

## USING GUIDED REFLECTIVE JOURNALING STRATEGIES IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING AND LEARNING

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### Abstract

*From the beginning of history sounds have played a fundamentally important role in humanity's development as ways of expression and of communication. However, contemporary western society, and indeed globally, we are experiencing an excess of speech and relentless encouragement to expression. The purpose of this article is to guide students to improve students' reflective thinking via journal writing and to examine what types of reflective journal entries students can write and how reflective journal writing contribute to their language learning improvement. Reflective journal is an important task to develop learners' metacognition, self-assessment, self-encouragement and critical thinking skills. Overall, personalized feedback on their journals and their relationships with their teachers were most essential in helping learners to grow.*

**Key words:** reflective journal, writing strategies, metacognition, self-assessment, self-encouragement

## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The impact of reflective journals on learners in higher education has been praised, studied (Korstange, 2016) and found useful. Reflective journals have also been found to enhance the learning process as this practice bridges the gap between what the learners are doing and what they should be doing (Cathro, O'Kane, & Gilbertson, 2017). It also develops students' awareness of their own skills (Boud, Keogh, & Walker, 1998). Studies have shown that learning while reflecting on the metacognitive process is an important way of learning, however, it is not spontaneously learned and it must be taught (Wallin & Adawi, 2017). Giving learners the opportunities to reflect on their learning is a substantial way to focus learners and give them tools for improvement. Chau and Cheng (2012) state that in the current literature of second language learning (L2), there is a significant effect on the development of learning in reflective writing. The importance of being cognitively aware through reflection in higher education has been extensively covered in the literature. Nevertheless, reflection journals may not increase students' grades in content, but it enhances their conceptualization of meaning and thinking skills (Murphy & Ermeling, 2016). There is rather limited research on how EFL learners reflect on their learning when involved in their academic content. This is particularly true with students in the Mongolian National University of Education who are studying to become English teachers in secondary schools. This article focuses on what types of journals students choose to write and how these reflective journals reveal students' awareness of concept learning. I have chosen one reflective journal from one of the senior students who are studying at the Department of English and German Languages as an example.

## **2. BACKGROUND OF THE REFLECTIVE JOURNAL WRITING**

According to Dewey (1933), reflection was defined as “an active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends” (p. 9). In this respect, Dewey (1933) stated that reflection involves thinking about experiences recursively, continuously and actively.

Furthermore, Kolb (1984) and Schon (1983) claimed that reflection leads adult second language learners to improvement of the ability to cope with the challenges that they encounter in the process of learning and helps them to learn how to solve these problems. Reflective learning embraces numerous definitions from a variety of aspects. Daudelin (1997) broadly defined reflections as “the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through the development of inferences” (p. 70). Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1985) also constructed reflection as “an important human activity in which people recapture their experience, think about it, mull it over and evaluate it” (p. 19). Boyd and Fales (1983) conceived of reflective learning as “a process of internally examining and exploring an issue of concern, triggered by an experience, which creates and clarifies meaning in terms of self, and which results in a changed conceptual perspective” (p. 100). From the aforementioned

remarks, reflection involves rethinking students' self-experiences and finding meanings in them. As such, when reflecting on learning, students have an opportunity to monitor their studying processes consciously. They also have a chance to develop their learning methods. However, since reflection is an internal thinking practice, it is not visible by others. Therefore, in order to investigate an individual's reflective ability, transformation of thought process into an utterance or written text is essential. Writing is one of the useful ways for researcher and teachers to observe how students reflect on their learning. A number of studies on reflection suggested a journal as an effective written tool to encourage reflect on learning. Chirema (2007) and Stevenson and Cooper (2009) suggested that journal writing is a great device which allows people to look back at what they have been through and reflect on their feelings and attitudes. Researchers view reflective journals as an instrumental tool for alerting and guiding students towards improving their learning. Dewey (1933) was one of the first to write about reflection in education. He stated that reflective thinking is "the active, persistent, and careful consideration of belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it ends" (p. 9). In 1987, Schon further explained the concept of reflection as a conversation between thought and action. Reflective journals are used in many courses as written logs of students' thoughts about specific concepts and their learning process (Thorpe, 2004). Other researchers stressed the importance of reflective journals focusing on the process of learning in enhancing students' performance rather than the product (Park, 2003). Boud, Keogh, and Walker (1998) further explain the significant impact of the reflection on the actual process of the learning at a deeper level. Other authors such as Sumsion & Fleet (1996) state that reflective processes allow the learners to be "looking back on experiences, decisions and actions; recognizing values and beliefs underlying these actions and decisions; considering the consequences and implications of beliefs and actions; exploring possible alternatives; and reconsidering former views" (Sumsion & Fleet, 1996, p. 121). With reflection, people are usually engaged in a period of thinking within which they examine complex experiences or situations.

