

**Developments in Business Simulations and Experiential Learning, Volume 32, 2005**  
**APPLICATION OF TRADITIONAL AND ONLINE JOURNALING AS  
PEDAGOGY AND MEANS FOR ASSESSING LEARNING IN AN  
ENTREPRENEURIAL SEMINAR**

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**ABSTRACT**

*The introduction of journaling into an entrepreneurial seminar is the centerpiece of this paper, which discusses the experiential-learning benefits and issues connected with traditional and online journaling, especially in a somewhat unconventional course in which instructors may want to consider alternate methods of assessing learning. The paper weighs the merits of combining traditional and online modes of journaling and raises a number of issues that instructors may wish to consider when deciding to introduce traditional journaling, online journaling – or both.*

**INTRODUCTION**

This paper describes the introduction of journaling into a guest-speaker-driven entrepreneurial seminar and discusses the experiential-learning benefits connected with the journaling pedagogy. The paper describes the setting, background, and rationale for using this methodology. After explaining how a traditional journaling methodology was implemented in an entrepreneurial seminar, the paper compares student comments about their journaling experiences with benefits of journaling as found in the literature, thus illustrating the value of journaling in assessing learning. The additional element of journaling using an online discussion board is then discussed. The paper concludes by raising a number of issues that traditional and online journaling can generate and suggests some approaches to those issues.

**BACKGROUND AND PAST LIMITATIONS**

The venue is an entrepreneurial seminar at Stetson University, DeLand, FL. The seminar, founded in the 1980s as part of the Prince Entrepreneurial Program, is primarily guest-speaker-driven. Guest entrepreneurs not only speak to the undergraduate students in the seminar class, but are hosted at a dinner and interact with students at both the dinner and the class during lengthy and freewheeling question-and-answer sessions. While the founder and underwriter of the seminar strongly believed that would-be entrepreneurs could learn far more from successful entrepreneurs than they could from a traditional business-school curriculum, the seminar had never initiated any

pedagogical approaches that truly enabled students to reflect on what they had learned.

Traditionally, seminar students had been divided into groups that took turns hosting the guest speakers at the dinners and during the presentations. Part of the students' grades had always been derived from these group-hosting experiences. While this traditional aspect of the curriculum was retained, journaling was introduced as a pedagogical strategy, providing the opportunity to explore and test this type of experiential learning as a way for students to reflect on what they learned from the speakers, discussions, texts, and other aspects of the class.

**RATIONALE FOR JOURNALING AS A  
PEDAGOGICAL METHODOLOGY**

Literature regarding journaling as pedagogical methodology formed the underpinnings of this experiment in journaling. Journaling was chosen for this class to promote reflective thinking and for the instructor to gain a sense of the level and scope of student learning. As Soleil (2000) writes, "Reflective inquiry encourages students to analyze issues raised in their reading, discuss the critical incidents from several points of view, voice opinions, problem-solve, develop respect for different perspectives while gaining confidence in re-thinking independently, and engaging in written reflections."

Journaling also provides a means for stimulating cognitive activities in students. McCrindle and Christiansen (1995, p. 172) note that "reflective writing can encourage students' awareness of their own learning processes and consequently can enhance cognitive control." Kerka (1996) elaborates by characterizing the activities typically stimulated by reflective journal-writing as "observation, speculation, doubt, questioning, self-awareness, problem stating, problem solving, emoting, and ideation."

Another phenomenon that Kerka (1996) describes – "journal-as-additional-text" – pays heed to the affective domain, which is often overlooked in pedagogy, especially in business education, and attention to which is one of the distinguishing marks of experiential learning (Gentry, 1990, p. 10): "The journal becomes another text on which to reflect, but it is a text written in the learner's authentic voice, and this personal engagement adds a necessary affective element to the learning process," Kerka writes.

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From an instructor's standpoint, these "journals-as-texts" provide a strong sense of how well students are learning. As Fenno-Smith (2003) notes, "Student-generated reflective texts ... provide both evidence of student learning and eye-witness or informant accounts of teacher strategies ... authentic evidence of both learning and instructional effectiveness." In short, the journaling assignment aimed to create what Cobine (1995) describes as a "communications triangle" of reading, writing, and discussing.

