

Journal-Keeping to Enhance Student Engagement in Learning Elizabeth Shively

I. OVERVIEW

Pedagogical obstacles and opportunities arise when students' deeply held assumptions are challenged in the classroom. How do we encourage students to examine those assumptions and find their 'voice', thus enabling engagement with course material? What is the evidence that we 'hear' students and that they are learning? In this paper, I look at journal keeping as a method for addressing such questions, using my module 'Jesus and the Gospels' as test case. I discuss my structure and use of student journals to enhance teaching and learning, formative and summative feedback, collection of various data and use of control groups to evaluate the effectiveness of journaling, and the transferability of ideas in this presentation to any discipline.

II. INTRODUCTION TO THE PROBLEM

For 6 years, I have taught a sub-honours module called "Jesus and the Gospels" in the Divinity faculty at the University of St Andrews. The module is required for Divinity students but is also a popular elective for students from a range of disciplines, from history to maths to international relations; and from a range of backgrounds, from Christian to Jewish to atheist. I therefore have a diverse classroom that includes those who are thoroughly familiar with the four canonical Gospels, and those who have never opened a Bible. No matter their background, all students enter with deeply held assumptions and beliefs that I inevitably challenge during the course of the term. For example, I teach historical-critical and literary approaches for reading the Gospels, and these approaches raise challenging questions for students who have only ever approached the texts from a position of faith. On the other hand, I also teach the congruence of theology and history when approaching the Gospels, and this raises challenging questions for those who have never engaged theological ideas.

I notice that these challenges begin to hit students at the beginning of the term. Yet at the end of the term, at the final exam the students tend to give 'textbook' answers to the essay questions, suggesting that their aim is to tell me what they think I want to hear. My rising questions have been: What happened to the students' own questions? To what extent have they identified their initial assumptions and beliefs, and how have they engaged them critically? Relatedly, to what extent have they engaged the course content critically? And crucially, what evidence is there that real, deep learning has taken place over the course of the term?

III. RESEARCH QUESTION

These questions suggest pedagogical problems: 1) that I may not have not give students ample space to develop their ideas; and 2) that I do not have a sufficient way of discerning evidence of their learning. These problems generated a pedagogical opportunity by suggesting a particular research question: To what extent can the addition of a continuous assessment tool to the existing teaching format that allows for ongoing reflective writing both enable students to clarify and examine their own thoughts and to understand the module content more deeply?

IV. RATIONALE and AIMS

Three assumptions provide the rationale for using ongoing, reflective writing to address the pedagogical problems I have identified: 1) *Writing enhances engaged learning*. Recent pedagogical research shows that writing enhances student engagement more than any other feature of a course. As John Bean states, 'writing is both a process of doing critical thinking and a product that communicates the results of critical thinking'. 2) *The practice of ongoing reflective writing builds motivation and fluency in students*. Students require practice

in reflective writing and critical thinking; practice yields fluency and fluency, motivation. 3) *The integration of ongoing reflective writing into course objectives and structure builds student value.* Building this sort of ongoing writing into a course gives students ownership of their own learning.

V. OBJECTIVES

My chief objectives were to enhance students' experience by prompting deeper engagement in their learning through ongoing writing by means of a tool that encourages 1) reflexivity about their own thinking and learning, 2) the development of fluency and voice, 3) critical engagement with issues addressed in the module and 4) creative and critical thinking.

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To answer my research question and reach these objectives, I added an ongoing reflective writing assessment to my Spring 2018 module by requiring students to keep a "learning journal" to demonstrate their individual participation in and personal engagement with the subject matter. "*Learning journal*" seemed the most appropriate designation because it "implies that there is an overall intention of by the writer (or those who have set the task) that learning should be enhanced" (Moon, location 274). And, '*learning journal*' seemed most appropriate (rather than another word such as 'log') because the language conveys the expectation that students will, through writing, personally and critically engage with material over time beyond the level of description. The use of journal-writing with nursing students conveys my thoughts in this regard. For example, Dimino says, 'The data, though not conclusive, seem to show that journals helped students clarify their thoughts and enhance their ability to develop ideas' (Dimino, 1988, about nursing students). My hypothesis was that the same would be true among Divinity students.

A. Description of the Learning Journal:

1. *Format*: I allowed students to choose a either a bound notebook or computer file format. The insides, however, had to include a table of contents that listed the title of every entry with date and page number.

