

Engaged Journalism: Using Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) for In-Class Journaling Activities

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Educators have long recognized the value and import of class journaling. Traditional approaches to journaling, however, only engage students in one mode of communicative expression while allowing them to procrastinate in writing their entries. Typical journals are also read exclusively by the instructor, which overlooks the opportunity for students to learn from one another. In response to each of these limitations, the present paper outlines a semester-long journaling activity we call Engaged Journaling. We begin by situating Engaged Journaling within the theoretical framework of Kolb's (1984, 2015) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT). Next, we offer a step-by-step description of the activity. We then discuss four specific benefits from using such a creative approach to in-class journaling: (1) a more holistic measurement of student comprehension, (2) engagement of potentially disengaged students, (3) enriched class discussion and cross-interaction, and (4) the creation of additional entry points for clarification. We conclude with variations on a theme (i.e., alternative ways in which Engaged Journaling can be used both within and outside of the classroom).

Educators have long recognized the value of class journaling as a tool to engage students in constructive and reflective processes (Hampton & Morrow, 2003; Hubbs, & Brand, 2005; Ross, 1998; Russ, 2012). Semester-long journaling activities typically require students to synthesize and reflect upon the material they have read in a series of brief entries, which are then turned into the instructor periodically or at semester's end. The resulting journals are read by the instructor, graded, and returned to the student.

Such a traditional approach to class journaling is beneficial in several ways; however, it is not without its limitations. The first shortcoming is that it only engages students in one mode of communicative expression: essay writing. Second, even when students are tasked to write journal entries periodically, they often procrastinate until the entire journal is due (Robey, n.d.). Finally, a fundamental shortcoming of the typical class journal is that its end result is only seen by the instructor. This reality results in limited feedback for the student while overlooking the invaluable opportunity for students to learn from one another (Curtis et al., 2009).

Addressing these limitations, scholars from a variety of disciplines have advocated for more creative approaches to journaling in order to engage students and provide a deeper learning experience (Deaver & McAuliffe, 2009; Hampton & Morrow, 2003; La Jevic & Springgay, 2008). Such suggestions include photo journaling (Ardoin et al., 2014; Land, Smith, Park, Beabout, & Kim, 2009), creative art project development (Deaver & McAuliffe, 2009; La Jevic & Springgay, 2008), online blogging (Bouldin, Holmes, & Fortenberry, 2006), and even dance experiences (Barbour, 2005). Building on suggestions by each of these scholars to engage students through several modes of creative expression (Sridevi, Gunasekaran, &

Paranthaman, 2012) while simultaneously grounding our understanding in Kolb's (1984, 2015) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), the present paper presents a teaching activity we call Engaged Journaling.

Engaged Journaling can be used in a variety of courses, spanning a multitude of disciplines (e.g., Anthropology, Communication, Sociology, and Psychology, to name but a few). Four specific learning objectives of Engaged Journaling include: (1) engagement with course concepts through multiple modes of creative expression; (2) experience with all four stages of ELT's learning process: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation; (3) presentation of course concepts and understanding before a classroom of peers; (4) observation, critique, and engagement in dialogue with one others' understandings of course concepts. In order to adequately address each of these learning objectives, Engaged Journaling is envisioned within the present paper as a semester-long activity. Although its entry prompts intentionally vary in both form and style, each prompt should require approximately 15-30 minutes of class time.

