

Adult Journalling: A Method of Learning and of Assessment

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Educational journal writing fosters a more personal and intense engagement in the learning process. Journalling allows the learner to “connect” with what is being learned. It permits the learner to reflect on personal learning, to pull together what has been learned, and to identify how to use the learning. Reflective educational journalling is a method of learning and of assessment.

This study identified the value of journals for the African participants. Values included having a voice, establishing and nurturing collegial relationships, and being free to ask questions within a safe milieu.

Reflective journalling requires stamina; it requires commitment from everyone.

Keywords: adult learners, assessment, learning, writing

WHAT ARE JOURNALS?

There are many definitions of journalling. In fact, some authors describe the term as a noun, others describe it as a verb, or as a process. There is no one clear definition. Similarly undifferentiated is the description of form. The "narratives" may be presented verbally, they may be written in various formats or grammatical styles (stories, poetry, music) or they may be presented as plays, or choreographed as dance. For the purpose of this paper, I have defined a *journal* as a collection of written, reflective, and responsive notes, which are developed in response to sets of questions in curriculum learning modality. I have defined *journalling* as the process of writing, developing, or creating reflective, responsive notes.

Journalling is a multi-faceted term. It has multiple interpretations and applications, including its use in literature, in education, and in medical/meta-psychology practices. Ruskowski (1997) states that the act of journalling can be writing a document such as a magazine or it can pertain to an account of personally-written articles such as a diary (p. 4). Gautier (1998) describes journalling in terms of keeping a diary, but as well, she infers that journalling can be "much more" (p. 35). Gautier (1998) goes on to describe journalling to be a centering, steadying, empowering, and enlightening process that can be likened to a meditative practice, which enables one to become intimate with one's personality with all its fears, foibles, and quirks (p. 35).

Browning (1986) describes journalling as an "excellent way to release pressure; not only a release, but a way to try and think about what isn't right, which brings on a form of responsibility and maturity" (p. 43). While Browning uses journalling as a technique to encourage reading and writing, she also encourages the students to submit journal entries about problems that they face. In the return journal, she may or may not write a response to the learners' comments. Thus, Browning encourages the journalling as

an adjunctive teaching/learning tool to include personal as well as educational matters. Sometimes, the personal matters can become overwhelming to the detriment of the educational process, and hence journaling is a tool to help the learners to read, write, and "find" their way. While Smith (1991) discusses the necessity of reflection on learning, he makes no direct reference to how this purposeful reflection should occur. Smith (1991) does maintain that personal reflection allows the writer to learn about the process of learning, and particularly one's own style of learning. McAlpine (1992), on the other hand, states "that keeping a personal journal is especially useful for the practitioner; it enables us to engage in reflection intentionally and somewhat systematically" (p. 15). In retrospect, Thompson (1992) wrote that journal entries would have been beneficial to him as he began his teaching career.

Your inquiry brings to mind an idea I sometimes have wished I had used. That idea is to keep a diary in which to jot down various incidents and thoughts relating to pedagogy as they arise in one's day-to-day classroom experiences. Education courses are often full of high-sounding phrases but give the neophyte very little real practical advice. A journal such as I hint at would be invaluable, it seems to me, and would furnish a suggestive guide to the beginner. And how interesting it would be for the author to read years later, when he had lost some of his youthful enthusiasm and freshness of outlook. (pp. 128-129)

McAlpine (1992) further elaborates that learners can reflect intentionally upon experiences in the practicum area and try to integrate these experiences with classroom learning in order to construct a professional stance (p. 15). Carswell (1988) concluded that

From my perspective as a teacher, the journal acted as an excellent communication device. I was able to keep in touch with student frustrations, problems, anxieties, celebrations, and joys. Comments in the journals enabled me to modify my expectations and specific demands as I more fully understood the realities of the students' lives. Students' observations and suggestions have been used in a formative way to restructure aspects of the course. (p. 112)

Bowman (1983) describes the function of student journals to "invite learners to find language deep within themselves to array their hopes, dreams, disappointments, concerns, and resolves. Journals encourage students to fashion questions, issues, and concerns central to their course work" (p. 27).

