

Learning Logs: A Communication Strategy for All Subject Areas

ARLETTE SANDERS

In the past decade, teachers of language arts have been quietly engaging in a new philosophy of written expression—that students can learn *from* writing rather than writing what they have learned. It has liberated these teachers from the tedium of grading every written shred and from the boredom of reading regurgitated facts and ideas.

Probably the most productive writing and learning strategy available to students and teachers in any subject area is the simple learning log or journal. Typically, students make entries during the last five minutes of each period, responding to the following types of questions:

1. What did I learn today?
2. What puzzled me?
3. What did I enjoy, hate, accomplish in class today?
4. How did I learn from the discussion or lesson?
5. How was my performance in class?

Sometimes the teacher might write four or five key words on the board and ask the students to "free-write" about them for several minutes. Another way to help students delve deeply into the process of a difficult operation or sequence is to ask them to focus on *how* they perform it, or where they believe they lose the strand of the sequence, process, or thought.

The topics teachers suggest will differ according to the age and experience of the students. Typical assignments for younger students might be:

1. Talk to your textbook, ruler, computer. Tell it how you feel about it.
2. Get angry with your work because . . .
3. Be proud today because . . .
4. Write your log a secret about your day today.

More sophisticated students can be guided to explore their feelings about their learning.

1. How did I feel doing CPR on a dummy? How will I probably react if I ever have to perform CPR on a human? What am I most/least confident about?
2. What words in political science caught my attention? Why?
3. What prejudices did I have about calculus? What has changed, improved, become worse?
4. What do I say about phys. ed. even though I know it isn't true?

Class members must have the right to withhold any entries they prefer not to share. Eventually, as student-teacher and student-student trust develops, fewer passages will be withheld.

At every grade level, students can write dialogues about a crucial point in a day's lesson.

1. Converse with a molecule about its properties.
2. Tell Helen of Troy about the women's movement.
3. Write a dialogue with your parent or a friend about authority.
4. Ask the subjunctive tense to explain its forms and function to you.

Several times weekly, students can share excerpts of their entries with the class. They can discern similarities and differences in one another's learning experiences, as well as difficulties and attitudes. While learning logs can't substitute for formal assessments, they can indicate to the teacher the need for subtle changes in teaching. They provide a simple "educational pulse."

Teachers, too, should write during those five minutes and share entries with the class. It might be a revelation for a class to hear, "I didn't enjoy teaching this class today because the kids looked bored. Well, I was out late last night and didn't really prepare much. . . ." or "This was a terrific class period. Even though the discussion on materialism went off on 20 tangents, it was great to see Ned and Sally involved. The kids really listened to them. . . ." □

As the year progressed, Linda, although not especially quick with numbers, began to sense that mathematics and her own learning of it was a sensible way of measuring and representing order in the natural world. She even startled herself when she volunteered to build a binary abacus with a friend and later to write a brief report on the origin of Venn diagrams. As a result of these active opportunities to rehearse her mathematical understanding, Linda's fear of the subject is a thing of the past, and she is planning to take some more advanced courses. Meanwhile, Mark, whose freshman science aptitude had actually tested out in the highest quartile, continued drifting, otherwise engaged, while his physics teacher never realized that students need to be involved in their own learning.

OBSERVATION: When teachers use writing to change the learning patterns expected of students in their classes, the quality of student learning increases substantially.

QUESTION: What problems will teachers face as they try to create an active learning environment for their students?

Studies of teachers attempting to change their classroom practices to make writing a more active means of learning in science, English, and music found that teachers frequently met with frustration and only partial success (Barr, 1983; Healy, 1984). In a chemistry class observed by Barr, the students were studying the concept of entropy through transmission/repetition methods. Only after they had completed the unit test did the students discover that even those who thought they understood the material (and had passed the test!) couldn't explain it. The regurgitation process required to pass the test had not led to the kind of mastery that would enable students to use the concepts to understand the world. Ironically, one of the students who had been least successful on the test had managed to grasp the essentials of the concept and offered the most successful explanation.

The junior high school biology class studied by Healy suffered from inadequate explanations of how to change their learning strategies to meet the

Copyright © 1985 by the Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development. All rights reserved.