Theoretical Framework

Scholars from a variety of fields who focus on curriculum development within higher education use Kolb's (1984, 2015) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT) as a framework for educational innovation (see Kolb, Boyatzis & Mainemelis, 2001; Kraft & Kielsmeier, 1995; Moon, 2004). Kolb (2015) defines learning as "the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience" (49). Thus, it is the grasping or interpretation of raw experience and the transformation of that experience that builds

knowledge. Kolb also argues that knowledge creation occurs as a dynamic learning cycle driven by the resolution of the dual dialectics of action/reflection and experience/abstraction. For each of these reasons, ELT portrays two dialectically related modes of grasping raw experience – Concrete Experience (CE) and Abstract Conceptualization (AC) – and two dialectically related modes of transforming experience – Reflective observation (RO) and Active Experimentation (AE). The learning process then consists of these four modes which build upon each other in stages. The first stage of ELT, Concrete Experience (CE) (i.e., feeling), endorses a receptive and experience-based approach to learning. The second stage, Reflective Observation (RO) (i.e., watching), scrutinizes the thoughts and behaviors that emerge during concrete experience. The third stage, Abstract Conceptualization (AC) (i.e., thinking), uses personal observation to develop an idea or generalized theory from which new action can be formulated. Finally, Active Experimentation (AE) (i.e., doing) tests hypotheses in order to implement new knowledge into future situations and experiences (Kolb et al., 2001; Kolb & Kolb, 2006).

Kolb (1984, 2015) argues that the learning process works best when learners have the opportunity to connect with concepts at each stage, as immediate or concrete experience is the basis for observation and reflection. In other words, when the learner “touches all the bases” (51) by experiencing (CE), reflecting (RO), thinking (AC), and acting (AE) in a recursive process, they are more likely to retain information and develop critical thinking abilities (Arends, 2014; Coffield, Moseley, Hall, & Ecclestone, 2004b; Kolb, 2015; Muscat & Mollicone, 2012). Developing assignments geared towards all four stages of the ELT “prepares learners for cultivating and directing personal growth by compelling them to plan for and apply the insights and knowledge gained” (Russ, 2012, 316). Consequently, the four-stage learning cycle of Kolb’s ELT creates a “recursive, holistic, and dialectic process of human learning” necessary for full student engagement as each stage of the cycle places different demands on learners (317; see also Frontczak, 1998; Healey & Jenkins, 2000; Jamil & Naureen, 2011; Sugarman, 1985).

Kolb’s (1984, 2015) theoretical framework is especially significant for Engaged Journaling, as it requires students to engage with course material in ways that speak to all four stages of ELT. Students are to choose from a variety of creative journaling options and then share their responses via presentation and peer critique. The result is a more holistic process of learning for the student, which spans throughout the entire semester. The following section outlines the specific steps of this semester-long activity in more detail.

Description of Activity

Step 1. Assign course readings as regularly scheduled. At least four different readings must be scheduled to ensure students have the opportunity to apply a journaling activity in each stage or dimension of ELT.

Step 2. In response to each reading, require students to evidence their understanding of major course concepts by choosing one mode of creative expression from within each of the four stages outlined below. Giving students a choice of engagement is consistent with Kolb’s ELT, as presenting students with options allows them to engage with the dialectical tensions of action/reflection and experience/abstraction (Kolb, 2015; Kolb et al., 2001).

Stage one: concrete experience. In accordance with the first stage of Kolb’s (1984, 2015) four-stage learning cycle, the following five prompts can be used to ensure students engage in receptive and experience-based learning. Each of these options aligns with stage one because they require students to take an active and hands-on approach to learning through the creation of social media artifacts. In fact, Bouldin, Holmes and Fortenberry (2006) advocate for the use of technology – such as blogs or the development of social media – because it engages students in a way that traditional journaling cannot, while creating a deeper learning experience and increased retention of course concepts.

- #1. *Tweet*: Summarize one major concept from the reading in 140 characters or less.
- #2. *YouTube video*: Upload an original 2-minute video that illustrates one major concept from the reading (see also Jenkins & Dillon, 2013a).
- #3. *Podcast*: Upload an original 2-minute podcast that illustrates one major concept from the reading.
- #4. *Facebook profile* (1 of 2): Conduct a content analysis of your own Facebook profile, focusing on the representation of identity formation and performance (see also Jenkins & Dillon, 2013b; Gallardo, Jenkins, & Dillon, in press).
- #5. *Facebook profile* (2 of 2): Conduct a content analysis of Facebook profiles from a particular grouping of your friends (work, social, church, family), focusing on the representation of identity formation and performance as it relates to group membership.

