

The Journaling Assignment: Issues and Paradoxes

Olive Yonge and Florence Myrick
Faculty of Nursing
University of Alberta and University of Calgary

Introduction

Journaling is an activity which can result in one of the most powerful and enduring of learning experiences, both for students and for faculty members. Successful application of this educational technique can lead students to a broader understanding of their particular discipline by situating them and their knowledge within their practice (Cash, Brooker, Penney, Reinbold, & Strangio, 1997), by giving voice to their experiences (Kobert, 1995), and/or by engaging them in meaningful self dialogue. In the context of journaling, writing can become a reflective activity fixing thought on paper (van Manen, 1997). It can enhance the ability of the student to think critically, can develop writing skills and can stimulate reflection on the learning process (Brown & Sorrell, 1993; Fonteyn & Cahill, 1998; Hahneman, 1986; Hodges, 1996; Leahy, 1985; Paterson, 1995; Kavanagh, 1998; Seshachari, 1994; Wong, Krember, Chung & Yan, 1995).

Effective journaling, however, is neither easily achieved nor without its drawbacks. As the authors have discovered, it is an activity that is both labour intensive and complicated by a variety of issues which left unaddressed can impair success. Some students have encountered journals or logs as assignments so frequently in preceding courses that their reaction to more journaling is likely to be rolling eyes and groans of "Oh no, not again!" or "Whatever for? I'm journalled out!" Some students argue that faculty have no right to be privy to their reactions to learning. Some regard journaling as a method of cheap grading, fearing that marks will be easily lost if written entries do not meet with the instructor's subjective expectations. Many students experience genuine confusion about the different terminology employed, and many express concern about the time commitment required to complete such assignments. The authors will comment on these issues and associated paradoxes under the categories of terminology, pedagogy and ethics, endeavouring thereby to provide some clarity about the positive possibilities of journaling within the teaching/learning process.

Terminology

There are three terms that are commonly used almost interchangeably in the teaching of this activity: diaries, logs and journals. It is our contention, however, that though similar, they are not necessarily identical in either meaning or in the expectations they imply. Thus, interchangeable use may well prompt misunderstandings. A diary is defined as a daily record of activities, experiences or observations in which thoughts, reactions, ideas and feelings are expressed (Funk & Wagnall, 1968; Holly, 1989). A log is a regularly kept record of progress, performance or operation that is a highly structured, descriptive and factual account maintained on a regular basis over time (Holly, 1989). A journal consists of a daily record of happenings, events or proceedings that includes personal interpretations ((Funk & Wagnall, 1968; Holly, 1989). Just as these distinctions with respect to content may be important in certain contexts, so may distinctions with respect to the purpose of the record. For example, in the case of diaries, which are generally personal and private, though objective content may be included much of the record and its overall aim is subjective. Logs are intended to collect and preserve data for the perusal of others such as inspectors or officials, as with ship or airline personnel. Usually the content is objective, such as daily records of specific events. Journals, however, may have both objective and subjective content. They consist of regular entries in which the writer "focuses and reflects upon a given theme, or a series of events and experiences" (Hedlund, Furstt & Foley, 1989, p.106).

In the context of education, these distinctions are important. Instructors must consider carefully the content to which they wish to direct their students' attention and the purpose they seek to achieve in doing so. Students may be asked to keep any or all of the three at the same or at various times, just as

an ethnographer would do for a research project. The content of each type of record, its overall function in the educational scheme, and the expectations imposed on students may differ widely. Owing to the value placed on the development of critical thinking in most academic settings, it is the demand for thematic focus and reflection (Hedland et al., 1989) that makes journaling most often the term of choice for faculty.

Pedagogy

The effectiveness of journaling as a teaching/learning activity depends on a number of factors, including the following: the students' previous knowledge and experience of the journaling process; faculty expectations of journaling as a course requirement; the manner in which such assignments are integrated into courses; the process of evaluating the journaling assignment; and the control of the student.

