LEARNING FROM LEARNING JOURNALS: THE BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF USING LEARNING JOURNAL ASSIGNMENTS

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This paper reflects upon what we have learned in seven years of using Learning Journals with adult learners in our MBA Organizational Behavior courses. We examine various types of Learning Journals and the different pedagogical purposes they may serve. We discuss the theoretical grounding for using reflective writing as a learning strategy and the objectives of this assignment, emphasizing development of critical thinking. We examine challenges in evaluating such assignments and limitations of the assignment with regard to student differences. Finally we look at the effectiveness of the assignment and pose questions for consideration when implementing a Learning Journal strategy.

Keywords: learning journals; management education; reflective writing; critical thinking

This article focuses on the way we use learning journals in our MBA classes. The learning journal assignment has been crafted carefully and has evolved over time to meet multiple objectives. Our initial use of learning journals was not theory based. Rather it was based on intuition and developed with experience. We intuitively believed what Daudelin (1996) clearly

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articulates: Managerial learning is a direct consequence of both formal and informal reflection. We believed that regular reflection on course topics as they relate to students' work and life experiences would benefit students in a variety of ways. We wanted students to critically explore course topics and we felt that requiring regular reflection would facilitate student learning.

We have learned a great deal in our use of journals, and as committed teachers we believe that through critical assessment of our pedagogy (Bailey, Saparito, Kressel, Christensen, & Hooijberg, 1997) we can learn more and share that learning with others. This article is our reflection on the use of learning journals.

Theoretical Grounding for the Assignment

Underlying the assignment is our assumption that learning depends on the reflective integration of theory with experience. Simply reading about the concepts is insufficient. This assumption is in no way new or novel. Plato, following the method of his mentor, Socrates, pushed his disciples to constantly question underlying causation (recall “the cave” dialogue). Rousseau believed that people continued to grow and learn by reflecting on the surrounding world. Philosopher John Dewey (1916) wrote in his famous treatise Democracy and Education that thoughts must be applied and tested to become learned knowledge. Brockbank and McGill (1998) state that the original ideas for universities were based on “self reflection as the means to higher forms of understanding” (p. 27). The movement in active learning (Sharan, 1994; Shulman & Keislar, 1966; Slavin, 1990) emphasizes learning through active engagement of the senses. This learning journal assignment simply formalizes and requires students to do the critical and reflective thinking in a written format as an integral part of the course.

Learning journals have been used in a wide variety of courses, from literature (Ross, 1998) to statistics (Sgoutas-Emch and Johnson, 1998) to nursing (Durgahee, 1998). Some of these journals are purely reflective (Cooper, 1998; Gorman, 1998), but others (Fisher, 1996) require students to integrate readings, observations, and experiences. Given this diversity of use, the term learning journal probably means something different to each of us. However, all learning journals share a common element: Students write about and reflect on personal experience as it relates to course content.

Beyond the common element of reflecting on experience, learning journals take a variety of forms depending on desired learning outcomes. The design and implementation of journaling activities are as diverse as courses,
students, and instructors (King & Higgins, 1998). Figure 1 illustrates how journals may vary along two primary continua. The vertical axis indicates that journal assignments may vary in degree of structure. For example, a structured assignment may require students to address a set of guiding questions. On the other hand, an unstructured format may call upon students to engage in open-ended, stream-of-consciousness writing. The horizontal axis illustrates that the desired learning outcomes of the journals may be inwardly or outwardly focused. When learning outcomes have an inward focus, the journal’s purpose becomes one of developing self-awareness. When the assignment has an outward focus, its purpose is concerned more with developing knowledge of course material. The role of the journal in the assessment strategy of the course varies along this continuum as well. Internally oriented

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**Figure 1: Types of Reflective Writing Assignments**

Structured

- Guiding questions for personal development and self-assessment
- Take-home exams

Unstructured

- Personal journals; stream-of-consciousness writing

Focus of learning outcomes

Inward: e.g., self-awareness; personal growth; self-assessment

Outward: e.g., course content; evaluation

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journals may be used by students for self-assessment of progress toward their personal development goals. Externally focused journals may be used as a way for students to demonstrate to the instructor their knowledge of course material.

Our learning journal assignment is a semistructured writing assignment that covers course topics as they apply to personal experience. Details of the assignment and its requirements may be found in Appendix A.

Objectives of the Assignment

The design of the assignment was driven by three objectives. First, we wanted to provide a way for students to learn and practice the conceptual skills necessary in their managerial and leadership roles. Second, we wanted a learning strategy that effectively facilitated comprehension and retention of course material. Finally, we wanted an effective means of assessing that comprehension.

In the more than 7 years that we have been using learning journals, we have found that they do accomplish these objectives. As we have noted, our initial use of learning journals was not theory based but rather evolved through intuition and experience. We find, however, that research on cognitive skills and learning corroborates our discoveries as well as explains how learning journals accomplish these objectives.

