ORIGINAL ARTICLE

# TO WHAT EXTENT DO REFLECTIVE LEARNING JOURNALS ENABLE EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATORS TO HEAR, LISTEN TO AND ACT ON THE 'LEARNER VOICE'?

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## ABSTRACT

*As part of a wide-ranging project in which experiential education was introduced into the learning and teaching methodology of a private higher-education college in London, two-way (student and teacher) learning journals were incorporated into a first year undergraduate law module. The study concludes that learning journals are extremely effective for educators seeking to understand the views of their students and that the views espoused within the journals are wide-ranging, beyond merely academic views. Additionally, the study shows the high levels of engagement through the use of learning journals and the perceived effects upon student learning within an experiential context.*

*Keywords: Education, teaching methodology, higher education, journal etc.*

## INTRODUCTION

Within a private, higher education establishment in London, UK, the researcher undertook a mixed methods action research project within a level 4 undergraduate law module in order to further understand the reflective aspect which falls within experiential education. It is held that experiential learning ought to pass through distinct stages; initially, we have the concrete experience which is then followed by a period of individual (and often group) reflection, abstract conceptualisation and experimentation (Kolb, 1984).

The researcher sought to close the experiential education loop by offering time and space for students to reflect on their learning. One method of student reflection can be demonstrated through learning journals, where students make regular written entries as they engage with course content. The purpose of this activity is to deepen understanding and foster thinking

(Williams & Wessel 2004), hence the introduction of learning journals into the researcher's class.

## Methods

The study employed a mixed methods approach which combines a thematic analysis of student reflections within two-way student-teacher learning journals. This used Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of analysis. Additionally, a quantitative, modal analysis of a fixed question questionnaire was employed.

### A Thematic Analysis

Each student was handed small notebook on their first lesson. It was explained that time will be set aside at the end of every seminar and lecture in which they should reflect on what has happened in the lesson, what they have learnt, how they feel and any other points they may wish to make. Care was taken to explain that the learning journals are for them to write whatever they wished, that no one piece of reflection is more valid than another and that they may write freely about any matter they chose. The researcher concurs with Walker (1985) who encouraged some rules for students keeping the portfolio, which was stated in the verbal briefing to the students. They can be summarised as follows;

1) Be personal – write the learning journal in your own way.
2) Be honest and frank.
3) Be positive about using it.
4) Just write – let it flow.
5) Symbols, pictures and diagrams are all acceptable – we express ourselves in different ways.
6) Underline, circle and highlight. Reflect on your reflection.
7) Be spontaneous, say what you feel and don't feel guilty about it.
8) Focus on the things that are important to you (so you keep the learning journal manageable).
9) Try new things, don't be rigid.
10) Stick at it.
11) Record the experiences as soon as possible after the event.
12) Have a regular, fixed time to reflect.
13) Date your entries

Following their entries, the journals were submitted to the teacher-researcher, which meant they were read once a week. The teacher-researcher aimed to respond to them each and every week, though tight scheduling and workloads meant this did not happen on two occasions. Upon completion of the term the learning journals were thematically analysed to look for themes of entry.

**A Quantitative Modal Analysis Questionnaire**

Students were asked eight simple questions. Questions 1-4 collected quantitative data, which can be measured. The most appropriate way of measuring this data is through a modal analysis, due to the responses being ordinal as opposed to genuinely interval (it is non-dichotomous, as the opinions being measured consist of a spectrum of values - four). Questions 5-8 collected qualitative data, which asked students to comment on areas such as their perceived levels of engagement and learning.

**Literature Review**

**What is Reflection?**

*'Reflection is as much a state of mind as it is a set of activities, with the end process being not so much resolution of an experience but rather a better understanding of it.'* Hart, 1990

As educators, it is crucial that we hear and listen to the learner voice. To do this we must allow our students the opportunity to talk and be heard – particularly difficult when big classes mean a lack of natural two-way communication. Teachers need to bridge this gap and of course, there are numerous methods in which this can be facilitated in order for us to engage the learners and raise the quality of their learning experience and a plethora of student response systems have been found to increase this (Heaslip et. al. 2013). It also has the potential to bring about individual and social empowerment (Masschelein, 1991).

