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## **Using journal writing to enhance reflective practice**

David Boud

University of Technology, Sydney

We write journals for many different reasons prompted by many different purposes. We may want to capture an experience, record an event, explore our feelings or make sense of what we know. We may want to narrate something of importance so that others can see what we saw in it. Sometimes we write primarily for ourselves, sometimes for other people. Journal writing is as varied as those who engage in it.

Journal writing can be viewed through many different lenses: as a form of self-expression, as a record of events or as a form of therapy. It can be a combination of these and other purposes. In this chapter I want to examine journal writing through the lens of learning. This perspective views the varieties of journal writing as ways of making sense of the world and how we operate within it. It looks at journal writing as a form of reflective practice, that is, as a device for working with events and experiences in order to extract meaning from them. Writing can be used to enhance what we do and how we do it. It may relate to learning in formal courses, to our professional practice or to any aspect of informal learning.

In her discussion of using journals in learning through reflection, Jenny Moon (1999a) identifies many purposes of writing journals in addition to those already mentioned (pp188-194). These include:

- To deepen the quality of learning, in the form of critical thinking or developing a questioning attitude
- To enable learners to understand their own learning process
- To increase active involvement in learning and personal ownership of learning
- To enhance professional practice or the professional self in practice
- To enhance the personal valuing of the self towards self-empowerment
- To enhance creativity by making better use of intuitive understanding
- To free-up writing and the representation of learning
- To provide an alternative 'voice' for those not good at expressing themselves
- To foster reflective and creative interaction in a group

Learning is inherent in any process of expression, that is, in any way of giving form to the world as experienced. No matter for what reason we write the lens of learning is an important way of viewing writing. This is not to say that learning is the only perspective on journal writing, but to acknowledge that journal writing is intimately associated with learning, no matter what else it may aim to do.

## **Learning and reflection**

There are many ways of thinking about journal writing in relation to learning. We can look at what journals show that their writers have learned, we can examine how writers have learned to express themselves in journals or we can see how journals can help other people learn. The most important aspect for our present purposes though is how individuals can use journals to enhance their own learning.

The process of exploring how journals assist their writers learn is commonly described in terms of how they can enhance reflection and reflective practice. Reflection has been described as a process of turning experience into learning. That is, of exploring experience in order to learn new things from it. Reflection has been described as ‘those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations.’ (Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985: 19)

Reflection involves taking the unprocessed, raw material of experience and engaging with it to make sense of what has occurred. It involves exploring often messy and confused events and focusing on the thoughts and emotions that accompany them. It can be undertaken as an informal personal activity for its own sake, or as part of a structured course. Within a course, it may focus on special activities contrived as a stimulus for learning (eg. workshop activities), on events of the past (eg. what learners bring to the course from prior experience), or on concurrent placements in workplaces and the community. In the discussion that follows, the term ‘event’ is used to refer to any activity from which learning may result whether it is in a classroom, a workshop, a formally scheduled placement or the incidents of life.

Any of these events provide the base material for journal writing and reflective practice. In learning terms, the journal is both the place where the events and experiences are recorded as well as the forum in which they are processed and re-formed. This working with events is intended to make sense of the experiences that result, to recognise the learning that results and to lead to a foundation for new experiences that will in turn provoke new learning.

### **Models of reflection**

The most familiar approach to reflection has been that developed by the late Donald Schön in his books of the reflective practitioner (1983, 1987). Schön argues that a vital attribute of all effective practitioners, no matter in what area they operate, is that they are able to reflect on their ongoing experience and learn from it. He describes examples of architects, musicians, therapists, teachers and others reflecting on what they do as they go about their everyday practice. He calls this reflection-in-action. Just as important as this aspect of reflection, however, is the considered reflection that takes place away from the press of immediate action when we pause and take stock of what we are doing. This may occur driving home at the end of the day, in the bathtub or when discussing what we do with colleagues or friends.

It is in this latter category that journal writing most often fits. Writing is a means of puzzling through what is happening in our work and in our lives. In some courses it is formalised even further and very specific guidelines and workbooks may be provided. However, in this chapter I want to focus on those features of reflection that aid learning independent of particular course requirements. Later in it, I shall discuss how some course requirements and influences from the contexts in which journal writing occurs inadvertently inhibits the very learning which writing is designed to foster.

