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Author(s)	Jim Murphy
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When Academics Collaborate: The Value of Learning Journals

Jim Murphy

Learning journals are a way to engage learners in critical self-reflection. The promise is the assumption that their use supports learning by helping learners to positively reconstruct their understanding in ways desired by their teacher. This paper offers evidence from an analysis of 33 journals written over 3 months by 14 academics from a variety of disciplines. Based on the content produced and evaluation comments, the paper concludes with an assessment of the value of this collaborative learning strategy for academic staff development—and for the academics themselves.

Introduction

Collaboration is a teacher philosophy of interaction that aims to achieve a set goal by pairing or grouping learners in class physically, or more recently, out of class using ICT. The goal may be set either by the teacher or the learners themselves. A joint responsibility then exists to cooperate to achieve success with any learning task (cf. Slavin, 1989).

Learning journals are known also as logs or diaries. Some years ago, Boud, Keogh and Walker (1985) encapsulated the rationale for their use in the title of their book: *Reflection: Turning Experience into Learning*. Journals are increasingly popular and used in a variety of circumstances for many reasons (Jolly, 1999; Moon, 1999; Thorpe, 2000). At NIE, as in other teacher education institutions, they are sometimes used in undergraduate and post-graduate diploma training programmes.

This paper is not directly concerned with trainee development. Rather, it assesses this strategy from my perspective as facilitator in modules

concerned with lecturers' professional development. Here we look at the writing of 14 academics from a variety of disciplines engaged as learners in academic staff development in pursuit of a *Post-Graduate Diploma in Higher Education* (PGDHE) offered at the *Nanyang Technological University* (cf. Murphy, 2002). Extracts from diaries that follow are chosen to illustrate how journals might be used collaboratively to assist personal and group learning.

Two things come through strongly in these extracts. First is that learning is an internal process strongly affected by the context and collaboration with others (co-learners and teacher). Second, learning journals and the way they are used demonstrate three levels of collaboration: learner to learner, learner to teacher and teacher to learner.

Journal Rationale, Process and Expectations

From the perspective of the learner the most sophisticated conception of "learning" is to change as a person (Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty, 1993). A person may be satisfied she/he has personally changed as an outcome of learning but how can a learner demonstrate that to a teacher or facilitator? How might these academics?

To address these puzzles I required a learning journal as part of the assessment for each module. The goal was to see if, by using critical self-reflection, my colleagues who were my students, could transform their academic experience and experience of the modules into learning outcomes using a collaborative approach. What did they think about the module goals, process and outcomes? What impact was there on their thinking and practice?

An evaluation is a formal way to get such information but I have found journals to be a superior form of data collection. Informal journal writing gets to the nub of matters often in an entertaining and bold way. I thought it would be interesting for us both, plus be insightful for me to help improve the modules I teach. In other words, we would engage in a form of collaborative learning.

My expectations were that each colleague would record their preparation for and content of each 3-hour class, post-class actions, and observation and reflection on these matters. A template was given to allow them to

do this. We then began each class with a 10-minute discussion of what they wished to share from their writing sometimes with a partner and other times with two colleagues to maximize interaction. After the discussion appeared to run its course I asked, "Assuming permission from your friend, who has heard something interesting that you think the class could benefit from?"

My expectations were that the learners would record what went on, what they thought of it, and how this impacted on their thinking and behaviour, if at all. In addition, as this was a pass/fail module I expected my colleagues to be mindful of the three assessment criteria of this piece of work. I desired them to be *thorough* (recording what they did in class and independently after), *observant* (of the utility of things they had done or thought about) and *critically reflective* (in terms of their theory and practice). Let us look at the journal outcomes. How collaborative were they?

Content and Learning Outcomes

My analysis is based on 33 journals prepared over the 3 months I met my classes. The analysis is to see if the writing outcomes matched my expectations, what my colleagues purported to learn and what I learned in collaboration with them. Let us first look at comments in terms of the criteria upon which I judged the writing—thoroughness, an observant attitude and critically reflective disposition. Extracts that follow illustrate how learners met these assessment criteria. Collaborative statements are italicized.