Stage two: reflective observation. The second stage of Kolb’s (1984, 2015) model involves reflective observation via shared experience. Consequently, the following journal options require students to connect course content with their own lived experiences via

storytelling, self-reflection, and/or personal observation. This opportunity encourages deep learning, as the intention is to develop a personal understanding of the material and relate it to what is already known by the student (Kraft & Kielsmeier, 1995).

- #6. Short story: Write a 1-page short story based on past experiences that illustrates one major concept from the reading.
- #7. Personal example: In 1-2 pages, use a personal example from your life to illustrate one major concept from the reading.
- #8. Original poem or song lyric: Create an original poem or song lyric that illustrates one major concept from the reading.
- #9. What if...?: In 1-2 pages, respond to a hypothetical scenario provided by the instructor (see Appendix for a sample scenario we have used in past semesters).
- #10. Muddiest point: Write 3 well thought-out questions inspired by the reading.

Stage three: abstract conceptualization. Building upon stage three of Kolb's learning cycle, Deaver and McAuliffe (2009) argue that visual prompts can engage students in ways that non-traditional teaching strategies cannot. Requiring students to reflect on experience and course concepts through the creation of art and/or visual journaling (e.g., painting, sculpture, photography, etc.) can be highly beneficial as imagery captures experience in a way that allows them to make cognitive sense of concepts (Ardoin et al., 2014; La Jevic & Springgay, 2008; Land et al., 2009). In order to engage students through visual thinking and abstract conceptualization, we suggest a number of creative journaling options:

- #11. *Sculpture*: Create a piece of sculpture that illustrates one major concept from the reading.
- #12. *Photographs*: Produce 2-3 original photos that illustrate one major concept from the reading.
- #13. *Comic strip*: Create an original cartoon that illustrates one major concept from the reading.
- #14. *Conceptual art/poster/diagram*: Create a visual image that illustrates one major concept from the reading.
- #15. *Clothing/furniture*: Design an original piece of clothing or furniture that illustrates one major concept from the reading.

Stage four: active experimentation. The final learning stage of ELT emphasizes the implementation of new knowledge into future experiences, thus creating a shared experience for students and their fellow classmates (Barbour, 2005). Journal prompts that challenge students to move beyond comprehension and self-reflection in order to physically embody course concepts include the following:

- #16. *Silent film scene*: Write and perform an original silent film scene that illustrates one major concept from the reading.
- #17. *Class activity*: Develop and present a 5-minute activity that illustrates one major concept from the reading.
- #18. *Dance moves*: Demonstrate a set of choreographed dance moves that illustrate one major concept from the reading.
- #19. *30-second short*: Prepare and share a 30-second oral presentation that illustrates one major concept from the reading.
- #20. *Reconciliatory letter*: Write a reconciliatory letter to someone in your past/present life.

Step 3. For each assigned reading, have students present their Engaged Journaling entries with one another in dyads, small groups, or one-by-one to the entire class. Students who choose to upload an original video to YouTube (option #2), for example, should present the video to their classmates and explain how it illustrates one major concept from the reading. Similarly, students who respond to a hypothetical scenario (option #9) should explain the rationale for their written response, and students who developed an original class activity (option #17) should invite volunteers to help demonstrate how their activity works.

Step 4. Following each student's presentation, classmates should then be given the opportunity to critique, discuss, and ask questions. If students share their journal entries with the entire classroom, this offers a seamless entry point into class discussion on major course concepts. If students share in dyads or small groups, each group can take time to report out on their conversations, conclusions, points of confusion, etc.

