

Reflective Journal Writing and the First-Year Experience

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In recent years, great emphasis has been placed on student success and retention in higher education. To address this issue, many universities' strategic retention programs include first-year seminars. A variety of pedagogical strategies have been employed in these seminars to help students succeed personally, socially and academically. This article reports findings from a qualitative study that explored the teaching/learning outcomes and benefits derived from the experience of reflective journal writing during a first-year seminar from the perspectives of students and the instructor. The findings document how journaling in a first-year seminar can be used to support institutional action to improve the quality of the undergraduate experience and student success.

The amount of attention, research and resources devoted to student success and retention in higher education has increased significantly in recent years. The large body of literature focusing on this issue identifies a complex range of personal and institutional factors that influence a student's path to graduation. Personal factors include such things as previous academic performance, self-efficacy (Jenson, 2011), social support and commitments (Huntly & Donovan, 2009), and employment responsibilities (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Institutional factors include academic and social support (Tinto, 2012), opportunities for academic and social engagement (Jenson, 2011; Tinto, 2012), teaching and learning strategies employed (Braxton, Jones, Hirschy, & Hartley, 2008; Laird, Chen, & Kuh, 2008; Pascarella, Salisbury, & Blaich, 2011; Tinto, 2012), and interactions with faculty and staff (Clark, 2005; Laird et al., 2008; Roberts & McNeese, 2010; Tinto, 1997, 2012). Studies of first-year students highlight the many challenges associated with making the transition to college life. These challenges include: newly found independence, living with roommates, activities associated with daily living, homesickness and identity (Cashmore, Green, & Scott, 2010; Palmer, O'Kane, & Owens, 2009). To help students successfully negotiate this period of adjustment, many universities provide first-year students with orientation programs.

Orientation programs for incoming students have been in existence for decades. Over the years, these programs have evolved to meet the social and economic conditions of the time. While in the past they served primarily as general information sessions, today extended orientation programs such as first-year seminars are employed strategically for the purpose of retention. Although many first-year seminars share a common goal of providing students with a strong foundation for successfully completing their college degree, the structure, content and delivery of these programs vary among institutions (Goodman & Pascarella, 2006). For example, depending on the university, these seminars may be offered as credit or

non-credit; optional or mandatory; during orientation week or as a partial/full semester course. The curriculum may focus on general skill development or provide students with an introduction to a specific topic or major (Porter & Swing, 2006; Tinto, 2012). Instructors for these seminars range from full professor faculty to professional staff members. In many instances a peer-leader, generally an upper-class student is assigned to help teach the class. Because of the key role they play in helping students adjust to their first semester of college, first-year seminar instructors have a strong imperative to meet students' needs and to provide support and positive feedback (Krause, 2001). The nature of the instructor-student interaction has been identified as an important determinant of students' levels of engagement and persistence (Clark, 2005; Lynn, 2008; Tinto, 1997, 2012).

Teaching methods have also been found to affect levels of student engagement and retention (Braxton et al., 2008; Tinto, 2012; Trotter & Roberts, 2006). Although a range of teaching strategies are used to deliver content in first-year seminars, the strategies that are the most effective in shaping student success are those that promote active learning and social interaction such as problem-based and cooperative learning (Thomas, 2002; Tinto, 2012). In addition to active and social engagement, research finds student persistence can be developed and enhanced through teaching/learning strategies that focus on shared experiences, positive feedback and reflection (Huntly & Donovan, 2009). The learning benefits derived from engaging in the process of reflection is widely accepted in the field of education (e.g., see Dewey, 1933; Kolb, 1984; Schön, 1983).