Thorough

With few exceptions from illness or absence, journal keepers all maintained a thorough record. In *Scholarship in Higher Education* the page range was 3–16 and the average was 8. In *Learning & Teaching in Higher Education* the range was 3–15 with an average of 6. In *Research Supervision* it was 4–7 with an average of 5 pages. By the time this final module rolled around 10 months after the start participants appeared to have "module fatigue". Perhaps their output declined from too much of a good thing. It was not a problem for them to record what they did out of class (e.g. preparatory reading), what we did in class (questions and issues discussed) and what

they did after (followed-up some idea by reading another article). Here is a sample of an interior designer's comment on preparatory reading:

- We were given a couple of articles to choose from to prepare for discussion in our class this week. I decided on ... "Are Professors Professional?" Fascinating because I had thought the answer would have been pretty obvious. I mean, surely the work performed by academics more than qualifies us to earn this status, doesn't it? What is there to debate about in the first place? As I read through the article, it becomes apparent my understanding of professionalism has been misguided. Criteria associated with professional life, when examined against what academics and other professionals do, appear inconsistent. Take for instance how professors are not called professors once they leave the academic profession, but a doctor or lawyer would always be recognized as one regardless whether he or she practices or not ... But here's another thing that fascinates me. How an article that I spent reading an hour before class was extremely thought-provoking and *helped me engage with others*. I can't wait to read the other article. As soon as I find the time that is!

Observant

As could be expected submissions showed academics are keen observers. A brief example is with regard how the classes were conducted. A lawyer noted:

- Dr M adopted a discussion-style approach in his teaching, varying short didactic periods, pair work and different sized buzz groups. I expected most postgraduate courses would be conducted wholly in a didactic style so I was very pleasantly surprised. I enjoy this style of learning—much more active than I thought. The *discussions gave me a chance to critically reflect on the nature of my work* and environment and how these can be "powerful forces" that influence my behaviour.

Critically Reflective

Sometimes things in class led to comments on the work environment and the nature of teaching.

- Engineer: A few weeks ago I didn't know that teaching theories existed. This is tragic because for a whole year I was teaching by instinct, with no

idea whether I was contributing positively to my students' learning. What compounds this tragedy even more is the *knowledge that I was not alone*. In these few weeks I have not only become aware of this store of literature, but have refined and even altered completely my teaching style in accordance with these theories. But this has not been easy and further change will be even less simple to implement as the theory I wish to comply with will almost certainly be at odds with what is "officially required" ... in only this short time the knowledge of these theories has effected a conceptual change in my view of teaching within higher education, in particular how I can be a more professional teacher by being scholarly.

- Lawyer: For homework we collected teaching problems faced by our colleagues. In class we compared them with those faced by teachers at *McMaster University, Canada*. *We found them to be similar* and concluded that teachers, students and disciplines were much the same worldwide. These questions also appeared to be questions I have asked myself at one time or another during my short span of 5 years as a teacher. The questions seemed rather universal yet I feel that teachers of Asian students might face more of certain types of problems as compared with teachers of Western or other culture students and vice versa. For example, I face problems of having non-participation and shy students who are afraid to argue and are of the view that asking the teacher too many questions or speaking up may come across as disrespectful to the teacher. I wonder if this might be the result of the way students have been trained in primary and secondary schools in Singapore, the Singapore "obedient" culture, or the Asian/Chinese culture? Perhaps all are contributing factors.

Finally, students offered *personal comments* derived from class discussion:

- Fashion designer: It's interesting to know that people are driven differently. *X said that* when teaching his main aim is to please the students because they influence his benefits/bonus by giving feedback on his performance. (That's indeed weird!) *Y said that* he has changed his attitude and now does not care a damn about management. His main focus is "what is best for the students", and if even a single student appreciates his efforts he feels *good!* (That's brave!) On hearing this someone asked him if he is married with a family. (Of course not!) *Someone also said that*

he feels responsible for shaping students' futures and tries to impart knowledge that will benefit them in the real world. (I like that).

