

The Paper Mirror: Understanding Reflective Journaling

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Although pervasive throughout counseling psychology and other training programs that incorporate experiential activities, reflective journals have sparse, fragmented and disparate theoretical bases to support their use. Coming from the fields of counseling and professional education, the authors use counselor education as a template to explore the use of reflective journaling in higher education. This article reviews literature supporting the use of reflective journaling, presents descriptions of various types of reflective journals, and proposes a method that allows instructors and students to critique journal entries collaboratively.

Keywords: Reflective Journals, Reflection, Personal and Professional Development, Experiential Learning, Counselor Training

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Counselor education students learn to interact with clients while monitoring their own cognitive and emotional processes; relate to clients in a nonjudgmental, open, and caring manner; and maintain appropriate boundaries. In addition, these graduate students are expected to learn and grow while producing results appropriate to specific academic, professional, and ethical standards. Counseling programs endeavor to develop in students concrete and measurable knowledge of psychopathology, and mastery of skills, necessary to apply diagnostic criteria to clients. However, development of a knowledge base, as well as professional skills, includes tacit processes internal to the student that are often difficult for an instructor to discern and measure. To address this dilemma, instructors may require students to write reflective journals that chronicle the students' internal processes about a course, an experience, a personal value, or a belief. The reflective journal holds potential for serving as a mirror to reflect the student's heart and mind. The journal assignment can be a structured and purposeful tool allowing access to the students' internal "making of meaning." This article explores several psychological and educational theories that explain why and how reflective journals work, common types of reflective journals, and a method for critiquing students' journal entries.

Theories Behind the Paper Mirror

The rationale for using reflective journaling in higher education is grounded in general learning theory, adult learning theory, experiential learning theory, and in the importance of the counseling student's personal growth and professional development. Education theorist John Dewey (1938) espoused an educative experience that fosters meaningful (i.e., purposive) learning. He viewed an effective learning condition as one that actively engages the student with the content in an intensely personal way, and advocated experiential learning as a resourceful means of achieving that end. Under effective learning conditions, according to Dewey, learners are inherently motivated. Subsequent research, such as Tough's (1968) landmark nationwide study of adult learners, supported Dewey's contention as Tough highlighted the significance of the mature learner engaging in independent, self-selected, and self-directed learning projects.

Drawing from Dewey's notion of active learning, Kolb (1984) promoted experiential learning, highlighting the reflective process as a necessary part of engaging the learner. Kolb posited a four-stage model of

experiential learning: (a) concrete experience, (b) reflective observation, (c) abstract conceptualization, and (d) active experimentation or application. Reflective journaling, selectively guided by the instructor, can help the student progress through Kolb's four stages. In stages one and two respectively, the student's journal entry may begin with a description of, and subsequent reflection on, a specific experience. In stage three, the student may explore explanations or questions regarding the meaning of the experience. Finally, in stage four, the student concludes the entry by applying new meanings, interpretations, or understandings of the event. Reflective journals used in this way create effective learning conditions that can result in the types of meaningful or purposive learning that was first put forth by Dewey, and has come to be further refined by adult education theorist Kolb and psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1982).

Believing that learners are the experts in their own learning and developmental processes, psychotherapist Carl Rogers (1982) voiced ideas that support the use of journals as a tool for learning, personal growth, and professional development. Rogers presented his emerging ideas about the importance of learning that results from self-discovery saying, "The only learning which significantly influences behavior is self-discovered, self-appropriated learning" (p. 223). If educators accept the importance of self-discovered, self-appropriated learning, then creating conditions for students' self-discovery becomes central to developing competent practitioners. Journaling, as a learning strategy, provides opportunities for students to mull over ideas, uncover inner secrets, and piece together life's unconnected threads, thus creating a fertile ground for the significant learning to which Rogers referred.

Psychologist and learning theorist Len Semtonovitch Vygotsky (1986), may have explained how reflective journaling helps students develop an understanding of connections between themselves and the world around them. According to Vygotsky:

Thought is not begotten by thought; it is engendered by emotion, i.e., by our desires and needs, our interests and emotions. Behind every thought there is an affective-volitional tendency, which holds the answer to the last "why" in the analysis of thinking. (p. 252)

The reflective journal provides a vehicle for inner dialogue that connects thoughts, feelings, and actions. Journaling may provide a medium for the student to access the affective-volitional tendency to which Vygotsky referred, and so prompts thought and action.

