overtly that ‘reflection’ is a constructed term, used to describe a desirable activity and that there is no one correct definition – just many attempts to describe or make sense of the activity that we observe.

Consider how reflection differs from more familiar forms of learning
We tend to use reflection when we are trying to make sense of how diverse ideas fit together, when we are trying to relate new ideas to what we already know or when new ideas challenge what we already know (ie taking a deep approach to learning). Reflection is the process we use when working with material that is presented in an unstructured manner – not organised and purified as in a traditional curriculum.

Issues around the use of the first person – ‘I’.
Most students will have learnt that they should not use the first person singular in an academic environment. They can be confused if they are suddenly being encouraged to use ‘I’. It may be helpful here to talk about the manner in which knowledge is constructed with the involvement of the individual knower. The use of the first person can be an acknowledgement of this process. It may be useful to talk about the role of the personal pronoun in study of a particular discipline.

Give examples of reflective writing – good and poor.
Students find real examples of reflective writing, learning journals, even published work (fiction or biography) helpful. There can be examples of reflective material and non-reflective material and students might be asked which is the more reflective, and on what basis they make their judgements. This is similar to the basis of the graduated scenario exercises.

Enable practice on reflective writing and provide opportunities for feedback
Students can be asked to reflect on their own performance in some activity (for example - in giving a 5 minute talk). They talk and then write a reflective account of how their performance went, weaknesses and strengths, assessment against their expectations, relationships to previous presentations etc. The impact of the activity can be increased if they are asked to write a descriptive account of their anticipated performance before they write reflectively. It is important not to give them the impression that reflection is simply evaluation of weaknesses or weaknesses and strengths.

Give a starting exercise that eliminates the blank page.
Blank pages are threatening to many (thought exciting to some). It is a good idea to get students started on their reflective work by getting them to do some reflective writing before they know they have really started. This will mean the development of some initial structure such as questions that will stimulate reflective writing.

Have other tools available to help students to get started.
There are plenty of exercises to encourage reflective writing. The use of these exercises in occasional class situations can help students to expand the areas in which they are thinking and to begin to deepen their reflection. Examples of activities are in Moon 1999, 1999a, 2004 and 2006).

Expect to support some students more than others
Some students will need much more support than others and they will not necessarily be the less able students. It may be possible to develop a system of peer support. The ‘supporters’ may be students who have written journals in a previous
module. They may know more about journal writing than their tutors.

Be open about your need, as a tutor, to learn about this form of learning and how to manage it
Demonstrating that it is not only students who need to learn to reflect can be very helpful for staff and students. Staff might write a learning journal about the process of helping students to learn reflectively – and share elements of it with the students.

Deepening reflective work

The deepening of reflective activity depends partly on developing awareness of the constructed nature of knowledge – understanding, for example:
- that events can be conceived of differently according to the frame of reference;
- of the role of emotions in guiding our conceptions of events or people;
- that different disciplines rely on different structures of knowledge and have different ways of working with knowledge.

Use examples to demonstrate deeper reflective activity
Examples are valuable in helping students to deepen their reflective writing and learning. The examples might be (with permission) from previously written journals, or they might be from fiction, or deliberately written, or from graduates scenario exercises (Moon, 2006). It is particularly effective to show students one example of descriptive and superficial writing another of more deeply reflective writing.

Introduce a framework that describes levels of reflection
A framework for reflective writing resulted from work with staff and with students’ reflective writing work. It can be applied to the criteria used in the ‘The Presentation’.

Introduce exercises that involve ‘standing back from oneself’.
Ask students write about their own processes of doing a complex activity using a semi-objective and critical stance. They might, for example, be asked to talk about and assess their own skills in their processes of learning something. The learning task might be different from normal activities. A more specific way of doing this is to ask students to give a short presentation on something and to write about their experience of presenting.

Introduce exercises that involve reflection on the same subject from different viewpoints of people / social institutions etc.
Students could be asked to reflect (or talk / present) on an event in a shop from the point of view of the supervisor, customer, counter assistant, onlooker and so on. The aim is to help them to recognise that it is legitimate to have different frames of reference for the same event and that inclusion of consideration of the viewpoint of others can enrich personal reflection.

