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## Counseling Students' Perceptions of Journaling as a Tool for Developing Reflective Thinking

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# Counseling Students' Perceptions of Journaling as a Tool for Developing Reflective Thinking

## **Abstract**

While much has been written about the potential benefits of journaling for counseling students, less is known about whether students themselves view this purportedly learner-centered practice as beneficial. This study explored the phenomenological experiences and writings of four counseling students in a CACREP-accredited program at a mid-sized public Midwestern university who kept a journal during an addictions counseling course. Participants indicated that journaling led to greater self-awareness and provided opportunities to practice the reflective thinking they will need in their counseling careers. The findings are useful to counselor educators who may be considering implementing or modifying journal or other reflective thinking assignments in their courses.

## **Author's Notes**

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## **Keywords**

journaling, reflection, reflective thinking, self-awareness

A primary goal of those training counselors is to foster students' abilities to reflect (Burgess, Rhodes, & Wilson, 2013). Through reflection, individuals learn from experience (Kolb, 1984), become more self-aware (Moon, 2006), and get better at improvising in professional scenarios (Binder, 1999). After interviewing 100 counselors at various stages of their careers, Skovholt and Rønnestad (1992b) concluded that reflection is the central process by which counselors grow as professionals. However, little empirical research exists on the process of reflection or how to teach it. This study investigated students' perceptions of one reflective writing assignment completed in a CACREP-accredited counseling program in the upper Midwest.

### **Review of the Literature**

Reflection is a process used for the critical assessment (Mezirow, 1991) of issues that do not have clear solutions (Schön, 1983). Schön (1983) argued that the ability to reflect is the hallmark of the professional. He distinguished two types of reflection: reflecting by looking back (reflection-on-action) and reflection in the moment (reflection-in-action). He contended that training programs for professionals must be redesigned so students learn how to reflect-in-action just as they learn other skills related to the profession (Schön, 1983, 1987).

In Kolb's (1984) four-stage model of learning, reflection is the tool that allows learners to make meaning of past experiences and sets the stage for the development of new ideas and approaches. Mezirow (1991) identified three forms of reflection: content reflection, process reflection, and premise reflection. Content reflection is what takes place when a learner critically assesses a perception, thought, feeling, or action. In process reflection, the learner reflects on how she carried out the process of perceiving, thinking, feeling, or acting, and assesses her effectiveness. Finally, in premise reflection, the learner critically examines the assumptions and beliefs that informed the way she approached her perception, thought, feeling, or action. Mezirow

(1991) contended that premise reflection is the deepest and most meaningful form of reflection, and is the means by which adults transform the way we look at and relate to the world.

Counselors can derive many benefits from incorporating these three forms of reflection into their work. These benefits include greater awareness of the self as it relates to one's interactions with clients (Hubbs & Brand, 2005), the capacity to improvise in a counseling session (Binder, 1999), and the power to ward off stagnation and professional impairment (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992b). In fact, educators such as Skovholt and Rønnestad (1992a) and Bennett-Levy (2006) argued that for counselors, the ability to reflect is not simply a benefit, but a necessity. Skovholt and Rønnestad, who carried out several studies of counselors at various stages of counselors' careers, concluded that ongoing personal reflection is the primary means by which practitioners continue to develop throughout their careers (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992b; Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2001). The researchers conceptualized reflection as making the difference between a counselor having "20 years of experience or one year of experience 20 times" (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2001).

Because reflection is an essential skill in the counseling profession, it stands to reason that developing reflective thinking skills should be one of the primary goals of a counselor education program. The reflective portfolio, or journal, has emerged as the method most frequently used for fostering reflective practice in educational settings for social science and healthcare professions (Norrie et. al, 2012). However, for the many benefits reflective journaling brings, there are also a number of potential downsides. For example, journaling requires some level of self-disclosure. The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics states that students in counselor education programs be informed of "training components that encourage self-growth or self-disclosure as part of the training process" (ACA, 2014, F.8.a). An issue that is separate from but

related to self-disclosure is confidentiality. Sutton, Townend, and Wright (2007) questioned how instructors would respond to student journals that contain indications of physical abuse, sexual abuse, or unethical treatment of clients.