McDevitt (2000, p. 57) cites the use of journals for "debriefing," as well as providing "relatively unambiguous feedback about what students were learning..." The author positions journaling within the "highest order in a three-stage hierarchy of experiential learning" (p. 58).

Many of the skills that students practiced while journaling are among those suggested AACSB International, the accrediting body for Stetson University's School of Business Administration: communication abilities, analytic skills, use of information technology, and reflective thinking skills.

### PEDAGOGICAL METHODOLOGY

Seminar students maintained an entrepreneurial journal with a set of entries in prescribed topic areas. They were given moderate freedom of choice within the topic areas and could also develop some of their own topic areas. They were required to complete 16 journal entries, one for each week of the class (see syllabus at [http://www.stetson.edu/~khansen/Prince/BN\\_399.html](http://www.stetson.edu/~khansen/Prince/BN_399.html)). Four entries were expected to be reflections of their assigned reading. Four were to be reflections on guest speakers. Four were "wild card" entries that could be about anything entrepreneurial. One was to be an entrepreneurial mission statement. One was required to be a reflection on a Web-based entrepreneurial assessment. One was to be a reflection on an informational interview with an entrepreneur. The last was to be a final wrap-up of the class, which also served as the final exam. The journal entries comprised 61 percent of the students' semester grade. Journals were collected three times during the semester to encourage students to keep up with their journal entries weekly and not save them all until the end of the semester. The first four journal entries were critiqued only, not graded. The subsequent collections of eight (including the four already critiqued) and then seven journal entries were graded. Online journal entries using the Blackboard interface (discussed later in this paper) comprised 23 percent of the students' 150-point class attendance and participation grade. The balance of their class grade came from the group-hosting assignments.

### ANECDOTAL EVIDENCE SUPPORTS VALUE OF THE JOURNALING APPLICATION AS A WAY TO ASSESS STUDENT LEARNING

Gosenpud (1990) notes that a distinctive aspect of experiential learning is that "instead of, or in addition to, trying to predefine what participants will have learned and how they will have changed, participants should simply be asked what they have obtained from a given experience" (p. 304). Asked to journal about what they had obtained from the entrepreneurial seminar and their journaling experiences, students offered reflections that often supported points in the literature describing the pedagogical value of journaling as experiential learning.

- Journaling for Memory, Retention of Learning, and Knowing: "What imprints on long-term memory," Soleil (2000) writes, "will potentially flush through the body after class or when the test is over, unless the method of learning stimulates ongoing vitality, invites the examination of issues from multiple perspectives, and allows time for reflection ... Reflection allows learning to pass through many stages on the way to acquiring a deep and thoughtful knowing." McDevitt (2000) similarly points to journaling as "a means for actively engaging students in the learning process and reflections on the learning that they have experienced" (p. 59).

#### Supporting comment from a student:

"As far as reviewing the semester as a whole, the most important aspect of the class was the journaling. Everything ... could have been short-term memory, gone within hours of the class, or scenarios and connections never made or played out to their fullest extent. What the journals did for me was create a requirement to make the class experience mine by applying it to my life, and making connections to the text, and then committing it to memory for further reflection by writing it down. Probably the most learning that took place for me, in terms of what sticks with me in the long run, was through my personal reflection. For example: sitting here writing this, I'm remembering the things I loved about [name of speaker] that I wrote about, and am able to make connections between [name of speaker] (least favorite from the first half) and [name of speaker], as to what characteristics made them such uninteresting and unhelpful speakers. Because of that journaling, I can still get something positive from negative experiences. In the same way, I was able to recall things in my life that were going on at one point in the semester that made more sense later in the semester after being able to reflect with time and text to supplement the decisions and understanding I gained from the speakers. I was able to learn a lot from myself, and the ways I changed throughout the semester (more than likely connected with the class)." – *Student, Entrepreneurial Seminar*

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- Journaling for Personal Transformation: Soliel (2000) writes: "... dialogue about issues of every day life leads to praxis: reflection plus action that move students toward personal transformation." Transformation of behavioral processes, Gentry notes (1990, p. 10), is also characteristic of experiential learning.

