References


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Electronic Journaling: Using the Web-Based, Group Journal for Service-Learning Reflection

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Student journaling is a fundamental reflective activity in many service-learning classrooms. This paper introduces the Web-based, interactive group journal as a potent, highly efficient, and research-based alternative to traditional, privately-kept journals. This journaling alternative is described in detail as it has been used in the last four semesters of an undergraduate service-learning course, and instructor and student assessments of this approach are presented.

Reflection, Journaling, and Service-Learning: A Brief View of the Research

Reflective practice, in which service-learning students monitor their own reactions and thinking processes in a deliberate manner, is an essential element of quality teaching in service-learning (Eyler & Giles, 1997, 1999; Silcox, 1993). "The hyphen in service-learning," reflective activities provide a vital link between student activity and academic learning in the service-learning process (Eyler & Giles, 1999). Student journaling, in which students privately record their service-learning experiences through informal, personalized writing, takes its place alongside classroom and small-group discussions, written papers, and faculty-student conversations in the spectrum of reflective practices used in the service-learning classroom.

Journals occupy a unique place in the array of reflective practices by giving students a safe place to withdraw temporarily and create an ongoing, informal record of meaningful aspects of their own learning process. de Acosta (1995) writes that journals rarely reflect ideas that are already fixed in a student's mind. Rather, journalers engage in "meaning-making" as they choose observations, thoughts, feelings, and connections to record. Journaling is particularly salient in the context of community service because such meaning-making directly relates to students' decisions regarding their course of action in the field.

Furthermore, there is some evidence that undergraduate journaling can actually accelerate the ability to cope with significant stressors. Poonhoolder, Colder, and Sharp (1990) found that college freshmen who wrote about coming to college fared better
in terms of health, grade-point average, and positive racial bias than a control group who spent the same amount of journaling time writing on superficial topics. This finding relates directly to service-learning since, for many students, community volunteering presents brand new environmental challenges and journaling may prove an effective tool in this process (Eyer, Giles, & Schmide, 1996). The quantitative and qualitative data amassed in these studies offer vast information regarding service-learning and the reflective process.

Eyer and Giles' (1999) work is particularly relevant in discussing journaling because it isolated the incidence and impact of written reflection and the impact of reflective discussions. Of the 1,100 service-learning students they surveyed, about 60% kept a journal, and roughly a quarter of these students wrote in their journals "very often." Written reflection — combining journal writing with other more formal writing assignments — was found to be a significant predictor for the measures of student tolerance, personal development, openness to facul-
ty, critical thinking, transformed perspective, and some measures of learning and application. In addition, qualitative data from these studies underscores the importance of the journaling process for service-learning students. Student comments mirrored many of the findings from the de Acosta (1995) study mentioned above. Several students said help students process their field experience, brought clarity to the important issues, allowed for a living record of the learning process over time, and aided other types of written and verbal reflection. In a final analysis of reflective practice elements related to positive academic impact in service-learning classroom, Eyer and Giles (1999) describe five main principles that emerged from their data. Coining the "Five C's" of quality reflection, these principles are: 1) Connection, characterized by reflective activities that encourage students to see the connectedness of their own service-learning experience; 2) Continuity, characterized by a flow of reflective activity in the students' thoughts before, during, and after service experience; 3) Character, characterized by reflective activities encouraging students to see the specific subject matter being applied to real problems; 4) Challenge, characterized by reflective activities challenging students' pre-service perspectives in a manner sensitive to student needs; and 5) Coaching, characterized by reflective journaling by students in workshops and readings that guide them in their own learning. This paper later discusses how switching to a technology-assisted group journaling format dramatically increased my ability to provide these "Five C's" of quality reflection.

The Evolution of a Journaling Component Background

The required, three-hour undergraduate course "Teaching at Florida State University serves approximately 50 Family and Child Science majors per year, and each student to serve 60 hours in the community over the semester. Although the needs of the students are seniors, for many of their service is a first encounter with work in the helping professions. At the beginning of the semester, students choose community placements from an array of service opportunities after an invited panel of site supervisors comes into the classroom and describes the service opportunities available in their respective organizations. Because students have different interests from early children to the elderly, separate groups of students may choose placements in child development programs such as Head Start, adolescent residential programs such as Girls & Boys Town, programs serving adult needs such as parent education or drug abuse, or programs serving the elderly such as Elder Care Services.

