

BOOK REVIEW

Theory into Practice

Unlocking the Power and Potential of Reflective Journals

Timothy S. O'Connell and Janet E. Dymet

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Experience is not what happens to you, it's what you do with what happens to you.

—Aldous Huxley

Reflection has been a key concept for educators for a century or more. From Dewey to Lewin to Kolb to Schon, from adult to service to outdoor education, experience and reflection have been hallmarks for a wide range of educational fields and professionals. Experiential education, no matter the field, focuses on the experience, but equally important is reflection. Journaling is one of the most common ways to reflect and is often used to assess the experiential learning.

I suspect many professional and experiential educators have asked their students to journal as part of the learning experience. And I suspect that many educators are like me, frustrated at times with the results of what should be a rich and valuable pedagogical tool. From shallow or superficial reflections, to poor writing, to figuring assessment schemes, to the sheer amount of time necessary to read and provide helpful written feedback, the ultimate cost/benefit ratio makes us question why we ever assigned journals in the first place.

Given both the potential and challenges of journals, a new book by outdoor educators Tim O'Connell and Janet Dymet, *Theory Into Practice: Unlocking the Power and Potential of Reflective Journals*, offers an excellent resource. The slim volume provides a comprehensive overview of journaling that will benefit educators ranging from those who have extensively used them to those who are just getting started or simply considering using them. The authors come from an outdoor education background, and most of the examples are naturally drawn from their teachings and field. However, their extensive and very useful literature review is wide ranging, touching on many fields. Their broad aim and ultimate result makes this an extremely useful work for experiential and professional studies educators from across the spectrum. And while the book's jacket mentions "post-secondary educators," the book would be valuable for high school educators as well.

Theory Into Practice has many strengths. The book is written so that almost any chapter can be read alone—meaning one can simply mine a single vein of interest—yet the chapters flow well together with little redundancy. For academicians, O'Connell and Dymet have a refreshingly

informal style. The authors, clearly strong proponents of journals, are also very honest in the challenges of using journals as educational tools. This includes students' resistances, difficulties for educators (particularly in regard to assessment and grading), and the mixed record of research into journaling's pedagogical efficacy. Perhaps most practical for educators is the review of reflection models and theories, particularly when the authors tie those models to assessment. Also useful are numerous examples of guiding or scaffolding questions to help students reflect more deeply.

Of course there are shortcomings to *Theory Into Practice* as well, but they are almost all very minor. The book would have benefited from more careful editing to address throwaway adjectives and an overuse of exclamation points. At times it feels like the book is more about reflection than journaling. The technology chapter, while raising many excellent questions, would be strengthened by on-line examples which would have been easy to cite. Perhaps most significantly, the book misses the opportunity to tie journaling into institutional priorities such as writing, critical thinking, assessment, or diversity.

John Dewey stated that "The skill of experiential learning in which people tend to be the most deficient is reflection." Journaling, as authors O'Connell and Dymet clearly, honestly, and comprehensively explore and examine, can be a most effective tool for student reflection and thus learning. Educators interested in encouraging authentic learning in their students will find *Theory Into Practice* a valuable key to unlocking both the challenges and rich potential of journals.