

Processes and Impact of Journal Writing in a Graduate-Level Theory Course: Students' Experiences and Reflections

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The authors of this paper offer an exploratory self-analysis of their own experiences in writing summary/reaction journals as a part of a graduate-level theory course. The self-analysis is presented in the form of individual metajournals—personal narratives about each author's journaling experiences. Within each narrative an author of this paper describes her process for writing journals and explains the personal impact of journal writing. When considered collectively, these narratives seem to confirm some of the benefits of journaling as described in the literature. For example, the act of journaling results in an internal dialogue that shapes and changes the writer's beliefs and opinions about course content. Furthermore, through journaling, the authors came to better understand themselves and their own learning; this better understanding is also a benefit of journaling discussed in the literature. The article concludes with recommendations for future natural inquiries into the journaling process.

Introduction

The writing-across-the-curriculum literature is rife with examples of assignments and approaches that seem to contribute to student learning. We extend this examination of the potential benefits of student writing, but we do so by describing our experiences as we wrote summary/reaction journals in a graduate-level theory course. Such an examination is appropriate as the instructional use of informal writings is on the rise, especially in adult education (Hiemstra, 2001). This paper begins with a theoretical defense of summary/reaction journals as a learning tool in the higher education classroom. In the second section, we describe our approach to examining our own journaling experiences. In the third section of this paper, we share our individual accounts of our journal-writing processes and the impact journals had on our learning. In the last section of this paper, we connect our individual accounts back to the literature, and we offer suggestions for future research.

Why Summary/Reaction Journals as a Learning Technology?

In general, journals provide an informal place of freedom where students can document their own thoughts and ideas without worrying about formal conventions of academic writing. In journal writing, there is no need to adhere rigorously to style manuals or avoid the often-taboo "I" voice (Hiemstra, 2001). A journal's flexibility of form is useful, as well. For example, students can journal on the back of index cards (cf., Blackmore, 2002) or even tape record themselves thinking out loud as a starting point for journal writing (cf., Thomas & Barksdale-Ladd, 2000). Perhaps because of the informality and flexibility, journals can promote an effective feedback loop between professors and students (Garmon, 2001). By reading students' journals, for example, professors can gauge student comprehension. Reciprocally, though, students can use their journals to suggest topics for class discussion and ideas for classroom activities (Blackmore, 2002).

So far, we have discussed the virtue of journals in general. In the remainder of this section, we point to the benefits of summary/reaction journals. Both summarizing and reacting are consistent with a theory of generative learning. Also, summary/reaction journals can promote self-dialogue.

Generative View of Learning

Wittrock (1983, 1991, 2001) notes that generative strategies promote learning through reading and writing. Students must (a) generate relationships and structure among parts of a text (i.e., summarizing) and (b) generate relationships between the text and the student's own knowledge, beliefs, ideas, and experiences (i.e., reacting).

Summarizing. Superficially, requiring students to summarize readings simply holds them accountable for reading. This notion of accountability is consistent with King's (1995) view of journals. More substantively, though, summarizing can help students process difficult ideas in a reading. Summarizing is not an easy skill, as it requires students to consider a reading holistically but support the holistic ideas with specific details (Friend, 2000/2001). These details must come in the form of students' own words (Wittrock, 1983) as a means of blending specifics throughout the text (Friend, 2000/2001).

In spite of the difficulty of writing good summaries—or perhaps because of the difficulty—writing summaries can aid students in processing information. Summarizing promotes the movement of ideas from students' short-term memory to long-term memory (Banikowski & Mehring, 1999). By summarizing, students express an idea presented in a text (currently in students' short-term memory) with their own words (stored in students' long-term memory). The degree to which students are able to process a reading is dependent on the number of connections that students make between a text and their own long-

term memory (Callison, 1999). To actively promote a large number of connections, students must define technical terms, identify key points, and uncover both the macro- and microstructures of a text. Numerous studies support the view that processing a reading through summarizing increases both retention and comprehension (cf., Wittrock, 1983, 1991).