LEARNING JOURNALS AS SKILL DEVELOPMENT

The learning journal assignment gives our students an opportunity to practice critical skills needed in contemporary organizations. For more than 25 years, organizational researchers have argued that the work of a manager goes beyond technical competencies to encompass interpersonal roles and conceptual skills (Katz, 1974; Mintzberg, 1973). More recently, strong arguments have been made for developing the ability to reflect, think critically, and continuously learn (Daudelin, 1996; Salner, 1999; Schon, 1983; Seibert, 1999; Senge, 1990a, 1990b). Daudelin (1996) points out that reflection is increasingly becoming a part of organizational life. Salner (1999) has argued that in order to prepare future managers for their roles in learning organizations they must develop their ability to reflect upon, question, and critically evaluate what they “know.” Development of these conceptual skills is critical in MBA programs inasmuch as students are preparing to lead today’s complex organizations through turbulent environments.
Learning journals help students hone their ability to reflect. Daudelin (1996, p. 70) defines reflection as “the process of stepping back from an experience to ponder, carefully and persistently, its meaning to the self through the development of inferences.” She connects reflection to learning by saying that learning occurs when the student uses those inferences to approach the world in a way that would not have been used if the reflection had not taken place. In this assignment, we ask students to ponder personal experiences as they relate to a course topic and to make that topic personally meaningful by using it to guide some impending or future action.

Daudelin’s (1996) examples of reflection include journaling, business writing, assessment instruments (solitary reflection) and problem-solving sessions, discussions with colleagues, and mentoring and feedback discussions (group reflection). Although our assignment is referred to as a journal and appears to be primarily an individual activity, it allows for students to draw upon group as well as solitary methods. For instance, whereas some students write journals as introspective pieces, others write them as department evaluations or as developmental critiques of self-assessment results. Still other students choose to use course information as a basis for work group problem solving, or in conjunction with a feedback session for a subordinate. In the latter case, the students “reflect with others” then reflect on the reflection. What is happening in all cases, however, is that students are practicing a reflective process that can then be transferred to other settings where thoughtful action is called for.

Along with the development of the ability to reflect, learning journals develop critical thinking by requiring students to engage course material at higher cognitive levels. Learning journals move students through all levels of Bloom’s taxonomy (Bloom, 1956), thus giving students a model of, and practice with, the critical-thinking process. Brookfield (1987) notes that critical thinking also has an action component. Reflection and critical thinking combine to add value to organizational action when we act upon that which we have critically reflected. Daudelin (1996) describes this as a four-stage process: articulating the problem, analyzing and searching for possibilities, formulating and testing a tentative theory to explain the problem, and acting (or deciding whether to act). We have designed this process into the required components of the assignment. Students must identify an event in their experience that will be explored in the journal (articulation), and then must analyze that experience using course concepts (analysis). Next, students are expected to evaluate and think creatively about the results of their analysis, formulating hypotheses about why the events happened as they did (explana-
Finally, students must think about the meaning of their analysis and evaluation as it relates to some present or future action (action). A student who fulfills the requirements of the learning journal assignment (i.e., one who works through all four stages of the reflection process) has the opportunity to practice reflection in the two ways identified by Seibert (1999). Coached reflection is a structured approach that guides a person to think through an experience and to identify what they learned from it. Reflection-in-action is unstructured, spontaneous reflection that occurs in the midst of engaging in a challenging experience. This type of reflection includes not only insight into the experience (Stages 1 through 3) but also an action component (Stage 4). Thus, we expect that by the end of the term our students will have practice with a cycle of thought and action that they will be able to apply beyond our classroom.

Having action-taking as an integral component of this assignment is not just important to skill development. It turns out that when we ask our students to act on their learning in this way, we also are supporting their overall learning process.

LEARNING JOURNALS AS AN ADULT LEARNING STRATEGY

As noted earlier, our course is part of an executive MBA program, thus our students are adult learners. Learning journals allow us to convey managerial skills in ways that fit the needs of this particular group of students.

Adult learners approach learning differently from their younger counterparts. Instructors can expect adult learners to be more self-directing, to be internally motivated (adults endeavor to learn what they want to learn), to be task- or problem-centered in their orientation to learning, to have an experience base that serves as a resource for their learning, and to be active learners who learn by doing and participating (Grissom, 1992; Knowles, 1990, 1992).

In view of these attributes, we find that learning journals provide an optimal way for students to meaningfully engage the content of our course. First, learning journals enable students to self-direct, because students determine their own focus within each assignment. Second, journals require students to anchor the new learning in personal experience. In addition, we encourage our students to use the learning journal to solve actual work problems. Some practice a skill discussed in class; others implement an intervention associated with the topic. As noted above, this reflection-in-action facilitates learning. Students who use their journals to resolve work problems have reported that doing so has given them an exceptional understanding of the material.
LEARNING JOURNALS AS ASSESSMENT TOOLS

Finally, in addition to helping students achieve the learning outcomes of the course, learning journals support our goal of using an appropriate means of assessing what our students have learned.

A central tenet of effective assessment is that test content should match what the student is expected to learn (Herman, Aschbacher, & Winters, 1992). We are primarily concerned with students’ ability to identify organizational behavior concepts as they arise in their experiences and then to apply concepts and models in ways that facilitate effective performance. Such objectives call for an evaluation method that asks students to show that they can apply, analyze, devise solutions, and critique. The learning journal assignment is structured accordingly. The evaluation criteria for the assignment are found in Appendix B.

