

Reflection Skills

Effective Learning Journals

Learning Journals

A learning journal is a collection of notes, observations, thoughts and other relevant materials built-up over a period of time and usually accompanies a period of study, a placement experience or fieldwork.

Keeping a learning journal is now an integral part of personal development on a wide range of courses at both undergraduate and postgraduate level within the University, e.g. Social Work; Nursing; PDP modules; Learning to Learn modules etc.

The notes you keep are a reflection and summary of **what** you learned and **how** you engaged with the process so that you can gain insight into the following:

- To identify or recognise your strengths, so you can capitalise on these;
- To acknowledge your current limitations;
- To identify areas for self-improvement and development;
- To identify ways of learning that suit you best;
- To gain insight into your potential contributions to future tasks;
- To recognise your own mistakes and the mistakes of others.

Learning Situations

Learning situations can fall into the matrix below:

Context	
Comfortable	Uncomfortable
Broadly familiar	Unfamiliar
Skill	

So a person applying a new, but **broadly familiar** skill in a **comfortable** (non-threatening) situation is likely to be confident of a particular outcome. 'Broadly familiar' means that you have a general understanding of what you have to do and how to do it. The confidence you feel is likely to boost the likelihood of a positive outcome for you.

A good example might be someone who is generally proficient with computer skills and buys and learns to use a new software package in their own home.

Conversely, learning or applying an **unfamiliar** skill in an **uncomfortable** situation (e.g. threatening in some way), is likely to feel anxious, which can affect the end result. A good example might be someone unfamiliar with using PowerPoint having to use it for the first time in front of a group of computer technicians!

There might be situations too, where you are **broadly familiar** with the skill involved, but **uncomfortable** with the situation, e.g. taking a driving test.

Exercise 1

Think of a past learning experience and apply the matrix to it. Then add in the third column how you felt at the time, and the **effect** of the situation for you, e.g. what effect or impact did it have on you.

Skill involved: familiar or unfamiliar	Context: comfortable or uncomfortable	2. How did the situation make you feel ?
Broadly familiar or unfamiliar?	What was the context?	
What did you have to do?	Why was it 'comfortable' or 'uncomfortable' for you	

What, if any, **effect** did the experience have on you? For example, what would you do differently next time?