One teaching/learning strategy used in first-year seminars that may require students to engage in reflective thinking is journal writing. Although journaling is commonly used in first-year seminars, the purpose and structure of the activity varies greatly among and within institutions. While there is a modest body of literature on the benefits of journal writing in higher education (Boud, 2001; Hiemstra, 2001;

O'Connell & Dymont, 2006), there is little empirical research on reflective journal writing in first-year seminars. Consequently, it is unclear if this activity is being used in a way that maximizes the benefits from the experience, for students, instructors and in meeting program and institutional goals. The current study aims to understand the experience of reflective journal writing from the perspectives of students and the instructor to address the central question guiding this research: In what ways does reflective journal writing improve teaching and learning outcomes from a first-year seminar?

Description of the Study

This study was conducted during the fall 2011 semester at a medium-size, 4-year public liberal arts institution located in the southeastern US. A total of 110 students in four sections of a mandatory 3-credit first-year seminar participated in the study. The overarching goal of the course was to help students make a successful transition to college. Specific aims of the seminar were three-fold: (1) developing general skills, including study, creative and critical thinking, information literacy and communication; (2) setting personal and academic goals; and, (3) introducing students to topics related to their majors.

Writing and submitting a weekly journal entry via the electronic Blackboard (Bb) site was one of the class requirements. As a first-year seminar instructor, I (author of this paper) was given freedom in how to structure this assignment. To meet my course objectives, I viewed this activity primarily as an opportunity for students to engage in critical thinking and self-reflection. Thus, students enrolled in my sections were given the following written instructions: "Your weekly journal entries can be as short or long as you like. They should include thoughts, feelings and questions you have about class readings, topics and/or any of your first semester experiences." Students received different instructions for the final/twelfth entry: "For your last journal entry, I would like you to read all of your previous entries, reflect on what you've experienced over the last 13 weeks, and express any thoughts and feelings you experienced while reading them." Assessment was based on the number of weekly entries submitted, not on the content of the entries.

At the end of the semester, students completed an anonymous questionnaire asking them to provide feedback about the reflective journal writing experience. The questions, all open ended, asked students to comment on the following: if they enjoyed the activity, what (if anything) they took away from the experience, if they found it useful as a strategy to work through issues, if they liked receiving reply comments from the instructor, if they think it is an activity they

will continue after the class ends, and suggestions for how to improve the assignment.

In addition to student journals and the questionnaire, throughout the study, I (researcher/instructor) kept a journal of reflective notes—a record of thoughts and feelings experienced while teaching the first-year seminar. Qualitative data generated from all three sources were read, re-read and analyzed to identify emergent themes (Patton, 2002). Analysis of these data sets served to meet a central aim of the study: to understand the experience of reflective journal writing during a first-year seminar from multiple perspectives.

Findings

The findings are presented as a narrative account of the experience of reflective journal writing over the course of the first-year seminar.

Beginnings

The fall 2011 semester was my first time teaching at the university and my first time teaching a first-year seminar. As I reviewed the course materials, I was pleased to see that journal writing was a required part of the class. My personal experience has shaped my thinking about engaging in reflective practice. I feel strongly that keeping a journal during the years I was writing my PhD dissertation was essential to the successful completion of the degree. During the course-planning stage, stemming from my experience with journaling, I envisioned this assignment as an activity for students' personal benefit, not intended for an outside reader. Consequently, before I started reading the first entries I decided that I would not provide reply comments unless there was a strong reason for me to do so.

As I read the initial journal entries, submitted in week two of the semester, I quickly became aware that this was a new experience for many students. First entries from students who were trying their hand at journal writing for the first time started with statements like, "I don't really know what to say so I'm going to talk about what's going on in my life." Many of the initial entries focused on challenges associated with settling in such as homesickness and issues with roommates. (Minor edits have been made to student journal entries to increase readability.)

My first journal: Getting used to this has been difficult. I've always lived at home. I miss my dog so much, and I miss the comfort of being home. This house is so unfamiliar. I don't want to be here. I miss being close to my horse.

Journal 2: My roommate is so messy and hardly ever picks up after herself. It is pretty annoying. . . .