Our experience with using learning journals as an evaluation method is consistent with McKeachie’s (1986) contention that reading such assignments provides the instructor with valuable insight into what students are learning. When we read students’ journals, we attend to their interpretation of the course concepts and judge the extent to which they understand the material. When we read their descriptions of their experiences through the lenses of theories, we have further evidence of their grasp of the meaning of the material. When we read their analysis of personal incidents and solutions they propose, we are given evidence of their ability to work with course concepts. If they demonstrate that they can transfer learning from reading to reality, we feel more confident that their understanding will be retained beyond the end of the term. Thus, we have found that grading journals gives us a good sense of what students understand and what they do not, in terms of both concepts and skills. This helps us critically assess our effectiveness in teaching (Bailey et al., 1997), as well as the students’ effectiveness in learning. Each time we consider alternatives to the learning journal, our reading of the journals convinces us otherwise. We find ourselves echoing McKeachie’s (1986, p. 90) words that “the impact on the teacher of what students are learning seems to be greater and more vivid” with journals than with any alternative.

Challenges Using Learning Journals

Despite the enormous benefits of learning journals (to both students and professors), many fundamental issues remain problematic. In this section, we identify issues with which we still struggle and share how we attempt to deal with some of the concerns. These issues can be classified as evaluation and feedback, and individual differences.
EVALUATION AND FEEDBACK

One of our most vexing problems in using journals is that of evaluation and feedback. Every semester we struggle with issues associated with evaluation.

To Grade or Not to Grade

Initially we wrestled with the issue of whether journals should be graded. We know that our students, like most people, put their energy into what is rewarded (Kerr, 1995). Their time is limited as they juggle school, work, and family. This points toward grading journals to signal the importance we place on this learning tool.

In addition, traditional methods of evaluating student learning, such as exams, fall short of measuring the depth of comprehension that we expect. We were searching for something that not only measured knowledge but also the student’s ability to apply and be fluent in those concepts. Grading the journals allows us to both signal their importance and use them as a substitute for exams.

Nonetheless, strong arguments against grading journals exist. Grading is time consuming and difficult. We read to determine if the student not only understands the content she or he is discussing but also if she or he is using the course material in the spirit of the assignment. We write extensive feedback pointing out what students have done effectively and how they can improve. Even with a structured evaluation form (see Appendix B), we invest significant time in grading the journals. In an average semester, depending on class size, we spend 50 to 70 hours reading and evaluating the learning journals.

Grading also forces us to make uncomfortable value judgments. For example, although one rationale for using journals is to provide students with practice in written communication, is it reasonable to penalize poor writers? We conclude that competent managers must have reasonable written communication skills. Therefore it is not unreasonable to expect proficient writing. We do not expect superb writing, although it is always a pleasure to read such submissions. However, we do expect and evaluate the journals for coherence, logic, and basic grammar.

Some students are more comfortable discussing issues than others are. Is it fair to reward students who are more comfortable with introspection? The learning journal is designed to develop students’ managerial skills. The ability to analyze, and clearly present that analysis, is a critical management skill. We may reward some students who already possess those skills, but everyone has growth potential. Furthermore, we endeavor to help all of our students develop the ability to analyze and report that analysis. We feel that we would
be doing our students a disservice if we permitted them to do only what was
comfortable.

Furthermore, we balance the journal’s written presentation of analysis
with class participation and oral presentation. Students are expected to orally
present and debate organizational issues during class discussions.

What Do We Grade?

Once we addressed the “grade or not to grade” question, the more difficult
“what to grade” issue had to be dealt with. Although we do grade the journals,
and have identified what we will reward, this is continually subject to
modification.

One way of grading could be a simple dichotomous “Is it done or isn’t it?”
This simple approach allows the highly motivated student to put in substan-
tial effort and (one hopes) derive substantial benefit. Students who are less
interested in examining their workplaces could provide a more cursory
assessment.

There are advantages to a dichotomous approach. It would make grading
simple and eliminate a major source of student complaints (a perception of
subjectivity in the grading process). However, we are concerned that a sim-
plified grading scheme would create the same problems as a “no grade”
approach. That is, it might signal students that the learning journals could be
at the bottom of their very busy priority lists.

Our evaluation method is designed to not only evaluate learning but also
help students continue learning. We try to make it very clear to students why
we use journals, and what we hope they learn from them. As much as possi-
ble, we try to clearly communicate our expectations. Students receive the
evaluation form (see Appendix B) as part of the course syllabus. We also use
it to score the journals themselves. The evaluation form identifies the jour-
nal’s required activities, and provides a clear description of what one must
provide to receive any of the possible point values. Clear writing and thinking
are valued, and the students are notified of this from the outset.

Students must provide evidence that they understand the concepts associ-
ated with each topic. As Locke and Brazelton (1997, p. 47) so clearly identify,
“Writing confronts students . . . with what they know and don’t know about an
issue.” We do not expect a comprehensive review of the theories discussed,
however we do expect theories to be used correctly. This aspect of the evalua-
tion is closest to more traditional essay exams. Most students are quite com-
fortable with providing evidence of understanding.
A good journal entry moves beyond simply reporting and applies the theories to the students’ own work and life experiences. Theories can be used to explain observations, or observations can be used to investigate theories. Some students are comfortable with the integration of experiences and theories, but this is a new skill for many of them. A common mistake is to simply describe workplace activities that seem associated with the topic.

Critical thinking is a fundamental expectation of both the class and the journals. We evaluate students on their ability to critically analyze and cogently express that analysis. Students rarely have significant experience in critical analysis. For many students, the learning journal is the first written work that they have done in a long time. Even for accomplished writers, the idea of integrating personal observations with analysis is often a new concept.

