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# **Using Faculty Response Journals in Higher Education to Promote Reflection, Collaboration, and Program Evaluation**

by

**Joan C. Fingon and Paul A. Fahey**

## **Introduction and Purpose**

Journals are not new to the field of education. Over the years, teachers from preschool to postsecondary levels have employed some type of journal writing as an effective way to engage students in the learning process (Fulwiler, 1987; Gaskins, 1982; Karlen, 1993; Levoy, 1992; Rhodes & Dudley-Marling, 1988). One type of journal is the response, or dialogue, journal. The purpose of this article is to describe how a teacher preparation program in a small liberal arts college in New England used response journals to promote faculty reflection, collaboration, and program evaluation. The article begins with a brief literature review. The research, related to response journals within the context of college courses, teacher education programs, and professional staff development, provided the foundation for the implementation of our writing project. The article continues with a survey of the common journal themes over a two-year period and concludes with a summary of the benefits gained from the process.

## **Literature Review**

According to Wollman-Bonilla (1991), response journals are written dialogues or letters two or more learners interchange on a regular basis. These writings can be information or ideas related to shared or individual learning experiences that are exchanged with others for written responses.

Flitterman-King (1988) utilized response journals in her college teaching as a way to encourage reflective reading practices. When assigning specific reading material, she provided students with guidelines for written comments. Such prompts were an attempt to evoke initial reading responses, to encourage connections between the material and real life experiences, and to help students identify the author's point of view.

In teacher education programs, response journals are often used to help students gain more independence and confidence in the classroom and to encourage preservice reflection about what students learn in college courses and what they encounter in the field (Armbruster, Anderson, & Mall, 1991).

Surbeck, Han and Moyer (1991) analyzed biweekly journal entries of student teachers and delineated three distinct categories of student thinking and understanding: reaction, elaboration, and contemplation. The reaction type includes entries that reflect initial student thinking about course content, class activities, and materials. Elaboration involves journal entries that expand upon these initial responses to the content and reflect student feeling and deeper thought processes. Entries that mirror contemplation contain elements of the first two categories, but also encompass issues related to personal and ethical concerns of the profession.

Response journals have been recently linked to staff development practices for classroom teachers. Mims (1993) analyzed data over a two-year period from the personal journals of new and experienced teachers and found significant improvement in collaboration and teamwork. She also discovered that the teachers were more creative and reflective in their teaching practice.

Along similar lines, Ackerman, Maslin-Ostrowski, and Christensen (1996) reviewed a professional development program for teachers and administrators who were encouraged to write stories about personal teaching experiences. These stories were then shared and discussed within small groups. The researchers determined that this collaborative writing and discussion process promoted a more thoughtful and reflective approach to problem-solving.

### **Our College and the Faculty Response Journal Process**

Green Mountain College is a small, residential, undergraduate liberal arts institution located in central Vermont. There are approximately 600 students and 36 full-time faculty. The student body is composed mostly of traditional, college-age students who come predominately from New England, with smaller percentages from other areas in the United States and foreign countries. Three full-time faculty members in the Education Department, one of the largest on campus, serve approximately 90 students enrolled in the elementary and elementary/special education Bachelor of Science degree programs. The teacher to student ratio is approximately 1:20 in the education classes.

Due to the heavy advising, teaching, and supervision requirements of the program, we initially implemented the response journals as a way to increase faculty communication and foster meaningful reflection about teaching practice. Since the Education Department had experienced relatively high turnover in the past, routinely losing then gaining one full-time faculty member each academic year, we also viewed the response journals as a vehicle to educate new faculty about department and college policy, program requirements, and the student population at Green Mountain.

Three education faculty members, two elementary and one special education, participated voluntarily in the writing project from 1994 to 1996. Since the Education Department was the first on campus to implement this practice, we agreed beforehand that the response journals would provide a safe arena for writing, thinking, and reflecting without fear of being judged or evaluated by others. The journals were not to be copied or shared with college faculty or staff outside the department without permission from the participants. We each had our own notebooks and each used a different color pen (red, blue, or black) for writer identification. Since confidentiality was a major concern, no student or faculty names were allowed in the notebooks. Participants were encouraged to read and respond openly in writing to the dated entries. Once a journal was read and the comments made, it was passed on to the next faculty member in the rotation. Journals were exchanged once a week through the campus mail service.

### **Journal Themes**

Over the two-year period, common themes routinely appeared in the journals. Entries at the beginning of a semester often described the difficulties getting started with instruction, student motivation and participation, and issues about the team-taught capstone seminar course. The following journal excerpts reflect some of these concerns:

## **Getting Started**

**Faculty Member A:** I don't feel into "the groove." I will soon after I meet my classes. One class that I teach every spring is smaller than usual, so I may try other approaches with the way I present the material and do more group work. This class seems more responsive and may produce better products than groups I've had in the past. I'll keep you posted.