Introduce an exercise in reflection on the same subject from viewpoints of different disciplines
This exercise is an extension of the last exercise. In terms of different disciplinary standpoints, students might be asked to describe a child’s pet dog or someone who is ill (etc etc) from the point of view of practitioners in sociology, psychology, medical sciences, English, art and so on.

Introduce an exercise that involves reflection that is influenced by emotional reactions to events
Students can be asked to describe a real or imaginary event and to write fictitious reflective accounts at periods after the event, each account illustrating a change of emotional orientation to the event. The important point here is that emotional state of a person influences the manner in which a subject is viewed. If the state changes, the view may change and completely different accounts may be written at different times. This may need to be taken into account in making judgements or writing reflective accounts.
Collaborative methods of deepening reflection – eg critical friends and group, activities etc.

Some of these methods involve small group or pair work. The groups will need to have common ideas about methods by which to deepen reflection and to see themselves as peer facilitators. The groups or pairs may work together over a period, learning how best to help each other by prompting and asking questions, querying frames of reference and so on.

Second-order reflection

Second order reflection is represented in any technique that requires a student to look through previous reflective work and write a reflective overview. A convenient way to do this is the double entry journal. Students write only on one page of a double spread or on one half of a vertically divided page. They leave space blank until at another time, they go through the initial material writing generating further comments that emerge from their more coherent overview of the initial work.

Some uses of journals in disciplinary contexts

Journals are widely used in initial professional education and later professional development (eg teaching, nursing, medicine and professional allied to medicine. They are usually aimed towards the development of practitioners who are willing to reflect on events, theory new ideas in relation to their current practice and how it might change. In addition, journals are used in many disciplines and I describe some ideas of how they have been used below. Journal uses in one context can have applications across other disciplines.

The sciences, engineering and mathematics

Selfe, Petersen and Nahrgang (1986) studied the manner in which journal writing could help mathematics students. Initially the intention was to compare the test grades of a group who were asked to write journals with another group using traditional methods, however, the writers found that the influence of journal writing was demonstrable. While initially journal writing seemed no better or worse than other activities for promoting learning, on subsequent more subtle investigation, journals appeared to facilitate learning in a number of ways. By encouragement to think in a manner that was their own and use of their own language, the students were able to develop personal conceptual definitions which were much more understandable than technical definitions. The concrete nature of this thinking facilitated comprehension and application of abstract concepts and they began to evaluate or appreciate the usefulness of the concepts. The other two effects relate to the ability to solve problems. There was evidence in the writing that students were recording strategies that they found helpful in problem solving. Furthermore, in writing about problems instead of just working on calculation, they were coming to solutions through the writing. An excerpt from the writing of one student illustrates the last point:

‘I see nothing in common with the three functions except that the derivative has a power of N-1 just like all the other derivatives have. Oh – wait a sec, now I see how you did it. You took the derivative of the first term and....’ (Selfe, Petersen and Nahrgang, 1987:200)

Selfe worked also with engineering students (Selfe and Arbabi, 1986), with a primary intention of introducing more writing into the course. The students, in a structural analysis and design class, were asked to write at least a page a week on their experiences of the course. While their initial reaction
was negative, and for a few (around 10%) it remained negative, most found that ‘it helped ...(them to)...clarify their thoughts, work out strategies for solving engineering problems, understand the important aspects of the structures course and identify areas in which they needed more help’ (p185).

In contrast to a control group, those who had written in journals wrote final reports that ‘were generally more coherent, organized and complete and in their description of methods used to solve engineering problems were more complete’. Instructors felt much more informed about their students’ processes of learning.

Grumbacher (1987) focused on the ability of physics students to solve problems. She observed the writing processes of students whom she considered to be the better problems solvers in the group. They articulated the problems clearly, used visualization and verbalization in the solving and they were aware of the relative appropriateness of their responses. More significantly they used ‘their learning logs to synthesize their new knowledge about physics with their prior knowledge and experiences’ (p325).

**English and allied subjects**

Lindberg (1987) applied the use of journals to help learners to gain a deeper understanding of texts in English. He used a double entry journal. This is a form of journal where one side of the page - or one column - is for the descriptive writing and the other column is for reflective observation or further processing of this type. In Lindberg’s journal design students wrote their observations of and reactions to the text on one side of the page. These could include ‘times when your reading changes you are surprised or puzzled...something just does not fit...your first impression of the ending’. When the story had been read, they were asked to go back and make sense of the observations in the other column. These journals were discussed in a planned series of one to one ‘conferences’ with tutors. Assessment was based on a paper that students wrote with reference to their journal entries.