We use a variety of methods to coach students in the direction of critical analysis. We integrate critical analysis into class discussions and explicitly indicate how this could translate into journals. Class discussions highlight how course material might be used in a journal entry. A general template of what constitutes a good journal entry is discussed in class and posted on the instructor’s Web page. We willingly provide unlimited explanations and examples throughout the term. Some students consider this overkill, but we want them to understand our expectations clearly. Finally, we provide students with extensive feedback on their analyses. The exercise derives its value from students doing it correctly.

One method has been particularly effective for coaching students toward critical thinking in their journals. To complement examples given in class, and also to accommodate learning style differences, three sample outlines for each journal topic are posted on the instructor’s Web page. An excerpt from the Web page is shown in Appendix C. Students may use these examples as a template for writing their entries, or they can simply use them to spark their thinking. The success of this tool is derived from the following:

- the examples provide detail and structure for those who need it;
- students have access to the information when they need it, rather than at the end of class (10 p.m.) when they are tired; and
- any student who follows this template has a good chance of gaining the learning experience that this assignment is designed to create.

Following the format is an option, so although it helps some students achieve success, it does not limit the creativity of others. As long as students meet the criteria for the assignment, they can complete the assignment however they choose.
Frequency of Grading and Its Learning Impact

We have experimented with collecting students’ journals both twice during the term and weekly. We initially believed that by having the students turn in four or five entries at once, they might take a more integrative approach to the assignment. However, recent experiences tell us that there may be greater learning value in collecting the assignments weekly. Because students get performance feedback earlier in the term, there is a greater likelihood that more of the entries will be of higher quality. When the students write a higher quality entry, they are by necessity forced to “stretch” in their thinking about the material. Although the evidence is anecdotal at the moment, we believe two observations are worth pursuing. First, we notice better student products by the end of the term. Second, we suspect that the practice of thinking critically in the journals transfers to other course activities, such as group papers and presentations. If this continues to be the case, then we will advocate weekly grading of the assignment.

We believe that the decision to grade or not to grade, what to grade, and how frequently to grade should be dictated by the intended purpose(s) and the expected outcomes. We use journals in our organizational behavior class for the purposes of promoting in-depth learning of the material and evaluating the extent of that learning. The primary outcomes desired are that the student understands the material, can apply it, and can critically evaluate organizational problems with it. Although we also are interested in our students gaining self-awareness and learning to become reflective leaders, we do not attempt to measure that gain. Consequently, our evaluation method is designed to measure comprehension of and fluency with course content, rather than self-development.

Instructors who use learning journals for introspective purposes, to facilitate self-awareness, or to achieve self-development outcomes may choose a nonevaluative or dichotomous approach. If the outcomes are such that the student best knows evidence of achievement, an instructor may even consider self-evaluation to be the best choice.

Biases in Grading

We believe that the grading issue is complicated by the fact that, when done well, the learning journal is a very personal piece of writing. Unlike other writing (e.g., essay exams or reports on a topic), students invest their self-image in these learning journals. Consequently, they may take a poor grade as a personal affront, a reflection on themselves as managers. This
requires us to be very vigilant against potential bias in our evaluations. As organizational behavior instructors, we are keenly aware of the potential for cognitive bias (Bazerman, 1986).

We recognize that the halo effect threatens our objectivity. This works in both directions; either a positive or a negative overall impression can influence evaluation. Our first line of defense is to read and evaluate each submission blindly; that is, unaware of the author. This prevents us from unfairly awarding credit to a student who is articulate in class discussions but whose journal has significant opportunity for improvement. Sometimes the blind review surprises us; a very quiet student may write very articulately. Grading the journals without knowing the author allows us to restrict the evaluation to the journal, rather than the student overall.

Yet, despite our best efforts, the halo effect still persists. A particularly well-written journal may be looked upon more favorably than it deserves, from a content perspective. Conversely, when we must work to decipher a particularly poorly written submission, we often find it difficult to grant it sufficient credit for content. We are aware of this potential, and continually refer to the evaluation criteria to ensure that we are scoring the submission appropriately.

Another cognitive bias that potentially influences our evaluations is the “like me” bias. When we find ourselves empathizing with a particular writer, we try to step back and be on guard for inflating the score. Here too, our evaluation sheet provides us with a helpful benchmark. Occasionally, we ask one another to review and evaluate a student’s journal. Specifically, if we have given (or are contemplating giving) a very low score we often seek a second opinion. Generally we are in agreement.

In summary, when making the decisions whether to grade and what to grade, instructors might ask themselves the following questions: What is (are) the primary purpose(s) of using learning journals in this course? Is that purpose something that, when accomplished, is gradeable? That is, is the accomplishment of purpose manifested within the student or through external evidence? What are the outcomes expected from learning journals? What will be the evidence that those outcomes have been achieved? How tangible, behavioral, or observable is that evidence? Who is in the best position to gather the evidence and thus do the evaluating? The extent to which the accomplishment of purpose and the desired outcomes can be specified and observed should influence the decisions of whether to grade and how that grading should be done. In conducting the evaluation, instructors should structure the process to guard against cognitive biases.
INDIVIDUAL DIFFERENCES

Differences in style and culture present the second major challenge in using learning journals. We wonder if this assignment, both as a learning tool and as an evaluation instrument, is more appropriate to some students than others.

