

Journal Writing Forums: Supporting Teachers and Encouraging Students

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This paper summarizes the author's contribution to the LLL SIG-sponsored forum "Bridging Social Distances in Online Learning" that was presented at the JALT 2020 Online Conference, co-presented with Andrew Reimann, Joseph Dias, Catherine Takasugi, Fraser Gould, Natsuki Suzuki, and Kazuko Namba.

Introduction

As useful as new technologies can be in this age of prescribed online classes, it is important not to forget tried and true ideas and technologies to support teachers and encourage students. The use of forums to create weekly writing journals is a simple idea that requires little technology or training to implement.

Journals require no new technology as they are basically bulletin boards, a technology as old as the internet itself. Forums are generally included in the learning management systems (LMS) of most schools, so no new software is needed. Multiple free services are also available should an institution not provide a forum or bulletin board. In addition, journal writing is familiar territory for most and thus does not require significant investments by teachers or students to learn.

A "Dialog Journal"

The journal activity used in my university classes was a weekly writing assignment of 250-300 words (with some variation, depending on the class level and subject). In addition, students were required to write a 200 word reply to a classmate's journal. Topics were occasionally the students' choice, but generally a topic

was assigned. Journals began in the second week of class and lasted until the end of semester.

General benefits of journal writing task

The journals had a number of benefits. They provided a weekly reading and writing activity that the teacher could oversee. Topics were chosen to encourage critical thinking, not just regurgitating facts. Assigned topics also allowed journals to be used to prepare students for upcoming class activities. With a little preparation, students seemed more willing to participate in online video discussions.

Journals allowed for more socializing as well. Students in new classes, especially first year university students, may not have had a chance to make friends or to socialize with classmates. The journal topics at the beginning of the year were more personal in nature and therefore gave students a chance to share their stories and interests and to find out about their classmates. Later in the semester, when topics were assigned, many students added a preface paragraph to their journals to share personal stories with the class.

In addition, the journals allowed for the teacher to connect with students. Reading the journals gave the teacher a weekly insight into students' wellbeing. Simply reading a journal assignment then commenting on it to the students during online video discussions drew a positive reaction from students and pushed the conversation forward.

Psychosocial benefits

Being asynchronous, journals offered the further benefit of a lowering of anxiety. When writing a journal, students have time to gather their thoughts and to prepare what they want to say, so no one is put on the spot. As mentioned earlier, this preparation may have helped promote smoother discussions in online video discussions. Many students who had never attended a single synchronous video session were active in the forums. This was especially important when we keep in mind the issue of mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic. Student participation in the

journal gave students a place to vent, share and be heard. It also gave the teacher a place to have students participate when synchronous activities may have been difficult or overwhelming.

Conclusion

The pandemic has pushed classes online and lead educators to look at new and exciting ways to accomplish learning objectives. However, in the rush to find new and exciting ways to engage students, educators shouldn't overlook tried and true methods. Journals are a simple and low anxiety method of bringing routine and structure to online classes and engaging students, both academically and socially.