Reflective Journaling In and Out of Philosophy Classrooms

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1 Project Summary

Low-stakes writing provides students with an opportunity to discover the limits of what they know. Reflective journaling provides low-stakes writing assignments that can motivate students to complete readings and participate in class discussions. This project examined the effects of regular, structured reflective journaling both in the classroom and outside the classroom. Specifically, this projected examined how the use of regular reflective journaling both outside the classroom and inside the classroom affects students' reading of assigned texts, understanding of the material, and a willingness to engage with abstract concepts.

The journal component of the course will made up 30% of the students' final grade. Each week students completed at least four journal entries outside the classroom and brief journal entries in class. Each week students were given at least seven journaling prompts to choose from. Those prompts covered a variety of reflective journaling approaches including free-writing, dialogue, metaphor, and meta-reflection. Each week one entry had to be modified commonplace book entry where students selected a passage from one of the assigned readings for the week and explained how that passage related to another class or something going on in their lives. In class, we prioritized focused free-writing for topics under discussion.

Goals

The goals for the project were to encourage consistent reading of the course material, conceptual understanding, and engaged class discussion.

Criteria of success

Since the primary goals were consistent reading of the course material, engagement in class, and conceptual understanding, I took anonymous surveys of how many students completed the reading on days new readings were assigned. Past student evaluations and literature on student reading suggest students complete approximately 25%-30% of the readings. So, if 50% or more students consistently completed the readings, the project successfully encouraged more reading. To test conceptual understanding, weekly quizzes assessed conceptual understanding. Grades in previous semesters averaged in the high 60s and low 70s. Using that as my starting point, a shift in a letter grade average, high 70s and low 80s, would reflect a significant change in a class's conceptual understanding and qualify as success. Class engagement was harder to assess, but if more than 50% of students regularly engaged in class discussions, this reflected a shift from previous rates of verbal class participation of about $\frac{1}{3}$.

2 Quantitative Results

Although all the students in my Introduction to Philosophy and Ethics and Society classes over both semesters were given journals (approximately 80 students), 74 students agreed to participate in this study. Given the criteria of success stated in the original proposal, this study was only partially successful.

Student Reading—Reading Surveys

For each reading assignment, students completed an anonymous reading survey on the day the reading was supposed to be read using the following form:

| Reading: _____ |
| Class:_____   Date: _____ |
| I completed this reading: 0% 25% 50% 75% 100% ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ ☐ |

For survey purposes, students who completed the reading after the assigned date or were absent were not counted as completing the reading.

Results by course:

Reading Percentage	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%	Surveys Completed
Results	183	63	57	57	80	440
Student Percentage	41.5%	14.3%	13%	13%	18.1%	

Table 1: Introduction to Philosophy

Reading Percentage	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%	Surveys Completed
Results	132	45	52	36	49	314
Student Percentage	42%	14.3%	16.5%	11.5%	15.6%	

Table 2: Ethics and Society

Reading Percentage	0%	25%	50%	75%	100%	Surveys Completed
Results	315	108	109	93	129	754
Student Percentage	41.7%	14.3%	14.4%	12.3%	17.1%	

Table 3: Combined Results

These results satisfy the criteria of success to the extent that over 50% of students did some of the reading. However, less than 50% of students did 50% or more of the reading. So, at best, these results are only partially successful.

Conceptual Understanding—Quiz Results

Each week, Introduction to Philosophy and Ethics and Society students took a ten-question quiz. The average grades for past quizzes were usually in the high 60s and low 70s. The average from Spring 2019 and Fall 2019 was 67. These results reveal that the journals made no difference in conceptual understanding as assessed through weekly quizzes.

Class Engagement—In-class Writing

At least once a week, and up to three times a week, students participated in in-class journaling assignments. Students wrote a focused free-write for five minutes in class. Some focused free-writing assignments were planned, but most were impromptu based on class engagement. Students were given a question and directed to write whatever they could in the allotted time. The results were typically positive. Although free-writing on a topic did not guarantee 50% or more of the students would engage in the discussion, any student could be called on to speak because they had been given sufficient time to form some thoughts on the topic. So, the results were not fully successful. I expected students would engage on their own after writing in class. The results revealed that students engaged more when called on to speak.

3   Qualitative Responses

Throughout the year, students were assessed on written meta-reflections (assignment attached). Students wrote meta-reflection on five journal entries they had previously written. The meta-reflections and the five entries were assessed based on variety, openness, and depth. One third of the grade was based on regularly completing journals, checked at the beginning of each class. The meta-reflections were primarily to encourage students to reflect on previous reflections, but they also provided a helpful source for qualitative results. Most students had positive responses to the reflective journaling assignment. Here are a sample of those responses:

> "I like the dialog themed journal entries. They allow me to think through both side (sic) of the coin." (Introduction to Philosophy, Spring 2019)

> "I loved the journals. It really made me think and evaluate what we learned in class." (Introduction to Philosophy course evaluation, 2019)

> "I enjoy writing in the notebooks you gave us. It really makes me think about my answers before I write them down." (Introduction to Philosophy course evaluation, 2019)