Style Differences

When we examine student differences in terms of Myers-Briggs type (Keirsey & Bates, 1984; Myers & Myers, 1993), we suspect that certain types find the assignment to be a very natural way of learning and demonstrating understanding of the material. For others, the process may be so unnatural, that the learning benefits are minimal and their writing may not represent their grasp of the content.

A few examples illustrate our concerns. Learning journals, as a means of solitary reflection (Daudelin, 1996), may enhance the learning experience of introverts who may use the journals to voice ideas that they may not have formulated during the class discussion. The assignment seems to be a natural for intuitive students, because it asks students to integrate concepts or ideas with the bigger picture of their personal experience and to envision future implications or action. Intuitive thinkers are likely to be at home with the opportunity for analysis and critical evaluation. Intuitive feelers are likely to find it meaningful to weave together course concepts and work relationships.

On the other hand, sensing or thinking types may find the assignment disconcerting. In approaching course material, a sensing or thinking type would be most comfortable impersonally taking in and reporting on the facts and data, but with learning journals we ask them to tinker with course concepts, to imagine the larger scope of material, and, furthermore, to make it personal. In addition, they may perceive that, as a substitute for an exam, journals are too subjective and too imprecise (there is, of course, no one right answer in this assignment!), thus not a fair measurement of their knowledge.

Such students’ needs are a legitimate concern given that we are likely to have all types of learning styles in our classes. However, we also recognize that another constructive use of “typing” is for individuals to learn to develop those areas that are not their preference. Thus, we strive to strike a balance between serving learning styles and giving students learning experiences that develop new competencies.

The dilemma of individual differences as they relate to learning journals raises many questions: Are we effectively addressing all students’ learning styles? Can all students achieve the learning objectives through this assign-
ment? What is the appropriate balance between learning course content and developing new skills? Is there perceived fairness in our evaluation? Of course this assignment does not stand alone. We believe that when balanced with other learning and evaluation activities of the class, these questions are answered favorably.

**Cultural Differences**

The use of learning journals with international students raises a number of dilemmas for us. English is a second language for the majority of our international students. Thus, reading and understanding may be easier than writing for these students. It is possible that the student has read and fully understands the concepts, but has difficulty communicating the level of comprehension. Although this could occur with American-born students, it is a much larger issue with foreign-born students.

This returns us to the issue of evaluation. We could be sympathetic to the difficulty of writing in a second (or in some cases third) language, and not penalize communication, grammar, and spelling problems. Alternatively, we could take the position that the standards are objective, and it is unfair to all the students if any students receive preferential treatment. To date, we tend to be more lenient with the writing of foreign-born students only in the areas of spelling, grammar, and clarity. Despite some trepidation that we are compromising standards, we opt to help these students improve their written skills, without penalty. However, we are not lenient in terms of the essence of the assignment. Foreign students, like U.S. natives, must integrate both personal experiences and analysis of the concepts.

Our experiences concur with Angelova and Riazantseva’s (1999) suggestions that sensitivity to foreign students’ challenges requires extra effort in evaluating their work. Instructors can learn the students’ communication patterns through attentive observation of the student in class and in after class discussions. This compromises the “blind review” designed to reduce halo bias, but it allows us, with considerable effort, to reasonably assess the work. We find this approach effective with the few international students currently in our program. However, it is very unclear what the impact would be if the numbers were larger.

More challenging than the language issue are cultural issues. We find that many international students are from high power distance cultures (Hofstede, 1993), which value a formal, respectful teacher-student relationship. The nature of the learning journal assignment may be problematic for these students. We have noticed that some find it difficult to critically assess or chal-
lenge either the professor or the readings. Their journals tend to include thorough discussions of various theories, but frequently fail to include personal applications and critiques.

We try to work closely with these students and provide them with extensive feedback. However, perhaps their discomfort with personal disclosure or issues with the power distance make some international students reluctant to engage in developmental conversation with us. The sample outlines on the Web page provide guidance for those reluctant to meet face-to-face.

These cultural issues raise a fundamental question: Is the learning journal an appropriate learning and evaluation tool for international students? Although we are convinced that it is the most appropriate tool for our U.S.-born students, we are uncertain about its applicability cross-culturally. Given the small number of international students in our program, we believe that the benefits to the many outweigh the difficulties for the few. However, as the number of international students increases, we may need to redesign this assignment.

Learning journals offer as many challenges as they do benefits. Appendix D looks comprehensively at the desired outcomes of using learning journals and the challenges and considerations involved. It also offers students’ responses with regard to these issues.

Evidence of Effectiveness

Having said that we believe that journals are excellent vehicles for student learning and assessment, but that there are considerable problems using them in this way, what do we find most persuasive about using learning journals in our MBA classes? Much of our conviction about the effectiveness of journals stems from what we see in, or hear from, our students.

We have no scientific measurement of learning journals’ effectiveness. However, we have witnessed enough positive student outcomes of journals to make us believers. A few stories from our classes will illustrate how students have implemented course ideas in their workplace, questioned and changed personal assumptions, and woven together a comprehensive understanding of course concepts.

