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Conversations of the mind: the Impact of journal writing on enhancing EFL medical students' reflections, attitudes, and sense of self

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Abstract

Journal writing is a means of self expression, and has been used in many disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education and even mathematics and remains a valuable teaching/learning tool in many classrooms, because it not only teaches the students to write, it also encourages them to share their experiences and ideas. In this study a class comprising of 65 medical students were instructed to keep journals to see the level of change in the style, reflections, attitudes and sense of self. The students were instructed to reflect on being a medical student, their clinical experiences and anything that captures their attention. The students were given freedom and choice in choosing the topics and were ensured of confidentiality of their journals. The analysis of the journal contents were reported in 6 themes. The six main themes included of pedagogical, reflections on past experiences, change of attitude, sense of self, personal experiences, and worries about future career. The results indicated a change in all of the aspects of writing. The findings suggest that the process of reflection may be actively facilitated through journals.

Keywords: Journal writing, Medical students, Reflection, Rafsanjan

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1. Introduction

Reflection is those intellectual and affective activities in which the students explore their experiences in order to lead to new understanding and appreciation (Boud et al., 2013). Journal writing refers to any writing that students perform that challenges the students to reflect on past situations and how they might perform if similar situations arise. Wong et al. (1995) maintain that reflective journal writing involves a reflective process that is initiated when the learner documents the experience encountered, return to the experience recollects what has taken place and replays the experience and reevaluation takes place. Andrusyszyn (2007) believes that through reflection learners have the potential to intentionally connect thoughts, feelings, and experiences to the learning activity in which they are engaged. There are numerous ways for creating situations in which the students could be taught to reflect on their own thinking and promote reflective learning; journal writing is one of these methods. Reflective learning is the key element in learning from experience. It places the emphasis on the self as the source of learning. Self-reflection has been used by many students in different fields including pharmacy, nursing, physical therapy through journals (Bouldin et al., 2006). It has been said that self reflection has a “potential in developing skills in communication, critical thinking, self-learning, self- and social awareness, empathy, and sensitivity to cultural differences” (Bouldin et al., 2006, p. 2). Journal writing has been used extensively to enhance reflection. The process has a long history and has taken many forms, especially in educational contexts. The overwhelming theme in the literature is that journal writing can engage an individual in conversation with the self, promoting the development of introspective awareness. The most common partnership described in the literature for dialogic or interactive journals is between learner and instructor.

Writing is considered a social practice which needs special attention to purpose and audience (Badger & White, 2000). Recently a trend has been incorporated to introduce Iranian students to a process genre based student center pedagogy in the academic setting (Hanjani & Li, 2014). But still in many academic settings the practice of single draft student product is still very common. In medical school because of the demand of school work and medical workload not much writing products are expected from the students. The medical students are required to pass about five general and two ESP English credits. In these classes mostly grammar and vocabulary are taught and students are very reluctant to engage in any writing activity, partly because they lack confidence in their own writing skills and partly because it is conceived as too demanding and time consuming. They are more eager to learn the skills and techniques to help them in the professional field and are rarely interested in any kind of writing. Also, as most Iranian EFL teachers have a low proficiency in the art of teaching writing to the students and consider single draft student products as enough language practice, the students do not develop appropriate writing skills. Self reflection is trying to understand one's self better by stepping back from an experience and deeply considering the feelings and emotions behind the work. Self-reflection in its simplest form is asking yourself thought-provoking questions so that you can develop a deeper level of understanding about yourself. We may engage in self-reflection when we are unsure about something, when we feel like we could have done something differently, or when we want to remind ourselves what we are doing well or what we have accomplished (Schneider Corey et al., 2009). A central characteristic for any person including the students of medicine is an awareness of self including one's identity, cultural perspective, goals, motivations, needs, limitations, strengths, values, feelings, and problems. Self-reflection promotes growth and development is widely supported across all the fields. Furthermore, there is much agreement that being introspective, self-aware, and self-accepting are important characteristics of professional helpers and thereby worthy of attention in the medical education. Learner's attitudes and beliefs affect how they approach learning and the degree of success they gain in language learning (Abraham & Vann, 1987). Of course these attitudes are related to their previous experiences and learning environments.

Journal writing is a means of self expression, and has been used in many disciplines such as psychology, sociology, education and even mathematics and remains a valuable teaching/learning tool in many classrooms, because it not only teaches the students to write, it also encourages them to share their experiences and ideas. (Garmon, 1998) believes that journal writing helps instructors know and understand their students better and therefore tailor instruction to meet their particular needs. Also, for the students it gives them an opportunity to grapple with the ideas presented in class and promotes self reflection, enhances self-knowledge and promotes students’ learning. Journal writing is also an activity that stimulates critical thinking and provides feedback about
learning. Reflective journal writing is one of the learner-centered strategies that can promote the learners' critical 
and reflective thinking (Chabeli, 2001; Rolfe et al., 2001).