She always watches the same exact television shows and does nothing all day long unless she has class. My other roommates barely try to get to know me. They're decently clean which sucks, because out of four other roommates I could have shared rooms with, I got the dirty person to live with. I'm not sure what lies next, but I'm praying for the best.

Some students identified specific skills they needed help with:

Entry One: After my first couple weeks [here], I've realized that I need to prioritize my time better. I've already forgotten to do one of my assignments, this journal entry. Next week I want to make sure to write all my assignments and be proactive in completing them. I know there is no excuse for this being late because I've known about it for two weeks, but I guess I just got caught up in the events of Welcome Week and my first couple weekends at college. I'm looking forward to learning more ways to help me better prioritize my time. I think I need some help!

Other students used their first journal entry as an opportunity to introduce themselves and to talk about their struggles with identity:

Journal 1: My name is xxxx. I grew up in South Carolina. I moved around a lot during my parents divorce, never staying put for too long. I am an extremely optimistic person who always looks at everything like the glass is half full. I believe things happen for a reason and everything gets better with time. I am a friendly person who has always been a little hesitant about speaking in front of a class or group of people. However, I love being the leader. So it is one of my goals as a college student to get over my fear completely. I want to be able to talk comfortably to a crowd. Well, that is a little bit about me!

Those intangible answers: At first I was perplexed; what do I write in a "journal"? I always had the idea of keeping one. Just never had the determination to write one. Should I submit something profound or simply a "Hi, my name is xxxx?" I've been struggling lately with the question "Who am I?" . . . I've found the answer to this depends on the day, the hour, my mood even. I grew up as the outcast. I wasn't like the other kids.

Different can be difficult. I'm constantly reminded of what I'm not and probably will never be. I won't lie, I like myself but not to the point where I love

myself. I've always been the conservative one that's never been able to find friends easily. I'm the sporty one out of the group that would rather be playing basketball than getting my nails done. But I've always wanted to be that girl that everyone stares at and says I want to be her, to have all the confidence in the world so when I do one small thing I don't worry about if I'm being judged or what others are saying about me, the girl that can put on a bikini and lay out at the pool in between classes and have the guys stare at. I wanna be able to say whatever the hell I want and not have to hold myself back because I'm scared. . . . All I ever asked for is to be that person I've always wanted to be.

Although some students' comments reflected a general state of unhappiness, the tone expressed by many students in the initial entries was one of optimism. They used such words as "exciting," "entertaining," and "fun" to describe their activities during the first couple weeks on campus:

Journal Entry 1: This journal entry will be about my thoughts and opinions about college so far. I really like it. I have good professors, like my classes, and have met a lot of new people. I have had a lot of fun so far and really look forward to the rest of the year and my college career.

Journal Entry 2: I absolutely love being [here]. In the last Journal I talked about how I was nervous and how I did not know how I would adjust but so far I have loved it. I am meeting new people, going to new places and experiencing new things. That is everything I wanted from my college experience.

Dramatic Tension

As the weeks progressed, many entries focused on academic challenges:

Crazy Weeks: This week has been very crazy. I haven't been doing that well on quizzes and exams and it just seems like everything is going wrong. I have to make time to do my homework, study, and participate in the activities planned for my sorority. It's hard trying to balance all of these things and still find time to hang out with my friends.

Journal Entry: I received my first paper back in English and I got a B on it so I was very excited, but I also got the grade for my first music test back, I did not do well at all. I am very nervous because I know that the reason I did so bad is because of my test anxiety. It is something I do subconsciously whenever I take a test. I have learned to control it a

bit more and can normally sense when it is starting but there are still times that I don't realize it is happening. . . . In high school it wasn't an issue because I wasn't graded on just tests so if I failed a test but did all the other work my grade would not be affected. But now in college I have a lot of classes that only grade tests so it doesn't matter how much I study or take notes. If I fail the test how can I pass the class? I am hoping to get all of this figured out one way or another before my next test.