In addition, while reflection is most useful when learners are exploring uncertain or confusing thoughts or feelings, the conventions of the graduate school classroom dictate that students' work must be assessed by some yardstick of completion and/or quality (Parikh, Janson, & Singleton, 2012). Hargreaves (2003) suggested that mandatory assessment of journal entries forces students to write "a narrative that they and their assessors each recognize as a legitimate reflection of an idealized professional scenario" (p. 201) rather than writing honestly. Other less controversial aspects of journaling assignments, such as structure, length, and number of entries, can also pose challenges. Students are busy people, and those who are required to keep a journal for class often do so in addition to other assignments. In their study of 41 students in an agricultural education program, Greiman and Covington (2006) found that a lack of time was the students' most commonly cited barrier to journaling. Finally, when instructors assess journal entries, they are likely to discover students have a wide range of reflective abilities, with few students able to reach the deepest levels of reflection (O'Connell & Dymont, 2011).

There is a limited existing research on the usefulness of reflective writing in post-graduate counseling and clinical psychology programs. A search of the literature using the keywords journaling, reflection, reflective practice, counseling, and counselor education revealed four studies, all qualitative in design and reliant upon participant self-report. Three of the studies were authored by individuals with institutional ties to the student group being studied. Bennett-Levy et al. (2001) studied two cohorts of Australian clinical psychology students who completed self-practice and self-reflection in a cognitive therapy course. This work was an ungraded yet required

element of the course. Participants reported that exposure to others' reflections helped them place their personal experience within a broader context. They also reported a considerable amount of resistance at the beginning of the course largely due to the personal nature of the exercise (Bennett-Levy et al., 2001). One potential limitation of the study is that five of the six authors were members in the first student cohort. Although the researchers took steps such as member validation and other forms of triangulation, there is a possibility that the researchers' biases as course participants impacted the conclusions they drew from the data.

In their study of 19 cognitive behavioral psychotherapy students in the United Kingdom, Sutton, Townend, and Wright (2007) identified several benefits of journaling, including the opportunity for emotional catharsis, a means for reaching deeper levels of empathy, and an opportunity to engage in self-reflection and track growth over time. The researchers concluded that despite ethical issues related to self-disclosure and assessment, and the open question of how much support faculty members should provide, reflective journaling "has the potential to be a valuable tool" (Sutton, Townend, & Wright, 2007, p. 400). Again, the identities of the researchers provide a potential limitation for these findings. One author was the leader of the program being studied, and another was a graduate of the program.

Noting the potential limitations some students might experience with written journaling, Parikh, Janson, and Singleton (2012) sought to capture the phenomenological experiences of seven master's-level counseling students who created two video journals during the first semester of their school counseling internship. Compared to written journals, participants felt that the video journals allowed them to be more authentic because they could communicate at two levels (verbal and non-verbal) and also knew the assessment of their work would not include a critique of their writing skills (Parikh, Janson, & Singleton, 2012). Again, existing and possible future relationships

between the researchers and participants indicate a potentially significant limitation for this study: The first and second authors, who analyzed the qualitative data, supervised the students during their internships and graded their journals.

Finally, in their study of six master's-level counseling students who kept a journal during their internship experience, Schmidt and Adkins (2012) found that participants viewed reflection as a significant tool for fostering growth in this environment and a skill they can improve over time. Individualized feedback from faculty members comprised an important means of this support and challenge, and it contributed greatly to whether participants perceived the journaling assignment to be beneficial for their learning (Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). Although the study's authors had taken courses with some of the same faculty members as the research participants, this study is not marked by the same limitations related to the researchers' identities as the previous studies. However, like other studies discussed here, the relatively small number of participants poses a potential limitation for its findings.