Previous Knowledge and Experience

A beginning writer may discover keeping a journal to be awkward, clumsy, uncomfortable, and even too disclosing (Hodges, 1996). A major influence on the reactions of students to journaling assignments is their familiarity with any of the related recording activities. They may have kept a personal diary themselves or read diary-based accounts in literature such as *Runaway: Diary of a Street Kid* by Lau (1989). Some may have been exposed to the works of Carl Jung, Marion Milner, Ira Progoff and Anais Nin, all of whom used diaries in the acquisition of insights and the formation of psychological theories (Rainer, 1978). Many will have been required to keep journals in primary school language arts programs. The quality and range of any of these experiences may vary but all provide background on which students can draw thus predisposing them toward the reflection and organization critical to the journaling activity (Hancock, 1999).

Teacher Expectations

Diversity among students in knowledge and attitudes concerning journals requires faculty to be clear about their journaling expectations. Students need explicit criteria for the form and function of the journal. If it is the expectation that both objective and subjective entries and thematic focus and reflection be included in journaling, then faculty must emphasize this at the beginning so that students can strive for them from the outset.

Student confusion can be circumvented if faculty communicate with each other about their journaling beliefs, practices and terminology, especially when journaling assignments are used in more than one course within a programme. In the absence of such communication and clearly delineated course expectations, it would be understandable if students applied standards they had learned elsewhere. Thus, observations on the quality or characteristics of a student's journal, that it is not sufficiently scholarly or reflective may reflect as much upon the faculty's preparation of the student as on the student him/herself.

Integration of Journal Assignments

Effective teaching is a complex process. No tool or effort operates in isolation, and despite its multidimensional nature, the same is true of journaling. As a vehicle for knowledge acquisition, reflection, communication, assessment and critical thinking (Fonteyn & Cahill, 1998; Landeen, Byrne & Brown, 1995; Marland & McSherry, 1998), a successful journal assignment is only one component of a successful course. Faculty make decisions about what course assignments will best augment, enhance, reinforce or create further content. Assignments are carefully chosen based on numerous criteria including knowledge acquisition, resources, teaching philosophy, sensitivity to individual student personality and learning style. Results of such choices may range from none to disastrous to excellent depending on the context, student reactions, and substantive content.

Choices about assignments in general and about journaling in particular are made in the context of a complex process. Faculty assumptions about that process as a whole greatly influence the integration of journaling assignments into a course. Faculty need to ask themselves some salient questions: What are the preconditions for successful journaling? When and how does the student learn from it? What are its risks and benefits? Which aspect of the assignment is more important, the process of writing it or the final product? Is journaling congruent with the faculty's philosophy of teaching and learning? Answers to and reflections on these questions can clarify the real reasons for journaling and result in a well articulated and defensible description of the assignment.

A practical consideration for the integration of journaling assignments concerns class size. Instructors of large classes are frequently confronted with time constraints. In such cases they can enable student journaling by designating class time to it. Students can be afforded a few minutes at the beginning or the end of the class for this purpose, either to help them centre themselves or to reflect on what they have learned.

Evaluation

Perhaps the most contentious issues associated with the journaling assignment pertain to evaluation. Grades depend on course objectives, desired learning outcomes, and faculty requirements, all of which result in a wide variation of approaches. Indeed, faculty vary in their willingness to grade journals, the strategies they employ for grading, and the importance they attribute to such assignments. Indeed, the weight of course grades given to journaling assignments range from 100 per cent to none (Fulwiler 1980; Hahnemann, 1986).

Among the numerous grading strategies that have been used for journaling are: a) assigning a set portion of the course mark to completed journals; b) attributing a mark for each journal entry; c) grading a paper based on the journal; d) grading dossiers compiled at the end of the course from students' best weekly entries; e) student self marking and using that result, or the average with the teacher's mark, as a percentage of the course mark; f) and correlating the grade with the number of pages written. As well, in professional faculties, it is not unusual for students to be required to complete unmarked journaling as an adjunct to other assignments, just as they are expected to perform other activities with no direct grade value, such as participating in clinical orientation prior to the actual practical experience. Such activities are considered to be part of their socialization into the profession and are usually greatly valued by students and faculty alike.