Reactions. Summary alone is not enough to fully promote students' understanding of a text. Writing reactions, too, can be useful as part of the journaling process. Kerka (1996) and Wollman-Bonilla (1995) suggest that response journals allow students to further develop connections between a reading and their own ideas, beliefs, and experiences. In fact, some evidence suggests that when summaries are combined with reactions students' comprehension may increase as much as fifty percent without increasing instruction time or costs (Wittrock, 1991). To show that journal writing can help increase student learning, Connor-Greene (2000) experimented with three psychology classes. In two classes, students connected theoretical concepts to their everyday lives. In the other class, no journals were assigned. At the end of the semester, students who wrote journals had statistically higher test scores than students who wrote no journals. Students in this study seemed to agree that journals forced them to examine theories from their own perspectives and apply what they had learned.

Dialogue With the Self

Journaling often intensifies the learning process by evoking conversation with the self—an internal dialogue. Internal dialogue might result in synthesis and reflection on new information (Swartzendruber-Putnam, 2000), but also internal dialogue may lead students to new understandings and insights about themselves as learners, which can aid in personal growth (Connor-Greene, 2000;

Hiemstra, 2001). Both knowledge of content and knowledge of self are appropriate goals of instructional strategies (Baylor, 2002), and literature suggests that summary/reaction journals promote dialogue with the self that can result in both types of learning.

In terms of internal dialogue about course content, journaling offers opportunities for philosophical inquiry, reflection on dilemmas, and resolution of contradictions. As students encounter new ideas, foreign ideologies, and opposing perspectives in texts, they can use the journaling process as an outlet to argue with themselves in support of their own viewpoints by critiquing opposing perspectives. Dialogue with the self through journaling may be a valuable strategy for facilitating professional development (Knowlton, 1995; Hiemstra, 2001). This perspective of journals as a tool that creates an internal dialogue with the self underlies the movement toward a more connected literacy that encourages development of an authentic reason to read and respond to a text (Falk-Ross, 2001/2002; Spalding, 2002).

Beyond course content, journaling as self-dialogue can help students better understand themselves. Through journaling, students may come to reflect on how they have learned. In fact, learning about content through journaling leads to learning about the self through reflecting on journals. According to Spalding (2002), self-reflection often begins from conflicting awareness of contradictory personal beliefs. These conflicts can be triggered by ideas presented in a text and captured in summaries. Reaction can lead to new understanding of ideas and change in individuals' beliefs and practices. As students come to see the utility of journals for changing their own beliefs, they may experience a shift from thinking to "thinking about thinking" (Buehl, 1996, p. 227)—the shift from cognition to metacognition. As an advocate of teaching students the strategies for thinking about

thinking, Lin (2001) would likely support journaling as a useful strategy among students. Kuiper (2002) suggests that the acquisition of metacognitive and reflective skills can lead to effective lifelong learning, and these lifelong learners are likely to be more empathetic, flexible, and persistent in the learning process (Costa, 2000).

Context and Concept for Analyzing the Use of Journals

In this section, we describe the context in which we wrote journals. Then, we offer a conceptual explanation of our journal analysis. At the end of this section, we offer an overview of the ways we developed a collective understanding of our own activities as writers of summary/reaction journals.

Context for Analysis

The first author of this paper is an Assistant Professor of Instructional Design and Learning Technologies at a mid-western university. The other four authors are all full-time public school teachers who were graduate students in the first author's "Major Principles of Instructional Technology" course. This principles course included seminal readings about the history of instructional technology (e.g., Reiser, 2001a, 2001b), learning theory (e.g., Perkins, 1999), philosophy (e.g., Jonassen, 1991), and the relationship between media as tool and technology as process (e.g., Clark, 1983; Kozma, 1991).

