INTERNATIONAL LITERACY ASSOCIATION

Reflective Journaling: A Portal Into the Virtues of Daily Writing

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Relying on observations from 25 years of classroom writing and using the work of experts who extol the virtues of journaling, I offer a framework for implementing daily journal writing in a fifth-grade classroom.

Writing in the Classroom

Often, in grades 2–6, writing instruction tends to focus on essay preparation for state tests. Troia and Graham (2016), in a teacher survey, discovered that "many surveyed felt the new writing and language standards for Common Core are too numerous to cover, omit key aspects of writing development, and may be inappropriate for struggling writers" (p. 1719). Additionally, Ohle (2013) stated that teachers often feel overburdened by implementing new curriculum policy and, as a result, were less likely to adopt new curricular practices.

Consequently, it came as no surprise that some teachers in my elementary school, when asked how much time they devoted to daily journaling, replied, almost uniformly, "We have so much on our plate. Who has the time for one more thing?" Our district's communication arts curriculum, Journeys (Anderson et al., 2017), has excellent writing lessons, including narrative and expository response-based practices, but it does not include a purely personal journaling component. As a result, it came to my attention that some teachers may struggle with implementing student-centered writing practices such as journaling.

A Panacea for the Writing Blues

Journaling is an exercise that is direct, productive, and profound in its use. It is easy to start, habit-forming, and beneficial, capable of elevating your classroom writing practice and, furthermore, building a community of writers simply through its daily practice.

Journaling as Self-Therapy

One primary, significant benefit of journaling involves a kind of self-therapy (Dunlap, 2006; Page & Clarke, 2014). Journaling captures a moment or portrays an experience; it provides a means to get in touch with our emotions and make sense of our feelings. Furthermore, journals can provide useful insights into student beliefs, values, and attitudes.

In a seminal study, Hiemstra (2001) told us, "As early as 1965, psychologist Ira Progoff and his colleagues began seeing the value of personal journals in enhancing growth and learning" (p. 19). It makes us feel better to journal, bolstering our personality without pointing out issues or assuming a diagnostic stance. The act of journaling becomes a form of self-therapy that assists with personal growth and development, intuition and self-expression, problem solving, stress reduction, health benefits, reflection, and critical thinking (Hiemstra, 2001). Additionally, Bromley and Powell (1999) explained that journal writing motivates students while revealing aspects of a student's personality that might otherwise remain invisible.

Students look forward to journaling and anticipate sharing their experiences. They transition from initially composing far-fetched or emotionally flat pieces to later compositions that are powerful because "they are able to relate what they write to their own lives and interests, they realize how new learning arises from everyday experiences" (Curtis, 2013, p. 375).

Journaling as the Architect of Community

In my classroom, as students journal and share, their writings reveal poignant images, challenges, and shared experiences. These narratives feed a growing

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sense of community and remain a primary benefit of journaling.

Vignette 1: Tori. We had been journaling for about 10 minutes when Tori's hand shot up. "Can I share?" she asked excitedly. "Sure," I replied. Tori (all student names are pseudonyms) stood, pushed her chair back, and walked quickly to the front of the room. Taking her place behind our podium, she cleared her voice and began to read from her journal. "I had a tough time falling asleep last night," she began. "My parents were fighting… again, and the yelling kept me up. After a while, the shouting stopped and I was scared. I felt alone, I—."

Sean, a student sitting nearby in a cluster of four desks, shouted out, interrupting Tori's read-aloud: "I know how you feel! I've been there." The class stopped journaling and as we put our pencils down, a new discussion began, one centered on student feelings and common experiences.

Page and Clarke (2014) stated,

> Although writing is a potential difficulty, none of the teachers had any complaints from their students. Many suggested that students felt valued and better cared for because their teacher was interested in hearing about and responding to their feelings, beliefs and attitudes. (p. 7)

This unexpected consequence proved useful in bolstering relationships with my students. Journaling provides a platform for students to dialogue about their lives and their families, all while communicating information to their teacher (McGough, 2012).

Interestingly, as students became self-aware through the daily process of journaling, they also grew more empathetic. Learning about themselves and others created a bond that was palpable. What better way to build community than through the stories of our lives, each unique yet sometimes remarkably similar?

Journaling as Motivator

Another benefit of journaling involved the synchronous intertwining of writing improvement and the motivation to write. At first, I was astonished at how quickly my fifth graders took to the idea of daily journaling without any prompts or instructions. Bromley and Powell (1999) explained that "journals motivate otherwise unmotivated students to read and write… [and to gain] practice in writing on a topic or theme" (p. 112). Journaling has a positive impact on students' self-efficacy and locus of control, important psychological benefits above and beyond its expected social, academic, and cognitive outcomes (Fritson, 2008).

