

EMPIRICAL ARTICLES

Students' Perceptions of Journaling in Undergraduate Classes

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Students' perceptions of journaling are examined with the hypothesis that students perceive reflective journaling as a beneficial tool that aids in their overall success in their courses. Students completed seven, one-page journals throughout the semester. A content analysis of the final journal reveals that students enjoy the process of journaling, find journaling helpful and beneficial, and state journaling aids in life application of course material. Results suggest journaling may be received well by students and assist them in the classroom; further exploration of journaling is warranted.

It has been suggested that self-efficacy and engagement are crucial in the development of personal growth, professional development, and learning (Dunlap, 2006; Zimmerman, 2000). Journaling is a useful tool in assisting ones' ability to put thoughts on paper and contemplate ideas, as well as to learn more about the inner and more personal self (Hiemstra, 2001). The process of journaling could encourage the use of transformative thinking, which involves the basic questioning of where the information comes from, and how information applies to everyday life. This involves questioning authority and applying preceding knowledge to what an individual is currently learning (Hubbs & Brand, 2005).

Hiemstra (2001) indicated that journaling has been underused as a teaching and learning tool. Journaling could provide a critical description of one's own thoughts and behaviors and force oneself to face the obstacles ahead. Despite the inclusion of journaling as a "hot topic" in pedagogic discussions, little empirical research has been done regarding the impact of journaling in college classrooms. Fritson (2008) investigated the impact of journaling on students' self-efficacy and locus of control. The results of Fritson's study indicated that

the students' self-efficacy scores were significantly higher at the end of the semester of journaling than at the beginning before the journaling assignments were done. Self-efficacy played a key role in learning as students who document their success in an endeavors through journaling are more likely to be successful in academics and possibly other areas in life (Fritson, 2008; Fritson, Forrest, & Bohl, 2011; Zimmerman, 2000). Fritson, Forrest, and Bohl (2011) described benefits of reflective journaling regarding engagement, self-expression, and content knowledge improvement.

The use of journaling can demonstrate the students' learning process, reflective thinking, and show the writers' written communication skills. Reflective journaling can also illustrate prior knowledge of the writer, skill attainment, critical thinking, and provide an emotional catharsis (Ruthman, Jackson, Cluskey, Flannigan, Folse & Buntin, 2004). Given the potential benefits of journaling, it is important to explore students' perceptions of the journaling process and develop ways to incorporate journaling into classrooms to maximize reflective journaling's benefits to students.

This study directly assesses students' percep-

tions of their journaling experiences in order to better understand how journaling might be successfully used in college courses. Since there is limited research on students' perceptions of journaling, this project contributes to our knowledge about students' ideas on the benefits/negatives of journaling, which may lead to better applications of journaling in courses. Additionally, results allow professors to weigh the pros and cons, from students' perspectives, of journaling in determining whether to incorporate journaling into courses.

JOURNALING AND ENGAGEMENT

Student engagement is defined as the amount of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation combined with the students' desire and eagerness to succeed (Bomia, Beluzo, Demeester, Elander, Johnson, & Sheldon, 1997). Students' participation in active, interesting learning experiences increases student engagement (Miller, Rycek, & Fritson, 2011). However, little research has been done in regards to how journaling affects college students' perceptions of their classroom engagement compared to classes when the students do not participate in journaling. Research done by Skinner and Belmont (1993) showed that student involvement was significantly impacted when teachers provided autonomy support. Autonomy support promotes student internal motivation and taking responsibility for their ideas and learning with very few guidelines from an instructor. One application of autonomy support is for students to complete journal assignments and be allowed to explore themselves on their own. Non-directed, intrapersonal exploration and application of new information is important. According to Exeter, Ameratunga, Ratima, Morton, Dickson, Hsu, & Jackson. (2010), active learning is when students complete assignments, introspect, and take responsibility for their work quality which can allow students to have the potential to promote student engagement. Journaling is a way of actively involving students in their own learning and allowing them to learn more about themselves and possibly help them become more involved in classroom lectures as the journaling process allows students to develop more comfort with new information, increase their awareness of the real-life information applications, and actively contemplate the information prior to class discussions. Additionally, the mere act of completing the journal constitutes a form of course engagement.