Students in this course were required to write summary/reaction journals for each seminal course reading—eighteen journals across the eight-week span of the course. Attempting to capitalize on the need for informality, the assignment guidelines offered the advice of not editing journals, having them instead serve as rough drafts of ideas that could be developed during in-class activities. To

this end, the assignment noted that spelling, grammar, and other mechanics of writing were of little consequence. The guidelines also urged students not to think in terms of length, but in terms of offering genuine ideas within the reaction. To scaffold students' abilities to produce a reaction, the assignment guidelines included a list of prompts that might prove useful to students (e.g., discuss why the ideas in a reading could or could not serve as a basis of activities in the graduate students' own K-12 classroom). The professor of the course offered written comments on completed journals; but instead of "grading," he marked a minus (for unsatisfactory), check (for good), or plus (for superior).

Purpose of our Analysis

The first night of class after the journal assignment was introduced, a discussion ensued about the relative usefulness of journaling. As a result of this discussion, the five of us decided to undertake a self-study of journaling during the semester. Self-study is acknowledged as a viable framework for making meaning of one's natural activities (Drevdahl, Stackman, Purdy, & Louie, 2002; Zeichner, 1999). We agree with Feldman (2003) that determining "quality" in self-study is difficult. Our goal in this paper, though, is not to offer insights based on empirical rigor, but rather to offer a type of naturalistic analysis of ourselves as students charged with writing journals. Our efforts here are exploratory, in that our goal is "to investigate a little understood phenomena" (Marshall & Rossman, 1995, p. 41).

Making Meaning of our Experiences

Because of our emphasis on naturalistic analysis—as opposed to empirical rigor—we resisted the urge to lock in a rigorous methodology to guide our explorations. This hesitation is consistent

with Hawthorne (1992) who notes the need for teachers and students freely "to tailor in an idiosyncratic manner methods of data collection and analysis to the phenomenon under investigation" (p. 136). In general, though, our analysis consisted of two types of activities. First, during each class session, we used our journals as a basis for building class discussion about the content of the articles that we read. Often, though, journals themselves became the topic of conversation as we steered each other into discussions of the journal writing process. Second, we each produced a reflective writing—a metajournal—about our own experience writing journals. The professor offered feedback on our metajournals, and we engaged in two different peer editings where we offered feedback and direction to each other—and thus to ourselves—about the salient points of the journal writing experience.

Student Reflections on the Process and Products of Journaling

In this section, we share our metajournals. There are common themes across the metajournals, and largely those themes are consistent with the literature presented earlier in this paper; but instead of searching for themes, readers should consider how each student holistically encountered the process of journal writing and the impact of that process. The metajournals presented here are edited for space limitations. Each of us shares here the aspects of journaling that seemed most important to us. For consistency across the narratives, we agreed to focus both on the process of journal writing and the impact that journal writing had on our learning and thinking.

Amy's Journal Narrative

My process for writing summary/reaction journals changed as the semester

progressed. I believe that journals are useful because they increase comprehension, put the learner in charge, and are a personal reflection on learning.

Process for Writing. Early in the semester, I would read a small section of an assigned article and then write a summary for that section. This approach kept me from focusing on the big picture of the article. As the semester progressed, I changed my approach in an effort to make my summaries more effective. I began reading the entire article before I summarized it. While reading, I highlighted important parts and reread sections that were unclear to me. If some ideas still seemed unclear, I would resort to writing a summary of that specific section, which led to clarity. For example, in one particularly difficult reading, I had to stop reading every sentence or two and break down each sentence by examining every clause and phrase. Then I would put the whole sentence back together in my own words. While tedious, this sometimes was necessary and helped me explain the reading to myself.

As I look back over my reactions, I see that they too have changed. Early in the semester, my reactions were vague. I would state that “I underst[ood]” the article, note that it was “interesting,” “enjoy[able],” and “important.” I didn’t offer specifics to support these reactions, though. Throughout the semester, I became less vague and included more personal examples and connections to my professional life. With a little encouragement from my professor through his feedback on my early journals, I saw how I could elaborate on my reactions and make stronger connections to my classroom.

