Using Learning Journals  
To Improve Student Performance in World History and Geography  
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Introduction

At the midpoint of year I began asking my students to write in learning journals. Three of my adaptive World History and Geography II classes have been writing their thoughts and feelings in reflective summaries. Most importantly, I wanted to help my students improve their understanding of history. The research idea I established at the beginning of school year was to see if overall student performance would improve through journal writing. In addition, I was curious whether learning journals would help students improve their handwriting over the course of the year. I also wanted to see a progression in their grammar, more specifically sentence structure, punctuation, and spelling.

The topic of journal writing interested me because I believe when a person learns history they should be able to explain it in their own terms. For example, if I gave the students notes on World War I, but they are unable to interpret the impact of World War I, I felt I would be doing them a disservice. Yet as Ovando & Collier (1998) point out, “Students need to improve their speaking and writing skills -- which is harder to develop than the receptive skills of listening and reading.”

At the beginning of the year I could see my students did not like to write, and when answers were volunteered they were almost always one word. I know they didn’t like to write because when I gave them an assignment they either would not do it or they would only do the bare minimum work. When giving notes I had often felt students would copy them down and not be able to explain what they meant. This was very frustrating because it appeared that students were not able to apply the knowledge they were learning on their own. I wanted my students to be able to apply what they were learning and I felt a learning journal was the best method to help them begin expressing themselves more fluently.

Rationale for Using Learning Journals

Learning journals put responsibility into the students’ hands, gave them a place to build fluency, allowed me to catch any misunderstandings, and to communicate more personally with my students.

By using learning journals in the class I put the responsibility for learning in the hands of the students. They need to take the topic and put it into words so they can better understand it. Journal writing is private, it is not evaluated and it is never criticized so that students can work more on building fluency in expressing their understandings rather than focusing only on the grammar in their writing. It is a way for students to express themselves freely. This allows me to see what they understand along with their misconceptions they might have. For example, Mohamed wrote in his journal, “Great
Britain controlled Ethiopia and Egypt.” After reading this entry I was able to write John a note clarifying his misunderstanding I explained how Great Britain controlled Egypt and the Sudan. This was a great opportunity for me to catch misinformation that without a learning journal may not have been caught.

In these journals students are able to tell me things they may not say in a group setting. For instance, one student, Abdul, said “thank you” in his journal,

In 1995 I came to USA. It was my first time that I was going out of my country. When I came here I saw many many things different. First of all people. Meeting with people who are totally different than you; languages, color, races, and many things. The attitude of new people changed me. I am really impressed by them, people were so nice. This place changed my whole mind. And way of thinking and place. Thank you very much.

I don’t believe most eighteen-year-old male students would openly say these words in a classroom, but the learning journal gave him the opportunity to express himself to me.

What I Did

I set up the learning journal at the beginning of the second quarter as a way to get the students more involved. Many people believe, writing in journals does not necessarily bring interaction. My thought was students were sitting back and letting me do all the work! As a teacher I know this is not fair. So, I started a new policy in November, the class was to write in journals once a week and I would collect them periodically for a homework grade. I remember how the groans and moans filled the classroom, nobody liked the idea of writing in journals. I went over the guidelines in class.

✓ First, they needed to reserve the back of their notebook for journals.

✓ Next we made journal covers during flex class, which they thoroughly enjoyed.

✓ Finally I told them my expectations:
  o You will have a journal entry once a week
  o Each entry must be at least six sentences long
  o Journals must be handed in on the day they are due, no exceptions.

✓ The journals were to be written in class and not for homework.

✓ I told them I would collect them periodically and would not grade on grammar, but I would be looking for completeness.

✓ I would allow approximately fifteen minutes for the students to write in their journals and I put target questions on the board for them as a springboard into writing.

At first many students fought me on the journal writing idea. When it was time to hand in journals I noticed that many of them did not have the required six sentences. For example, Abdi was a wonderful student, but he was also the type of student who
does not like to do ANY work in class or out of class, so he did not do the first four journal entries. He just did not hand them in, which was no big deal for him, he would gladly take the zero. Then one day Abdi overheard a conversation I was having with another student about their journal entry and the comments that I made, and something in Abdi must have clicked. I think he realized what he was missing out on by not partaking in these assignments and from that point on Abdi handed in more journal entries. Recently I asked Abdi what made him start handing in journal entries and he told me it was because he wanted to pass the class. I think Abdi will pass 10th grade world history and I wonder if the journals had anything to do with that.

