

## In the Classroom 109

# How to Implement Journaling in the Classroom

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**Stan Skrabut:** Thanks ever so much for taking time to listen to this podcast. I know you could be doing other things, perhaps you are, but you're still hanging out with me and I really do appreciate it. At the time I'm recording this, we've gotten quite a bit of snow here in Eastern Massachusetts. We've had a number of fronts coming through. This is right after Texas froze solid.

We've been catching a little bit of those storms and nor'easters kind of exciting. The day after this episode is going to be released, I will be closing on a new house, and it will be down in Rhode Island. Shout out to all those folks in Rhode Island. I'm moving into the neighborhood, looking forward to it. This week as promised, we are going to explore journaling. I have to be honest, I've had mixed experiences with journaling in academic environment, but I really do understand the value and that's why I wanted to talk about it.

While attending college classes, I've had to journal twice. In all those classes, twice I've been asked to do journals. One time was when I was at the United States Air Force Academy Prep School, it was for an English class. We had to use a journal, and I now understand a little bit more of what that instructor was trying to do. The other time was during a graduate-level course.

Fortunately, I was able to talk to the instructor and I turned that journaling experience into a blogging experience. One that I continue to do. In both cases, I was frustrated because I really didn't grasp the essence of the exercise. It was certainly something that I did not continue pass that class as a journaling exercise. I did continue to blog and now I have over 800 entries.

More recently, I'd say probably in the last five years, I actually have picked up journaling, specifically bullet journaling. Bullet journaling has been a really powerful tool to help me keep on track. I'll include a link in the show notes about bullet journaling, and I suggest that you check it out. I started to journal in earnest after listening to entrepreneurs talk about the power of it on their podcast.

All these different entrepreneurs I listened to, they were just hyping the power of journaling. In addition, they also provided lots of insights on how to reap the benefits of journaling. I believe my earlier encounters with journaling were lackluster because I did not understand why I was doing it. This, I believe, is an area where we can improve the idea of journaling in the classroom.

It's just one area, but telling students why they have to do something, what the benefits are, what they're expected to see, all of that should have been more pronounced in those classes. Let's take a closer look at journaling. Psychologist

James Pennebaker and his colleagues have shown that people who engage in expressive writing have better memories, higher grade point averages, less absenteeism from work, and quicker reemployment after a job loss.

Those are some of the reasons why you would want to do journaling. There's lots of other benefits out there regarding journaling. I wish these had come to light when I first started journaling, at least, in an academic environment. As I mentioned, there's a number of entrepreneurs who have shaped my thoughts regarding journaling. Michael Hyatt happens to be one of them.

He shared some of his the recognized benefits of journaling. By keeping a journal, it helps him process previous events and experiences. He is constantly writing down previous events and lessons learned and so he's able to look at those later. He uses a journal to clarify his thinking. He'd take a closer look at the context of the situation and his associated feelings about the situation, so that's part of what he journals is what is he feeling at the moment.

Importantly, he can record less significant lessons learned and also pose questions for further reflection. Michael Hyatt has found journaling to be so important, he's gone out to create a journal, really geared around planning called the Full Focus Planner. This planner provides prompts to help you keep on track, very much like a bullet journal. I put a link to this planner in the show notes.

It's an affiliate link, which means if you happen to pick it up, I get some compensation back, but it does not- you don't have to pay extra. It's just the fact that I'm sharing this, they're rewarding that. Journals are useful for offloading your thoughts. Your brain is great for idea generation, but for storing ideas, not so much. Journals are a better memory. It's a physical memory or a digital memory, it's a better memory than what you have. I know this to be true because I'm really surprised at a lot of things I've captured years ago in my bullet journal.

When I go back to look at it, I'm just surprised that some of the things that I wrote, and it's like, "I don't remember writing that," but I'm glad that I did, and more importantly, I'm glad I didn't have to remember it because I didn't. Journals allow you to tune into your own radio. It's difficult to self-reflect, but journals are a tool to help you do that. Another benefit of journals, it allows you an opportunity to practice writing.

The more opportunities that you have to write, the better writing that you can do. It's one of those important tools. It will help turn students from passive learners to active learners that they are actively involved thinking about what they are learning and reworking that and being able to put it back on paper. If done right, it encourages regular writing. It not only makes you a better writer, but the fact that you'll have a consistent habit of writing.