STUDENTS' SELF-EFFICACY

Self-efficacy is the perceived ability of oneself to complete a task. Students who set small attainable sub-goals leading up to a large goal increase general self-efficacy and ability to self-teach information even when the activities previously held little interest (Bandura & Schunk, 1981). Through achieving these small attainable goals, this could help students obtain a mastery over all the courses information. Specifically, as students gain mastery over small amounts of information, they gain momentum and confidence (self-efficacy) to attempt and complete future assignments/tasks in a classroom. According to Bandura (1982; 1997), self-efficacy has significant effects on changes in people's coping behavior because of their level of physiological stress reactions, self-regulation of refractory behavior, resignation and experience with failure, desire to strive for achievement, career pursuits and more success in academics.

Furthermore, people with a higher self-efficacy or belief they can achieve are successful despite obstacles (Prat-Sala & Redford, 2010). Those with higher self-efficacy are found to be more internally motivated; in academic settings, higher self-efficacy is correlated with higher academic motivation and performance, and negatively correlated with dishonesty (Prat-Sala & Redford, 2010). The reflective journaling process is believed to promote improved self-efficacy through the opportunity for mastery and expression of new information, feelings of success in completion of an autonomous assignment and having a greater understanding of themselves (Fritson, 2008).

STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF JOURNALING

Although limited, research is supporting the use of journals in classrooms; however, limited research has explored students' perceptions of journaling in traditional face-to-face classrooms as opposed to non-traditional on-line schools. In an exploration of graduate students' perceptions of reflective journaling in an online learning situation, students felt that reflective journaling strengthened clarification of roles, bridged the gap between theory and practice, and contributed to identification of strengths and weaknesses (Landley & Brown, 2010). It was found that reflective journaling allowed for examination of attitudes and perspectives, helped in emotional expression, contributed to personal meaning,

reinforced the understanding of complex information as well as promoting the courses objectives, helped students in reflection of new ideas, and contributed to students' ability to become active learners. These findings were echoed by Dunlap (2006) finding that reflective journaling assisted students in identifying issues, aided in the learning process, and helped with personal assessment presently and in the future.

The purpose of the present study is to determine students' perceptions of journaling in their courses. The researchers hypothesize that students will report they like the journaling process and that they benefit from the journaling experience. Specifically, those students will report journaling increases their study behavior and use of their textbooks. This could improve understanding of the material and improve their ability to apply information to their lives.

METHOD

Participants

The sample for this research experiment consisted of 112 participants from two lecture/discussion, face-to-face introductory psychology courses (42 men and 70 women). The participants ranged in age from 19-45 years, with a median age of 20. All students in the courses completed reflective journals as part of the course expectation and received a total of 100 points in the course if they completed all 7 journals. The participants were not at any risk while involved in the study as they simply completed reflective journal assignments on topics studied in the course, then one reflective journal on their journaling experience. They were graded only on completion of the journals, not content, grammar, or technique. Students who chose to complete some additional psychosocial measures that were not used in component of the study, earned two points extra credit, which is consistent with other extra credit given for completing survey research. This study only used students' reflections about the journaling process from journal seven to explore students' perceptions of the journaling process.

Procedure

Student researchers introduced the research opportunity to undergraduate students in two different classrooms and highlighted that their involvement was voluntary. Students who chose to participate

completed the consent forms; consent forms were housed with the student researchers to ensure that the professor did not know which students did or did not participate in the research project. Students' participation in the study was kept from the professor in order to avoid any coercion of students to participate and prevent bias of the professor towards students' grades.