In the feminist perspective, journal writings are described as narratives - storytellings that are written to represent the feminist viewpoint of a woman's way of knowing. Witherell & Noddings (1991), in their presentation of a number of narratives written primarily by females, preface their work with the thoughts that stories and narratives, whether personal or fictional, provide meaning and belonging in women's lives (p. 1). As well,

stories can join the worlds of thought and feeling, and they give special voice to the feminine side of human experience - to the power of emotion, intuition, and relationships in human lives. They frequently reveal dilemmas of human caring and conflict, illuminating with the rich, vibrant language of feeling the various landscapes in which we meet the other morally. (p. 4)

Heilbrun (1988) advocates the writing of, about, and for women. Heilbrun (1988) discusses the four ways of writing a woman's life: the woman herself may tell it, in what she chooses to call an autobiography; she may tell it in what she chooses to call fiction; a biographer, woman or man, may write the woman's life in what is called a biography; or the woman may write her own life in advance of living it, unconsciously, and without recognizing or naming the process (p. 10).

To this point, to answer the statement *what it is*, journaling is a method of/for:

- writing an article for a magazine,

- documenting an account of personally-written pieces such as a diary,
- using a meditative process to connect oneself with one's inner self,
- deploying an agent for social change,
- initiating an adjunctive learning tool,
- recording personal viewpoints, and
- developing new learning skills.

Journalling can be utilized to achieve various results. Journalling is used as a tool to know oneself, to make sense of one's identity intrinsically and comparatively with extrinsic forces. Perreault (1995) reports about Adrienne Rich's writing: "I have to face the sources and the flickering presence of my own ambivalence as a Jew; the daily mundane anti-Semitism of my entire life" (p. 39). Narratives of the feminist perspective are used to make sense of unspeakable events. Kate Millett (Perreault, 1995) writes of the heinous events surrounding the death of a young teenager in 1965 in Indiana. While writing the story, Millett uses voices of the various characters in her interpretation of the torture of sixteen-year-old Sylvia Liken. Abuse of the female for sexual gratification is described graphically through the use of narrative. Millett attempts to make sense of the event for the reader. Journalling is used as a tool for clarification. Journalling is a process with specific pre-determined outcomes (explanation, entertainment, self-identity), although the mechanisms, the form, or the substance of that journalling may not be pre-determined. The process may, in fact, evolve.

Gautier (1998) states that direct benefits of journalling include increased clarity, focus, creativity, self-trust, and an undeniable release of stress and negative emotions (p. 35). Burns (1980) describes the use of journalling as a method to teach sufferers of depression to track their moods. This method may be of help in assisting a patient to recognize altering moods and the meaning of that alteration. Journalling, thus, can be used diagnostically. In other words, the journal can help to make sense of life experiences.

Journalling can be used both as a learning and as a teaching tool. Writing promotes learning through reflection. The learning process can be enhanced by using journals as a facilitative strategy. Kooy and Wells (1996) contend that the most important function of a log is to serve as a place where readers make overt those thoughts and feelings usually hidden in the act of reading. In other words, it makes explicit what is implicit. The log becomes a forum for expressing thoughts about reading experiences (p. 16).

Duffy (2000) describes her international teaching project in which she utilized journalling as an adjunctive teaching tool as well as a method of assessment. Duffy writes that "in a culture where learning is by rote and women are discouraged from self-awareness and critical thinking, journal writing helped bring reflective learning to post-diploma nursing students" (p. 30). Journal writing became a tool not only to discuss program content, but also a venue to reflect critically of and on praxis.

