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Journal Writing in Service-Learning: Lessons from a Mentoring Projects

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Journals contribute to learning by focusing students' attention on elements of their community service and by providing a quiet space for reflection on their actions. Writing helps students to engage in observation, questioning, speculation, and self-awareness, and to gain an overview of their community service. Lessons about enhancing the quality of students' journal writing in service-learning are discussed.

Writing in the journal was helpful as I could sit after the day, collect my thoughts and write about my day's experience.

Writing in the journal helps me keep an outlook of where I am going and what needs to be done.

Writing in the journal helped me in writing my (class) paper.

Journals provide students with a space for active, regular, systematic thinking about what they are learning. In service-learning courses, where keeping journals is a fairly common practice, journal writing contributes to integrating experiential learning with classroom learning. Observations, accounts, questions, comments, and reflections in the journals examine and make sense of classroom discussions and community service activities. Moreover, journals provide students with a quiet space in which to explore how their feelings are brought forth in service-learning.

In this paper I analyze the thinking and learning demonstrated in journals by a group of students who participated in "Internship in Mentoring," a service-learning course offered by the Sociology Department at Cleveland State University. I review the ways in which informal journal writing allowed college students to see and interpret the issues they encountered in the school and to engage in reflective thinking about how to accomplish their mentoring goals. From their experience, I draw lessons about enhancing

the quality of journal writing in service-learning.

The last two decades have seen extensive growth in the theory and practice of writing journals to promote student learning (Fulwiler, 1987; Lukinsky, 1990). Most research on this topic has consisted of teachers' self-study of their practice and the work of their students. These teachers have found that informal journal writing contributes to students' learning and nudges teachers' reflection on teaching. They argue that journals provide students with a safe place in which to withdraw temporarily to become reflective on their own learning. In the teaching of English and composition, students begin to formulate ideas in an informal language and without much concern for audience in their journals (Belanoff, 1987; Elbow & Clarke, 1987). In the arts and humanities, journals become, in the words of one student, an "anthology of thought" (Thaiss, 1987). In the quantitative disciplines, workbooks or logs offer students a place to record and write about their data, formulate problems, and think of ways of solving them (Fulwiler, 1987).

Across the disciplines, instructors have found that the written integration of personal experience, thought, and action that takes place in journals also leads to expressing feelings and emotions about what is being learned (Lukinsky, 1990; Thaiss, 1987). Indeed, most teachers who assign journals do so in the belief that writing gives students a way of understanding ideas and experiences, articulating connections between what they already know and what they are learn-

ing, and establishing a personal connection between learning and their lives (Fulwiler, 1987).

Thoughts and insights expressed in journal writing do not represent ideas already formulated. Meaning-making takes place as students select observations, find relationships, recognize patterns, analyze, generalize and interpret.

The theory and practice of journal writing can be applied to the service-learning field. The unique characteristics of service-learning courses seem to create distinct roles for the journal as a learning tool. The writing of the college students in the mentoring project[1] shares similarities with classroom-based journals, but is distinct in how it prepares and guides students for community service and helps them in reflecting on their actions in the community. To appreciate the similarities and differences between service-learning journals and journals assigned in traditional academic courses, we need to consider agenda and form.

Course-assigned journals share with personal journals their informal, colloquial quality as well as the styles in which they are written. In *A Book of One's Own*, Mallon (1984) has categorized diary writers according to the diaries they keep. Four of the types he identifies can be considered analytically distinct ways of keeping course-assigned journals. According to Mallon, *chroniclers* keep a record of what happens to them every day; they wish to preserve the flow of their days, the routine as well as the unusual. *Travelers* map a journey; they describe a special time and tell about people and events that are new to them. *Pilgrims* write about a different journey, favoring an introspective diary of self-discovery and personal growth. *Creators* use notebooks to capture an idea, develop a project, and sketch. I will show that in favoring one of these ways of writing, or in alternating between and among them, students assign meaning and orient themselves to their service-learning activities.