Debriefing with Results

Over the past four years, we have used this activity in nearly a dozen course sections at four different universities. Classes in which we have successfully used Engaged Journaling include Communication Theory, Interpersonal Communication, Organizational Communication, and Intercultural Communication, to name but a few. Throughout this time, we have been routinely surprised by the students' positive reactions, as well as the activity's positive effects upon our classroom environment. More specifically, we have observed that Engaged Journaling (1) offers a more holistic measurement of student comprehension, (2) engages potentially disengaged students, (3) enriches class discussion and cross-interaction, and (4) creates additional entry points for clarification.

Holistic measurement of comprehension. The first result we have observed from our use of Engaged Journaling stems from the way it engages students

through multiple modes of creative expression. Traditional journaling activities only ask students to write about their understanding of course concepts. Such a limited and limiting approach favors English-speaking students, as well as students who have strong writing skills. It ultimately serves as a better measure of students' ability to *write about* course concepts than it does students' actual understanding of those concepts. The requirement to explain a reading via standard essay format, for instance, might prove difficult for a student who is not a strong writer. Similarly, international and second-language students may find it impossible to express the depth of their understanding through written expression alone. Engaged Journaling, however, allows students to express themselves in a variety of ways – many of which are unhindered by the limitations of language (Jenkins, 2014a, 2014b; Leitch, 2006). Consequently, the opportunity to record a podcast (option #3), create an abstract piece of sculpture (option #11), or design a piece of clothing/furniture (option #15) can result in a much more holistic measurement and accurate representation of student comprehension.

Engaging the disengaged student. While using Engaged Journaling in the classroom, we have also witnessed time and time again as non-participatory students seem to come “out of their shell” in front of classmates. During one of our first semesters using this activity, for instance, a seemingly disengaged student who did not excel at writing or feel comfortable participating in class discussion became visibly excited about the opportunity to share an original poem/song lyric (option #8). On the day his first journal entry was due, this student walked to the front of the classroom with an iPod and small set of speakers in hand. He then proceeded to rap before 30 of his peers on social judgment theory to the ubiquitous beat of “Rapper’s Delight.” Additional students have expressed a similar reaction via end-of-semester course evaluations and personal communication. Within her/his course evaluation for Interpersonal Communication, one student commented, “Loved the journal options... very unique and helped me pay attention to the content covered.” Another student responded similarly by describing Engaged Journaling as the “best part” of the class, and yet another student took the time to send a personal message: “Thanks you for making the class interesting... It meant a lot to a student like me to be able to use music and art to express myself... [and] the options kept me interested.”

Class discussion and cross-interaction. In addition to offering a more holistic measure of comprehension while engaging potentially disengaged students, this activity has also shown to enrich class discussion. Research shows that the majority of college students enjoy learning from their peers while also having their own opinions heard in the classroom

(Arends, 2014). For these reasons, after listening to a classmate’s three well thought-out questions (option #10) or watching a peer’s choreographed dance moves (option #18), students are typically fraught with their own comments and questions. This approach not only spurs additional participation and cross-interaction among students, but also allows a natural opportunity for students to help co-construct the classroom experience (Jenkins, 2013). Rather than covering course material through the use of a typical lecture format, instructors can use Engaged Journaling as a launching pad for classroom conversation. Consequently, they can address course material in a much more organic manner that allows the students to learn from one another while also letting their voices and opinions be heard.

Entry points for clarification. The fourth effect we have observed in the classroom includes additional entry points for clarification. When a student shares her/his understanding of a concept with the class, it not allows them to help co-construct the classroom, but also allows instantaneous feedback from the instructor. This reality is especially significant in the case that a student’s explanation is inaccurate. The same is also true for classmates who comment on, or ask questions about, another student’s journal entry. Each of these circumstances allow the instructor to immediately recognize and correct misunderstandings in the moment: misunderstandings that might have otherwise gone unnoticed with a standard journal turned in at semester’s end.