**The humanities and social sciences**

Wagenaar introduced a journal in sociology in order to encourage students to relate the theory taught on the course to their own observations and experiences (Wagenaar, 1984). In so doing he suggested that ‘the journal assignment can assist the instructor in meeting the higher level cognitive objectives in her or his course’. He describes it as ‘An intellectual exercise in reflexivity’. The guidance for journal writing was to include two elements – the observation of behaviour and the discussion of it in theoretical terms. Students were not asked to write about their feelings but there was evidence of emotion in the writing.

Baltensperger (1987), working with geography students describes a similar element in his work with classroom journals. He posed a question to students and asked them to write their responses first. He would then ask the question again, requesting oral reports based on the written ideas, and then would open the discussion for more general comment. He found this a valuable means of combating problems of poor response to oral questions in class.

In two papers, separated by fourteen years, Hettich advocates the use of journals in psychology (Hettich, 1976, 1990). He observed that journals help students to connect course learning to their
real experiences and observations. The emphasis was on the course material and instructions indicated that entries could contain ‘examples that show comprehension of the concept; application or experimentation with principles; and analysis, evaluation and synthesis of course concepts’ (Hettich, 1990).

In a project to investigate the impact of different forms of writing in anthropolo

ogy, Creme (1999) describes three different uses of journals in a social anthropology department. Project logs accompanied a first year course which introduced the theoretical and conceptual basis to anthropology research. Logs accompanied a research project and contained recordings and reflection on the records. The second form of log was called a record of study. Students developed an account of their learning from different sources throughout the course with a focus on the development of ‘understanding of central course concepts’. The third type of journal was used in a first year multidisciplinary course on death. In their journals, students explored their reactions to various accounts of death and to their personal experiences.

Languages

Mulhaus and Loschmann (1997) discuss the use of journals in foreign language learning in higher education. The change from integrated programmes to the accumulation of modules meant that students enrolling on a module were likely to have diverse backgrounds in relation to the subject matter. A distance learning approach was adopted with students using workshop time for advice and progress checks. With this approach, the writers considered that students needed to give attention to their learning strategies and they used journals to address that need. Journals included the written work of students – video summaries, vocabulary lists, worksheet tasks and self reflective comments. A marking scheme assessed ‘the interaction with the material and the depth of the learning process as evident from the students’ vocabulary lists, translations and comments’(p25).

Arts subjects

One form of journal that is a natural accompaniment to the creation of music, art, writing and drama (etc) is the project type of journal where the development of ideas is recorded and considered reflectively. The aim is to enhance the thought processes that contribute to the project. With art and design students, Davies (1998) set a similar journal that accompanied project work, but where the main aim was for assessment. Davies suggests that there can be too much focus on the outcome of art student work and not on the all-important process of it. The journal provided a location for the recording of thinking processes.

Business subjects and law

November (1993) comments of his subject – commerce – that the study environment is not conducive to deep approaches to learning. He used journals in order to deepen the quality of learning in a final year course. In his experience, the best results occurred with there had been considerable guidance on the journal writing given. One method was to ask students to write a list of problems or issues of concern, and then to require that they should examine them in a systematic manner. Every-so-often he asked students to reflect more generally on questions raised in their writing.
Assessment of journals

There are some who argue that journals and reflective writing should not be assessed. This comment from a convinced proponent of journals sums up some of the issues.

‘How can you mark an individual’s own personal development? I think it’s a right and proper part of education for us to encourage students to express their feelings so that they know it’s alright to have those feelings. However, for me to mark those feelings seems inconsistent and incongruent. Marks can also create a barrier or obstacle to the person finding his or her own voice...’ (Sister Craig cited in Dillon, 1983)

It is very easy to go along with arguments that assessment of reflective writing or journals is intrusive on personal development or is too difficult. However, there are strong arguments for the development of assessment regimes. First, the fact is that students are being assessed on journals and reflective writing whether they are given marks or assessed on the basis of ‘competent’ or ‘not yet competent’, or pass or fail / not yet pass. The criteria being used are often ‘gut reactions’ or personal interpretations and this poor quality of marking is not fair to students. When reflection and reflective practice are so highly esteemed in some areas of education and professional development, we should be able to do better than this.