Students begin their service after two weeks of basic orientation in the classroom. Once their service begins, class time is split between brief lectures on topics that cut across service areas and student discussion of their service experience. Students bring a short paper to every class covering an aspect of their experience, and they have the opportunity to discuss these papers both in small groups and in the larger classroom. Class time is also supplemented by guest lecturers and panelists from the community called in to address specific problems identified by the students from their service experience. This is currently my fifth semester teaching the class in this format.

My Experience With Traditional Journaling

In addition to the aforementioned written and verbal reflection opportunities, weekly student journals are required. The first semester I taught this course I asked students to keep journals in personal composition books. On the first day of class, I read aloud the "Five C's" of quality reflection, the principles are: 1) Connection, characterized by reflective activities that encourage students to see the connectedness of their own service-learning experience; 2) Continuity, characterized by a flow of reflective activity in the students' thoughts before, during, and after service experience; 3) Character, characterized by reflective activities encouraging students to see the specific subject matter being applied to real problems; 4) Challenge, characterized by reflective activities challenging students' pre-service perspectives in a manner sensitive to student needs; and 5) Coaching, characterized by reflective journaling by students in workshops and readings that guide them in their own learning. This paper later discusses how switching to a technology-assisted group journaling format dramatically increased my ability to provide these "Five C's" of quality reflection.

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Blackboard allows students to easily register themselves online. Whenever they subsequently log onto the site, they are only a few clicks away from the journaling area.

I introduced this journaling component to my students with traditional journals. I explain the journaling process and its benefits, describing an open format encouraging students to share their thoughts and feelings about service-learning experiences in whatever prose style suits them. I also explain that although I occasionally provide prompts to guide entries, these prompts should not take priority over something they feel is more urgent.

Regarding class credit, I award credit for each week’s required entry. In past semesters I asked students to make two entries per week, suggesting one of these should respond to another student’s entry. However, I found one required entry per week is sufficient; some students make more, and most students naturally comment on others’ entries in the course of their own weekly offering. At the beginning of the semester and throughout this process I stress the importance of confidentiality. Using client names or other identifying information is forbidden. Because the rules of confidentiality are stressed throughout this course, students are highly attuned to this professional practice, and this has not been a problem.

Regarding my voice in the journaling process, I have the best success by minimizing my own posts to the discussion board. My experience is that students find entries more candid and meaningful in a personal and peer context. I inserted my voice more often in the first semester I used this approach, and felt that as a result many students framed their entries as messages to me or deferred to me as the “expert” on the scene. Now, I approach feedback on the journal entries in a few different ways. Occasionally I post an entry in the public journal area to address a question clearly calling for my judgment or support, and for the benefit of the class as a whole. More often, however, I individually reply to journal entries through personal e-mail to only the student making the entry, or I will comment on an entry or a current journaling theme during ongoing class discussions. This “hands-off” approach to the formal journaling process empowers a community of journaling students to treat the environment as their own creative space.

Electronic Group Journaling: A Personal Assessment

While I was fairly certain that the new group journaling format would mirror most of the educational assets of the privately kept journal, my primary concern was that students would not feel as free to express vulnerabilities in a peer context. Would the cathartic component of journaling highlighted in the aforementioned qualitative student journaling research translate to the group context? Would students still be able to use journaling to express fears, doubts, frustrations, and insecurities? Would the intensely personal aspect of journaling be lost?

I have found journal entries in the electronic group format have, for the most part, been as personal in nature as the traditional, privately kept journals. My impression is that students who feel comfortable sharing their journaled vulnerabilities with their instructor also feel comfortable using their journal in this way in front of their peers, provided that the atmosphere is respectful and welcoming. So far, the journaling environment has maintained these qualities of safety, partly because I underscore and model throughout the process what students already know about journaling—all entries must be respectfully received.