Journals are almost always written documents. They are personal written expressions of the ideas the writer perceives to be important. Journals are usually written in the first person. In order that journals and journalling be used effectively, the following must be considered (Carswell, 1988; Crowhurst, 1989; Zacharias, 1994):

- Writing to learn is an essential tool.
- Students generate learning through writing.
- Success depends on the dedication of the teachers.
- Teachers must be willing to give of themselves.
- Teachers must be willing to interact at a personal level.
- Rapport and trust must be established at the outset.
- Confidentiality must be respected; it is vital.

There are various formats of journal writing (Crowhurst, 1989; Reed, 1988; Zacharias, 1994). Some formats are

- interactive journals which include peer journals and teacher/learner dialogue journals,
- private personal journals which are strictly for personal use and value, and

- learning/reading/research logs which typically include a summary of learned content. The purpose of this type of journal is to connect personal experience with content and to record research progress.

Journal Writing Styles

There are multiple writing formats that can be used which can be divided into two main groups:

- free writing journals, and
- guided forms of journal writing.

The major distinction between the two groupings is that the former are unguided, "anything goes," while the latter are specific, guided, and goal-oriented. Examples of guided journal entries (Carswell, 1988; Crowhurst, 1989; Zacharias, 1994) include the following:

- journalling prompts which can be pictures, paintings, music, sounds, leading questions, etc. to which the participant writes a response,
- lists which can include wish lists, lists of why I don't like myself, balanced, on the other hand, with lists of positive things about myself or lists of the pros and cons of a situation,
- webbing, clustering, mapping of ideas, words, random thoughts grouped into sections of like or unlike,
- headlines to stimulate writing of reactions, "This makes me feel . . .",
- word associations to words in a list, words in poetry, etc., and
- letters to teachers, to peers, to friends, to family, to discuss pertinent events, attitudes, or feelings.

Journals serve multiple purposes. Reasons to choose to journal are many, and may include (Bowman, 1983; Hoover, 1994; Krutilla & Safford, 1990; McAlpine, 1992; Reed, 1988; Zacharias, 1994):

- create/develop possibilities of new ideas,
- develop personal insight on our struggle to organize, to interpret, and to assimilate new ideas,
- develop eye-hand-brain co-ordination through writing,
- clarify the issues people face,
- develop deeper levels of understanding of issues,
- learn new concepts thoroughly,
- develop writing skills,
- make sense of experience through personal involvement,
- facilitate learning by making connections between personal and professional experiences,
- record experiences for future reference,
- communicate thoughts, feelings, impressions,
- build understanding and meaning through interaction,
- develop critical thinking skills,
- reflect on personal thoughts and feelings,
- summarize learning,
- make connections with inner thoughts and feelings to bring these to the surface,
- give educators a tool by which to know learners,
- help educators know whether learners are or are not comprehending classroom materials, and
- clarify personal lifestyle issues students are facing.

Potential functions of the journal are limited only by the number of practitioners who practice and/or assign journalling. Kooy and Wells (1996) choose journalling for their students: "some comments affirm for students that they are on the right track; others push them to explore their thinking. My responses may open windows to new understanding, or make suggestions about which points would be fruitful for further discussion" (p. 65). In communication classes, I use journals to help students explore the concepts of communicating, to understand the students' point of view, as well as to gain personal mastery of communication skills.

Alternative Journal Formats

Alternative forms of journalling abound (Crowhurst, 1989; Zacharias, 1994). Practitioners may explore a variety of methods to record experiences, interpretations, feelings, and thoughts. Some may choose to use audiotaping or videotaping to record their experiences. This has the added value of "hands-on" recording on audio or videotapes, which can help to develop confidence while completing this task. Voice quality and tonality can add to the expressiveness of the verbal journal. Art forms, such as drawing, may be encouraged to express the interpretation of music, visual impacts, and issues. Doodle art would be an example. Writing prose in poetry form, or creating poetry to interpret events, is also a viable option.

