E-Journaling: Achieving Interactive Education Online

Electronic journaling enhances interactivity in traditional and online courses, fostering intellectual exchange and successful learning

By Jonnie Jill Phipps

One teaching strategy successfully being implemented in the high-tech environment of online education is that of electronic journaling, or e-journaling. It enhances traditional face-to-face classrooms and courses offered at a distance to multiple sites using video technology. E-journaling provides an opportunity for learners to express opinions, ideas, and concerns about the course materials that would not be shared otherwise. The intellectual exchange allows faculty members to encourage, guide, and engage students in an academic venue. E-journaling builds a rapport between faculty and students that contributes to positive learning experiences and successful outcomes. Although effective in a number of educational settings, e-journaling proves essential for successful interaction in Web-based courses where materials are delivered completely online.

Journaling Explained

There are many types of journaling, and all probably aid in some type of self-reflection.1

- Spiritual journals and dream logs are extremely personal in nature. They are often used to improve self-understanding.
- Diaries simply record day-to-day happenings or special events. They preserve historical data but add little to the educational process.
- Autobiographies and memoirs are valuable tools for self-assessment and for sharing life experiences, and possibly for inspiring others.

However, when discussing journal writing in the academic arena with the goal of improving critical thinking skills, the following types of reflective writings offer the most powerful tools:

- Professional journals record the growth and development of the author in his or her specific field of study.
- Interactive reading logs provide an opportunity for recording reactions to materials being read as the learner progresses through a book, an article, or instructions. These logs can include imaginary conversations with the author of the material being read, even questioning the ideas presented.
- Theory logs compel students to examine and interpret theoretical concepts and significant points, restating them in their own words and then recording how they are applied in practice. Faculty should not assume that students know how to write reflectively; these skills must be taught.2 First, the learners must be able to distinguish between narrative and reflective writing, and the instructor should elaborate on the varieties of reflective writing.
- Technical reflection contemplates performance based on external criteria to evaluate what changes need to occur to ensure the required improvement.
- Reflection in/on action refers to contemplating better ways of implementing what the writer has already done or observed, or analyzing what was done and why it was successful. Writing about these events helps to clarify planned changes and may provide patterns for improvement.
- Deliberative reflection weighs the writer’s opinions, along with those of others, in order to determine the best solution in a specific situation and to articulate the reasoning used during the decision-making process. When practiced on a regular basis, this will hone critical thinking and decision-making skills.
- Personal reflection encourages learners to examine motives related to their worldview, ethical behaviors, and basic beliefs about who they are and what they want to become. This is a valuable tool in self-evaluation and goal setting.
- Critical reflection is the highest form of reflection because it does not just stimulate personal understanding but also has the potential to instigate social change. Rather political in nature, it allows participants to question current rules and procedures and challenge the status quo.

No one method of journaling is inherently more important or valuable than the others, as each serves a different purpose in the realm of education. In fact, it is advantageous to include a mixture of journaling types to achieve more comprehensive results. Examples of each method should be provided and discussed with students, along with an explanation of expectations for the assignment. Participants should be encouraged to maintain a balance of personal and professional disclosure when composing entries.
for submission, and faculty responses can guide learners into an appropriate approach. If it seems advisable, faculty can respond to entries with thought-provoking questions, prompting and stimulating learners to elaborate in subsequent entries. Naturally, positive comments and encouragement result in continued efforts from the learner. Students could also be encouraged to voluntarily share selected entries with their peers.

An open-minded attitude on the part of the student is also beneficial to successful reflective journaling. Reflective writing helps the individual to become more reflective as a person, and reflective individuals carefully consider consequences prior to acting. They tend to have more purpose in their lives, thinking carefully before acting or talking.

Problems with Traditional Reflective Journaling
Reflective journaling has been used in the traditional college classroom for many years, with some inherent disadvantages. For instance, reading the handwriting in traditional journals is often an obstacle, and sometimes an impossibility, for both instructors and students. Faculty struggle for meaning and content instead of being able to read entries in a comprehensive manner. Students likewise have difficulty interpreting comments scrawled in the margins by their instructors. E-journaling eliminates these problems and proves less frustrating for all involved.

Other disadvantages of traditional journaling involve time management. Students often neglect to make the daily or weekly entries as assigned. Then, a day or two before the journals are due, the student writes several entries to play “catch up.” The journal is therefore not truly reflective but more of a memory exercise—a struggle to remember what materials were covered when, what the student did, and how he or she felt about it. In addition, if the instructor collects the journal during the course of the semester to monitor students’ progress with their entries and provide feedback, the learner does not have possession of the physical journal to continue making new entries during this period of time. With online journaling, however, students can compose their daily or weekly entries as assigned while the instructor has access to their journals to check individual progress and offer feedback on a continuous basis.