In parallel with Schön’s work on reflective practice, I have been involved in exploring reflection from the point of view of someone trying to learn from their normal complex and unruly experience. Over a number of years I have been involved with colleagues in developing a model for learning from experience and the place of reflection in it. We have done this to provide a means of focussing the attention of learners, and those who assist them, on some of the key features that appear to inhibit or facilitate learning (Boud, Keogh and Walker 1985, Boud and Walker 1990, Boud and Walker 1998). Each aspect of the model has implications for journal writing.

To highlight the varieties and forms of journal writing discussed elsewhere in this book which can be used to facilitate reflection and learning from experience, I describe the main features of the model and discuss the implications for journal writing of each in turn.

The basic assumption of the model is that learning is always grounded in prior experience and that any attempt to promote new learning must take account of that experience. All learning builds on existing perceptions and frameworks of understanding and links must be made between what is new and what already exists if learners are to make sense of what is happening to them. Learners bring to any event their *personal foundation of experience*. This is a way of describing the influence of all their previous experiences on them now. Past experiences profoundly affect perceptions of what does and does not count as important, it acts to sensitise us to some features of our world and blind us to others and it shapes the *intent* we have which guides our priorities.

The second assumption is that the process of learning from experience is necessarily an active one involving learners engaging with the events of which they are part. Much of the benefit of participating in any event derives from how we can shape our participation to suit our goals.

### **Occasions of reflection**

While reflection is conventionally thought of as taking place after something has happened, such a view can tend to construct learners as passive respondents to events. It is useful to consider three occasions of reflection: in anticipation of events, during them and afterwards. Journal writing has a significant role to play at each of these times.

#### *Reflection in anticipation of events*

The emphasis here is on what we can do to make the most of future events. What might usefully be taken into account in preparing ourselves for what is to come? While we can never fully predict what will occur, the model suggests that there are three main aspects to take into account. Firstly, a focus on the learner. What intent and specific goals do we bring to the event? What are our expectations of the event and the outcomes? How strongly do we hold our intentions, and will these blind us to other possibilities of which we are as yet unaware? Journals can be used to explore what we want from involvement in any activity. We write about what we bring to the situation, what we want out of it and what we need to be mindful of which may distract us from our intentions. The more complex and unfamiliar the situation, the more difficult it will be to keep track of the reason for being there.

The second consideration is a focus on all aspects of the context. Usually, many if not most of the features of an event are given and cannot be altered. Sometimes we are briefed on what might happen, but often we have to discover this for ourselves. Journal writing helps clarify questions we need to address about the situation we are entering, that is, what we need to know to make the event a productive one for us. Other people may have quite different to us about what will happen. This is particularly true of work placements where the learner must fit with the everyday practices of the workplace. How may people there view things and what are the implications of that? Journals can be used here to record what we know of the context and what is possible.

The third aspect is a focus on learning skills and strategies. It is not sufficient to focus on what we bring and what the context will be like, we need also to equip ourselves to make use of the opportunities available. What must we notice in order to be fully involved and understand what is going on? What guides or learning-to-learn strategies can we usefully develop and take with us? What might we need to rehearse before we start? Journals allow us to practice imaginary scenarios, to ask 'what if', to plan what we need to take to the event, to try out forms of record keeping that might be suitable and to trial conversations and interactions with key players we will meet. A useful question to ask at this stage is what will I do if my assumptions about the event are wrong? What will I be able to fall back on to cope effectively?

### *Reflection in the midst of action*

It is engagement with an event that constitutes a learning experience. The model points to key features of learning in the midst of action. Through *noticing*, *intervening* and *reflection-in-action* we can steer ourselves through events in accordance with what our intentions are and what we take with us to help us through the process.

*Noticing* is about becoming aware of what is happening in and around us. It is directed towards both the external world of events and the internal world of a thoughts and feelings. Noticing affects the extent to which we become actively involved in the process, whether or not this is observable by others. *Intervening* refers to actions we take to change the situation we find ourselves in. Again, intervening may not be overt and noticeable to others. The conscious decision not to speak, or to focus attention on thoughts and feelings rather than external activities, are forms of intervention (intervention in our internal learning processes) just as much as a provocative question or a physical act.