Conclusion

The present activity outlined twenty unique entry options for Engaged Journaling, five for each stage of Kolb’s (1984, 2015) four-stage learning cycle: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Once an instructor has moved beyond the conventional mindset of class journaling, however, the range and variety of entry options is virtually endless and limited only by one’s own imagination. For instance, additional journal options we have used for abstract conceptualization (stage three of ELT) include the creation of paintings, business cards, model buildings, card/board games, secret handshakes, advertising slogans, reality television synopses, and even 3-course dinner menus, to name but a few.

Over the years we have also found the specific way in which students share journal entries with their classmates can vary dramatically, adding additional levels of interest and engagement. For example, at one point each semester we usually draw a bracket on the whiteboard prior to class. The names of those who created a 30-second short (option #19) are then placed on the bracket as a way to create a fun and playful sense

of competition. One-by-one, students face off with one another by sharing their oral explanation of a major concept. Classmates vote anonymously by a raise of hands, indicating which explanation they felt was most accurate and explanatory. The winner for each round advances, and the process is repeated until a class champion is determined.

An alternative option for presenting journal entries in an interesting and engaging manner involves displaying original sculptures (option #11), photographs (option #12), comic strips (option #13), conceptual art/poster/diagrams (option #14), and clothing/furniture designs (option #15) around the room or in a nearby hallway. Students can then take time to peruse the work, not unlike they would at a major museum or gallery exhibit. Outside faculty and students can also be invited to view these “student exhibitions,” further disseminating the students’ work and garnering outside perspectives.

Yet another unique way for students to engage with their journal entries is to (re)consider what is done subsequent to their grading. We have often offered bonus points, for instance, to students who actually mailed their reconciliatory letter (option #20). The results of this particular journal entry are especially profound, as students often use the activity’s gentle nudge as opportunity to reconcile with a friend or family member. On more than one occasion students have credited their reconciliatory letter for mending a fractured friendship, reuniting them with a distant sibling, or reopening lines of communication with an estranged parent.

Despite each of these options – or rather because of them – one potential limitation of Engaged Journaling is its myriad of choices: the activity’s greatest strength is also a possible weakness. For this reason, certain instructors might find it helpful to align 1-3 journal options with each class reading in a way that ensures students “touch all the bases” within ELT’s four-stage learning model (Kolb, 1984, 2015). This approach makes certain that students experience each stage of ELT while still offering them a certain level of flexibility. Yet it avoids overwhelming students with too many alternatives to choose from. This approach also allows the instructor to match specific journal options with appropriate/corresponding course readings. The writing of a short story (option #6), for instance, might be coupled with readings on Fisher’s (1984) Narrative Paradigm, the performance of an original silent film scene (option #16) might be coupled with readings on nonverbal communication, and the writing of a reconciliatory letter (option #20) might be coupled with readings on conflict negotiation. Likewise, the Tweet (option #1), YouTube video (option #2) and podcast (option #3) might each be coordinated with readings on social media or virtual communication. The sculpture (option #11), photographs (option #12), comic strip (option #13), conceptual art/poster/diagram (option #14), and clothing/furniture

design (option #15) might be assigned alongside readings on visual communication, and so on.

In the end, each of these variations enable Engaged Journaling to build upon traditional approaches to class journaling while simultaneously avoiding many of journaling’s limitations: its focus on one mode of expression, the tendency for students to procrastinate until semester’s end, and the missed opportunity for students to learn from one another. In accordance with Kolb’s (1984, 2015) Experiential Learning Theory (ELT), Engaged Journaling also employs multiple learning styles through several modes of creative expression, and it allows opportunities for students to engage in each level of ELT’s four-stage learning cycle.

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Appendix
Journal Option #9: *What if...?*

Directions: In 1-2 pages, respond to the following hypothetical scenario by employing one major concept from the reading.

Unbeknownst to you, a close friend recently turned in one of your class papers as her/his own. The friend was caught by her/his professor who now assumes you conspired with your friend to help her/him cheat. The professor wants to meet with you in her office about possible expulsion from the university.