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Journal Keeping

James Rhem, Executive Editor

Until I sat in on a conference session last year led by Dannelle Stevens and Joanne Cooper, I'd had very little respect for or interest in journaling. I'd published pieces on it, of course. It was one of the new things being used in teaching and naturally deserved attention in the *Forum*, but as a fellow who'd never been able to keep a diary and one who could not conceive of how students could be asked to share their most honest thoughts and feelings and then be graded on them, the whole business seemed bogus to me. Moreover, all the experiences of journaling I'd heard of from students when something like this: They'd be given a sheaf of articles to read and write journal entries on. These would be due at a certain date and inevitably students waited until that date, read the articles hastily, and wrote their one-page reflections just in time for the deadline. To me, it all sounded like busy work with a trendy new name—“journaling.”

Indeed, Stevens doesn't think much of that sort of journaling. “I think where profs go wrong is when they tell students to do a reading and then go home and reflect on it.

Uh uh . . . Students put it off, they resent it, and you don't get what you want from them. They aren't really reflective. It's just more busy work that the teacher requires.”

The Book on Journals

But where Stevens and I found agreement on what journaling often is and shouldn't be, she and Joanne



Cooper, coauthors of *Journal Keeping: How to Use Reflective Writing for Learning, Teaching, Professional Insight, and Positive Change* (Stylus 2009) have a deep understanding of the good that can come from journaling.

Part of their understanding comes from seeing how and why many faculty go wrong in their efforts to use journals. “Faculty are coming from a place where they want to get students actively engaged,” says Stevens, “and they think

this is a way to do it. But the only way journaling works is to have a variety of activities, and to begin to get students accustomed to the idea that they will be surprised by their writing, and that they can and will find some interesting stuff to work with from that.”

Rich Surprises in Writing

Surprises? Yes, surprises. While Stevens has her students interact with their journals in a wide and creative variety of ways, the thinking lying behind the whole endeavor owes much to Peter Elbow’s influential work on the process of writing in such books as *Writing without Teachers*. “Writing is thinking,” says Stevens. “That’s what I tell my students. They think it’s what’s done *after* they think.”

Happily for me, Elbow’s books began to come out just when I needed them; indeed, without the inspiration I drew from them, I wonder if I ever would have finished my dissertation. So, when Stevens cites Elbow, she’s immediately put a lot of points on the board toward persuading me that journaling can work, because, through Elbow, I see how. Stevens and Cooper embrace Elbow’s technique of “freewriting” fully. Of freewriting, Elbow writes:

“Not a perfect stream of consciousness. It is private writing and may or may not be lucid and organized. Anything goes. Freewriting is writing without pauses.

“It invites surprise. Students often discover things they didn’t know they thought or felt. The deepest insights often come after ten or fifteen minutes when writers initially feel they have run out of things to say. Writers should generate a lot of ideas to allow them to keep only the best ones for the finished draft.”

Echoing Elbow, Stevens adds, “If you don’t get a surprise in your writing you wouldn’t keep writing. You have to put aside your belief that nothing will come of this [freewriting].”

And so Stevens convinces students that letting go, forgetting punctuation and grammar and just keeping the pen, pencil, or keyboard moving for a period of time will bring something worthwhile to the surface. “In journals they are the source of the text. They express who they are in that journaling activity. They develop their own voice; they affirm their own voice.” And so in journaling, students—writers—become confronted with an objective trace of their own thoughts and feelings, something to interact with, to build on, something that will not only help them write their final papers, but help make those papers better products of their learning.

Owing Your Learning

Stevens first had students keep journals in a course in action

“Students will be surprised by their writing, and that they can and will find some interesting stuff to work with from that.”

research she was teaching at Portland State. “The students weren’t owning their projects,” she says. “This was sort of a pedantic activity for them: They’d read the research, and they thought ‘Okay, I just go through these steps: I read the literature, I form a problem, and then I do my method.’ They were not invested at all, really. They were just following directions.” That wasn’t good enough: “I know that when students are invested in what they’re doing they learn more,” Stevens says, and so she imposed the journals as a way to provoke investment.

Personally, Stevens prefers a handwritten journal. She carries hers everywhere. The inside cover of *Journal Keeping* reproduces a page from her journal showing the elaborate system of categorization

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December

Editor's Note:

Writing, speaking, and Peter Elbow make frequent appearances in the pages of this edition of the *Forum*. **Ed Nuhfer's** DEVELOPER'S DIARY suggests that writing and speaking (or discussing) inform different but associated neural networks so that the learning they create operates differently but toward stronger mutual ends. The same idea from different perspectives recurs in **Dannelle Stevens'** and **Joanne Cooper's** new book *Journal Keeping* profiled in our lead article. And the ideas make another appearance in **Molly O'Donnell's** article "The Space *and* the Structure for a Community of Truth."