A journal assigned for a class differs from a personal journal in the way it is initiated and the purpose for which it is kept. In contrast to a personal journal, course-assigned journals are usually initiated at an instructor's request thereby changing the motivation to write from intrinsic to extrinsic. Students are asked to take a step back from the learning experience to record it, speculate about it, reflect upon it, connect it to theories and concepts learned in the course, and make sense of it in preparation for speaking to others in class and writing papers (Summerfield, 1987). The purpose for keeping journals is usually clear;

most instructors discuss what they think students will gain from writing in them. However, students often complain that they do not know what the instructor really wants (Gatlin, 1987). Because journal writing is so different from other writing students are asked to do in college, many of them need encouragement and guidance to embark upon and pursue this more informal writing. Students are familiar with the process of submitting written assignments as finished compositions to be graded. Journals, however, are evolving compositions, in which students ask questions, speculate, and advance their train of thought. When instructors do not articulate what kinds of writing would assist student learning, students seem to gain less from journal writing (Lawrence, 1993).

One way of making the journal writing agenda clearer for students is to articulate the kinds of thinking and writing that are valuable for the specific class assigned. Fulwiler (1987) has identified cognitive activities that, in his view, are evidence of critical thinking in a journal: (1) *Observations*: students write about something they have noticed; (2) *Questions*: students write down questions, including among others, personal questions as well as questions of fact and of theory; (3) *Speculation*: students wonder about the meaning of the events, behaviors, facts, readings, and about patterns that they encounter; (4) *Self-awareness*: students become conscious of who they are or are becoming and how their identity makes them like or different from others; (5) *Digression*: students stray from what they usually write about to deal with what appears at the time to be unconnected thoughts; (6) *Synthesis*: students combine ideas and establish relationships between elements that, until then, appeared disparate; (7) *Revision*: students consider their previous entries and notice the ways in which their views have changed; and (8) *Information*: students document that they have read their assignments, listened to class lectures and discussions, and that they paid attention to course assignments.

While helpful in identifying critical thinking activities, Fulwiler's list doesn't show the relationship between those activities, nor the conditions under which students would engage in them. Those are important questions for assessing the role of journals in service-learning. As service-learning educators we value reflective thinking, the deliberate purposeful act of thinking about a problem situation encountered in pursuit of a goal

(Loughran, 1995). We wish students to be attentive to their community service experience, open-minded about puzzling or frustrating situations, active in trying to figure out what is going on and how to accomplish their goals. Reflection helps students learn from the service-learning experience because their inquiry matters to the course of action they will take and the connections they will make to academic learning. The presence of reflection, its focus and process as demonstrated in student journals in one mentoring project, reveals the ways in which journal writing contributes to student learning.

Journal Writing in A Mentoring Project

The journals analyzed in this article were written during the service-learning course referred to above. The author of this article directed the project and conducted process and outcome evaluations for it. The project, which integrated academic study with service, was also staffed by a faculty member who taught the service-learning course and by a student coordinator who supervised students in the schools and ensured that the communication between the schools and project staff was open and direct.

The 4-credit course was open to all undergraduates with junior or senior class standing, and was offered during three consecutive academic quarters. It consisted of seminars, conducted once a week, and mentoring of pupils in an urban school setting for six hours a week. The course content and method were selected to provide college students with the opportunity to apply the sociological perspective in an urban setting, afford them experiential based knowledge through mentoring, acquaint college students with child development in the inner city, and enable them to conceptualize their service-learning experience.

The first two weeks consisted of orientation and preparation of the college students to enter and function in the schools as mentors. Topics discussed were mentoring, and in particular, the nature of the mentoring relationship, mentoring roles, outcomes of mentoring; urban conditions; the effects of poverty on children; child development; and schools and classrooms in the inner city. Once the college students began their service-learning the problems and queries they encountered were the starting point for discussion

and exploration of relevant concepts. Students compared and contrasted their experiences as mentors, posed questions, drew from what they had learned in this and other courses and from their personal experiences, interpreted the events and behaviors, and formulated hypotheses. They were guided by the instructor who facilitated the discussion and acted as a resource.

Teachers at the two schools assigned mentors to students whom they believed would benefit most from individualized attention in building their academic skills. The mentors worked with groups of 3 to 5 students at a time, usually for 30 to 40 minutes. Mentoring was built around meetings which were integrated into the daily routines of the primary grade students. Most often the college students helped their mentees with math and reading, but as they did this, the young students brought up other things that were on their minds at the time including home life, friendships, and events in their lives.

