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An Evaluation of Learners Journals as Tool for Learning and Assessment

Shamim Ali, Ph.D.

Abstract

The evaluation of students' course experience has been given due importance in the higher education sector as educators realize that effective teaching matters greatly. This paper discusses the use of student journals as a means of collecting data on the overall effectiveness of teaching in a study programme. Students in M.Phil. Class English Linguistics at the National University of Modern Languages were observed for the whole session. Student's journals provided the record of their reflections and teaching-learning experience in one semester. I obtained useful evaluative data from the student journals regarding students' perceptions of the course content, instruction, workload and assessment. The results showed that students value effective feedback and clear expectations from course teachers. The use of student journals as a course evaluation technique provides a longitudinal and insightful perspective of students' perceptions of their teaching-learning context.

Keywords/Terms: Journal, Evaluation, Writing

Introduction

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The purpose of this study is to provide an introductory overview of the nature of Journals assessment, showing examples, describing practical details, and offering suggestions for implementation for my colleagues. Being a teacher for several years, I have observed my students in testing and non testing situation, and I have noticed that students don't go for creative writing and they like stereotype classroom study, based on lectures and End term examination on the basis of rote learning. This situation was very painful for me I wanted to assess my students throughout the course, so my daughter Sophia kindled an idea of introducing journal in my M.Phil. Class. I also liked this idea and I was also sure that my students would also appreciate it, and for me these journal can work as form of assessment that can provide a more authentic, student-teacher experience and growth-oriented interactions between me and my students than tests and final assignments.

I have used Journals in a variety of instructional contexts, including class room record or the minutes of classroom proceedings. I have discovered many benefits of using Journals in my M.Phil class for ongoing assessment of my students. Students are sometimes skeptical at first about the whole idea of Journals. They often don't know what to do, and wonder about the time involved. Some are unused to self-evaluation, and are uncomfortable with the decision-making process required. Some find it difficult to complete products that are not "handed in" as an "assignment" for an immediate assessment by an external authority. I tried to provide supportive help, suggestions when asked, and feedback to early efforts as much as possible.

Anatomy of Journal

A Journal is a kind of personal diary assembled by the learner, containing samples of the learner's work collected over a short period of time such as during one particular course of instruction, or a longer period such as a year of a student's students study programme. The kinds of items will reflect the nature of the course content. Journals may contain sketches, photographs, and different diagrams in various stages of completion. A Journal describes different personality aspects of the learner's workplace situation, a classroom's inventory, the personal written reflections completed at various points, a plan for implementing a new program, an analysis of a particular study. Any of the following items are commonly collected in learner Journals:

1. Learners' formal written papers, articles, descriptions, problem solutions.
2. Assessment inventories (such as personality or learning style inventories)
3. Photographs or drawings of learner-created products, artwork
4. Record of Power Point Presentations
5. Learner journal, record of the classroom proceedings
6. Written reports, learner performance by teachers
7. Quiz Results /Record
8. Written observations of Classroom proceedings
9. Classroom Environment
10. Caricature of unwanted class fellow or a Teacher

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11. Catharsis

Theoretical Background

Journaling offers a context for making internal mental dialogue explicit. It involves self-analysis and reflection on events, discussions and ideas. This process can be structured or free flowing, individual or shared, and can often deal with metacognitive issues as well as content (Andrusyszyn & Davie, 1997). Kerka (1996) believes that journaling can “provide tangible evidence of mental processes.” Journals can aid in the ‘making of meaning’ through allowing the connection of past to current experiences. Because journaling is a combination of writing and reflection, it is a tool that is suited for both instructional and assessment purposes in online learning environments (Hansen, 2005). Connell (2000) examined two graduate courses in which learning journals were used.

Students reported that learning journals promoted a deeper level of understanding of both the course content and of their own thinking and understanding. This deeper level has also been observed in student online journals used in other computer conferencing environments (e.g., Heflich & Putney, 2001). Journaling involves self-analysis and reflection on events or discussions (Andrusyszyn & Davie, 1997). Self-analysis is a significant focus in graduate studies because an important part of graduate learning involves the development of epistemic cognition.

Purpose of Journals

Journals are used and written in different ways according to the instructional purpose. Clark (1993) describes Journals used extensively to assess students’ basic skills, knowledge, and values that are difficult to evaluate: integration, critical thinking, analysis of issues, values clarification, multicultural issues, etc.

I chose a limited number of items to avoid voluminous folders to be assessed, and because I felt that much information could be learned from relatively few items. Students submitted proper journals on weekly basis. Regularly scheduled reviews of the Journals between me and student took place at key points in the student’s academic record. The process of developing Journals required discussion with the Dean of the programme and agreement to develop a statement of what learners were to learn.