Kolb's claim that learners should be able to involve themselves fully, openly and without bias in new experiences is one driver behind this research essay. He believed experiential education in its fullest form (with reflection) moves the learner from a state of defensiveness, dependence (on the teacher) and reaction to a state of self-actualisation, independence and self-direction' (1984).

Experiential learning is more than a delivery of information to students. It is a more thorough learning experience, in which students become active thinkers and problem solvers. Too often, academic settings pressure students to "defend their knowledge rather than exhibit their thinking" (Clinchy 1995), but it is our challenge to find ways to invite our students into the process of learning. (Connor-Greene 2000). This research is an exploration into the successes, benefits and limitations involved in reflective learning journals.

It is important to understand what is meant by the term 'reflection' and indeed what exactly a 'learning journal' is. Schon, in his oft-cited work of 1987, stated that he believed reflection leads to change, which ultimately (providing the change is beneficial) is one of the aims of an educator. His work on reflection is highly important as he brought the subject to the attention of a wide range of professionals. In particular, he categorised reflection into two areas; reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. The former is the process whereby a practitioner (in this case the students) think about what they're doing whilst they're actually doing it. They will draw on previous experiences and knowledge whilst undertaking an activity and reflect, in that moment, in order to best achieve the desired outcome. This differs from reflection-on-action, where the practitioner reflects after the event; reviewing the experience had, making sense of it, trying to learn from it etc. In practice, the two should interrelate in order for practitioners to be constantly reflecting and improving/developing their performance and outcomes.

They may also re-assess and change future goals in light of the reflection – particularly if they have achieved the original goal (something known as single-loop learning (Argyris & Schon 1978)) In even more advanced situations, the practitioner may become involved in double-loop learning, where they not only detect and correct earlier errors but use them to modify their norms and objectives – something that could lead to them instigating change with the teacher regarding the learning experience, teaching methods and course content. Students who engage with what they're studying tend to understand it more, learn more, remember more, enjoy it more and be more able to appreciate the relevance of what they have learned than students who passively listen. (Park 2003)

Boud et. all (1985) stated that reflection moves through three key stages:
  o Returning to experience
  o Attending to feelings

o Re-evaluating experience

This model, in combination with Gibbs reflective cycle (1988) formed the basis for a 'suggested reflective questions' document, which was distributed to students prior to their first reflective experience.

Learning Journals fall under a variety of guises – personal journals, student journals, learning logs to name but a few, and many have different aims. Thorpe (2004) defined them as 'written documents that students create as they think about various concepts, events, or interactions over a period of time for the purposes of gaining insights into self-awareness and learning.' This definition allows for a more discretionary form of reflection. The aims behind the learning journals used within this study was simply to allow the students to have a voice (and for them to be able to air this during a reflective period), to understand what that voice was and then to make adjustments and improvements to my teaching and classroom based on these.

It is also the case that reflection aids the skills necessary to be a competent law student in particular, with Oglivy (1996) highlighting this. He stated that the use of learning journals improve critical thinking and problem-solving skills, raise self-awareness, promote assessment skills, allow the release (through the sharing of) stress and provides student feedback to the educator. This final point is of particular interest to the researcher as it can be argued that it creates a feedback loop whereby both parties are able to speak openly and honestly.

**How does Reflection Work?**

*'Learning journals help students hone their ability to reflect. Reflection is the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through the development of inferences.' Daudelin (1996)*

Put simply, reflective learning journals provide a place for students to record basic observations of what is happening to them and around them. Any entry can be valid, proving it is personal, meaningful and honest. Cisero (2006) believes that journal writing can only be effective in improving course performance if students make the effort to engage in reflective thinking but this is debateable. It can be argued that teachers should cherish each and every journal entry as they are so useful and tell us so much about student views, moods, feelings and concerns. Timely, regular feedback is critical to the success of the journals and the

teacher should read everything that is written (Korgel 2002). This is important as it means important comments can be responded to, which, in turn, will show the students that the teacher cares about what they are writing and therefore, them. It has the knock-on effect of building rapport with the individuals and, crucially, trust. Students must believe that the journal is a two-way process, a means of dialogue and communication and of benefit. This will encourage them to write openly.

