

E-Journaling: Achieving Interactive Education Online

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

By **Jonnie Jill Phipps**

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

Journaling Explained

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

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

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

- *Professional journals* record the growth and development of the author in his or her specific field of study.
- *Interactive reading logs* provide an opportunity for recording reactions to materials being read as the learner progresses through a book, an article, or instructions. These logs can include imaginary conversations with the author of the material being read, even questioning the ideas presented.
- *Theory logs* compel students to examine and interpret theoretical concepts and significant points, restating them in their own words and then recording how they are applied in practice.

Faculty should not assume that students know how to write reflectively; these skills must be taught.² First, the learners must be able to distinguish between narrative and reflective writing, and the instructor should elaborate on the varieties of reflective writing.³

- *Technical reflection* contemplates performance based on external criteria to evaluate what changes need to occur to ensure the required improvement.
- *Reflection in/on action* refers to contemplating better ways of implementing what the writer has already done or observed, or analyzing what was done and why it was successful. Writing about these events helps to clarify

planned changes and may provide patterns for improvement.

- *Deliberative reflection* weighs the writer's opinions, along with those of others, in order to determine the best solution in a specific situation and to articulate the reasoning used during the decision-making process. When practiced on a regular basis, this will hone critical thinking and decision-making skills.
 - *Personal reflection* encourages learners to examine motives related to their worldview, ethical behaviors, and basic beliefs about who they are and what they want to become. This is a valuable tool in self-evaluation and goal setting.
 - *Critical reflection* is the highest form of reflection because it does not just stimulate personal understanding but also has the potential to instigate social change. Rather political in nature, it allows participants to question current rules and procedures and challenge the status quo.
- No one method of journaling is inherently more important or valuable than the others, as each serves a different purpose in the realm of education. In fact, it is advantageous to include a mixture of journaling types to achieve more comprehensive results. Examples of each method should be provided and discussed with students, along with an explanation of expectations for the assignment. Participants should be encouraged to maintain a balance of personal and professional disclosure when composing entries



for submission,⁴ and faculty responses can guide learners into an appropriate approach. If it seems advisable, faculty can respond to entries with thought-provoking questions, prompting and stimulating learners to elaborate in subsequent entries. Naturally, positive comments and encouragement result in continued efforts from the learner. Students could also be encouraged to voluntarily share selected entries with their peers.

An open-minded attitude on the part of the student is also beneficial to successful reflective journaling. Reflective writing helps the individual to become more reflective as a person,⁵ and reflective individuals carefully consider consequences prior to acting. They tend to have more purpose in their lives, thinking carefully before acting or talking.

Problems with Traditional Reflective Journaling

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

Other disadvantages of traditional journaling involve time management. Students often neglect to make the daily

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

Journaling with Technology

Any type of journaling can be successfully implemented in an electronic format.⁶ Today’s technology provides educators access to a variety of electronic communication tools, including threaded discussions and e-mail. (Longhurst and Sandage recommended submitting electronic journal entries by e-mail.⁷) Indeed, using this technology has several advantages over the traditional handwritten journal of previous generations. Most faculty and students are familiar with and check their e-mail accounts regularly. The electronic format prevents late or lost journals or miscellaneous papers being shoved under office doors. Submissions arrive within minutes of being sent, dated and time-stamped. Simply clicking the reply button ensures the comments are sent directly to the correct student; no more shuffling of papers, toting stacks of notebooks home for grading, or struggling with piles of homework on the way to and from the classroom.

E-mail is not perfect, however. Messages received by an e-mail system (independent of a course management system) must be organized within specified folders and can accidentally be filtered out or deleted, or lost in the myriad of other messages received during daily activities. Then there is the question

of how long to save the messages: six months? A year? Two years?

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

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

Pedagogical Soundness

Nowhere is e-journaling used to its potential as an educational strategy despite evidence indicating that significant benefits are possible through a variety of techniques.⁸ Reflective writing can aid learners in synthesizing new information, and it is often used to improve reading comprehension, writing performance, and self-esteem via self-examination.⁹ In distance education, Internet courses, and traditional lecture classes that serve hundreds of students with no time for questions or discussion, e-journaling can add an interactive component. E-journaling assignments also employ Chickering and Gamson's "Seven Principles of Good Practice in Undergraduate Education,"¹⁰ as follows.



