

Is Journaling Write for You? A Qualitative Analysis of Undergraduate Perceptions of Journaling in an Introductory Agricultural Communications Course

Introduction

Students increasingly face various distractions to learning due to an abundance of external media influences (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020 and Dontre, 2021). This can affect the engagement and self-efficacy in the classroom if students are focused on things other than the content being presented to them (Dontre, 2021). Journaling can alleviate this issue by enhancing self-awareness, student interest and learning through reflection (Hampton & Morrow, 2003).

The term 'journal' references any personal writing that allows an individual to express perceptions, dreams, experiences, and creativity from the perspective of the self (Hemphill-Pearson, 2008). There are different forms of journaling including computer-based journals, Internet-based journals, hard copy journals and structured workbooks (Hemphill-Pearson, 2008). These all assist with personal growth, synthesis and reflection on new information an individual acquires (Hiemstra, 2001). Journaling is a useful tool to develop positive relationships between teachers and students and build an enhanced learning environment focused on experiences that will help increase student engagement during their learning process (Ali & Hassan, 2018). In agriculture classrooms, enhancing engagement and knowledge retention can help advance public knowledge of agriculture, food, and natural resources (AAAE, 2023).

While research on reflective journaling is abundant in educational settings, it currently lacks in higher education courses within Agriculture. Research on Agricultural Communications and Journalism undergraduate students' perceptions and reactions towards journaling exercises can assist professors to better develop a classroom environment that will generate more engagement. In Agricultural Communications, journaling can be used to increase metacognition and metacognitive awareness of students' experiences, allowing them to contemplate and articulate their skill development (Redwine et al., 2016). The research questions guiding this study include: RQ1) How does journaling impact students' learning experiences and environments. RQ2) What are students' general reactions to reflection through journaling.

Conceptual Framework

This study was guided by the Social Cognitive Theory. The Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) provides a model demonstrating the connection that behaviors and environment have on the motivation and learning of a person (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Reflection can play a role in this framework, as problem solving mostly arises in thought rather than in action (Bandura, 1977a). A review of more recent SCT literature examines that self-efficacy largely influences the choice of activities, self-regulation and efforts, and in succession is affected by the results of one's achievement efforts (Schunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). The principles of social cognition can be applied in the classroom to foster self-regulatory actions (Schunk, 2013). Reflection in journaling assists students to better understand the abstract concepts needed for learning outcomes (Hampton & Morrow, 2003).

Methods

Students in [Blinded Course] completed a total of nine journal entries over the course of the semester. Students were notified that the journaling assignments would be graded for completion and not content and were welcome to share anything in this space. Students were provided with guiding prompts to facilitate idea generation and reflection. These prompts included questions

such as: How do you feel today? What was your biggest take away from the last two weeks of class? What questions do you still have about agricultural communications?

The research team conducted a qualitative content analysis of 32 student's response comments in their final journal entry. The researchers used in vivo coding for the first cycle of analysis and further categorized and refined responses into categories and themes (Saldaña, 2012).

Findings

Theme	Quotes
1. Positive student journaling experiences include time to think, chance for reflection and renewed interest.	"I really enjoyed journaling in this class too because it helped me review what we learned and comprehend it to another level." "I think the prompts have been a great tool to really reflect on what we have learned and stop and think about where we are at."
2. Past journaling experienced students were more open to journaling again.	"I have journaled before and, I will likely continue to do so moving forward from this class." "I used to journal daily but have fallen out of the routine, having done it this semester I may go back to it."
3. Students who know they will not continue journaling still acknowledge the benefits.	"I feel journaling for me, has allowed me to have kind of a reminder almost and it is definitely something I should continue to do, but it is more than likely I will not." "It was nice to reflect every few weeks and see how far I have come this semester. I don't think I will continue to journal."

Conclusion

While not all students enjoyed the journaling exercise, most had some positive takeaway regarding its contribution to their retention of content or for providing the opportunity for personal or professional reflection. These findings are consistent with principles from Social Cognitive Theory connecting learning to self-direct reflection and retention (Shunk & DiBenedetto, 2020). Understanding this connection between learning and self-directed reflection and retention for education efforts can allow teachers to use reflection activities to aid in retention and learning (AAAE, 2023 and Ali & Hassan, 2018). Metacognitive awareness is an important part of learning and should be further investigated within Agricultural Education and Communications. The activities and findings within this study could be applied in educational settings, and future research can apply this longitudinally across a range of agricultural disciplines and course levels.

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