Moreover, the group format provides an added bonus in this area—the ability for students to recognize and respond to vulnerabilities in the same service setting. Following are three separate entries in which three students involved in a parenting education project simultaneously express their own fears and attempt to comfort each other:

Student 1: My primary fear about volunteering is that the parents are going to think I’m a jock. I mean, come on, if I were a parent I would laugh at some young college student trying to get up and tell me how to parent. I don’t have any children. I’ve worked with children since I was 15, but it isn’t the same. Who am I to tell these parents that the way they handle their children now isn’t right but that I have the answer? But how do I go in there and say, “OK, now I’m going to fix you!” But, I am incredibly nervous that I won’t be taken seriously.

Student 2: We have discussed this together, and I am totally with you on being nervous. Parents are intimidating. And it’s not so much the idea that I’m up there pretending to know how to parent, and being someone who has no kids. It’s the fear of not having the answer, or wanting to fix something that takes them working to fix. Like [our site supervisor], said we are a “fix it” society. The fear for me is that I won’t know what to say in some situations. Praise God we are not doing this alone.

Student 3: Let me just tell you that I have a 6-year old daughter and a 15-year old step-daughter, and yet I don’t feel any more worried to teach this course than you do. But I do want to remind you (and myself) of something that the Leader’s Manual stated. We are not authorities on parenting, the curriculum is the authority. Which basically gets us off the hook, because we don’t have to pretend to be something we are not (if we did, the parents would see right through us anyway). We are simply trained to teach this particular curriculum (plus a degree in Child Development can’t hurt)... You are going to do great! It will be a learning experience for all of us.

The above journaling interaction is typical of the kind of supportive students regularly give one another in their weekly entries. It is difficult to describe how important this aspect of the interactive journal has been to students struggling with difficult experiences at their sites. Students at sites such as hospitals and abuse shelters have regular encounters with client problems that leave them shaken to the core. The interactive journal allows them, day or night, to log on, share these experiences while they are fresh, and receive immediate comfort and feedback from others at their site and in our class. In a typical post, one student commented:

As I have been reading through the journals each week, there is one thing that I have noticed. I can’t decide whose journal to reply to because I have had the same experiences as almost everyone. It is comforting to know that we all have the same emotions for the children and we are all going through similar episodes.

Becoming more experienced with facilitating the journaling process, I find that some students are more likely to feel comfortable expressing their emotions if they are prompted to do so. For instance, the interaction between the three parent educators cited above took place in the students’ first week of service, after I suggested that students might journal about their greatest fear. My experience is that it is easier for students to take emotional risks when others do the same.

Another real advantage of the interactive journal format is that students share observations with each other and puzzle together over aspects of their experience that confuse or interest them. Following is an interaction around the subject of race. Both students served in child development settings with predominantly African American children and staff. I became involved in this interaction to model the open discussion of race:

Student 1: I was just wondering if any of you that have worked with kids in the past have noticed that children in day care are like from
A child in a day care has been too used to adults coming in and out of their lives that they don’t seem afraid of anything. I was in the center for about three seconds and got a hug from a child… no other setting in the world allows for that. I have worked in the public school setting as well as day care and kids don’t just walk up to you and give you hugs. I was also apprehensive because I am the only male and the only white staff person, with only one white student in the entire center. It seemed not to matter as the children saw past that and were able to accept me for who I was. I just thought that was an interesting observation I noticed the other day.

Professor response: I agree that it is striking how affectionate the children are at Head Start. My experience goes all the way into the kids that tend to be more (immediately) affectionate at Head Start, I like your idea that it has to do with the kids’ experience of adults coming in and out of their lives. I wonder if Head Start centers with predominantly African American kids might have more of that (immediate affectionate) environment because the extended families are stronger in the African American community. Maybe the kids are more used to being cared for and watched over by adults beyond just their immediate nuclear family, and so they warm more quickly to new adults. Of course, this is pure speculation and must fit in with the experience of those in other centers.

Student 2: [Student 1] and Dr. Mills I would like to commend you on your observation. As an African-American I can say that I am open to allowing people in and out of my life. As a child my family lived in an apartment complex, and all of the residents took a part in raising every child that lived within that community. As a child I got into a fight with another child in the apartment complex. There was an old lady who scolded me, and told me fighting was wrong. Later in the day I had to deal with my mother, because the lady informed her of my behavior. It is not uncommon for many individuals to come in and out of those kids’ lives. As you can see at a young age they learn to embrace the short time they have with each individual.

