# Using Team Journals in a Large Introductory Course

*David Zehr*

## Introduction

Large enrollments in beginning level General Education courses are problematic. Specifically, when faced with high enrollments, instructors, myself included, often fall into the default mode of lecturing as the primary means of disseminating course materials. Certainly we all lecture at times; its pedagogical and practical value are without question. Nonetheless, an over-reliance on lecturing has certain pitfalls, For instance, it breeds passivity in students. They develop a mind-set of trying to write down everything an instructor says, and then spend time studying it with the hope of simply repeating what they heard on the exams. Compounding this problem is the anonymity encountered in courses with large enrollments. Students typically do not know one another, and when they passively sit through lecture after lecture they fail to benefit from the skills and knowledge that each possesses. Also, professor-student interaction is minimized in such a setting, which inhibits a meaningful give-and-take that would benefit both parties. The end result is sometimes, unfortunately, a group of unmotivated stu-

dents and a professor frustrated and upset by an apparent lack of caring about course content.

While my description above may seem extreme, far too many conversations with colleagues about their classes suggest that it is not merely caricature. That, in part, motivated me to try something new last fall that would invigorate the large classroom experience for both myself and my students. An additional source of motivation came from Bolling's (1994) article describing the use of group journals in an upper-division writing course. Those familiar with the use of journals know that they are usually kept by individuals, privately, and read only by the instructor. This is an appropriate application of the journal technique in certain contexts, but Bolling showed the promise of moving beyond the traditional journal format. Intrigued by Bolling's idea, I modified her procedure for use in my introductory psychology course. By doing so I hoped that students would gain a greater understanding of how peers responded to course materials, a heightened sense of belonging to the class, and an awareness that I cared very much about their reactions to course materials.

## Implementation

I assigned students to teams of five and supplied each team with a standard composition book for keeping journal entries. On the first day of class team members introduced themselves to one another and exchanged names and phone numbers. They recorded that information in the front of the composition books. I told each team that I would provide them with prompts for journal entries at various points throughout the semester and that they were responsible for rotating the journal among themselves outside of class. Prompts focused on assigned readings, controversial issues presented in-class, and, when appropriate, current events that related to course materials. For example, one prompt posed the following question:

"Drugs have proven to be successful in treating certain mental illnesses. Their success at altering maladaptive symptoms and behaviors raises an interesting question—even if you weren't diagnosed with a particular illness, but if you could take a medication that would alter your basic personality, for example, improve your assertiveness, make you less shy, more confident, etc., would you? Why or why not?"

Each student provided ten entries in the journal. Each prompt consisted of two or three items per entry. I collected the journal four times over the course of the semester and hence read two to three entries per student at a time.

It is also important to mention that I used the teams for a second purpose beyond keeping a journal. Periodically, team members assembled themselves during class for in-class demonstrations and active-learning exercises. I did this to both supplement my lecturing and to help build team identities.

Given the novelty of the project, I decided to use the group journals solely as a means of adding bonus points to students' final point totals, which, of course, determined final grades (students could earn up to 500 points on four exams and a major writing assignment). Each time I collected the journals, teams received either a check or a check minus for their evaluation. To receive a check each team member had to have the appropriate entries, and the entries had to be more than overly simplistic analyses and platitudes. If a team accumulated four checks, each member earned twenty bonus points toward their final grade. Three checks earned fifteen points, two checks earned five points, and one or no checks earned no extra credit. At the end of the semester I also asked each team member to evaluate the other members of their group. They used a similar check, check minus system to rate the overall degree to which they felt members met their obligations to the team (e.g., cooperation in passing the journal in a timely manner and thoroughness of journal entries). If a member received all checks,

they earned ten bonus points. If they received one check minus, they earned five points, and if they had two or more check minuses they earned no bonus points. I required students to provide written justification for each rating of fellow team members. Any student then could earn a maximum of thirty extra points.