- Nurse educator: The anxiety I had prior this course was unfounded. It was a warm welcome by several NIE Deans. Our class consists of lecturers from NTU, NIE, NAFA, Lasalle and two Polytechnics. A refreshing mix of people from very diverse backgrounds. *After listening to others* the major problems we are all facing seem to be pretty much the same: (1) lecturing without professional teaching training, and (2) adapting to the culture of Singapore's tertiary institutions. The other students are very open about their abilities and weaknesses and Dr M seems to be a competent and experienced facilitator. After just one meeting I am now confident that this course will benefit me.

Having a critical perspective that allows perceptive and insightful comment or determinations is fine but it is the *learning* that is most crucial.

Learning and the Utility of Journals

Most writing matched my expectations in terms of both quantity and quality but what did my colleagues purport to learn together? Learning described below is both conceptual and practical. First, changes to conceptual understanding.

- Lawyer: We're halfway through the Certificate course, time flies! Seems like only yesterday that I walked into NIE for the first time. I suppose time flew by for me because I was enjoying my learning experience. *The discussions and conversations with classmates*, the different teaching methods used, the chance to bury myself in books and articles on educational issues, the new discovery about my own thinking and teaching style—all these had a big impact on me these past weeks.
- Multimedia artist: The end of this module has set me on a course of thought and action at the same time. I realize now the importance of ALAR (Action Learning and Action Research) in developing our profession ... It brought about a colleague's analogy that the *Approaches to Teaching Inventory* (ATI) helps us see where we are on our map and ALAR is a compass to our destination on a voyage of self-discovery ... I conclude now that for every cross-road I may face there is always a solution if we recognize our position on this map ... This entire module

has left me reeling in excitement as at last I now recognise the pathway to being a scholarly teacher.

- Video artist: I have to put this down in my learning journal as this has been bothering me—filling and fuelling my mind, since the last session. And it came from a rather unexpected source—not from Jim nor the excellent readings—but my classmate from *Lasalle*. In *sharing her journal entries from our last meeting at the start of class*, she made a point I found very enlightening. She advised we should judge the success of our teaching *not* by how well the good students perform, but how much the so-called “poorer” ones improve. It struck like a thunderbolt. This insight is so important for me.

Conceptual learning becomes really valuable if it becomes practical. Sometimes comments were about the *use of ideas* talked about in class:

- Accountant: *Class starts with a exchange of notes in learning journal* between participants. Helps me to understand what and how other people do in and after class. Also gives me some ideas of what I should do in my own learning journal or how I might use it in my own teaching.
- Lawyer: If teachers’ conceptions of teaching and/or learning are related to their approaches to teaching, the task of improving teaching may have to focus more on changing *how* academic staff conceive of teaching and learning rather than on teaching strategies. I note our poly staff development programs focus on strategies. I’ve witnessed strong resistance from some older colleagues when they were “forced” to adopt the problem-based learning (PBL) approach. They attended numerous training on strategies of PBL even though they never really believed the underlying benefit of encouraging deep learning using a student-centred approach. Perhaps my colleagues needed first to change their *conception* of teaching and learning before such strategies were introduced.
- Psychologist: Today’s session and the readings on the “scholarship of teaching” have been helpful and enlightening. My role predominantly has been limited by what I have to do daily—prepare my package of knowledge and skills and present these to students. I have not given the four forms of scholarship of teaching equal weight. Upon reflection I realize I have to make a more conscious effort to incorporate these four faces of scholarship of teaching. It is important to be open to new learning

to allow myself to grow and change, not just as a scholar but also as a human being embarking on the journey of life-long education.