Of course, learning journals are introduced and used in a variety of ways. Hubbs and Brand (2010) recommend giving the students guidance on what to write and how to write their entries, whilst Dyment and O'Connell (2010) feel it necessary to frame the purpose. This followed the work of Moon (2006) who believed if students do not have a clear understanding of the purpose and expectation of their journaling task they might not know what is expected of them.

 *'Through the writing of reflective journals most students arrive at a position where they are able to reflect more deeply. This deep reflection allows them to develop a better understanding of the subject area...it enables students to become capable, autonomous and competent learners.' (*Rue et al, 2013).


## METHODOLOGY


The study employs an action research methodology. It does not seek to generalise results beyond the specific narrow context and setting though it does offer a high level of internal validity due to it being undertaken by an insider-researcher. Results are not transferable to other settings, nor to other practitioners as the study cannot be replicated or wholly validated Three reasons have been stated by Carr and Kemmis (1986) for undertaking action research; firstly, to improve practice; secondly, to allow practitioners an opportunity to explore and understand their practice; and thirdly, to improve the situation in which the specific practice takes place. These were important drivers for this study and the emergent and practical nature of the study can appropriate scope for an action research approach (Gall et. al, 2007).

Action research can be designed to fit to the needs of a teacher-researcher and, also, to the schedule of the curriculum within their setting (Burke, 2012). This thereby allows for interventions and actions to be undertaken by the researcher when most appropriate and convenient. This was, for example, the case with regards to the implementation of the learning journals within the classroom but also to the writing of feedback within the journals themselves.

An accessible population of students were sought as participants through a purposive sampling approach. This resulted in one seminar group of 35 students being invited to participate.

## ETHICS

The students whom were enrolled onto the module were given verbal and written briefings initially. They received participant information sheets which explained the research study and ensured anonymity. Additionally, an opt-in form was created so as to effectively ameliorate against the power that the researcher, as an insider-researcher and teacher, may have. Only the learning journal comments and questionnaire responses from students who opted in were considered for the research study, but in order to ensure a fair and equal learning experience for all students, all members of the seminar group were taught using the learning journal approach.

## RESULTS

The reflective period within experiential education is crucial. Not only does it give students an opportunity to embed their learning, through the re-iteration of what they have been taught, in their own words. But, it also teaches them to think about what teaching styles they like or respond to and to ask further questions on the learning objectives they have not understood. It gives them an arena to air their voice which has an array of positive connotations both for them and for the teacher.

Teachers are able to use feedback to aid future course design as students will frequently comment on aspects of the course they feel are interesting or boring or difficult to grasp. One example of this arose when several students commented upon a short (8 minute) video lecture they had been shown within class. On the whole, they found the video unengaging (despite the belief of the teacher-researcher that it contained important knowledge they needed to assimilate). The result was that the teacher-researcher removed this video from the session in question and replaced it with their own verbal interpretation of the information - a minor example of learning journals aiding course design.

Learning journals build, quickly and effectively on the student-teacher relationship as teachers are able to get to know their students as more than just faces in the classroom (Spalding & Wilson, 2002). This is particularly effective if good rapport is developed in the

classroom environment too, and also if authentic and meaningful feedback is forthcoming. This takes time for a teacher to complete but the benefits are truly worthwhile.

Students should be able to say whatever they wish in the journals. In fact, the teacher-researcher repeatedly urged them to do so. The confidence to speak freely, to criticise their teacher and teaching methods, the environment or the students around them gave insights as to what areas needed to be dealt with and this feedback gives us data that can be far more meaningful than that which is collected during end-of-course evaluations due to the fact that the journals relate to each stage of the curriculum and level of student learning as and when it happens (Haigh 2001).

**Thematic analysis**

**Reflective learning journals – was the learner voice heard?**

The answer to this, simply, is a resounding yes. The researcher found the learning journals gave the students a wonderful opportunity to give feedback (both positive and constructive), worked as a vehicle for the implementation of change and forged a closer more trusting relationship through the two-way communication channel it created.