Whatever the method of evaluation, however, some criteria must be used to assess the quality of the journaling assignment, and the search for these is best guided by one's original purpose in designing the assignment. Glen, Clark, and Nicol (1995) ask if it is possible to use journaling simultaneously as a means of evaluating professional competence and as a means of encouraging the student's personal and professional development. Each of these, perhaps competing, purposes would require its own criteria for assessment. Leahy (1985) requests that students work with him in developing appropriate evaluation criteria; but given his purposes, he considers the common standards for written assignments based on correct grammar and organization of content as inappropriate. He regards a journal as acceptable if entries are regular (at least three a week), demonstrate a variety of strategies for learning (integration and synthesis), include examples and details, and has "plenty of voice" (Leahy, 1985, p.110). In this context voice refers to the writer's distinctive style of expression and thought.

A description of criteria for evaluating journaling is also provided by Connolly (1994), who assessed excellent journals from a research project class of 95 students as: "graphic, detailed, honest, unsentimental, unromanticized... reflecting awareness of the experience, including the student's awareness of the experience of his or her development over time...stories that are oriented, strong, rich and deep" (p. 312). These criteria focus on both affective and cognitive domains of learning. Like Leahy (1985), Connolly expects students to reflect on their learning and write about it in their journals with vigour, thoughtfulness and care.

Other criteria, and another purpose, for journalling are suggested by Brown and Sorrell (1993), who base their views on the concept of mastery. They advocate that students continue their journal entries until they have exhibited mastery of the course objectives by writing in the journal at a satisfactory level. At this point, mastery would be considered achieved, so students would receive a Pass or an A grade and could, but would not have to, discontinue writing in their journals.

The views of Brown and Sorrell (1993) regarding the purpose of journalling and the criteria for evaluating it differ markedly from those of Leahy (1985) and Connolly (1994). Fulwiler (1980) and Leahy (1985) state that a journal is a place to fail. Students learn through a process of being able to take risks and make mistakes, which in itself can be a messy, confusing, but occasionally brilliant, process and not one which is clear and linear. Rigid marking schemes for journalling assignments that are employed in recognition and service of such a process would seem inappropriate.

Of course, equally as important as choosing criteria appropriate to the purpose of the assignment is that students understand that purpose, the desired outcomes and the associated criteria. With accurate communication and reinforcement, students are much more likely to eventually write material that is filled with "voice" (Leahy, 1985, p.110) or that demonstrates mastery of course objectives (Brown and Sorrell, 1993). Also, it must be remembered that journalling is itself a skill which, like other forms of writing, evolves over a lifetime, even though courses last only a semester. Patience is thus pivotal to the process. Journalling begets journalling and for that reason the skills essential to the activity develop from and are promoted by engagement in the activity itself.

There is more to evaluation in support of this developmental process, however, than the assignment of marks. Faculty must consider the quality and quantity of the responses they give students about their journals. Initially, in a journalling effort faculty may endeavour to shape student thought and expression by providing more volume in feedback than has been provided in the entries themselves or by posing questions to guide students in further entries. Such responses demonstrate one of the benefits of journalling. It can serve as a channel for discussion between faculty and student, the nature of which may fluctuate as appropriate from instructor to instructor or student to student. It is possible for ideas to flow both ways, in which case the term feedback may no longer be apt. In such circumstances, journals become written dialogues, teaching becomes individualized and students are both treated and respond as persons, which is, of course, the idea.