Faculty have long appreciated the need to come at things from different angles, and they've long required writing as well as discussion. But the articles here pull our understanding of these means of learning closer together in a thread of deeper understanding. And there's one thing more, something latent (if not hidden) in these dual processes—the element of surprise. Certainly **Linda Shadiow** found herself surprised, as she recounts in her piece "In Praise of Cacophony," when her students began to tell her what they needed in order to learn more effectively, especially when it differed from the image of the teacher she'd carried around since childhood. But she had the good sense to let her teaching be guided by surprise.

Peter Elbow speaks of the wisdom of inviting surprise and being guided by it, and Dannelle Stevens embraces the idea eagerly in her insistence that students will find unexpected riches in their thinking when they see it poured out from their doubting hands in their own writing. Thinking, as I often do, of teaching and learning as a sacramental transaction, I am reminded of a hymn by the eighteenth-century poet William

Cowper. It begins "Sometimes a light surprises the [student] while he sings;/ It is the [mind that] rises with healing in [its] wings." I've amended the text a bit. But all teachers must believe that something within seeks meaning and can find it standing openly on the border between the known and the unknown. As students put their fears behind them and explore that new territory, they soon may find themselves able to join Cowper in singing "Set free from present sorrow, we cheerfully can say, / Let the unknown tomorrow bring with it what it may."

Happy Holidays —
James Rhem

and filing she has worked out for her own journal. She doesn't require anything like that for her students. "I suggest they use it in their life—take it to meetings, make notes on reading, etc. *I require* them to use it in class," she says.

How She Does It

That in-class use may include keeping lecture notes in the journal, but the required use usually works something like this: First, Stevens asks students to take out their journals and write in them for five or ten minutes. She doesn't tell them what to write about, just to write. Later on in class, she'll say: "Okay, now I want you to think of some project or problem or concern that you are interested in and then do a focused freewrite on it." This is something related to their research project.

"The first activity warms them up so that the second is better. That's my typical procedure—a freewrite to get the dust off the road, make them more present in the class, then a focused freewrite."

Reflection tends to move students' cognitive development upwards in the well-known Bloom Taxonomy of cognition, but it can advance them in affective development as well, Stevens maintains. "Those higher Bloom levels are important to me—analysis and synthesis—but also creativity," she says. "A journal is a safer place to explore creatively. If we want students to engage and be motivated, compare ideas, and so on, they become more active learners when they have to write about it in a journal and interact with the subject creatively." To encourage creative interaction, Stevens may suggest students write a dialogue in their journal between an imagined figure and an ideal interlocutor, or some other fancy freeing writing.

Arrrrrrggh . . . Grading

Of course anything a teacher assigns must be met with some level of feedback to be meaningful to students. Some faculty grade journals according to rubrics they

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share with students. Stevens doesn't grade them, but she does respond to them, or rather to meta-reflections on them.

"I don't want to slog through all that stuff; I want them to slog through it at the end of the term," says Stevens. "I have them go back and read their journal and select two entries to photocopy for me and then type a one-page reflection on why each was an important entry for them. Sometimes they put lecture notes in there and they may say, that was so good the way you talked about paradigms, or whatever. I have a rubric for assessing those meta-reflections. And it asks how much they refer to the text itself—quotes from their own journal related to course content or something learned in the course, asks whether the reflection touches on whether the journaling has extended to their personal or professional lives (how useful), and so on. I also look for whether they've been critical of their own work, and whether they see their own growth."

"Scoring the meta-reflection is hard, I admit."

The amount of extra work faculty take on when they do journaling right results in such notable gains in the quality of students' learning, says Stevens, that she's always found it worthwhile.

Some students meet required journaling with the same resistance I'd long felt to it. How does Stevens persuade them? To some extent, she doesn't. "I tell them it's not a choice," she says. "But they get persuaded when they find themselves surprised by what they've written." In addition, students

become persuaded by the way Stevens models the activity. "I write along with them," she says. When she calls for a freewrite, she does a freewrite at the same time. When

"I tell them it's not a choice, but they get persuaded when they find themselves surprised by what they've written."

she calls for a focused freewrite, she writes too. "Students like models," she says. "They respond well to examples of what others have done." In that same vein, she often combines the journaling activity with another effective pedagogy. She'll invite students to share what they've written with a fellow student before the class as a whole takes up the topic. Indeed, she may suggest that students may want to find a "journal buddy" with whom they share their writing regularly through the semester. Those who do, usually find the experience a rich and deepening one.

Of journaling overall Steven's says, "It affects the level of engagement if you do it right—and there are a lot of people who do it wrong—if it is integrated with your course and students have a variety of ways to use the journal it makes a big difference in their learning." ■■■

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