

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at:
<http://www.researchgate.net/publication/227498622>

Using journal writing to enhance reflective practice

ARTICLE *in* NEW DIRECTIONS FOR ADULT AND CONTINUING EDUCATION · JANUARY 2001

DOI: 10.1002/ace.16

CITATIONS

118

DOWNLOADS

3,002

VIEWS

173

1 AUTHOR:



David Boud

University of Technology Sydney

118 PUBLICATIONS 6,187 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

I *Journals promote reflection on experience. This chapter examines features of journal writing that aid reflective practice and circumstances inhibiting their use for this purpose.*

Using Journal Writing to Enhance Reflective Practice

David Boud

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

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

In her discussion of using journals in learning through reflection, Moon (1999a, pp. 188–194) identifies many purposes of writing journals in addition to those already mentioned—for example:

- “To deepen the quality of learning, in the form of critical thinking or developing a questioning attitude”
- “To enable learners to understand their own learning process”
- “To increase active involvement in learning and personal ownership of learning”

- “To enhance professional practice or the professional self in practice”
- “To enhance the personal valuing of the self towards self-empowerment”
- “To enhance creativity by making better use of intuitive understanding”
- “To free-up writing and the representation of learning”
- “To provide an alternative ‘voice’ for those not good at expressing themselves”
- “To foster reflective and creative interaction in a group”

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

Learning and Reflection

There are many ways of thinking about journal writing in relation to learning. We can look at how journals reveal what their writers have learned, examine how writers have learned to express themselves in journals, or find out how journals can help other people to learn. The most important purpose for this chapter is how individuals can use journals to enhance their own learning.

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

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

Any of these events provides the base material for journal writing and reflective practice. In learning terms, the journal is both the place where the

events and experiences are recorded and the forum by which they are processed and re-formed. This working with events is intended as a way to make sense of the experiences that result, recognize the learning that results, and build a foundation for new experiences that will provoke new learning.

Models of Reflection

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

It is in this second category that journal writing most often fits, because writing is a means of puzzling through what is happening in our work and our personal lives. In some courses, journal writing is formalized even further, and specific guidelines and workbooks may be provided. However, here I focus on the features of reflection that aid learning independent of particular course requirements. Later in the chapter, I discuss how some course requirements and the influences of the contexts in which journal writing takes place inadvertently inhibit the very learning that journal writing is designed to foster.

In parallel with Schön's work on reflective practice (1983, 1987), I have been involved in exploring reflection from the point of view of someone who is trying to learn from his normal complex and unruly experience. Over a number of years, I have been involved with colleagues in developing a model for learning from experience and the place of reflection in it. Our purpose has been to provide a means of focusing the attention of learners, and those who assist them, on some of the key features that either inhibit or facilitate learning (Boud, Keogh, and Walker, 1985; Boud and Walker, 1990, 1998). Each aspect of the model has implications for journal writing.

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

The basic assumption of the model is that learning is always grounded in prior experience and that any attempt to promote new learning must take into account that experience. All learning builds on existing perceptions and frameworks of understanding; therefore, links must be made

between what is new and what already exists if learners are to make sense of what is happening to them. Learners bring to any event their personal foundation of experience. This is a way of describing the influence of all their previous experiences on them now. Past experiences profoundly affect perceptions of what does and does not count as important; they act as a way to sensitize us to some features of our world and blind us to others, and they shape the intent we have that guides our priorities.

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

Occasions of Reflection

Although reflection is conventionally thought of as taking place after something has happened, such a view depicts learners as passive respondents to events. To counteract this idea, it is useful to consider three occasions of reflection: in anticipation of events, during them, and afterward. Journal writing has a significant role to play at each of these times.

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

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

Third is a focus on learning skills and strategies. It is not sufficient to focus on what we bring to the context and what it will be like; we also need

to equip ourselves to make use of the opportunities available. What must we notice in order to be fully involved and understand what is going on? What guides or learning-to-learn strategies can we usefully develop and take with us? What might we need to rehearse before we start? Journals allow us to practice imaginary scenarios; ask “What if?”; plan what we need to take to the event; try out forms of record keeping that might be suitable; and practice conversations and interactions with key players we will meet. Useful questions to ask at this stage are, What will I do if my assumptions about the event are wrong? What will I be able to fall back on in order to cope effectively?

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

Noticing. This feature is about becoming aware of what is happening in and around us. It is directed toward both the external world of events and the internal world of thoughts and feelings. Noticing affects the extent to which we become actively involved in the process, whether or not this fact is observable by others.

Intervening. This feature refers to actions we take to change the situation in which we find ourselves. Again, intervening may not be overt and noticeable to others. The conscious decision not to speak, or to focus attention on thoughts and feelings rather than external activities, are forms of intervention (intervention in our internal learning processes), just as much as a provocative question or a physical act.

Reflection-in-Action. This feature describes the process of all three features working together to interpret events and the effects of one’s interventions. For much of the time, these features are invisible and unconscious, and as Schön (1983, 1987) eloquently points out, they are part of the artistry of effective practice. However, in developing expertise of any kind, it is often helpful to become more deliberate and conscious of the process and more aware of the decisions being made by others and ourselves. It is through exposing these decisions to scrutiny that the assumptions behind them can be identified and a conscious decision to act from a new perspective can be taken.