### **3. EFFECTIVE JOURNAL TYPES FOR THE CLASSROOM**

Reflective journaling can provide instructors with glimpses of the inner workings of the students' mind. Journal entries allow the instructor to view, through the student's words, the quality of comprehension and mastery of the material, as well as affective responses to the content. The reflective journal can be a vehicle for the student to define, question, and interact with content, concepts, ideas, values, beliefs, and feelings. In addition, reflective journaling invites students to articulate their understandings of course content and clinical experiences. In this way, reflective journaling can serve to link the students' understandings and feelings. In this article three types of journals described by Goldsmith (1996): the dialogue journal, the class interactive (team) journal, and the personal journal.

#### **3.1 The Dialogue Journal**

The dialogue journal provides a means for the student and instructor to maintain a private dialogue with one another around any number of issues. The instructor comments in writing on a

student's initial dialogue journal entry. In turn, the student may respond to the instructor's comments or proceed to the next journal assignment. This iterative process is repeated, creating a dialogue between the student and instructor. The instructor should recognize that the student may experience the desire to please the instructor, to say the right things, or to seek approval and validations of his or her feelings, thoughts, and values. The desire to please may impact the journaling process. Consequently, instructors using journals may want to view students' dialogues in light of this effect. This interplay between journal writer and instructor models the interactive nature of counseling, and through this parallel process should come permission to air issues, thoughts, values, and beliefs without concern for judgment. The journaling process allows for examining and analyzing beliefs in a manner that encourages openness to alternative interpretations. This interactive procedure provides the student an opportunity to challenge his or her habits of mind, which is the critical thinking process described by Mezirow (1998) and Brookfield (1998).

### **3.2 The Class Interactive (Team) Journal**

Whereas the dialogue journal facilitates a conversation between student and teacher, the class interactive journal provides a forum for students to interact among themselves. In a class interactive journal, the student shares his or her written reflections with classmates, receives feedback, and subsequently constructs a written reflection considering classmates' input. A variation of the class interactive journal is the *team* journal identified by Goldsmith (1996). This serves as a method for communicating, and sharing ideas and events between, and among, small groups of students. Because the team journal requires entries from each group member, it must be accessible by all members and, thus, serves as an ongoing record of team progress and learning. This journal is especially useful when group dynamics are important learning goals. In addition, team journals are suited for use with electronic message boards, such as Blackboard, where messages can be posted and team members can respond. Another feature of the dialogue journal and the class interactive journal is based on the fact that they are both iterative in nature, in that they evolve as a result of interactions between the student and others.

### **3.3 The Personal Journal**

The personal journal is generally a narrative description of the student's inner processes. The solitary nature of a personal journal does not contain the sounding board effect inherent in dialogue and class interactive journals, and the writer of the personal journal may well process and re-process the same concepts repeatedly with little challenge to his or her accepted beliefs or ideas. This intrapersonal looping of ideas may be self-affirming but not necessarily productive, as Brookfield (1998) posited: A self-confirming cycle often develops whereby our uncritical accepted assumptions shape actions that then only serve to confirm the truth of those assumptions. We find it very difficult to stand outside ourselves and see how some of our most deeply held values and beliefs lead us into distorted and constrained ways of being, (p. 197) The private nature of a personal journal, although possibly valuable as a tool for reflection, may mire the writer in those endless loops of self-modulated introspection against which Brookfield (1998) cautioned. Though practiced journal writers extol the virtues of this form of reflection, the personal journal may have limited application for classroom use or professional development.