In reality, faculty often view feedback in terms of the time it takes to read journals and respond in writing or verbally to students. Those with large classes (over 50 students) often perceive journal assignments to be impractical. This is not necessarily the case. Workloads can be kept manageable. There are various strategies for maintaining manageable workloads. Journals may be: a) limited as to volume by length or number of entries (for example, one page), as with micro teaching assignments (Leahy, 1993); b) alternated between sections of students on a particular time frame (for example, on a weekly basis), with students divided on objective criteria (such as name or month of birth); and c) incorporated into other assignments, such as small research projects, in which case students may be encouraged to keep journals as part of the collection of data. In any event, not all faculty feel compelled to read all journals or every entry in them. Some review selections randomly. Some read portions of journals to the entire class and give public feedback for the benefit of all. Others have teaching assistants help with marking.

Control

Aside from the issue of grading and evaluation, the effectiveness of journalling assignments depends greatly on how closely students are controlled. Control in this kind of process can be exercised in different ways, either through the structure imposed by the requirements of the assignment or through the questions asked. Either way, control is within the purview of faculty and the potential for tight control is great. The question arises, then, of how much control to exert. At this point then, it is important to remember that the general goal of journalling is to guide or facilitate learning. Freedom, flexibility and creativity can be stifled by excessive control. Too much structure, therefore, may interfere with the journalling process. Students who are too strictly controlled may not attain the abstract processes that

render journalling effective regardless of the intent of the assignment or the teaching philosophy employed.

Ethical Considerations

Both the personal, often introspective, nature of journalling and the fact that this activity deliberately encourages risk-taking means that the sharing of what is written may be invasive to those who undertake it. In other words, journalling could violate students' rights and boundaries (Paterson, 1995). Such potential may be diminished by the provision of clear guidelines about the learning objectives and criteria, as already discussed (Durgahee, 1988). Beyond this, however, there are ethical issues involved in the journalling process which faculty and students alike must address, the most important of which are respect, vulnerability and trust.

Respect

Respect is required by all who are party to the journalling process: the author of the journal, the faculty supervising the assignment and fellow students who may share the journal and its evaluation through classroom discussion. Students must first learn to respect themselves. Those who write "diaryish" entries must be given immediate feedback not only as to the quality expected, as discussed above, but also with regard to the need for care in safeguarding personal confidentiality. Sharing personal matters may have its place in some classroom situations, but for the most part students are wise to carefully consider what information about themselves they really wish revealed. Some students, for example, occasionally forget that they are recording entries as students, for the purpose of learning, and may want to treat their journal as a therapy tool (Capacchione, 1989). Such self disclosure is inappropriate in a class room setting.

Students' property rights deserve respect as well. Generally, journals are considered the property of their authors though this could be debated where faculty have written extensive comments. In any event, it is at least courteous, if not mandatory, that student privacy be observed. A protocol must be observed to guard against unauthorized disclosure of student personal information and observation, deliberate or incidental.

Deliberate disclosure includes any revelation of journal contents intentionally initiated by the faculty or the pertinent institution. Thus, an instructor who wishes to read or share a journal with others should obtain the prior permission of the student who wrote it, at least verbally. It is not enough to assume that the author's writing or style of expression will not be recognized by others in the class. Actual publication of journals, on the other hand, requires prior written consent. Moreover, faculty must be sensitive to the potential of citing content out of context in disclosing from journals. Faculty must be careful not to exploit or devalue students' work.

Incidental disclosure involves any revelation of journal content that is inadvertent. For the most part this can be avoided by faculty simply receiving, retaining and returning journals to students enclosed in a plain brown envelope marked with the student's name. Clinical practice situations may require journals to be temporarily left unattended in public places such as hospitals or health units – a questionable practice making them, however unwittingly, available for unauthorized perusal.