Despite the existence of several studies examining students' experiences of journaling in training programs, there remains room for further exploration. In particular, there is a need for studies in which investigators lack both institutional ties to the programs being studied as well as existing or future relationships (evaluative or otherwise) with the study participants. In the present study, research was conducted by a master's-level student who did not attend the participants' university and had no role in evaluating their coursework. The present study couples phenomenological exploration of participants' experiences with analysis of participants' journal entries. It has the potential to offer important new insights on master's-level counseling students' perceptions of whether journaling is an effective tool for promoting reflective thinking.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this study was to develop a better understanding of master's-level counseling students' experiences keeping a reflective journal as part of their required coursework. Specifically, did students perceive the journal to be a forum for practicing and demonstrating reflective thinking? Did they believe that keeping a journal for class had any impact on their level of self-awareness? In short, how well (or poorly) did students' lived experience keeping a journal align with their professor's expectations for the assignment? Furthermore, how might an understanding of these perceptions impact the way counselor educators structure journals and other reflective practice assignments in their courses?

### **Method of Inquiry**

This study used a phenomenological design to capture participants' experiences and perceptions of journaling (Parikh, Janson, & Singleton, 2012; Schmidt & Adkins, 2012). The intended outcome was to develop a rich description of students' experiences keeping a journal as part of their course requirements. Researchers collected data in a number of forms. Each participant completed an online survey and sat for one individual interview. The researchers also reviewed students' journal entries and their instructor's feedback on this writing. By analyzing students' thoughts and feelings on keeping a journal alongside the learning outcomes demonstrated in those journals, the researchers sought to develop a rich, multi-faceted description of the experience of journaling from students' perspectives.

### **Participants**

Participants were recruited from a pool of 28 master's-level counseling students who completed an addictions counseling course in the summer of 2013. These students were enrolled in a CACREP-accredited counseling program at a mid-sized public university in the upper



Midwest. None of the researchers or authors were affiliated with the participating students' university or its counseling program. Four students participated in the research. Three were female and one was male. Two participants chose the clinical mental health emphasis, one chose student affairs and college counseling, and one chose school counseling. Three participants identified as Caucasian/White, and the fourth identified as Hmong. All four participants were between 26 and 30 years old.

The addictions counseling course was required for all students, and for most, it was one of the final content courses they took in their master's program. As part of the course, students chose a behavior and attempted to change it during the term. They attended at least four open recovery meetings, submitted online discussion posts, and kept a weekly journal. The instructor evaluated journals using a rubric, and the journal comprised 25 percent of the students' grade. Seventy-five percent of students in the class (21 of 28) received an A on the assignment.

### **Participant Recruitment**

Sampling was purposefully homogeneous (Creswell, 2012): Each person in the sample pool was a master's student in a professional counseling program who completed the addictions counseling course in the summer of 2013. Within this pool, researchers attempted to gather a variety of perspectives by selecting participants randomly. The students received an invitation to participate from their course instructor. After a limited number of the randomly selected students agreed to participate, the researchers extended the invitation to all students who had taken the course. Follow-up recruitment efforts included additional emails from students' addictions counseling professor and internship professor, as well as an in-person recruiting visit by the primary author. Of the 28 class members, four students agreed to participate in the research.

## **Data Collection**

All participants gave their written consent prior to their participation. Before their individual interviews, participants completed an online survey to provide demographic data and basic information on their current and past experiences with journaling. Each participant sat for one 30-45-minute semi-structured interview in the counseling lab of the students' university. The interviewer posed each of the listed interview questions to each participant. Based on participants' survey and interview responses, the interviewer posed follow-up questions to develop a detailed understanding of each student's subjective experience with journaling.

Participants also consented to release their class journals, including feedback from their instructor. Journals ranged in length between 2600-6300 words, and between 7-14 entries. The average number of words per entry ranged from 300 to 450. One journal was hand-written and the other three journals were typed. All four participants were part of the 75% of the class who earned an A on their journals. The instructor provided additional written feedback for three of the four journals. This feedback was not available for the fourth journal because the student submitted the journal late.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Interviews.**

The primary author transcribed each interview. After all transcriptions were complete, the primary author and a department staff member from the primary author's home university completed open and axial coding to develop a list of themes from the interview data. These coding procedures provided the researchers with a systematic process for identifying assigning meaning to collected data and moving toward larger themes and patterns (Creswell, 2012). Both coders were upper-level master's students who had previously completed coursework in research methods

and assisted with department faculty members' research projects. First, the coders independently reviewed the interview transcripts and developed an initial list of open codes. The goal of this first coding pass was to distill each unit of data into a summative word or phrase (Saldaña, 2014). The coders met to discuss their respective lists. When a code appeared on both coders' lists, it was added to a separate, final list of open codes. When there was disagreement, the coders returned to the interview transcripts to demonstrate and discuss the presence or absence of a particular code and determined by consensus whether to add the code to the final list.

