

“Journal Writing is Something We Have to Learn on Our Own” – The Results of A Focus Group Discussion With Recreation Students

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Abstract

Reflective journals have become an increasingly popular tool used by numerous instructors in many academic fields, including recreation and leisure studies. Previous research and narrative reports of journal writing have indicated there are several positive and negative aspects of journal writing for students. However, many aspects of journal writing remain poorly understood. In this paper, we describe the results of a focus group discussion centered on journal writing held with nine students who were enrolled in a post-secondary recreation program. By and large, the students who participated in this focus group enjoyed and valued their journaling experiences. They were, however, cautious about certain aspects of the journaling process and offered numerous suggestions for improving the ‘journaling experience.’ Five themes were explored in this focus group, including: 1) general journaling behaviors, 2) barriers to journaling, 3) evaluation of journals, 4) gender differences in journaling, as well as 5) self-perceptions of journaling. This paper concludes with 10 recommendations to be considered by recreation and leisure studies instructors who use journaling as an instructional technique.

Keywords: journaling, university students, focus group, reflection, experiential learning.

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Introduction

Many educators who work in colleges and universities are continually looking for meaningful ways for students to reflect on their experiences, both in the classroom and

in practical settings. Reflective journals have become an increasingly popular tool used by numerous instructors in many academic fields, including recreation and leisure studies (Anderson, 1992; Bennion & Olsen, 2002). Previous research and narrative reports of journal writing have indicated that there are several positive benefits of journal writing for students in a number of academic fields and of varying demographic backgrounds (Arredondo & Rucinski, 1994; Cantrell, 1997; Chandler, 1997; Cole, 1994; Hettich, 1990; Kerka, 1996; Raffan & Barrett, 1989; Walden, 1995). However, there have also been reports of problems with academic journal writing, such as 'writing for the teacher,' over use of journal writing in academic programs, and negative student perceptions of both the content and the process of journal writing (Anderson, 1992; Chandler, 1997; Cole, 1994; Hettich, 1990).

A review of the published literature related to journal writing indicates that students are often given little, if any, instruction in journal writing techniques (Bennion & Olsen, 2002; Cole, 1994; Hettich, 1990; Kerka, 1996). Students are frequently left to 'go it alone' and are expected to write quality entries with minimal guidance from the instructor as to the process of journal writing. In an effort to better understand how recreation and leisure studies students perceive journaling, how a journal writing workshop impacts student writing behaviors, and how educators may improve the use of journal writing as a reflective technique, we are conducting a four-phase research project. The entirety of this project is focused on students who write journals for outdoor recreation field courses (i.e., practical skills and theory courses occurring predominantly out of the traditional classroom). The initial phase investigated conceptualizations of journal writing of 62 undergraduate recreation, parks and tourism students at two universities in North America (Dyment & O'Connell, in press). The second phase examined the effects of a journaling workshop designed by the researchers who provided instruction in both the process and content of reflective writing. (for a summary of workshop, see Dyment & O'Connell (2003); for a report on research findings, see O'Connell & Dyment (in press). Students from the aforementioned universities participated in a pre-post control group experimental design. The third phase, which is the focus of this paper, was to conduct a focus group that examined themes that emerged from the previous two phases. The fourth and final phase of the research project - content analysis of student's journals - is now underway.

The purpose of this paper is to present the findings from the focus group phase of this research project. Five themes framed the focus group discussion and subsequent analysis: 1) general journaling behaviors; 2) barriers to journaling; 3) evaluation of journals; 4) the influence of gender on journaling; as well as, 5) self-perception of journaling. These themes were identified through our review of the literature as well as our findings from earlier phases of this study. This paper concludes with a presentation of 10 recommendations as to how these findings may assist recreation and leisure educators in making journal writing a more powerful and meaningful academic exercise for students as well as instructors.

