

Appendix I: Reflective Learning Journal¹

Implementing Reflective Learning Journal

Reflective learning journal is useful in cultivating lifelong learners if implemented successfully. However, as a novel idea, the relevance and value of keeping a reflective learning journal are not readily perceivable to many students such that the time and effort it requires can be justified. In this section, we shall share with you some ideas that may help you in implementing reflective learning journal successfully.

Launching the reflective journal keeping

To motivate students in engaging in reflective journal keeping, it is important to show them that the teacher cares and the department supports this continuous assignment, and that it is a worthwhile thing to do. Here are a few reminders and suggestions:

- Explain to them clearly what a *reflective* learning journal is.
- Mention the benefits of keeping such a journal.
- Give them a briefing in the administrative particulars of this exercise, e.g. length per entry, assessment criteria etc.
- If resources allow, provide students with a nice simple binder to keep their journal entries. After all, the collection of entries should be something nice to look at.

Clear instructions and continuous support are important as students might feel quite lost and confused at first, not knowing how to begin. A comprehensive guide might just be what they need.

Preparing a comprehensive guide for a reflective learning journal

The content of the guide should pretty much offers the support and guidance students need, which may vary depending on your course and subject. We suggest the following basic items:

Cover We suggest giving the guide a cover not just to make it look nice, but to convey the objective of the exercise in a direct, visual manner. A nice cover also communicates the importance given to it by the teacher. It is also recommendable to let students design their own cover to personalise their journal.

Introduction Briefly introduce what a reflective learning journal is and the benefits of keeping one. This part reinforces the introduction given in class as mentioned above.

General instructions **Object of reflection** What learning experience to reflect on? It could be anything about learning or anything related to the course.

Frequency and length The emphasis should be on quality rather than quantity, on regularity rather than frequency. One major benefit of reflective journal writing is to develop the habit of reflecting on one's process of learning, and a habit only develop through regular practice over time.

¹ Adapted from EDC's Learning to Learn Network, The Hong Kong Polytechnic University, at http://www.polyu.edu.hk/learn-to-learn/teacher/_contents/htm/fs_g1.htm.

Requirement for submission Because this exercise of journal keeping lasts over a long period of time, it is useful to set some checkpoints to give the exercise a time frame and the teacher an opportunity to give feedback and/or assess the work.

Pattern of Feedback Some feedback is necessary for early entries to make sure that the students are on the right track. The level of feedback depends on the level of interaction and involvement you wish to gain through this activity. Feedback offers guidance and support to students and is important in keeping their interest in making entries. Some teachers used group discussion as a means of feedback and attained very good results (e.g. Sinclair, 2001).

Assessment The assessment of reflective journal is a struggle between giving the freedom of writing and guaranteeing the willingness to write. Some teachers resolve this by checking for completion rather than in-depth grading. This frees students the worry of being penalised for writing what comes to their minds, so that personal reflection can take place. If grade is to be given, a protocol of assessment will be a useful guide for students. Here is a sample protocol:

- (0) No entry or entry not related to the studying of the subject
- (1) Provide a descriptive account of one's study
- (2) Provide evaluative account of one's study with reference to one's learning process
- (3) Demonstrate effort in planning for improvement based on the evaluative outcome of reflection

Detail guidelines

Guiding questions can be included in the detail guidelines section to help students get a grip on making reflective entries. Guiding questions can aid or hinder reflection. See *Designing a Reflective Learning Journal* for further discussions.

Help for students

This section provides quick help to making journal entries, offering tips to matters such as content and style of writing. Uncertainties in such matters could make the task much harder thus de-motivates students.

Sample entry

In addition to clear instructions and suitable prompt questions, a sample entry would be most useful for students new to keeping reflective learning journal, as it shows them how the answers to the prompt questions may be put together to form a coherent piece of writing. It is recommendable to write your own sample entry following the instructions and guiding questions you are about to give to your students. This helps you evaluate the feasibility of the task and the comprehensibility of your instructions.

Designing a Reflective Learning Journal

The structure of reflective learning journal

A journal can be structured with guiding questions (see our *Prompt Questions Bank*) or unstructured, in which students are asked to write about anything related to the subject or to their learning. An over-structured journal prevents reflective thinking, while an overly unstructured one might not encourage reflection to be made either.

Structured reflective learning journal

The example below is a highly structured kind of journal with specific questions that students have to answer in each entry. In particular, these questions aim at leading students to find out difficulties they encountered during the process of learning, also to provide themselves with plans and remedies in order to solve these problems.

This kind of reflective journal is suitable for courses with regular tasks of similar nature, like mathematics. This form of reflective journal is ideal and most effective for helping your students to realize their problems. However, it forgoes the space for them to have personal reflection, which also is an important component for cultivating a lifelong learner.

Writing your Reflective Learning Journal

This course composes of different teaching and learning activities, such as lecture, tutorial, discussion, take-home assignment, presentation.

In the entry, you might want to write something about each of these activities with the help of the following questions:

- What points you've learnt from the activities?
- How do I do in the activities?
- Give one or two examples of your most successful acts in the activities. Try to explain what things you did that made them successful
- Give one or two examples, if relevant, of errors or less successful acts in the activities. What did you do wrong or fail to do in each case
- The next time you confront a similar situation, what if anything, could you do differently to increase your learning?

Notes:

- Although a structured reflective journal contains specific questions to be answered, this should be executed with a fair amount of flexibility to avoid trivial entries of little significance to the development of students' learning.
- Similarly, make sure your students understand that answering the questions is not the purpose of keeping a reflective journal, that things outside the area covered by the questions may also be included.

Unstructured reflective learning journal

This type of reflective journal is characterized by little prompt questions provided, which gave students the greatest freedom to ponder upon things that had the greatest personal significance to them. This regular writing exercise helped students organise their thoughts, reflect on their work, identify problems, and find solution to them independently.

However, students often felt confused and uncertain about what to write in this highly unstructured piece of writing. Therefore, it is recommendable to give simple instructions and jump-start questions to give students a lift, but these questions do not necessarily confine the structure or intrude the personal quality of students' writing. See the following template:

Writing your Reflective Learning Journal

This course composes of different teaching and learning activities, such as lecture, tutorial, discussion, take-home assignment, presentation.

In each journal entry, you might therefore want to write down your reaction, comment, personal feelings, suggestion to each of these teaching and learning activities. For example, you can start by thinking:

- What's my interest in the course?
- What's my interest in the lecture?
- What's my reaction to a particular topic in this lecture?
- What's my opinion on the content of the course?
- How do I like the format of each of the above teaching and learning activities?
- How can I relate other things directly or indirectly to things that I have learnt in the course?

Notes:

- This piece of writing should be highly unstructured, therefore it's important that the guided questions provided should be very open-ended, so that allow students to carry deep thinking on course-related issues
- Only a few guided questions will do, otherwise, students will be overwhelmed and divert all their energy in attempting all the questions instead of taking a quality reflection on their learning

Reflective Journal

What is the text about?
What is your opinion about the content of the text?
What do you find interesting / inspiring about the text?
What is your reaction to a particular topic of the text?
How can you relate what you have read to other aspects of your life?