Impact of Journal Writing. Writing journals put me more in charge of my learning because I had to take responsibility for what was being learned. In past classes where I was required to read an article and be prepared to discuss it, I sometimes didn’t understand the article. This made me feel stupid, almost as if I

didn’t belong in the course. The use of summary/reaction journals helped me see that I could understand the articles and even explain them in my own words. Being in charge of my learning at first was overwhelming. Then, as the semester progressed, I realized that it was a good thing to be in charge of my own learning. Summary/reaction journals allowed me to become a better student, and so I was able to take a greater interest in my learning.

As I reflect on journals that I have written this semester, I see that writing responses has helped me form strong opinions about topics. Forming opinions leads to greater learning. For example, in one journal about the effects of media on learning, I wrote:

After reading the articles for this week I am beginning to change my view [about whether] media [influences] learning. I thought that when students used media learning [would have] greater meaning to them and be more fun, which resulted in greater retention of knowledge. I am now seeing that it is not the media that affects the learning, but the instructional method. I could teach the same concept to students in different [ways, but] the same learning outcome would occur. ... I believe [that] I have learned a lot about technology, media, [and] learning so far, but I still have a long way to go.

As the semester progressed, I seemed to go back to the topic of media. For example, in one journal, I noted “that way too often teachers (myself included) get too caught up in making their lessons look eye appealing and cute [but] they forget to use animation effectively. We need to remember to only use animation for specific purposes.” After writing these reactions I gained a better understanding that it’s the way you use the media that affects student learning, not the media

itself. Journal reactions led me to change my beliefs on this topic, but I think the belief change occurred directly as a result of writing the reactions and being able to now go back and see my own thinking.

Natalie's Journal Narrative

As I wrote summary/reaction journals throughout the semester, I noticed that the process helped me increase my comprehension of assigned texts. The informality of journals made them easy to write. I found that through the use of journals I became more accountable as a learner and actively looked for connections between the assigned readings and my own beliefs and opinions.

Process for Writing. To help myself write an accurate summary, I read material slowly from beginning to end, highlighting key points as I read. After I had finished the entire article, I used the highlighted points as a guide to write a summary in my own words. This shift from the author's heavy-handed academic jargon to plain language that I could relate to helped me make sense of the readings. I feel I retained much more of the content I read in this course compared to other courses.

While increasing comprehension through summarizing is obviously of great benefit, I must honestly say that the idea of numerous written assignments sounded unappealing to me, regardless of how beneficial they might be. After all, most writing in graduate school requires tedious checking of form and conventions that results in numerous readings and revisions before a final submission. The writing process becomes formal and restrictive. Because journals are a simple form of writing, many of the elements of writing that often caused me anxiety were eliminated. Journaling was as easy as holding a conversation. I did not have to worry about run-on sentences or minor punctuation errors. Therefore, I was free to get my ideas into writing without breaking my train of thought. Furthermore, since

length was not a requirement, I did not feel as if I had to include filler statements to reach a certain number of pages. If a reading did not invoke a strong reaction from me, I wrote a brief one. My longest reaction was forty-eight lines while my shortest consisted of thirteen. The informality of journals coupled with the less stringent grading scale used to assess them allowed me to use them as a learning technology to focus my understanding of and connection with an assigned reading.

Impact of Journal Writing. Knowing that I had to summarize an article or other text made me read more diligently than I usually do. In some of my previous classes, readings were often assigned with the understanding that the material would be discussed during class. I must admit that I frequently skimmed assigned texts to grasp the general meaning without reading for detail or checking my own understanding of the text. While skimming is appropriate in some situations, I learned that I retained much more of a reading through summarizing.

Summarizing content was one step towards comprehension, but reacting furthered my learning greatly. I guess I've always naturally reacted to assigned readings; but without journals, reactions were often passing notions. The exercise of putting my reactions into written words gave me a chance to explore my thoughts and opinions and helped me think further about my own relationship to the ideas presented within the text. As I retrospectively consider my reactions, I realized that my own teaching and learning practices were revealed to me through written responses.

