

Teaching Employment Relations with Learning Journals in Distance Mode: Initial Experiences

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The problem facing the teacher of employment relations is how to make the subject 'come alive' for students so that they engage more seriously with the subject. Then their learning can move on from short-term factual regurgitation and shallow learning, to serious reflection and long-term deeper learning. This paper describes and reflects upon experiences of the author using learning journals initially in an 'on-campus' two hundred level employment relations subject, and most recently as part of a distance presentation of the same subject. Individual subject learning journals have been required of each student to encourage what November (1996) has called the 'Journey into deeper learning'.

If you are an academic looking for more effective ways of pouring *factual small beer* into your students, then you will have no interest in using learning journals. I first came across learning journals during Refresher Study Leave at Griffith University in 1994 (Bond, 1994), but I had never thought of using them in teaching MGMT 215 Employment Relations and Personnel Management until reading casually in *Higher Education Research and Development* Peter November's (1996) article 'Journals for the Journey into Deeper Learning: A Framework'. I immediately recognised my plight in his account of how students, academics, academic administrators and educational technologists all have misconceptions about the nature of higher education. They believe that it is the transfer of knowledge from a fountain to cups held deferentially by thirsty students. November believed that such a shallow approach to learning, typical of commerce type courses which he taught, could be made deeper and more lasting through the use of learning journals.

LEARNING JOURNALS

November (1996) has identified the following uses that academics have had for journals:

- To develop writing skills
- As a psychological dumping ground
- A route to self-awareness
- To recreate experiences, ideas, feelings, impressions, valuable or troublesome
- To promote critical thinking
- To get to know each other
- To dialogue with students and/or get course feedback
- To encourage thoughtfulness/thought development/reflection

- As part of a larger project
- As a source of group discussion topics

Only the last two have not been useful to me. Each student taking MGMT 215 since 1997 has been required to keep a journal of their experiences, thoughts and feelings about taking the subject, the lectures, the tutorials, assignments completed and so on. The object of keeping this journal was to help assist students achieve *deeper and more lasting learning* in MGMT 215. They were advised that marks were not awarded for content in the same way as for a normal project, but for the regular recording of what they thought and felt about the subject and how it was developing.

Students are asked to begin with an opening prompt: Who are you? Your background? Your interests? Your ambitions? Your educational background, including subjects you are currently studying? What do you find interesting in these subjects? How do you normally approach study? What you think of this subject? What do you think of writing a journal? What are your personal objectives in this subject? What do you think of each of the formal subject objectives? This is great for getting to know your class from the beginning.

ONGOING REFLECTION

Ongoing reflection is the main body of most journal entries and promotes a deeper approach to the subject. Students are asked to think in terms of an agenda, or list of employment relations issues or problems that they currently face in the subject. Once the current agenda has been identified, students are invited to comment on each item using questions such as: What do I feel about it? What information is needed? How does it relate to other issues? What did I do and how did it work? Where can I find more information? Can I think of an example I have observed?

Some students have been good at the ongoing keeping up of the entries, others have not. Those that made the effort and seriously attempted to reflect on the subject have scored well. Some students have been particularly innovative with their journals adding all sorts of bits of information such as photocopies of news items, articles, and bits of books. Their journals have been really worthwhile learning tools and often I have learnt from them.

To help students, journals have been collected each fortnight, read and commented on by the tutor or myself. Following November (1996) we wanted to help students make the most of the efforts we were asking them to make. They then had regular feedback on how they were going, and advice on how to make their journals more useful. The unexpected benefit of this approach was that it gave me some ongoing feedback from the students on how the subject and I were going - points that had really struck them, or that they had not grasped. However, journals had one big advantage that was again unexpected. They enabled reluctant or shy students to ask questions without appearing stupid or dumb to their colleagues.

The value of the reflective process needed for the teaching journal can be seen in two quotes from the journal of Steve Lancaster, lock forward of the *Canterbury Crusaders* Super 12 rugby union competition winners in 1998, 1999, 2000. Steve wrote about his journal:

'This journal has really been a good way of reinforcing the learning. Writing entries forces one to think about what has been covered, imprinting it on the mind, and is also a unique way of creating dialogue between student and teacher.'

