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AUTHOR Robinson-Armstrong, Abbie
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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that student journal writing promotes the development of independent thinking as well as writing skills. Journal writing helps students comprehend course material, relate course content to their own lives, and prepare for class discussions. Instructors who use journal writing to help students achieve instructional objectives are charged with the responsibility of: designing both free and restricted writing assignments, including analytical and evaluative questions; making provisions for students to complete in-class and out-of-class entries; offering constructive feedback to validate students' writing efforts; returning journals to students in a timely fashion; modeling the process of synthesizing and analyzing academic content by keeping a journal and reading entries to students; and encouraging students to read their entries to each other. Overall, student journals constitute a salutary teaching-learning tool in which the students can record their personal observations, impressions, and questions about academic content. (Nineteen references are attached.) (Author/KEH)

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Using Academic Journals to Promote the Development of Independent Thinking and Writing Skills

Abbie Robinson-Armstrong
Centennial college
651 Warden Avenue
Scarborough, Ontario
M1K 5E9

Running head: Using Academic Journals

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Abstract

Regardless of whether students complete them in-class or out-of-class, research indicates that academic journals promote the development of independent thinking, and writing skills. Journal writing helps students comprehend course material, relate course content to their own lives and prepare for class discussions. Instructors who use academic journals to help students achieve instructional objectives are charged with the responsibility of: designing both free and restricted writing assignments, including analytical and evaluative questions; making provisions for students to complete in-class and out-of-class entries; offering constructive feedback to validate students' writing efforts; returning journals to students in a timely fashion; modeling the process of synthesizing and analyzing academic content by keeping a journal and reading entries to students; and encouraging students to read their entries to each other.

Using Academic Journals to Promote the Development of Independent Thinking and Writing Skills

Today's diverse student population creates the need for instructors to rely upon instructional methods which meet individualized needs and, at the same time, help students realize course objectives. Researchers contend that journal writing is an expressive form of writing that instructors in all curricula can use to help students facilitate learning on an individualized basis and develop independent thinking and writing skills. From this prospective, is the academic journal a panacea? If it is as invaluable as researchers assert, how does the academic journal differ from a diary, and what benefits do students derive by keeping a journal?

Clearly, there are no panaceas in adult education. However, the positive aspects associated with the academic journal encourages examination of its potential to effect student success. This is especially true in courses where the use of independent thinking and writing skills are linked to success. Since the sixties, academic journals, also referred to as logs, commonplace books and writer's notebooks (Fulwiler, 1980), have been used across the disciplines, and are now considered as suitable for use in large classes as they are in small classes or seminar groups.

Harris(1981) reported that the use of academic journals in courses on introductory psychology, information processing, psycholinguistics, psychology of mass communication, problem solving and decision making provided essential practice with psychological concepts and helped students comprehend course content. Academic journals have also been used successfully in courses in physical geography (Cropp, 1980), Shakespeare (Nicholl,1979), study skills (Hoffman, 1982), English composition (Wilson, 1980, Moss, 1979), Literature (Kay, 1977), Curriculum Evaluation (Carswell, 1988), sex/gender(Roth, 1985), basic skills (Cloud,1981) learning how to learn (Feathers & White, 1987), and social foundations of teaching (Wood, 1978).

Moffett(1968) defines the academic journal as "more impersonal and public than a diary which is written more about oneself and to oneself"(p.317). Like diaries,academic journals are written in the first person, and they individualize instruction for students by focusing on academic subjects from a personal point of view and encouraging them to relate course content to their own lives (Daly ,1977; Harris ,1981;Fulwiler, 1980).

Advantages Associated With Academic Journals

Journal writing fosters the development of independent thinking skills, and prepares students for class discussions and tests. Academic journals may motivate students to keep up with reading assignments because they have an opportunity to earn marks for their entries (Nicholl, 1979). Platt(1975) contends that when students are asked to write journal entries

before class, they come to class with the vocabulary and comprehension of content necessary for active participation in discussions. Platt(1975) discovered that after students became familiar with journals, he was able to relinquish the role of discussion leader. As Platt's (1975) students gained independent thinking skills, they became more adapt at planning and conducting effective student-centered discussions. Platt's (1975) findings were buttressed by evaluative statements made by two students who attended a Community College in Southern Ontario and who were enrolled in a course on Supervising and Administering Early Childhood Settings.

According to student number one:

"Journal writing helps me to understand the assigned readings because the questions focus on specific issues. "

Student number two reported:

"The journal helps me prepare for class discussions. It gives me something to refer to. Also I retain what I read so I am able to participate in the discussions."

Academic journals promote the development of writing skills.