This qualitative study was devised to find out the impact of journal writing on the enhancement of reflections, 
attitudes and sense of self of the medical students at Rafsanjan University of medical sciences. As participants 
chronicle their movement from resistance to awareness, they provide an inside view of the ways in which self-
reflection might promote personal growth. Accessing the inner world of individuals who are engaged in such 
personal and professional evolution offers insight and direction for teachers and curriculum designers.

2. Review of literature

To promote reflective thinking and learning many researchers believe that it is imperative for the teachers to 
focus on using learner-centered teaching strategies that are learner friendly and allow the students to express their 
opinions and relive their experiences without fear or anxiety (Shields, 1995). Journal writing is considered one of 
these strategies. According to Mlynarczyk (2013), there are three factors as the most important elements in 
improving ESL/EFL students’ writing abilities: “practice, attitude, and individual tutoring”(p.37). She points out 
that these three components are central to journal writing: “journals give students extensive writing practice, the 
opportunity to express and perhaps to change their attitudes toward writing, and the chance to develop a personal 
relationship with the teacher” (p.36). Yinger (1985) maintains that journal writing also improve students' writing 
skills by: 1) focusing on processes rather than on products, 2) emphasizing expressive and personal aspects and 3) 
serving as a record of thoughts and expression that is available for rereading.

Journal writing has also been used in practice settings with nursing students (Heinrich, 1992) for guidance and 
therapy by counselors, and in numerous educational applications (Lukinsky, 1990). Baker described how reflective 
journals were used in a nursing program to stimulate critical thinking (Baker, 1996). Davies (2003) reported that by 
journal writing, the students moved from being passive to active learners during their clinical debriefing sessions. 
Sedlak (1992) also reported the same shift of change in his students and reported an improved self-confidence and 
problem solving ability. Davies (2003) stated that journal writing provides students with an opportunity to return to 
their experiences in an attempt to develop new perspectives that can guide future clinical actions.

Ritchie (2003) reported that through journal entries, physical therapy students were provided with many 
opportunities for both the student and faculty member to give feedback, ask questions, and offer ideas for further 
reflection. In addition, bonds of trust were formed, not only between the student and faculty member, but among the 
students themselves as they learned to begin to trust themselves and the decisions they made.

Journal writing is often used by the instructors as a means of evaluating students in academic courses. Some 
studies have indicated that instructors also have a positive impression of students' journal writing assignments, since 
in this method the responsibility of learning is shared by the student and instructor. Young and Wilson (2000) also 
report that journal writing is a student –centered approach, in which students are in control of their own writing 
styles. Learner-centered collaborative learning environments that enhance reflexive awareness facilitate knowledge 
construction (Bednar et al.,1992; Jonassen et al., 1995; Jonassen, 1994). “Students and instructors can then build 
meaning, understanding, and relevant practice together and go beyond the mere movement of information from 
instructors’ minds to students’ notebooks” (Jonassen et al., 1995, p. 8). Boud et al. (2013) proposed that educators 
can facilitate this internal process and that it need not be a solitary activity. They believe that the more teachers and 
learners understand this reflective aspect of learning and organize learning activities which are consistent with it, the 
more effective learning.

3. Methods

In the fall 2013, 65 medical students were enrolled in the medical school. All of the students were required to 
pass five credits of general English at the first term. Later on two students were transferred to other universities and 
63 students remained. Thirty two students were female and they ranged in ages from 18 to 20. One of the tasks 
given to the students was journal writing which was considered to be 20 percent of the final grade. The students met 
twice a week for a two hour session. At the last 20 minutes of each session the students were asked to brainstorm
and write on a topic of their choice for 15 to 20 minutes and reflect on the experiences that they had in the classes or clinical settings or any other topic that was of interest or concern to them. The participants were told to use their journals as a medium for what they've seen, felt or experienced, and could be filled with sights, sounds, smells, concerns, insights, doubts, fears, and critical questions about issues, people, and most importantly themselves. Every effort was taken to ensure that the students felt comfortable and at ease with their journaling assignments. They were also told to feel free about the choice of topics and consult the instructor about any problems.

None of the students in this study had any prior experience in keeping journals in an academic or any other educational settings, since none of them had ever been requested to keep daily journals as part of any course. The journals were analyzed using qualitative content analysis at the end of the term to see the level of change in reflections, attitudes and self of sense. In this method the content of the data is illuminated and by careful analysis and constant comparison in an inductive process the themes and categories are shaped. The main document were coded and the themes were drawn based on the meaningful items. To ensure the authenticity of the journals some of the data were separately reviewed and coded by the co-researcher. At the end the primary researcher/instructor reviewed the data again to ensure the internal validity and the final results and analysis were presented.