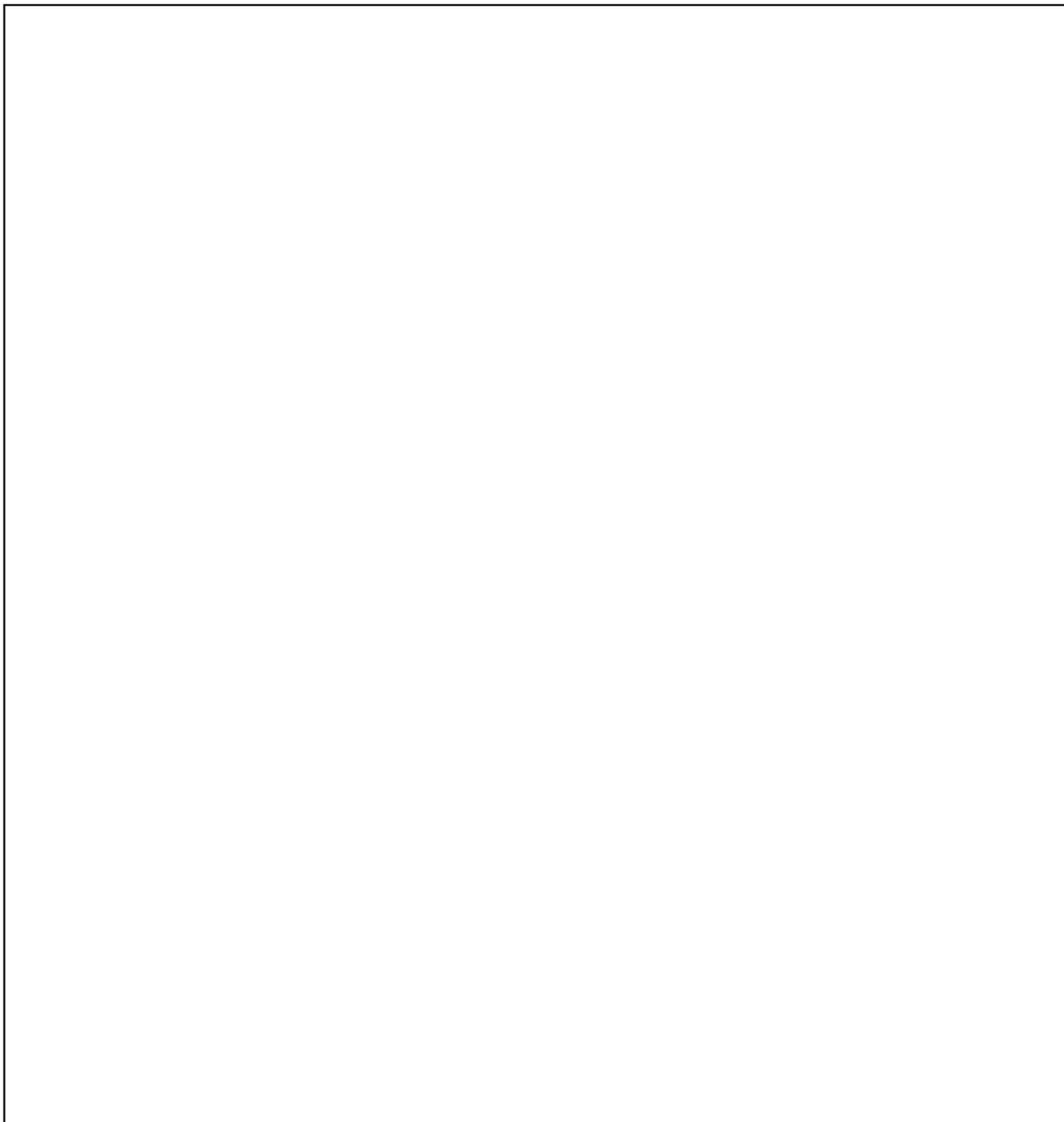


Learning Experiences

So learning involves a number of inter-connected elements:

1. **Your knowledge** - what you know;
2. **Your skill** - your ability to apply knowledge in a particular context
3. **Your feelings** - how you felt about both 1 & 2 above. Your feelings about learning are important, as these can affect how you approach similar situations in the future.

So thinking back to the learning experience you have just described, what could you write about? What features of the experience could go into your journal extract?



Learning Journals and Learning Experiences

Learning journals are a way that you can record and think about the range of elements involved in any learning situation you find yourself in. There is no standardised format and no one right way of writing a journal.

A journal could be a hand-written notebook, a word processed document or sometimes can be recorded verbally on a tape. You will need to check which format is required with your module tutor. The important thing is what goes in it.

Exercise 2

Now read the following extract from a learning journal from a career decision making module

Watched a video entitled 'Interviewing Do's and Don'ts' in class today. I was surprised at what the data showed in terms of how few people really follow the basic principles of interviewing. Like other students in the class, I didn't know that 9 out of 10 people are not prepared properly when they go for a job interview. This certainly gives the person who does prepare well a definite competitive advantage by being in the 10 per cent who are prepared.

Although the acting in the video was very staged and corny it did at least illustrate the basic sequence of events that take place in interviews and pointed out some of the important do's and don'ts of interviewing. I see more value now than I did at the beginning of class for the assignment to interview a working professional to get a few tips on how to compete for jobs in their field.

The class discussion was lively today. I think the subject challenged some of our deep fears about rejection and it made many of us a little uncomfortable. I enjoyed it though and I think I will keep some of the ideas the tutor put out on how to confront, accept and manage fear in mind as I prepare for interviews someday.