Literature Review

History of Journal Writing

Journal writing, in a wide variety of formats, has been used throughout history. Early journal writers included the Greeks and Romans, Japanese women in the 10th century, and 'enlightened' individuals during the Renaissance. Frontier life and westward expansion in North America allowed individuals such as Lewis and Clark to record reflective thoughts as well as factual accounts of their experiences. Henry David Thoreau, Anne Frank and a host of other writers have also impacted modern perceptions of journal writing (Janesick, 1998; Raffan & Barrett, 1989).

Journal Writing in Academic Settings

In contemporary academic settings, journals are used for many purposes and with a wide variety of individuals and groups. Students from the fields of therapeutic recreation, psychology, literature, teacher education, sociology and nursing have traditionally used journals to record their perceptions of practical experiences (Anderson, 1992; Burt, 1994; Hettich, 1990; Kerka, 1996; Murray, 1997). Journal writing is often employed as a means of evaluating students in academic courses, but has been criticized when used in this capacity as well (Chandler, 1997). Journal writers include students of many ages, people of a variety of ethnic descents, and non-traditional students (Cantrell, 1997; King Jr., 1998; Steiner & Phillips, 1991; Walden, 1995). Journals have also been used by researchers, autobiographers and experiential educators (Grumet, 1990; Janesick, 1998; Raffan & Barrett, 1989).

Research on Journal Writing

Although the literature is rich with anecdotal evidence of the strengths and weaknesses of using journals in an academic setting, surprisingly little formal research has been conducted on this topic. Many studies have not controlled for individual differences or established meaningful goals (Cole, 1994). Additionally, there has been relatively little research done in the field of recreation and leisure studies (Bennion & Olsen, 2002).

The positive aspects of journal writing have been noted by many researchers. Students have shown preference for writing in journals as they believe journals require them to focus while reading, assist in centering thoughts on subject matter, stimulate thinking, and allow them to address a wider range of interests related to course material (Cole, 1994; Hettich, 1990). Hettich (1990) reported that students preferred the more personal nature of journal writing to other types of assignments such as the traditional term paper. Further, he suggested that students viewed journals as a continual process, and not something that came to an abrupt end, like term papers or projects.

Researchers have indicated that students also hold negative perceptions of journaling. They often feel 'journalled to death,' display a general dislike for journal

writing, and complain about unclear expectations from instructors (Anderson, 1992; Chandler, 1997; Cole, 1994).

Studies have revealed that instructors have positive impressions of student journal writing assignments (Hughes & Kooy, 1997; Kerka, 1996; Young & Wilson, 2000). Instructors note that students often become engaged in the reflective process and the responsibility for learning is shared by the student and instructor. Additionally, journal writing is a student-centered approach, which favors different learning styles (Young & Wilson, 2000). Students are often able to write using characteristics of natural speech, and may shape knowledge as they like which allows them to grapple with academic material on their own terms (Hughes & Kooy, 1997; Kerka, 1996). Negative aspects of using journals cited by instructors include the following: using the journal to attack others, writing to gain favor with the instructor, and issues related to evaluation (Anderson, 1992; Chandler, 1997; Cole, 1994; Ediger, 2001).

It appears as though there are differences between how males and females perceive journaling and how they approach journal writing (Burt, 1994; Dymont & O'Connell, in press). Burt (1994) reported that a significantly higher percentage of females than males kept a customary journal. He postulated that journal writing is related to stereotypical gender roles (e.g., journal writing is a passive, reflective activity related to feminine behaviors). Related to this finding, he reported the following: females were more likely to write about emotions and feelings, females started keeping a journal at a significantly younger age, and that females wrote in a wider variety of styles than their male counterparts.

There have been few rigorous examinations of the mechanics of journal writing. Those that have been conducted are tempered by small sample sizes, the anecdotal nature of their findings, and unclear explanations of the curriculum used (Anderson, 1992; Hettich, 1990; Raffan & Barrett, 1989; Walden, 1995). Cole (1994) proposed a cognitive model of journal writing for literature students. This model was based on seven components that were influenced by six factors. The seven components included: goal identification, building a text base, construction of a situational model, predicting outcomes, identifying significant elements, reflecting on meaning, and reconstructing schemata. She listed the six factors that may influence journal writing as instructor expectations, overt activities, strategies for writing, student characteristics, difficulty of the assignment, and availability of resources (Cole, 1994). A significant downfall of this model is that it had been tested with a relatively small sample size and never replicated. However, the roots of this model may be adapted to recreation and leisure applications.