PAUSE AND PONDER

- Do you consider yourself a writer? Why or why not?
- Reflect on writing practice in your classroom. What works, and what does not?
- Do you think journaling might increase your and your students' motivation to write?
- What additional benefits might journaling offer your students?
- Do you believe that journaling promotes personal growth, self-expression, and stronger classroom bonds? Why or why not?

Journaling, by its very nature, encourages creativity through sharing. Students and teachers discover and discuss how to compose text that stimulates emotions. Our writing becomes the classroom's über-text, prose to share and imitate. This condition of journal writing, with its emphasis on the creative aspects of personal expression, motivates students to write more, and by writing more, they become better writers.

Vignette 2: Tony and Tyrese. Tony was laughing as he journaled. Some students looked up, trying to figure out what was so funny. After about six minutes, we stopped writing and Tony raised his hand, asking if he could share.

"In the lunchroom yesterday," Tony started, "I was eating the main platter, spaghetti, and Carter said something really funny and I inhaled a piece of spaghetti and it shot out my nose and…." The class erupted into laughter, and Tyrese interjected that he had a funnier story and couldn't wait to journal tomorrow.

I addressed the class: "Can I change my story? I've got a story that will get a bigger laugh than Tony's. Of course, follow your thoughts and write what matters to you." "I can't wait to write this down," Tyrese replied with a hint of mischief in his voice.

A Writer Writes

At first, my students do not consider themselves writers: Writers publish and are paid. I suggest that writers are simply people who write. A musician plays music, a basketball player plays basketball, and a writer writes. Daily journaling affirms our writer status.

So, then, if a writer writes, what constitutes good practice? Excellent writing practices include the following:

- Daily writing
- Understanding that the more you write, the better you will get at it
- Writing about what interests you; writing for yourself
- Making journaling a habit
- Quieting your negative inner critic and writing without worrying about self-evaluation (Edelstein, 1999; Raab, 2007; Yolen, 2006)

Embracing these principles, the students and I forge ahead. Over time, this routine becomes our new norm, one where habit trumps resistance and daily journaling leads to self-identification as a writer.

Journaling in the Classroom: A Suggested Framework

Addressing Technology

Motivating students to write with a pencil in the digital age may appear to be paradoxical, but there are reasons why I choose handwriting over typing. There is no doubt that a contemporary approach to using journals in the classroom should incorporate technology. For example, blogging and online journals engage students, bolster reflective learning, enhance experiential learning, create a community of writers, and provide multimodal opportunities for self-expression (Karchmer-Klein & Shinas, 2012; Lacina & Griffith, 2012; Zawilinski, 2009).

Google Classroom, for example, includes Google Docs, a multifaceted web-based word processor that does not require the student to save, allows multiple writers to edit a document simultaneously, and can be revised in real time from any internet browser (Technology for Teachers and Students, 2018). However, typing is a learned skill that many of my fifth graders are not yet proficient in applying. It has been my experience that this slows down their composing and fractures their reflective flow, which makes it more difficult to fluidly capture and express a moment. Handwriting works when a student describes in detail the power she feels in her pencil when she writes (Niebling, 2006). Research has shown that longhand composing is more beneficial than typing for text-related learning, similar to image-related learning (Luo, Kiewra, Flanigan, & Peteranetz, 2018), and cognitive development (Saner, 2014).

Additionally, not all districts have a one-to-one initiative with technology. Shared computer schedules can make it difficult to maintain a journaling routine. Furthermore, because of the digital divide, some students do not have access to technology at home. As a result of the prior constraints, my class's journaling routine is most effective when we handwrite.

The First Day of School

On day 1, when students enter the classroom, have them store their backpacks and find their seats. Then declare, "We are going to journal for one minute." Tell the students that when they write, you will be writing, too. "I'm a writer," you can state, "and I want to write with you. Write whatever you like. Just follow your thoughts." Set a timer for one minute and begin. Do not provide any further instruction. Share afterward, then ask if anyone else wants to share. Respectfully decline to answer questions about how to journal.

Day 2: No Prompts

On day 2, announce that journaling is prompt-free and ungraded. Later, you can explain, we will learn to edit and revise our text. Direct the students to plumb their experiences for a story and silence their inner critic. If they persist in asking what they should write about, tell them to recall something memorable. Do not worry that what you write is no good; save those self-critical thoughts for later (Lamott, 1994). Tell your students to read the world, to go back 24 hours and begin to record the details of their day, and most important, let everyone know that you start your day with writing. Explain that when students write, they do not find it as difficult to choose topics (Graves, 1994). On day 2, write for two minutes. Then, share.

Day 3: Prompts

If students need prompting, offer these suggestions:

- Describe your morning.
- Detail last night's activities.
- Recount a story from the lunchroom.

Tell students to follow their thoughts as they write. As a last resort, suggest writing "I don't know what to write about" until they find a topic or the timer sounds at three minutes.