A second justification for assessing journals is based on the observation that, even able learners may not find reflective writing in a journal easy (Wildman and Niles, 1987). Unless teachers have an understanding of the task that they are setting and the qualities in it that constitute a good performance, they will not be able to help these learners. It will be in the process of understanding what constitutes good reflective writing that we will begin to understand ways in which we can assess it.

Thirdly, reflective writing is rooted in the nature of the higher education system as it exists at present. Many students have become strategic and often do not pay attention to work that is not assessed. If we believe that reflective writing and journals contribute to learning, then the assessment of journals may be necessary in order to ensure the requisite student effort.

Too often, journal writing tasks are set without thought being given as to how they are to be assessed. Students should be told the purpose for the journal and the basis or criteria for the assessment of them before they start writing anything. As the earlier parts of this document suggest, there are many different purposes for journals.

Two key questions to be considered in developing assessment regimes for journals are whether we are looking to assess the process of reflection or the product of learning. As an example of the latter, Selfe, Petersen and Nahrgang (1986) describe the use of journals with mathematics students. The aim of the work was not primarily to develop reflective skills in these students, but to improve their learning of mathematics. The quality of their reflection could be said to be incidental. A maths test
would assess the learning in this case. However, among, for example, social work students, the primary aim of using journals is likely to be to produce reflective professionals. Then it would be necessary to assess criteria relating to reflective processes.

The next issue relates mainly to those situations in which it is the process of reflective writing that is assessed and it concerns the details of the purpose for which the journal has been set. If a journal has been set with the explicit intention of encouraging critical thinking through reflective work, then it should be the extent to which critical thinking is demonstrated in the work that represents the main criteria for assessment.

It is important to remember that any method of assessing journals which involves an assessor looking at the journal writing itself has an effect on the manner in which the journal is written because students will try to write what they think is required. They may be wary of revealing personal difficulties, weaknesses or concerns. However, for a student to censor what she writes in the journal (eg to reveal, or not to reveal some weakness), she will need to reflect on the initial issue. In this case, the journal writing may be more valuable for the unwritten reflection that the exercise of journal writing encourages rather than that which is subsequently described in writing.

So where journals are to be assessed directly, there should be a stated purpose for the journal that is reflected in chosen assessment. Sometimes there may be other criteria to be included in the assessment to improve the quality of the task. Some might be:

- Length, presentation and legibility, number of entries or regularity of entries;
- Clarity and good observation in presentation of events or issues;
- Evidence of speculation;
- Evidence of critical thinking and willingness to revise ideas;
- Honesty and self assessment;
- Thoroughness of reflection and self awareness;
- A deep approach to journal subject matter; depth, detail in the structure and writing;
- Evidence of creative thinking;
- Use of skills of manipulation of knowledge (synthesis, analysis, evaluation etc);
- Relationship of the entries in the journal to relevant coursework, theory, etc.
- ‘Multidimensionality’ – the breadth of sources from which material in a journal is drawn.
- etc

**A more desirable form of assessment of journals?**

I have described direct methods of assessing journals above. However, I suggest that the best way to assess journals and most reflective work is indirect. Students are asked to write a separate piece that broadly describes what they have learned (or other words – see below) from their journal writing. It is the indirect piece that is assessed. I suggest that this is not seen as or called an essay, but an account or other term. The account will relate to the purpose for which the journal has been set and it will need to be consistent with any criteria/ definitions used for reflection. The title of the account will need to relate to the purpose for which the journal has been set (eg ‘What I have learned about
reflection as a result of writing the journal’). Assessing such a piece of writing will be more familiar to tutors and there are other advantages too.

There are decisions to be made. One is whether or not to ask to see the actual journals. If the journal is not to be viewed, then some students will not write a journal, they will just write the account. On this basis, viewing the journal may be necessary. Then there is the issue that some journals will be exceptionally detailed etc and others will have been written on three pages after the account has been written – and the night before they are due to be handed in. To control the quality of journals, it can be useful to give some assessment to the journal. This might be pass or fail and it could be that where journals are not good enough, there will be no mark or a minimum mark for the account. Another way of doing this that allows credit to be given for an excellent journal, is to say that journals need to meet a few well considered criteria – that relate to its purpose. For those that do not meet the criteria, there might be a reduction of the mark for the account by a small amount (eg 5 percent) and for excellent journals, the mark could be lifted by a small amount. For most students with adequate journals, though, there would be an unadjusted mark for the account.