Six main themes emerged from the learning journals;

- Design of their own learning
- Expressing concern
- The need for self-change
- Activity feedback
- External problems
- Feedback on their peers

*Designing their own learning*

One major aim of experiential education is to get the student actively involved. This is done largely through the interactive experiences they have, getting involved in processes and taking part in activities. However, a further stage of experiential learning is one whereby students play a part in course design. They learn best when they are learning in the way they wish to learn and despite the reservations of some educators, teaching can often be flexible enough to allow for the creativity that will give students this opportunity. The learning journals can play a big role in facilitating this, as can be shown in the relevant section in the appendix. From these comments alone the researcher gauged that the videos shown to students were not warmly received, that the group enjoys interactive seminars and wish to

practice exam questions. Acting on these requests and comments meant the teacher-researcher allowed the student voice to play a part on forming how they would be taught in the future.

**Expressing concern**

This can also be categorised as 'students who have doubts over their ability' as it often showed which students were vulnerable or insecure over certain skills or development points. Generally, students needed minor reassuring over their workload, time management, revision capabilities etc, but on some occasions a more lingering student insecurity came to the fore. This was demonstrated by the student who had concerns over deep-rooted shyness when he first came to the class. Week by week he demonstrated how these insecurities reduced and through the work in front of his peers, slowly built up over a period of time, and the two way communication in the journal, he developed his confidence considerably. Without the learning journal, the teacher-researcher may never have even been aware that the student had this concern.

**The need for self-change**

In some instances learning journals were almost confessional (which is something that some practitioners consider to be a drawback to the reflection process – though the researcher disagrees - It is of benefit for the teacher to know where a student feels they need to change). Student participants wrote about problems they were having, faults they had not corrected in the past and things they were doing now which were holding them back from realising their potential. Only when they recognised these areas would they be able to move forward and develop.

**Activity feedback**

True experiential educators need to be quite thick-skinned at times. They must be brave, for they are putting themselves in a position where things could go wrong and also leave themselves open for criticism and very honest feedback. They should not shy away from this, in fact it should be embraced.

A wide-range of positive feedback about the class, my teaching, the environment or the subject matter, was offered. This can help keep to keep an educator motivated and also engage them more fully in the reflection process. However, this is not the most valuable part of activity feedback. The crucial thing about this area is that the students (as open feedback

was appreciated by the teacher-researcher and responded to warmly) will tell you what they would like to be different. The comments in this area gave scope to tailor the teaching methods where a class had concerns or to be aware of the needs of certain individuals. Without them freely raising these the teacher-researcher would have been unaware of them and the students may possibly have remained unhappy about certain matters for longer than necessary. Students do have a voice – we should let them speak and act on it to implement positive change where possible.

**External problems**

All manner of issues were raised by students on an ad-hoc basis; not having intranet access, which textbooks to buy and where to buy them, the timing of seminars being inconvenient and many more. However, two serious concerns were raised – one, where a student was struggling with her English Language – the journals prompted a discussion whereby the student voluntarily enrolled in additional English lessons and the second, where a student with learning difficulties voiced concerns over the scribe he was given in exams. This matter was taken forward to learning support to ensure he was afforded a trained scribe who is able to give the support he needs.

**Feedback on their peers**

Experiential education involves a lot of group work, a lot of interaction and a lot of activity-based learning. Because of this, skills are developed continuously and students need to understand and value the need for working collectively. Learning journals aid this considerably as they give the educator the opportunity to hear problems about peers that some students might not wish to air in their presence. It also highlights issues that groups may have with individuals, prompting teachers to deal with the issue earlier than we have otherwise been able to – crucial to prevent group fallout or any serious issues between classmates.

**Questionnaire results**

At the end of the semester an anonymous questionnaire was distributed to gauge student feeling and reaction to the reflective learning journals. It contained a mix of open (free) and closed (fixed response) questions, short and with simple, non-jargonized language in order to facilitate an easy but meaningful response.

Questions 1 and 2 from the learning journals questionnaire (appendix 5) ask whether their use had a positive effect on the students' learning and engagement with the subject. It was important to understand this, as educators must meet these demands and expectations. The results were favourable – 82.9% either agreed or strongly agreed with both questions. Therefore, the reflective journals met one of their first aims – they acted as a framework for the 'reflection' stage of experiential education to be covered.