### Supporting comments from students:

"After doing the first journal assignment was when I first came to the realization that I was the type of person that would be a good candidate for an entrepreneur. ... I found that the journals were also a necessary part of the class in order to really make me think about how each speaker as well the text had affected me personally." – *Student, Entrepreneurial Seminar*

"Journaling the speakers and reading was influential to my learning, because it allowed for me to reflect on situations that have occurred in the seminar. This transfers to my real life, because it allows me to realize the importance of creating a business journal of my entrepreneurial activities. This will allow me to grow by going back and looking at problems and benefits entered into my journal and how to deal with the situation. This allows one a deeper insight into failures and successes." – *Student, Entrepreneurial Seminar*

"Even though I dislike writing, one of the assigned journal entries was the most valuable assignment I have ever done. The informational interview I did with my boss was one of the best experiences for me and for my future." – *Student, Entrepreneurial Seminar*

- Journaling to Encourage Higher-Order Thinking: "Journals are an excellent alternative assessment," Sanders (2001) notes, "because, like traditional essay questions, this format allows the instructor to gain some insight into the depth of the student's knowledge of a topic. It also calls for higher-order thinking."

### Supporting comments from students:

"I was challenged this semester to think in ways that I have not had to do in the past and to reflect through journals on how I could use the testimonials of others to benefit my desire to enhance my grandfather's baseball product company." – *Student, Entrepreneurial Seminar*

"The good thing about the journal was that it made me reflect more on what I had learned. Even though I know that I picked some things up while I was either reading, or watching 'The Apprentice,' or listening to the speakers, writing the journals made me look further into what I had learned." – *Student, Entrepreneurial Seminar*

"[The class] jogged our creative side with the journal reflections and also made us think realistically about what it means to be an entrepreneur." – *Student, Entrepreneurial Seminar*

- Journaling as a Way to Give Students a Voice and the Ability to Express Themselves Without Inhibition:

"Journal writing is closest to natural speech, and writing can flow without self-consciousness or inhibition," Kerka (1996) writes. "It reveals thought processes and mental habits, it aids memory, and it provides a context for healing and growth. Journals are a safe place to practice writing daily without the restrictions of form, audience, and evaluation." Cobine (1995) adds that instead of responding to grammatical and mechanical errors in student journals, teachers can "lead by example, modeling grammatical and mechanical correctness in ... written responses."

### Supporting comment from a student:

"The journal writing was another aspect of this course that I enjoyed. I loved writing journals. I loved the fact that you didn't judge us on how well we wrote or how grammatically correct we were at times but you just wanted to read about our thoughts and read about what we learned from a speaker's presentation or from the readings." – *Student, Entrepreneurial Seminar*

- Journaling as a Way to Derive Meaning and Make Connections among Different Types of Knowledge: "Writing is a critical ingredient in meaning making, enabling learners to articulate connections between new information and what they already know," Kerka (1996) writes.

### Supporting comment from a student:

"I honestly like journals. Doing them really helped me organize my thoughts and relate many of the aspects of the class together. I can get my thoughts out more freely when I type than when I write. It also gives me time to flip through my notes or the book and see what my initial responses to issues were and see if they changed how I felt about it later." – *Student, Entrepreneurial Seminar*

## ENHANCING JOURNALING THROUGH USE OF AN ONLINE CLASS DISCUSSION BOARD

In the entrepreneurial seminar, students not only "journalled" using traditional paper journals, but also by contributing to threaded asynchronous communication in an online discussion board using the Blackboard interface.

The addition of the online journaling dimension came about for reasons similar to those cited by Pillutla (2000) – lack of "ample time for teamwork and discussions" (214). Opportunities for in-class discussions were limited by a class decision to fill 12 of 15 class sessions with entrepreneurial speakers. Pillutla (2000) notes that such online discussions can "engender discussions that maximize the learning potential," while Wickstrom observes (2003) that "discussion boards are particularly suited to facilitating and improving learning because they provide a place for students to post comments related to the course content and process."

Adding the dimension of online discussion boards to journaling results in discourse among students. It also enhances the interactive aspect that Gentry lists as one of

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the critical components of experiential learning (1990, p. 13), enabling learning to move beyond the “instructor-student dyad” that traditional journaling represents and involve other students in the class.