Grades: Midterms oh midterms, how deceptive they are. While I know I need to be doing better in my precalc [*sic*] class, and I've decided to withdraw from my Biology lecture, I still have a C and a D that will be quite underwhelming to my parents' eyes. What immediately comes to mind is a saying my mother has told me for a great many years when it comes to school and grades. "Well, its time to step up to the plate" and indeed it is. I don't have mom or my teachers checking up on me. This is my time now. I need to do all that I can with it. Yes, even if it means not hanging out with my friends. Homework needs to come first.

Some students sought my advice:

Journal 4: I need advice, feel free to give me some if you feel so inclined. (1) I have no idea what I want to do with the rest of my life. I have no idea what I want to major in. I'm so confused. (2) This is a little more personal and no one but myself is probably going to be able to help me out with this one. Here is my scenario: I have a boyfriend. I like him a lot.

Many students used the journal as a place to let off steam:

Journal 3: There are so many things that have angered me this week and I feel like letting it all out in this journal really helped because I needed to vent out this anger! I don't have anyone here to really talk to about this tough situation . . . and I need to figure it out. I feel much better getting all that off my chest!

Journal entry: "[A pastor] asked why I didn't believe, straight off the bat, like I had some sign on my back or something shouting it to the world. I replied that I've had too many bad things happen to me for God to exist. He told me it was gods plan. I walked away. I'm sorry but bad things shouldn't happen! Bad people shouldn't exist. Why would god create a world where such terrible things can occur? Everyone is taught to believe in God and

he'll believe in you. How can he believe in me when I don't believe in him? It's ironic because I do believe in heaven. I believe that everyone deserves a second chance. But, I just don't believe that there is a greater force on our side. To be honest, it's bull. Sorry, I just really had to vent.

Students also used journal entries to talk about challenges that were highly personal in nature, including run-ins with the law, pregnancy, relationship break-ups, issues with parents, and the death of family and friends:

Week 3: I broke up with my girlfriend today her betrayal to my love was just too much of an obstacle for me to overcome, probably should have done this months ago but still, . . . I feel pretty bad about it and I think I made my depression even worse but I will overcome that. Whats worse I think is that I still love her and care for her but in the end I think this is the best for the both of us. Sorry I didn't get a journal entry to you last week there was a lot on my mind.

The lies: Today my mother called me, asking the truth about some rumors she'd heard at home. You see my mother doesn't like piercings, what so ever, so when she heard a rumor that I have 11 naturally she'd be concerned. No mom I have the 4 I left home with. of course I was lying I have 9.

Cancer sucks: Today, well since it is past midnight now so yesterday, I lost a friend of mine as well as my second mother to cancer. My friend was 20 years old. He just turned 20 too. I can't believe it. Also the same day a couple hours later I lost [someone] who is basically my second mother to cancer. . . . This hurts so bad, I cannot believe she is gone. I've been around and have had to deal with deaths my whole life. I've lost many friends. None of which have hurt more than this.

Untitled: It's my grandpa's birthday today. He would've been 71 years old. He died when I was eleven years old. . . . I have never stopped missing him. I miss him every second of every day. I got a tattoo in memory of him. I wore his bracelet every day. I still break down when the sadness gets to me. I hate it. I hate missing him. This is why love sucks. Because it always ends in heartbreak . . . regardless of the relationship.

I can remember how surprised and concerned I was when I read these entries. It was a real eye-opening experience for me. I never imagined that so many students had such serious issues to deal with in addition to the academic challenges facing them. Reading these

entries prompted me write this question in my journal: “So how will my awareness of these challenges influence the way and what I teach?”

Although initially I told the students not to expect reply comments from me, by the fourth week, because of the nature of the entries, I found myself replying to many of them. In my journal I wrote:

I’m not sure what caused me to change my mind. It must have something to do with feeling that I can offer some advice. I really do enjoy helping these students, and I feel they need a place to unload. I now see the journal writing activity as a way for me to establish a personal relationship with each and every student. . . . I hope the communication via the journal helps convey the message that they are important to me as individuals.