Overall, it is unclear how students and instructors may gain the most benefit from reflective journal writing in an academic setting, particularly in the recreation and leisure studies field. As the use of journals as a reflective tool continues to expand, so must the examination of this practice.

Methods

With a view to gaining more insight into the five themes emerging from earlier phases of the study and the review of the literature, we conducted a focus group. Powell and Single (1996) define a focus group as “a group of individuals selected and assembled by researchers to discuss and comment on, from personal experience, the topic that is the subject of the research” (p. 499). A crucial feature of focus groups is that participants are able to interact, by asking each other questions and by expanding on each other’s ideas. A focus group was selected for this phase of the research in order to draw on participants’ attitudes, feelings, beliefs, experiences and reactions towards journaling in a way which would not be possible using other research methods, such as questionnaires or one-to-one interviewing (Kreuger, 1988; Morgan, 1997).

Given that the recommended number of people in a focus group is usually six to ten (Kreuger, 1988; Morgan, 1997), we randomly selected nine students (five women and four men) from the student roster of an undergraduate recreation, parks and tourism program at a university in North America to participate the focus group discussion. The total number of students enrolled in this program is 350. By randomly selecting the students from the roster, we hoped to explore a diversity of opinions on journal writing. The students were all in their third or fourth year of the program and had been required to keep journals as part of mandatory academic field courses in the first two years of their studies. Students who had participated in the earlier phases of the research program were not eligible to participate in the focus group.

We, the researchers, facilitated the two-hour focus group with a view to exploring five main themes that had emerged from the literature as well as earlier phases of our research. A list of 14 questions (with many sub questions) was used to guide the discussion. Our role within the focus group was to facilitate the discussion, by encouraging the involvement of all participants and by limiting the domination of discussion by a few students. We provided prompting questions to elicit expansion of interesting subtopics and challenged participants to share a diversity of perspectives on the topics under discussion. As facilitators, we were aware of the drawbacks of focus group research, such as the difficulty of separating individual viewpoints from the collective view point, and made every effort to fully explore the diversity of opinions within the group as well as the degree of consensus on given topics (Kreuger, 1988; Morgan, 1997).

A note taker was present during the focus group session. The session was also recorded on audiotapes and later transcribed. We listened to the tapes and read the transcriptions on multiple occasions with a view of performing a content analysis on the data. The material collected was then reduced by selecting, focusing, simplifying, abstracting and transforming the raw data (Miles & Huberman, 1984). Strauss (1987) refers to this method of organization as the “conceptualization of data.” The names of all participants in this study have been changed to protect their anonymity.

Results and Discussion

The focus group discussion addressed five main themes: general journaling behaviors, barriers to journaling, evaluation of journals, gender differences in journaling, and self-perceptions of journaling. In the following section of this paper, we present the results and discussion related to each theme.

General Journaling Behaviors

The focus group began with a broad overview of the students' experiences with journal writing for academic courses, all of which included some out-of-classroom experience. Students reported a remarkable range of courses using journals as a reflective tool including, therapeutic recreation, leadership, environmental issues, geology, ecological literacy, outdoor skills practical courses, and extended field expeditions. As Cole (1994), Hettich (1990) and Anderson (1992) reported in earlier articles, journal writing appears to remain popular among university instructors from a number of academic disciplines. It is interesting to note that faculty from both the natural and social sciences use journals as an instructional technique.

Participants in the focus group suggested a variety of reasons they liked journal writing for academic courses. All the participants stated that journals helped clarify their personal observations about the course. As Phil stated, "My thoughts and observations are clearer on paper." Lucas supported this contention, noting that, "Journals are very useful for reviewing," as did Maria, who said, "Journals are good to look back on." The majority of students enjoyed the permanence of journals as well; seven students indicated they would keep their journals in the future. Finally, as found earlier by Hettich (1990), all students in this study reported they were able to reflect on occurrences in their own terms. They liked being able to write from their individual perspective. Instructors should take note of these observations, as many journal writing assignments are bound by questions that limit individual student interpretation.