The value of the approach is also shown in a second quote about his experiences of forming psychological contracts with the *Crusaders*. The idea of psychological contracts between people is central to *MGMT 215/255*. Steve's quote shows the beneficial interaction of workplace experiences as a professional rugby player and a theoretical component of the subject, helping to set what may be seen as unworldly theory in the real world of work:

'Yes, there certainly is a psychological contract (PC) underlying every relationship. They are more important than the legal contract that exists in an employment relationship because they dictate the spirit of the relationship...it is important for the psychological contract to be brought out into the open. As long as the PC remains 'secret' or not clarified it is open to misrepresentation or poor perception.

In the *Canterbury Crusaders* we clarify our psychological contract at the beginning of every season. The team and management will have an open meeting where the 'team protocols', as we call them, are agreed. The team will state its expectations of the coaches, management and medical team, and *vice versa*. Each protocol will be discussed, debated and agreed upon. Although the term 'psychological contract' isn't used, I realise now that we are in fact setting out our PC. As a result of this meeting a document is prepared and everyone receives a copy. By having a written document which everyone has bought into, breaches of protocol (PC) are easily dealt with. In my experience clarification of the PC greatly enhances the working relationship, between both management and employees, and fellow employees. It creates an open relationship where, because each party understands what the other expects of them, expectations and goals are more easily met.

I have noticed that many of the definitions of PCs refer to them as implicit or secret. You don't get the impression that they are openly discussed and understood. I guess in most cases they are not. If employers and employees began their relationship with a thorough discussion of their PC as well as their legal contract, it is likely that the relationship would be more productive and result in a better relationship between the parties...'

DISTANCE TEACHING

In 2000, for the first time, MGMT 215 was presented as an identical subject in distance mode as MGMT 255 Employment Relations and Personnel Management. Assessment for MGMT 215 and MGMT 255 was made as similar as possible, and the individual subject learning journal continued to be worth 25 per cent of the subject marks for both papers. Initially MGMT 255 was only to be taught off-campus in the Christchurch area. The system, which had been developed for what was called the *Regional Education Programme* at Lincoln University, involved converting subjects into twelve modules, one for each week of the teaching semester. Besides a programme of appropriate readings and exercises for each module, the *Regional Education Programme* involved either a once a week/module teaching meeting for all students in a locality. For students in isolated locations a teleconferencing facility was provided. These are usually staffed by recruited learning co-ordinators. I decided to be my own learning co-ordinator to see and experience the operation of the distance mode before asking anybody else to be a learning co-ordinator. When enrolments for MGMT 255 were reviewed it became apparent that there were students wanting to take the subject from outside the Christchurch area. Therefore it was decided to have one group in Christchurch and one teleconference for non-Christchurch students, so I had two groups to service on the same night.

The key difference between the Lincoln's *Regional Education Programme* and others is the regular weekly interactive teaching session. Also, the formal contact session provides an extra incentive to get students to do the necessary reading. Without that additional leverage it is very easy for students in distance mode to get seriously behind with the reading. My own son, studying full time in another two hundred level subject only available in distance mode, found this a continual problem. Personally, I preferred to keep lecturing to the internal students to remind myself of my own material. Students have certainly appreciated the interactive learning sessions, especially when run by the lecturer/examiner! The highpoint of these evenings was when one middle aged, female, retail shop manager said at the end of a role-play/case study that she had had fun that evening.

Both internal and external subjects were provided with identical written materials and briefings on the individual subject learning journal. I encouraged students to be quite uninhibited in their approach to their journals, and assured them that they would be graded on how they were using the method at the end of the semester, not as they were at the beginning. However, how was I to convert my method of providing feedback to the distance mode? Christchurch did not present any problems as I was also the *Learning Co-ordinator*, but what about the distant teleconference group? I was concerned by two factors: the speed of getting the journals in, read, commented on, and returned; secondly, by the risk of a journal being lost or mislaid. Knowing that all my students did not have good computing facilities permitting email, I devised the following system:

- All journals are to be kept in A5 Spiral bound notebooks.