I have come to believe that for some students, this journaling atmosphere is a more comfortable place to broach potentially sensitive subjects. Perhaps this is because a journal is a place where “thinking out loud” is expected and encouraged. Most students do not feel the thoughts or emotions expressed through journaling have to necessarily be “appropriate” or stated in their most finished form. This allows students the benefit of discovering and sharing their own perspective in an evolving, low-pressure atmosphere.

Having regular access to students’ substantive questions about their service experience has been a real advantage in classroom discussions. In the following interaction, students placed at a brand new charter school discuss some important theoretical questions facing alternative education:

Student 1: Everything is going well at the school. My class just started preparing for the FCAT test [Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test]. I am really excited that the school didn’t try to focus on FCAT throughout the school year instead of just the last two weeks. I mean it’s overemphasized for the students. Also considering that this is a charter the students are not familiar with assessments and testing. What do you think should be done? Do you think this is effective? I mean the school has no kind of way to assess and evaluate the students skills and abilities. How do the educators know that they are successfully understanding all of the material?

Student 2: I have the same concerns you do about all of the testing. I think many of the parents do as well and I think more preparation will help them understand the test. I also think that the school is so new, I was just at the school today and the children already in the K-2 class were preparing worksheets for the FCAT. Some of the students seemed understood, but for most it was difficult. So I see that yes this is a problem and I see how slowly the teachers are realizing this.

Student 1: Thanks for replying to my comment. But anyways you are absolutely right about the FCAT testing. It has totally slipped my mind that this school is just beginning to develop. So I require more time and adjustment to prepare the students adequately. Thanks for helping me realize that. Anyways, I was at the school yesterday and me and another intern were talking about public vs. charter. What are the advantages and disadvantages? We both argued that public schools have more advantages. Well, I have to cut this short. Talk to you later.

This journaling conversation alerted me to the students’ concerns, and in our next class I joined this site’s small group discussion and was able to answer several of their questions. In a later class, the educator who piloted the charter of this school joined us and clarified several points about the development of this new school.

In addition to the pedagogical advantages, there have been considerable practical benefits to this journaling approach. Keeping up with the journaling is easy — I spend a few minutes each day reading the latest entries and keep my finger on the pulse of the student experience. Furthermore, because the journals reside online, I do not have to return them, and can look back and review past entries to see how a student or service site is progressing. Sometimes journal entries alert me to problems occurring at a particular site, and I can quickly intervene with the on-site supervisor to avoid a more serious problem. More often, however, journal entries simply allow me daily access to the most salient thoughts and experiences of my students, allowing my much fuller engagement in the learning process. Checking in on student journaling is often the highlight of my day as an instructor, and the effort-to-benefit ratio is nothing short of outstanding.

Adherence to the Five Cs of Quality Reflection

The practice of Web-based, interactive journaling incorporates the Five Cs of quality reflection proposed by Eylter and Gileas (1999) mentioned earlier in this paper. Connection is the heart of this journaling approach. Students are connected to each other in the journaling effort, within and across areas of service. Access to others’ experiences serving the same community underscores the connections inherent in human service work like perhaps no other component of this class. Continuity is a salient feature of this process; students do not have to wait for class or chance encounters with their peers to experience a continuous stream of dialogue around their service experience. Content is the engine driving the process; students share information and knowledge relating specifically to the social service culture of their placement, and place these conversations in the context of our ongoing classroom dialogue. Challenge is dramatically increased in this format; student opinions and experiences regarding their sites are diverse, and students are regularly challenged to understand and respect how peers process events differently from themselves. Commitment is dramatically increased in this format. Not only are our opportunities to mentor and support students in specific situations increased, but also students serve a coaching function for each other that tremendously helps them negotiate their service experiences.

Student Assessment

In my end-of-semester evaluation packet, I ask students to anonymously rate each course component on a 1-5 satisfaction rating scale (higher number means more satisfied) and offer comments on experiences or suggest improvements for this component. I have received three semesters worth of evaluative data. In the current semester, I asked students to include any thoughts about the journaling experience in their weekly entry.