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

otherwise go unsaid.¹¹ Personalized encouragement from faculty to learners promotes student motivation, intellectual commitment, and personal development.¹²

2. *Active Learning*: E-journaling can serve as an invitation for students to participate in the process of learning, as it helps them to reflect critically on the content and can aid in the synthesis of new information. Learners become actively engaged in the learning process when required to write journal entries on a regular basis.¹³
3. *Prompt Feedback*: E-journaling makes prompt feedback a reality because faculty can easily reply to postings within a day or two.¹⁴ Early comments should be comprehensive, with specific instructions for improving the reflective learning process. Just as in a traditional journal, the instructor need not comment on every entry but can offer feedback of the general impression from multiple entries. It is crucial to keep the tone of the communication as positive and encouraging as possible. This is the "body language" that the students read, and it will set the climate for the entire course. Frequency of contact is a vital factor in student motivation and involvement.
4. *Time on Task*: Word-processing technology is more accommodating than paper and pencil or the typewriter when making journal entries because of the ease of making corrections and additions and rearranging portions of text. There is also the added value of learning or practicing the related technical skills of typing, formatting, and editing. Composing journal entries electronically increases time on task not only by making writing more efficient but also by making entries easier to read. No one must struggle trying to decipher handwriting.
5. *High Expectations*: Success in an online course requires setting and communicating high expectations. Expecting students to perform well becomes a self-fulfilling proph-

ecy; giving respect to students can prompt them to take their learning more seriously. This attitude can not be taught overtly but rather is implanted unobtrusively by the manner in which instructors convey information, in the tone of the correspondence, and by example. The students' likelihood of learning improves when they perceive that the faculty member is genuinely concerned about their personal academic achievement. E-journaling provides the perfect opportunity for this to occur. Instructors impart this encouragement as they "listen" attentively and respond with supportive feedback, using the student's name often.¹⁵

6. *Respect Diverse Talents and Ways of Learning*: Reflective writing and e-journaling might be a new mode of learning to many students. Journal entries, although a "written assignment," allow for a broad range of interpretation on how the author might approach the composition, structure, and content of the entries.
7. *Reciprocity and Cooperation among Students*: While e-journaling does not promote interaction or cooperation with other students, it is an excellent forum for faculty to address bigotry, prejudice, or issues of narrow-mindedness revealed in these writings. Cooperation and respect can be nurtured and encouraged through instructor responses. Also note that private e-journaling is only one strategy—it does not replace discussion, interaction, and collaboration with peers.

Getting Started

When using e-journaling for the first time, start small and require only a few entries throughout the course. This provides an opportunity to learn more about responding to student remarks and to adjust to the added workload. Keep in mind that instructors decide how many entries will be required, the minimum length of entries, and the criteria for grading submissions.¹⁶ Evaluating journal entries can take as much

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or as little time as the instructor wants to dedicate to the endeavor.

Brookfield suggested that journal entries cannot and should not be assessed.¹⁷ Perhaps awarding credit for completing the assignment would suffice. However, it is imperative to read the students' entries and make annotations periodically. Otherwise, they will feel their writing is not valued and view the process as unimportant. Confidentiality is also an essential factor; participants need to feel respected and know the private information they share is secure and privileged.

For those already using journaling as part of their class assignments, moving to electronic format is not a major transition. Instructors can still require the same number of entries, and standards for grading can remain unchanged. However, because of problems that can arise when dealing with any technology, consider offering some leniency regarding due dates.

Conclusion

E-journaling remains underused as a teaching and learning tool. Possibly many instructors do not know of its many benefits or are unfamiliar with the various technologies available to implement it.

Implementing the traditional teaching strategy of journaling in electronic format has many advantages. E-journaling is ideal for reflective learning activities in traditional classrooms and enhances distance classrooms that use video to connect multiple sites. This interactive forum provides the "personal" connection that many Web courses in particular lack.

E-journaling has many educational advantages, some of which I have

explained here. If you have not already used this learning strategy, why not give it a try? *e*

Endnotes

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