Research indicates that the making of journal entries increases writing fluency and helps to sharpen composition and editing skills (Harris, 1981). Carswell (1988) asserts that the opportunity to write in unstructured situations enhances students' understanding of course content and reduces the threat that a formal assignment may imposed. Four students enrolled in the course on Supervising and Administering Early Childhood Settings

provided support for findings reported by Harris(,1981) and Carswell(1988).

Student number one:

"When I write now, I am more concerned about what I write and how I write it. My grammar, spelling and vocabulary have improved."

Student number two:

"The journal helps me to translate the course material into my own words. This means that I take time to think about what I read rather than just reading through it quickly."

Student number three:

"My writing skills have always been on the weak side, and I think the journal has helped me to improve. It has helps me focus on issues and translate those issues into my own words."

Student number four:

"The journal helped me develop paraphrasing skills. I used to plagiarize without realizing it. Now, I write everthing in my own words."

Using Academic Journals

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On the graduate level, journal writing is viewed as an essential skill for conducting qualitative research projects (Craig, 1968; Lumley, 1987; Clandinin, 1985). Graduate students who participate in research projects which require them to collect ethnographic, rather than quantitative, data, must demonstrate excellent observation and report writing skills. They must also demonstrate the ability to transfer knowledge from research techniques and a number of related disciplines to their research project. Keeping a journal is one vehicle through which graduate students can sharpen writing skills.

Academic journals have a therapeutic effect on some students. The writing process provides an opportunity for students to explore their feelings and attitudes (Craig, 1983, 1986; Lumley, 1987; Clandinin, 1985). This is essential for students who need to address specific problems such as listening and paying attention in class. Hoffman(1982) conducted a study which encouraged participants who were enrolled in a study skills class to keep "records of their struggle with school: studying, attending classes and lectures, taking notes, navigating textbooks, and preparing for tests". Hoffman(1982) concluded that " journals provide opportunities for students to analyze themselves, reflect upon their analyses and make changes in their behavior".

Fulwiler (1980) believes that journal writing works because " the act of silent writing writing, even for five minutes, generates ideas, observations and emotions." Two students who were enrolled in an interpersonal communications course at the same Southern Ontario Community College reported that writing journal entries helped them prepare for tests and encouraged self-reflection:

Student number one:

"The journal is a little time consuming but helpful.

It helps me prepare for tests , and also encourages me to do some soul searching."

Student number two:

"When I study from a textbook, it takes a lot of time to pick out the important points and study too.

When the important points from each chapter are recorded in my journal, my mind isn't loaded down with unnecessary information while I study"

Journals also help students develop a metacognitive awareness of the reading-learning process. Feathers and White(1987) analyzed journal entries of freshmen enrolled in developmental reading classes to determine the students' level of metacognitive awareness of reading and learning. Analysis of the journal entries suggest that students not only acquired

comprehension and study skills, they also demonstrated a growing awareness of "inconsiderate texts, uses of alternative strategies, organization of information, metacognitive monitoring, and the importance of accepting personal responsibility for learning" (Feathers and White, 1987).

Disadvantages Associated With Academic Journals

Journals may be written in class or out of class. However, there are some disadvantages associated with both the in-class and out-of-class journal. In-class-entries are written either at the beginning of class or before the period ends. This can create two problems: writing journal entries takes away from available class discussion time, or pressures some students to write on occasions when they are unprepared or not in the proper frame of mind.

While students write in-class entries, Fulwiler(1980) encourages instructors to write their own journals and read the entries to students. This practice not only serves as model for students, it also provides an opportunity for the instructor to engage in the process of self-evaluation or develop an understanding of the problems associated with assigned writing tasks.

Out-of-class entries can present some challenges for students and instructors. Analysis of out-of-class journal entries made by students enrolled in the interpersonal communications course revealed that some students rambled rather than focused on the identified topics. Nicholl(1979) reported that when students who were enrolled in a

Shakespeare course produced out-of-class entries, they were less likely to write on a regular basis or to use expressive language. According to Nicholl(1979), some students "summarized plots or class discussions; others lacked the self discipline to respond on a regular basis."

When students who were enrolled in the interpersonal communications course were encouraged to refer to journal entries while writing essay tests, they reported that their section of the course was "easier (than those sections in which journals were not used during test-taking periods) because we take open book tests". Those students who reported inaccurate information about the use of journals during testings periods demonstrated a lack of understanding of instructional objectives (outlined in the course syllabus) which were linked to the analysis of course content, synthesis of content with every day personal experiences, acquisition of the lexicon of interpersonal communications, and reading to write. Analysis of the students' inaccurate comments lead to the development of a handbook, "Here's How The Academic Journal Can Help You Succeed", which was designed to indtroduce journal writing to students, help them comprehend related insturctional objectives and present criteria for making entries. During the second semester, use of the handbook helped students understand the link between essay tests and journal entries. One student said:

"I think this method of testing is good because we are not told to just memorize the material. This way, reading the textbook, participating in class activities and Using

recording my reactions, taking notes from the textbook, viewing films, making personal entries and trying to analyze my actions, and combining this information with ideas shared during class discussions, storing this information in my journal and then using my journal for reference during the test, I learn more easily and remember what I learn."