*Reflection-in-action* describes the process of working with noticing and intervening to interpret events and the effects of one's interventions. For much of the time these factors are invisible and unconscious and, as Schön eloquently points out, they are part of the artistry of effective practice. However, in developing expertise of any kind it can often be helpful to become more deliberate and conscious of the process and aware of the decisions being made by others and ourselves. It is through exposing these decisions to scrutiny that the assumptions behind them can be identified and a conscious decision taken to act from a new perspective.

While there may be few opportunities to write in the heat of the moment when events are rapidly changing, enough needs to be recorded to prompt fuller exploration when there is time to do so. On some occasions it may be possible to schedule timeout for reflection. This can be particularly useful in some placements as journal writing can be used to prompt awareness of new features of the situation and plan new interventions that can be implemented almost immediately and the effects observed.

### *Reflection after events*

Much important reflection can occur once the immediate pressure of acting in real time has passed. Some learning inevitably takes time and the ability to view particular events in a wider context. Reflection following events has been discussed in the literature for many years, but it is important to emphasise that it is not simply a process of thinking, but one also involving feelings, emotions and decision-making. We can regard it as having three elements: *return to experience*, *attending to feelings* and *re-evaluation of experience*. These are features of reflection at all stages and what is written here is also applicable at earlier stages.

*Return to experience*. The base of all learning is the lived experience of the learner. To return to this and recapture it in context with its full impact allows for further reflection. Often too little emphasis is placed on what has happened and how it was experienced at the time. Judgements about this are made prematurely and possibilities for further learning can be shut out forever. Mentally revisiting and vividly portraying the focus experience in writing can be an important first step. The role of journal writing here is to give an account of what happened and retrieve as fully as possible the rich texture of events as they unfolded. The emphasis is on conjuring up the situation afresh and capturing it in a form that enables it to be revisited with ease.

*Attending to feelings*. As part of returning to the experience, we need to focus on the feelings and emotions which were (or are) present. These feelings can inhibit or enhance possibilities for further reflection and learning. Feelings experienced as negative may need to be discharged or sublimated otherwise they may continually distort all other perceptions and block understanding; those experienced as positive can be celebrated as it is these which will enhance the desire to pursue learning further.

Expressive writing has a particular role in working with our feelings. Journals are not just the place for writing prose. Images, sketches, poems, the use of colour and form and differently drawn words are among devices that can be used as vehicles to express ways of experiencing. Stream of consciousness writing in which words are poured out without pause for punctuation, spelling or self-censorship can be of value here. Rainer (1980) has, for example, many good examples of expressive forms of writing.

*Re-evaluation of experience.* Re-acquaintance with the event and attending to and expressing the thoughts and feelings associated with it, can prepare the ground for freer evaluation of experience than is often possible at the time. The process of re-evaluation includes, relating new information to that which is already known; seeking relationships between new and old ideas; determining the authenticity for ourselves of the ideas and feelings which have resulted; and making the resulting knowledge one's own, a part of one's normal ways of operating. These aspects should not be thought of as stages through which learners should pass, but parts of a whole to be taken up as needed for any particular purpose.

These reflective processes can be undertaken in isolation from others, but doing so may often lead to a reinforcement of existing views and perceptions. Working one-to-one or with a group for which learning is the *raison d'être* can begin to transform perspectives and challenge old patterns of learning. It is only through give and take with others and confronting the challenges they pose that critical reflection can be promoted.

From the more diligent writing of return to experience, and the expressive modes of attending to feelings, re-evaluation is about finding shape, pattern and meaning in what has been produced. It involves revisiting journal entries, of looking again at what has been recorded, of adding new ideas and extensions of those partially formed. It addresses the question: what sense can I make of this and where does it lead me? It involves trying out new ideas and asking the 'what if' questions mentioned earlier. Re-evaluation is the end of one cycle and the beginning of another as new situations are imagined and explored.