Whereas Vygotsky (1986) focused upon the interplay of thoughts, feelings, and actions, Knowles (1983), in explaining his theory of *androgogy*, highlighted the importance personal experience plays in the process

of adult learning. According to Knowles, "Because of our experience we have often developed habitual ways of thinking and acting; preconceptions about reality, prejudices, and defensiveness about our past" (p. 4). Knowles continued, "To overcome this problem, adult educators are devising strategies for helping people become more open-minded" (p. 4). Boud (2001), Goldsmith (1996), and Moon (1999) believed that reflective journaling is an especially successful strategy for helping move the adult learner toward higher levels of critical (i.e., analytical) thinking, and personal insight.

Similarly, Mezirow's (1998) *transformative learning* theory explained how one's deeply held values and chosen perspectives form mental frameworks that govern an individual's interpretations of the world and her or his place in it. Mezirow labeled automatic thinking as "habits of mind" or, in other words, conclusions and judgments to which people tend to jump without thought or question. Mezirow (2000) stated:

Transformative learning refers to the process by which we transform our taken-for-granted frames of reference (meaning, perspectives, habits of mind, mind sets), to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, emotionally capable of change and reflective so that they may generate beliefs and opinions that will prove more true or justified to guide action. (pp. 7-8)

Because transformative learning is thoughtful learning adopted deliberately by the learner, reflective journals can be significant adjuncts in the transformative learning process. Transformative learning requires the student to question the foundations and prior learning that went into the formation of a given belief. In other words, transformative learning prompts the learner to consider whether a given belief came about as a result of concepts tacitly accepted, or as the result of a deliberate thought process. Mezirow (2000) adopted the term *assimilative learning* to describe the process of absorbing knowledge tacitly from the environment. Thus, assimilative learning is our unchallenged and untested acceptance of a belief as true, factual, or real. Transformative learning, then, involves examining an "assimilative" learned belief. The iterative process of examining the belief, testing it, and exploring alternatives to the belief results in transformative learning when the learner is ultimately changed, or "transformed" through the process. Thus, the learner's prior patterns of thinking would ultimately grow and change, or "transform."

Reflective journaling can provide ways to illuminate automatic thinking and habits of mind, and can lead students through a transformative process, especially when the instructor engages the student in mutual dialogue. Journaling provides students practice in the art of reflection that

is important in learning new material and essential for transformative learning. Journaling also provides an opportunity for students to move past an intuitive adoption of patterns of thinking, or unquestioned beliefs, and encourages students to progress from *assimilative learning* to *transformative learning*. Reflective journals provide a structured way for the instructor and student to examine the student's thinking patterns or belief systems, and this examination process encourages relevant assimilative learning and supports transformative learning.

The Ethics of Assigning Reflective Journaling

The ethical implications of journaling in higher education programs should not be ignored, especially when personal disclosures could be used to assess suitability of the student to continue in the program. Counselor educators are governed by strict ethical codes designed to provide guidance to clinical practitioners (American Counseling Association, 2005; Gladding, 2004). Educators from other disciplines may follow ethical codes that govern their profession and may provide guidance applicable to the use of reflective journals. However, several general guidelines may be applied to the use of reflective journals as a learning and professional development tool in most educational programs.

Guidelines on the Instructional Use of Reflective Journals

Kerka (1996) suggested three conditions necessary for reflection in the use of reflective journals including: (a) perceived trustworthiness of the journal reader, (b) clarity of the expectation, and (c) quantity and quality of the feedback. Each condition guides the instructor when assigning reflective journals in the classroom. Students may be initially fearful of possible judgments or reprisals from the instructor as a result of what is written in their journals (Elbow & Clarke, 1987). To combat this, the instructor may need to dialogue with students about the purpose of the journal and the importance of self-knowledge in learning. Clarification of the purpose of the journal as a professional development tool in which the students and instructor share ideas about the students' experiences may mitigate some students' anxiety. We have also found it helpful to clarify in the syllabus the specifics of the journal assignment and to include a statement specifying how information contained in reflective journals will be treated. It is important for students to know if the information contained in their journals is written for a private audience, such as a private dialogue between the student and instructor, or if the journal assignment will be shared with another audience. It is important, after all, for the journal writer to be confident of the trustworthiness of the reader.