We continuously see entries that demonstrate how students put course concepts to use, thus adding value to their work setting. For example, one student used his journal to focus his thinking on his expectations for himself and for his staff. The inquiry helped him clarify and shape the specific goals that he used in his new role as work unit leader. Another student addressed her team’s communication problems by administering a short Myers-Briggs type
indicator (Myers, 1962) to her fellow team members. By reflecting on the interaction in her team meetings, and using a class handout discussing how type influences group dynamics, she recognized opportunities to improve group dynamics. She then created a plan for facilitating future team meetings. Throughout the semester, this student kept her instructor aware of her team’s progress.

We also witness students attempting personal transformations in their journal entries. Students will sometimes identify personal growth issues that can be addressed in their entries. For example, one student probed the question “How and why am I motivated?” He began with the query,

One of the things that I have always struggled with during my professional employment is motivation. I know I can put a lot more effort into my work than I presently do but, I really do not feel motivated to do so.

The student continued by pursuing questions such as, Where do I feel exceptionally good and bad about my job? What factors do I pay attention to when I feel motivated and unmotivated? Why have some settings been motivational for me, and others have not? How could I identify situations in which I will feel motivated in the future? At the end of his inquiry, he claimed to have a changed perspective regarding his motivation.

Finally, we have seen students shift their personal perspective in a cumulative manner across journal entries. For example, one student realized that apparent individual motivation problems among his coworkers reflected situational, leadership, and organizational culture problems. As the complexity of the difficulties became clearer, the student moved from blaming his colleagues to assessing potential solutions. In his final entry, on organizational change, he explored options for change and assessed the likelihood of success. Although his prognosis for large-scale transformation was bleak, it was more realistic than his original perspective of “fire the slackers.” For this student, following his topic across multiple concepts not only gave him an understanding of complex interrelationships in the whole system but also brought about a shift in his “mental model” of his colleagues.

Earlier, we described how the learning journal assignment was designed to give our students practice with critical thinking. Has our experience borne this out? Yes! Nearly every term a student tells us that the journal assignment prompted thought about issues in ways she or he never would have thought of before. Some find the practice of reflecting in journals so compelling that they decide to continue doing so after the class has ended. Anecdotal evidence suggests that repeated practice with critical thinking in the journals influences higher level thinking in other course assignments. For example,
when weekly grading of journals focuses students’ attention more on critical thinking, group presentations seem to demonstrate a parallel pattern of critical thinking. Presentations become more focused on analysis, evaluation, and synthesis of ideas into action plans. Of course, one group presentation doth not a critical thinker make. We concur with Salner’s (1999) observations that the development of such skills is a slow process, often not observable within a 14-week term. It is likely that the contribution that learning journals make to the development of this managerial competency may not be evident in the short time we are with the students.

Such personal and professional outcomes, plus the growth in conceptual skills that we notice throughout the term, have made us believers in the learning journals. Each time we witness a student experiencing an “Aha!” and each time we observe a student thinking critically about experience through the lens of organizational behavior, it is enough to convince us to keep the assignment in our course design, despite the challenges it presents us.

Conclusion

We believe that learning journals add value to our organizational behavior course in three ways: they teach essential skills needed by managers in today’s complex and chaotic organizations, they meet the needs of adult learners, and they provide an appropriate assessment vehicle.

Learning journals, of course, do not stand alone in preparing MBA students for leading the organizations of the future. They are one portion of a total learning strategy in our organizational behavior course. Learning journals enable students to develop skills and understanding at the individual level. When used in combination with assignments that foster group competencies, the learning that takes place in our classes is not only knowledge of the subject matter but also knowledge of self in the context of that subject matter.

Journaling is a tool that students can continue to use throughout their organizational (and nonwork) lives. By regularly and intentionally inquiring into their thoughts and actions, they practice continuous learning and ensure their receptiveness to new options and possibilities for guiding their organizations.
Appendix A
Learning Journal Assignment

The Learning Journal Assignment (excerpt from the course syllabus)

Learning Journals

Each week, students will submit a written account of personal experience as it relates to specific course topics.

RATIONALE

Effective managers are people of reflection, as well as of action. Today’s business leaders must be multidimensional thinkers who are adept at critically evaluating situations and creating novel solutions to problems. The journal is a means of practicing higher order thinking and exploring the “tough” questions that have no easy answers. Learning journals will help you to arrive at new and significant insights into who you are in your managerial role, how you operate, and what actions you can take to further your success.

WHAT IS A LEARNING JOURNAL?

A learning journal is a semistructured written assignment that provides evidence that you can use to translate course concepts for use in the real world. Entries should apply the theories to your personal experiences, assess those experiences through the lenses of the theories, and propose some action steps based on the assessment. Your “experiences” can be those from any organizational setting—work or nonwork.

The learning journal differs from a personal journal in that it is more structured: It is not “stream-of-consciousness” writing, although it can certainly be written in an informal style. Each entry must demonstrate the application of course concepts and some critical thinking about those concepts. Because journals are substitutes for exams, you must clearly show your understanding of the concepts you choose to discuss. That is, clearly name them and explain in detail how they relate to your experience.

What a learning journal is not: A learning journal is not a copy of your class notes, it is not a summary of the reading materials, nor is it a forum for “opinionizing.”