The professor randomly split the two classes in half and assigned half of each class to journal and half of each class to not journal for the first half of the semester. For the first six weeks, the students assigned to journal were given a topic from the chapter discussed in class each week and required to complete a one-page, double-spaced reflective journal about that topic and its application to their lives. A sample prompt was "Write a reflective journal about the stages of sleep and apply the stages to your life. Use personal examples or examples you're aware of from others in your life". The final journal assignment (week 7) was the completion of a one-page, reflective journal about the experience of the journaling they completed the previous six weeks. The prompt for the final journal was, "You all have completed 6 reflective journals about different topics in this class, so this journal is worth 10 points and please write a reflective journal about the journaling process this semester. Include any ideas, feelings, and beliefs you had about the journaling process and how it affected you in this course". At mid-semester, the students then switched roles with the students who did not journal the first half of the semester journaling, and the students who wrote in a journal the first half of the term no longer documenting in a journal. At the end of the semester, researchers read and analyzed journal seven to assess students' perceptions of the journaling process in the course.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The study was a content analysis on the final journal, which entailed the students' perceptions of the journaling process. The three individual researchers coded journals independently in order to ensure inter-rater reliability. Responses were coded into thirteen separate categories. The categories included the following: 1) liked/enjoyed, 2) time/length good/reasonable, 3) helped grades, 4) assisted writing skills, 5) thought provoking/deeper thinking/critical thinking/insight/problem

solving, 6) helped class attendance, 7) helped them express thoughts/feelings/self-reflect, 8) they were beneficial/helped/understand/mastery, 9) helped the student remember information/material from class, 10) helped on exams, 11) involved life application, 12) easy points, and 13) and wanted full semester journaling patterns. In order to make the findings easier to read and understand, we grouped the 13 categories into 4 themes. These themes include: 1) Positive Experience, 2) Assists Students' Grade in Course, 3) Increases Overall Learning, and 4) Promotes Thinking. Findings show that students' perceived journaling favorably (see Table 1 for student endorsement percentages for all 13 categories within the 4 themes).

Positive Experience

Results showed that 22% of students stated they liked/enjoyed journaling. Additionally, 13% of students reported journaling took a reasonable amount

of time, and 12% indicated they would like to journal the whole semester rather than just half of the term. These findings suggest that students might view journaling as an asset to a class and engage willingly rather than view journaling as another task "to get through" in a course. Additionally, no students reported journaling was a waste of time or spoke negatively of the journaling experience.

Assists Students' Grade in Course

This theme refers to ways students report the journaling assisted them specific to the course. Students reported that the greatest benefit journaling offered to the course is assistance on exams (31%). Twenty-one students also reported that the journals were "easy points", while thirteen percent indicated the journaling helped their grade. Only two percent of students reported that journaling increased their attendance in the course.

These results indicate students view the journaling

Table 1: Students' Perceptions of Journaling

<u>Students' Perceptions</u>	<u>Percent Response</u>
Positive Experience	
Liked/Enjoyed.....	22%
Reasonable time.....	13%
Wanted full semester journaling patterns.....	12%
Assists Students' Grade in Course	
Helped on exams.....	31%
Easy points.....	21%
Helped grade.....	13%
Increase in class attendance.....	2%
Increases Overall Learning	
Beneficial-helped understand and master material.....	66%
Aided in remembering material.....	29%
Assisted writing skills.....	4%
Promotes Thinking	
Life application of class topics.....	55%
Thought provoking.....	21%
Expression of thoughts.....	21%

Note: The students' perceptions of journaling were noted from the seventh journal. The comments were totaled; the mean was calculated and converted into a percentage.

as a positive tool to earn participation points, yet they believe the journaling process provides assistance on their exams. This suggests students might see the benefit of journaling as greater than the cost, so they might engage in the course, especially journaling as a means to improve their grades. These results also indicate that students do not view their attendance in the class as being related to their journaling.

ANALYSIS

Increases Overall Learning

This theme includes categories that students report assisted them in learning material and using academic skills. The most notable of all of the findings is that sixty-six percent of students reported the journaling as beneficial and that it helped them understand and/or master the course information. It is important to note such a finding because if students' find a specific learning tool beneficial, it would be to professors' benefit to take advantage of those tools, and to implement the tools into their classrooms. Additionally, twenty-nine percent of students found the journal assisted them in remembering course material. These findings suggest there may be some academic benefit for students who journal, as well as, the perception by students that they benefit and recall information as a result of journaling.