Some colleagues wrote about *how* the classes were conducted. This is a practical issue for they might adopt something they have experienced for their own teaching:

- Journalist: There are two ways that I'm learning here. First, I'm taking in the information conveyed to us. Second, I'm also taking careful note of *how* Jim conveys it. Sometimes I find it hard to fill a two-hour class with my students. I guess I have to look at the way he blocks out a larger three-hour period and structures it with different activities in order to not only convey the material but also keep the interest level up.
- Interior designer: It was fairly amusing as *the class started to share their various experiences* we had as research students. One classmate, for instance, lamented his supervisor has no time for him. Another talked about his "turbulent" time—how he went through phases of "fun", "hiding" (from his supervisor) to "panic". Supervisors too have their fair share of stories. One complained about restrictions—how, for instance, some research topics are rejected, as they are deemed inappropriate or sensitive. Another bemoaned the pressure of admissions and deliveries (since more research students often equates to more funding for the institution). Others felt supervisors are sometimes "coerced" into accepting students, without being necessary the most qualified person for the job ... As we started to share our experiences as research students and supervisors, it became apparent to us that the level of research supervision lacks support, standards or consistency. *Sharing experience has great advantages.* I felt somewhat consoled by the end of the day: I am not alone in feeling inadequate after all!
- Lawyer: We learned today that there are many facets to students' learning—conceptions, approaches, orientations, intentions and strategies. To come to grips with this Dr M conducted his class by using a peer teaching method. I found this a powerful way of learning. It certainly encourages deep learning for the peer tutors. When the peer tutors move in the groups to teach, their own learning of the content is reinforced and doubts are clarified when they are forced to answer questions posed by the tutees. As the "tutors" become more experienced with each group

they visit, they progress in their teaching by learning to be succinct and focus on the main points. We actually learned without a “teacher”. I have since used this method to conduct my tutorial classes and students enjoyed it. The learning was also improved.

- Teacher educator: As mature-aged students from diverse fields sharing a common ground—teaching—we are keen to share and discuss issues we face in our profession. The organization of groups to that end was very flexible and productive. It provided the *opportunity for social interaction and importantly diversity in discussion*. As mature-aged students from varied professional fields, flexibility with no constraints led to a fruitful discussion. I felt that immediately we were put at ease to express “unguarded” opinions. I feel this atmosphere is vital for the coming discussions and our learning.

Having seen what academics chose to write about and how they did it, what might we learn from this about collaboration?

Conclusion

I designed each module with two main goals. First, I wanted my colleagues to be confronted with new knowledge, then use their process skills and appraise its merit for their diverse needs. Second, I wanted them use their critical dispositions to build a new personal understanding with the unspoken objective that this would potentially change their practice as discipline teachers.

Journal extracts show me that they account for new knowledge and comment on it. When they process they “play” with this knowledge and “kick it around” in order to make sense of it. They sometimes comment critically and reflectively on themselves or others based on their experience. Then they project how they might use their new understanding. I saw an increase in subject matter interest, critically reflective thinking, and suggestions of how new understanding might be used or actually is being used. Reading their journals showed me how collaborative discussions one-on-one with me or their colleagues, plus small group work, assisted in building their understanding. Finally, I gained ideas of how I might better organize things next time. Without these journals I would have no knowledge of any of these matters.

In many disciplines learning journals are a possible assessment device, especially at the postgraduate level. Experience reported here shows there are well-founded reasons why they are recommended for both learner and teacher. Can you use learning journals in your teaching? If you choose to try I recommend:

- specifying the teacher's goal in using them;
- specifying objectives for learners;
- offering a template for guidance;
- setting aside time in class to share journal entries; and
- assessing journal writing by offering written comments.

You *may* find that establishing journal writing is not easy. But you *will* find that your effort is worthwhile for the new insights it gives you into student learning. You will also discover it allows new opportunities for collaborative learning that may not exist without building journals into your module design.

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