Participants also described several aspects of journal writing they disliked. All students indicated they had an aversion to the mandatory nature of journaling assignments. Six students indicated they disliked the objective nature of writing for academic courses. As Maria stated, "Journals focus too much on weather, sightings, etc., and not personal feelings." On the contrary, one student reported he did not like being forced to write about personal thoughts that were limited to specific aspects of the course.

A theme that emerged from this focus group is that many students dislike preformatted journals. They do not want to be limited in what they write, as well as how they write their entries. However, two of the students appreciated the need to focus journal content and liked a 'roadmap.' Stephanie stated she liked "...direction – [it provides] a good base." Recreation and leisure studies instructors should consider balancing their needs for providing a structure for journal writing with students' needs for both direction and freedom. This is an unenviable task as each student and group of students enrolled in a course will have different needs and expectations of the journal writing process.

Closely related to the issue of structure and direction is the amount of creativity students use while journaling. All focus group participants indicated the level of creativity they utilized was dependent on the course and instructor. If the instructor allowed for more creativity, the students would include creative entries. This is reminiscent of Anderson's (1992) finding that students may 'write for the instructor.' Although, this is contrary to the initial intent of Anderson's statement, it does indicate that students make assumptions about different instructors' willingness to accept creative entries. We asked students if they would use supplies such as crayons, colored pencils, tape, and glue if given the opportunity to make their journals more creative. Seven students reported they would use materials both at home and in a field context if given access to the materials. However, two students countered this preference saying they used more simplistic methods in their journals. Lucas stated, "I tend to just draw with my pencil," and Dave said, "I stick to words." As may be expected, those students who favor creative journal entries would like to use supplies more, and those who do not like creative entries prefer a more traditional approach to journaling. As Raffan and Barrett (1989) suggested, instructors must allow for a wide range of types of entries that reflect individual student styles of journal writing.

Barriers

The literature suggests that students are confronted with many barriers to journal writing (Anderson, 1992; Chandler, 1997; Cole, 1994). All participants in the focus group said time was one of the biggest factors in writing quality journal entries. The nature of 'time' took on several guises in their remarks. Four students remarked that they often complete their journals the night before the assignment is due as a result of other obligations, as well as procrastination. Some recreation and leisure instructors build time into their field experiences for students to write in their journals. Participants in our focus groups specified both agreement (n=5) and disagreement (n=4) with this practice. Lucas thought it would be difficult to designate time for journaling in contending that "It is hard to set aside a time for journaling on a field course because people have totally different needs out there." Two participants said that journal writing took away from the actual experience of being in an out-of-classroom context. Dave summed this up by saying, "...just being out there - Why write when you can enjoy being out there?" Perhaps recreation and leisure instructors should consider the advice of Cindy who said, "Just enough time for the objective stuff would be good...for the simple things."

Evaluation

As many researchers have noted, evaluating journals can be a complicated, daunting, repetitive, time consuming, and ethical task (Anderson, 1992; Chandler, 1997; Ediger, 2001; Hettich, 1990). With a view to understanding student perceptions of evaluating journals, we asked students in the focus group a variety of questions about grading journals. The majority of students (n=7) in the focus group appreciated the fact that they "got a grade" for their journal. More specifically, they appreciated that their professors

recognized the important learning that can occur through journal writing. When asked how much of their overall grade should be allocated towards journal writing, students reported that they would like journals to count for 25% to 100% of their grade, depending on the course. In entirely field based courses, all students indicated they would like journals to account for a higher percentage of their overall grade. Maria explained, "In field courses, evaluation shouldn't happen through traditional tests...a journal can capture so much of the learning that happens out there." Cindy proposed that a positive relationship exists between evaluation and effort, suggesting that, "The higher the percentage, the more effort people will put into it." Melissa commented, however, that assigning 100% of a grade to journal writing would be unfair for students who dislike journaling. She noted, "...everybody learns differently, so it's not fair to assign the whole grade to journals."