2. *Structure*: A journal may be free/unstructured or guided/structured, depending on one's objectives. Since I had two objectives – regarding course content and personal reflection – I wished to have both structured and unstructured elements in the assignment. Thus, I asked students for three types of entries throughout the term:

- a. *In-lecture and in-tutorial writings*. The only rule is that the students' pens are to be on the page for a set time, e.g., 3-6 minutes. Students were not to be concerned about organizing their ideas or using correct grammar or punctuation; rather they were to be concerned about generating as many ideas, questions, concerns, and insights as they could. This sort of writing is helpful during a lecture or tutorial for generating discussion, helping students articulate questions.
 - *Prompts*: I might give students a key word, guiding question, or a statement to complete, in order to generate their reflection (e.g., 'What confused you in this week's lectures or readings?' or 'What effect is this module having on our beliefs, values and your previous understanding of things?' or 'What was the gist of the lecture today?').
 - *Lists*: I would have students enumerate everything they know know about a topic in brief phrases ('Why did Jesus die?').
- b. *Reading responses*. I gave students specific questions to answer about their required readings, and supplied them with a guide for how perform a critical reading of an essay, article, or chapter. Students used these responses for tutorial discussions..
- c. *Freewrites*. I required students to write in their learning journals outside of class at least once a week on a topic that connected course material to their own emerging questions and problems. I gave students the following guidance for structuring their writing:
 1. *Description*: what idea, theory, experience, or event are you examining?

2. *Interpretation*: what is the most important, meaningful, useful, or relevant aspect of the idea? How can you explain it? What did you think, feel, know, or observe before? at the time? later? How is it similar to and different from other ideas, theories?
3. *Outcome*: What have you learned or realized? How is this knowledge or understanding important or useful to you? What questions do you now have? What does it mean for your future, i.e., what will you now need to do or think about or investigate?

Some of the students' freewrite questions were:

- Was the resurrection of Jesus a hallucination or reality?
- What are my views regarding historical approaches to studying Jesus?
- Was Christianity nothing more than a subset of Judaism that got lucky?
- Why is the resurrection described so differently in the gospels?
- Are miracles rational?
- How does our society distort Jesus?
- What is the significance of the image of Jesus in Western art?
- Does Jesus' teaching have any place in contemporary culture?

B. Assessment of the Learning Journal: Assessment is tricky because one of the objectives of reflective writing is to encourage a greater degree of freedom and candour. Students may feel reluctant to write freely if they know that someone will be reading and evaluating their work. Also, it is difficult to assign word-limits on reflective writing. Finally, this sort of writing can generate too much material for a teacher or module coordinator to assess. To address these issues, I made the learning journal semi-private, with only portions submitted for an end-of-the-term summative assessment. I set no word-limit requirements for the ongoing journaling; however, I did set word-limit requirements for summative assessment. For this assessment, I required students to submit three elements: 1) The table of contents of their learning journals that included date, title of entries and page numbers with the indication that at least one freewrite was done each week outside of class; 2) Three significant journal entries that the students found unusual, insightful, meaningful or helpful. I evaluated these submissions on the quality of reflective and critical thinking and not on the quality of the writing (such as mechanics or style); and 3) Three 1-page (350-400 word each) metareflections upon each of the three selected journal entries. For each of these small papers, I asked students to re-read, review, and reflect on what they had written in their journals over the term. They were to refer to specific parts of the journal entry being analyzed; describe clearly the extent to which their assumptions or thinking had changed; and connect their entry to relevant course themes.

V. EVALUATION OF THE RESEARCH

I measured the results of the research in four ways:

A. *Focus group*

A mid-term meeting with randomly selected students gave me feedback on their views of the effectiveness of the learning journals. One student felt that the *reading responses* encouraged him to engage the reading deeply and strengthen his own view by 'codifying it in writing.' He had trouble sometimes thinking of topics for the *freewrite* and wondered whether suggestions of questions might be helpful. He sometimes struggled to answer the *in-class* and *in-tutorial* questions because he didn't know what kinds of responses he was allowed to give: because he comes from a faith background, he found that he sometimes self-censored, even when he knew no one was looking. Finally, he sometimes found it hard to find time to write.

Another student responded via email with unexpected connections that freewriting has helped her to make:

At first, I wasn't very positive about the learning journal as I thought it would take up a lot of time. However, I really enjoy the free-writings each week as it

allows me to consider things that I find interesting and it has also made me eager to explore things in greater depth with research etc. There is one that I really enjoyed writing, it was on the apocryphal gospels; coming from Northern Ireland where there is such a political/religious divide, it was quite refreshing to consider the validity of these gospels and also as to why they are not a part of the canon- it made me see both sides of the argument in a new light.