**Faculty Member B:** I looked over my lecture notes for the next class(es), and I'm amazed to find that I can't remember much about how I presented the information previously. I actually taught that, really? Even though I keep most lectures on computer and try to save my outlines, I find I'm continually cutting them up, changing the organization and adding new material from workshops and conferences. This semester I started one of my classes with an activity because I'm finding that it's sometimes better for students to discover relationships and facts by themselves than for me to tell them through lectures.

## **Student Motivation and Participation**

**Faculty Member A:** I'm beginning to explore who feels comfortable speaking during class discussion and who prefers to talk in small groups or while working with a partner. I try to mix and match different people to "draw out" the quiet ones and to help them find their voices. I also call on students by name to answer a question. Some are eager and some are embarrassed or even unprepared. I always tell them they can refer to their notes, ask a neighbor for help, or pass if they are unable to respond. What do others do?

**Faculty Member B:** I think our biggest challenge is getting more participation. I haven't succeeded much beyond 40%. My morning class is really tough. Students yawn, study holes in their jeans, close their eyes, daydream. And that's just the beginning of class! I've rearranged my lecture and group activity sequence and now start off with some kind of cooperative learning exercise, use overheads, write on the board, and ask questions. In one class (Behavior Modification) there are 4 or 5 other majors, so education examples leave them cold. I have to be more general there.

## **Student Teaching Seminar**

**Faculty Member A:** A concern I have relates to student teachers in seminar. The class doesn't always flow the way I would like it to. It seems that the students need a window of time to prepare for the transition between leaving their schools and arriving on campus. I would also like to place more emphasis on journal writing. Should we do it at the beginning of the class, toward the middle, or as closure to the class? I was thinking of writing some prompts ahead of time and then writing along with the students. I tried this idea a few years ago. Any ideas?

Faculty Member B: I like the idea of making the journals a major focus. Having us also participate in this writing activity shows how critical reflection is to our professional lives. We could alter the prompts to fit the situation. For example: "How did the first week go?" or "Some things I do in class that are different from my cooperating teacher." What do you think?

During the middle of a semester, faculty comments focused on midterm grades, teaching creativity, methodology, and anxiety related to completing the course material on time. By the end of a semester or an academic year, professors targeted individual energy levels, final grades, committee assignments, advising duties, and portfolio assessment for discussion. (The Vermont Department of Education requires that all teacher preparation programs include an outcome-based portfolio component that reflects student progress toward meeting state standards and teaching competencies.) The following journal entries furnish additional information regarding these issues:

### **Teaching Methodology**

Faculty Member A: Entertainer vs. teacher. I think our students will face this phenomenon in their future teaching as we face it today. I always try to make my lessons interesting, but I like to focus more on making meaningful connections between the course content and "real" teaching. Sometimes we need bells and whistles, and sometimes we don't. I try to "hook" the students into the content or guide them to become curious and explore on their own. Everything we teach (specific competencies) is not intrinsically stimulating, interesting, or exciting all of the time. Enthusiasm helps. Students need to challenge themselves. We can only provide opportunities for learning.

Faculty Member B: Sometimes I feel that if we are involved, energetic, and enthusiastic it rubs off without us being vaudeville entertainers. I think that sometimes the distinction is blurred. I agree we must get students to see and make connections between the content and student teaching whenever possible. What seems to help is a kind of combined recitation and visualization technique. Before the lecture, I try to see myself delivering the lesson, anticipate problems and questions, and attempt to infuse humor into the dull and dry bits. I often forget the jokes I planned, but my style of delivery and comments are usually a little nutty and eccentric, so I don't always have to work out that part beforehand.

### **Committee Assignments**

Faculty Member A: It's interesting to learn that each of us gets frustrated about what is or is not happening in our work groups. We are truly a faculty of divergent thinkers. Our approach to a task seems to demonstrate this. In the end, the work will get done, and everyone will compromise and be somewhat relieved when it is over.

Faculty Member B: I agree that many like to talk in these committees, but since talking is not my forte, I'm always happier when we produce something concrete. It eventually happens, but while I wait I wonder if I'll live through it.

Faculty Member C: Keep in mind that for some faculty these meetings are quite stimulating discussion. We often work in isolation, spending many hours alone, grading and reading papers and planning lectures. Some enjoy the conflict and the verbal banter.

### **Portfolio Assessment**

Faculty Member A: In terms of helping students identify best portfolio pieces, I usually make a check mark on work that is acceptable but not worthy of the student's portfolio. A star indicates an appropriate portfolio piece. I try to focus on having students consider the quality of their work first and the progress made rather than the assigned grade. What do others think?