### Assessment

At the end of the semester students completed an evaluation form for the group journal project. The first part of the form contained six objective items answered using a Likert-type rating scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree). The items and mean ratings are found in Table 1. The second part of the evaluation form contained three open-ended questions. Students described what they liked best about the project, what they liked least about it, and last, provided any other comments they deemed pertinent.

### Discussion

Examination of the mean ratings for the six evaluation statements suggests that the project did meet some course objectives. Students generally agreed that the journals aided their thinking about course materials, taught them the importance of behaving responsibly toward fellow team members, and got them to appreciate my interest in their learning. They also generally agreed that the project should be used again. Less satisfactory are the ratings for whether or not the students felt better acquainted with classmates and the degree to which they learned from their peers. While not indicative of the project being an abject failure in those regards, these ratings do suggest that the project needs modification if those course objectives are to be met.

To better understand the thinking behind the ratings I examined the responses to the open-ended evaluation items. By far and away, students liked most the opportunity to express their own ideas and opinions, particularly to me. They liked least the process of

passing the journal around outside of class. Some found it difficult to track down team members; others felt some team members kept the journal too long, leaving them little time for their own entries. Obviously then, one is not going to feel better acquainted with people who are less than cooperative in achieving a collective goal, nor is one likely to perceive that such people aided understanding of course material.

## Conclusion

On the basis of students' objective and open-ended evaluations, as well as my own personal impressions, I feel the group journal project worked fairly well. I certainly plan on using it again, but with several modifications. First, I think more needs to be done at the beginning of the semester to build a sense of belonging to a team. Several students commented on the evaluation form that I should do that. I had hoped that using the groups for in-class activities would facilitate the formation of team identities, but their sporadic nature and student absences probably undermined this to some extent. I will therefore probably introduce several team projects very early in the semester before assigning the first set of journal entries. For instance, on the first day of class I might have the teams do some informal writing and discussion about their expectations for the course.

A second possible change will be to use smaller groups. With a class of *70* students I had fourteen teams. That lessened the number of journals that I had to physically deal with, but perhaps it introduced problems that hindered the groups from working effectively together.

One final thing to consider for the future will be to incorporate the journal evaluation as part of the overall course grade. Not being sure of how smoothly things would go, I hesitated to do this the first time through, and hence used the exercise primarily as a means of rewarding students for their perseverance (I did warn

students that if they abandoned their group completely and refused to participate at all they would lose thirty points from their final total). Sadly, students often do not take assignments seriously if they perceive them to have little consequence for their overall evaluation. Linking the group journal more explicitly to the final grade might foster a greater sense of purpose and cooperation within the groups.

For those who might be interested in adopting this technique, let me close with a comment (from my perspective as instructor. Without doubt, reading and commenting on all of the journal entries is time consuming, so extraordinarily large class sizes might make the costs of using group journals prohibitive. If, however, one feels that a class size is manageable, the benefits of the exercise are worth the effort. Students in large classes may feel dissatisfied in the sense that they are passive and not likely to be heard and known by the instructor. This technique sends a clear message to students that their ideas and opinions do matter, and allows opportunities for full expression by everyone in the class. I feel that I got to know my students better as persons and as partners in learning about psychology.

## References

Bolling, A. L. (1994). Using group journals to improve writing and comprehension. Journal of Excellence in College Teaching. 5, 47-55.

**Table 1**

*Student Evaluations of the Group Journal Project*

| Item | M | SD |
|---|---|---|
| The team journal project aided my thinking about course materials. | 3.21 | .56 |
| The team journal project taught me the importance of behaving responsibly toward other team members. | 3.31 | .66 |
| The team journal project helped the instructor learn about my ideas and opinions. | 3.28 | .59 |
| The team journal project should be used in other large lecture sections of courses. | 3.00 | .71 |
| The team journal project allowed me to become better acquainted with my classmates. | 2.83 | .76 |
| The team journal project allowed me to learn more about how fellow students react to course materials. | 2.97 | .68 |

Note: N=29. Raters used a 4 point rating scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 4 (strongly agree).