Reflective journal assignments may become a key factor in the student's development of reflective skills and are often not limited

to classroom content. Journal writing as classroom assignments treads the fine line between personal issues and professional development. Although it is easier for instructors to deal only with classroom content, many educational and training programs require a level of competence from students that transcends content and touches on the "person" of the student (English, 2001). Rather than passing judgment on values and beliefs shared by students in their reflective journals, the instructor is tasked with maintaining an objective focus on the reflective process and unflinchingly adhering to the guidelines specified in the journal assignment.

Instructors using reflective journals can clarify their expectations by initially providing students with guidance, explaining that the purposes of journal are self-reflection and professional development. The instructor may then provide feedback that is focused upon the student's reflections *about the issue*, rather than the issue itself. The instructor encourages students to focus on what the journal reflections say about their reactions, their perceptions, and themselves.

Finally, just as students are expected to devote time, effort, and thought to writing journal reflections, instructors should find ways to demonstrate that students' efforts are monitored by the instructor throughout the semester. In our experience, students appreciate both written and verbal feedback about their journal entries. As students reflect upon issues, course content, and learning experiences, instructors can observe student responses and give feedback that reinforces reflections compatible with the goals of the journaling assignment. Conversely, reflective journals give instructors an opportunity to guide less-than-optimal comments into forms that are appropriate for developing professional skills.

Effective Journals for the Classroom

Reflective journaling can provide instructors with glimpses of the inner workings of the students' mind. Journal entries allow the instructor to view, through the student's words, the quality of comprehension and mastery of the material, as well as affective responses to the content. The reflective journal can be a vehicle for the student to define, question, and interact with content, concepts, ideas, values, beliefs, and feelings. In addition, reflective journaling invites students to articulate their understandings of course content and clinical experiences. In this way, reflective journaling can serve to link the students' understandings and feelings.

A review of the literature suggests that reflective journaling methods have not been qualitatively or quantitatively studied to any great extent. The literature does not disclose systematic attempts to assess the efficacy of any single journaling technique over another. However, anecdotal evidence suggests that the use of reflective journals can hone students' reflective skills, assist students in applying course content, help students

process experiential learning activities, and encourage personal growth and professional development.

Reflective journals can take several forms. This article will focus on three described by Goldsmith (1996): (a) the dialogue journal, (b) the class interactive (team) journal, and (c) the personal journal.

The Dialogue Journal

The dialogue journal provides a means for the student and instructor to maintain a private dialogue with one another around any number of issues. The instructor comments in writing on a student's initial dialogue journal entry. In turn, the student may respond to the instructor's comments or proceed to the next journal assignment. This iterative process is repeated, creating a dialogue between the student and instructor.

The instructor should recognize that the student may experience the desire to please the instructor, to say the right things, or to seek approval and validations of his or her feelings, thoughts, and values. The desire to please may impact the journaling process. Consequently, instructors using journals may want to view students' dialogues in light of this effect. This interplay between journal writer and instructor models the interactive nature of counseling, and through this parallel process should come permission to air issues, thoughts, values, and beliefs without concern for judgment. The journaling process allows for examining and analyzing beliefs in a manner that encourages openness to alternative interpretations. This interactive procedure provides the student an opportunity to challenge his or her habits of mind, which is the critical thinking process described by Mezirow (1998) and Brookfield (1998).

The Class Interactive (Team) Journal

Whereas the dialogue journal facilitates a conversation between student and teacher, the class interactive journal provides a forum for students to interact among themselves. In a class interactive journal, the student shares his or her written reflections with classmates, receives feedback, and subsequently constructs a written reflection considering classmates' input. A variation of the class interactive journal is the *team* journal identified by Goldsmith (1996). This serves as a method for communicating, and sharing ideas and events between, and among, small groups of students. Because the team journal requires entries from each group member, it must be accessible by all members and, thus, serves as an ongoing record of team progress and learning. This type of journal is especially useful when group dynamics are important learning goals. In addition, team journals are suited for use with electronic message boards, such as Blackboard, where messages can be posted and team members can respond.