Next, each coder independently reviewed the final list of open codes. They separately developed a list of axial codes under which they could group one or more of the open codes. These axial codes, which were longer phrases or full sentences, captured both the face-value and the underlying meaning of the interview content (Saldaña, 2014). The coders met to compare their lists of axial codes and combined them into a single list. Finally, they discussed and determined by consensus which of the axial codes could stand alone or whether some codes should be combined. The outcome of the process is a list of categories (previously axial codes) and themes (previously open codes). These categories and themes provide a phenomenological description of students' experiences of journaling in their addictions counseling course and in their master's program as a whole, as described to their interviewer.

### **Journal entries.**

Paired with data from surveys and individual interviews, data from the analysis of journal entries helps complete the picture of participants' overall experiences with journaling. The primary author and the department staff member who coded interview transcripts also analyzed participants' journal entries. They used a coding system developed by Wong and colleagues (1995) that was based on Mezirow's (1991) model of reflection. They used this information to identify

each participant's highest level of reflection as well as his or her most frequently reached level of reflection. The two coders piloted the process by individually reading each journal entry for one of the participants and determining whether each journal entry demonstrated non-reflective, reflective, or critically reflective thinking. They then met to discuss the labels they had assigned and their reasons for doing so. Disagreements were resolved by returning to the journal entries to cite a specific passage or passages, discussing differences, and reaching a consensus. Following the pilot, the coders used the same process to assign levels of reflection for each entry in the other three journals individually and collaboratively.

### **Trustworthiness of the Data**

This study employed a number of strategies aimed at increasing trustworthiness. Interviews were conducted by a master's-level counseling student who had no institutional affiliation with the participants' home university and had no role in assigning participants' grades or determining their fitness for graduation. Two forms of triangulation were employed in this study. The first was triangulation among methods of data collection. While individual interviews were the primary form of data, data were also collected through an online survey and through participants' journal entries. The second was triangulation of investigators. Both the primary author and a department staff member coded the interviews individually and then reached a consensus on their findings (Patton, 2002). A similar process of triangulation was used to analyze students' journal entries. Prior to beginning data analysis, the two coders met to describe and discuss their own thoughts and feelings regarding journaling and reflection in both academic and personal contexts.

## Results

### Participants' Phenomenological Experiences of Journaling in an Academic Setting

Analysis of participants' interviews initially uncovered 16 themes emerging from the data. Upon further analysis, these 16 themes were collapsed into five larger categories. See Table 1 for a list of these categories and themes. The following sections present each category with supporting data from participants' interviews. For the purposes of these results and subsequent discussion, *journal* refers to the academic assignment, while *reflection* refers to the intrapersonal and sometimes interpersonal process of deriving new learning from past experience. Participants' interview responses and journal passages are labeled with pseudonyms. However, where spoken or written comments could provide clues to participants' identities, pseudonyms have been omitted to protect anonymity.

#### Category 1: benefits and drawbacks.

Participants expressed that keeping a journal was important and useful for learning. They used their journals to process the new ways they were thinking, feeling, and behaving as a result of the behavior change assignment. In summing up the experience, one participant wrote, "I learned a lot about how I need to continue working on reaching out to others and asking for help (big things I don't like to do)!" Participants indicated that the journal assignment reflected their program's goal of increasing self-awareness and engaging in personal growth.

Participants also acknowledged the difficulties of reflection. Participant Two explored resistance to journaling in the context of clinical practice, and arrived at this insight: "I don't journal, and I haven't really ever journaled except for class. It's something that I encourage clients to do... It's kind of funny that I ask other people to do it... but I don't do it myself." Participants mainly described their barriers to journaling in terms of time and extra work; however, some

responses indicated that there may be emotional barriers underlying these surface concerns. Participant One offered this hypothesis: “If you’re not willing to go into certain areas... that’s where most people get frustrated, I think. Because they’re like, I don’t want to do this, so I’m going to block all of this, and I don’t have anything to write about because there’s no issues!”

