A Journey of Journaling

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Abstract
The Journal is recognised as an excellent tool for experiential learning and for the discoveries of insights. For centuries theorists have recommended it and academics still acclaim it. So why do so many students loathe it? Does the journal really promote a search for “true” theory to enhance practice? Are we academics living in a fool’s paradise? Or are we perhaps not being all that true to ourselves? Using Kolb’s (1984) Experiential Learning Process this paper traces a journey of journaling by a tutor who promotes the use of the journal to early childhood education student teachers. The journey has covered a period of a few years and has been a sincere attempt to examine the processes of journaling. During the journey, the author has been disappointed at the quality of some students’ journaling; embarrassed at her own perceived hypocrisy; over-enthusiastic in presenting metaphors, and ultimately ambivalent about both the process and the product. Even with the journey incomplete, the author has to conclude: “I don’t know”.

Introduction
Writing a journal or personal diary has long been recognised as a way of discovering inner insights and determining what is meaningful to a person (Cooney, 1999; Katz, 1995). Various philosophers throughout history have written about how inner experiences can be accessed by journaling and then converted into conscious learning (Schon, 1995; Zepke, Nugent, & Roberts, 1996).

Academics at tertiary institutions praise the value of journaling as a learning tool. Many students, however, loathe it or would like to ignore it (November, 1996). The purpose of this study began as an attempt to find out why. Surely, journaling promotes a search for truth? If it does, then why can the students not see its worth?

There has been increased impetus in the past thirty years to design a structure to assist learning through journaling. According to Smith (1996) the best known formulation of experiential learning is that of Kolb (1984) who drew on the work of Piaget, Dewey and Lewin. Kolb’s Experiential Learning Process is cyclical. The learner can “enter” the cycle at any point, although it is customary to start at the
"Concrete Experience" or what is sometimes known as the "Event", which can be an everyday experience. The description is usually a brief, factual account of the incident or occurrence. Next, the event is examined in the light of "Reflective Observation". Here the student will examine the effects of the particular incident. The student may reflect on how they perceive the event. They may place their own insights and awareness on, and reactions to, the incident. Drawing from these, the student moves to "Abstract Conceptualisation". Here they examine what they see as the underpinning theory or philosophy. They may explore the notions on which the event could have been based. It would be common at this point to extract or deduce generalisation or hypotheses such as "If ... is the case, then .... would follow". There may be a range of circumstances involved in suggesting a general principle or making a generalisation. Attaining these "rules of thumb", prompts the student to the next stage where the learning can be transferred into a possible, future "real world" situation embodied in the next stage, that of "Active Experimentation". If the deduction had been accurate, then it proposes direction for the student for "next time". This stage is the planning stage because from the knowledge and understanding gleaned from the previous stages the student can plan what to do if in a similar situation again.

The process can be "used again" by the student to experiment with how they would make changes to similar events. This promotes the concept of learning taking place in the form of a spiral. Transference of learning takes place when similar actions are seen to have differing effects and the student can learn to anticipate differing effects from differing causes (Smith, 1996).

I expected the students to use Kolb's Experiential Learning Process and so I too used it as the underpinning theory for my journey of learning. This paper traces the journey of journaling I experienced while promoting the use of the journal to early childhood education student teachers over several years. The journey is described in five phases.

**Phase 1**

As part of a team of tutors I am involved in teaching a three-year Diploma of Teaching (Early Childhood Education) Diploma. It is field-based four-year course. I had spent a couple of years visiting students in their early childhood centres and reading their journals. Members of the teaching team did not feel that the students had reached the standard of quality writing we would have liked them to
attain. We had coached the students in groups and on a one-to-one basis, and we had provided them with notes and other material to help and guide them in their writing. Therefore we decided to look to ourselves to see where we could improve and called in the help of the Professional Development Unit.

The facilitator for a professional development workshop on journaling pointed out that four years was a long time to expect students to write their journals. I had never looked at it from that perspective. I have often kept a personal and professional journal but I have never continued one for such a length of time. I felt hypocritical in expecting this of the students. I realised that to write a journal each week for four years and still remain fresh, focussed and motivated was a huge undertaking for anyone. It was no wonder — with such a task for so long — that the quality appeared poor.

As a team, and within the curriculum, we split the expected tasks. Students would have to prepare a portfolio with specific requirements and the journaling requirement was reduced in terms of quantity. For the first time, we agreed to being tied down to numbers: During the students practicum of ten months each year they would have to write a minimum of 25 entries, of which 15 would be required to be in a format adapted from the Kolb model. This, we thought would not only set a standard, but would also provide "hangers" for the students' thoughts. Finally, it was decided that the whole team would attend the session where new students were introduced to journal writing and its processes at the beginning of the academic year, in order to standardise our expectations of the students' work.