Journaling is not something new. Folks have been journaling ever since pretty much paper came about. There's a lot of famous people who have regularly journaled or kept what is called a commonplace book. I'll tell you a little bit more about that. The folks that who regularly journal, like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, Abraham

Lincoln. He would write down his notes. A lot of scientific folks, Albert Einstein, Madame Curie, Charles Darwin, Thomas Edison, Leonardo da Vinci, and then writers like Mark Twain.

They seem like folks that are definitely in the past, but I'm telling you that entrepreneurs who are very successful are regularly journaling. They're trying to understand what they're doing and what's working and what's not working and that's why they do it. What is journaling? Basically, journaling is the capturing of your thoughts and feelings on paper, period. That's what it is. Once they are documented, then you can go back and reflect on them for a better understanding of what's happening.

What events are happening, what kind of learning that's taking place, and that's why it's important. I mentioned that I use a bullet journal. Bullet journaling is a specific type of journaling that I use, but there was something else that was very common and it still is common. It's called a commonplace book, so a lot of commons in there, a commonplace book. A commonplace book is very similar to a journal. It's something that I think you should encourage your students to maintain.

Commonplace books were pretty much in vogue a couple of hundred years ago because building a library was really expensive. Books cost a fortune. Instead, people took an empty book, blank notebook, and when they were reading, they would capture quotes and ideas and points of inspiration and put them into that commonplace book. Many famous people, past and present, have kept commonplace books. Writers use them to collect ideas for stories or scripts. Politicians use them to craft policies or speeches. Business leaders use them to save ideas for new business ventures.

Ordinary people throughout history use commonplace books to save worthwhile ideas. It is a place to put ideas. How to journal? There is no right or wrong way to journal, but in a classroom, to get students started, you may initially want to guide your students in their writing. There's lots of different types of ways to do that, but one is getting them on a schedule. There is mixed discussion on whether one should journal daily or not. Some see benefits, some say it's not good.

However, benefits are noticeable when there is consistency in journaling, doing it at least a few times a week. When journaling, part of that consistency is picking a period of time when you're going to do it. A lot of people journaled during different parts of the day. Some do it in the morning, so they use it to identify what they're hoping to achieve during the day.

Other folks journal in the evening when they reflect on what transpired and what they achieved, what they have learned, and what they're thankful for. In some cases, or in conjunction, there are weekly journals. A weekly journal is really looking over the week to reflect on what had transpired, but also planning out the upcoming week. A lot of entrepreneurs that I listened to write a weekly journal entry, either on a Friday or Sunday evening as they plan out the upcoming week.

When you're working with your students, it's important to coach them on deciding what is a good time to journal.

What should you journal about? There are no must-haves in journals. Journals are up to the imagination of the individual, but here are some things that people often journal about and things that you may want to ask your students to journal about in addition to thinking about the curriculum. Many of the items that I'm sharing can be listed in the same journal entry, right? It's not like you're creating a separate journal entry for these ideas that you can put them all into one journal entry. Here is some writing prompts that you may think about.

One is gratitude. A lot of folks start out by recognizing three to 10 things that they're grateful for. What things of note of the day. Something that they're really happy about, or really thankful about. You can also track goals and progressions. A journal can be a great place to write down your goals. The steps that you need to take and your progress towards those goals. Research has come out that individuals who write down their goals have an increased success in meeting those goals.

Think about it in terms of your class. How can you get your students to write about goals that they're setting for your particular class and help guide them through it. In terms of goals, especially when you get to-- After you've written your initial goals that you want to achieve and you're discussing progress, you may create a writing prompt around the three to five things that you plan to get accomplished that day.

Specifically, the one thing that you must accomplish in order to have that successful day. Part of tracking goals is also to track learning goals. What do you expect to learn during the day? Did you succeed? One way to activate prior knowledge is to predict what will happen during the day. It may not happen the way you expect it, but it will get the learning juices flowing, which is important, and gets the brain prepped for learning new lessons.

