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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. Pennebaker, Colder, and Sharp (1990) found that college freshmen who wrote about coming to college fared better

"I think journals are pretty effective, but the problem with journals is that it's so self-contained and you can't share your reflections with other people. 'Cause sometimes it takes from somebody else's mouth. That really helps you reflect more...I think it's really...sharing ideas within the group --- verbalizing it --- then everybody learns. Everybody gains."

-University of Colorado student
(Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996, p. 37)

Student journaling has been heralded in service-learning literature as an effective teaching tool to help students reflect on their community service experience. Recent research validates the belief that journaling helps students discover, integrate, and apply the lessons of their service-learning experience on a broader, deeper, and more conscious level (de Acosta, 1995; Eyler & Giles, 1999; Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996).

This paper chronicles my experience with the journaling component of the service-learning course I teach in the department of Family & Child Sciences at Florida State University. I describe my transition from traditional, private journals to a Web-based, interactive format allowing students and myself immediate access to the journaling of their classmates over the course of the semester. I include a brief review of service-learning research as it relates to journaling, my pedagogical justification for switching formats, and details of how this technology works in my classroom. I also assess this approach and its results by focusing on actual journal entries and student evaluations received over the last four semesters.

in terms of health, grade-point average, and positive mood 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 volunteer work presents brand new environmental challenges and journaling may prove an effective tool in this process (Eyler, Giles, & Schmiede, 1996).

Educators from diverse fields support journaling as an effective tool to develop critical thinking skills (Fulwiler, 1987; Lukinsky, 1990). Fulwiler identified several types of journal entries to develop critical thinking, including general observations, questions, speculative statements, expressions of self-awareness, statements of synthesis, revision of previously held ideas, and the accumulation of new information.

de Acosta's (1995) analysis of 29 service-learning journals revealed that students used their journals in diverse ways. Some preferred to use journals simply as a log of detailed facts and events, but most integrated observations, thoughts, and feelings. Journaling served to focus students' attention on the aspects of their experience they considered most important. They explored their own beliefs and theories, and how their service work related to previous experiences, readings, and classroom discussions. Students also used journals to express complex feelings of fear, intimidation, and frustration related to their service. For many, the journal offered an opportunity to examine how their attitude and competency evolved over time.

Though there have been several studies focused on the academic outcomes of service-learning in higher education, only a handful have isolated the impact of reflective practice on such outcomes, and most of these have grouped journaling with other forms of reflective practice. Regarding general reflective practice, Eyler (1993) found that intensive reflection aided the transfer of academic concepts to service situations, and Myers-Lipton (1994, 1996) also found that intensive reflection was related to service-learning's impact on students.

In one of the most ambitious service-learning research reports to date, *Where's the Learning in Service-Learning?*, Eyler and Giles (1999) combined their findings from two national service-learning studies conducted in the last six years. The first study compared service-learning models through 1,100 student surveys from 20 different colleges (taken before and after a semester of service-learning), and added intensive interviews with 66 of these students from seven different institutions. The second study focused on the benefits of service-learning and specific approaches to reflect-

teach at Florida State University serves approximately 50 Family and Child Science majors per term, and asks each student to serve 60 hours in the community over the semester. Even though the majority of the students are seniors, for many 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 possibilities after an invited panel of site supervisors comes into the classroom and describes the service opportunity available in their respective organization. Because student interest ranges from very young 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 domestic 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 assigned aspect of their service experience, and they have the opportunity to discuss these papers both in small groups and 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 notebooks and hand them in for review at the semester mid-point and end. The first mid-point check-in revealed an extremely diverse response. While some student journals showed extensive, productive use, most lacked depth and purpose, seemingly thrown together at the last minute in one sitting by simply back-dating entries. Of additional concern was my discovery that handling and reading the journals was surprisingly labor-intensive. Scribbled in student penmanship that was often difficult to decipher, 50 notebooks lay in stacks around my office.

The final journal showed more students used the journal productively in the last half of the semester; there were more substantive entries demonstrating considerable investment in the service-learning process. I found myself thinking over and over

again, "I wish this student would have shared this insight or struggle in class or with me personally while it was happening!" More than once the journals revealed students simultaneously struggling with the same issues, and although they may have shared these struggles with each other in small-group discussions, I could not confirm this.

In short, I ended this first semester unhappy with the journaling component. End-of-term student evaluations revealed that they were not particularly pleased or motivated by the journaling component either. Students complained that it was too time-consuming for a course already demanding extensive amounts of their time, and others suggested I give more regular feedback.

Planning for the next semester, I was determined to overhaul the journaling component of the course in two main areas. First, I needed to access the student journals on a more regular basis without the considerable hassle of transporting physical journals or collecting and returning individual entries. Second, the journals strongly needed an ongoing feedback component, both from me and from fellow service-learning students in the course. I believed such feedback would increase student motivation to write in their journals, and that access to diverse peer opinions was consistent with literature concerning undergraduate development.