Vulnerability

Even when student permission for sharing of journal entries is obtained, issues pertaining to the appropriateness of disclosure and to teacher and public reaction remain. Journalling can be a highly personal and even intimate activity that leaves students vulnerable to inhibition or regret. Care must be used in assigning journalling and in disclosing the contents of journals even when permission to do so has been obtained. Owing to the nature of the activity and the power differential between student and faculty, students may feel coerced into revealing information (Cameron & Mitchell, 1993). In some courses, in fact, it may be inappropriate to use this kind of assignment. For example, students with

culturally diverse backgrounds who are asked to journal about discrimination might be unwilling to reveal their experiences on this subject but feel that they have no choice but to do as requested. Appropriateness for individual circumstances must always take precedence.

There is also a need for sensitivity to differences between faculty and student perspectives. Some students journal from "the heart", fully and openly, believing their revelations to be highly significant and relevant. Having opened themselves up in this fashion, they may be very vulnerable to the response to what they have shared. Faculty, however, may not share their views. They may regard the resulting content instead as sentimental, irrelevant or superficial. Any hint of this to students is likely to result in defensiveness, hurt or anger, in which case journaling would be more of an obstacle to learning than an aid.

Other students, may find self examination or revelation daunting. One of the author's students related having written an entire journal in fiction, as the prospect of pondering and disclosing about personal learning seemed too threatening. Uncomfortable with her vulnerability, she distanced herself from the challenge of her reality by creating a new one. Other students have confided lapsing into fiction too. One explained "I'm a want-a-be..." But authenticity, based on genuinely personal thoughts and reflections, is critical to successful journaling. Accordingly, teachers must be alert to circumstances that might render journaling assignments unsuitable for students or classes at particular times.

Trust

Vulnerability poses questions for students and teachers alike. It is natural for students embarking on journaling. They may worry about how their thoughts will be received. If students are not able to express their thoughts and beliefs without risk of negative feedback they will write to please the teacher, not to learn from the journaling exercise (Cameron & Mitchell, 1993). Watching classmates scribbling away beside them, they may wonder how their work compares, even if they are writing enough or too much. Faculty, on the other hand, may wonder how to get their students to open up. The answer to most such questions is trust. The introspection and disclosure inherent in successful journaling flourishes only with confidence in self expression and the resulting response. This issue is so fundamental to the journaling process that it should be addressed directly at the commencement of the assignment. Students must be advised that there are rhythms to learning and that their journal productivity may vary from entry to entry in response to professional and personal demands. Essential to successful journaling is that students feel comfortable and safe. Students need to trust their teachers, but also they must be encouraged to trust themselves.

Faculty need to trust their students also. They need to be assured that students are actually attending to their journals. This concern can be alleviated by designating classroom time or by requiring journals to be handed in frequently. If students are clear about the criteria of the assignment and the consequences of not meeting them, faculty can have confidence in their students in this regard. This is the first level of trust.

On another level, faculty also need to be know whether or not students are journaling to their potential. Usually, the answer to this important question can be discerned early in the process when various evaluative data have been assembled. This is the second level of trust. Teachers of very large classes, however, may never know their students well enough to ascertain the answer. Failure of students to reach their potential, or to assume some of the responsibility for the assignment, is often revealed by denigrating comments such as "I wrote what the faculty wanted me to write." Conversely, optimal realization of potential is indicated when students express the desire to continue journaling upon course completion, take subsequent courses on the process, or express the belief that they will journal for life.

Summary

Journaling, then, is an activity of many issues and paradoxes. If assigned in a course, journaling needs to be integrated with the teaching philosophy, course objectives and content. Terminology and criteria for evaluation must be well clarified. The establishment of faculty respect for student privacy and ownership of journal content, and a particular sensitivity to their vulnerability is pivotal. Subsequently, an assignment replete with risk can result in meaningful, lasting learning. Perhaps the essence of what journaling can become is best captured in the words of one of the author's third year nursing students in one of her final entries: My journal is now part of my body. At first it felt awkward like a winter coat that was too large and heavy. I knew the shape and warmth of the coat but it wasn't me. I had to grow into it. Now it is my protector, security blanket and the screen from which I view the world. I feel secure in my knowledge and ironically know that my knowledge changes and expands even as I write. (Nell - fictitious name).

