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Following is an early version of a chapter that was published as follows:

Hiemstra, R. (2001). Uses and benefits of journal writing. In L. M. English & M. A. Gillen, (Eds.), *Promoting journal writing in adult education* (New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education, No. 90, pp. 19-26). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

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September, 2002

Journal writing in its variety of forms is used in various ways by adult learners; adult educators should consider the benefits in terms of enhancing learning and professional development.

Uses and Benefits of Journal Writing

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Journal writing as an instructional or learning tool in adult education has gained cogency during the past three decades. As early as 1965, psychologist Ira Progoff and his colleagues began seeing the value of personal journals in enhancing growth and learning. Progoff believed what he called an “intensive journal process” could “draw each person’s life toward wholeness at its own tempo. . . It systematically evokes and strengthens the inner capacities of persons by working from a non-medical vantage point and proceeding without analytic or diagnostic categories” (Progoff, 1975, p. 9).

Adult educator Malcolm Knowles (1975) introduced readers to notions of personal reflection through activities such as self-assessment and proactive reading of materials. Another useful source is Christensen (1981), in which she describes how a diary can be used as a learning tool for adults. Brookfield (1987, 1995) provides various ideas pertaining to critically reflective writing through such tools as autobiography, critical incident citing, and seeing ourselves as others see us.

However, even given more than three decades of use and attempts by a few adult educators to encourage personal reflection in various ways, journaling still remains underused as a teaching or learning tool. As a professor I have found tremendous value in the journaling process for those learners with whom I have interactions. Thus, this chapter reflects not only what others are saying about journal writing, but also my own personal experiences.

Why Use the Journaling Process?

Journaling in its various forms is a means for recording personal thoughts, daily experiences, and evolving insights. The process often evokes conversations with self, another person, or even an imagined other person. Add the advantage available in most

journaling formats of being able to review or reread earlier reflections and a progressive clarification of insights is possible.

In the adult education classroom, this learning method becomes a tool to aid learners in terms of personal growth, synthesis, and/or reflection on new information that is acquired. I urge my learners to use one of the journaling formats as a means for assisting them obtain the maximum amount of interaction, knowledge, and personal growth from their reading efforts or other learning experiences.

There also is the potential for a journaling technique to promote critical self-reflection where dilemmas, contradictions, and evolving worldviews are questioned or challenged. In the graduate classroom, for example, this may be an especially valued result as teachers attempt to facilitate a professional development in their learners. Learning something that is new or different and then reflecting on what that means for a current or expected professional position can be an important outcome. Some of my students include portions of a journal or diary in a professional portfolio as a means of demonstrating to current or prospective employers their ability to critically reflect on issues.

I also urge my students to incorporate such self-reflection through a journaling technique into the development of a personal statement of philosophy or a code of personal ethics (Hiemstra, 1999). “This recognition of personal values, beliefs, and the various changes a person undergoes throughout life, if combined with a personal philosophy statement, can result in foundational tools useful as guides or mirrors for subsequent professional action and ethical decision making” (Hiemstra, 1988, p. 178).

The purpose of the next section is to describe a variety of these journaling techniques, types, and formats. Several have been tailored to fit my particular instructional philosophy and approach, so you may need to make appropriate adjustments if you decide to use them in your own classroom (Hiemstra and Sisco, 1990). I have additional material related to many of the techniques at Hiemstra (2000).

Various Journal Types and Formats

A variety of journaling types and formats have been developed over the years. A literature search produces a plethora of types, descriptions, and examples. For purpose of this sourcebook I am including those I have found particularly useful in the graduate classroom. Each has advantages and disadvantages, but all are effective in helping students record information important to their efforts. Most students even use them to move beyond the knowledge and skills available through normal classroom activities.

Learning Journals. A learning journal typically is a hand written in a notebook or on a pad of paper as a means for recording thoughts, reflections, feelings, personal opinions, and even hopes or fears during an educational experience. However, students can use a tape recorder or computer keyboard. The point is to find a recording device that feels comfortable and enhances frequent writing. The comments included can come from stimulation received while reading course materials or talking with fellow students. They also can simply be random reflections obtained during a learning experience or just through participation in life. Progoff (1975) even suggests having simulated conversations with the inner self or real conversations with others, including obtaining feedback, as a means of furthering any value received from the process.

Throughout a course I recommend that students maintain a personal journal, diary, or log to

capture their growing understanding of the field, a particular subject, and/or their own professional development. This can include systematic observations of insights, events, and changes in personal perspectives during the course. Journaling, as it is often called, typically is one of the most complex of all forms for recording personal changes and insights. For many students, the process of maintaining a journal helps them become more organized and focused on the areas they are studying. There is often a bit of personal clarification that takes place, too, as the journaling process helps in the elucidation of opinions, beliefs, and feelings. Progoff (1975) outlines various tools or procedures to aid in the writing process, such as personal logs, daily logs, and life history logs.