A meeting in the form of group discussion with my students was held in the first class. I explained to students the purpose of journal writing, how it could fit into general classroom situation and how it could help in achieving the broad goals of the M.Phil. programme and my expectations from students. I modified my syllabus and developed scoring protocols with descriptors, and went on to explore the use of Journals. After the second week of my class, students submitted their journals to demonstrate specified competencies such as creative ability and writing skills. The record of journal in relation

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to the total work was calculated using dates. I reviewed Journals together with my students in a classroom setting.

The Application of Journals

Here are some questions for my colleagues to follow when beginning to use Journals:

- What is to be collected, by whom, and when?
- What is the purpose of Journals?
- How are distinct items to be evaluated fairly and with reasonable validity?
- How can you prepare and modify your initial plans as you and the students explore possibilities and impossibilities of using Journals?
- How can you limit the number of products required in a Journal?
- How can you use Journals in conjunction with other methods of assessment: presentations, quizzes, and formally accredited assignments?

Practical Suggestions for Using Journals

Introducing Journals to learners

Experienced Journals-users suggest that you give as much help to learners up front as possible. Be as clear as you can about what things can go in a Journal, being careful to balance your directions with the essential theme of learners' freedom to create and to choose from their creations. If possible, show samples.

Share with learners

The long terms and specific benefits of the Journals approach is sharing your thoughts. Help learners know what to expect in the Journals process. Feelings of ambiguity and a sense of unclear goals are natural, and everyone needs to be open to the trial-and-learn process of writing Journals. Show them your own intent to adapt your expectations as the Journals progress.

Communicate to learners

The best part is to communicate to learners your general expectations for the Journals contents, then work with them throughout the period of collecting their work. Learners

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need lots of help focusing and selecting, especially if they are unused to the Journals method of assessment. Most simply need confirmation that the items they are creating and selecting for their Journals do indeed meet whatever might be your minimum expectations. You can help by providing time for learners to share their Journals with one another and talk together about the process of collecting items.

Arrange discussions with learners

Sometimes discussion develops harmony between teacher and learner, one elaborate discussion about journals mid-way through the program and the second at the end of the program. The teacher discusses the samples of work chosen from the journals and describes an assessment of her evaluation process

Grading the journals

It is very difficult to grade each item in the Journals especially in the large class, and then add up the marks for a final grade. Different program contents dictate different needs for items in the Journals. First, items in one student's Journals often differ in kind and number from items in another Journal so an item-by-item grading process will be counter-productive. Bantus (1994) agrees in his Instructional Module that grading process can be very time-consuming. But the Journal is to demonstrate overall growth in learning. Item-by-item grading assesses early items against the same sorts of external criteria used to measure final items. Eagleton (2002) introduced a holistic mark blending different aspects of the Journals process: grading of particular items in the Journals (perhaps the learners' choice of the best), kinds of learning growth demonstrated, evidence of the learners' insight and self-assessment of their own learning process as evidenced in the conferences, and balance and range of skills represented in the Journals items. Tamolyn, H (2002) mentioned the role of some institutions and, instructors who meet to work out general guidelines for the contents and assessment criteria of student Journals. These instructors work on specific details and develop to grade Journals of learners in a professional training program. Rosetti (2005) emphasized on teacher evaluation as pedagogic opportunity role of the teacher. Proper Feedback throughout the process of collecting items for Journals. She asserts that it is essential to help learners focus and clarify the purpose of the Journals in their own learning. I also believe that either orally or in writing we should provide learners with thoughtful responses to their assembled Journals and the self-evaluation evident in their rationalizations for items chosen.

Benefits of Using Journals

Learners can monitor their own growth over time. They work well to follow a student through a program from course to course and year to year, providing continuity, integration, and a record of overall progress. Journals involve learners directly in their own learning and evaluation. When learners can exercise more control over the kinds of

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learning products that are evaluated, their sense of responsibility and ownership for the learning increases. The act of creating a Journal also helps move learners towards self-evaluation. It shows the process of learning, not just the outcomes. Samples are collected at various periods throughout the learning process, thus reflecting the learners' incremental stages of development. The transitions and growth that become apparent are fascinating for both learner and teacher. Learners find out more about their own learning process. Besides, people's motivation for following through any project like learning usually increases when they can see visible evidence of their progress accumulating. One of the most common reports from instructors using Journals is the powerful effect they have on student self-esteem.

The accumulated folder of concrete, personal accomplishments is visible proof to students of their own ability and mastery of the new learning. We can assess our students holistically. They contain diverse samples of work that demonstrate a variety of interconnected learner knowledge and skills. Thus Journals reflect more authentically the capability and achievements of learners. Learners must reflect on their learning, evaluate their own learning products, make selections representing their own competencies and rationalize their choices.

This process is a powerful way to raise student's awareness of the learning process. As the Journal grows, its very existence begins to shape the learner's goals. Meanwhile the student's insights about the learning process, revealed through the selection and reflection involved in assembling the Journals continue to shape the student's approaches to learning experiences and assignments. Journals are useful for learners seeking employment.