Another feature of the dialogue journal and the class interactive journal is based on the fact that they are both iterative in nature, in that

they evolve as a result of interactions between the student and others. The interactive nature of these types of journals is an inherently social process that provides the writer an opportunity for testing beliefs and assumptions—a sounding board, if you will, that allows students to examine values, concepts, and issues beyond their personal filters.

The Personal Journal

The personal journal is generally a narrative description of the student's inner processes. Personal journals (i.e., personal diaries) conjure the image of the little pink book with a flimsy lock kept by adolescent girls for recording secrets and dreams to be read by none other than the author. The solitary nature of a personal journal does not contain the sounding board effect inherent in dialogue and class interactive journals, and the writer of the personal journal may well process and re-process the same concepts repeatedly with little challenge to his or her accepted beliefs or ideas. This intrapersonal looping of ideas may be self-affirming but not necessarily productive, as Brookfield (1998) posited:

A self-confirming cycle often develops whereby our uncritical accepted assumptions shape actions that then only serve to confirm the truth of those assumptions. We find it very difficult to stand outside ourselves and see how some of our most deeply held values and beliefs lead us into distorted and constrained ways of being. (p. 197)

The private nature of a personal journal, although possibly valuable as a tool for reflection, may mire the writer in those endless loops of self-modulated introspection against which Brookfield (1998) cautioned. Though practiced journal writers extol the virtues of this form of reflection, the personal journal may have limited application for classroom use or professional development. In our experience, because the personal journal does not allow feedback from others, the critical self-assessment that is a necessary skill for many professionals is unlikely to be developed through keeping this type of journal. Consequently, *class interactive* journals and *dialogue* journals hold more potential than *personal* journals for students' personal growth and professional development.

Critiquing Reflective Journal Entries

For purposes of collaborative review, the instructor and student seek together to discern the nature and quality of reflection represented in a student's journal entry, to determine whether students have moved past a simple understanding of course content and have progressed toward integrating the content into professional practice. In order for the instructor and student to critique a journal entry collaboratively, they must share a

common understanding of how content relates to process, and how the student can move from superficial reflection to critical, or analytical reflection. The use of the 2 x 2 matrix (see Figure 1) provides the needed structure for the instructor and student to create a common understanding, or language, for examining journal entries.

With a given journal entry, both the instructor and student first determine whether the entry is a content or process statement. For the purposes of this method of critique, a *content* statement focuses “outside” the student, whereas a *process* statement discloses the student’s level of introspection. For example, “Rogers’ Person Centered Therapy lets the client take the lead,” is based upon a fact or event, focused outside of the student, and, as such, would be a content statement. A process statement that incorporates the student’s thoughts, feelings, or attitudes might sound like, “I felt awkward using person-centered techniques.” Analyzing journal entries in this manner can assist the instructor and student in creating a mutual understanding of what comprise content statements and process statements. In addition, the matrix helps the instructor identify misunderstandings or misinterpretations of course content, and provides a means for instructors and students to review journal entries collaboratively.

Using the 2 x 2 matrix (see Figure 1), the instructor and student can plot a journal entry on the content-process continuum. Following the content-process decision, the student and instructor judge where on a continuum, from *superficial* to *complex*, the journal entry appears. For example, a student’s superficial entry would focus on content with no emotional value, but an entry that integrates theory with personal and introspective insights would suggest movement toward understandings of greater complexity. An entry falling into Quadrant A represents the student’s superficial reflection of the content, and a Quadrant D entry demonstrates the student’s ability to reflect upon the topic with a level of consideration that transcends superficial.