While the students did appreciate getting a grade for their journals, they were also quick to note the challenges and difficulties of evaluating journals. All students perceived the most challenges in grading the subjective portion of journals (as compared with the objective). Lucas commented, "How can you get a grade on your feelings?" Stephanie expanded, noting that it was hard to "...put your whole heart into your journal and be told 'it wasn't good enough.'" All the students also welcomed written feedback on their journals. Phil explained, "I can't stand it when I get my journal back and I only have a mark out of 10...what am I supposed to do with that?" Another concern that was raised with respect to journal evaluation related to who was doing the grading. Five students believed that only faculty members should evaluate the journals, as opposed to teaching assistants. The other four students, however, disliked when a faculty member, who was not present on a field course, was responsible for grading their journals.

The students unanimously reported that they wrote, to varying degrees, "for the teacher," a phenomenon observed by Anderson (1992, p. 307). Carl acknowledged that he often used a "...cookie cutter approach to journal writing," where he would "...go to the professor, find out what they wanted in the journals, and write for them." Melissa also feels influenced by the evaluator noting, "I try not to let it influence my writing, but unconsciously it does." It thus appears that having a trusting relationship between the journal writer and journal reader is critical for some students. Cindy noted that she is very self-conscious about her journal writing and that she would "...have to build trust before I could write freely."

In light of their concerns about evaluating journals, the students had numerous innovative suggestions for grading journals, including: self-evaluation (where they assign their own grade), peer evaluation (where another student evaluates their journal), and co-evaluation (where the faculty and student evaluate together). They also suggested a model where students would select the percentage of the overall final grade that journals would account for. This suggestion was offered in order to honor the learning styles of students who like and dislike journaling.

Gender Differences

From our own experiences and from our review of the literature, we suspected that men and women in the focus group might have different perceptions of journaling (Burt, 1994). Our suspicions were confirmed in earlier phases of study where we found several statistically significant differences in attitudes towards journaling between men and women (Dyment & O'Connell, in press). The women in Phase 1 of our study reported having significantly more pride in their journals and significantly more positive attitudes towards journaling than men (Dyment & O'Connell, in press).

In this phase of the research, gender perceptions were explored with participants. The results indicated that men and women did differ. Dave summarized the group's discussion with the following observation: "My journal does not compare to any female's journal...and it doesn't surprise me one bit!" We probed the students for explanations of this phenomenon and found that deep-rooted socializations of acceptable behaviors for boys and girls might be the root causes for the differences. Stephanie suggested, "Maybe it is because of the expectations of little boys and young girls." The students discussed how young girls are often encouraged to keep 'diaries' while growing up, whereas little boys are rarely encouraged. As Lucas explained, "Since girls have practice keeping diaries, they are better at keeping journals at university...it is just a product of our society." Cindy also suggested that men might have difficulty writing in their journals because they "...don't usually talk about their feelings."

The results of this study support conclusions made by Burt (1994) who found differences in journaling behavior between men and women. In his study, significantly more women than men reported keeping journals. He also found that men and women reported different reasons for keeping journals. While men indicated that they kept a journal primarily as an aid to recall past and future events, females suggested that they kept journals as an avenue for expressing thoughts, feelings, and emotions. Burt explained the gender differences towards journaling by suggesting that journal writing is associated with stereotypical feminine traits (e.g., being more 'in-touch' with feelings than men). He writes, "Perhaps, females are also more likely to write about their emotional feelings than are males. Furthermore, the apparent ability of females to express their emotional feelings may account for why more females than males are diarists" (Burt, 1994, p. 180). Indeed, men and women have been sent powerful messages since childhood about what behaviors are and are not acceptable.

