

Achieving the “Ah-Ha” Moments Thanks to Reflective Journaling

Define the Issue

As an instructor, I often struggle to know whether my students really understand the information I teach. I believe students should not only be given an opportunity to master the class, but to also learn more about themselves and the world around them. We discuss challenging topics in my social psychology class, from aggression, prejudice, and discrimination to the laws of attraction, the different theories of love, and how we can improve “the self.” These concepts touch on many things students experience in their own worlds and emotionally connect with.

But how can I know students are really “getting it?” What can I do to make sure the students connect what they read about in the textbook and hear about in our class discussions to the events they see on their social media feed? How do I get their learning to expand outside of the classroom?

Research has shown that diaries and journaling activities encourage students to rethink and reflect on their learning, as well as on the classroom environment itself (Boud & Soler, 2016; Struyven, Docy, & Janssens, 2005). After talking to colleagues of mine and gauging their perspectives, I decided to give this method a shot. Most classes at my institution are structured in an eight-week format. So, I asked students to write five reflective journals covering material from the class. Each journal entry is due at various times throughout the term.

In the opening paragraph, I ask students to tell me the term or concept that caught their attention during the class or within their readings. In their own words, students tell me what the term is and how it fits in with psychology. Basic, beginner-level Blooms Taxonomy: Check. For the remainder of the journal (I ask for a minimum of two pages double-spaced), students tell me how that concept or term applies to their world. In what ways do they see Asch’s studies on group pressure occur in their work environment? According to Sternberg’s theory, what type of love do they have with the most important people in their life? When did they use the door-in-the-face technique to get their roommate to do something for them?

Miller (2017) notes the most effective journaling assignments occur when expectations are set for content, length, and degree of reflection. I make sure there is a grading rubric in place. Grammar and writing skills are a small portion of the grade; I’m more focused on the content and the connections they make. I get to read about these “ah-ha” moments students have outside of the

classroom, moments that solidify their learning and sharpen their critical thinking skills about the world around them.

What Works?

After assigning reflective journaling in a few classes each term, I have seen students evolve and discover a paradigm shift in the world around them. The students like that they get the freedom and flexibility to select what they write about, yet have the parameters of a page limit to help make sure they provide enough information to give me a full picture of their learning. Iqbal, Ishtiaq, Gul, and Jatt (2019) note higher-order thinking and stated learning outcomes are achieved by the end of a nursing course with the use of reflective journaling. I see these same outcomes achieved in my psychology courses.

Due dates are clearly indicated on the Dropbox and I post announcement reminders to let students know when their journals are due. During our discussions and lectures, I also make comments like, “This would make a great journal topic,” to help keep this assignment at the forefront of their thinking. By having the structure of what I expect from the assignment while giving the students the chance to pick the topic, I’m giving them roots and wings, both vital for effective learning.

Challenges

This method of learning and reflection does not come without its challenges. First and foremost, there are simply some students who do not like writing assignments. For the longest time, they have never thought of themselves as writers, don’t know where to begin with writing, and don’t think they have anything of value to offer. As many in academia can attest, writing is a challenge, even for the best of us. But to get a student who has never embraced writing to sit down and write out their thoughts is an uphill battle. To overcome these anxieties, I give a lot of encouraging feedback, especially on the first journal entry. Helping students see that their thoughts, opinions, and perspectives are valued is a remarkable way for them to build their courage to write the next journal entry. For students whose reflections are stellar, I recommend different writing competitions and opportunities to them for awards. While they may not consider turning in their reflective journals for these opportunities, I hope to give them the confidence to keep writing. After all, the next Hemingway may be among us.

Another challenge is getting students to stop procrastinating on these assignments. As I’m reading the journals, I can tell which students really and truly took the time to reflect on their learning versus the students who picked a concept and try to apply it in

any way they possibly can at the last minute. The language of the latter papers lack reflection and depth of content. Yes, those students have crossed something off their to-do list for the class, but a deeper layer of learning is simply not there.

Finally, there is an element of trust that must be established in the beginning stages of the class and with the first submitted journal entry. If students do not trust you enough to be vulnerable in their writing, the full possibilities of reflective journaling are diminished (Miller, 2017).

What to Do Differently

Artistic journals can be used in addition to or instead of written journals. While there is healing and power in reflective writing, instructors should not dismiss the importance of drawing, painting, photography, and or other creative outlets for expression and reflection. Instead of all five journal entries being written, students can be given the option of one to two of these journals being in a different artistic style, one where they feel they have more freedom of expression.

When incorporating different artistic processes into the reflective journaling assignments, the instructor should still have a rubric in place that captures the key elements. Criteria similar to the written journal could still be used. Substituting elements of creativity instead of spelling and grammar can be a way to make sure the concepts of the class are covered, and the more artistic students can express themselves in a way that still makes deep connections between class concepts and real life they don't necessarily have the words for.

Recommendation for Others

When implementing this assignment, it's important to remember the demographics of students in your classes. Many of them are in their young adult years and are not 100 percent confident in who they are as a person or comfortable enough to make themselves vulnerable to an instructor by reflecting on a concept or topic occurring in their world. They may be afraid of judgment or feeling stupid. Self-disclosure requires a level of trust with the instructor. Establishing this trust early in the classroom and letting the students know their thoughts and perceptions are welcome are key to making this activity succeed in your class.

Rachel Gallardo, *Instructor, Psychology; Department Head, Psychology*

For more information, contact the author at Blinn College District, Rachel.Gallardo@blinn.edu.

References

Boud, D., Soler, R. (2016). Sustainable assessment revisited. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 41: 400-413.

Iqbal, N., Ishtiaq, M., Gul, H., Jatt, K. A. (2019). Experiences of undergraduate nursing students about reflective journaling. *I-Manager's Journal on Nursing*, 9(2), 20-25.

Miller, L.B. (2017). Review of journaling as a teaching and learning strategy. *Teaching and Learning in Nursing*, 12(1), 39-42.

Struyven, K., Dochy, F., Janssens, S. (2005). Students' perceptions about evaluation and assessment in higher education. A review. *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 30: 325-341.