

An introduction to learning journals

Lydia Arnold (2009)

What is a learning journal?

A learning journal is a place for the thoughts, reflections and musings of someone who is seeking to advance their learning. Keeping a learning journal is a process through which an individual can develop or deepen their understandings, come to see things differently, ask questions of themselves, and simply pause amongst the hustle of daily life to consider, unpack and learn from happenings. A learning journal is a space that both captures and facilitates a process of learning from experience.

- Learning journals are built up over time.
- They may be private to the author, public or they may be shared in part, for example with an assessor or with a colleague.
- They can take many forms, for example a paper notebook, a video diary or an online web space.
- Entries may follow a recipe or standard format, or they may be more fluid and variable.
- Content may differ from individual to individual; some choose to keep entries entirely routed in practice and some include both practice and study issues, whilst others include personal issues too.

The primary purpose of a learning journal is to learn by exploring one's own experiences. The context of that experience could be wide ranging, for example it may be formed around:

- Work.
- College or university courses.
- Voluntary work or duties.
- Home, for example in the role of parent.
- A hobby or sport.

In all of these contexts though, a diary could also be kept. It is not the context but rather the processing of entries that differentiates a learning journal, which considers each incident in search of learning, new directions and inspiration, from a diary which acts simply as a record of events.

Benefits: Why would I want a learning journal?

Individual motivations for keeping a learning journal vary. Equally motivations may flux across time for any person.

Learning journals:

- Allow us reconsider events and come to decisions about how to best act in future;
- Articulate our understandings or recollections;
- Help us to consider our own behaviour and our own role in a course of events;
- Help us to reach a position or viewpoint;

- Generate questions;
- Give us chance to get a sense of perspective around emotionally charged happenings;
- Help us to apply learning to new situations;
- May facilitate professional prioritising;
- Enable us to step back from a complex situation and take stock to make sense of what is really going on.
- Help us better understand the ways in which we learn;
- Allow us to explore our own personalities; our learning, working and private selves;
- Enable us to identify both our strengths and weaknesses;
- Provide a record of our learning journey's, it tells our own story;
- Offer a space to think openly, playfully and productively;
- Help to identify real learning needs, as themes across time can be identified;
- Provide a pool of material for PDP, job interviews, application forms and professional memberships.

When a learning journal is shared and discussed, it may provide an opportunity for an additional layer of interaction with the topics under consideration. It can deepen the reflective process through such mechanisms of questioning, critical friendship and review or simply through informal dialogue or online interactions.

How do I set up a learning journal?

This is your choice - there are many different ways that this can be done.

You might want to make

- ✓ a video diary
- ✓ a web page
- ✓ a blog (e.g. wordpress.com, blogger.com)
- ✓ word processed text
- ✓ a mobile phone blog
- ✓ a notepad
- ✓ a dictaphone/audio collection

... and where do I keep it?

Your choice too! It could be on your home computer or on the World Wide Web or in a book.

Consider that the most important thing is that you are regularly able to make entries. Technology may help, but if a notepad on the train home is most practical for you, then this is fine.

Who gets to see it?

Only you get to see all of it.

There are benefits in sharing your learning journal if you keep it in an online space others can comment and add new perspectives to your ideas. Writing for an audience may also make you more disciplined to make entries.

If you choose a public learning journal, be aware that you may need to self-censor, revealing company secrets is rarely a good plan, so exercise a common sense approach to writing online. Particular caution should be exercised when discussing incidents that involve others.

Not to be deterred though, being aware of the issues around disclosing information about others may have a positive effect on your writing as it forces the journal keeper to focus on the issues rather than the personalities.

How often do I use it?

When you want to record an important event or idea or thought. You might use it daily or only use it once a fortnight, but all researchers are expected to keep some form of learning journal.

Try to get in to a routine of regular writing.

Should it have a set structure?

Reflective writing may be achieved in a number of ways. Some people to write freely whilst others benefit from structured writing.

Techniques for writing reflectively in a journal can include:

- Try to stand back from yourself and write in a detached and more objective way.
- Consider an incident from different view-points (e.g. from your own view point, from a colleagues, from an independent observer).
- Reflect upon your original journal entry. Perhaps after a break, come back to the entry and consider what your account may mean.
- Use examples when you make a statement, this helps to add a sense of scale to issues as well as to bring out the detail.
- Use a framework approach:

One suggested structure for a format for a learning journal entry may be to use the following subheadings to reflect upon an incident or idea.

Description: What is the stimulant for reflection? (An incident at work, a one off event, a theoretical idea, a training experience, putting new learning in to action for the first time).

What are you going to reflect on?

Feelings: What were your reactions and feelings?

Evaluation: What was good and bad about the experience? Make value judgments.

Analysis: What sense can you make of the situation? Bring in ideas from

outside the experience to help you. What was really going on?

Conclusions (general): What can be concluded, in a general sense, from these experiences and the analyses you have undertaken?

Conclusions (specific): What can be concluded about your own specific, unique, personal situation or ways of working?

Personal Action plans: What are you going to do differently in this type of situation next time? What steps are you going to take on the basis of what you have learnt?

(This format is adapted from Gibbs, 1995)

Another, more simple format, may be

For incidents: What happened and Why?, What does this mean for me?

Getting a learning journal format that suits you may take some experimentation. Consider which type will work for you - what media, what level of structure you require, whether you will make a weekly entry or when you 'feel the need'. Try different approaches if you are unhappy with your first attempt.

Some tips to help get the most from reflective journal writing include:

- Be honest – sometimes this is difficult as it may involve self-critique.
- Try to lose inhibition when writing; the journal is yours.
- View the journal as a playground for your professional mind, through playful consideration of ideas and events learning and creativity can thrive.
- Be flexible and try new approaches to journal keeping. Seek support from others; perhaps in the course forum.
- View your learning journal as a journey. If you continue to keep it, its form will change over time as you consider what works well for you.

Not feeling the benefits?

For many the first encounter with a learning journal may be brought about through the demands of a course requirement during a period of study or training. After practicing journaling in a course context, some may continue whilst others do not. Reasons for not sustaining the practice beyond the course period can include:

- Not feeling a connection with the process
- Not feeling comfortable with the type of journal set up
- Simply forgetting to bother with it
- Not knowing what should go in to an entry
- Failing to see value in the process

Sharing experiences of your journaling as you progress may help alleviate some of these elements. Simply sharing that sense of being unsure what to include can help to generate new ideas and approaches.