

Teaching Tip Tuesday

Reflective Journals

Reflective journals can be a powerful tool for active learning in your course. They can be employed to help students develop a variety of different academic skills. They can encourage students to think critically about their existing knowledge, experiences, and beliefs before or while diving into new content. Depending on your context, you may want students to focus on activating their **prior knowledge**, relaying **observations**, asking **questions** about what they have observed, **speculating on explanations** for what they have observed, **integrating new and existing knowledge**, and/or **critiquing** specific works. The combination of a pre-lesson reflection and post-lesson reflection can be especially useful in addressing multiple functions. The following tips will help you organize reflective journals so your students can get the most from them.

Steps to Creating Effective Reflective Journals

1. **Provide an introduction to reflective journaling.** Explain to students what these journals are and why they are valuable to the learning process. Emphasize that the journals are a safe space to record thoughts, ideas, understandings, and reactions, and to begin connecting disparate facets of learning.
2. **Set expectations.** Be transparent about the purpose and expectations for the assignment. Let students know how their entry should be related to stated learning outcomes in the course. Also explain how you will be scoring the journal.
3. **Provide specific prompts.** Useful prompts guide students to reflect on specific learning and knowledge. For pre-lesson journal entries, be sure to plant memory seeds that will stimulate students to recall information from prior courses in preparation for expanding on their existing knowledge. For post-lesson entries, prompt students to record their observations and reactions, in addition to more specific reflections on the lesson.
4. **Promote self-reflection and metacognition.** In pre-lesson reflections, encourage students to think critically and deeply about how their prior knowledge relates to course learning outcomes and how it may affect their learning of upcoming material. In post-lesson reflections, ask them to summarize their understanding of main elements of the lesson, reflecting on what did or didn't make sense to them. Both activities help students identify strengths and weaknesses in their understanding.
5. **Create a safe/judgment-free environment.** Emphasize that journals are not graded for their correctness, so they are a safe place to make mistakes and float new ideas. This can help to stimulate more honest and useful reflections without fear of being found wanting.
6. **Provide feedback and guidance.** Offer feedback on a few select entries to help guide students in their reflective process. Highlight their more insightful observations and encourage them to dig deeper when appropriate. Validate their learning process.
7. **Have students assess growth and development.** Near the end of the course, encourage students to revisit initial journal entries and reflect on how their understanding has changed throughout the course.

Stevens, D. and Cooper, J. 2009. Journal keeping: How to use reflective writing for effective learning, teaching, professional insight, and positive change Sterling, VA.: Stylus Pub.