

# An Instructor's Experience with and Students' Opinions about Reflection Journals

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## Vignette

The shift from face-to-face to online lessons due to COVID-19 created new challenges beginning in spring 2020 for EFL classes at my university. I felt disconnected from engagement and interaction with learners. At the same time, I was interested in finding new ways for students to self-evaluate, set goals, and process the lesson's contents, as I have long been interested in ways to foster learner autonomy. Program managers suggested reflection journals as an activity and area for research for the fall 2020 semester. As it was my initial experience using reflection journals, I thought that receiving student feedback would help deepen my understanding of the activity. I continued to seek learner feedback on the journaling activity each semester from fall 2020 to fall 2022.

## Definition of Reflection Journaling

Reflection: more than just recalling a past event but also processing and expressing thoughts about the event.

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Journaling: guiding learner self-reflection as well as encouraging self-regulation, self-knowledge, and motivation in learning.

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Reflection Journal

## Objectives

- For Instructors: To assess students' participation in class and their writing abilities; to provide an understanding and sense of achievement of lesson goals, such as through students' reflections about the lesson content.
- For Learners: To increase autonomy through goal-setting and self-assessment with more awareness of their performance; to provide assistance with life-long learning practices.

## Practical Implications

### Implementation

Journal prompts may focus on 1) a summary of the lesson's contents, 2) performance self-evaluation, 3) skills used in the lesson, 4) goals for the next lesson, and 5) general comments. Without prompts, it may be difficult for the learners to understand the purpose of the activity, which could result in their writing being more personal than academic. Below is an example of prompts used in a first-year debate class from fall 2020:

1. Summarize the main points learned in class.
2. What did your team do well in the debate? (Please give reasons and examples)
3. What did the other team do well in the debate? (Please give reasons and examples)
4. What can your team do to improve the debate?
5. What is important when making rebuttals?
6. What is important when judging a debate?
7. A goal for the next class.

## Learners' Opinions

To gather learner feedback, the final journal for fall 2020 had prompts which sought to discover 1) their opinions about the reflection journals on the development of their skills, 2) their ideas about if journals help them to remember the class contents, 3) their opinions about whether writing their goals helped with the achievement of the goals, and 4) their advice about the activity or any additional comments. The most frequently appearing themes in the learner feedback were the following:

- the development of writing proficiency.
- the creation of a writing habit/a writing opportunity.
- an opportunity to review and reflect on the learning process.
- time to process what is learned.
- analysis of their performance.
- a challenge of their abilities.

- awareness of goals/clarity of goals.

Additionally, two other areas to consider that appeared in the data:

- the level of difficulty.
- the necessity for review after submission.

### **Alternative Suggestions**

Instructors could journal simultaneously with learners. Prompts could be used to aid with instructor development. For example, if the instructor is uncertain about whether the lesson's goals were achieved, they could share these goals with the students at the beginning or in the journal; they could then ask for the students' comments about how much they remember the goals or how well they could complete the goal. The instructor could create their own journal prompts or use modified versions of the students' journal prompts to reflect the instructor's voice.

Based on their rapport with the class, the instructor may also want to share with their learners that they are also doing the activity, and perhaps in some classes, even share the contents of the journal with the students. This shared instructor's journal could provide a writing sample for the learners and help the instructor to develop a deeper connection with the learners through the shared activity.

### **Reflective Conclusion**

Though I have continued to use reflection journals, this section will only focus on the implementations in the fall 2020 and spring 2021 semesters.

### **First Implementation Reflections**

There were three main satisfactory outcomes: learners' writing skills developed, I understood better how they self-assess, and I saw their ability to set goals increase. However, there were also several areas for improvement. I was too rigid with prompts which may not have been useful, focused on the format more than content, and neglected the importance of the type of classes. There was also a gap between the time learners spent writing and I spent grading, as students took time writing, while I only quickly skimmed their submissions. Reading the students' comments after the first implementation gave me a better understanding of how to create a

more meaningful activity and provided me with more confidence for future uses of the activity.

### **Second Implementation Reflections**

Since I did the activity a second time in spring 2021, my confidence with it increased. However, since I had more experience using reflection journals, I forgot to solicit regular feedback about the activity. However, in the middle of the semester, one journal prompt asked the students to review their second journal and reflect on their completion of the task in comparison to their sixth journal. This helped some students to see the improvement in their writing skills. Looking forward, I will try to be more conscious of seeking learner feedback about the activity so that the necessary adjustments can be made.

Using reflection journals and seeking out learner feedback continuously since the fall of 2020 until the fall of 2022 has helped me to feel more confident in using the activity as I understood how to create journal prompts that will aid the students in reflection, assessment, and goal-setting. In addition, sharing about reflection journals on numerous occasions with peers in professional development settings also prompted me to re-examine learners' voices for the development of my teaching practice. When using new activities, getting feedback from the learners is beneficial to make language learning more meaningful for both the students and their teacher. Sharing about such activities with peers also helps the teacher develop their activities, and in turn, their teaching practice.

### **Author Bio**

**Devon Arthurson** teaches English at Rikkyo University in Tokyo. Since moving to Japan from Canada in August 2008, she has been working in EFL education. She has a Bachelor of Social Work and a Master of Arts in Integrated Studies. Her research areas are in fostering learner autonomy and reflection. <[devonarthurson@rikkyo.ac.jp](mailto:devonarthurson@rikkyo.ac.jp)>

### **Link to Presentation on YouTube:**

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8Twf5L6k7ZE>>