## 4. GUIDELINES ON THE INSTRUCTIONAL USE OF REFLECTIVE JOURNALS

Kerka (1996) suggested three conditions necessary for reflection in the use of reflective journals including: (a) perceived trustworthiness of the journal reader, (b) clarity of the expectation, and (c) quantity and quality of the feedback. Each condition guides the instructor when assigning reflective journals in the classroom. Students may be initially fearful of possible judgments or reprisals from the instructor as a result of what is written in their journals (Elbow & Clarke, 1987). To combat this, the instructor may need to dialogue with students about the purpose of the journal and the importance of self-knowledge in learning. Clarification of the purpose of the journal as a professional development tool in which the students and instructor share ideas about the students' experiences may mitigate some students' anxiety. We have also found it helpful to clarify in the syllabus the specifics of the journal assignment and to include a statement specifying how information contained in reflective journals will be treated. It is important for students to know if the information contained in their journals is written for a private audience, such as a private dialogue between the student and instructor, or if the journal assignment will be shared with another audience. It is important, after all, for the journal writer to be confident of the trustworthiness of the reader. Rather than passing judgment on values and beliefs shared by students in their reflective journals, the instructor is tasked with maintaining an objective focus on the reflective process and unflinchingly adhering to the guidelines specified in the journal assignment. Instructors using reflective journals can clarify their expectations by initially providing students with guidance, explaining that the purposes of journal are self-reflection and professional development. The instructor may then provide feedback that is focused upon the student's reflections *about the issue*, rather than the issue itself. The instructor encourages students to focus on what the journal reflections say about their reactions, their perceptions, and themselves. Finally, just as students are expected to devote time, effort, and thought to writing journal reflections, instructors should find ways to demonstrate that students' efforts are monitored by the instructor throughout the semester.

### 4.1 Designing a Reflective Journal

A journal can be structured with guiding questions or unstructured, in which students are asked to write about anything related to the subject or to their learning. An over-structured journal prevents reflective thinking, while an overly unstructured one might not encourage reflection to be made either.

#### Structured reflective journal

The example below is a highly structured kind of journal with specific questions that students have to answer in each entry. In particular, these questions aim at leading students to find out difficulties they encountered during the process of learning, also to provide themselves with plans and remedies in order to solve these problems.

This kind of reflective journal is suitable for courses with regular tasks of

similar nature, like mathematics. This form of reflective journal is ideal and most effective for helping your students to realize their problems. However, it forgoes the space for them to have personal reflection, which also is an important component for cultivating a lifelong learner.

### **Writing your Reflective Journal**

This course composes of different teaching and learning activities, such as lecture, tutorial, discussion, take-home assignment, presentation.

In the entry, you might want to write something about each of these activities with the help of the following questions:

- What points you've learnt from the activities?
- How do I do in the activities?
- Give one or two examples of your most successful acts in the activities. Try to explain what things you did that made them successful
- Give one or two examples, if relevant, of errors or less successful acts in the activities. What did you do wrong or fail to do in each case
- The next time you confront a similar situation, what if anything, could you do differently to increase your learning?

### **Notes:**

- Although a structured reflective journal contains specific questions to be answered, this should be executed with a fair amount of flexibility to avoid trivial entries of little significance to the development of students' learning.
- Similarly, make sure your students understand that answering the questions is not the purpose of keeping a reflective journal, that things outside the area covered by the questions may also be included.

### **Unstructured reflective journal**

This type of reflective journal is characterized by little prompt questions provided, which gave students the greatest freedom to ponder upon things that had the greatest personal significance to them. This regular writing exercise helped students organize their thoughts, reflect on their work, identify problems, and find solution to them independently.

However, students often felt confused and uncertain about what to write in this highly unstructured piece of writing. Therefore, it is recommendable to give simple instructions and jump-start questions to give students a lift, but these questions do not necessarily confine the structure or intrude the personal quality of students' writing. See the following template:

### **Writing your Reflective Journal**

This course composes of different teaching and learning activities, such as lecture, tutorial, discussion, take-home assignment, presentation.

In each journal entry, you might therefore want to write down your reaction, comment, personal feelings, suggestion to each of these teaching and learning activities. For example, you can start by thinking:

- What's my interest in the course?
- What's my interest in the lecture?
- What's my reaction to a particular topic in this lecture?
- What's my opinion on the content of the course?
- How do I like the format of each of the above teaching and learning activities?
- How can I relate other things directly or indirectly to things that I have learnt in the course?

### **Notes:**

- This piece of writing should be highly unstructured, therefore it's important that the guided questions provided should be very open-ended, so that allow students to carry deep thinking on course-related issues
- Only a few guided questions will do, otherwise, students will be overwhelmed and divert all their energy in attempting all the questions instead of taking a quality reflection on their learning

### **Detailed guidelines of writing reflective journal in class**

This section offers practical guidelines to making journal entries that are reflective and significant to you personally.