In English literature (Carswell, 1988; Crowhurst, 1989; Reed, 1988; Zacharias, 1994), students can read a story and subsequently create a literature response web. The terms used could be teacher- or learner-derived. Creating webs, clusters, networks, maps, or other linear graphics can be used to organize thoughts, feelings, expressions, and interpretations. These pictorial expressions can be used to explore meanings, linkages, and the connections within and between. Word association exercises can be placed in this category. The various words can be likened to stringing pearls or beads on a necklace. The word association journal shown in Figure 1 makes the string of words look like a pearl necklace.

**FIGURE 1
WORD ASSOCIATION**

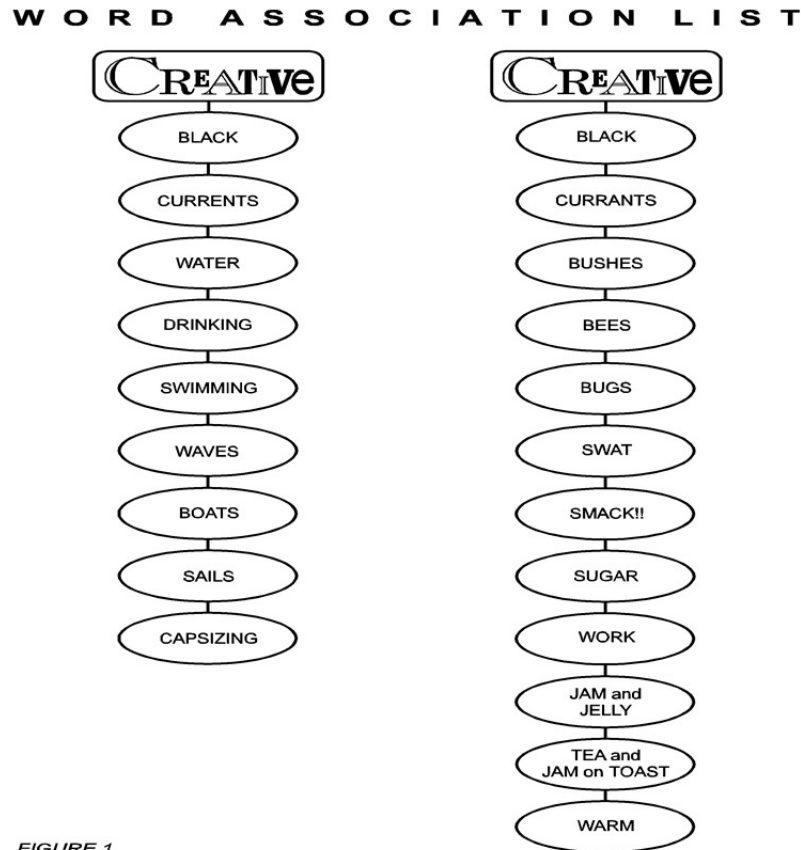


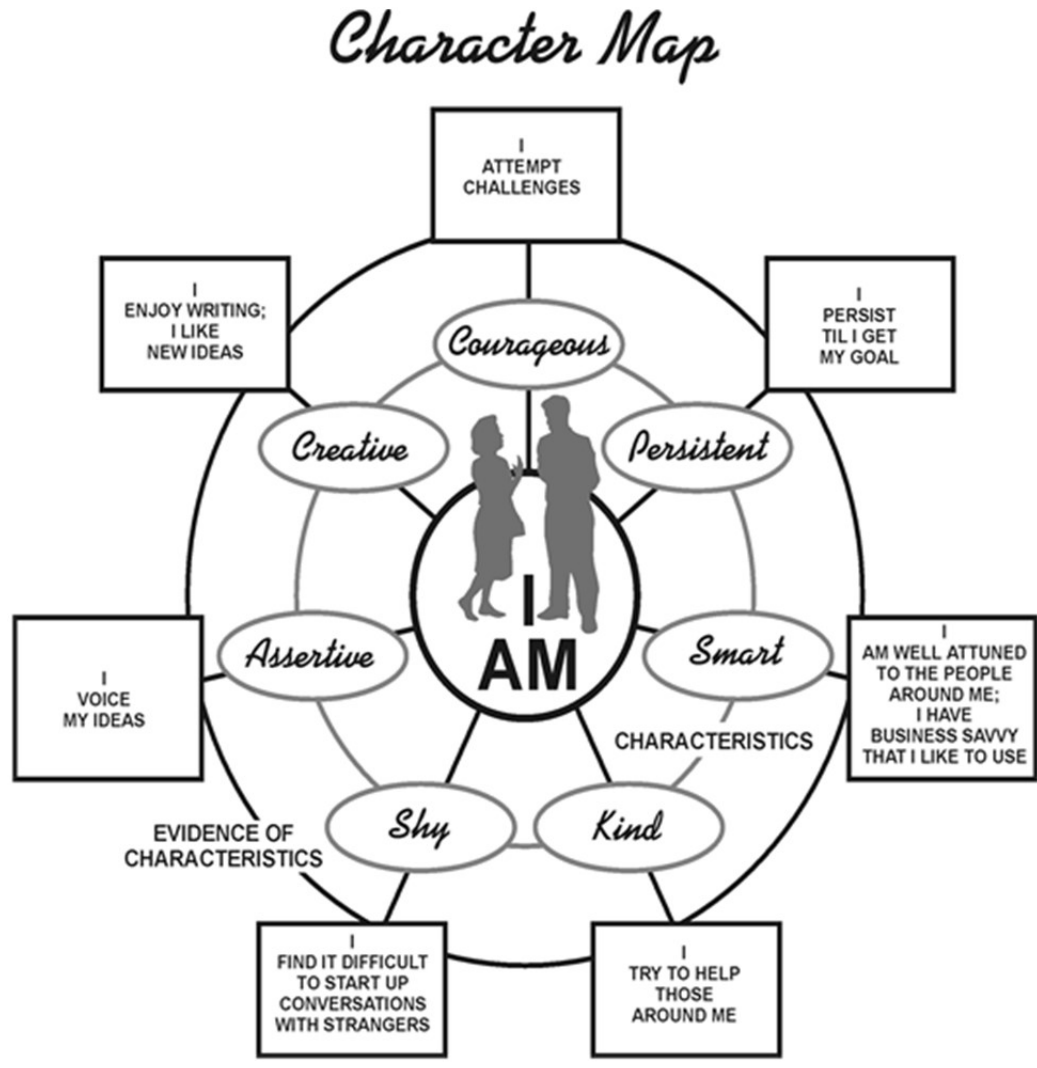
FIGURE 1

Zacharias (1994) states that character maps are word association journals. However, the function of this type of word list is to describe oneself. Once descriptive terms have been chosen, writers choose evidence from their lives that confirm the descriptive terms. The "terms" and the "evidence" can be arranged in any visually aesthetic manner. Possible drawbacks of character maps include factors such as unwillingness to share, feeling that the character map says too much in too little space, or

misinterpretation of contents. The writer may feel vulnerable and at risk. The teacher-learner benefits of character maps include enhanced rapport, increased levels of understanding, and trust. Kooy and Wells (1996) state that "students value this style of personal contact and care that their ideas are taken seriously" (p. 65).

An example of a character map is shown in Figure 2. Note that this map is created as a web or a dimensional field, which gives it an appearance and a feeling of depth. Adult learners often have negative views of themselves. I use the character map as an exercise so that the learners can describe themselves in positive terms. The learners can use this mapping technique to introduce themselves as well as an introduction to journaling.

**FIGURE 2
CHARACTER MAP**



It seems that we have been socialized to look for negatives about everything that we do. Coupled with some real failures along the way, it is easy to describe oneself by a litany of negative characteristics. This exercise encourages the learners to look at themselves in order to find positive characteristics about themselves and to supply evidence which supports those characteristics. It is a positive stroke for those learners who perceive themselves as "losers" to see a visual map of positive attributes: their own successes.

METHODOLOGY

The study used descriptive qualitative research methodology by means of informational questionnaires, artistic renditions of their life maps, and their stories they shared. The researcher gathered information from all participants to become familiar with the individuals taking part in the study. Participants were professional educators studying learning, teaching, and assessment strategies.