Self-Perception

One of the most interesting findings that emerged throughout the focus group was how students perceived their own journal writing skills and abilities. Students in the focus group unanimously contended that they were advanced journal writers and that their journals were a venue for critically evaluating their experiences, instructors, and themselves. Furthermore, when we provided students with a list of specific types of

entries (e.g., personal reflections, relating academic and field experiences, and professional development), all participants reported that they made a wide variety of types of entries and that they were able to make connections between their field expeditions and other academic experiences. Upon explaining Bloom's Taxonomy of Educational Objectives in the Cognitive Domain (Bloom, 1956) to the participants and asking them to identify the level at which they were typically writing, the students felt strongly that they were writing at the highest levels (i.e., synthesis and evaluation). Thus it appears that students in this focus group believe they were writing at very advanced levels.

The self-assessments by the participants in this focus group directly conflict with our own professional experiences in evaluating student journals at our university. They also contradict our preliminary findings in Phase 4 of this research in which we are performing content analyses on the journals. Preliminary results emerging from the content analyses suggest that student journal entries are fairly descriptive and that critical reflection, by and large, is absent. Further, while the majority of student journal entries contain descriptions of day-to-day events and observations of group dynamics, surprisingly few entries make any connections between the field and in-class experiences. These preliminary results are consistent with our own personal assessment of student journals that we have gained over numerous years of evaluating them in university settings. It appears that other researchers, such as Anderson (1992), have observed this as well. In reflecting upon the journal entries that he has read, Anderson (1992) noted that most entries have "no evidence of analysis, synthesis, deliberation, or reflection" (p. 307). It appears that the students in this focus group have an inaccurate and elevated perception of their abilities as journal writers.

Some very interesting answers were received when, later on in the focus group exercise, students were asked the following open-ended question: "If you were given no direction, what would you write about in your journal?" Lucas reported that he would write about "...the daily events, the weather, and the route," and Stephanie stated that she would write about "...special moments she wanted to remember when she is 80 years old." Upon probing into their interest in writing about theory and making connections to their formal academic experiences in the university (which they claimed to do earlier in the focus group), seven students reported that, unless forced, they would not be interested in writing about theory. "Theory," Maria explained, "is definitely out of the question." Cindy agreed, stating, "I wouldn't write about theory unless I was forced to." Note that these assertions were in direct contrast to their earlier responses when we asked them whether or not they wrote about specific types of entries. It appears that when we provided the participants with a list of types of entries (see above), they reported ease in writing all types. However, when they were asked about the types of entries they actually do make (without providing examples of types of entries), they reported very different answers. These contradictory responses suggest that what these students think they are writing about differs substantially from what they are actually writing about.

Understanding student perceptions of their own journaling abilities helps us to understand the potential role that the journaling workshop might have had with the students who participated in Phase 2 of the research. Since the students believed they are advanced journal writers, it makes some sense that they demonstrated a lack of interest in learning more about journaling. Indeed, why would a student want to learn more about journaling if she/he believes that they are already skilled in journaling? And since the students in this focus group have never been taught how to journal, it should come as no surprise that most students believed, as Jen did, that journaling is "...something that you have to learn on your own." Cindy agreed, suggesting that journal skills come "...naturally with time." These assertions suggest that students might benefit from receiving thoughtful and direct feedback that would help them better understand their own journaling abilities and potential areas for growth.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, we conclude this paper with a presentation of 10 recommendations. Recreation and leisure studies instructors using journals should consider the following points:

1. *Help students generate accurate self-assessments of their journal writing abilities:* It appears that the students in this focus group had an elevated perception of their journaling abilities and lacked the ability to accurately assess their own skills. Help students to improve their self-assessment skills through feedback and instruction.
2. *Offer thorough and detailed feedback:* Students in this focus group disliked getting only a numeric grade on their journals and appreciated receiving written feedback. Faculty who want to fully capitalize on the potential of journal writing as an instructional tool must be willing to offer students significant written feedback on the substance of their journal entries. Feedback will also help students identify their own areas of strengths and weaknesses in journal writing.
3. *Improve students' journaling skills by offering journal writing workshops:* Although the students in this focus group contended that journaling skills come naturally and that training is unnecessary, it appears that they might benefit from learning more about journal writing. Recreation professors, who include journals in the curriculum, would be wise to offer students formal and informal training in journal writing. Instructors might also consider the work of Bennion and Olson (2002) who suggested that professors in different departments collaborate to provide journal writing instruction.
4. *Recognize that students will have varying interests in journaling:* While most students in this focus group were generally supportive of the value of journals

in post-secondary recreation programs, all students did not share this sentiment. Remember that some students may dislike journaling and consider offering alternative means of evaluation.