As the weeks went on, I looked forward to reading and responding to the entries.

Closing Stages

For their final journal entry, I asked students to read all previous entries and to write about what they were thinking and feeling as they read them. Many students fully embraced the opportunity to engage in reflective thinking. They wrote about their failures, accomplishments, and lessons learned:

New Beginnings: I’ve looked back at all the journal entries that I’ve submitted and realized how often I talked about changing my bad habits, and then I look at the way things are going now and realized that I haven’t changed anything. I still barely study and that is really hurting me in math. . . . I don’t know how I let my grade in math get this bad when I’ve known the whole time what needed to be done in order for me to pass. It’s not that easy trying to change bad habits when you’re so use to doing them I guess. The rest of this semester and next semester I plan on studying and trying not to fall behind on anymore of my work.

Final Journal: Over the semester I’ve had to deal with problems at home and at school, and overall, I think I’ve handled both pretty well. Beginning of the year I had to deal with the death of a friend, which I’ve totally handled, and get use to the whole college system, which I’ve come to understand a little bit better. I’m still working on managing money and my time, still having some problems with procrastination, but I’ve managed so far. Overall the semester has been pretty good to me, doing pretty good in just about all of my

classes, and now I’m pretty sure that I can handle the whole college thing.

Last journal: I cannot believe this is the last journal entry. I know I have said it before but this semester has gone by really quickly. Now second semester is about to start and I will be starting all over again. This time though I know more and have learned a lot since the beginning of this semester. After reading through my journal entries I can tell that I have changed a lot since coming to school here. In my first journal entry I went on and on about how I was glad [that] I went away for school. While I still feel that way I could tell that that in my first journal I was nervous and unsure. . . . I was nervous about so many different things and so unsure that I would be able to succeed here. . . . I wanted to come here to try new things but I feel like in some ways I limited myself this semester, and I think that was because I was so overwhelmed and nervous. But next semester will not be the same because I won’t have as much to be worried about.

Students also commented on the journal writing experience:

#12 The last and final journal entry: Okay so I just went through my journal entries from the past semester, and I’m pretty surprised with myself. I really enjoyed writing these entries and I liked that you responded to what I was saying. It really helped me out throughout my first semester of college. I had a really rough awful time adjusting to this school, probably the hardest experience I’ve ever been through. Things have always been easy for me and now I realize I have to work for the things that I want. The only thing that I can say is that I hope I become something great and figure myself out eventually.

Journal 12: Looking back on all of my journal entries, I realized that I have grown a lot within my first semester here. I’m glad that you made such a big deal about these journals because it really helped me deal with the stress of freshman year. Throughout the first semester I realized that I only really expressed myself through these journals and it helped me a lot. I’m not really a person who expresses themselves so now I know this is a way that I can do it.

Final Entry: Looking back on these entries, I see how I have grown as a student and remember how much I have struggled with my work. But on a brighter note, college has taught me how to deal

with these stressful times and manage my time in order to work hard. I'm proud to say I'm learning day by day to manage my time better. These posts have really allowed me to reflect on my week and take a moment to digest what really happened. . . . They help me experience the full effect of the things I have learned and the good times I have had.

I felt it was important to reply to each final entry. I viewed this as my last opportunity to provide individual support and encouragement. Reading and commenting on the final entries was a highly emotional experience for me, as revealed in these selections from my journal:

My eyes teared-up as I read xxxx's entry. Thinking about how much (many of) these "kids" have grown; all they have been through; all the adjustments they have had to make. I need to let them know how proud they should be of themselves and how proud I am of them. . . . I want each and every one of them to achieve success at this university and beyond.