Wickstrom (2003) summarizes the advantages of this discourse:

Using language for inquiry allows the teacher and the students to be problem solvers who generate an idea, reframe the idea through discussion, make connections between experience and knowledge, qualify existing beliefs, as well as judge what might happen next. As a result of this experience, the discourse becomes more reflective rather than being a question-and-answer session.

### CAVEATS AND LESSONS LEARNED

Journaling as a pedagogical method is not without issues:

**Privacy:** “How can you encourage students to write freely and also require them to share what they have written?” Kerka (1996) asks, citing privacy and the teacher-learner relationship. The syllabus for the entrepreneurial seminar pledged to keep all journals confidential. But students still knew, of course, that their instructor would not only read the journals but grade them. It’s impossible to know if students would have written the same things in their journals if they did not have to hand them in for instructor perusal and evaluation.

Wickstrom (2003) notes that unlike the traditional type of journal viewed only by the instructor, journal entries on the online discussion board are also read by the other students in the class. Some open discussion at the beginning of the semester about how students feel about these issues could yield ideas for the best ways of addressing them.

**Avoiding writing for the instructor:** Kerka (1996) points to the danger of students writing what they think the instructor wants to read. To stimulate reflection that is not designed to impress the instructor, teachers employing journaling may want to engage their students in helping to decide how journals are to be evaluated and whether that evaluation should even involve a grade.

**Feedback:** One of four factors that Kerka (1996) lists as criteria that affect willingness and ability to reflect is “quantity and quality of feedback.” Gentry identifies feedback as a critical component of experiential learning (1990, p. 15) and calls it “critical for proper learning to take place after an experience” (p. 17). Instructors must be willing to give journaling students ample feedback if they want them to glean the most from the experience.

**Varying levels of participation:** While most students in the entrepreneurial seminar completed all the traditional offline journal assignments, levels of participation on the online discussion board varied widely from student to student. One student contributed to every discussion forum and virtually every discussion thread. One student failed to participate at all. In between were students with varying levels of participation.

Wickstrom (2003) realized that basing grades on the number of postings each student made to the discussion board was not necessarily the most pedagogically sound approach. “I consider grading in this manner counterproductive to reflectivity,” Wickstrom writes. Here again, it may be desirable to engage students in determining whether and how their discussion-board contributions should be graded.

Wickstrom (2003) hypothesized that her students would be eager to use this electronic communication tool, but some were less than enthusiastic. Some complained of having limited time, as did some of the entrepreneurial seminar students. Others noted a lack of computer access, thus raising class, socioeconomic, and demographic issues (Potosky, 2002, p. 174). Several seemed to have major problems with their computers during the semester, and at least one noted that he didn’t own a computer and had to depend on campus computer labs. Given the importance of online communication in contemporary society, students should practice their online fluency, but teachers should be sensitive to time constraints and access to technology.

A factor that can positively drive participation is that discussion online – as opposed to in class – favors shy students who are uncomfortable speaking out in class and are intimidated by others who dominate the conversation (Potosky, 2002, p. 174, and 2004, p. 28). Conversely, however, some of the same factors that inhibit classroom discussion, Wickstrom (2003) observes, also hinder online discussion. Some of her students said they were embarrassed to have others read what they had written, and one student told her his reason for limited participation was that he “found it hard to reflect when someone other than the teacher was going to read it.” Wickstrom wrote that in future classes, she would ask the students to use pseudonyms so they might feel less inhibited about participating in the discussion.

**Improving the assignment’s capacity to measure learning:** Given that methods for measuring learning in the entrepreneurial seminar had been virtually nonexistent before the journaling assignment was introduced, the assignment represented a significant improvement. The students’ journal entries indicated that learning had taken place, but they were rarely specific about exactly what they had learned. Instructors may wish to consider ways to structure the journaling assignment to measure learning more specifically. Specific questions and writing prompts may reveal more about the level and scope of student learning than the current assignment did.

**Overlap between traditional journaling and online journaling on discussion board:** The intent in asking students to journal both in the traditional way and online sprang from the notion that the online discussion board would feed and inspire the traditional journal entries by suggesting areas for deeper reflection; however, the online discussions generally did not supply food for thought for the offline journals to the intended extent. Instructors employing both online and traditional journaling may want

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to vary the topics of the discussion forums from the required topics for the offline journaling assignments.