In my courses I provide students with a large workbook of supplemental materials. I include a write up on keeping journals, diaries, reading logs, and theory logs and provide bibliographic references to several supportive sources. I also have on hand a few learning journals and diaries from previous students who have given me permission to share their materials with others needing to look at samples. I also suggest that students search the World Wide Web for samples of various journaling forms.

Diaries. A diary is typically a notebook, booklet of blank pages, or any source for students to record thoughts, reactions to learning experiences, and even innermost fears about a learning activity. Some learners prefer to create electronic or audio diaries. Regardless of the particular format, entries of daily experiences, insights, and problems often are made: “Diary writing usually involves the unstructured, chronological recording of the events of a person’s life” as they are perceived. “We have to recognize, however, that the mere fact of continuously writing entries, as is done in the keeping of a diary, is not sufficient in itself to bring about deep changes in a person’s life” (Progoff, 1975, p. 87).

Another feature of a diary is being able to look back on specific days or time periods in an attempt to sort out personal feelings. Combining such features with instructor feedback, the development of something like a statement of personal philosophy, and subsequent student writing and reflection can begin desired or even unanticipated personal changes. I recommend to learners Christensen’s (1981) work in which she describes how a personal diary can be used as a supplement to classroom activities.

Dream Book or Log. Many people are interested for personal or psychological reasons in recording and/or interpreting their dreams. This usually involves keeping a recording device (such as a tablet, notebook, and even tape recorder) on a nightstand to be used upon waking for recording the dream experience before it has faded from conscious memory. Subsequent analysis of those dreams can lead to interpreting how the subconscious might be directing or impacting on the conscious. I tell a student who is really struggling with some particular concept or subject to consider keeping a dream book or log for awhile as a means of obtaining new insights. Bethards (1997) describes how to examine such remembered or recorded symbols from a dream and tie them to potentially new understanding or knowledge.

Autobiographies, Life Stories, and Memoirs. Autobiographies, life stories, and memoirs can reveal the heart and soul of human existence. Autobiography focuses on self-assessment, life stories typically assess someone else’s life but can be used personally, and memoirs take a more informal approach to telling a life story. All three approaches present an account of someone’s life. Something like an autobiography can even be used as a way of understanding or gaining knowledge on a particular topic. For example, a student might obtain a better understanding of adult development by creating an autobiography that focuses on the various stages of personal development over two or more decades. This typically involves asking students to draw on their own lives and experiences, as well as the

lives of others with whom they have associated, to develop a critical self-reflection on some aspect of their personal development.

Not only do autobiographies, memoirs, and life stories encourage self-reflection, they also can promote a sharing of experiences with others to examine similarities and differences between individual life histories. Autobiography thus moves beyond learning as a solitary experience to one based on the potential of synergistic interaction with others.

Spiritual Journals. A spiritual journal usually is somewhat different than a regular journal or diary. It normally involves recording personal reactions to spiritual or religious matters. This particular approach may not match the needs of many adult students, especially if they are taking a course for credit, but occasionally a student with deep religious convictions will find the technique a useful companion to their other study activities. Spiritual journals also can be used in retreat settings where learners use mechanisms to help improve their self-understanding.

Professional Journals. Journals also can have a very specific purpose in mind. For example, asking a student to keep a professional growth and development journal can be very important, especially as they near completion of a degree program. Such a journal "may be written solely with the author in mind, or alternatively for a wider professional audience, possibly for colleagues, a tutor, or an assessor in courses in higher education contexts" (O'Hanlon, 1997, p. 168).

I ask my students in their final graduate seminar to keep a professional journal that includes developing a statement of professional commitment (Hiemstra, 1999). The professional journal then becomes part of the learner's professional portfolio and all these materials are shared with and critiqued by fellow seminar members and me.

Interactive Reading Log. The interactive reading log provides a mechanism for a student to critically reflect on information as it is read. It is essentially a series of reactions or responses to those elements in any material being read that is particularly meaningful or provocative. In essence, such logs enable learners to record aspects of what they are reading in their own voice or words (Perham, 1992). In a graduate course, the items selected for reaction typically include books, instructional media, and professional journal articles.

I recommend to my students that they use the following format: Begin with one or two introductory paragraphs describing the reasons for choosing whatever subject area was covered, include the log of reactions (this could be several pages constituting the bulk of the report), conclude with a two or three page retrospective overview of the effort as a whole, and supply a list of references utilized. I note that they can skip some sections in their reading efforts, skim others, read others at a normal rate, or read some passages more carefully and in depth. The spacing and number of reactions depend on the scope and purpose of any reading. It might involve including entire sentences or longer passages striking for their clarity, insight, stimulation, and usefulness. It might include items the student regards as ambiguous, exaggerated, poorly reasoned, insufficiently supported, or with which they disagree. They are even encouraged to have simulated conversations with any authors as a means of prompting clarification or new insights. The idea is to read and react letting the experience help in growth of knowledge and ability to practice critical reflection, and as a means of expressing personal thoughts in synthesizing the reading experience.