My big fear in an interview would be that my anxiety would either make me babble on, or take me the other way and make me dry up completely when asked a question. It is the aspect of being judged by others, being weighed-up, and dismissed, or accepted, that is the bit that makes me anxious, and if I am being honest rather resentful too about being in this subservient position.

Interviews are a bit of a power game, it seems to me, although I can see why they are still one of the main ways of selecting people. Employers need to see if you will 'fit in', and that's way it's important to try and get an idea of the values of the company beforehand, and not just think about the job

tasks

What is happening in this journal? What is the student trying to **do** in this journal entry? Try and identify the different features of the extract.



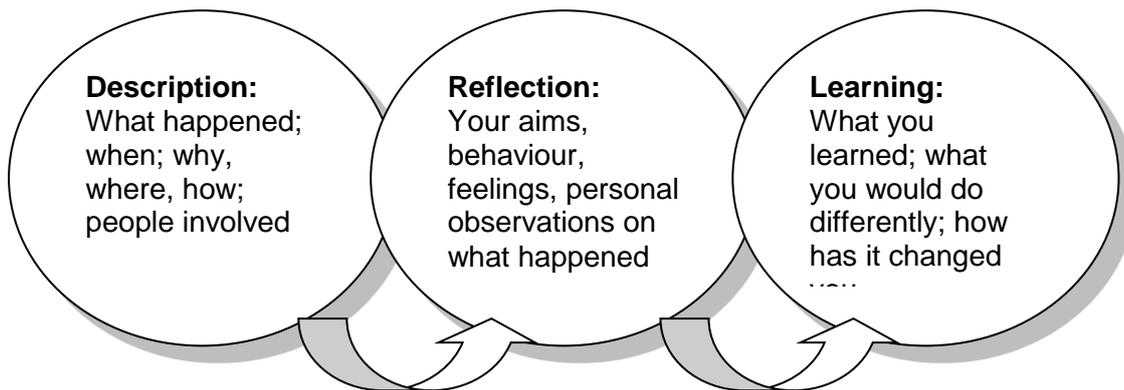
Exercise 2 Notes

What is happening in this journal extract?

The student:

- **Describes** what happened during the class
- **Criticises** aspects of the learning medium, e.g. the video
- **Summarises** what he/she learned – from both subject knowledge, and self-knowledge perspectives
- **Reflects** what he/she enjoyed about the class
- **Offers** a personal response to the class discussion
- **Expresses** his/her fears at two levels: **describes** them; and **analyses** them.

The key elements of writing effective learning journals



You could specifically include:

- The physical-emotional impact of **where** you were learning, e.g. placement environment; classroom etc.
- What you think about issues raised on your course/module/placement;
- What you find puzzling, difficult or contradictory on the course/module/placement;
- How comfortable/uncomfortable you felt **applying** any learning – and why you felt like that;
- How you might reach a better understanding regarding the above;
- Your response to what others around you are saying or doing, and why you feel or felt like that;
- What resources have helped you to understand and/or been interesting to use;
- How you feel about the way you have approached the issue/topic/ course/module/placement so far;
- Any new knowledge, skills or understanding you gained during the process of writing your learning journal;
- If, how, and why you have changed during the course/module/placement;
- Next steps for you – what else you want to learn, why, how, and when.

Writing Style

- Unlike most essays or formal reports, you should use first-person terms, e.g. 'I', or 'Me', as this is about you, and your **personal responses** to your learning.
- Make the writing true to your personality – don't write in a false way; make it **you** that is heard from the pages.
- Try and write as soon as possible after the event, as this will encourage a true and honest reflection on events.
- Don't write to please your tutor; be fair and objective, but above all, be honest.

Useful reading:

Cottrell, S. (2003). *Skills for Success: The Personal Development Planning Handbook*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan (particularly chapter 7).

Moon, J. (1999) *Learning Journals*. London: Kogan Page