Reacting did more than reveal my beliefs. Reacting changed my beliefs. After reading a series of articles related to the debate over whether or not media influences learning, my viewpoint changed significantly. As I reacted to the first two articles in this series, I noted that "I [previously] believed that media influence[d] learning (greatly), and after reading [them]

I'm still convinced [that media influences learning] but I've learned a lot." By reconsidering my later journals, I can see more change in my opinion:

After reading and rereading ... I don't have a really firm stand, just the understanding that there are divergent views about whether or not media influences learning and some good points to back up each view. Coming into this debate (with no experience) I was shocked to learn that someone felt that media had no influence on learning, and I think a lot of teachers would feel the same way. Computers are often viewed as "magical learning boxes" in education—if the kids are doing something at the computer ... it's got to be good, etc. So, I was a little skeptical about Clark's (1983; 1994a; 1994b) views and more inclined to side with Kozma (1991). ... [B]ut Morrison (1994) attacked Kozma's reference(s) to research (therein making Clark's point that the method is often what is compared during media comparisons and research).

Later in the same journal I concluded, "At this point I would probably say that instructional method (rather than media alone) is what influences learning." My standpoint changed throughout my reactions to the various readings. In fact, my beliefs changed within a single reaction—from not having a "firm stand" to concluding the importance of a teaching strategy over media selection. Through reacting, I changed my own mind.

Beth's Journal Narrative

My process for writing summary/reaction journals actually depended on the nature of the reading itself. Overall, writing the summary/reaction journals has added value to both my understanding of

course content and my understanding of my own learning.

Process for Writing. The content of the articles sometimes changed the way that I summarized and reacted. The first journal that I wrote for this course was based on two articles by Reiser (2001a; 2001b), which were histories of technology and media. I wrote the summary section of this journal as a bulleted list. A bullet point described each new discovery or theory. The history articles lent themselves to being summarized through bullets because the content seemed so matter-of-fact. Every other journal that I wrote, though, was in paragraph form. Paragraphs seemed to better help me capture more complex theoretical information where even summaries required me to make judgment calls and interpretations.

I also think that my life beyond this course caused me to change my process. The course that the journals were written for was a summer course, but it started three weeks before my teaching school year ended. The articles were long and heavy in theory, and the average journal entry usually required three to four hours to complete. Because of the conflicting time demands between this course and my professional responsibilities as a school-teacher, my journal writing process was partly a search for efficiency. Every time that I tried a new approach to writing my journals, it was with the intention of trying to make the process less time consuming. I changed from reading part of the article at a time to reading the whole article and taking notes in the margins. By just reading parts of the article and writing a little after each section, I wasn't getting the whole message of the article. Switching to reading the whole article and taking notes in the margins helped to keep me organized while still allowing me to see the whole picture that the article was presenting. I did find this to be more efficient and more educational. Even with this focus on efficiency, I noticed that my

reactions were longer when the topic of the article was of interest to me. Also, longer and more difficult articles required longer summaries.

Impact of Journal Writing. To be honest, I have cheated myself in other graduate courses by only skimming over course readings, or not reading them at all. Journals made me read thoroughly. By reading more thoroughly, not just skimming, I learned more. Writing journals prepared me for class discussions. Not only had I read the assignment, but also I had taken the time to reflect on the reading and connect it with real life. This made classroom discussion and debate easier because I had already formed an opinion and was ready to hear what other classmates had gained from the assignment.

Writing journals added value to this theoretical class, and because of journals I walked away at the end of the semester having a deeper knowledge about the Instructional Technology field. Of course, I've been assigned readings in other courses, but reading alone is simply not sufficient if the goal is to develop true and useful understandings of course content. If I had not written a journal about Reiser (2001a, 2001b), I don't think that I would clearly understand the difference between media and technology. Through journaling, I was able to get a handle on the difference: "Media is a tool, and technology is a process." This is not a minor distinction, as I learned through writing journals that even professionals in the field misuse these terms: Cradler, McNabb, Freeman, and Burchett (2003) used the term technology appropriately when they were discussing processes involved with learning, but in other places where they referred to computers and software they should have used the term media instead. This distinction is more than word play. Not distinguishing between media and technology can lead to problematic perspectives about teaching and learning. Kozma (1991) argues the importance of media while Clark (1983)

emphasizes the value of technology. Reading these articles would not have been enough. They were long, difficult, and contained a lot of information. By summarizing and reacting to the content, I feel like I gained more knowledge from this course than many others in my graduate program so far. If not for the need to write a journal about these articles, I would not have read them so closely. Without reading closely, I would have glossed over a major issue in my field of study. In fact, in my reactions to these articles, I made connections to my classroom that will ultimately change my teaching and professional practice. As a teacher, I use media differently than I did prior to this course and writing journals.