College students were directed to keep journals of their community service activities. The course instructor articulated the goal of the journal writing as a mechanism to prepare for both classroom discussions and a final paper that would synthesize what they had learned from their mentoring.

Research and evaluation were central in this mentoring project because we were testing a way of providing mentoring to young students. The journals kept by the college students became a source of data for the project because they portrayed the interaction between the mentors and the people and circumstances the mentors encountered in their community service. Through writing, the college students organized their community service experience, deciding what would be attended to and what would be ignored, thereby giving meaning to the world they encountered and to their role in it (Berlin, 1982; Jenseth, 1993).

At the end of the course, students contributed their journals and gave their consent to use them for the research project. I coded journal entries for the actions, objects or people on which they focused and for the nature of the cognitive activities displayed. Coding and analysis began as the project ended; 29 journals were analyzed for this article. Coding, recoding, and sorting of data were done using Ethnograph (a software package to analyze text-based data). The names used in the journal quotations are fictitious to insure the

anonymity of the participants.

Observations in Journals

A few students favored the chronicling of observations over other kinds of journal writing. They saw the journal as a daily record that helped them "remember details and sequence of events." Like naturalists on a hike, they gave themselves time and space to jot down what they did and encountered only "in order not to forget what happens daily." In these chronicles college students recorded salient aspects of their environment in view of the goals they were pursuing. They focussed their attention on student and teacher behaviors and classroom practices that they had to take into account in order to accomplish their mentoring task. For these students, logging entries in their journals was separated from reflection and feeling; they postponed the latter for classroom discussion and the final paper.

For most students the journal integrated observations, thoughts, and feelings. Writing in the journals was a way for students to see and think about their work in the school. Students created a point of observation for themselves, standing behind their acting selves, observing their daily behaviors, thoughts and feelings, and drawing overviews that encompassed longer periods of time (Baldwin, 1977). "Writing and thinking and learning" were one process (Zinsser, 1988).

Writing in the journal helped all mentors to focus their attention. As one said, it helped her to see "what things I felt were important enough for me to write down and zero in." It was their goals and tasks in the school classroom that gave meaning to the situations they encountered. Their purpose in the classroom made them notice characteristics of people and practices that were related to their mentoring task and made them look for causes that accounted for students' academic achievement.

For most college students the children they were mentoring were at the center of their observations and questions. They observed children's behavior, became finely attuned to what the children did and how they responded to the teachers and the mentors, asked questions, and formed ideas to guide their mentoring. A case in point: a mentor writes of observing a child who is staring at a blank page, not working, a behavior which could be an indicator of many different things. The mentor remembers going over to talk to him,

"I asked him why he didn't do it and he said he wanted to get in trouble so he could go home. So obviously we did the work together."

The multitude of impressions hitting the mentors' senses were also organized by the concepts learned in class. School failure, underachievement, and factors affecting school success received great attention in class. Aware of the complex nature of school failure and underachievement, college students began to observe classroom patterns and school procedures that contributed to the lack of success some students experienced in school and those that appeared to foster success for a larger number of students.

College students' observations led to class discussions and final academic papers in which students related social patterns and regularities— the effect of class size, teaching style, school bureaucratic rules, among others—to students' school performance.

Mentors used their journals to record how they observed and noticed elements that could affect learning beyond the students' academic performance; they learned about the children's lives, troubles, and aspirations. They selected and commented on these conditions; they could not remain in the background—they had to find ways to address them.

As adults, perceived by the children as "friends" and "buddies," working in small groups with the children, mentors had an opportunity to diagnose children's academic difficulties and find out what got in the way of learning. In their journal entries mentors recorded what they noticed and, when comparing notes with teachers, realized that they had a special vantage point, for the teacher sometimes was unaware of what mentors discovered during their one-on-one interactions.

> I have observed several occasions in which a child either cannot do the problems or is much slower than most of the class so that the child stalls and acts busy when really they're waiting for the teacher to go over the answer so they can fill them in. In cases like that, the problem may not be apparent until test time.