These findings are consistent with Ruthman et al. (2004), which reiterates the importance of using journaling as a teaching tool. Such a result is important for teachers and students alike, because there are many classes in which journaling may be appropriate, but is not utilized. Many teachers and professors could successfully implement journaling, and potentially have similar positive and beneficial results. The findings also may be particularly important in higher level courses in which the subject material may be more difficult to understand. Journal assignments by an instructor may aid the students in focusing on material the professor acknowledges as important as was shown by Langley and Brown (2010). Furthermore, Hubbs & Brand (2005) stated that journaling was necessary in order to put ones' own thoughts to paper and allow self-reflection.

Promotes Thinking

The categories in this theme suggest students think more and utilize information in real life as

a result of journaling in the course. Specifically, fifty-five percent of students indicated that journaling promoted the life application of course topics outside of the classroom. Additionally, twenty-one percent of students indicated the journals were thought provoking, caused deeper thinking, involved critical thinking, involved further insight, and required problem solving. A reason for this response could be that the journals topics promoted further exploration of class materials. Students were asked to use the acquired knowledge from class and use it in another setting to adequately complete the assignment. Likewise, twenty-one percent of students stated journaling promoted self-exploration and expression of their own thoughts. These findings suggest the journaling process stimulated students' thought processing and influenced their use of deeper thinking in the course.

These findings indicate self-reflection is important in the classroom in order to aid in the mastery of topics, consistent with the early findings of research done by Bandura (1977) on self-efficacy and mastery. Additionally, Exeter et al. (2010) found that journaling promotes student course engagement. Considering this, it could be inferred from the personal application of the journals, students were then more engaged. If students have a personal connection to their learning they may be more likely to be successful in personally applying the knowledge learned to real life situations in the future.

CONCLUSION

Consistent with previous research regarding an online learning in a graduate course (Landley & Brown, 2010) and Dunlap's (2006) findings, this research strongly suggests that students perceive journaling as a positive and beneficial experience. Clearly, many students reported the reflective journaling experience as beneficial and that it would be welcomed as a consistent tool for learning in their classes. Since few studies have explored students' perceptions, further research in this area is warranted and we offer some ideas to enhance future endeavors. Specifically, having students journal an entire semester would be helpful; however, that creates difficulty if researchers want to also explore any difference between students who journal and do not journal during a given semester. Another suggestion is to create a specific rubric for assessing students' perceptions; perhaps a Likert scale rating their perceptions of the various

characteristics identified in this study. Another idea is to have a greater number of raters of the last journal to enhance the reliability. Lastly, this line of research could be strengthened if the professor is less involved in the explanation of the journals or rating process since the professor's biases might influence students' responses. The addition of a professor who is less invested in the class would assist in eliminating such bias.

Author Biographies

Krista K. Fritson, Psy.D. is a tenured, Associate Professor at the University of Nebraska at Kearney where she teaches the clinical track courses, including Psychopathology, Intro to Clinical Psychology, Abnormal Psychology, and General Psychology while supervising students' Field Experiences and Practica in mental health settings. She also has an active research program with students and colleagues. She has six publications, including a chapter on Autism in *Handbook of 21st Century Psychology* (2008, Sage), a research project on the effects of neurotherapy on college students' cognitive abilities and emotions (2007, *Journal of Neurotherapy*), two research projects on journaling and college student engagement in the classroom. She is currently exploring alternative strategies to assist emotionally/behaviorally troubled youth in classroom settings. Additionally, she is a licensed clinical psychologist who has worked in the mental health field with children and adolescents in some capacity for 25 years. Her experience includes working as the Clinical Supervisor for a residential treatment center for boys ages 7 to 14 for twelve years. She serves as the Supervising Practitioner for several therapists in the community, provides consultation services to mental health/medical organizations, maintains a private practice, and provides continuing education seminars regularly for mental health professionals.

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