Well, I just sent xxxx his final journal comment. That was a tough one; tough because he is such a special person and student. He is everything a student should be . . . serious, dedicated, polite, creative, full of appreciation, a deep thinker and so much more. I don't know why I'm sad because I know he is going to go on to achieve great things with his life. I should feel happy that I have been provided with the opportunity to help him gain a better understanding about who he is (his many gifts and talents) and where he is heading.

In response to a student's entry in which she thanked me for providing encouragement I replied:

Teachers live to hear that they have made a positive difference in the lives of their students! I am moved beyond words. Thank you xxxx. You can't know how happy it makes me to know how well you are doing!!

Seeking Students' Perspectives

After students submitted their final journal entry, I asked them to provide feedback about the experience. I was curious to gain their perspectives on the activity. Overall, the comments expressed on the survey were very positive. The negative comments focused on forgetting to submit them or not being able to come up with a topic to write about. Comments from students who appreciated the

experience focused on how this activity helped them relieve stress and express feelings: "It gave me a chance to unwind a little bit each week"; "Felt like it was a way of reducing stress. I could let go of frustrations in a positive way"; "I think it was helpful because anything that was stressing me out I could just write down and it didn't really bother me anymore"; "It was kind of like keeping a personal journal because we could write about anything. We could vent. Get advice on something, or share new things we learned"; "Well, it just helped me express my feelings somewhere I know it will be viewed and safe"; and "I found it useful to write down my thoughts and feelings because no one else has to know; just the professor."

Student comments also reflected the view that journaling provided opportunities to engage in critical and reflective thinking: "I learned how to take time out and reflect. It's something that I honestly never did before"; "Putting my worries into words helped me come to terms with things"; "It makes me just take a step back and think. It helped a lot to just write everything down instead of taking it out on others"; "Having the option as a freshman to reflect and let [off] steam was a weekly breath of fresh air"; "It made me reevaluate my decisions and think about my goals"; "They got me to think about my future"; "I [discovered] that I can write out what's going on in my life and help figure out what I want to do"; "I was able to understand myself and my feelings"; "I feel like I grew up and saw things that I need to improve about myself that I wouldn't have seen otherwise"; "What I took away from the journal writing was that I need to work on my patience"; and "Realization of my growth as a student throughout the first semester."

For many students receiving reply comments was an important aspect of the experience: "I felt that I could have a personal conversation with my professor if I would have liked to"; "It let me know that you are reading them and it's nice to know someone cares about what I have to say"; "It made me feel like you cared and you took the time out of your day to read them"; "It's good to know you are actually reading them and it's not just busy work"; "It made me more determined to work harder and showed someone actually cared"; "I got to know that you knew me, that I was there, that you care"; "It showed me that people actually do listen"; and "The comments were encouraging and it gave me a little boost to push through the obstacles I faced."

Although many students found value in the journal writing experience, some of these students stated that journaling was something they most likely would not have time to do in the future. Other students said they would not continue with it because no one would be "on the other end to read them."

As the semester came to an end, I was left with many thoughts and questions about journal writing and the first-year experience.

Discussion

Findings from this study extend our understanding of the experience of reflective journal writing in a first-year seminar. The findings highlight the teaching/learning outcomes and benefits derived from the experience: for students, the instructor and in meeting program and institutional goals.

Benefits for Students

Well-being. The students' journal entries illustrate the variety, multitude and seriousness of personal, social and academic challenges students face during their first semester in college. These students were dealing with personal issues concerning identity, homesickness, loss, legal matters and pregnancy; social issues including fitting-in and managing relationships with family, friends and roommates; and, academic challenges dealing with bad grades, time management and test anxiety. Although journaling was a new experience for many students, many found it useful as a strategy to work through some of these challenges. In this context, journal writing served as a tool for well-being—a place they could go to express feelings and relieve stress. Journal writing provided an important outlet for expressing a complex range of emotions experienced during the period of transition, including anger, frustration, disappointment, sadness, fear, excitement, pride and happiness. It also served an important outlet for relieving stress. The findings highlight the high levels of stress today's first-year college students experience (Huntly & Donovan, 2009). This raises an important question concerning pre-college preparedness and how to provide incoming students with the knowledge and life skills needed to adequately manage stress before they arrive. Additionally, the findings underscore the need for universities to place a greater emphasis on developing strategies that focus students' attention on issues related to their personal health and well-being (LaFountaine, Neisen, & Parsons, 2006).