### **Category 2: experiential learning.**

A commonly expressed sentiment was that the content and quality of participants’ reflections was intrinsically tied to richness of their experiences. Participant One summarized it this way: “Writing kind of put it together, but the experience brought it out.” Participants wrote about many aspects of the behavior change experience, including attending recovery meetings and interactions within their family systems. Participants described using their journals to reflect on their personal thoughts, feelings, and behaviors in the context of what they were learning in the classroom and through their exposure to individuals in the recovery process. Participant Four recalled, “[Attending meetings] gave me a lot more compassion because I would see [people at the meetings] and think, no, I can do this for an assignment. They have to do this for their whole life.”

### **Category 3: developmental nature.**

Participants revealed that the journaling assignments they completed during their program helped them grow as reflective thinkers. They spoke of their journals as a chronological record of their learning: “When you do it over time...you can look back and see where you were before and where you are now” (Participant Two). Participant Four expressed that recorded reflections are valuable because re-reading the journal can spur additional reflection and learning: “I’m able to re-read [my journal] and look at different layers of myself that I think can be kind of hard if you don’t really keep track of that file system in your head.”

As advanced students in their program, the participants demonstrated an awareness of their growth as reflectors over time. Participant One stated, “Through reflecting over the last two and a half years, I’ve been able to learn how to reflect and do it effectively. And do it to a point where it’s not as challenging as it used to be and it’s more meaningful.” Participant Three conceptualized this developmental process as a shift in audience: “What I struggled with when I first started the program was just like, OK, I’m writing something for my professors to read ... It was probably in [my] group [counseling course] when I finally... was like, I’m not writing for them, I’m writing for myself.”

Participants spoke of their journals as helping to reinforce the knowledge and skills they need to be successful practitioners. One participant discussed how reflection helped address potential sources of countertransference: “I went out of my spring semester with a goal of reflecting and really digging deeper for the remainder of the program to ensure that I was viable for clients... I went into this semester kind of, ‘I need to do this. I’m going to do this.’” Another shared that at its heart, the participant’s approach to journaling was the practice of reflection, a key counseling skill, in writing: “In the program we talk a lot about, when we’re with our clients and stuff, ‘Say what you hear, say what you see, and say what you feel.’ And so I think I focused on [that]” (Participant Three).

#### **Category 4: individual preferences.**

Interview data revealed a belief that in journaling assignments, the student is at the center. As such, it is important for students to be able to individualize their work. For example, while most participants chose a typed, modified-APA style, mirroring other written assignments, one participant chose to handwrite the journal instead: “Typing would have gone faster and probably longer, but there’s... something therapeutic of just having that actual contact with what you’re

writing.” Participants were unanimous in their preference for an assignment structure that supported expressiveness and personal choice: “There were guidelines provided, and it was easy to see that you could write about, you know, get in those guidelines and yet write about what was personal and important to you” (Participant Two).

Most participants expressed satisfaction with their instructor’s choice to provide summative feedback. One stated, “I think turning it in all at once and then getting the feedback afterwards, you can look back and see all, you know, from the beginning to the end, you’re more likely to do that” (Participant Two). However, Participant Three would have preferred formative feedback: “I think if we were to get feedback earlier on and see, like, oh, I didn’t really think of it that way or that didn’t really pop up to me, would have been helpful for me during the whole process of it.” Participants spoke appreciatively of their professor’s choice to respond to their journal entries in a personal way. Participant Four recalled how the professor “made a comment that was something like, your experience has helped me come to terms with something she was experiencing ... It’s, like, wow, she really just connected with what I wrote.”

#### **Category 5: ethical considerations: audience awareness.**

Participants reported some costs to sharing their reflections, which for most resulted in some level of self-censorship: “I think [having an external audience] does take away from how personal you can be with it ... I guess it’s like how much can you trust other people or even yourself when you’re writing it out” (Participant Three). Participant Four shared: “I wanted to make sure it was my thoughts, but it was still graduate-level writing. And that’s probably what prevented me from writing down my, you know, my initial gibberish.” However, self-censorship was not universal, as Participant One expressed: “[The journal] gave me a place to express my feelings



unfiltered... Writing, I always feel like I'm able to just spit it out. And I didn't filter or buffer anything I was thinking at the time."