Speaking of learning lessons, one of the reasons or one of the ways that I use a journal is to write down what I'm learning. If I'm reading a book, watching a webinar, or participating in some other learning event, I take notes in my bullet journal. I will then identify specific items from what I've learned and try to put them into actions. I try to operationalize what I'm learning. This is also a good place to connect ideas that students are learning in a class how these ideas connect over the pages.

For students, journals also provide a place for them to share their reactions about course material. They can think about what excites them, or what they didn't understand, but they can capture those type of reaction. Other reasons for using a journal, and once again it could be part of a bigger journal entry, is health and fitness. Journal can be used to track your health and fitness progress.

For readers, and we hope that students are readers, and I've talked about reading in a past episode. Reading is absolutely essential, and I'll put a link in the show notes about that. With a reading journal prompt, students can share what they're reading, what they've gained, and it doesn't necessarily have to be about reading. It could be

about movies or documentaries they watch, podcast they listen to, articles that they read. It doesn't have to be about books.

Although, I think students should be reading books. When I drive, I often listen to podcasts. When I hear something noteworthy, I make an entry in a journal, and then usually I'll share that with other people. If I find something really noteworthy, I tend to share it, probably through this podcast, one way, but I do capture a lot of ideas. Ideas are a great place, or a journal is a wonderful place to log your ideas, quotes, anecdotes, observations.

Basically, any information that you come across in your life that's noteworthy, you can put it into a journal. For students, these ideas may be topics that they're going to research as a student to a grad student or research professionally. This is a great place to collect those things and go back through your journal later and pull those out. In my book, *Read to Succeed*, I advocated for maintaining a list of new vocabulary words. These lists can be easily maintained in something like a bullet journal.

Check out episode ITC 42 for other strategies for teaching vocabulary to college students, but you may want them to collect new words and define them in their particular journal and be able to have a place to go back and reflect. As students are learning, they can also use a journal to collect their questions that they have while they're working through the content, and then they can use those to bring those questions back to class.

One of the prompts that I use in a discussion primarily is application of what they're learning. A journal serves as a great medium for reflection on what one is learning, but more specifically how it can be applied. How they envision that content to be applied in their life. Basically, like I said, journaling is a place to capture your thoughts, but also reflect.

They have an opportunity to periodically, maybe at your prompting, to reflect upon what they're learning and how their knowledge of that topic has changed over time. Then the last thing, talking about different learning prompts is a project journal. Students can use journaling to document the progress on a major project. This major project could be academic, or work, or personal, but they can kind of keep an eye on it and keep notes, what's working, what's not working, and keep working on solutions.

Like I said, I learned some lessons. The two academic journaling adventures that I had, I learned some lessons along the way. It was not probably the most positive experience for me, simply because I didn't understand why, but there's other tips that I want to share to help you do this successfully in your class. First of all, explain the whys of journaling. I think this is the most important thing that you can do to help your students take on journaling is successfully explain why you're asking them to journal and what you are hoping them to achieve because of journaling.

This was never made clear, and therefore, I did not buy into it. If I understood the why, greater chance that I would've bought into it. There's probably a greater chance



that I would've become a lifelong journaler earlier in my life. I lost an opportunity. I would say you also have to model good journal writing. You certainly want to show them examples of others who are journaling, but you need to include yourself.

Well, the question, is are you eating the dog food? Are you asking to do something that you are also doing? If that's the case, then show them how you're doing it, and why you're doing it, what you're getting out of it. Also, looking at a blank page can be very intimidating. Whether you're writing a novel, piece of poetry, an article, what have you. You can help your students by creating writing prompts. My greatest struggle that I had in academic journaling was what to write.

It wasn't very clear. What I learned from these entrepreneurs as I listen to them is the benefit of having writing prompts. When I had a digital journal, I had a macro or a template that would automatically provide me with a set of writing prompts to get me started. I would just simply answer the questions and then I would go in and elaborate, but it got the prompt primed. Do the same with your students. Provide specific prompts to help your students, and occasionally, send students a unique writing prompt.

This prompt may focus on the curriculum, current events, or just something fun to change the pace. You may ask them to write based on certain writing prompts or questions that you want them to address every time they sit down and journal. What I think is important is use the system that works for the learner. If you think journaling is an important lifelong activity, and I hope you do, then you need to be flexible with how your students are journaling.