The materials in a Journal can be easily translated into a resume. Some employers now require applicants to provide Journals of their work. Journals are not useful for students only, they provide an opportunity to work together to develop criteria and scoring tools, agree on items for inclusion, and make changes to programs and instruction based on Journals results. Developing a Journals approach requires teacher to reexamine instructional goals and communicate these clearly to one another and to students. Because Journals reach across courses, they promote collaborative teaching.

The following five strategies can help maximize the effectiveness of Journals in language class

- elaborate the purpose of the Journals
- make them aware of self-reflection
- teach them the art of reviewing
- teach them the purpose of peer evaluation
- Make them comfortable with creative writing

Potential Concerns in Using Journals

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Journals assume that learning unfolds in different ways, with different outcomes, for each learner. Journals allow learners to reveal skills, creative abilities and understandings that are unique, and possibly not anticipated by the instructor. In programs and courses where certain performance standards must be pre-determined and met exactly, Journals should be supplemented with other kinds of assessment tools (such as testing and students demonstration of a particular skill).

Some instructors wonder how a Journal can be a valid or reliable measure of learner achievement. Constructs like "validity" and "reliability" assume that learning outcomes should be pre-determined and measurable against an external standard. The learner may choose samples of work that reflect different outcomes and performance standards than what have been pre-determined for the learner to achieve. The learner's own creative products reflecting a particular direction of learning may be admirable, but not always helpful indicators of the extent to which the learner has achieved the minimal standards.

Journals are often time-consuming for teachers to evaluate. This issue cannot be considered outside of context. Some teachers spend far more time writing comments on learners' final essays than they would in grading a Journal of products holistically. Some instructors find that time spent conferencing with students about their Journals is valuable instructional time, and cannot be considered as "extra" marking time.

Learning how to use any unfamiliar assessment approach will be, in the beginning, more time-consuming than customary approaches .Journals can provide a history of learning and growth, a structured record of learner accomplishment, a vehicle to engage learners in active reflection on their experience, a way to develop self-evaluation habits and skill, as well as a method for assessing progress. Building a Journal involves point-in-time performance assessment. The construction of a Journal allows both the students and the instructor to assess transitional change as well as cumulative learning. The following six strategies can help maximize the effectiveness of Journals use to evaluate students in your program:

- define the purpose of the Journals
- teach the students to self-reflect
- structure Journals reviews by the students
- make time for peer evaluation
- share Journals with students regularly
- give them time to become comfortable with Journals

Conclusion

Journal writing is a kind of assessment that has been described as "authentic", grounded in activities connected with learners' everyday problems, insights, and practical dilemmas. Journals demand learner responsibility in the process of creating, reflecting on and evaluating learning, and Journals focus on the learning process as well as its

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outcomes. Creating a Journal requires new skills in selection, articulation and design, and a favorable attitude towards critical reflection and self-analysis. While learners usually can develop these skills during the process itself of building a Journals, they often need assistance and patient understanding from course instructors as they work through the process. Journals assessment, when planned and implemented thoughtfully, can promote learners' personal and educational development, strengthen connections between course material and its application, and provide a focus for meaningful speech acts between teachers and students.

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APPENDIX

| Journal Assessment | | |
|--|------------------|----------------------|
| Name _____ Date _____ | | |
| 1=Contingent 2=Narrow 3=Ample 4=Competent 5=Proficient | | |
| Preparation of Journal | 1 2 3 4 5 | Grading _____ |
| Journal is complete - contains all required material | | |
| Items are appropriately dated, identified, organized | | |
| Journal contains Table of Contents | | |
| Overall presentation shows care and thought | | |
| Comments: | | |
| | | |
| Documentation of Growth | 1 2 3 4 5 | Grading _____ |
| Work samples reflect growth in particular areas | | |
| Journal items written thoughtfully and purposefully | | |
| Journal demonstrates achievement in significant outcome areas of knowledge, skill, and attitudes | | |

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| | | |
|--|------------------|------------------------|
| Journal organization and presentation demonstrates awareness of identified audience needs | | |
| Comments: | | |
| Evaluation of Selected Item(s) | 1 2 3 4 5 | Weighting _____ |
| Overall quality | | |
| Thoughtfulness: detail, clarity, originality, development | | |
| Appropriateness of form for message and audience | | |
| Relationship of form and content | | |
| Use of details in presentation to enhance . . . (meaning, audience appeal, mood, design, unity, emphasis, voice, clarity, or whatever criteria are relevant to the item) | | |
| Comments: | | |
| Quality of Reflections/Self Evaluation demonstrated at closing conference | 1 2 3 4 5 | Grading _____ |
| Comments examine products as well as learning processes, strategies | | |
| Comments show evidence of revisiting specific work samples | | |
| Comments show self-awareness and insight into behavior, attitudes, values, and beliefs | | |
| Comments identify areas for further improvement and set directions for action and learning | | |
| Comments: | | |

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