#### **What learning experience to reflect on?**

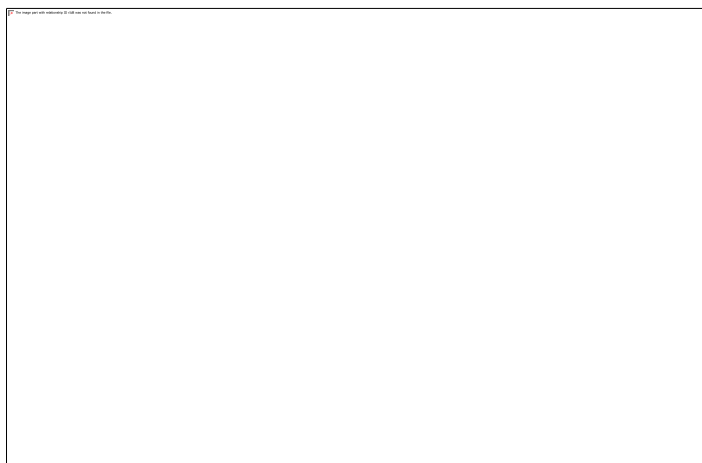
Reflect on your process of learning. Record any observations, experience, thoughts and insights that are significant to you as a learner, or even as a person.

#### **Prompt questions for your reference:**

The function of prompt questions is to stimulate your reflective thinking. You don't need to (in fact, you are not supposed to) answer every one of them in any entry.

- How what I have learned relates to my other experiences?
- What implications does it have regarding my learning?
- What difficulties have I encountered in applying my knowledge in dealing with everyday situations?
  - What would be the causes for those difficulties and how could I overcome them?
  - What has been discussed today in class? What does it mean to me?
  - What do I find difficult in understanding? Why?
  - What do I find difficult in accepting? Why?
  - Could it have been otherwise?

Gibbs' reflective cycle is a common model for reflection. It incorporates six stages that are shown below.



**Figure 1. Gibbs Reflective Cycle, 1988**

### Sample entry 1

Here is a sample entry to a reflective learning journal with teacher's comments on the right.

*The third lecture taught about critical reading. In the part of defining critical reading, I found myself always read books passively and recklessly. When I have to read textbooks, this will happen easily. Some contents of those textbooks are quite long and boring. Just as now I am studying Microeconomics, I should read the whole chapter to get more information and concepts about this subject. But I don't think it is easy to read. The sentences are long and hard to understand. And those examples are cases in America. As I know very little about politics and economics, let alone American politics and economics, when I read this textbook, I often cannot get concise concept and write summary.*

*Miss recommends us to jot notes when we read: after understanding every paragraphs, write down the words in my own expression. It is more useful for use to re-read. I quite agree with her point. When I was in F.6, I retook the HKCEE in Chemistry. In that year, I jotted down all the important points into other points into another book. Then at the day I had my exam, I just read that book instead of bringing four textbooks. Although I spent much more time to write my own notes, the result proved that this method worked. However, as we now studying further, it is not same as HKCEE. The syllabus is much more detail. If I still use this method in my present study, I am sure I cannot follow the rate of progress of the syllabus. Thus, I do not use this method now. But is there any other method good for me to apply?*

*I also have a question: We spent almost the whole lecture to talk about argument, how to distinguish it from other statements and identify the sentences to see if they are premise or conclusion. Yet what is the use of identifying a statement as an argument? Is that what we need to know when we can judge or with other uses?*

*I got many difficulties and questions in writing this second reflective journal. At first, I think I know well to write journal, but later, I don't think so. Do I need to write every reflective journal referring to the previous lecture or tutor? I cannot apply them so quick and see if they work for me.*

*The content of the third lecture is quite hard for me to apply in my daily life. Apart from the above mentioned problem, I also have a question of what I learnt from the third session. At that tutor session, we focused on evaluating the author's tone and works, the choice of evidence, the validity of the evidence. I think these points can be tried only when I read a commentary or article. If I am reading some storybooks or textbooks, can I still apply them?*

Well, in tertiary education, one important skill is to speed up the reading pace, but not necessarily comprehend less. It takes time. Practice makes perfect.

We need to at least have statements in order to have argument. Otherwise, there is nothing to be criticised & reasoned, i.e. it's important to tell whether a sentence is actually a statement

No. Anything relevant to your learning or in the course will do.

I am no rush in seeing application. Struggling with new concepts takes time.

Probably non-statements. If so, do we have to reason so harshly?



## Sample entry 2

Here is a sample entry of reflective journal writing from one of the junior students who study at the Mongolian National University of Education. The purpose of this reflective journal is to examine the effect of reflective journals on students' learning, give students freedom to understand their own learning and reflect on what they have learnt from the experience. The following are the questions to reflect on students' own learning.

