

# Reflective Journals and Learning Logs

Reflective journals are personal records of students' learning experiences. Students typically are asked by their instructors to record learning-related incidents, sometimes during the learning process but more often just after they occur. Entries in journals and learning logs can be prompted by questions about course content, assignments, exams, students' own ideas or students' thought processes about what happened in a particular class period. Journals and learning logs are then submitted to the instructor for feedback. Both paper-based and online journals or logs can be turned in before or after each class period or at any other designated time.

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A student's writing style for journals and logs can be informal and sometimes inappropriate. However, to help students learn more about a particular subject or content, you can require students to write more formal entries using correct terminology, facts, and connections to course content. Consider providing guidelines and/or rules to help students write meaningful and authentic journals or logs.

Journals have long been used in exploratory writing activities but also can benefit the student beyond learning how to write. As with any instructional or learning activity, selecting to use reflective journals or learning logs as part of a course should fit your teaching style and also connect with the course learning goals and objectives (Bean, 1996). Because it takes time for students to write in their reflective journals or learning logs, so too, it will take time for you to read and respond.

*... there is evidence that the art of reflection can help boost students' critical thinking skills, encourage students to think about their own thinking (meta-cognition), and help students prepare for assignments and examinations...*

The literature is not consistent in defining the differences between reflective journals and learning logs. One may be considered less personal than the other; one might incorporate more instructor prompts and questions while the other might be more student-driven. "Journals often focus subjectively on personal experiences, reactions, and reflections while learning logs are more documentary records of students' work process (what they are doing), their accomplishments, ideas, or questions" (Equipped for the Future, 2004). However, there is evidence that the art of reflection can help boost students' critical thinking skills, encourage students to think about their own thinking (meta-cognition), and help students prepare for assignments and examinations (Homik, M. & Melis, E., 2007; Johnson, S., n.d.; RMIT, 2006).

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## **Types of Reflections**

Journals and learning logs can be used to reflect on a range of issues and situations from numerous viewpoints and perspectives (RMIT, 2006). RMIT (2006) lists six types of reflections. The following descriptions depict a reflection on university student groups and drinking. Possible student comments are in italics.

**Observations**—At this stage a student would write about what they actually saw or their viewpoint on a particular event. For example, *At the pre-game parties outside the stadium I saw student groups guzzling buckets of beer.*

*By reflecting on theories or ideas about cultural norms the student has connected the experience with what he or she has learned.*

**Questions**—Upon reflection, the student could ask the question, *Why do the all of the student groups drink together at football games but don't seem to get along when they don't drink?*

**Speculations**—After thinking about the situation, the student could reflect, *Maybe it's possible that that student groups drink because it's easier to socialize that way. Or, maybe they think that they have to drink because everyone else does!*

**Self-awareness**—At this point a student may place himself or herself in the situation by considering the ramifications. *I really don't think I need to drink to be able to socialize with my friends and think we would get into trouble if we decided to drink as much as the groups do.*

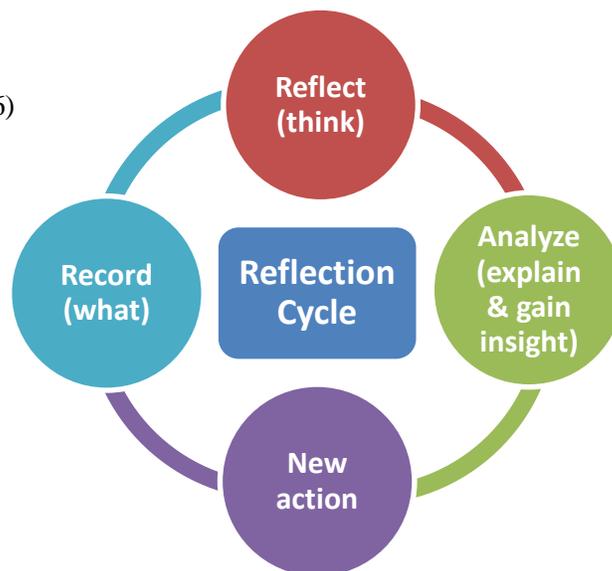
**Integration of theory and ideas**—By reflecting on theories or ideas about cultural norms the student has connected the experience with what he or she has learned. The student might write, *Social norm theory explains that particular group members think other group members drink more than their group does.*