References and Other Resources


Carlsmit (www) ‘Academical notebook’


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<th>Author</th>
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Appendix 1

Graduated Scenario Exercise in reflective learning: The Park

For instructions on the use of this exercise, look at Supporting Reflective Learning 1 The Park and 2, the G.P’s story – that are/ will be available at www.CEMP.ac.uk/people/jennymoon.php or contact jenny@cemp.ac.uk.

Account 1
I went through the park the other day. The sun shone sometimes but large clouds floated across the sky in a breeze. It reminded me of a time that I was walking on St David’s Head in Wales – when there was a hard and bright light and anything I looked at was bright. It was really quite hot – so much nicer than the day before which was rainy. I went over to the children’s playing field. I had not been there for a while and wanted to see the improvements. There were several children there and one, in particular, I noticed, was in too many clothes for the heat. The children were running about and this child became red in the face and began to slow down and then he sat. He must have been about 10. Some of the others called him up again and he got to his feet. He stumbled into the game for a few moments, tripping once or twice. It seemed to me that he had just not got the energy to lift his feet. Eventually he stumbled down and did not get up but he was still moving and he shuffled into a half sitting and half lying position watching the other children and I think he was calling out to them. I don’t know.

Anyway, I had to get on to get to the shop to buy some meat for the chilli that my children had asked for for their party. The twins had invited many friends round for an end-of-term celebration of the beginning of the summer holidays. They might think that they have cause to celebrate but it makes a lot more work for me when they are home. I find that their holiday time makes a lot more work.

It was the next day when the paper came through the door – in it there was a report of a child who had been taken seriously ill in the park the previous day. He was fighting for his life in hospital and they said that the seriousness of the situation was due to the delay before he was brought to hospital. The report commented on the fact that he had been lying unattended for half an hour before someone saw him. By then the other children had gone. It said that several passers-by might have seen him looking ill and even on the ground and the report went on to ask why passers-by do not take action when they see that something is wrong. The article was headed ‘Why do they ‘Walk on by’? I have been terribly upset since then. James says I should not worry – it is just a headline.

The Park (2)
I went to the park the other day. I was going to the supermarket to get some meat to make the chilli that I had promised the children. They were having one of their end-of-term celebrations with friends. I wonder what drew me to the playground and why I ended up standing and watching those children playing with a rough old football? I am not sure as I don’t usually look at other people’s children – I just did. Anyway there were a number of kids there. I noticed, in particular, one child who seemed to be very overdressed for the weather. I try now to recall what he looked like - his face was red. He was a boy of around 10 – not unlike Charlie was at that age – maybe that is why I noticed him to start with when he was running around with the others. But then he was beginning to look distressed. I felt uneasy about him – sort of maternal but I did not
do anything. What could I have done? I remember thinking, I had little time and the supermarket would get crowded. What a strange way of thinking, in the circumstances!

In retrospect I wish I had acted. I ask myself what stopped me - but I don’t know what I might have done at that point. Anyway he sat down, looking absolutely exhausted and as if he had no energy to do anything. A few moments later, the other children called him up to run about again. I felt more uneasy and watched as he got up and tried to run, then fell, ran again and fell and half sat and half lay. Still I did nothing more than look – what was going on with me?

Eventually I went on I tell myself now that it was really important to get to the shops. It was the next day when the paper came through the door that I had a real shock. In the paper there was a report of a child who had been taken seriously ill in the park the previous day. He was fighting for his life in the hospital and the situation was much more serious because there had been such a delay in getting help. The report commented on the fact that he had been lying, unattended, for half an hour or more. At first, I wondered why the other children had not been more responsible. The article went on to say that several passers-by might have seen him playing and looking ill and the report questioned why passers-by do not take action when they see that something is wrong.

The event has affected me for some days but I do not know where to go or whom to tell. I do want to own up to my part in it to someone though.