B. Questionnaires

End-of-term questionnaires gave me feedback on students' view of the effectiveness of the learning journals. I received back 20 questionnaires. Below I include the results:

Writing in the learning journal has...	Yes	Somewhat	No
helped me to develop my voice, examine and affirm my insights.	11	6	3
encouraged me to examine or explore my beliefs, values and/or assumptions.	13	5	2
helped me to understand others' perspectives.	2	12	6
helped me to raise questions and issues to think about in the future.	6	12	2
enhanced my engagement with the lectures	6	9	5
enhanced my engagement with the tutorial discussions.	8	8	4
enhanced my learning of the subject matter of the module.	8	8	4
helped me to connect the content of the module to my own life.	6	7	7
Which learning journal assignment did you find most helpful?	In-class/ tutorial: 8	Freewrite: 5	Reading response: 7

Notice that overall the 'no' answers were not as prominent as the 'somewhat' and 'yes' answers. Also, the most 'yes' answers occurred with the first two questions, which are metareflection-type questions. Also, a number of comments on the questionnaires raised concerns about the time constraints that students had to accomplish the amount of writing that was required of them.

C. Analysis of the metareflection papers.

The metareflection papers suggested to me the extent to which students engaged in critical reflection. First, over half of the students fulfilled the objectives in either a very good or outstanding manner: 59% of the students received a high second or above, and 43% of the students received a clear or high first for this assignment. Second, 74% of the students described in some way their assumptions and how their thinking

had developed. Below, I include content that demonstrates the quality of the best students' metareflections. This is from an in-class writing on, "Was Jesus a feminist" from March 5th 2018.

In-class writing (excerpt):

I do not think that Jesus was a feminist. Feminism is a movement, which was created for women's right to vote. It is not a movement present in Jesus' society and culture. I therefore argue that to cast Jesus as a feminist is anachronistic because it is very much a concept of the 20th and 21st century and not of 1st century Judaism. Jesus' central message was not for the promotion of women's rights. It was instead to establish the kingdom of God. Jesus does search out marginalized women; but it seems a byproduct of his bigger, overarching message. To call Jesus a feminist is to project our own values and preconceptions onto a person who has no conception of them.

Meta-reflection (excerpt):

In my reflection I assumed a definition of feminism with a capital "F," which influenced my conclusion. I initially stated it was anachronistic to refer to Jesus as a feminist, which is true, but a more beneficial way to approach this question is through analyzing Jesus' general approach to women (feminism with a lower-case "f"). Through using this definition of feminism it is clear to see that Jesus wanted what was best for women. I mentioned in my first reflection how he sought out the marginalized women; however, I failed to show how radical this really was. In John 4, Jesus talks to and even makes a disciple of an unclean Samaritan woman. Considering the Old Testament Laws this is an immensely radical step. It would therefore be unfair to criticize Jesus with our own conceptions of feminism but rather his own. This means that my initial attempt to prevent our presuppositions to colour our view of Jesus as actually misguided. Rather than a refusal to see Jesus as a feminist it is better to challenge what we really mean by feminist. This process enables us to see Jesus within his own time rather than constrained by our own worldview. It is a method that can be applied to all historical Jesus study.

D. *Final Exam*

The final exam at the end of the term will tell me both directly and indirectly the quality of the student thinking and the extent of their understanding by what they articulate. I used the past 5 years of student exams as control groups, since I had not used learning journals during these years. I did not substantially change the essay questions substantially. I predict that the most motivated students will fulfill the aims of this research and become more critical and reflective thinkers about their own ideas.

VIII. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

The results confirm that students become active learners and that their learning is enhanced when they are forced to engage with their own thinking. But the results also confirm that not all students recognize or appreciate the connection between writing and critical thinking and that many students conceive of writing as 'busy work' that is not 'real learning'. Unmotivated students were strongly opposed to ongoing journaling and did not do well with the metareflection project. But even some motivated students struggled with finding time to write, thinking of topics for their freewrites and with uninhibited writing. What remains unresolved is how to change perceptions about the concept of 'writing is thinking', how to engage unmotivated students, and how to provide helps for motivated ones. In the future, I will provide sample questions for freewrites and allow students to drop one. Also, I will use

use the journal-writing to generate a problem-based research question for the essay. That is, they can pose their own question and then solve it.

The learning journal is transferable to other disciplines, because all students enter the classroom with certain assumptions or beliefs about which they must learn to think critically. While I used a journal in the humanities, it can also be used in the sciences, engineering and mathematics, disciplines in which journal writing might seem to be foreign. For instance, in mathematics, journal writing has been shown to facilitate learning when students are enabled to, 'think in a manner that was their own and to use their own language' so that 'the students were able to develop personal conceptual definitions that were much more understandable than technical definitions' (Moon, *Learning Journals*).

In conclusion, I aim to help students to cultivate the hard work of thinking by writing. Pulitzer prize winning author David McCullough once said, 'Writing is thinking. To write well is to think clearly. That's why its so hard.'