Self-discovery. Journal writing also provided students with opportunities for self-discovery and personal growth. Some students expressed an appreciation for the opportunity to stop, write and reflect. As members of the millennial generation, these students are used to constant input, distractions and multi-tasking (McGlynn, 2005). Their comments reveal that, for many of them, engaging in the process of critical reflection was a new experience. Research supports the view that many millennial students lack

reflection skills (Johnson, 2009). This suggests a strong need to teach these skills (O'Connell & Dyment, 2006) in addition to the skills typically taught in first-year seminars such as study, communication and research skills. Students' final journal entries and survey comments illustrate the power of reflection in gaining a deeper understanding of self. Through the reflective thinking process, many students came to understand the personal benefits derived from reflective journal writing in helping them assess their growth, think about their goals for the future, and identify areas for self-improvement.

Social engagement. Interestingly, in the context of this course, for many students, journal writing was not a private activity, but a form of social engagement—a way of communicating with the instructor. This may stem, in part, from their familiarity with using social media as a mode of communication. The intent of many entries was to have a private conversation with the instructor, and for the instructor to get to know them on an individual basis. Communicating electronically provided a platform for students to share things they may not have otherwise shared. They revealed highly personal details of their lives. The reasons why they shared this information, however, are unclear. Did they want the instructor's empathy or advice? Or was it simply viewed as a safe place to release tensions and struggles associated with daily life? The findings suggest that for some students the two-way communication was an essential part of the journaling experience. Specific things they took away from the social aspect of the activity were: having a sense of being heard, sharing experiences (both successes and disappointments), feeling a connection with someone, and receiving advice and encouragement. Perhaps the main benefit students derived from the social dimension of journal writing was gaining a sense that someone cares (Porter & Swing, 2006). This was a theme that emerged from students' journal entries and survey comments. Students' perception of "mattering" has been found to foster a sense of belonging and connectedness (Tovar, Simon, & Lee, 2009). The way journaling was used in this context promoted active involvement with the instructor and a deeper level of engagement, both factors found to influence student success (Roberts & McNeese, 2010).

Benefits for the Instructor

The experience of journal writing benefitted the instructor in specific ways, professionally and personally.

Knowing students. First, the journal writing experience provided me with an important opportunity to get to know my students and to gain a greater understanding of the issues and challenges facing them.

Given that the overarching objective of the course is to help students adjust to college life, it is essential to know what specific issues they are dealing with in order to provide the appropriate support. This deeper understanding led to feelings of empathy, concern and a genuine caring for students as individuals. After reading their entries, I became interested in their lives. Their stories touched me on a personal level. I first had to know my students before I could truly be invested in them. The concern I had for these students, as reflected in their comments above, was something that was very important to them. In the typical college classroom setting, it is often difficult for teachers to find a way to express a genuine sense of caring. Journal writing served as a vehicle to convey that message. Knowing students' individual struggles was essential to the process of shaping a learning environment that supports the development of first-year students (Allan, Clarke, & Jopling, 2009).