- To provide the necessary feedback, I required the journals to be taken in every two weeks. To ease postal charges and provide greater security of the individual journals, distant students were required to photocopy their entries for the fortnight¹
- I undertook to read them as soon as possible; write my comments upon them; and post them back for the students' further guidance.
- I also kept a photocopy of the original journal submission with my comments for security, in case of loss². Students were assured these entries were for my eyes only and would be treated as confidential waste at the end of teaching.
- The dates when students should provide regular entries and a final review statement were also provided. The whole journal was required for the final grading exercise.

My plans were nearly derailed because I had not allowed for the poorer postal service in remoter rural areas causing delays. Some students found the hand written journal style a problem as they could type faster than they could write. They got around it by creating their own A5 size ring binders with the journal entries typed in A5 format. In 2000, electronic submission was never contemplated. No research had been done on learning journals being submitted by email or Internet.

RELATIVE PERFORMANCE OF THE DIFFERENT GROUPS IN 2000

Simple comparison of the MGMT 215 and 255 classes' marks gives means of 61.3 per cent (s.d. 8.1, n=12) and 65.0 (s.d. 10.26, n=11). However, this comparison is not simple because we are looking at different types of students performing under different conditions. MGMT 215 students on-campus would tend to be full-time students taking usually four subjects, while MGMT 255 students might only have been taking one or two subjects, and also holding down full-time jobs. Further, if we differentiate between the Christchurch group in MGMT 255 and those at a distance, we find better performance in the Christchurch group which gave an average of 67.1 (n=7), while those at a distance averaged 61.1 (n=4). My suspicion would be that the external students in general were far more motivated, underestimated their own abilities and the value of their maturity and worldly experience to study. With one notable exception, the external students were keen to succeed and upgrade their educational qualifications. However, one year's data can only be taken as suggestive, not conclusive.

ELECTRONIC LEARNING JOURNALS

An initial search of the Internet suggests lots of examples when students do their entries as a Word document, and then email it to their lecturer. Where group projects use a journal, individual students have areas that are password protected, which only the lecturer and the individual student can access. Some reports are not helpful because they are tied to a particular computer system, for example, Laffey, Musser and Tupper (no date) who focus solely on Macintosh systems for journals; or are constrained by the specific discipline they

relate to, for example, mathematics (Fairholme, Dougiamas and Dreher, 2000). While theoretically possible, there are a number of practical problems that I perceive with electronic submission. First, not all students at present have ready access to computers and email. Secondly, personally (with relatively poor eyesight), I find it a lot easier to read a manuscript journal rather than off a computer screen. Thirdly, an all-electronic process would curtail the spontaneity of some journal entries made in many informal places, often according to November in lectures! Fourthly, while words can be conveyed easily electronically, spontaneous drawings/cartoons and news clippings are much more problematic. The value of the written journal is found in its ability to absorb items of all these types.

EDUCATIONAL OUTCOMES

I have used a subject learning journal now for four years, 1997-2000. I was so pleased with them in 1997 that I increased the marks allocated to them from 10 per cent to 25 per cent in 1998. Last year (1999) 61 per cent of the class described their personal journal as good or very good in terms of its value to learning (n=18), compared to 73 per cent in 1998 (n=45) and 62 per cent in 1997 (n=36). I am sure there is much further I can go in encouraging my students to become deeper thinkers and to reflect far more so I am still trying to come to grips with John Cowan's *On Becoming an Innovative University Teacher - Reflection in Action* (1998) in which journals are discussed more.

NOTES

¹ To avoid cutting off margins, reduction to 95 per cent of the original was found to be a good idea – two A5 pages requiring one A4 photocopy

² In 1999 I had had a student whose journal mysteriously disappeared and I found allocation of the 25 per cent of the subject mark very difficult.

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