3.1. Research questions

1. Does journal writing enhance reflection in the medical students?
2. Does journal writing change the attitudes about writing in the medical students?
3. Does journal writing enhance sense of self in the medical students?

3.2. Participants

65 medical students enrolled in the general English credit at Rafsanjan University of Medical sciences. All of the students were new entry students and had had no previous experience in writing English journals, and data collection included ten journal entries of each of the students throughout the term which collectively came to 457 pages.

4. Results

The journal entries of 63 medical students were analyzed for reflection, change of attitude about writing and sense of self. The journals were analyzed and codes were given to the emerging themes. The themes that emerged were pedagogical, personal reflections, changes of attitudes, sense of self, worries about future career and society's attitudes towards medical students. Pedagogical themes included subthemes of educational facilities, instructors and the feelings about the chosen major and its role in their future lives. The themes are explained in details in the following paragraphs.

4.1. Pedagogical

Pedagogical theme included the following subthemes:

1.1. The heavy course load: The students complained that they were new to the university and did not have any idea how hard they have to work: "the teachers ask too much of us. I don't have any time for myself anymore."

1.2. Free writing: They felt very happy and relieved that they did not have to worry about grammar, punctuation or spelling and said that we had given them choice and power.

1.3. Doubts about choosing major: Many students had a lot of doubts about becoming a medical doctor and some indicated that they won't live up to the standards a being a doctor."I didn't want to be a doctor. I wanted to be an elementary school teacher. But my mother said no. I was cheated I was deceived, I was robbed. I will be a useless doctor."

1.4. Difficulty of English writing and time consuming: As these students had no prior experience about journal writing they indicated that it was difficult, time consuming and they were not ready for this task.
1.5. **Feelings towards instructors:** Some students indicated that the instructors do not understand them and ask too much of them.

4.2. **Reflections on past experiences**

Reflections on past experiences theme included the following subthemes:

2.1. Recording their thoughts
2.2. Diary writing
2.3. Expressive writing

4.3. **Change of attitude**

Change of attitude theme included the following subthemes.

3.1 **A more positive attitude towards learning English:** Almost most of the participants indicated that learning English in this way (finding the vocabulary, using the dictionary in a different ways and not worrying about grammar) had had a positive impact on their learning process.

3.2. **Change of attitude regarding writing in English:** Again as they were writing in their own logs and not worrying about the topic had made them powerful and gave them the ownership of their own products.

3.3. **Change of attitude regarding the learner centered education**

4.4. **Sense of self**

*Sense of self* is having a deep understanding and awareness about one's emotions, strengths and weaknesses and gives the person an ability to stand back and look at themselves. The important issue here is using the information about self to reflect on the actions.

The subthemes that came up through this theme included the following:

4.1. **Emotions:** "I didn't want to become a doctor. I wanted to be an elementary school teacher, but my mother said absolutely no. I was robbed, cheated, and deceived…"

4.2. **Personal life experiences:** "I remember when I went to the classroom, there were six students, standing in front of me. I asked them to sit down and they did ….. Finally I started the first lesson. To my surprise, they accepted whatever I told them about the lesson. Gosh! They were looking at me as a perfect teacher." (Male participant)

4.3. **Being yourself:** "I was simply able to be, I don't have to cover my emotions…."

4.4. **Becoming more confident:** "This is the first time that I will write my memories in English. It is to some extent interesting because someone will read my memories who do not know me and I do not know her, but it is also difficult. Although I haven't enough time this semester for writing my memories each day, I will try to do my best."

(Male participant)

4.5. **Comfort in the presence of people:** "I think if I become honest with my patients, people will be more comfortable with me."

4.5. **Personal experiences**

The theme of personal experiences included the following subthemes.

5.1. **Marital worries:** The female students wrote about the dreams of being married and having a family but worried how medicine would affect their married life. One wrote "I hear a lot of female doctors go through a divorce because they cannot balance work with life. I hope this does not happen to me."One student in particular had written a long essay about the suitor who had jilted her and married another girl after two years of engagement simply because the girl had not been accepted to the university.

She reported that this sad experience had motivated her to study hard and get into the university.
This entry shows the level of trust that she had felt between herself and the reader. She had also tried to write eloquently and with a lot of emotion. In this light we could assume that at least for her journal writing had facilitated the development of language learning as well.