This last piece of advice at least provides an exercise for one's hand muscles while eliciting a chuckle from fellow classmates. It is funny, although short-lived. Someone will eventually read something extraordinary, motivating the class to up their ante. Sharing a poignant piece about a lost pet, a comedic take on lunch, or perhaps an action piece on sharing the bathtub encourages students to emulate what they hear. Imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

Sharing

After writing, we share. At first, shyness masks student confidence, so I, alone, read aloud. Eventually, though, almost everyone wants to share. When students read, they often improvise with their text, adding words, deleting text, moving phrases, or substituting ideas. Through sharing, students are learning how to revise, edit, and add to their writing. Furthermore, it is significant that reading becomes a central component of our writing routine.

To give everyone an opportunity to share, I create a spreadsheet of readers' names and date of sharing. I make note of pieces I enjoy or want to discuss. I allow a few students to read daily, but over a week, I try to include everyone. If someone is shy about participating, I will meet with them privately and discuss their piece. Sometimes this shyness slowly dissipates, but, if it does not, they may contribute privately.

I peruse each student's journal weekly, and if something worries me, I act on it. You will learn a great deal about your students and their families through this activity; it is imperative to monitor carefully for disturbing passages.

12-Minute Rule

Although you start journaling for one minute, this increases daily until you reach 12 minutes. Journal first thing in the morning, after lunch count and attendance. If there is a special, journal afterward. If you teach math in the morning, journal in the afternoon before communication arts. For me, 12 minutes is a magic number where writing begins to flow; less than that and I am still warming up. By the 12-minute mark, my mind settles, I engage. When the timer sounds, I often feel genuinely startled and reluctant to stop.

You will need to find your own stop time, though, as will your students. The time you spend journaling is your decision. The important aspect is the daily routine that you develop.

Journal Routinely

Cisero (2006) explained that journaling improves course performance, and Raab (2007) told us that "a journal can be a veritable treasure chest of thoughts and anecdotes. It is not only a place to collect ideas, though, but a place to practice writing and overcome writer's block" (p. 2). Graves (1994) emphasized having students write each day: "If students miss a day or don't know when they will write again, they are losing a sense of structure and predictability" (p. 111). Write daily to create a habit.

Benefits

I adapted the following list from the critically important work of Ponsot and Deen (1982), who focused on writing instruction in the classroom. Writing, they maintained, is a significant academic activity. I took the liberty of replacing the word *writing* with *journaling*, a crucial semantic modification that underscores the necessity for its praxis.

- Practice journaling without lecture or explanation.
- The best way to make something easy is to make it a habit.
- Journaling perfects itself through use; for example, a baby learns to walk by walking. So it is for journaling.
- Journaling cannot, and should not, be measured.
- Daily, prolific journaling generates and sustains writing.
- Journaling is energizing, pleasureful, and self-evidently constructive.

Vignette 3: Shea. A quiet, shy student, Shea raised her hand in the middle of journaling one day close to the end of another school year. I was surprised because she usually did not like to speak in front of other students, and if she needed something, she would signal to me quietly and I would give her my attention by standing close to her and then listening to her request. Today, though, she appeared unusually animated, her hand pierced the air with jabbing motions, and it was clear that she had something she needed to say.

"Shea?" I called out, a bit hesitantly. "I love journaling!" she exclaimed. "My mom bought me a diary, and I've been writing every night before I go to bed. I love it, journaling that is, more than art or music. It's my favorite subject." She stopped abruptly, as if the winds had suddenly left her sails. There was a moment of silence, it hung there, just for a second, and then the class erupted into applause. Shea blushed a deep red and looked down at her sneakers. I smiled widely. "Why do you like it so much?" I asked. She spoke up without a moment's hesitation. "It's fun, it's easy, there are no grades, I love hearing everyone's stories, and this year I learned that I love to write," she gushed.

Final Thoughts

Start journaling today. I understand that adding one more activity to an overcrowded curriculum is stressful. Yet, when it comes to writing, the benefits of a writing-rich classroom outweigh any other considerations.

Write every day, share routinely, allow time for writers to pay attention to their own and their colleagues' writing, and let writers draw inferences from the observations they hear and make. Although teaching writing may be a more complex act than simply journaling, nonetheless, journaling can serve admirably as the beating heart that pumps life into the body of your writing workshops.

TAKE ACTION!

1. Discuss with other teachers how, or whether, they use journals in the classroom. Explore why they do or do not.
2. Analyze the benefits suggested in this article as a natural byproduct of journaling. Can you think of any other benefits journaling has to offer?
3. Create a schedule to include journaling in your daily lesson planning. When will you do it? How will you share in your classroom?
4. Organize teacher meetings to see if anyone else in your building is interested in journaling in the classroom. Share your experiences and your lesson plans.

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MORE TO EXPLORE

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