1. What and how did you learn from the lesson?
2. What helped you to study successfully?
3. What tasks and activities did you do in order to improve English language skills independently?
4. What difficulties or problems do you face when you learn English? What are the causes?
5. How do you solve the problems?
6. What are the steps and strategies will you use to solve the problems or difficulties?

№	Research questions	Student 1	Student 2
1	<b>What did you learn from the lesson? How did you learn?</b>		
2	<b>What helped you to study successfully?</b>	<i>Studying successfully depends on me a lot. Teacher, colleagues and my family push me and motivate me to learn successfully.</i>	
3	<b>What tasks and activities did you do in order to improve English language skills independently?</b>	<i>Recently, I have been concentrating on developing vocabulary skill like memorizing new words, reading, collecting information and summarizing. Written this note on the 25th, March.</i>	<i>I have decided to listen to British council podcast every day because it is advantageous to listen even there is no internet connection. I know that there should be an improvement on my language skills if I make an effort on practicing. Written this note on the 22nd, March. I watch movie "Friends" Written this note on the 21st, March.</i>
4	<b>What difficulties or problems do you face when you learn English?</b>	<i>I face some problems for example, I sometimes do not understand the lesson, cannot find the necessary materials related to the lesson, I do</i>	<i>I could not differentiate the tasks with false and not given well but now I understand how to do it.</i>

	<b>What are the causes?</b>	<i>not like when others interrupt me and sometimes I get lazy when I work on my assignment or do homework. /03.25/</i>	
5	<b>How do you solve the problems?</b>	<i>I understood that if I do not complete the tasks on time it will be difficult to understand them. I solve the problems by studying alone in quiet place to concentrate well.</i>	<i>Today I have learnt how to do the IELTS reading exercises on true, false and not given. I need to practice a lot on these exercises. If no there will be confusion between them.</i>
6	<b>What are the steps and strategies will you use to solve the problems or difficulties?</b>	<i>In further, I am going to make notes about my lesson Highlight the activities to complete Ask advice from teachers when I complete the tasks independently. Try to understand the lesson on time. /03.25/</i>	<i>I will tick what I have done and what I have not, write my further plan, make some notes on what problems I faced. The above are important strategies to complete the tasks.</i>

From these entries, it can be seen that participant tried to answer the questions given as a guideline. However, their answers did not really show deep reflection. Nevertheless, he/she was not able to use journal writing to set their goals after they knew their problems. Rather, the/she used journal writing simply to answer the questions asked by the tutor. What the researcher/tutor gained from the journals was the reassurance that the students understood the content of the course because they explained what they had learned. What seemed to be missing was a realization about the benefits of a journal as a tool for self-assessment, even though they were expected to use it to assess their learning.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The strength of reflective journaling lies in the collaborative opportunities for the instructor and student to employ common criteria to critique the student's reflective skills through journal entries. Consequently, because the instructor is not the sole reviewer, the student learns necessary skills of self-reflection and self-assessment. As Baldwin (1991) stated, "Writing bridges the inner and outer world and connects the paths of action and reflection" (p. 9). Thus, students who master the skills of reflective journaling gain an ability to connect their internal processes with their external realities. The connecting of inner and outer world experiences is a process that demands self-awareness and self-knowledge necessary for the practice of counseling, as well as other professions. As a glass mirror reflects a visual image, the paper mirror reflects students' inner worlds and making of meaning. By providing a means for sharing

student reflections, coupled with instructor feedback resulting in ongoing dialogue, the paper mirror can provide the instructor and students valuable information about students' progression and development. An ultimate goal in professional education is for students to synergize theories with their personal styles, broaden their repertoires of professional methods, inculcate professional ethics into their practices, and develop a base of knowledge that is the foundation for becoming well-rounded, model practitioners. The paper mirror reflects the student's struggles, questions, frustrations, and successes. As Dewey stated (1933), "The function of reflective thought is, therefore, to transfer a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious" (p. 100-101).

Journal writing is both a product and a process that helps us “capture an experience, record an event, explore our feelings, or make sense of what we know” (Boud, 2001, p. 9). Using guided reflective journal writing to capture students’ experiences, perspectives and stories — their perceptions and perceptual changes — as they participate in various learning experiences provides educators with a unique technology for assessing cognitive and perceptual changes that are hard to measure with conventional evaluation methods (e.g., exams, essays).

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