What I Learned

The learning journal project was well worth my time and the students did enjoy them. I found out that my students enjoy writing in their own words. Also, the questions I posted on the board did help. For instance, in journal entry three I asked them to “summarize what you learned today and why it is important information to you” One student wrote in his journal literally everything we did in class. He wrote as follows,

First of all, we did the poster. The posters were review for us about the quiz. Then we did the quiz of England Revolution. After that, we went over the chart and the packet.

And he continued his entry in this format. I learned from this mistake and I realized my questions needed to be more focused. To evaluate what the student’s thought about the journals, I handed out a survey. 24 out of 33 students said they liked the journals and 2 out of 33 commented on the focus questions being too much information. The students felt like I was asking too many questions with too many different ideas.

I also learned that the ESOL students have very interesting journals entries because so many of them have traveled to various parts of the world. This is very helpful when talking about other cultures in history. My favorite journal entry was number eleven, which states, “How has traveling to new places changed your view of the world, of other people, and of yourself.” The students were able to answer this question better than I could myself. They have so many experiences to pull from it is fascinating. As Ovando and Collier (1998) explain, “History needs to be meaningful, integrative, value based, challenging- by writing journals students can pace themselves” (Ovando & Collier, 1998, p. 210). Journal entry number eleven pulled all of these ideas together. What we learned during Imperialism became more meaningful to the students.

While reading the journals I learned a lot about myself. As I stated before, learning journals allow me to correct student misunderstandings. They also show me what I may not have covered properly or thoroughly enough in class. All teachers know that by the last class of the day sometimes we say 1776 when we mean to say 1767. Students do not pick up on this small error, but the one who does could be completely confused. The journal gives students time to summarize their notes and in return I check to see if I have covered all the standards. “Journals can also provide teachers with valuable feedback about students understanding of ideas presented in text” (Richek et.al., 2002, p. 276). The best example I can give containing misunderstandings is the journal question about working on an assembly line. Five out of 30 students
explained to me that working on an assembly line would be fun. This is not the impression had intended the students to get. We had spent weeks learning about the atrocities of working in a factory during the Age of Industry. I showed pictures, read stories, but these five students say it would be fun. Obviously we had missed something. We discussed in class why it would be fun and they explained that it was a steady job that did not take much effort, this made some sense to me, but by the end of class I was able to make their view a more well rounded one. The students understood why it was dangerous to work in factories and I learned that having a steady income was more important to some than safety on the job.

Learning journals have also given me the opportunity to correct student’s grammar – but by modeling the correct form, not by marking up the page with red ink. When a student misspells words I would write the correct spelling in my comments to them. Richek et al. supported this idea with advice to “try to respond personally to the content of the students’ message. Try to use words the student originally misspelled in your response so that the student can see the words spelled correctly” (Richek et.al., 2002, p. 272).

Impact

In all honesty I am not sure the reason for the students’ improvement was directly correlated with the learning journals. Many students naturally progress throughout a school year. On the survey I gave students, 24 out of 33 students said that the journals did help them. I don’t know for sure if they were being honest or just answering the questions with what they thought I wanted to hear.

I believe learning journals have greatly helped my students throughout the course of the year. I witnessed student improvement through the use of learning journals. At least four students have drastically improved their handwriting. I compared their first few journal entries with the last few journal entries and I saw a noticeable improvement. Five students had greatly improved their writing style. They were writing in complete sentences and using some transition words so their paragraphs flowed from one thought to the next. I believe that since students were able to write freely based upon the focus questions, they were more apt to write whatever came into their heads. In the fourth quarter we looked back on all the journal entries we had made and the students were able to compare their work. Many of them noticed their progress throughout the year. One student laughed as she read her earlier journals she said “uh I have gotten a lot better, right?” The learning journal were not graded based upon writing skills so this allowed students not to worry or focus on their grammar but to instead concentrate on the content of their writing.

Future Impact

Next year I will definitely use the learning journals in my classes but as all teachers do I will change particular aspects of the project. First, I will introduce the learning journals at the beginning of the year as opposed to half way through the year. Secondly, I will set more time aside to write in the journals. I wanted to write in the journals once a week but with the rotation schedule and the enormous amount of information that needs to be covered I did not follow my intended plan and instead we wrote in journals every other week. This past year I felt the journals became a burden
when we did not have time for them. I believe the learning journals are an excellent teaching tool and they should not be used as an extra homework assignment but rather they should be incorporated into the weekly class assignments.

References