Reflections in Journals

In writing down ideas that would guide them the following day, many mentors produced journals that resembled artists' and creators' notebooks. In their journal writing these student captured ideas on various topics relevant to the pursuit of mentoring goals and considered alter

native ways of making connection and finding meaning. They wrote about how they arrived at their beliefs and how those beliefs guided their mentoring approaches. In addition, these mentors documented their thinking while engaged in action, their retrospective reflection on the day's actions, and their consideration of what courses of action they might pursue the following day. The informal style of journal writing made use of students' personal background in trying to understand their mentoring experience and its context, and the free expression of the feelings such experience elicited. Finally, students related concepts and ideas they had come across in their readings and in class with the situations they encountered.

Mentors documented at length how they became convinced that their interpretations of children's behaviors were well-founded. Mentors arrived at their belief by studying the children closely, comparing the performance of various children, and talking with the teacher. Finding out why children were not attending to their assignments suggested ways of helping the children. Discovering that two students had a very hard time understanding the directions for assignments, one mentor found a strategy that worked and briefly recorded it, "I usually read the directions to them and write down an example so that they can see what exactly they have to do. The boys usually get the hang of it."

Others arrived at their beliefs by listening to students, "Tim kept asking Mrs. Taylor, 'When can I work with him, huh?' So Mrs. Taylor let him spend time with me, but we did not do all that much. Instead he just wanted to hold my hand and 'shmooz.' This was all fine with me...sensing his needs, I fed to them."

Thinking on their feet in the midst of their actions, mentors interpreted cues and signs and decided approaches to work with the children. As they reflected on mentoring later in the day, they created a framework for considering what to do next. Students documented how they decided upon strategies and initiatives to mentor students; they described and analyzed the role they had constructed for themselves vis-a-vis the young students and the teacher; and they reflected on their feelings in particular situations. After working with a first grade boy who was having trouble with his math problems, a mentor writes,

> Shawn can't sit focused for too long, you have to give him a break after working for a while. I tried to show him how to utilize what he has

on hand (such as his fingers). Maybe I should make him draw lines instead of using his fingers, because he kept having trouble. Thursday we'll work together and I'll try the new approach.

In this journal entry the mentor goes over what she did with the child, the approaches she tried with him. She notes that she is able to work longer with him if she gives him a break and deals with her lack of success in teaching him to add. At that point, looking back on her day's work, she formulates a different approach for their next encounter. The journal provided her with a space for documenting reflection-in-action, retrospective reflection, and anticipatory reflection (Loughran, 1995).

Students applied anticipatory reflection not only to specific mentoring tasks, but to the mentoring role as well. This anticipatory reflection took into account an overview of longer stretches of time and how children were responding to the mentors. They pondered whether they should be more or less of a big brother/sister and friend or an authority figure, and weighed how close to get to the children in order to be both a trusted friend as well as an effective teacher. One mentor reflected that it took him a long time to "figure out the correct recipe or mixture of emotional attachment and authority. On the one hand, I must teach these children, on the other, I must be their best friend, and in some cases, a father away from home."

In retrospective reflections mentors tried to make sense of puzzling situations they encountered with the children by drawing from their own prior experience. They tell how their memories of math and reading lessons, and other apparently unrelated learning experiences, helped them make sense of the hurdles encountered by the children with whom they were now tutoring.

> Later I worked with Simone...she has difficulty sounding out sounds that are produced by two adjacent consonants. Her primary problems are sl, sp, pr, pl, etc. Another problem she has is that she spends too much time and emphasis sounding out parts of the word she breaks down. So when she finally reaches the end she not only has forgotten the beginning sounds of the word, but also has made it sound totally different by equally emphasizing each word part. I can empathize with this problem because I am learning to play electric guitar. When I attempt to teach myself a song from a

book, which is analogous to the child trying to read a word, I tend to spend too much time on each note. As a result, the fluidity of the song is lost and the result sounds like a fragmented specimen of bliss. I tried to help, but I realize that practice is the key. Seeing this, I gave a letter sheet with four letter combinations, each with adjacent consonants, to practice. For example, by sl, I drew a picture of a turtle and told her to remember the slow turtle.