It has to be their system. If you keep journals in a proprietary learning management system, it will not be helpful as a lifelong activity. As soon as they leave the LMS, they're going to stop journaling. It's better for them to create their system, something that they're going to use. I was fortunate that one professor allowed me to create a blog. I was then able to journal in public, and this podcast is a continuation of that blog. I have been going on for 10 years now.

This is just one form of journaling. I'm sharing my learning adventures with you. My bullet journal is a Moleskine book. It's a paper book. I carry it with me everywhere I go. All my meeting notes are in that book. I use it to track what I'm learning and I use it to capture ideas I wish to implement in my work and personal life. Many of these ideas have fortunately come to fruition.

As I noted earlier, suggest some ideal journaling time. If you want students to develop a lifelong habit of journaling, they need to first develop the habit. Therefore, it's important to offer suggestions on the best time for journaling, and more importantly, associate it with the trigger. When I talk about a trigger, a trigger is a habit they already have. For some students, the first thing they do is grab a cup of coffee and sit down and relax. Well, that's a trigger.

If you can get journaling associated with that morning cup of coffee, or evening tea, then there's a greater chance that they will continue to journal. Students need to carve out a regular set time in order to journal. Give them suggestions on how to do

this. Teach them how to make this part of their life. The other thing is to use journals in your class. Zachary Nowak and Reed Knappe recommended that journals are used directly in class activities. In their article, *The Benefits of Course Journaling*, they offer suggestions for journaling during a class session. They will encourage students to have their journals available while they're having face-to-face discussions.

They may ask them to define terms in their journals or summarize key points from journal articles, keep track of their research papers, the progress, different milestones that they have in their paper and document those all in their journal, or create concept maps in their journal, where they're drawing things out. It's a version of note-taking, but they definitely incorporate this into their classrooms. I shared the article, definitely worth going to see.

I think you'll pull out some really good ideas there. Also, if you think journaling is important, make time in your class for them to journal. It can be anywhere 5 to 15 minutes that you're providing them that time. That time, it can be dictated by a prompt or you just let them do free writing. It's an opportunity to write whatever they desire. As I reflect on what I wrote 40 years ago at the prep school, I can see very often I was at a loss for words, but these were free writing opportunities. I did not have any set prompts, and it's obvious if you look at my journal.

As an instructor, you need to also review the journals. Take time to review what students are writing and offer suggestions, encouragement for improvement. Basically, provide feedback, but really don't focus on grammar and spelling. I definitely would not grade these except for participation. If they met the basic parameters, then give them credit. If not, tell them they don't get credit. That participation grade should be anywhere from 10% to 20% of the final grade.

This shows that you really want them to do journaling and because it's part of the grade, you're finding that's important. Therefore, it will become important to them because you don't want to nitpick on a journal. If you start assessing grades for content, you're going to take fun out of the whole exercise. It also will change what the students will write. You want them to be more open. You want them to be honest. You want them to tap into their inner self. You basically want to create a safe place for writing.

Also, encourage self-evaluation. As students develop more journal entries, you may ask them to go back and review past entries and then reflect on it with a new entry. Todd Finley shares an end-of-semester reflection activity that's worth checking out. I will put the article in the show notes. Basically, students review their entire journal at the end of the semester and identify 10 key journal entries that focused on the course material. Then they put together a letter which addresses a series of reflective questions and they turn that in for their instructor to grade.

Just another way of adding journals and how to assess them. Early in the semester, teach students how to write journal entries, especially if you're looking for a specific format. Then finally, coordinate journal writing across the campus. Find out who at your institution is also incorporating journal writing into their class. Can you use a

common journal so students are not going to get burned out by this activity? If each of their classes requires a daily journal, this can create a significant amount of workforce students.

How can you use a single journal entry to suffice across all these classes? In the show notes, I've shared a lot of links that you can also use with your class to help them understand the importance of journaling and maybe some success tips. While I have benefited from journaling, my initial exposure was not as beneficial as my instructors probably had hoped. In this episode, I have shared strategies to help you implement a successful academic activity. I've also shared a bit about journaling in my book, *Read to Succeed*, so here's a quick plug.