CHOOSING WHAT TO WRITE

Entry 1—Introduction: Your first journal entry is a statement of your expectations for the course. Consider the course topics and how they apply to you; write about what you might like to gain from studying these topics. Identify your learning goals for the course.
Entries 2 through 9 should discuss a concept, theory, or practice from the readings for the topic (see topic list below). Do not attempt to write about everything within the topic of the entry! What you choose to write about should be meaningful to you, and should have a link to some personal experience (work or nonwork). The “personal experience” that you write about can come from a number of sources; for example, you may evaluate a past work or life experience, you may draw from a current organizational experience; or you may choose to practice a technique from the readings in your workplace and report on it. The following guidelines will help you structure your entries so as to fulfill the requirements of the assignment:

• Describe an incident in your experience that relates to an organizational behavior theory or theories or concept(s) within the entry topic.
• In your description, name the distinct elements of the theory or concept that you have chosen and show how they correlate to your experience.
• Analyze the experience—explain what happened in the terminology of the theory or concept.
• Draw conclusions and support them.
• Propose a precise future action or devise a plan based on your conclusions.

Ideas for content of journal entries are posted on the course Web page; however, you are free to discuss any concept covered in the readings for that topic. (You also are free to structure your writing creatively, as long as you meet the objectives of the assignment.)

Entry 10: Wrap-up: This entry should contain your reflections of what you have learned in the class. What did you learn that is significant to you? Were the learning expectations that you stated in the introduction fulfilled? What more do you want to learn about yourself and organizational behavior?

TOPICS

The topics and due dates for each learning journal entry are as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Entry Topics</th>
<th>Due Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Introductory entry</td>
<td>5/7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Personality and individual differences; values and attitudes</td>
<td>5/14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Perception; global and domestic diversity</td>
<td>5/21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Motivation</td>
<td>6/4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Performance management and performance communication</td>
<td>6/11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6. Groups/teams</td>
<td>6/18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7. Leadership; power and politics</td>
<td>6/25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8. Conflict</td>
<td>7/2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9. Organizational structure; work design</td>
<td>7/9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10. Wrap-up</td>
<td>7/16</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note that Entry Topics 2 through 9 correspond to the readings for a session. Each entry is turned in at the session following the one in which the topic is discussed.
Appendix A (continued)

EVALUATION CRITERIA, ENTRIES 2 THROUGH 9

Understanding: Journal entries should demonstrate knowledge and comprehension of the material about which you are writing.

Application: Journal entries should make an explicit (that is, not implied) connection between subject of the entry and personal experience.

Analysis, assessment, action plan: Journal entries should include analysis of personal experience using the elements of the concept(s) being discussed, and a conclusion or evaluation based on the results of the analysis. Journal entries should offer recommendations or devise action plans based on the conclusions of the analysis.

Professionalism: Journals should be free of grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors and readability problems.

Specific measurements for these criteria are included in the final pages of this syllabus.

All journal entries must be typed (word processed). Entries are typically about three typed pages in length. The journal is confidential between you and the professor.

Learning journals are substitutes for exams. Please take them as seriously as you would an exam. Late journals will not be accepted.

Appendix B

Learning Journal Evaluation Criteria

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-11</td>
<td>Examples define the concepts thoroughly; any definitions given are completely accurate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-9</td>
<td>Examples show basic understanding of the concept; definitions are adequate.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>Examples indicate some misunderstanding of the concept; some parts of definitions are misstated. Discussion of concept has omitted key elements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-5</td>
<td>Gives textbook definition only; does not translate definition into his or her own words.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-3</td>
<td>Alludes to, but does not name the concept she or he is discussing; does not discuss course concepts directly; does not elaborate to show understanding.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>Definitions or explanations of concept(s) are missing or completely inaccurate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

COMMENTS:
Appendix B (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Points</th>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>10-11</td>
<td>Connection between concept(s) and experience is fully demonstrated; concepts are named and their key elements are correlated with experience.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8-9</td>
<td>Limited use of personal experiences to illustrate course concepts or limited use of course concepts to explain personal experiences.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-7</td>
<td>General examples from experience are used in a very general discussion of course concepts; linkage is unclear.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-5</td>
<td>Only personal experience is discussed, with no clearly stated correlation to course concepts.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0</td>
<td>No personal examples used; entry summarizes but does not apply the readings.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

COMMENTS:

Analysis or evaluation or action: Should include analysis of experience using the elements of the concept(s) being discussed, and a conclusion or evaluation based on the results of the analysis; offer recommendations or devise action plans based on the conclusions of the analysis.

10-11 Logical analysis uses all parts of the concept being discussed. Analysis uses multiple concepts. Critically evaluates situation based on the analysis, and provides strong support for conclusions; identifies specific actions to be taken and plan for follow-up.

8-9 Logical analysis uses most of the elements of the concept. Evaluation or critique is supported by the findings of the analysis; identifies general actions that may be taken.

6-7 General analysis does not fully explore the concept. Evaluation or critique is not strongly supported, has some inconsistencies in reasoning. Lacks action plan or recommendations where there clearly could have been one; recommendations lack a rationale.

4-5 Weak analysis; position taken has internal inconsistencies. Lacks action plan or recommendations.

2-3 Entry is primarily unsupported opinion.

0 No analysis, evaluation, or critique of the subject of the discussion; lacks action plans or recommendations. Makes multiple illogical or inconsistent statements.

COMMENTS:

Professionalism: Free of grammar, spelling, and punctuation errors and readability problems.