Empathy and feelings of attachment to the children, as well as frustration at not being as successful in teaching academic skills as they wished, colored the journal entries, making mentors reflective about their environment and spurring them on to try new approaches. After working with a girl "who had not mastered her ABC's", a mentor expressed frustration and considered how to help her.

> It was a little frustrating working with her when all the other children are busy recognizing whole words and reading from books. I thought that a good idea would be to give her an ABC paper/chart which she could take home to practice, using the ABC song to go through the chart and memorize the letters. I asked Mrs. Campbell if this was ever done and whether or not I should try this. She told me that she has given Rose numerous charts which just end up lost or thrown out. After hearing this, I suggested that maybe I should print an ABC chart at home on my laser printer and then laminate it so that she would perceive it as something more important and regarded it with more importance and make sure not to lose it. Mrs. Campbell liked this idea and encouraged me to do it.

The mentor figured out the reason for the child's academic difficulty and, by taking into account the child's need for attention, made an alphabet chart that was special, thereby communicating to the child that he cares about her learning. He records this in his journal and for several weeks keeps track of the student's progress.

A few students applied social science findings to understand and attempt to predict what would happen in the classroom. Again on the topic of what conditions children need to perform successfully, one mentor wrote about his concern for a student he had observed closely and who "was having a particularly easy time...He found the test to be so little a challenge that he was actually frustrated." After observing the child closely, the mentor inferred that the child "has a need to be stimulated constantly with challenging exercises."

The child's behavior had at this time the potential of being labeled "troublesome and/or deviant without the possibility of intellectual advancement." Indeed the child was usually the class troublemaker; he finished his work quickly or did "not focus on his studies." The mentor concluded, "If this is the case, Ray Rist's self-fulfilling prophecy will activate and Chris will join thousands of other mislabeled children. This label will stymie his intellectual thirst and be replaced by anger and frustration." The mentor saw the opportunity to take different courses of action regarding this student. He believed that Rist's findings about teachers' expectations of students suggested that if the student was mislabeled it would affect his intellectual advancement.

Many students used their journals to develop arguments that they articulated more fully in their final academic paper. For instance, a student had observed the effect of budget cuts on instructional services and reflected about it in his journal. He then wrote a final paper about how research findings in the social sciences have been misused to underfund urban public schools.

Journal writing also connected concepts and ideas from readings, classroom discussions, and experiences in the school to inform their work with the mentees. Several of the course readings described strategies that mentors can use in helping youth, and students repeatedly portrayed in their journals how they applied techniques such as questioning, and task and cognitive structuring. In class, students often discussed the difficulty of striking a balance between certain mentor's roles, such as friend and disciplinarian, and in their journals they reflected over and over on the weekly adjustment in those roles.

Service Is A Journey:
Framing the Mentoring Stages

Throughout the journals mentors used images and analogies that suggest that they thought of mentoring as a journey. Thinking of mentoring or other service projects as a journey allows us to apply the lens supplied by this metaphor. The flow of time, with a beginning marked by strangeness, a middle characterized by familiarity, and a closing punctuated by loss, was a central organizer of the mentors' community service experience. Consequently, journals often had the quality of a travel diary. Mentors mapped their journey, looked back, tried to figure out where

they were, and anticipated new experiences. They also told of an inner journey of self-awareness and self-discovery, as they monitored their work with the young children and reflected on their roles as mentors.

Almost all of the college students recorded their anticipation upon embarking on the journey. One student described her eagerness and feeling of strangeness,

> First day in the classroom! I couldn't sleep the night before. My mind racing a thousand thoughts a minute. Will the class respond to me? Will I meet the expectations of Mrs. Artwell? I wasn't worried, more like eager. I arrived early, wanted to be settled in before the class actually got under way. The class was buzzing with activity...Mrs. Artwell...told me that I would begin working with the kids after the bell rang and after she did all the "start of the class" stuff. Armed with a list of names and the materials to work with them I sat, much like a stranger in a strange land.