Meeting needs. Second, being better informed about what students were going through meant that I could be more responsive to their needs. The journal entries reveal the wide range of needs students have during their first semester. They also illustrate the close link between personal and academic needs (Roberts & McNeese, 2010; Thomas, 2002). I used the information they shared in their journals to extend opportunities for support both in the classroom and through reply comments. I found myself changing lesson plans to address specific issues raised in their journals—issues that were relevant to them and their lives. Making learning relevant served to increase levels of interest, engagement and motivation, and contributed to achieving intended learning outcomes (Hidi & Renninger, 2006; Jessup-Anger, 2011). Modifying the curriculum not only provided opportunities to delve deeper into issues, but it also provided students with an understanding that other students were experiencing similar issues and challenges. Meeting students' needs required flexibility in teaching and adopting a student-focused classroom (Allan & Clarke, 2007; McGlynn, 2008).

Replying to journal entries was another way to address the needs of individual students and provide further support. At times I offered a simple word of encouragement or served as a sounding board. In other instances, I directed them to the appropriate student support service. Possessing a positive, compassionate, non-judgmental attitude and keen listening skills were essential to the process of responding to students' needs (Fenwick, 2001). Another key factor in increasing responsiveness was finding and devoting the additional time required to address individual needs.

Receiving encouragement. Finally, the journal writing experience provided me with valuable feedback and encouragement. Many teachers never know

whether they have made a difference in the lives of their students. The journaling experience provided such an opportunity. I felt encouraged as a teacher when I read the journal entries letting me know that my advice and support affected their lives. Knowing that I may have helped them in even a small way was extremely meaningful and rewarding. In my journal I reflected on how my experiences with them affected me:

I've been thinking a lot about what I want to say to my students on the last day of class. First, I want to thank them. After I finished my PhD I was filled with sadness; sadness because I thought that I would never again be involved in work that personally meaningful. But, because of them and my experiences with them, I now see that I will have opportunities for meaningful work, now and in the future.

Through their comments, I came to see that although many students hold negative views about having to take the first-year seminar, the course did serve an important purpose—as an outlet for support and well-being. The feedback they provided strengthened my commitment to assist students negotiate their way through one of the most critically important and challenging periods of their lives.

Benefits for Meeting Program and Institutional Goals

This study's findings illustrate how reflective journal writing served to address program and institutional goals of promoting student success. Broadly speaking, the teaching/learning strategy of journal writing in a first-year seminar supports an institutional commitment to enhance the quality of the undergraduate experience. More specifically, it serves to address three key conditions for student success and retention: promoting active involvement with faculty (Roberts & McNeese, 2010; Tinto, 1997, 2012), meeting students' needs (Trotter & Roberts, 2006), and providing social and academic support (Tinto, 1997, 2012).

Journal writing provided a unique opportunity for students to interact with the instructor—on a personal level and on a weekly basis. It was a way for them to receive individual attention, deepen engagement and strengthen the student-teacher relationship. It provided a vehicle for the instructor to gain a greater understanding of individual needs. Knowing specific needs helped shape meaningful learning experiences and created additional opportunities to provide support.

The effectiveness of journal writing as a pedagogical tool for meeting program and institutional goals of student success and retention

will, however, depend on several key influences: (1) The value the institution, administrators, instructors and students place on journal writing. Is the activity viewed as an important strategy for student success? (2) The intended purpose of the journal writing activity. Is the activity being used to improve and increase interaction between students and faculty, and to provide students with personal, social and academic support? (3) The role and responsibilities of the person monitoring journal entries. Have the appropriate resources been allocated for professional development to provide faculty/staff with the skills needed to effectively address a diverse range of needs? In essence, successful implementation will require building a shared understanding and commitment among all stakeholders.

Concluding Thoughts

This study provides new understandings about teaching and learning outcomes and the benefits students, the instructor, and the institution derive from reflective journal writing during a first-year seminar. The findings underscore the important role teaching and learning strategies employed at the classroom level play in deepening levels of student engagement and support. Tinto (2012) argued that the classroom is the center of student education, and therefore should serve as a primary site for institutional action aimed at improving student retention and success. Findings from this study illustrate the use of reflective journal writing as an effective pedagogical strategy for supporting such action.

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