Journal writing has also made me think about how I process information. I suppose I always knew that writing things down could help students learn. In high school and as an undergraduate, I recopied notes as a study strategy, and this helped me learn through repetition and reinforcement. In my graduate school career, I had fallen into the trap of highlighting, most likely as a time-saving strategy. Now I see the value in journaling. Journal writing can be time consuming, but in the future, I can envision myself using summary/reaction journals in other graduate classes with difficult readings. Perhaps equally important, I foresee myself using summary/reaction journals as a tool in my junior high classroom to help my students connect their own lives with the content that we are studying.

Holle's Journal Narrative

Extended exposure to the summary/reaction journal process helped me develop and refine my methods for completing my journals and changed my focus for participating in journaling. The process that I went through in writing journals helped me refine my approach to reading, increase my participation in classroom discussions and activities, and

increase my awareness of my personal philosophies.

Process for Writing. I was anxious while writing the first few journals. I was completing them because they were assignments, and I wanted my professor's assessment of my journals to be both positive and strong, which caused me to be more concerned with diplomacy than with communicating my true opinions. This anxiousness and concern caused me to struggle with the process of writing summary/reaction journals. I constantly found myself second-guessing and revising. As I look back on one reaction from an early journal, I'm surprised by how factual and general I was: "I have only had the opportunity to participate in video conferencing once. ... I was uncomfortable with parts of the video conferencing process. ... Whether you were the instructor or the student, it would take some time to get used to the process."

My purpose for writing the summary/reaction journals gradually changed. I no longer completed the journals just because they were assigned. Summary/reaction journals provided me with an opportunity to communicate my thoughts to the instructor in a more individualized manner. While I looked forward to reading the instructor's feedback, I was less concerned with impressing him and more interested in expressing what I learned and thought about the readings. Because of this change in purpose, journals seemed to take less time to complete. I was more confident of what I wrote and did little revising once it was written. My concern for diplomacy vanished: "I have to say that I did not care for this article. I struggled to get through it. For some reason, I had trouble determining the relevance of this article to myself and my situation."

With this shift in purpose came a change in process. Expressing what I learned and thought required that I actively think about what I was reading. When readings were extremely long, had complex subject matter, or highly

technical language, it was necessary to read the whole article, take a break, and read it again in order to identify and comprehend the main points. I developed my own system of identifying key points for the summary and coding points that I wanted to address in my reaction. Reading my own summary to get a more clear understanding of an article's main ideas also became a part of my process for writing reactions.

One difficulty that I noticed in my own journal writing process was my lack of motivation to complete these journals towards the end of the course. I attribute this difficulty to a lack of variety in the application of our readings. Journaling became routine. While the content of readings varied, my task—to write a thoughtful journal—did not. I am motivated by novelty. Although I am more anxious in new situations, there is also something kind of exciting about attempting something new. Although I have taken more from the material using summary/reaction journals than I would have with reading alone, I think I would prefer to learn through a variety of learning assignments.

Impact of Journal Writing. Summary/reaction journals require the use of good reading strategies. I have had a tendency to be more of a passive learner in my previous classes. For example, all of my graduate courses included assigned readings, but not written assignments to accompany those readings. Although I read the assignments, I seldom struggled to understand confusing points or attempted to apply the ideas to my world. I assumed these points would be addressed during class lecture or discussion. Therefore, I often neglected the opportunities that I had to develop and apply various reading comprehension strategies. Journaling forced me to take an active role in my learning and apply good reading skills. It is impossible to write about a topic proficiently without an understanding of the content. I had to carefully

improve my comprehension by rereading passages of text that I didn't understand, underlining key points, and writing comments in the margins. Only after good reading could I summarize the information in my own words and reflect on how the information applied to me. Journals gave me a purpose for reading. While I was aware of these strategies, journaling provided an opportunity for me to use these skills, which helped me develop an awareness of which reading comprehension strategies worked best for me.