Journaling with Technology
Any type of journaling can be successfully implemented in an electronic format. Today’s technology provides educators access to a variety of electronic communication tools, including threaded discussions and e-mail. (Longhurst and Sandage recommended submitting electronic journal entries by e-mail.) Indeed, using this technology has several advantages over the traditional handwritten journal of previous generations. Most faculty and students are familiar with and check their e-mail accounts regularly. The electronic format prevents late or lost journals or miscellaneous papers being shoved under office doors. Submissions arrive within minutes of being sent, dated and time-stamped. Simply clicking the reply button ensures the comments are sent directly to the correct student; no more shuffling of papers, toting stacks of notebooks home for grading, or struggling with piles of homework on the way to and from the classroom.

E-mail is not perfect, however. Messages received by an e-mail system (independent of a course management system) must be organized within specified folders and can accidentally be filtered out or deleted, or lost in the myriad of other messages received during daily activities. Then there is the question
of how long to save the messages: six months? A year? Two years?

Using an online course management system, such as BlackBoard or WebCT, offers distinct advantages for instructors and students alike. The internal e-mail (within a course management system) uses threaded technology. This means that the original message is grouped with all subsequent responses. The ability to compile and print out these related messages is an added benefit. The online classrooms (including all student activities) can be archived and then restored in the future should the need arise.

Course management software also provides useful discussion-board capabilities that can be configured for private rooms used exclusively for personal journal entries and instructor responses. Each student has his or her own room, and the individual and the instructor are the only persons who have access to the confidential postings. Reflective writing assignments submitted via these private discussion rooms further increases the efficiency, and therefore effectiveness, of e-journaling, as compared to e-mail. Again, threaded technology organizes entries according to the topics, placing replies directly under the text to which they are responding. These entries can also be compiled and printed to preserve a hard copy for posterity.

Pedagogical Soundness

Nowhere is e-journaling used to its potential as an educational strategy despite evidence indicating that significant benefits are possible through a variety of techniques. Reflective writing can aid learners in synthesizing new information, and it is often used to improve reading comprehension, writing performance, and self-esteem via self-examination. In distance education, Internet courses, and traditional lecture classes that serve hundreds of students with no time for questions or discussion, e-journaling can add an interactive component. E-journaling assignments also employ Chickering and Gamson’s “Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,” as follows.

1. Student-Faculty Contact: E-journaling provides an excellent opportunity for personalized intellectual exchanges and can be used to effectively model respectful responses between academically oriented individuals. E-journaling can provide a “voice” to those who are reluctant to share ideas with their peers, whether the forum is used as an enhancement to a traditional classroom, in an online classroom environment, or as a combination of the two. Students can be more candid in this private venue and may share concerns or ideas about readings, assignments, or course improvement that would otherwise go unsaid. Personalized encouragement from faculty to learners promotes student motivation, intellectual commitment, and personal development.

2. Active Learning: E-journaling can serve as an invitation for students to participate in the process of learning, as it helps them to reflect critically on the content and can aid in the synthesis of new information. Learners become actively engaged in the learning process when required to write journal entries on a regular basis.

3. Prompt Feedback: E-journaling makes prompt feedback a reality because faculty can easily reply to postings within a day or two. Early comments should be comprehensive, with specific instructions for improving the reflective learning process. Just as in a traditional journal, the instructor need not comment on every entry but can offer feedback of the general impression from multiple entries. It is crucial to keep the tone of the communication as positive and encouraging as possible. This is the “body language” that the students read, and it will set the climate for the entire course. Frequency of contact is a vital factor in student motivation and involvement.

4. Time on Task: Word-processing technology is more accommodating than paper and pencil or the typewriter when making journal entries because of the ease of making corrections and additions and rearranging portions of text. There is also the added value of learning or practicing the related technical skills of typing, formatting, and editing. Composing journal entries electronically increases time on task not only by making writing more efficient but also by making entries easier to read. No one must struggle trying to decipher handwriting.

5. High Expectations: Success in an online course requires setting and communicating high expectations. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling proph-
E być podejmowanych przez studentów, ale są one uznawane przez nauczycieli za serio. Niniejsza postępowanie nie może być nauczone na zasadzie, ale jest ono nadzorowane przez nauczyciela za pomocą komunikacji, w tym poprzez odzwierciedlenia, interakcji, i przykładów.

**Getting Started**

Kiedy uruchamiamy e-journaling for the first time, należy zacząć mało i zacząć tylko z kilkoma wpisami w ciągu całego kursu. To stwarza możliwość uczenia się wewnątrz, ale nie jest to zamiast dyskusji, interakcji, i współpracy z przyjaciółmi.

**Conclusion**

E-journaling pozostaje podzaczektowane jako narzędzie nauczania i uczenia. Możliwe, że mamy do czynienia z wiele różnych nauczycieli, którzy nie zna swoich korzyści lub są niesprzyjająco wobec technologii dostępnych do implementacji.

Implementacja tradycyjnej strategii nauczania w e-journaling w formacie elektronicznym ma wiele zalet. E-journaling jest odpowiednia do rewalacyjnego uczenia w tradycyjnych klasach i rozwija odległymi klasami, które używają technologii wideo, aby połączyć różne miejsca.

E-journaling ma wiele edukacyjnych zalet, niektóre z których są opisane tu. Jeśli nie jesteś już znanym e-journaling, dlaczego nie da się to spróbować? E

**Endnotes**


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