7 Professional submission: free of grammar, spelling, punctuation, readability problems.
Appendix C

Journal Entry Templates

**Journal Entry: Leadership and Power and Politics**

1. Examine your own leadership behavior, skills, and attributes.

   **Apply:** Using the frameworks of the articles on leadership, conduct an in-depth study of yourself as a leader. (Or do this for a leader whom you know well.)

   **Analyze:**
   - Analyze your attributes and actions as a leader or manager, using the points made in the Kotter and Zaleznik articles.
   - Identify the leader behaviors in the Pagonis and Drucker articles that you observe in yourself, and those that you do not observe.

   **Assess:** Keep the above analysis in mind.

   Do you think you are more inclined to be a leader or a manager, or both?

   According to your analysis, are you implementing all the behaviors you would like to do to be the leader you want to be?

   Or do you want to be a leader at all? How did you score on the “leadership motivation” instrument? How does that fit with the above analysis? Is there anything you would like to change?

   **Action:**

   - What steps will you take to become the leader you want to become?
   - Which of these steps do you anticipate will be easiest for you? Most difficult?
   - Or, if you think that being a manager is the more appropriate path, what steps will you take to do so?

2. Examine a situation in which you have observed one person influencing another.
Apply: Use the five power bases and the concept of dependency to explain and understand why this person did, or did not, have influence.

Analyze:
Dissect this interaction to show how the person made use of the five power bases, and what the reaction was.
Determine if the influence was a result of compliance or internalization.
Identify what the person did to create one or more of the three components of dependency, and how that affected the influence process.

Assess: Keep the above analysis in mind.
In view of the result achieved, and the impact of the influence, was power used wisely or unwisely in this example? Support your conclusion with your analysis.
Would you consider the use of power in this example to be a model for you, and why?

Action:
What could have been done to diffuse power in this situation? Name some specific actions that might have neutralized power or changed the dependent relationship, such that the degree of influence was changed.
Give specific examples of three tactics you will use the very next time you need to influence someone’s action.

3. Think about a situation you have been in where organizational politics were very evident.
Apply: Using the framework of the article “Manager as Politician,” explain and evaluate this situation.

Analyze:
Discuss the behaviors of the actors in this situation using the “skills” that are discussed in the article. Who used which skills? Give specific examples.
Show how these actions answer the questions regarding ethical political activity.

Assess: Keep the above analysis in mind.
How skillful were the politicians in your story? Was this ethical or unethical political action?
How comfortable were you personally with the politics in this situation? Look again at your score on the “Self-Monitoring” instrument (p. 58 in text). How do you think this might explain your level of comfort with the politics in this situation?

Action:
What is your personal strategy for dealing with organizational politics?
### Appendix D

**Outcomes, Impact, and Challenges of Using Learning Journals**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desired Outcomes and Rationale</th>
<th>Students Say . . .</th>
<th>Challenges and Considerations for Instructors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Effective method for learning content</td>
<td>“They say that you learn from your mistakes, but I am not sure that really happens unless you analyze your mistakes in detail. And writing these journals has allowed me to really delve into my successes and failures and find insight. It is this process that has truly made the course valuable to me, as I have been able to apply everything I have learned directly to me and my professional life.”</td>
<td>Clear explanation to students of what it means to connect experience to course material. Providing enough structure to frame the assignment, yet allowing freedom of choice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concepts and theory anchored in (integrated with) experience</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning is self-directed in the sense that students choose a focus that is meaningful to them</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effective method for learning important skills and practices</td>
<td>“In sum I suppose these journals haven’t been all bad. My 11 may never be considered some of today’s best literature, but it has made me think through some of the situations I have been in and help to see what is coming. Again, being a facts-and-figures kind of guy, it’s nice to have some concepts and theories to help mesh together different attitudes and opinions. And maybe, just maybe, occasional self-reflection isn’t all bad.” “Just taking the time to write down my thoughts gave me new insight into what I needed to do next. I plan to continue to use a journal throughout my career.”</td>
<td>Sensitivity to individual differences, both at the cognitive level and the demographic level (i.e., international students). Other learning strategies used in the course must support and be congruent with higher level thinking skills development. Evaluation criteria must include measurement of conceptual skills.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reflection and self-awareness</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Critical thinking and development of conceptual skills (analysis of complex management issues and interrelationship and evaluation of theories and actions)</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
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</table>
Appendix D (continued)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Desired Outcomes and Rationale</th>
<th>Students Say . . .</th>
<th>Challenges and Considerations for Instructors</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Best method for assessing comprehension</td>
<td>“The learning journals are good tools for thinking through the applications to real life, but they take more time than an in-class exam.”</td>
<td>Full attention must be given to the meaning of what the student is writing: grading journals requires a great deal of concentration. Awareness of cognitive biases. Development of sophisticated grading criteria. Time consuming to grade.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Learning journals tell us if the student understands how course concepts manifest themselves in organizational life.</td>
<td>“A few nights of studying (for an exam) would require far less work than having to write all of these journals. However, I must say that I learned considerably more in the process of writing these journals that I would have in taking two or three tests.”</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

References

Angelova, M., & Riazantseva, A. (1999). “If you don’t tell me, how can I know?”: A case study of four international students learning to write the U.S. way. Written Communication, 16(4), 491-525.