**Critique**—This is where the student may self-reflect on or “critique” the situation by writing, *I can now reflect on my own drinking experiences to see if I really drink because my friends do.*

### The Reflection Cycle

Reflecting is a cyclical process, where recording ones thoughts (reflecting) “leads to improvement and/or insight” (RMIT, 2006). Improvement could mean progress, development, growth, maturity, enhancement, or any number of words which could imply change. In education, we want students to change for the better, to grow while learning and to mature into knowledgeable adults. Recording what has happened, reflecting on processes and analyzing to improve deeper learning all can lead to new dimensions of students’ inner selves. See Figure 1 below.

Figure 1  
Adapted from (RMIT, 2006)



There are a number of stages through which students progress when writing reflective journals or learning logs. Each source outlines the stage or process somewhat differently yet with a similar approach. The essence of these models is presented below as the fundamental method of reflective journal and learning log entries. Note that each of the items below could be modified to fit a personal situation (for the reflective journal) or a learning environment/situation (for the learning log).

*Key to reflective journals and learning logs is to see progression over a period of time and to “gain a sense of achievement.”*

### **Method of Creating Reflective Journals and Learning Logs**

It is suggested that students capture all formal and informal events which will prove useful when the time comes to return to the reflective journal or learning log for review. Students should focus on the areas which pose the most problems or difficulty in addition to those which are less problematic. Key to reflective journals and learning logs is to see progression over a period of time and to “gain a sense of achievement” (Dalhousie University, n.d.).

#### **“Write, record**

Describe the situation (the course, the context)  
Who was involved with the situation?  
What did they have to do with the situation?

#### **Reflect, think about**

What are your reactions?  
What are your feelings?  
What are the good and the bad aspects of the situation?  
What you have learned?

#### **Analyze, explain, gain insight**

What was really going on?  
What sense can you make of the situation?  
Can you integrate theory into the experience/situation?  
Can you demonstrate an improved awareness and self-development because of the situation?

#### **Conclusions**

What can be concluded in a general and specific sense from this situation/experience and the analyses you have undertaken?

#### **Personal action plan**

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 learned?”

(Sources include: Homik, M. & Melis, E., 2007; Johnson, S., n.d.; RMIT, 2006)

#### **Summary**

Reflective journals and learning logs can be useful as a teaching and learning tool. Either format can be adopted in any discipline where you can determine

what students are learning and in what areas they need assistance. Be open to read entries by students who might request feedback more often than scheduled.

### References

Bean, J. C. (1996). *Engaging ideas: The professor's guide to integrating writing, critical thinking, and active learning in the classroom*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Publishers.

Equipped for the Future (2004). Teaching/Learning Toolkit. *Learning logs*.  
[http://eff.cls.utk.edu/toolkit/tools\\_learning\\_logs.htm](http://eff.cls.utk.edu/toolkit/tools_learning_logs.htm)

Johnson, S. (n.d.) *Faculty strategies for promoting student learning*.  
<http://www.csudh.edu/titlev/learninglog.htm>

RMIT University, Study and Learning Centre, Melbourne, Australia (2006).  
*Reflective journals*.  
[http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/2\\_AssessmentTasks/assessment\\_tasks/reflective%20journal\\_LL/index.html](http://www.dlsweb.rmit.edu.au/lsu/content/2_AssessmentTasks/assessment_tasks/reflective%20journal_LL/index.html)

### Selected Resources

Dalhousie University (n.d.). *Learning logs*.  
[http://channelcontent.dal.ca/portfolio/r\\_learnlogs.html](http://channelcontent.dal.ca/portfolio/r_learnlogs.html)

Paskevicius, M (n.d.). *Conversations in the cloud: The use of blogs to support learning in higher education*.  
[http://bluelightdistrict.org/assets/SharedBlogs\\_2010\\_v5-completeFinal.doc](http://bluelightdistrict.org/assets/SharedBlogs_2010_v5-completeFinal.doc)

*Writing to learn learning logs* (n.d.).  
<http://www.wku.edu/3kinds/mflmpg.html#Independent%20Study>