The Park (3)

The incident happened in Ingle Park and it is very much still on my mind. There was a child playing with others. He looked hot and unfit and kept sitting down but the other children kept on getting him back up and making him play with them. I was on my way to the shop and only watched the children for a while before I walked on. Next day it was reported in the paper that the child had been taken to hospital seriously ill – very seriously ill. The report said that there were several passers-by in the park who had seen the child looking ill and who had done nothing. It was a scathing report about those who do not take action in such situations.

Reading the report, I felt dreadful and it has been very difficult to shift the feelings. I did not stop to see to the child because I told myself that I was on my way to the shops to buy food for a meal that I had to cook for the children’s party – what do I mean that I had to cook it? Though I saw that the child was ill, I didn’t do anything. It is hard to say what I was really thinking at the time – to what degree I was determined to go on with my day in the way I had planned it (the party really was not that important was it?). Or did I genuinely not think that the boy was ill – but just over-dressed and a bit tired? To what extent did I try to make convenient excuses and to what extent was my action based on an attempt to really understand the situation? Looking back, I could have cut through my excuses at the time – rather than now.

I did not go over to the child and ask what was wrong but I should have done. I could have talked to the other children - and even got one of the other children to call for help. I am not sure if the help would have been ambulance or doctor at that stage – but it does not matter now. If he had been given help then, he might not be fighting for his life.

It would be helpful to me if I could work out what I was really thinking and why I acted as I did. This event has really shaken me to my roots – more than I would have expected. It made me feel really guilty. I do not usually do wrong, in fact I think of myself as a good person. This event is also making me think about actions in all sorts of areas of my life. It reminds me of some things in the past as when my uncle died – but then
again I don’t really think that that is relevant - he was going to die anyway. My bad feelings then were due to sheer sadness and some irrational regrets that I did not visit him on the day before. Strangely it also reminds me of how bad I felt when Charlie was ill while we went on that anniversary weekend away. As I think more about Charlie being ill, I recognise that there are commonalities in the situations. I also keep wondering if I knew that boy....

**The Park (4)**

It happened in Ingle Park and this event is very much still on my mind. It feels significant. There was a child playing with others. He looked hot and unfit and kept sitting down but the other children kept on getting him back up and making him play with them. I was on my way to the shop and only watched the children for a while before I walked on. Next day it was reported in the paper that the child had been taken to hospital seriously ill – very seriously ill. The report said that there were several passers-by in the park who had seen the child looking ill and who had done nothing. It was a scathing report about those who do not take action in such situation.

It was the report initially that made me think more deeply. It kept coming back in my mind and over the next few days - I begun to think of the situation in lots of different ways. Initially I considered my urge to get to the shop – regardless of the state of the boy. That was an easy way of excusing myself – to say that I had to get to the shop. Then I began to go through all of the agonising as to whether I could have mis-read the situation and really thought that the boy was simply over-dressed or perhaps play-acting or trying to gain sympathy from me or the others. Could I have believed that the situation was all right? All of that thinking, I now notice, would also have let me off the hook – made it not my fault that I did not take action at the time.

I talked with Tom about my reflections on the event – on the incident, on my thinking about it at the time and then immediately after. He observed that my sense of myself as a ‘good person who always lends a helping hand when others need help’ was put in some jeopardy by it all. At the time and immediately after, it might have been easier to avoid shaking my view of myself than to admit that I had avoided facing up to the situation and admitting that I had not acted as ‘a good person’. With this hindsight, I notice that I can probably find it more easy to admit that I am not always ‘a good person’ and that I made a mistake in retrospect than immediately after the event. I suspect that this may apply to other situations.

As I think about the situation now, I recall some more of the thoughts – or were they feelings mixed up with thoughts? I remember a sense at the time that this boy looked quite scruffy and reminded me of a child who used to play with Charlie. We did not feel happy during the brief period of their friendship because this boy was known as a bully and we were uneasy either that Charlie would end up being bullied, or that Charlie would learn to bully. Funnily enough we were talking about this boy – I now remember – at the dinner table the night before. The conversation had reminded me of all of the angonising about the children’s friends at the time. The fleeting thought / feeling was possibly something like this:– if this boy is like one I did not feel comfortable with – then maybe he deserves to get left in this way. Maybe he was a brother of the original child. I remember social psychology research along the lines of attributing blame to victims to justify their plight. Then it might not have been anything to do with Charlie’s friend.

