

# Keeping a teaching journal: individual activity

**Collection:** The Subject & pedagogy

**Resource:** Hearing yourself teach

## Approximate duration

Duration: time unlimited: the idea is that you keep adding and reflecting

## Learning outcomes

Activities of this nature are designed to help you focus on the process of your teaching. Carrying out activities of this kind (even on a selective and occasional basis) should help you

- become more aware of your goals as a teacher;
- become more competent at finding ways of carrying these goals into practice;
- learn from the things that go well in a class or learning occasion;
- learn from the things that go badly in a class or learning occasion;
- understand more about your relationship to your students;
- (in terms of your career and for your own satisfaction) NOT to keep having the same experience over and over again!

## Introduction

This 'activity' is in fact a set of related activities, all of them designed as stimulus to pedagogic thought and reflection. You are invited to choose one or two that appeal to you as a basis for your own continuing reflection. We suggest that you take seriously the advice in the Overview that very often the best way of getting at important things is to do it indirectly, not by head on assault. Professional intuition needs to be fed by



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research, evidence, dialogues with colleagues. You can't just rely on what pops into your head. But at the same time, you don't want to get overwhelmed. Both planning and retrospective thought can be set going by an oblique approach. To that extent, creativity in teaching is akin to creative writing, or indeed creativity in any other sphere.

Keeping a Teaching Journal isn't something you have to do obsessively or all the time. But practised selectively, as a form of reflective discipline, it can be developmentally useful, an opportunity to reflect on things you've tried, and keep a record of things you might want to come back to later. It's up to you how you prefer to do it: some people prefer an actual physical notebook, or loose-leaf binder. Others might prefer to jot notes into a computer file. You might choose to concentrate on a single module, or to follow through a theme. Or you might go for a sort of loosely 'modernist' approach and capture some vignettes in order to try to decipher their significance. In the [small group teaching resource](#) we suggest that the seminar takes place simultaneously at affective, cognitive, and social levels. The same might broadly be said to be true of teaching. This means that awareness of your own experience in the classroom is actually part of your resource. There will be those who decry such approaches as 'touchy feely' stuff. And you shouldn't rely on your own experience alone, or become too precious about it. But you will learn a lot from asking yourself questions about how you felt about a class or a lecture and trying to account for why you felt as you did. In the light of these comments, here are some brief suggestions for activities within the broad scope of your learning journal.

## The activity

- **Metaphors:** Explore and work with the metaphors for learning and teaching - see the metaphor activity from '[writing and the teacher](#)'.
- **Seminar plans.** University teachers often reject seminar planning as too 'school-y'. They fear, perhaps, that having a plan will militate against the spontaneity of discussion. Neither here nor in the **seminar resource** are we advocating blind adherence to plan. But writing a scheme and thoughts on the activities you are going to use will help you to focus even if in the end you abandon it. Students may also find it helpful if you share the plan with them on the whiteboard or flipchart – part of the object is to share pedagogic thinking with them, and make



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them aware that there is nothing inevitable about what takes place. They can learn as much from the teacher's dilemmas and decisions as from the teacher's apparent all-seeing confidence. A scheme or plan in this sense is complementary to your marked up texts or notes on the substance of the session. A single page of A4, preferably in a type face you can see without having your head down in your notes should suffice. List the main things you want to achieve; the activities you are planning to use; one or two activities or questions in reserve in case things flag. Obviously these suggestions are prospective. But your annotated plan – even just handwritten jottings made in the margins immediately after the session – also takes on a retrospective value as part of your log or record.

- **'Card index'**. Doesn't have to be real cards, of course. But you'd be surprised how quickly you can build up a dossier of activities – and jottings about how they actually worked. File under topics, or under kinds of activity. The English Subject Centre's **Teaching Topics and Texts** provides a collection of sketches for group activities.
- **Diagrams or drawings**. One way of reflecting upon a session can be to by-pass the verbal record and to think in spatial terms. You can explore the success or the difficulties of a session by drawing yourself a map. At a simple level this might just be a sketch of who was sitting where. This sharpens awareness of the dynamics of the group, what the characteristic clusters and associations are. Who sits opposite you or next to you? Who stays clear of your sightline? In turn you could superimpose on this plan some lines representing the flows of utterance or dialogue. Who speaks to whom? Do speakers always address you? The object is not to achieve a scientific rendering of what happened so much as to provoke your own thinking about what happened. You could also move on to reflection upon your own subjective experience: where are the spots of difficulty in the room? Whose eyes do you try to avoid? What are the signs of unease or relaxation? Does your drawing help you to understand why things sometimes flow, or why they are sometimes blocked?
- **Key moments**. What were the key moments or nodal points of your seminar or class? When did things start to move? Or to slow down? Draw a large circle, and move round it like a clock face. Mark the 'quarter hours', then mark in roughly the moments in the circle when particular things happened.