Two hypotheses underlie this study; the first hypothesis is that there is value in the writing and reading of educational reflective journals for both the participant learners, as well as the educator/presenter. A second hypothesis is that reflective educational journals could be used for learning and assessment.

Data were collected from classroom discussions, artistic (or not) life maps, and journal entries. Participants were given the following journalling template:

At the end of each day, reflect on your learning in your journal. Reflect on the question or statement "From what was presented today....". Record your reflections under the following headings:

ANALYSIS – how can this information be applied (in my country); possible barriers to applying this information in my country, school, or agency

INTENT – examine necessary adaptations to make this information applicable to my country; list and describe what information should be included/excluded/expanded upon for the next phase

QUESTIONS/CONCERNS – keep a brief record of questions or concerns that you have about what you have learned to date, areas for you to pursue; you may include personal concerns

RESULTS

This study identified the value of the journals for the participants and the facilitator. For participants, values included having a voice, establishing and nurturing collegial relationships, and, being free to ask questions within a safe milieu. Values for the facilitator included learning about the learners, learning which additional teaching strategies would clarify concepts, learning about social issues of a different culture, and, learning about myself. Reflective educational journals served as a medium of learning and of assessing the learners.

The value of the reflective journalling is described by Participant JY:

In my opinion, journalling is the best way of assessing students. Students are in different categories. Some can express themselves while others cannot. Journalling gives them a chance to air out their views. A teacher can adjust accordingly. With this method, even the most dull students are accommodated because you can understand their feelings better. With the other methods, you assume everybody has understood the topic. Journalling can improve one's teaching strategies. One can also use this method in a situation where there is a language problem. Imagine, a class made up of students from other continents apart from America! It could be difficult at times. I intend to use this method as well.

Drawing life maps is an example of alternative journalling methods. Participant G wrote:

I found the drawing of life maps very interesting in the sense that I was able to arrange facts about my life since I was born. While I was drawing a series of facts about my life after school, I thought that what I had done was enough but as soon I had sat down to digest what I had done I discovered that more facts were now flowing to fill the gaps. The life map is able to grow bigger each time the mind continues to look at it. I am now able to recall issues which had long been forgotten. The map is like a growing tree which gains size each counted day of the year. There are good developments taking place at each life stage shown.

Attendance in my campus classes is enforced; absenteeism is not tolerated. Adult learners arrive with a litany of issues beyond their studies. Life happens as illustrated in the following journal entry. Journalling allows me to “see” the struggles the learners have. This particular journal entry continues to haunt me (regarding restrictive classroom rules). Learner TMc wrote:

I had a really bad feeling when the telephone rang late at night. I was informed that my young six-year-old son was found alone in the boat drifting across the lake. When questioned he responded that grandfather had taken him fishing, and while out on the water grandfather stood up to take a leak. Grandfather fell into the lake and never came back. It was cold and I was so scared.

CONCLUSIONS

Reflective educational journals are time consuming; they demand learner and facilitator/teacher/instructor commitment. Journals are an important strategy or tool to:

- learn about the learners (personal information, concerns and issues),
- assess their learning and comprehension,
- provide a rich medium to improve writing, reading and comprehension of materials,
- provide a mechanism to make sense of clinical/practicum experiences,
- allow learners to address hurtful clinical/practicum events (e.g., the death of “favourite clients”); they can reflect on the meaning of the event; and, they can decide if that profession is for them or not,
- allow facilitators/teachers/instructors to improve instructional strategies based on the journal contents and comments,
- help to learn about, to practice, and to value cultural competence in this era of internationalization of our institutions (e.g., appropriate approaches in variable classroom/workshop settings which may or may not include physical interactions), and
- assist facilitators/teachers/instructors to reflect on their own strengths/weaknesses to maintain or to improve their presentation styles.

Reflective journals provide a myriad of learning and assessment tools. They are worth the effort.

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