So I can see how I looked at that event and perhaps interpret it in a manner that was consistent with my emotional frame of mind at the time. Seeing the same events without that dinner-time conversation might have led me to see the whole thing in an entirely different manner and I might have acted differently. The significance of this whole event is chilling when I realise that my lack of action nearly resulted in his death – and it might have been because of an attitude that was formed years ago in relation to a different situation.
This has all made me thing about how we view things. The way I saw this event at the time was quite
different to the way I see it now – even this few days later. Writing an account at the time would have been
different to the account – or several accounts that I would write now. I cannot know what ‘story’ is ‘true’. The
bullying story may be one that I have constructed retrospectively - fabricated. Interestingly I can believe that
story completely.

In deepening reflection, there are shifts –

- from description to reflective account;
- from no questions to questions to responding to questions;
- emotional influence is recognised, and then handled increasingly effectively
- there is a ‘standing back from the event’
- there is a shift from self questioning, challenge to own ideas
- from recognition of relevance of prior experience
- in the taking into account of others’ views
- towards metacognition - review of own reflective processes

Commentary on the quality of reflection in The Park

The Park (1) This piece tells the story. Sometimes it mentions past experiences, sometimes anticipates the
future but all in the context of the account of the story. There might be references to emotional state, but the
role of the emotions on action is not explored.

Ideas of others are mentioned but not elaborated or used to investigate the meaning of the events.
The account is written only from one point of view – that of Annie.
Generally ideas are presented in a sequence and are only linked by the story. They are not all relevant or
focused
In fact – you could hardly deem this to be reflective at all. It is very descriptive. It could be a reasonably
written account of an event that could serve as a basis on which reflection might start, though it hardly signals
any material for reflection – other than the last few words

The Park (2) In this account there is a description of the same events. There is very little addition of ideas
from outside the event – reference to attitudes of others, comments.
The account is more than a story though. It is focused on the event as if there is a big question to be asked
and answered.
In the questioning there is recognition of the worth of exploring the motives for behaviour – but it does not go
very far. In other words, asking the questions makes it more than a descriptive account, but the lack of
attempt to respond to the questions means that there is little actual analysis of the events.
Annie is critical of her actions and in her questions, signals this. The questioning of action does mean that
Annie is standing back from the event to a small extent. There is a sense that she recognises that this is a
significant incident, with learning to be gained – but the reflection does not go sufficiently deep to enable the
learning to begin to occur.

The Park (3) The description is succinct here – just sufficient to raise the issues. Extraneous information is
not added. It is not a story. The focus is on the attempt to reflect on the event and to learn from it. There is
more of a sense of Annie standing back from the event in order to reflect better on her actions and in order to
be more effectively critical.
There is more analysis of the situation and an evident understanding that it was not a simple situation – that there might be alternative explanations or actions that could be justified equally effectively. The description could be said to be slightly narrow (see The Park (4)) as Annie is not acknowledging that there might be other ways of perceiving the situation – other points of view. She does not seem to be recognising that her reflection is affected by her frame of reference at the time or now. It is possible, for example, that her experience with Charlie (last paragraph) – or her question about knowing the boy have influenced the manner in which she reacted. It might not just be a matter of linking up other events, but of going beyond and checking out the possibility that her frame of reference might have been affected by the prior experiences.

**The Park (4)** The account is succinct and to the point. There is some deep reflection here that is self-critical and questions the basis of the beliefs and values on which the behaviour was based. There is evidence of standing back from the event, of Annie treating herself as an object acting within the context. There is also an internal dialogue – a conversation with herself in which she proposes and further reflects on alternative explanations. She shows evidence of looking at the views of others (Tom) and of considering the alternative point of view, and learning from it. She recognises the significance of the effect of passage of time on her reflection – e.g., that her personal frame of reference at the time may have influenced her actions and that a different frame of reference might have lead to different results. She notices that the proximity of other, possibly unrelated events (the dinner-time conversation) have an effect either possibly on her actual behaviour and her subsequent reflection – or possibly on her reflective processes only. She notices that she can be said to be reconstructing the event in retrospect – creating a story around it that may not be ‘true’. She recognises that there may be no conclusion to this situation – but that there are still things to be learnt from it. She has also been able to reflect on her own process of reflecting (acted metacognitively), recognising that her process influenced the outcome.

