

Assessing Projects: Checking Understanding Written Journals

Reflecting in Writing

Considerable research supports the role that writing can play in learning. Writing forces students to make their vague ideas explicit in language, allowing both teachers and students to examine and analyze their thoughts.

Journals consist of brief, informal entries written over time, prompt reflection and analysis of concepts or processes. They may be written in response to prompts designed to elicit specific understandings or misconceptions or they may be more open, allowing students to make decisions about what kind of reflection would be most beneficial for them.

Journals are designed to help students:

- Organize their reflections on the project and the process
- Document their work, feelings, thinking, needs, and attitudes for self-assessment during and at the end of the project
- Provide a place for them to write questions and comments for the teacher to respond
- Journals are designed to help teachers:
- Gain insights into individual student learning, thinking, and group processes not evident in the product and not available through observations
- Compare early and late entries to determine student progress
- Provide early and on-going feedback to students and to get feedback on students' understanding of the project, process, or of a particular activity
- Reflect on their teaching and plan future instruction

Different types of journals can be used for different kinds of learning activities. Varying the method and format for journal-writing can help keep students engaged in reflecting on their writing.

Managing journals can be a challenge for secondary teachers where responding to individual journals in a timely manner can be overwhelming. One way to address this problem is to teach students effective strategies for assessing and responding to their peers' reflections. This ensures that students get constructive, frequent feedback even when a teacher is unable to respond. To collect the information necessary to plan instruction, teachers can read randomly chosen journals and target particular students' journals to read based on classroom observations. Finally, when students write to themselves as an audience, they can use their journal entries to reflect on their learning over time and describe how they used the writing to explore their own understanding. If the writing in the journals is an integral part of their learning, students can be motivated to take them seriously and to recognize the benefit of this self-assessment activity even without constant teacher feedback.