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

Reflection After Events. Much important reflection can occur once the immediate pressure of acting in real time has passed. Some learning inevitably

takes time and requires the ability to view particular events in a wider context. Reflection following events has been discussed in the literature for many years, but it is important to emphasize that it is not simply a process of thinking, but a process that also involves feelings, emotions, and decision making. We can regard it as having three elements: return to experience, attending to feelings, and reevaluation of experience. These are features of reflection at all stages, and what is written here is also applicable at earlier stages.

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

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

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

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

These reflective processes can be undertaken in isolation from others, but doing so often leads to a reinforcement of existing views and perceptions. Working in pairs or with a group for which learning is reason for

being can begin to transform perspectives and challenge old patterns of learning. It is only through a give and take with others and by confronting the challenges they pose that critical reflection can be promoted.

Reevaluation is about finding shape, pattern, and meaning in what has been produced. It involves revisiting journal entries, looking again at what has been recorded, and adding new ideas and extensions to those partially formed. It addresses the question: What sense can I make of this, and where does it lead me? It involves trying out new ideas and asking, "What if?" Reevaluation is the end of one cycle and the beginning of another as new situations are imagined and explored.

Inhibiting Reflection

So far, this chapter has focused on occasions of reflection and the ways that journal writing can be used at different times and in different modes. However, there are many features of the contexts in which writing occurs that get in the way of learning and block reflection completely. The exploration of the self that reflection involves requires a relatively protected environment in which one is not continually preoccupied by defending oneself from the scrutiny of others. This is not to say that journal writing cannot usefully take place in the most adverse of conditions. The prison diaries and notebooks of such thinkers as Dietrich Bonhoeffer (1997) and Antonio Gramsci (1971) give testimony to the power of reflective writing. The conditions of contemporary journal writers in formal courses may be less physically oppressive, but nonetheless they can inhibit reflection.

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

Who Is the Reader? One of the main inhibitors is the prospect of others' reading one's journal. These could be peers, employers, teachers, or indeed anyone else. The expectation of writing for an external audience can profoundly shape what we write and even what we allow ourselves to consider. (Other chapters in this volume pick up on this point, especially Chapters Three and Four.) The range of consequences of having one's writing read by others can range from mild embarrassment to loss of a job, or even worse. For example, revealing negative feelings about the difficulties of classroom practice could have a substantial influence on how a student teacher is perceived by supervisors and may lead to failure to graduate. Whether this is the reality of the situation, simply imagining such an occurrence may be a barrier to recording such feelings.

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

Formal Assessment. Many of the ideas about learning from experience have developed in situations unconstrained by the requirements of educational institutions. Therefore, great care needs to be taken in translating them into a formal setting. One feature of accredited learning has considerable potential to adversely affect learning through journal writing: the assessment practices of the program in which a student is enrolled. (Fenwick discusses this in Chapter Four.) A common example is that of grading and assessing journals.

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

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

In some situations, it may be appropriate to assess journals (Moon 1999b; see also Chapters Three and Four in this volume). These include preparation for professional practice in which the use of case notes and commentaries on them is part of normal work. However, it is important to distinguish from the start journals that are essentially available for public or semipublic inspection and those designed to prompt reflection. It is misleading to treat all forms of journal writing as equivalent to each other. Their purposes constrain their form, and the use of a single term like *journal writing* to convey such widely differing purposes is confusing and risky.

Conclusion

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

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

References

- Bonhoeffer, D. *Letters and Paper from Prison*. (E. Bethge, ed.). New York: Macmillan, 1997.
- Boud, D. "The Use of Self-Assessment Schedules in Negotiated Learning." *Studies in Higher Education*, 1992, 17, 185–200.
- Boud, D., Keogh, R., and Walker, D. "Promoting Reflection in Learning: A Model." In D. Boud, R. Keogh, and D. Walker (eds.), *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*. East Brunswick, N.J.: Nichols, 1985.
- Boud, D., and Walker, D. "Making the Most of Experience." *Studies in Continuing Education*, 1990, 12, 61–80.
- Boud, D., and Walker, D. "Promoting Reflection in Professional Courses: The Challenge of Context." *Studies in Higher Education*, 1998, 23, 191–206.
- Brookfield, S. D. *Developing Critical Thinkers: Challenging Adults to Explore Alternative Ways of Thinking and Acting*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.
- Dewey, J. *How We Think: A Restatement of the Relation of Reflective Thinking to the Educative Process*. San Francisco: New Lexington Press, 1933.
- Gramsci, A. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. (Q. Hoare and G.-N. Smith, trans.). New York: International Universities Press, 1971.
- Mezirow, J., and others. *Fostering Critical Reflection in Adulthood: A Guide to Transformative and Emancipatory Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1990.
- Moon, J. *Reflection in Learning and Professional Development*. London: Kogan Page, 1999a.
- Moon, J. *Learning Journals: A Handbook for Academics, Students and Professional Development*. London: Kogan Page, 1999b.
- Rainer, T. *The New Diary*. London: Angus and Robertson, 1980.
- Schön, D. A. *The Reflective Practitioner: How Professionals Think in Action*. New York: Basic Books, 1983.
- Schön, D. A. *Educating the Reflective Practitioner*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987.

David Boud is professor of adult education at the University of Technology, Sydney, Australia.