**A Generic Framework for Reflective Writing**

There are four ‘levels’ of depth of reflection described below. They do not necessarily accord directly with the accounts in exercises such as ‘The Park’ but provide an general guide.

**Descriptive Writing**

This account is descriptive and it contains little reflection. It may tell a story but from one point of view at a time and generally one point at a time is made. Ideas tend to be linked by the sequence of the account / story rather than by meaning. The account describes what happened, sometimes mentioning past experiences, sometimes anticipating the future – but all in the context of an account of the event.

There may be references to emotional reactions but they are not explored and not related to behaviour.

The account may relate to ideas or external information, but these are not considered or questioned and the possible impact on behaviour or the meaning of events is not mentioned.
There is little attempt to focus on particular issues. Most points are made with similar weight.

The writing could hardly be deemed to be reflective at all. It could be a reasonably written account of an event that would serve as a basis on which reflection might start, though a good description that precedes reflective accounts will tend to be more focused and to signal points and issues for further reflection.

**Descriptive account with some reflection**
This is a descriptive account that signals points for reflection while not actually showing much reflection.

The basic account is descriptive in the manner of description above. There is little addition of ideas from outside the event, reference to alternative viewpoints or attitudes to others, comment and so on. However, the account is more than just a story. It is focused on the event as if there is a big question or there are questions to be asked and answered. Points on which reflection could occur are signalled.

There is recognition of the worth of further exploring but it does not go very far. In other words, asking the questions makes it more than a descriptive account, but the lack of attempt to respond to the questions means that there is little actual analysis of the events.

The questioning does begin to suggest a ‘standing back from the event’ in (usually) isolated areas of the account.

The account may mention emotional reactions, or be influenced by emotion. Any influence may be noted, and possibly questioned.

There is a sense of recognition this is an incident from which learning can be gained, – but the reflection does not go sufficiently deep to enable the learning to begin to occur.

**Reflective writing (1)**
There is description but it is focused with particular aspects accentuated for reflective comment. There may be a sense that the material is being mulled around. It is no longer a straight-forward account of an event, but it is definitely reflective.

There is evidence of external ideas or information and where this occurs, the material is subjected to reflection.

The account shows some analysis and there is recognition of the worth of exploring motives or reasons for behaviour

Where relevant, there is willingness to be critical of the action of self or others. There is likely to be
some self questioning and willingness also to recognise the overall effect of the event on self. In other words, there is some ‘standing back’ from the event.

There is recognition of any emotional content, a questioning of its role and influence and an attempt to consider its significance in shaping the views presented.

There may be recognition that things might look different from other perspectives, that views can change with time or the emotional state. The existence of several alternative points of view may be acknowledged but not analysed.

In other words, in a relatively limited way the account may recognise that frames of reference affect the manner in which we reflect at a given time but it does not deal with this in a way that links it effectively to issues about the quality of personal judgement.

**Reflective writing (2)**

Description now only serves the process of reflection, covering the issues for reflection and noting their context. There is clear evidence of standing back from an event and there is mulling over and internal dialogue.

The account shows deep reflection, and it incorporates a recognition that the frame of reference with which an event is viewed can change.

A metacognitive stance is taken (ie critical awareness of one’s own processes of mental functioning – including reflection).

The account probably recognises that events exist in a historical or social context that may be influential on a person’s reaction to them. In other words, multiple perspectives are noted.

Self questioning is evident (an ‘internal dialogue’ is set up at times) deliberating between different views of personal behaviour and that of others).

The view and motives of others are taken into account and considered against those of the writer.

There is recognition of the role of emotion in shaping the ideas and recognition of the manner in which different emotional influences can frame the account in different ways.

There is recognition that prior experience, thoughts (own and other's) interact with the production of current behaviour.

There is observation that there is learning to be gained from the experience and points for learning are noted.

There is recognition that the personal frame of reference can change according to the emotional state in which it is written, the acquisition of new information, the review of ideas and the effect of time.
passing.

The exercise is devised by Jenny Moon, CEMP, Bournemouth University. If you want to copy it or use it or modify it, feel free to do so – there are no copyright issues.