![Diagram](image-url)
Phase 2
I held responsibility for teaching the new students. I thought that I would be as creative as possible by using an analogy of a duck. I used the Kolb cycle:

- The “Concrete Experience” or “Event” was seeing “Duck crossing” signs.
- My “Reflective observation” concluded that ducks in New Zealand are literate.
- The “Abstract conceptualisation” was the generalisation of: “If ducks can read signs, then they will know where to cross the road”. I could conclude that I need not worry about ducks as I drove because they would cross the roads at their own crossing, and
- “Active Experimentation” meant that I could drive freely – without worrying about ducks.

Obviously (I thought) the idea was so absurd, that we could do a number of progressive cycles of the duck analogy, and thereby return to various hypotheses to make the theory (from the Road Code) underpinning it all quite clear. I was wrong. Students shrieked in delight. They laughed about the duck, but most missed the metaphor completely. The students did not hold the monopoly on missing the point either. A week or so later some of my colleagues reported that while they really enjoyed the session they did not see how it related to Kolb’s cycle.

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\begin{align*}
\text{Teach the new students} & \quad \text{More notes to clarify} \\
\text{The duck metaphor was fun} & \quad \text{but students missed the point!} \\
\text{Could have been clearer!} & 
\end{align*}
\]

Phase 3
At about this time we had also been working on a matrix of expectations of quality and standards from students during each of their four years of study. This material was designed to help students identify at which level they were meant to write. In it, at Kolb’s “Abstract Conceptualisation” stage, it was explicitly stated that the students needed to “research” the notions and concepts which they had experienced.

“Researching” had not necessarily been the intention of this stage for me. I had rather understood it as a time of quiet reflection, a time of deciding what meaning the notion or concept had for me - not necessarily for some great thinker, theorist or educationalist. I was concerned that the students might lose some of the
spontaneity and magic of their journal writing. Nevertheless, I presented and
distributed the material and we then went to visit students in their Practicum
placements.

Phase 4
During Practicum visits, I found that most students obediently sought answers to
the events, which they had experienced, in various textbooks. I saw that the
spontaneity of some students' work was lost. I could not be sure if this was in an
effort to be obediently correct, or if it were the perennial problem of having
someone else (the tutor) read their journals? Much to my astonishment, however,
I liked the theorising. I liked the way in which the students leaned on the
theorists for their understanding of the events, and their explanations of notions
and concepts that arose. For me, this signalled an internal hypocrisy: I wanted the
students to appreciate the spontaneity and pleasure of personal growth and
understanding and yet I also felt satisfaction in finding that they were seeking
knowledge from books and bodies of knowledge. This internal paradox sent me
back to the textbooks, articles and another course of reflective writing.
Phase 5

I read many and various articles. I was able to confirm the large body of experiential learning theory that we had passed on to our students. Much information was erudite and almost absolute in assurance of the “best” way. The certainty left me uncertain.

One article, however, provided me with fresh insight. It was an article by Peter November (1997) who described in detail an 11 year excursion down the “reflection” road. He described various tensions and these are seen in his assessment of students’ learning as he changed the weighting of the “reflections” components. His struggles with his perceptions of students’ adaptations were refreshingly open. I found it very freeing that he admitted in the final discussion that he “was not practising what [he] eventually preached” and he asked “whether preachers of experiential learning are not doing the same?” (p. 297).

November (1997) concluded that he had found an explanation for his unease: “It was a fight between my rational self and my emotional self. A fight between modernism and postmodernism [and] postmodernism had won” (p.298).

What I came to understand is that I did not understand and that it is not important to understand. What is important is that we try to understand and that we learn and grow in the process. I came to learn that the process – and not the product – is important.

I felt freed of having to be the local expert, the buffet or guru of experiential learning. I could toss over the “authority” mantle that was so ill-fitting. I would continue to search for answers and to seek “the best way” but I no longer had to be certain of the road or the destination.

I believe that students are enjoying the new fruits of these discoveries. They have reported the excitement of updating earlier entries with new connections that they have made. Their questions reflect the shift from product to process; they no longer seek to write “the correct way” but rather their writing is flexible and
evolutionary. The content of their journals reflects the pleasure of discovering what may exist and also how the process can work for them. The process does not work for all students as some may never know the joy of self-discovery through journaling and some will always find it a “chore”. The students do, however, need to try to understand themselves - how they learn and how they grow. The process is important and on-going. It is never ending - such is the essence of learning.

References

ABOUT THE AUTHOR
Kim McEvilly is a tutor at the Waikato Institute of Technology. She has 15 years experience teaching students in early childhood and also in adult education. Currently she also works with students doing special investigations for their Bachelor Degrees in Applied Social Science.