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## Reflective Journals

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**COMMERCIAL EDUCATION SOCIETY OF  
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## **REFLECTIVE JOURNALS**

**Emeritus Professor Tony Shannon *AM***

**CESA Dean**

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### **Introduction**

A reflective journal helps to think honestly about one's actual thinking. This can be uncomfortable at first!

A reflective journal is simply a record, kept throughout the year, of thoughts you have about the teaching or other work you are doing from the perspective of your duties or what you are studying. However, behind this simplicity lies the fact that journals have been found to enhance learning, and we hope that as a result of this experience you may want to use this learning method with your own students or in your own professional development.

A reflective journal is like a diary, but in many ways it is more haphazard. It is also very personal but, at the same time, very professional, because it is the story

- of your development,
- of your plans,
- of your aspirations.

It is not prepared to show to anyone else.

Many of us reflect on students, classes and subjects, but do it in our heads. Sometimes we write notes to ourselves about things which did or didn't work well in our classes. A reflective journal is one way of having a coherent process for thinking about these reflections more deeply and making connections between these thoughts and other sources of information. Essentially your journal would be a record of reflections over time, so that you become more aware of your own learning through changes in the nature of your reflections.

### **Reflection**

Journal writing is one of the ways to promote and facilitate reflection. Reflective learners constantly review their actions in the light of their goals. This reflection empowers one to connect the insights gained from the reflective process to changes that they need to make in their lives in order to strive for their goals. These goals need to be formalised and fully articulated prior to initiating any journal activity.

A journal combines the objective data of a log with the free flowing personal interpretations and expressions of a diary. It records the writer's practices, and reflections on those practices, weaving together accounts of the private and the professional in an ongoing manner. The process of writing ensures that one's thoughts and recollections of events are given a certain degree of structure, and

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\* These papers are for internal discussion within CESA - on topics related to the Mission and Vision of CESA.

such a record of professional practice can be used to gain further insights at a later date. Critical thinking, as distinct from mere description of events, is also encouraged as the writer is encouraged to discuss and integrate different ideas in the drawing of coherent conclusions.

### **Guidelines for Writing a Reflective Journal**

Reflective journals involve writing in a reflective way which is different from the descriptive writing used in diaries or records of meetings. Hatton and Smith (1995) provide a useful way of recognising different types of writing. The terms they use are not particularly important, but note the distinctions they make between the different types.

*Descriptive writing* is not reflective. It simply describes events and does not attempt to provide reasons for those events or thoughts about their implications. Descriptive writing is useful for recalling what happened, but is not useful for a reflective journal.

Eg: "Today's lecture dealt with the structure and function of parts of insect bodies. I broke students up into buzz groups twice and it seemed OK. I managed to get through the lecture but the students talked a lot."

*Descriptive reflection* includes both a description of events and reasons for why they occurred. At a more sophisticated level, it might involve using perspectives from literature to provide these reasons.

E.g.,: "I tried breaking students into buzz because I wanted them to explore what they thought were the relationships between the structure and function of parts of insect bodies. They seemed to think quite a bit about it and mostly came up with good answers – I think it helped them to understand the main concepts I was trying to get across. I had hoped that students wouldn't talk as much during the rest of the lecture, but they still talked quite a lot towards the end. Why is it that they always seem to talk the most when I'm rushing to get finished? I must remember to ask for some info on stopping students talking."

*Dialogic reflection* (as in conducting a dialogue with yourself) involves a greater stepping back from events and exploring alternative explanations and courses of action in context. The writing might make connections with a range of perspective from the literature and other sources, and might begin to reflect back on earlier reflections. This is the type of writing we hope a reflective journal would include, especially towards the end of the course.

E.g.,: "After reading Ramsden and discussing Jane Stein-Parbury's video lecture in the Grad cert class, I think I was making too many assumptions about student talking in lectures. I assumed that talking meant that students weren't motivated or were too used to watching TV in 5 minute segments and that there wasn't much I could do about it. I now suspect that one reason why my students talk is that I've probably lost them – maybe if they don't understand then they just switch off and just start talking. This might be why they always seem to talk most when I'm trying to rush through things – especially at the end of lectures! Maybe my students also can't see the relevance of the materials in the lecture, or they're overloaded and need time to think about things. The buzz groups I used this week seemed to get them to think, and they were interested so I should try to find more activities that will do this. Looking back on my earlier reflections and reading things like Gibbs and Ramsden, I think I'll need to make quite a few changes to the lectures and perhaps the rest of the subject. I don't think I can deal with student talking as a separate problem."

"Ramsden's comments about assessment determining the curriculum just stunned me. It is so true I don't know why I never thought of it before. It was exactly like

that when I was a student and it is still the same – we ask too many questions which encourage students to memorise, then complain when that’s what they do. Next assignment: analyse the assessment in the first year subject then make sure it really assesses what I think is important.”

While reflective journal writing is expected, formality is not and there is no single right way to keep a reflective journal. Reflective journals can include disconnected paragraphs, stuck in post-it-notes with later annotations and odd sentences indicating thoughts to be followed up at a later date. Some past participants have preferred to keep their “journals” in an exercise type book, others have used loose leaf pages, others have typed notes into a computer file and some have kept separate sets of reflective pages with materials and notes from the subjects they teach. Similarly, there isn’t necessarily a best time to write in a journal. Some people are successful in writing down ideas as soon as they occur, others have found it most convenient to write in their journals in the train or bus on the way home once a week (one past participant claimed that the best reflections were written during boring meetings!).

Whichever method you use, we suggest that you make a habit of writing something (however small) at least once a week, that you put dates on your reflections and that you keep them together in some way. Previous participants who have gained the most from reflective journals tended to be those who brought “journals” to classes and carried something around to enable them to note down relevant thoughts when they occurred. They then kept their writing together in some form so that they could re-read and reflect on their earlier writings, using this to reflect on their own learning.

### **Concluding Comments**

Dewey identified three characteristics of a reflective learner:

- open-mindedness,
- wholeheartedness, and
- intellectual responsibility.

The last means freedom from prejudice, bias and partisanship, which are habits of bias which

- close the mind,
- obscure our real difficulties, and
- block off new ideas for improvement.

The journal must focus on the writer’s self-examination of

- goals,
- beliefs,
- assumptions, and
- actions.

Wholeheartedness, on the other hand, refers to the genuine enthusiasm to channel one’s

- mental,
- emotional, and
- physical

resources to resolve a problem. These are the results of the polished professional product of postgraduate study. Whichever method of reflective writing that you use, it is suggested

- that you make a habit of writing something (however small) at least once per week,
- that you put dates on your reflections, and
- that you keep them together in some way.

### **References**

There are numerous web references to both teaching portfolios and reflective journals. Though the citations below are somewhat dated, there has not been much theoretical

development in recent years, though Sarah and Diat provide much relevant food for thought on reflection in general.

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