With practice, students’ journal entries should indicate movement toward a level of introspection that integrates theory, concepts, and practice into the student’s personal and professional development. The goal is for the student’s writing to demonstrate progress toward reflective and inwardly focused entries. For instance, “Because I was quite directive and failed at staying person-centered when working with my client, I’m afraid I’ll never be a good counselor,” would be an example of a complex, inwardly focused entry. This statement demonstrates the student’s understanding of a counseling theory. It also acknowledges recognition of his behavior and describes his emotional state. A journal entry combining these components in this way transcends superficial reflection and is, thus, categorized as a Quadrant D statement.

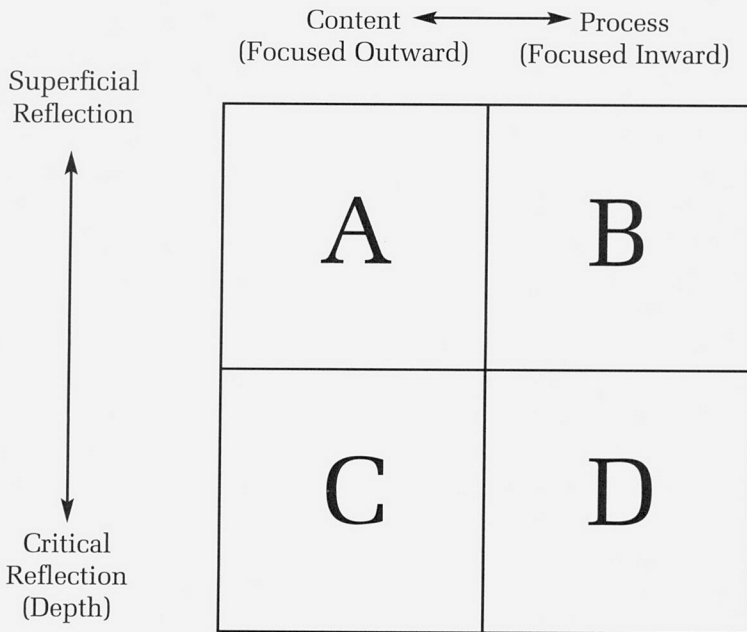


Figure 1. The diagram illustrates two continua merged into a 2 x 2 quadrant with context of the journal entry forming one axis and level of reflection forming the other.

In our experience, students often begin their early journal entries with Quadrant A statements but, with practice and encouragement, move incrementally to deeper, more profound critical reflections that naturally fall into Quadrant D. It should be noted that students do not necessarily move through the four quadrants sequentially, but rather move from quadrant to quadrant influenced by level of maturity, development of reflective skills, and comfort with the topic. Consistent use of Quadrant D statements suggests that the student is demonstrating skills necessary for insightful or critical reflection, the same traits counselor educators strive to instill in their students. Just as counselor educators strive to instill a set of skills and ways of thinking in their students, instructors of other disciplines have embedded ways of thinking, skills, and methods appropriate to that discipline. Instructors in any field can use reflective journals to dialogue with students, and in so doing, model the language and methods appropriate for that discipline.

Conclusion

The strength of reflective journaling lies in the collaborative opportunities for the instructor and student to employ common criteria to critique the student's reflective skills through journal entries. Consequently, because the instructor is not the sole reviewer, the student learns necessary skills of self-reflection and self-assessment. As Baldwin (1991) stated, "Writing bridges the inner and outer world and connects the paths of action and reflection" (p. 9). Thus, students who master the skills of reflective journaling gain an ability to connect their internal processes with their external realities. The connecting of inner and outer world experiences is a process that demands self-awareness and self-knowledge necessary for the practice of counseling, as well as other professions.

As a glass mirror reflects a visual image, the paper mirror reflects students' inner worlds and making of meaning. By providing a means for sharing student reflections, coupled with instructor feedback resulting in ongoing dialogue, the paper mirror can provide the instructor and students valuable information about students' progression and development. An ultimate goal in professional education is for students to synergize theories with their personal styles, broaden their repertoires of professional methods, inculcate professional ethics into their practices, and develop a base of knowledge that is the foundation for becoming well-rounded, model practitioners. The paper mirror reflects the student's struggles, questions, frustrations, and successes. As Dewey stated (1933), "The function of reflective thought is, therefore, to transfer a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, coherent, settled and harmonious" (p. 100-101).

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