- **Vignettes; the semiotic code.** In Barthes' terms, the semiotic code is the code of hints and flickers of meaning. If you are trying to capture the sense of a seminar without making a verbatim record, you might want to capture two or three moments which seem to you to sum up something important. Again, the point is not some notion of objective truth. It is an aid to reflection upon what will inevitably be an unclear and confusing process. This might be a short moment of dialogue, an arrival, the moment when you suddenly thought of a way of putting something. It might even lead you to an awareness of 'retrospective plans': what was going on that did make sense but which you hadn't consciously planned for?
- **Evaluations.** The suggestions above are largely to do with getting some hold on process while a module is in progress, therefore before the stage at which student evaluations come in. But somewhere in your teaching log you'll need to take account of evaluations. The first thing to say is that you're likely to feel these very personally. You may feel a small glow over praise. And you'll feel upset by criticism, and writhe with the unfairness of unmerited criticism, hurtful remarks, or casual dismissals of what you've been trying to do. You're not alone! Even highly experienced teachers can find things said in evaluations rankling, and pen green pen letters in their heads to the supposed authors. Record what you feel – and most of us tend to pay more attention to negative comments than to positive. But once the dust has settled a bit, and the first hurt has dissipated, you need to find ways of learning from evaluations, so perhaps the next thing is to try to discriminate between one-offs and consistent themes. Is there something on which a number of evaluations agree? Are there points which – however thoughtlessly expressed – you might want to take account of in another seminar, or next time you run this module? Regard the evaluations not as a final verdict on what you have done, but as part of a continuing dialogue.
- **The student experience.** We all build up our awareness of 'how things are going' by extrapolating from the emotional tone of classes, chance comments in the corridor, overheard remarks. One way to gain richer and to some extent more systematic understanding about how students are experiencing would be to set up something akin to a 'focus group'. You'd need the support of your department or school to do this, and it might be better as a collective exercise. We're not talking here about a method from which objectively balanced conclusions could



be drawn. There is a place for a proper social science exercise, but this is not it. We're talking about creating the space for a conversation which you can in some sense read as a text. Even if the membership of the group is not truly representative, you can learn more from working through a list of pre-circulated questions than you can just by picking up scraps.

## Links & References

A bit of background to this discussion:

- Knights, Ben. '[Group Processes in Higher Education: the uses of theory](#)'. *Studies in Higher Education*. 20.2 (1995)

## Relationship to the Professional Standards Framework

- **Area of Activity 5:** Integration of research, scholarship and professional activities with teaching and supporting learning
- **Core Knowledge 2:** Appropriate methods for teaching and learning in the subject area and at the level of the academic programme
- **Professional Values 3:** Commitment to the development of learning communities
- **Professional Values 5:** Commitment to continuing professional development and evaluation of practice.

More information about the Professional Standards Framework can be obtained from the summary factsheet in the Subject & Pedagogy Collection in HumBox.

<http://humbox.ac.uk/2731/>

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## Resources in the *Subject and Pedagogy* Collection

- Subject and pedagogy: introduction to the collection
- Working with the English subject benchmark statement: resource overview
  - Using the English subject benchmark: group activity
  - Using the English subject benchmark: individual activity
- Working with the Creative Writing subject benchmark statement: resource overview
  - Using the Creative Writing subject benchmark: group activity
  - Using the Creative Writing subject benchmark: individual activity
- Writing and the teacher: resource overview
  - Writing tasks: group activity
  - Metaphors: group activity
- Hearing yourself teach: resource overview
  - **Keeping a teaching journal: individual activity (\* you are here)**
- Working with threshold concepts: resource overview
  - Crossing the line: individual activity
  - Crossing the line: group activity



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