5. *Recognize the different ways that men and women perceive journal writing:* The students in this focus group supported the findings in the literature that suggest that men and women have different perceptions of journaling (Burt, 1994; Dymont & O'Connell, in press). Some men may thus need additional training to feel comfortable with journaling as a reflective technique. Positive, constructive feedback from faculty may influence how men perceive their journals and may lead to a more powerful reflective experience.
6. *Set aside semi-structured time for journal writing on field courses:* All students in this focus group reported that lack of time was a major barrier to journaling on field courses. As such, instructors might consider providing explicit times for journaling throughout the field course.
7. *Model good journaling behavior:* In addition to providing time for journaling on field courses, instructors should model good journaling behaviors. If an instructor is supportive of the journaling process, keeps a daily journal, and helps to facilitate reflective activities, then perhaps students will have more positive experiences with journaling. Conversely, if an instructor devalues the role of journals, fails to role model journaling behaviors, and discredits the importance of allowing journaling time, then students might feel discouraged and disinterested in their journals.
8. *Consider alternative models for evaluating journals:* Many students in this focus group believed that journals did not always have to be evaluated solely by the faculty member. They suggested self-evaluation, peer evaluation, and co-evaluation as alternative methods. They also advocated that students should be allowed to choose the percentage of the final grade that their journal is worth.
9. *Establish a trusting relationship between the journal writer and the journal reader:* Some students in this focus group asserted that trust is a critical factor that influences their perceptions and behaviors of journaling. Faculty must work hard to develop trusting relationships with their students to maximize the potential of journaling in recreation programs.
10. *Avoid journaling students 'to death:'* Professors working in recreation programs must coordinate journaling assignments to ensure that journals are not over-used. Students in this focus group suggested that they did not like keeping journals for more than two classes per semester. We recognize the obvious challenges of attempting to coordinate assignments within a department or university, but suggest that educators consider this recommendation.

The authors of this paper recognize that many of the recommendations in this list may appear daunting and overwhelming. How is a professor, who believes in journaling as an instructional tool, supposed to give thorough feedback, establish relationships based on trust, model good journaling behaviors, and train students to journal more effectively? Further, how is a professor supposed to implement these suggestions in large classes, with potentially limited support, in addition to teaching other classes? Indeed there are no easy answers to these questions. The findings of this study, however, highlight the potential and possibilities of journal writing in university settings. Understanding student perceptions of journals is a gateway to understanding the full potential of journaling as a reflective tool. We encourage readers to reflect upon their own journaling assignments in light of this list of recommendations.

Conclusion

In this study, we explored student perceptions of journaling by conducting a focus group discussion with nine post-secondary recreation students. By and large, the students who participated in this focus group enjoyed and valued their journaling experiences at university. They were, however, cautious about some aspects of the journaling process and offered numerous suggestions for improving the 'journaling experience.' We have summarized many of their suggestions and encourage professors to consider their recommendations.

Given the small sample used in this study, we recognize the limits of generalizing the findings to larger populations, such as university classes using journals as a method of teaching and/or evaluation. The findings of this focus group study do, however, provide a greater understanding of the five themes that emerged in Phase 1 and 2 of this research. The findings also set the stage for more ambitious explorations of the role of journaling in post-secondary recreation programs. We are currently conducting content analyses on the student journals to understand if and how participation in a journaling workshop affects depth and breadth of entries (Phase 4). The results from this focus group, coupled with the results from Phases 1, 2, and 4 will provide us with a rich understanding of student journaling behaviors and perceptions in post-secondary recreation programs.

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