Faculty Member B: We need to present models of portfolios early on. Get students used to what they look like and how best pieces are chosen. Maybe have them develop mini-portfolios in each of their classes. I've been asked many times by students, "What's a portfolio supposed to look like?"

Faculty Member C: Unless we all buy into the portfolio idea and incorporate portfolios into each of our courses, we will continue to have fragments of understanding among students regarding the concept and process. Here are some ideas. Mark or star specific course assignments on your syllabus as appropriate portfolio pieces. Ask students to reflect in writing after completing course projects and have them list the reasons for including the assignments in their portfolios. I plan to add a question about portfolios on the final exam in my literacy course.

Many other subjects were covered as a result of this two-year collaborative writing process. A sampling of journal topics and questions related to teaching and learning, collaboration, and program evaluation is presented below:

### **Teaching and Learning**

1. Different ways of learning including multiple intelligences.
2. Alternative feedback opportunities such as classroom-traced research.
3. How do you use humor in your class presentations?
4. How do you keep focused on the major course goals?
5. What's the right combination of lecture versus application?
6. Do we provide enough models and samples of what we are teaching?
7. Why do our students do so poorly on traditional exams?
8. Where do you draw the line when you know it is no longer productive for students to share their experiences with the class?

### **Collaboration**

1. How do you deal with being a new face on campus?
2. How can we stay in contact with each other given our busy schedules?
3. Can we figure a way to collaborate better with other college faculty in our geographical area?

4. Should we be teaching more about collaboration in the student teaching seminar and in the overall program?
5. What can we do to teach our student teachers to be better listeners?
6. Parent-teacher role playing. Do we do enough in our classes?
7. Strategies for improving collaboration between regular and special educators.
8. Tips to help all teachers succeed in helping students with special needs in the classroom.

### **Program Evaluation**

1. How can we match cooperating teacher and student teacher personalities for optimum success?
2. What are the critical features of the best field settings for special education?
3. How do we present options to students early on who are not suited to teaching?
4. Should we change the sequence of our introductory education courses?
5. How do we incorporate the Vermont Standards for Educators (Learning, Professional Knowledge, Collegueship, Advocacy, and Accountability) into our courses?
6. What is the effect of gender on student-teacher interactions? How can we increase student reflection throughout the program?
7. How can we better align student portfolios and our curriculum with the Vermont Standards?

### **Overall Benefits and Conclusions**

All faculty participants expressed satisfaction with the response journal process. Many important ideas and useful suggestions about teaching practice were generated over the two-year period, and we appeared to benefit from the weekly exchange of information. Given our demanding teaching schedules, we agreed that the rewards from this writing experience far outweighed the time and energy that the project required. In many ways these results are consistent with the professional development studies of teachers and administrators by Ackerman et al. (1996) who found this type of case story sharing and reflection "promotes an atmosphere of trust and a sense of participation and well-being" (p. 23).

The response journals also offered a forum for our faculty to engage in a deeper reflection of teaching practice. We wrote about what was on our minds, what was working in our classes, and what was not working. We shared previous teaching experiences and made suggestions for individuals as well as for the overall program. The journals, in themselves, came to represent a wealth of information about the Green Mountain teaching experience.

In addition, we were introduced to each others' subject area content and to different views of learning theory and teaching methodology. (During an academic year, there were more than twenty topics covered and over forty entries exchanged in each of the faculty response journals.)

Since there is no central "faculty room," at our college for sharing ideas about teaching and learning, the journals helped to counteract feelings of isolation and were often instrumental in providing emotional support during stressful or difficult situations. Members offered assistance to each other, even if it was only in the form of a brief comment or a simple acknowledgment.

Although our students were not active participants in the journal writing process, they did receive some benefits indirectly as evidenced by the following excerpts:

## Teacher Effectiveness

Faculty Member A: The lesson I taught today bombed. I thought I had prepared a decent lesson by writing key terms on the board and providing several examples. It seemed to me students understood and participated in a good discussion. At the end of class, I asked some questions as a quick review. Nobody answered. All I saw were blank looks. I spent more time preparing for this class than I have for any other this semester. What happened?

Faculty Member B: It can be discouraging when you plan a lecture that you think is great but the students don't. It happens to me from time to time. We have all been in that situation. Did you use the same terms or language in your review questions? If not, synonyms and paraphrasing can often throw the students off the track if you use them too early. They may only understand the material concretely and not be ready to see applications or use the ideas abstractly. Try again using the same lesson vocabulary and see if it helps. Let me know how it goes!

In summary, faculty at colleges and universities where teaching is a primary focus may want to consider the response journal as an alternative mechanism for promoting reflection and collaboration. Analysis of the journal entries can also pinpoint critical issues that surface from year to year. As such, the journals can be viewed as instrumental to program change and revision. We hope that the preceding discussion offers helpful ideas and suggestions for faculty members who already use response journals and for those who are considering implementing the technique in the future.

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