

# Journaling with Students

## 1 What is it?

Journaling with students in online classes, for the context of this article, refers to regular, private, one-on-one interaction with students, usually in a text-based format.

## 2 Why is it important?

In general there are three main purposes for online journaling – reflection, social learning, and stimulating critical thinking (Montouri, 2016; Nowak & Knappe, 2019; Walker, 2006). For students, e-journaling provides a safe space to self-reflect; to carefully connect course content and one's own learning. It also provides opportunities to ask students to think critically about key ideas that instructors want their students to consider thoughtfully. Perhaps most importantly, it helps to build rapport between instructors and students as it helps students feel that their instructors care about them and support them in their success (see [Social Presence - Student Engagement](#)). For instructors, e-journaling provides a consistent, one-on-one connection with students, something that can be missing in the online environment. This contributes to the development of a positive relationship that supports learning (Stevens & Cooper, 2009).

## 3 How to do it?

The first step in making journaling successful is to engage students. To do this, it is important to grade their efforts to show they are valued. This can be minimal but it should not be insignificant. The second step is to make journaling a regular activity

to create an ongoing conversation between the instructor and the student. The third step is to work at creating a positive relationship with each student by projecting empathy, respect, and support. There are multiple ways to organize journaling, each reflecting different types of learning goals:

- **Basic Journals** open a channel of communication between each student and the instructor. The goal is to provide a space for private, one-on-one communication that facilitates the development of a connection between the student and the instructor. It is equitable to eye contact in a virtual medium. Students are often encouraged to reflect on the course, their learning, and even their lives. Grades are given to encourage participation, but these are low-stake assignments.
- **Learning Journals** ask students to reflect on their learning on a regular basis. The simple act of reflection on learning helps students solidify their knowledge and gives them the opportunity to ask questions in private. For example, in an introductory mathematics class, students might be asked to summarize what they learned each week and identify any confusion they had with the material. Similarly, a biology instructor might ask students to relate what they learned in labs to their learning in the class. It provides instructors with a means for gauging student understanding, as well as an avenue for remediating misconceptions. Grades can either be given for participation or for specific responses that you want to encourage.

- **Reading Journals** are similar to learning journals but focus on course readings (see Phipps, 2005). They can be open-ended, ask for specific types of responses (e.g. what was the main idea? What confused you? What excited you? ), or pose questions related to specific texts. For example, in a history class that includes primary sources, students might be asked to identify bias in the text and state what that reveals about its author and the time in which it was written. Grades are assigned accordingly and designed to encourage specific responses or simply to encourage reading.
- **Theory Journals** focus on learned theory (see Phipps, 2005). For example, in an introductory psychology class, students might be asked to summarize the major theories they have encountered and/or note what questions they have concerning these theories. In a philosophy class, they might be asked to identify underlying reasoning and possible problems with it. Theory journals are useful when it is important to ensure students grasp key theories in a discipline. A private journal for this allows students to articulate their understandings or lack thereof without fear of embarrassment and, accordingly, allows instructors to remediate misunderstandings in a safe space. Grades are designed to encourage critical thinking and reflection.

## 4 Technology Tips & Tools

The essential tool for journaling-based interactions between instructors and students is a private space accessible only to the instructor and the student. Some Learning Management Systems (LMS) have embedded journaling tools (e.g., Blackboard) or

plug-ins (e.g., Moodle) available. There is also a [Digital Journal Doc](#) option available for Google Classroom that can be linked to from an LMS. It is also possible to develop your own journaling spaces in an LMS (e.g., [Brightspace](#)) by creating multiple discussions that are accessible only to the instructor and one student. *See the additional resources below for detailed instructions.*

## 5 Additional Resources

The following are links to directions for creating journals in different LMSs:

- **Journaling resource for D2L/Brightspace**  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xu4w2kihe6>
- **Journaling resource for Blackboard**  
<https://help.blackboard.com/Learn/Instructor/Interact/Journals>
- **Journaling resource for Canvas**  
<https://stedwards.instructure.com/courses/5655/pages/creating-a-journal-in-canvas>
- **Journaling resource - plug-in for Moodle**  
[https://docs.moodle.org/38/en/Journal\\_module](https://docs.moodle.org/38/en/Journal_module)

## 6 References

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