The average Likert rating from the last three full semesters of anonymous evaluations was 4.04. Written comments were diverse but clustered around a few themes. The few negative comments predominantly focused on two issues: difficulty remembering to post in any given week, and not having time to read other students’ posts. One student who rated the journaling assignment a 3 commented “It was a pain, at times. I’m a traditional journal girl but I liked it more once I got used to it.” The most negative comment so far came from a student whose class had to post two journal entries per week rather than one. She wrote:

I hated the Electronic Journaling. It was so hard to keep up with. It’s harder for those who have a busy schedule, and who may not have access to a computer every time. It would probably be better to have journals on paper or [to give] an extended [time] for students to keep up with.

A few students asked for an occasional “topic of the week,” and incorporating prompts this semester proved beneficial.

Overall, ratings for the journaling component were extremely high, with positive comments spread across the traditional journaling and the ability to connect with other student experiences in an informal atmosphere. One student wrote that journaling provided “a time to reflect on our experience that week on a ‘more relaxed’ level.” Another wrote, “I really enjoyed keeping this record of my experiences. I made copies of them for my personal development folder!” One student said that the journaling “enabled us to express our ideas/emotions about the practicum. I thought this was a great idea.”

Most comments mentioned the advantages of journal interaction. One student said,

I liked journaling a lot. It gave us a chance to say things about our sites and read what happened that week to our fellow classmates that we don’t get to discuss in class. It also gave us a chance to know a little bit about everybody.

Another explained,

I love this journaling. I’ve taken other classes that were online and it drove me nuts. However, in this class, it’s life dropping notes to others in your situation. I check this site daily. (At least) I read up in other sites that interested me. I check on friends and how
they are doing. I think that based on the nature of the class, it is necessary. I'm sure it could be done without the journal; however, it wouldn't be the same. I love knowing how others in my class are doing, what they love about it and what drives them

Finally, in a comment that captures many of this approach's positive points that have been mentioned, one student wrote,

I think electronic journaling is an excellent idea for classes like this because of the outside work that it entails. This discussion board provides students with the opportunity to ask questions and have others respond to them at any time of the day. It helps because we can write about situations that occurred at our sites, right when we get home and it is still fresh in our minds. It is also a less threatening way for us to talk about issues because we are not in person, the discussion is over e-mail. I think electronic journaling also helps with cohesion of students that are at the same sites. It allows us time to hear about everyone else's experience and does not take away from class time.

Conclusion

I have attempted to make a case for a new, Web-based approach to student journaling that simultaneously maximizes the benefits of journaling and responds to practical burdens of the service-learning endeavor. This approach offers students the traditional sanctity of a personal and privately recorded account of their experience in a connected context allowing for feedback, encouragement, and continuous challenges from their instructor and peers. With Web-based, interactive journaling I am afforded an extra measure of daily involvement in the service-learning process, and the journal impressively serves both individual and classroom needs. No other reflective component of this course more consistently adheres to the attributes of quality reflection in service-learning literature, and no other component more efficiently reflects daily student experience for the entire class to register and contemplate.

Research and theory underscore the importance of high quality reflective practice to service-learning classroom success, and yet, high quality reflective practice does not occur in a vacuum. Service-learning instructors must provide a stimulating and organized forum for intensive, high quality reflection to occur, and this must be done in a teaching context that is already burdened with a starting degree of organizational demand (Korfinechter, 1999). It is imperative that we take advantage of smart, efficient methods for facilitating quality student reflection whenever those methods are available. To this end, I believe the Web-based, interactive group journal is an invaluable option for quality reflection in the service-learning classroom.

Notes

1 For a list and brief review of popular systems, see Marsh, Price, & McFadden, 1999. Keep in mind, however, that this technology is rapidly advancing: each CMS of interest to instructors should be researched through that company's current Web site.

2 Use of the Web-based, course management system is steadily rising at Florida State University. As of Spring 2001, 1,052 course sections utilizing Blackboard. This company alone currently serves over 3,000 educational institutions.

3 Most of my students make a natural practice of confirming others' entries before presenting an alternate point of view. However, our major has a significant therapeutic component, and many of the students have taken at least one basic counseling course. In other student populations it may be prudent to explicitly discuss and establish the interactive expectations of the journaling community at the beginning.

References


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