> "The journals helped to understand the course more and helped me put my ideas on the readings on paper and allowed us to express our thoughts." (Introduction to Philosophy course evaluation, 2019)

> "I thoroughly enjoyed journaling on the topics such as: *The Soul, The Forms, Essentialism,* and *Taking on the Role*; however, I do not detest our current subjects. I find them intellectually stimulating. I have always wanted to write and the required journals are - I believe - a driving force in my development. I have seen improvements in not only my essays, but my daily thought pattern. While before it was a bit of a blur, I know think a little more orderly. I attribute this to my frequent journaling and reading." (Ethics and Society, Spring 2019)

"I've once again enjoyed the journals, it helps me for your test and help me develop my thoughts on subjects I've never really contemplated. Morally I've questioned myself in your class. I'm learning that I'm more traditional that (sic) I first thought. I learned that I don't like things that don't line up with my ideas. My next goal in this class is to learn to understand other opinions and actually consider them with mine and why they think that way" (Ethics and Society, Spring 2019)

"This journal continues to give me an opportunity to explore new ideas and challenge this (sic) I disagree with. The entries are topics I probably wouldn't think of on my own, and I really enjoy being able to evaluate these ideas." (Ethics and Society, Spring 2019)

"Journaling through Ethics class has changed my perspective of 'journals' and 'diaries'. I use (sic) to never use one as a kid but now that I changed my view I make it my priority to put pen to paper almost everyday (sic). Either doddling (sic) or a list of frustrations, and feelings that has benefited me in dealing with my emotions throughout the day. [. . .] [I]n the first half of the semester journaling has allowed me to connect to each philosophers (sic) ideas and motives while reflecting on each passage I have been assigned." (Ethics and Society, Spring 2019)

4 Application

Given the limited results from this study, I do not plan on disseminating these results beyond this report at this time. The qualitative results are encouraging. Students who took reflective journaling seriously responded extremely well, as noted above. This, however, relied on journaling making up 30% of the course grade, which I suspect was a contributing factor in motivating students to complete the journals. The limited results from this study do not significantly contribute to my current student learning outcomes. For that reason, I will not continue using reflective journals in my classes at this time. However, I have decided to incorporate other forms of low-stakes focused free-writing in my classes. I believe this creates an atmosphere in class where students are more comfortable discussing topics, even though they may not engage without being called upon.

PHL 106/206   **Name (Print):** ———————————————
Spring 2019
Meta-reflection Assignment 3

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Directions: Go through your journal entries from assignment 8 to the present. Choose five entries that stand out to you for any reason. Using those five journal entries to write a meta-reflection on those five entries.

- Your meta-reflection should be one page typed and double spaced. You can go a little over if you want.

- **Photocopy** your five entries and attach them along with your meta-reflection to this assignment sheet. (Many cadets have found that using a scanning app such as the one in Dropbox works well.) **Make sure you've copied the entries so they can be read.**

- Write the titles of the journal entries you selected below along with the date you completed the entry.

- You will be graded based on the attached rubric. The completion component is based on what you have shown me in class, not what you are submitting today. If you have not been doing regular journal entries, it will be difficult to do well on the other criteria in the rubric.

1. Title and date: ——

2. Title and date: ——

3. Title and date: ——

4. Title and date: ——

5. Title and date: ——

Completion	Variety	Openness	Depth	**Grade**
/10	/6	/7	/7	/30

Rubric

Criterion	Outstanding	Good	Poor	Unacceptable
Completion	10	8	4	0
Regular entries, approx. 1 page each.	Four journal entries completed per week. Entries reflect regular writing.	Four journal entries completed per week, but not completed regularly.	Regular journal entries per week averaged 2 or below.	Journal entries were not completed
Variety of Entries	6	5	3	0
	Entries include free writing, dialogue, metaphor, and metareflection.	Some diversity among entries but mostly of the same kind.	More than one kind of entry, but most entries take the same form.	Entries are incomplete or use only one type of entry.
Openness to Reflection, Meaning, & Change	7	6	4	0
	Entries show willingness to revise ideas, speculate, and examine closely held beliefs. Entries are honest and reveal self assessment. Provides evidence of creativity, playfulness, or new approaches.	Entries show willingness to examine ideas and closely held beliefs. Entries are honest and reveal self assessment. Entries consider new ideas but no willingness to revise ideas.	Entries show willingness to reveal ideas and closely held beliefs, but not examine or revise them. Entries are descriptive without critical self-examination.	Entries show no willingness to examine closely held beliefs. Entries dogmatically maintain previously held beliefs.
Depth of Reflection	7	6	4	0
	Entries refer to specific parts of the text. Provides evidence of willingness to revise ideas and beliefs. Clearly describes a plan of action. Shows how basic values and assumptions changed.	Entries refer to specific parts of the text. May reveal hidden assumptions, but does not question those assumptions. May consider a plan of action, but does not develop it.	May reference the text but not specific parts. Evidence of willingness to consider new ideas, but not willingness to revise beliefs. No evidence of change in attitude or approach.	Entries make no reference to the text. Reflection does not move beyond describing events.