

Group Journaling: A Tool for Reflection, Fun and Group Development

By Morten Asfeldt

Personal journaling is common practice in outdoor programs and is an important means of reflection and meaning-making. For over 20 years I have used group journals to promote reflection and understanding, raise important questions, explore difficult issues, develop writing and speaking skills, and enhance group development. I first discovered group journaling on a 28-day Coppermine River expedition with friends and have since used it on personal, student and commercial expeditions.



To begin the practice, invite participants to take turns writing in the group journal; this can be voluntary or required depending on your group. During a group gathering near the beginning of the first day of the expedition, explain the group journal process and seek a volunteer to write about the first day; you can give as much or as little direction on what and how to write as appropriate for the group and expedition goals. At this point, which I find best done in front of the whole group in a fun and ceremonial fashion, give the writer a hardcover journal that will be passed from writer to writer through the expedition.

The following morning, gather the group and have the writer read their entry aloud

to the group. I prefer to do this as a part of a morning ritual that I maintain throughout the expedition after the canoes or backpacks are packed and the group is ready to go. My ritual often includes an overview of the day, a map talk and some sort of “thought for the day.” After the group journal reading, ask for another volunteer to write. If no volunteers come forward, you can have the person who read give the journal to any member who has not written or play a game to determine who is next. Either way, have fun with the “passing of the journal.”

Once the expedition is over distribute a copy of the journal to all members. This can be as simple as photocopying the journal or compiling typed journal entries with photos, maps, menus, and other information from the expedition.

Group journal entries have included prose, poetry, art, songs and skits. They can be hilarious beyond imagination, deeply emotional and filled with insight. At times, issues are identified that you may want to address such as meaningful insights, new areas of interest and group tensions. In some cases, issues and ideas raised have had significant influence on the focus and structure of the remainder of the expedition.

From time to time there are people who are reluctant to write because they may be uncomfortable sharing their writing or speaking in public. Support these people as needed. After most journal readings there is considerable celebration and applause from the group as the practice becomes an integral part of the day. In fact, when I have forgotten to make time for the journal reading the group is quick to remind me: “We aren’t going anywhere until we have the journal reading.”

Morten Asfeldt teaches outdoor education at the University of Alberta, Augustana Campus.