

Reflection Journals

What is a Reflection Journal?

In experiential learning, students are both a participant and an observer. As a participant, students will be contributing to the organization they are partnered with and learning new skills. The academic component is derived not just from the experience, but from students' ability to describe, examine, and articulate their learning. This requires them to be present, make astute observations, consider multiple viewpoints, and be open to questioning their own values, beliefs, and assumptions. These practices can be cultivated training and tools, such as well-written journal. Using a journal to describe the experience, what was learned, the skills that were gained, and how they reacted to, and felt about, it can help solidify the information in students' minds. Reflection journals can then be used to contextualize the experience within students' lives—both personally and academically—and connected to assignments. They support the learning process and help students set goals.

Key features of reflective writing:

1. It integrates theory and practice. Students identify important aspects of their reflections and write these using the appropriate theories and academic context to explain and interpret those reflections. Students may be expected to use their experiences to evaluate their course theories—can the theories be adapted or modified to be more helpful for their CEL experiences?
2. It identifies the learning outcomes of your experience. Students can identify what they would do differently, their new understandings or values, and unexpected things they learned about themselves through their Experiential Learning opportunity.

What should students write in their journal? Here are a few key points for an effective Reflection Journal:

1. Journals should be snapshots filled with sights, sounds, smells, concerns, insights, doubts, fears, and critical questions about issues, people, and, most importantly, themselves.
2. Writing honestly and without judgment is key to effective journaling.
3. A journal is not simply a log work of responsibilities, but responses to how the tasks, events, times, dates, and people impacted the experience.
4. Write freely—grammar and spelling should not be stressed until the final draft.
5. Make it a practice—write an entry after each stage of Experiential Learning. If you cannot write a full entry, jot down random thoughts, images, etc., which you can come back to a day or two later and expand into a fuller picture.

Below are some examples of the depth that reflection can have for students' writing:

Observation

"We went to the seniors' home and met a lot of the old people that lived there. They seemed really sad. Nobody paid attention to them."

"When we arrived at the seniors' home, I was struck by how empty it seemed. The residents mostly kept to themselves and very few had visitors. It was extremely quiet and I got the impression that people were lonely. One woman told me she hadn't seen her family in six months. I wondered how the residents would describe their quality of life."

Personal Relevance

"After visiting the Hospice three times, I thought about my grandfather. It would have been great if our city had a Hospice when he was ill."

"After visiting the Hospice three times, I am impressed with the services they provide to people who are dying, and their families. When my grandfather passed, he was in a hospital. Only two people could visit at a time, and the room felt very cold and sterile. This project has made me think about how we treat people near end of life. I think we have a long way to go, and I am hopeful that our project will make a difference."

Connection

"We talk in class about how to improve access to exercise programs for seniors. It seems like the centre we visited is doing a good job in this area."

"In class, we read an article about lack of access to exercise programs for seniors. The author mentioned that transportation was a key concern, and I had not really thought of that before. Working with the folks at the centre has allowed me to witness the issue first-hand and I am surprised at how few seniors know about the transportation service they provide. It will be important for the staff to consider a marketing plan moving forward."