Writing Assignments for Journals

There are two types of writing assignments which are appropriate for use with journals: free writing and restricted. Free writing assignments are appropriate for use in personal as well as academic journals. These assignments permit students to choose topics on an individual basis. They also provides opportunities for students to articulate problems, fears, joys, and anxieties while sharpening expressive writing skills. There are, however, some disadvantages associated with free writing assignments. Nicholl(1979) contends that free writing assignments may result in discussions that "are trivial or simplistic, that deal with questions that are excessively broad, even impossible to answer." This may be viewed as positive or negative, depending on the instructor's objective for using academic journals. In courses such as interpersonal skills, simplistic entries may be acceptable or encouraged. In courses designed to provide opportunities for students to acquire scientific facts, rambling and simplistic entries may be discouraged.

Restricted assignments are more appropriate for use with academic

journals. Restricted assignments permit instructors to present students with questions, case studies or problems. Instructors may ask students to use their journals to record self evaluations; reactions to interviews, films, books, tests, visitors to the classroom, topics arising from class discussions, or visits and observations. Restricted assignments may also encourage students to record evaluations of class activities or cite goals and personal aspirations (Cloud, 1981; Roth, 1985).

To individual instruction and meet students' needs, it is important to take a flexible approach to journal assignments. Rather than rely upon one type of writing assignment to meet the needs of all students, it seems more appropriate to assign both free writing and restricted assignments. Expressive writing opportunities provided by free writing assignments help students develop critical analytical skills while restricted writing opportunities encourage student-course content interaction. Both, free and restricted writing assignments, help students become competent proficient writers.

Evaluating Journals

There is no identified single method for evaluating academic journals. The evaluation method selected is closely linked to course content and objectives. When journals were used in English classes, Nicholl(1979) adopted a plan that included the awarding of points for organization, content, style, grammar and mechanics. Fulwiler(1980) reported that some instructors count the number of pages in the student's

journal and assign a grades which represent the institution's grading criteria. Eighty-five to 100 pages, for example, equals an "A" . Seventy to 75 pages equals a "B" . Some journals are spot-checked, skimmed or not read at all. Others are marked for completeness and effort, and points are deducted for every instance in which the journal is not turned in. If students who were enrolled in the interpersonal skills course completed 80% of the entries, an "A" (30%) was assigned to the journal. Points were deducted for failure to respond to an assigned writing task.

During the semester the interpersonal skills course ran, journals were collected six times and feed back was provided in the form of brief comments. The on-going feedback encouraged students to respond to a large number of writing assignments. Analysis of evaluations on the use of journals revealed that the feedback, although minimal, motivated students to make entries on a regular basis, and the grade attached to the making of an entry validated their efforts

Fulwiler(1978) supports the practice of providing continuous feedback because some students require guidance to develop journal writing skills. Others may fail to see the value of an assignment which is not evaluated by the instructor. Further, positive comments and suggestions about the journal can serve to "improve effective use of journals" (Fulwiler, 1980). Wood, (1978) suggests that when providing feedback, instructors should "avoid judgements, preaching, or other comments that may turn students off".

Points assigned to the journal varied from no credit to 50% of the final grade. When students in the interpersonal communications course

discovered that a completed journal was worth 30% of the final grade, they indicated that they felt rewarded for their efforts.

General Conclusions

The academic journal is not a panacea, but it is a salutary teaching-learning tool. It is a vehicle through which students can record their personal observations, impressions and questions about academic content. This invaluable exercise individualizes instruction for students and provides opportunities for them to sharpen writing, thinking and editing skills.

Journals provide opportunities for instructors to model synthesizing and analyzing strategies for students and build solid and meaningful instructor-student relationships. Through active participation in the writing process, instructors become cognizant of the challenges presented by the tasks they assign.

Journal assignments should be as creatively challenging as possible. Therefore, it is advisable to expose students to both free and restricted writing opportunities. Since in-class and out-of-class entries present dissimilar challenges, students should have opportunities to complete both while using academic journals.

Instructional objectives should determine the criteria for evaluating academic journals and the number of points assigned to entries. Regardless of the criteria for evaluation or the number of points assigned to journal

entries, instructors should make efforts to provide feedback to students and return their journals in a timely fashion.

One key to the academic journal's success lies in the instructor's ability to design creative assignments which meet students' individualized needs while helping them to demonstrate knowledge or acquire skills outlined in instructional objectives. A second key to the journal's success is linked to the instructor's ability to communicate an appreciation for rigorous thinking and writing to students.

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