Questions 3 and 4 were included to give a quantitative measure of the levels of communication with tutors and the degree of honesty within entries, that students felt the learning journals gave them. 91.5% felt it improved communications with tutors (agree or strongly agree) whilst 100% strongly agreed that their entries had been honest. The researcher interprets this data to mean that reflective learning journals allowed the teacher-researcher within this study, to have been given the opportunity to have heard the honest student voice.

One point to note from the quantitative data was that one student had answered 'strongly disagree' to Questions 1-3, highlighting they felt the learning journals did not have a positive effect on their learning, their engagement with the subject or as an improvement to the communication with me as the tutor. Interestingly, this student also commented in questions 7 and 8 that they like 'nothing really' about the journals as they 'don't find them that useful' and that they'd like to change the use of learning journals by 'not having one, because everyone reflects in their own way'. These are useful findings because they highlight that reflective learning journals are not enjoyed by everyone and not all students will find them useful. However, additionally, this assures the researcher that trust and honesty levels were high as it enabled students to give negative feedback even when not happy with the process (whilst the questionnaire was anonymous the student in question spoke to the researcher directly about what they had written which prompted a discussion over the benefits and purposes behind the journals. They remained sceptical but agreed to carry on with the entries in future iterations of the journal to see whether their opinion changed or they felt a beneficial effect).

There is a great deal of information to be taken from the qualitative data gained in the student answers to Questions 5-8. Question 5 re-iterates that students were able to write what they truly wanted to whilst Question 6 shows that the majority of students prefer the two-way communication as opposed to them keeping the journals to take home with them.

Question 7 asked the open question 'What do you like about the use of learning journals?' The answers suggest the students like feedback, clarity, interaction, answers to their

questions, a chance to express themselves and an open channel of communication. Again, this highlights the view that students felt their voice was heard through this method of reflection.

Unfortunately, student responses to Question 8 didn't provide the researcher with much data to interpret. In hindsight the question used ('What, concerning the use of learning journals, would you like to change?') may have been better had it been replaced with the actual question 'What are the problems associated with the debrief process?' This may have resulted in different comments as students would have then thought about any issues, logistical concerns or problems they had individually faced as opposed to just 'what they'd like to change'. This limited the scope of answers available to students.

Question 9 asked whether students had 'any other comments'. This section was largely left unanswered and added little to the results.


## Problems to overcome

*'A structured journal carries an imposed form of constraint regarding the manner in which it is written.'* (Johns, 1994: p71)

It became evident that getting meaningful, useful and original entries from those students who chose to write using a rigid structure was troublesome. The purpose of the journals is to benefit the students (in their learning and to empower their voice) and the teacher (through the gaining of valuable insight and feedback). These students gave very little of value as their entries were similar each and every week. They had a demotivating effect on the teacher-researcher, as they found those students; writings unoriginal and predictable. Others wrote merely a description of events, summarising materials covered in the session rather than for any positive feedback or avenue for communication. With more time, individuals who adhered to a structure without offering any original or insightful comments would have been coached into a more reflective frame of mind, but time restraints and the initial 'organic' approach which the teacher-researcher wished to cultivate meant this was decided against.

Another issue could be that of confidentiality. Students were told explicitly that only the teacher-researcher would read the journals and that was indeed the case. It is vital they know not only the aim of learning journals but also the audience, as it can help them make the levels of reflection appropriate (Stewart and Richardson, 2000) and, again, honest. It may also have been prohibitive that the journals were not anonymous, which could have compromised their authenticity.