Theory Log. The assumption serving as a basis for this activity is that each student taking a

graduate course will need to learn to think and critically reflect on corresponding terminology, theory, and knowledge. Brookfield (1995) refers to this as reading theory critically. Throughout a learning experience, students who choose to keep a theory log are asked to make notes regarding what they perceive to be theoretical concepts, salient points, truths, bridges to known theory, ideas to be tested, and gaps in the knowledge. They are encouraged to ask various kinds of epistemological, experiential, communicative, or political questions about what they read. The ultimate result is a log, statement, outline, or whatever else seems appropriate in expressing their grasp of the theory providing a foundation for the course content.

Electronic Journaling. Because of the growing use of computer technology and distance education in various forms, many students are choosing to record their insights or reflections in some electronic form. In essence, any of the previously described journaling techniques can be carried out fully or partially in an electronic form. One of my students, for example, likes to publish his insights on his web page for fellow students to read. He subsequently encourages computer-mediated conversations as a way of further enhancing his own knowledge and understanding. Some related web sites can be seen in "Life Journal" (1999) and "My Story" (1998).

Benefits of Journal Writing

There are a number of potential benefits for learners in maintaining some type of journal, diary, or log. For example, enhanced intellectual growth and development is achievable by most learners, especially as they gain more experience with the writing or recording procedures. However, as a teacher I have been pleased with how these learning tools can help learners in their personal development and ability to examine new knowledge in critical ways. The following sub-sections provide more detail on those benefits I have observed learners achieving.

Personal Growth and Development. Perhaps most important for the adult learner of all the benefits is the enhancement of personal growth and development. Journaling can help with such learning goals or expected outcomes as integrating life experiences with learning endeavors, allowing for a freedom of expression that may be inhibited in a group setting, stimulating mental development, enhancing breakthroughs in terms of new insights, and even planting seeds in terms of future study or research. Basically it is an investment in yourself through a growing awareness of personal thoughts and feelings.

Intuition and Self-Expression. Another outcome, and one that is not always expected, is an enhanced ability at self-discovery. Learning to trust that inner voice and interpret new thoughts or even dreams can increase self-confidence not only in the classroom but in many other settings, too. For me there is almost nothing more satisfying than seeing learners tackle new topics because of their growing ability to personally reflect on changes taking place and integrate such new knowledge in an ever enhancing personal capability.

Problem Solving. Utilizing a journaling technique often helps in the solution of problems. Writing down and imagining your way through a problem via personal insights and reflections on life experiences can be very rewarding. Often an epiphany will emerge that might not have been possible with some other problem solving technique. I recommend to my students engaged in one of the journaling procedures that they allow adequate time in their reflecting processes for new perspectives to emerge.

Stress Reduction and Health Benefits. There is considerable evidence that journaling

can improve various aspects of personal health. Bruce (1998) describes research with subjects who wrote thoughtfully and emotionally about traumatic experiences and most of them generally experienced improved physical health. Adams (1998) also talks about journaling as therapy for enhancing psychological healing and growth. Most adult education students may not need psychotherapy or medical recovery assistance, but some can use whatever helps them to release pent-up emotions, counter anger or frustration, and overcome or reduce the stress so typical in today's busy work world and lifestyle.

Reflection/Critical Thinking. This benefit has been discussed in various ways in prior descriptions of journaling procedures. However, it is important to make explicit the value of journaling in helping adult learners increase their ability to reflect critically on what they are studying or learning. The resulting outcomes from values clarification, finding meaning in what is being examined, and developing wholeness as a professional through critical judgements enhances not only the professional but also the profession.

Overcoming Writing Blocks

During the journaling process it is likely that a student will face an obstacle in not knowing what to do next. In essence, they reach an impasse that can even inhibit their continuing with the writing process. As an instructor I keep alert for such circumstances through questions I ask in class or in individual advising sessions to determine potential problems.

Hiemstra and Brier (1994) note that there are various types of blocks: "Some blocks are internal, that is, they reside within the writer. Other blocks are outside the writer and are external in nature" (p. 59). Besides any obstacle's impact on the journal writing process, it also can produce varying degrees of frustration, anxiety, and even enervation.

Although such writing inhibitors can be unsettling, they are part of the process of sorting through new learnings or probing how personal feelings are changing. Progoff (1975) developed a number of techniques to help a person move beyond some blocking issue. Such techniques as imagery work, daily logs, period logs, steppingstone identification, and even dialogue with fellow learners often help a person move forward with new insights, reflections, and ideas. Those using an electronic recording mechanism can accomplish the same thing through a chat room or some form of asynchronous discussion.

Cortright (2000) also describes various approaches to help students move forward with the writing process. These include such techniques as writing quickly, allowing words to fall freely from the subconscious, dating journal entries, using different writing or recording techniques to enhance a feeling of creativity, and setting aside time that is devoted only to the journal or diary writing.

This chapter has provided considerable evidence of the tremendous benefit possible through a journaling technique. Enhancing the ability of each person to take increasing personal responsibility for their own growth and development is a goal that has tremendous potential by encouraging a "proactive approach to the learning process" (Brockett and Hiemstra, 1991, p. 27). Thus, I urge all adult education teachers and students to try one of the techniques.

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