Summary/reaction journals were based on readings that were to be covered in class. I found that I participated more in class because of journals. A number of other factors have affected my increased participation in classroom discussions, including small class size and a supportive classroom environment; but summary/reaction journals had a significant role in my increased participation, as well. Summary/reaction journals were often used as a starting place for class discussion. Through journaling, I already had considered the topic as it related to my professional life, and I often had formed opinions or thought of questions that related to the readings. So, I was more willing to share my ideas and opinions in class.

Journaling increased my awareness of my own beliefs about education. Part of this new awareness came as I reacted to inconsistencies between my beliefs and ideas in the literature:

I have always assumed that media had a direct effect on learning. After reading Clark (1983), I question my opinion. However, I still feel that certain media is more effective and efficient for certain tasks and learners. ... I continue to believe careful media selection and application can have a positive effect on learning as long as good instructional strategies are also included.

Just a week later, after reading more literature on this topic, I saw a shift in my thinking: "I agree with Clark (1994a) that content and instructional strategy has the greatest influence on learning." Seeing these changes in my thinking gave me the opportunity to reflect on my beliefs and consider possible changes in the way I teach. In fact, the majority of my journals for this class made me think about my teaching methods. When I started this course I was comfortable with a very teacher-directed approach. In one of my first reactions I noted this comfort as a "good thing." Through reacting to other articles, though, I took a closer look at my teaching methods. My concern about my current teaching practices became a recurring theme in my reactions. Towards the end of the course, I was very aware of the shift in my thoughts about education and started taking steps to modify my teaching. One of our reading assignments for this course required us to self-select readings about learning theory. My reaction documented a full shift from the teacher-centered emphasis that I focused on earlier in the semester:

I found information on a variety of topics. However, my focus seemed to be on cognitive and constructivist theories. This theme in topics was not intentional. However, it suggests to me that I am unsatisfied with my current teaching practices and need to find a way to modify my current teaching theories and practices.

As I reflect on this journal now, I further recognize that reacting to articles changed the types of ideas that I was drawn to. Reacting has changed my perspective, and this change will make me a more effective teacher in the future.

Implications and Recommendations

Elsewhere, we summarize the strengths and weaknesses of summary/

reaction journals as a technology for promoting learning, and we offer direct advice to help professors and students maximize the strengths of journals (Knowlton, Heffren, Fish, Eschmann, & Voss, 2004). Our purpose here, though, has not been to promote a pedagogical approach; rather, our purpose has been to offer a type of naturalistic analysis of our experiences. From our analysis as presented in our narratives, we make connections back to the literature on journal writing. Then, we offer implications for future inquiry.

Connections from Narratives to the Literature

Based on our experiences with writing journals, we agree with some literature (cf., King, 1995) that journals caused us to read more closely and more completely. To focus only on the “accountability” for reading, though, is to stop short of a more important point that is reflected in both our narratives and the literature about journaling. Accountability in reading was a supplemental benefit; the primary benefit was that writing summary/reaction journals increased the amount of content that we learned and made our learning more durable.

This improvement in learning occurred in two ways. First, as some of us noted in our narratives, to summarize is to teach ourselves by explaining the content to ourselves. By summarizing, we were, in essence, simplifying and decoding what one of us called “heavy-handed academic jargon.” This experience of simplifying and decoding is in accordance with the ideas of Friend (2000/2001) as described in the first part of this paper. Second, through writing journals, we did make connections between course content and our own personal contexts, which is consistent with the ideas of Kerka (1996). As several places in our narratives suggest, these connections better helped us “learn” the course material as we integrated

readings into our day-to-day professional activities. This type of integration made the content seem more relevant and therefore easier to learn. From these two points it should be clear that we agree with the literature that journaling increases accountability in reading, but the acts of summarizing and reacting lead to the type of meaningful learning that Wittrock (1991, 2001) described. Meaningful learning far transcends notions of simple accountability. Indeed, to journal is to learn.