5.2. Feeling of love

5.3. Sympathy: "I have decided to go to Ahvaz and see the places that our young people suffered martyrdom without any fear and went to the paradise. I want to pray there and kiss its soil because our martyred walked there. I'll never forget them and their devotion." (Female participant)

5.4. Lessons learned: "The best lesson I have ever learned from a teacher was that 'no matter in what position you end up to be, either as a doctor, a teacher, or simply a house wife, try to be the best possible.' As a result although I will always try my best to climb to be a higher position I won’t be disappointed if I do not succeed." (Female participant)

One student wrote that writing essay all through her school days have been very boring and unnecessary for her.

4.6. Worries about future career

Worries about future career were the last emergent category and included the following subthemes.

6.1. Society’s attitude: Many students felt really lucky that they had finally succeeded and chosen a major that society valued and respected. Also many of them were happy that their parents had become proud of their hard work. "My mother can sleep easier now, she was worried about me all her life. Now she is happy. I think she is so proud of me."

6.2. Family pressure: Two students had indicated that they had only chose the medicine because their parents had put pressure on them and also because there were other siblings who had become medical doctors and they felt very pressured to live up to the family standards.

6.3. Sense of doubt: Some students were very doubtful about their future career and indicated that they had chosen their majors and loved it but they were doubtful as to how it would affect their personal values in the future: "Will I be good doctor or will I become a "money doctor?"

5. Discussions

The themes that emerged were pedagogical, personal reflections, changes of attitudes, sense of self, worries about future career and society’s attitudes towards medical students. these themes showed the level of importance and care that the students had placed on the journaling process. As (Routman, 2000) emphasizes, journal writing is a good way to begin implementing a writing workshop because, and as he says it "promotes fluency in reading and writing and encourage risk taking, provides opportunities for reflection, and promotes the development of written language conventions" (p. 233). We know that all writers need to relate to what they are writing about, and be motivated by their feelings about a topic. They also need to experience the process of discovering what they want to say through their own writing. Therefore we need to give them choice and power to draw on these potentials and give them time to realize for themselves that good writing is essentially re-writing. In this light, journal writing seems to be a good beginning practice in teaching the true art of writing. In this study for the sake of the investigation we did not offer any feedback to our students and it seemed like what they needed most was a validation of their efforts.

Personal reflections included looking back at past experiences and suggesting new ways to handle situations or just stating feelings about those experiences changes of attitude included feelings about school, writing and language learning. The theme of sense of self included themes about recording of thoughts and feelings of the students; and as (Davie & Wells, 1991) states offered an open window on the self. While results seemed to indicate an improvement in both writing style and grammar, closer inspection reveals additional factors which might explain the differences in reflections, attitude and sense of self. Self-reflection should promote self-awareness and, potentially, personal change. All participants reported a heightened self-awareness as a result of engaging in self-reflection. Having an atmosphere conducive to self-reflection was greatly appreciated by the participants. This fact was repeatedly stated in the students’ journal entries. Some students especially women assumed that the journal is a safer environment in
which to discuss ideas than in classroom setting. As (Parkyn, 1999) points out, "controversial or sensitive issues that are addressed in a lively manner in the journal are sometimes discussed only reluctantly, if at all, in the classroom." The journals also allow the students who are usually silent and afraid to speak up "to talk" on the paper. For example some female students had openly described their marital problems and asked for advice, while others had talked about their dream husbands or broken hearts. Most of these students had tried to write very neatly and with lots of emotions. It seemed like they had searched the dictionary for the right and eloquent words to describe their feelings and show their emotions. Being engaged in an on-going process of writing and reflecting allowed the participants to effectively follow a path of describing their sense of self. Other subthemes that could be drawn from the journals included heightened awareness of self, recognition of personal potential, enhanced empathy for self and others, and improved interpersonal relationships. Emerging from their focused efforts in self-reflection, participant reported an expanded sense of self and a confidence in their capacity to become successful journal writers. Through these writings the medical students found their own sense of self and discovering their own way of thinking. Our students were full of doubt about their chosen major and worried about their future careers. Although becoming a medical doctor was a desire for many of them, but the value that the society places on the medicine was the incentive for the students to choose their major and not necessarily their own talent and wish. They became doubtful as to will they become good doctors who would be valuable for the society and particularly the poor or will they become doctors who were only after money and lose their sense of humanity in the process.

6. Conclusion

Medical instructors could use a pedagogy that would incorporate clinical instruction with reflective writing and in the process assess and enhance the student’s sense of self reflection and attitude. Also, guide the students to use their own potentials and develop self awareness in order to deliver better patient care and problem solving skills in the future. In this study for the sake of the investigation we did not offer any feedback to our students and it seemed like what they needed most was a validation of their efforts. So, we suggest that if educators want to use journal writing in their classes and capitalize on their potential, they must be willing to spend time and effort to offer the students feedback on their journal entries. Feedback will help the students find out their own weaknesses and strengths and challenge their writing techniques.

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