Some entrepreneurial seminar students complained that making entries both in their journals and on the online discussion board was repetitious. A discussion forum on the guest speakers, for example, paralleled the assignment to journal about four of the speakers. Forums on each of the textbooks overlapped journal assignments about the readings. Some students also groused that they were assigned to keep journals in one or more other classes and felt they were “journal-ed out.”

Instructors considering journaling as pedagogical methodology may wish to use either online or traditional journaling instead of both. Throughout the literature, most authors writing about their teaching experiences with journaling have used either traditional or electronic journaling, but not both simultaneously.

Some scholars report that their students greatly preferred the online approach for journaling. Comparing the adaptability of several experiential-learning formats to online use, Potosky gives the highest marks to journaling in terms of adaptability to a Web-based format, ability to capitalize of current Internet capabilities, and tendency to retain intended learning outcomes (2002, p. 176).

Another approach might be to use traditional journaling but reserve the online aspect of the class for discussions, more clearly differentiating between journaling and discussion activities (Dougiamas, 2003). The intent in the entrepreneurial seminar was for the Blackboard discussion board to make up for the lack of in-class discussions, but as Dougiamas (2003) observed while teaching in a similar fashion, “students ... tended to engage in serial monologues rather than in rich dialogue.”

Also worth considering are journal assignments suggested by Duerden et al (1997) in which students use journals to report on their class progress, as well as reflect on which have been the most useful journal assignments and why, as well as which of their entries has been most significant.

Future research and experimentation might support the notion that the discourse provided by the online discussion board can be a springboard for private reflection and offline journaling. As Wickstrom (2003) writes, “... discourse is important to the development of reflection that allows the individual to look at the circumstances and then change them, either in process or in future. If we can articulate what we know, then we have the opportunity to reflect on it and make changes.”

**Instructor participation:** Soleil (2000) discusses dialogic pedagogy as an opportunity for teachers and students to bring knowledge to the relationship and to discover what each knows and what the participants can teach each other. The instructor can certainly learn from students in the online discussions; students in the entrepreneurial seminar often raised points that hadn't occurred to the instructor. Instructors may be tempted to hold back from posting their own opinions so that students

can offer their thoughts more freely, without the “taint” of seeing the instructor's opinion first. This holding-back strategy may not be pedagogically sound, as Dougiamas (2003) notes, however:

Because the teacher ... had not wanted to dominate the online forum he had tended to silence his own voice in favour of allowing the students to develop and exercise their own online voices, and thus had not adequately modelled reflective dialogue. As a result, [he] had tended not to develop strong educative relationships with the students. He was more of an outsider looking in, providing occasional prompts and contributions, but leaving the students to deal with one another in accordance with the rules of discourse. Most of his interactions with the students occurred in the context of assessing their journal entries.

Similarly, Potosky (2004) recommends the instructor's “clear presence” on the discussion board (p. 31) and notes that the instructor needs to model a good discussion thread for students so they can recognize and understand how to create an effective one (p. 19). She suggests demonstrating use of the discussion board in class before students attempt to use it outside class (p. 31). Ledman and Roby (2004, p. 59) echo that students cannot be left on “autopilot” in the discussion; instructor monitoring and facilitation are crucial.

**Choosing the best online interface:** Although many instructors may be constrained by the technologies proffered at their universities, those with a choice may want to carefully consider courseware features. Unlike many discussion boards, the Blackboard interface, for example, doesn't allow for any formatting – boldface, italics, font variations, colored type, emoticons, tabbing, or even the ability to spell-check. Lack of such features, which Dougiamas (2003) says can add “rich body language (aesthetics and emotions)” to the discussion, may inhibit creative expression.

## CONCLUSION

Journaling, despite its issues and despite inconclusive results from combining online and traditional journaling, added a significant dimension to the entrepreneurial seminar. While the reflective thinking provided by this type of experiential learning was especially well suited to a class that is guest-speaker driven and in which students are called upon to process information from numerous, diverse sources, it can successfully be applied to virtually any class.

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