### **Inhibiting reflection**

So far this chapter has focused on occasions of reflection and ways journal writing can be positively used at different times and in different modes. However, there are many features of the contexts in which writing occurs that get in the way of learning and block reflection completely. The exploration of the self that reflection involves requires a relatively protected environment in which one is not continually preoccupied by defending oneself from the scrutiny of others. This is not to say that journal writing cannot usefully take place in the most adverse of conditions. The prison diaries and notebooks of such various thinkers as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1943-1945) and Antonio Gramsci (1927-1935) are testimony to the power of reflective writing. The conditions of contemporary journal writers in formal courses may be less physically oppressive, but nonetheless they can inhibit reflection.

The more that journal writing moves into the realm of critical reflection, that is, the questioning of taken-for-granted assumptions about oneself, one's group, or the conditions in which one operates, the more it is necessary to consider the inhibiting gaze of others. The more that journals are used to focus on those characteristics of reflection such as 'perplexity, hesitation, doubt' (Dewey 1933), 'inner discomforts' (Brookfield 1987) or 'disorienting dilemmas' (Mezirow 1990), the greater the account which needs to be taken of the interventions of those who may read one's writing.

#### *Who is the reader?*

One of the main inhibitors is the prospect of others reading one's journal. These could be peers, employers, teachers or indeed anyone. The expectation of writing for an external audience can profoundly shape what we write and even what we allow ourselves to consider. The range of consequences of being read by others can stretch from mild

embarrassment to loss of a job or even worse. For example, revealing ones negative feelings about the difficulties of classroom practice could have a substantial influence on how a student teacher is seen by supervisors and may lead to failure to graduate. Whether or not this is the reality of the situation, simply imagining such an occurrence may be a barrier to recording such feelings.

Keeping journals private, away from the eyes of others, can be a useful principle to adopt in courses. It means that writing may not be as constrained, as it would be if it were going to be revealed to others. At the very least, the postponing of decisions about whether writing is to be revealed, to whom and in what form, can be liberating. It can release creativity and a flow of representation that can always, later, be censored and shaped for others.

### *Formal assessment*

Many of the ideas about learning from experience have developed in situations unconstrained by the requirements of educational institutions. Therefore great care needs to be taken in translating them into a formal setting. One feature of accredited learning has considerable potential to adversely effect learning through journal writing. It is the assessment practices of the program in which a student is enrolled. A particular common example is that of grading and assessment of journals.

The conventions of assessment demand that students display their best work for it to be judged. Students are therefore interested in portraying themselves in the best light possible. It is in their interests to demonstrate what they know and disguise what they don't know. This is quite the opposite of what is required for reflection. Reflection involves a focus on uncertainty, on perplexing events, of exploration without necessarily knowing where it will lead. It is in the interests of their learning for them to express their doubts, to reveal their lack of understanding and to focus on what they don't know. There is therefore a tension between assessment and reflection that must be addressed in all courses where it may arise.

In my own teaching, for example, I encourage students to keep portfolios of reflective material, but say from the start that I will not view them. I point out that unless they feel sufficiently free to write things in their journals they would be embarrassed for me to read, then they are probably not using them sufficiently freely for them to be good examples of reflection. This does not mean that students cannot use items from their journals in assignments, but that there is a clear separation of writing for learning and writing for assessment purposes. In order to emphasise this distinction, I include as one assignment the production of a self-assessment statement which draws from, but which is distinct from, students' confidential learning portfolios (Boud 1992).

There are some situations in which it may be appropriate to assess journals (Moon 1999b: 91-107 and in Fenwick and English's later chapter in this book). These include, for example, preparation for professional practice in which the use of case notes and commentaries on them are part of normal work. However, it is important to distinguish from the start journals that are essentially available for public or semi-public inspection and those which are designed to prompt reflection. It is misleading to treat all forms of journal writing as equivalent to each other. Their purposes constrain their form, and the use of a single term—journal writing—to convey such widely differing purposes is confusing and risky.

### **Conclusion**

Journal writing is a multifaceted activity that can take many forms for many purposes. It can be used in many different ways to promote reflection. Different strategies and devices can be used at different stages of learning to focus on events anticipated as well as those that have passed.

The conditions under which journal writing takes place can have a powerful influence on what is produced and the extent to which writers can engage in critical reflection. If journals are to be used in courses then great care needs to be taken about how they relate to assessed work. In general, reflective activities should be distinguished from those graded.

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