The final argument with regards to potential areas for concern is that of assessment. Wide research has been conducted as to whether or not it is beneficial to assess learning journals or

student reflections and the views are very much split on the issue. Creme (2005) believed that if the records of reflection are a valuable part of a course then they should be part of the assessment process, else students will not take them seriously and eventually they would be an extra piece of work which would dwindle in importance. This view is backed up by Moon (1999) who believed that grading can encourage motivation and therefore deep approaches to learning. Park, in 2003 was of the opinion that students probably wouldn't take part unless there was the incentive of an assessment in the area, though he also commented that by making the reflection process more formal it left some students scared. The researcher agrees with him insofar as the students should feel there is an incentive to reflect openly and at length, however the researcher does not believe this needs to be by way of assessment. The incentive for students is that they get regular feedback from their lecturer, build a trusting and open relationship with them, have a format in which they can ask questions in a non-confrontational way and air their opinions about the class, methods of teaching or peers in a confidential fashion. The benefits of the reflective learning journal were soon realised by the student participants. Formal assessment may, in some instances, increase motivation but it could also prompt the students to write their reflections more deliberately and purposely. Students being careful and precise as opposed to open, honest and free may have the effect of entries becoming less genuine and therefore less valuable in terms of feedback to use for change. The researcher advocates that assessment/grading of reflection could be beneficial if your aim as a teacher is solely to improve reflective writing. If your aim is also to generate a learner voice to prompt a feedback loop and enable the potential for change, then a two-way channel of communication without formal assessment generates this effectively.

## DISCUSSION

It is, of course important to explain to the students what is expected of them and the purpose(s) behind the journals. The teacher-researcher briefly spoke to the students on the advantages of keeping a journal and also gave them literature on the benefits. This had a double-edged effect; on the one hand, it created a curiosity amongst the students that made them write and take part. Some students may have been reticent to do so but levels of trust which had previously been created with many of this cohort in their foundation year ensured they were, on the whole, prepared to try something that was new to them. Setting aside time was hugely important in the process. The teacher-researcher decided to make the final ten minutes of every seminar and lecture a 'reflection period' where students would be given

their notebooks. Without this time set aside the teacher-researcher could not be sure that students would involve themselves in the process. For novice journal writers it is important to get into the habit of writing regularly and to develop their skill. The study found that only when students began to write did they become more open and truly recognise their voice. Also, allocating time within a busy lesson period showed the teacher's commitment to the journals and gave them a clear message of importance.

A logistical problem for those teaching very large cohorts is posed, as the 'notebook' method would be simply unmanageable. Interestingly, there was a response to this from the students who seemed genuinely disappointed to note that the teacher hadn't responded on one particular week. Whilst the teacher researcher had previously been unsure as to how important their own communication had been in the reflection process, they were left in no uncertain terms as students openly asked me 'why they hadn't responded' and 'where their comments were'. One student even stated 'what's the point in having the journals if you (the teacher-researcher) are not going to respond?'

Students rely on and engage more fully when the process is two way. Meaningful, accurate and appropriate communication from the teacher can be motivating, and responses are critical in getting the students to write more fully.


## CONCLUSIONS

The conclusions which can be drawn from the study is that despite some initial scepticism from the students, they were largely engaged in the process and felt it had a positive effect on their learning and engagement with the subject. They felt learning journals improved communications with tutors and allow them the opportunity to be honest in their journal entries.

One aim of the teacher-researcher was to increase the sense of agency within the students – to help them understand what they are able to do, to give them the capacity to comment on and act within their own world, to have an awareness of their abilities and areas for improvement and to feel supported by me, their educator. The data gathered, and the observations made, indicate that reflective journals, despite the potential areas of concern, give educators a privileged opportunity to get to know their students – to hear the learner voice, to truly listen to it and to act upon it where appropriate.

It is the recommendation of this research that educators embed the use of reflective learning journals into their teaching practices, regardless of the level or subject taught. With careful

planning, logistical thought and time set aside, reflection and the setting up of a two-way dialogue to hear and respond to the learner voice is not only beneficial but builds trust and allows for a positive teaching and learning experience for students and educators alike. If we want students to learn then we must hear *what* they learn, *how* they learn and *why* they learn.

**One final thought;**

*'The idea of reviewing what I have learnt in the lecture and seminar is good for me. When filling in the journal I tend to have an idea how much I've understood and it reflects the way I felt on the day. The tutor can also pick up on my weak areas. It is probably the best way of getting general feedback and I like the fact that whatever I write, the teacher responds to it. There is an excitement to see what the teacher has answered or commented.'* An experiential student.

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