Becoming comfortable and at ease in a strange land seemed to require cues from the youngsters that they welcomed and appreciated the mentors in the classroom. In a typical journal entry one mentor wrote, "First day there; the class made me feel welcome." Another mentor also captured students' eagerness to work with the mentors, "Today when the list of kids I would work with came out almost all the kids gathered around to read it. 'My name's not in on the list? I wanna visit your table! Can you work with me? Oh Pleeeease!'" Pleasantly surprised by the warm welcome children showered on them every time they showed up in the school, mentors became more comfortable and confident in the school setting.

Throughout the mentoring journey, mentors wrote about the unfamiliar roles they were assuming, and how they differed from roles they played in other settings. One college student, accustomed to the informality of college campuses, was at first surprised when the classroom teacher introduced him to the children as Mr.G., expecting to be addressed by his first name. Later in the day, however, as he reflects on the experience, he sees what the teacher has done,

> Hearing myself introduced as Mr. G. has a profound effect on me. It seemed so unnatural and contrived, almost fake. But as I realized my role in the classroom and what the intention

of my presence is, I soon realized that "Mr.G." was not that inappropriate. Very quickly I assumed the role of teacher, mentor and friend. Although at this point the role was only in a conceptual stage, this conception acted as a guide for how I interacted with the children. Because one's perception of a role dictates how they will act that role out, this initial conception did in fact direct me.

Mentors contemplated how the relationship with teachers and students changed as they worked together and they looked for signs of trust, appreciation, and closeness. "Starting this project I had one goal to make a difference in at least one child's life. Based on Danielle and Damian's responses, I fulfilled my goal. The students' smiles and gratitude also confirm this."

As the mentoring progressed, signs that mentors began to recognize routines and children appeared recurrently in the journals. "The day started off as usual," "Typical day today" is how two students described their familiarity with the way the day was organized.

At the end of the quarter, mentors wrote about the pain of parting, how difficult it was to leave the children behind. Mentors who described themselves as emotional and those who did not were equally moved by the close relationship they had established with the children and the latter's show of affection for the mentors. As one wrote, "I am not an emotional person but I felt overwhelmed with emotion. I came to care very deeply about these children. I will never forget my experience with them."

The end of the journey was the time for summary assessments of what the mentors had accomplished during the quarter they had spent with the children. They expressed comfort and joy in the progress made by children who had responded positively to the mentoring. Many regretted that the time they had to make a difference had been so short and that many of the elements affecting children's school performance were beyond their control. They also acknowledged that changes take time and they might not be there to witness them. "Mentoring is like throwing a pebble into a quiet pond. The ripples are many and you will never know how you have affected the children. Just your presence is enough to stir the waters, encourage some children."

Lessons from Journal Writing in Mentoring

Writing about personal journals, Baldwin

(1977) noted that there is an agenda at work that motivates the writing process and provides a framework for how individuals write and what they write. In contrast, the role of journal writing in academic courses, including service-learning courses, is shaped to a large extent by the instructor's agenda.

As the mentoring journals discussed above reflect, in jotting down observations, recording feelings, and keeping track of thoughts, journal writing can be preparatory for other class work. Journal writing can also give shape to reflection on community service action and help in the formulation of subsequent courses of action. The mentoring journals also illustrate the ways in which journal writing can capture fleeting thoughts and insights about solving problems. Finally, journal writing can play a key role in the integration of concepts, theories, insights and the community service experience.

The extensive chronicling and reflective writing that prevailed in the mentoring journals, corresponding closely to what the instructor had asked of students, suggests that instructors need to be very deliberate in formulating the role that journal writing will play in their service-learning courses. Instructors' directions and feedback should make clear what kinds of entries students are expected to make in their journal writing.

The review and analysis of the mentoring journals, based on data from a single course, contributes to our understanding of the role journal writing can play in service-learning courses. However, it does not address issues that might be answered by other case studies or even a comparative study of journal writing in courses in various academic disciplines. I suggest a few questions for further study: Are reflections on action and on readings influenced by the discipline in which the course is based? If so, how? Are variations in the extent to which students express feelings or judgments attributable to the academic discipline, to the kind of community service activities, and/or to students' characteristics? How does the instructor's teaching style affect journal writing? Case studies exploring these questions will further our understanding of student learning in service-learning courses, and how to organize the journal assignments to enable them to maximize learning and service effectiveness.

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