Pedagogical Considerations

Literature on students' moral and cognitive development clearly underscores the usefulness of undergraduate exposure to a multitude of perspectives (Blanchard-Fields, 1989; King & Kitchener, 1994; Perry, 1970, 1981). This literature tracks the evolution of undergraduate thinking from dualistic and authority-based to an increasing comfort with relative judgment, internal agency, and the ability to commit to a perspective while remaining open to other's thoughts. As students move along this continuum, activities exposing them to peers' thoughts, experiences, and observations are invaluable to the growth process.

In a review of literature on undergraduate learning, McKeachie, Pintrich, Lin, & Smith (1986) concluded that students' critical thinking skills were most improved by three pedagogical strategies: discussion among students, explicit emphasis on problem-solving methods using a variety of examples, and verbalization of methods and strategies. Angelo (1995) stressed that to help students build critical thinking skills, faculty must *continuously* monitor student learning throughout the term. This aim, combined with a belief that making one's own learning explicit promotes both meta-cognition and critical thinking skills, led many instructors to utilize a

The Evolution of a Journaling Component

Background

The required, three-hour undergraduate course I

form of reflection known as Classroom Assessment Techniques (CATs) (Angelo & Cross, 1993). CATs require students to reflect on their learning, usually by writing regular, brief responses to simple questions or prompts designed to capture their ongoing experience in the academic course. These responses are collected by the instructor, informally analyzed, and used in the next class period to both promote further discussion and to give feedback to students regarding the reported direction of their learning.

I wanted to coordinate a journaling environment that would allow for all of these learning elements and relatively easy monitoring. I sought a method for students to enjoy the benefits of private journaling without totally sacrificing the opportunity to share the mental, emotional, and problem-solving development of their peers. I wanted a format that would allow me to continuously monitor my students' learning processes even as they reflected on their own learning processes and the processes of their peers. The following sections review my attempt to technologically create this environment.

The Web-Based Group Journal

The next semester began my experimentation with the Web-based group journal that I have used with increasing success over the last four semesters. My class uses *Blackboard* (www.blackboard.com), a leading Web-based Course Management System (CMS), one of several popular and user-friendly CMS programs available.¹

I use Blackboard's "Discussion" function to host student journaling. Because the program allows me to set up separate forums within the basic Discussion area, student entries are organized according to their service site. For instance, a student serving at Head Start enters the Discussion section, clicks on "Head Start," and enters a forum with journal entries from other students placed at Head Start. They can make an independent entry with its own title heading or click on another student's entry and post a reply. Students must make one entry per week to their particular site group, but I also encourage them to visit the other site forums to read about and comment on what students at other sites are discussing.

I have found that students are excited about the concept of online journals and the ability to share and comment on peers' entries. Every semester a larger percentage of my class has previous experience with this technology, and those who do not seem eager to participate in this cutting-edge approach. I provide written instructions, and make sure students are aware of available campus computer resources. Like most CMS programs,

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 introduce this journaling component to my students as I would 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 educa-

tional 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.²

Moreover, the group format provides an added bonus in this area—the ability for students to recognize and respond to others' 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 joke.

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? I know I'm not supposed to 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 worthy 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 support 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 concerns 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

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 to prepare for the FCAT test [Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test]. I am pretty amused 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 overwhelming for the teachers and 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 happen but it will be slow just because the school is so new. I was just at the school today and the children already in the K-2 class were practicing worksheets for the FCAT. Some of the students 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 begun to develop. So it requires more time and adjustment to prepare the students successfully. 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. Thanks.

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 penned 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 journals

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 my day as an instructor, and the effort-to-benefit ratio is nothing short of outstanding.

Adherence to the Five C's of Quality Reflection

The practice of Web-based, interactive journaling incorporates the Five C's of quality reflection proposed by Eyler and Giles (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. *Context* is central in this approach; 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. *Coaching* increases dramatically in this format. Not only are my 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 com-

ponent. 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 busier 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 focusing on the traditional benefits of 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 journal "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 like dropping notes to others in your situation. I check this site daily. (At least) I even read up in other sites that interest me. I check on friends and how

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

they are doing. I think that based on the nature of the class, this 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 site are doing, what they love about it and what drives them nuts!

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

I think the electronic journaling is an excellent idea for classes to have, especially this class because of the outside work that it entails. This discussion board provides students with an 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 that 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 sanctuary of a personal and privately recorded account of their experience in a connected context allowing for feedback, encouragement, and continuous challenge 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 startling degree of organizational demand (Korfmacher, 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

I would like to thank Murray Krantz for his helpful comments regarding this manuscript.

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 utilized Blackboard. This company alone currently serves over 3,600 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.

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