References

Brown, H. N. & Sorrell, J. M. (1993). Use of clinical journals to enhance critical thinking. *Nurse Teacher* 18(5), 16-19.

Cameron, B. & Mitchell, A. (1993). Reflective peer journals: Developing authentic nurses. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 18, 290-297.

Capacchione, L. (1989). *The creative journal: The art of finding yourself*. North Hollywood, CA: Newcastle Publishing Co., Inc.

Cash, P., Brooker, J. Penney, W., Reinbold, J. & Strangio, L. (1997). Reflective inquiry in nursing practice or 'revealing images'. *Nursing Inquiry*, 4(4), 246-256.

Connolly, M. (1994). Practicum experiences and journal writing in adapted physical education: Implications for teacher education. *Adapted Physical Activity Quarterly*, 11, 306-328.

Durgahee, T. (1998). Facilitating reflection: From a sage on stage to a guide on the side. *Nurse Education Today*, 16, 158-164.

Fonteyn, M. & Cahill, M. (1998). The use of clinical logs to improve nursing students' metacognition: A pilot study. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 28(1), 149-154.

Fulwiler, T. (1980). Journals across the disciplines. *English Journal*, December, 14-19.

Funk & Wagnalls, (1968). *Standard College Dictionary*. New York: Readers Digest Association Inc.

Glen, S., Clark, A. & Nicol, M. (1995). Reflecting on reflection: A personal encounter. *Nurse Education Today*, 34(3), 140-142.

Hahnemann, B. K. (1986). Journal writing: A key to promoting critical thinking in nursing students. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 25(5), 213-215.

Hancock, P. (1999). Reflective practice-using a learning journal. *Nursing Standard*, 13(17), 37-40.

Hedlund, D. E., Furst, T. C. & Foley, K. T. (1989). A dialogue with self: The journal as an educational tool. *Journal of Humanistic Education and Development*, 27, 105-113.

Hodges, H. F. (1996). Journal writing as a mode of thinking for RN-BSN students: A leveled approach to learning to listen to self and others. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 35(3), 137-141.

Holly, M. L. (1989). *Writing to grow*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Kavannah, K. H. (1998). Summer of no return: transforming care through a nursing field school. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 37(2), 71-9.

Kobert, L. (1995). In our own voice: Journaling as a teaching/learning technique for nurses. *Journal of Nursing Education*, 34(3), 140-142.

Lau, E. (1989). *Runaway: Diary of a street kid*. Toronto: Harper Collins Publishers Ltd.

Landeen, J., Byrne, C. & Brown, B. (1995). Exploring the lived experiences of psychiatric nursing students through self-reflective journals. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 21, 878-885.

Leahy, R. (1985). The power of the student journal. *College Teaching*, 34, 108-112.

Leahy, R. (1993). Microthemes: An experiment with very short writings. *College Teaching*, 42(1), 15-18.

Marland, G. & McSherry, W. (1998). Practice placements: We have the ingredients but do we have a recipe? *Nurse Teacher*, 23(2), 10-14.

Paterson, B. (1995). Developing and maintaining reflection in clinical journals. *Nurse Education Today*, 15, 211-220.

Rainer, T. (1978). *The new diary*. Los Angeles: Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc.

Seshachari, N.C. (1994). Instructor-mediated journals. *College Teaching*, 42(1), 7-11.

Usher, K., Francis, D., Owens, J., & Tollefson, J. (1999). Reflective writing: A strategy to foster critical inquiry in undergraduate nursing students. *Australian Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 17(1), 7-12.

van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience*. London, Ontario: Althouse.

Wong, F., Krember, D., Chung, L. & Yan, L. (1995). Assessing the level of student reflection from reflective journals. *Journal of Advanced Nursing*, 22, 48-57.