But, what of that learning? Did it create an internal dialogue as the literature implies that it should? Did this internal dialogue result in shifts in our own beliefs? We think that writing journals did cause us to engage in dialogue with ourselves as described by Swartzendruber-Putnam (2000) and Hiemstra (2001), and we note that such dialogue leads to changes in our understandings of ourselves and shifts in our beliefs. Regarding a new understanding of ourselves and our own learning—what we describe as a shift from cognition to metacognition—each of us was aware of how the journaling process made our thinking more concrete, and thus more “real.” Most broadly, this paper in itself evidences an analysis of our own learning and each of the narratives presented in this paper are examples of metacognitive analysis.

Regarding a shift in our beliefs about content, we do see evidence of these shifts within our journals. As one of us presented in the narrative section of this paper, our opinion was changed while writing a single journal. (See, for example, Natalie’s narrative within this paper.) More importantly, we do think that these changes will have an impact on our own teaching and curriculum/lesson planning. In fact, as a result of using summary/reaction journals in this graduate-level course, at least two of us plan on using journals with our own K-12 students. The impact of journaling on our own teaching

directly relates to the ideas of Baylor (2002).

Future Inquiry

Two aspects of the inquiry presented in this paper are striking to us, and we point out that future inquiry in this area might consider these aspects. The first aspect is an issue of methodology. The second aspect raises questions about the “voices” that should be heard through narratives about journal writing.

First, this paper provides an emic, or insider, perspective of the journaling experience; and “being ‘on the inside’ [of an inquiry] fundamentally changes one’s perspective.” For example, when researchers conduct inquiries from the emic perspective, they “struggle to influence and shape the change process in order to create a desired outcome” (Fishman, Marx, Blumenfeld, Krajcik, & Soloway, 2004, p. 51). How would an inquiry of the processes and, more importantly, the impact of journaling be different if a naturalistic inquiry was conducted from an etic, or outsider, perspective? This point is particularly important in light of one of our criticisms of journals—that they become monotonous as a strategy for promoting learning over time. (See Holle’s narrative for a discussion about the need for variety in learning assignments.) Perhaps research conducted from other viewpoints could be useful in identifying changes to the journaling process that would simultaneously break the monotony and increase learning. Case study and ethnographic research may add to the inquiry begun here, yet still allow a researcher to maintain a naturalistic—as opposed to positivistic—framework for inquiry.

Second, future inquiries should consider a broader range of “voices” when exploring journals and their impact. All of the students in this inquiry were female. Would men have constructed a narrative of the journaling process differently? We

suspect that they would have, and some evidence suggests that we are right (e.g., Knowlton, 1995; Gannett, 1991). Natural inquiries should consider the male voice in constructing both journals and narratives about journals. Similarly, the voice of the professor is missing prominently from the narrative content presented in this paper. As we noted, the professor for the graduate course that we describe is one of the co-authors of this paper and thus shaped some of the ideas presented within this paper, and he contributed to our journals by providing us with feedback to promote our continued thinking; but the narrative voices “heard” in this paper do not include his. Specific to this inquiry, did the professor view our journals in the same ways that the other authors of this paper did? Our paper does not consider this question. Future naturalistic inquiry might consider the voices of the professor and the relationship between journals as viewed by the professor and by students.

Conclusion

Our purpose in this paper has been to offer a naturalistic analysis of ourselves as students charged with writing journals in a graduate-level theory course. We hope that each of our narratives as presented in this paper will provide insights into the process of journal writing and the potential impact of journals. As we note, more research is needed, and that research should be conducted from a variety of frameworks and perspectives. We hope that future inquiries about journaling will continue an exploration of how they impact the educational development of students.

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