Table 1

*Categories and Themes in the Phenomenological Data*

Category	Theme
1. Benefits and drawbacks	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Reflection provides a “time out” that leads to deeper thought.</li> <li>b. Journals are a place to describe and label thoughts, feelings, and behaviors.</li> <li>c. Journaling increases self-awareness, particularly awareness of areas for growth.</li> <li>d. Struggle is part of the process. Reflection is difficult for both emotional and practical reasons.</li> </ul>
2. Experiential learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Rich experiences provide multiple sources for reflection.</li> <li>b. Participants generated meaning by layering different facets of their experience.</li> </ul>
3. Developmental nature	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Written journal entries provide a record of reflective thought over time.</li> <li>b. Revisiting past journal entries facilitates additional reflection.</li> <li>c. Participants became better reflectors over the course of their program.</li> <li>d. Reflection supports personal growth</li> <li>e. Reflection supports growth as counselors.</li> </ul>
4. Individual preferences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Number of entries, length of entries, and journaling format varied for each participant.</li> <li>b. Preferences regarding instructor feedback varied.</li> <li>c. The structure of this journaling assignment facilitated personal writing, which participants welcomed.</li> </ul>
5. Ethical considerations: audience awareness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>a. Tension exists between sharing and confidentiality.</li> <li>b. Self-censorship is a reality.</li> </ul>

## **Level of Reflection in Participants' Journals**

Data from journal entries revealed that each participant demonstrated reflective thinking on a regular basis, and each reached the level of critical reflection in at least two entries. Twenty-nine percent of journal entries (12 of 41) failed to meet the threshold of reflective writing. Much of the non-reflective writing was descriptive, such as this account of an Al-Anon meeting: "There was an even amount of men and women but I noticed how half of the circle was women and the other side was men. There was also a very strong odor of cigarette smoke in the room, which was slightly distracting." Another proportion of non-reflective writing was introspective, in which a writer describes inner thoughts and feelings without critique (Mezirow, 1991). For example: "I spent about an hour researching and calling local agencies to find open recovery meetings. I felt angry and disappointed; no progress and wasted an hour. I wanted to give up."

Forty-nine percent of journal entries (20/41) met the criteria for reflective writing. Instead of simply demonstrating awareness, reflective writing records new learning stemming from that awareness (Mezirow, 1991). This passage demonstrates reflective thinking: "I have noticed that I am disciplined. Yet, I wonder how true that is. Yes I can give up [the banned behavior], yet I see I have replaced [it] with a different one with similar consequences."

Finally, twenty-two percent of journal entries (9 of 41) met criteria for critically reflective writing, which Wong et al. (1995) described as an analytical assessment that is based on experience, draws upon more than one source of information, and is placed in a broad context. Each participant produced at least two journal entries with such content; for example: "This last fifteen minutes could have been a very critical point in my life... I have a better understanding of how [the risk] could be much greater if I had an addiction. How grateful I am."

## **Discussion**

### **Participants' Perceptions of Journaling**

The results of this study show that for this group of master's-level counseling students, journaling was an effective means of fostering reflective thinking and self-awareness. These results reflect the findings of Schmidt and Adkin's (2012) study of a similar population. Participants in the current study expressed a personal understanding of the importance of reflective thinking in the counseling field. When asked why counseling professors assign journals in their classes, all four participants responded that the assignment was a tool for practicing reflection, deepening awareness, and/or fostering personal growth. Additionally, at least one participant recognized how keeping a reflective journal was practice for the reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983) that is necessary for effective counseling: "If ... I feel myself kind of just distancing myself from a client or a situation, I have to sit in it and kind of, what is going on? ... By giving myself a chance to reflect on it, I am able to access whatever that reaction was" (Participant One). These findings differ from those of Sutton, Townend, and Wright (2007), whose study of 19 cognitive behavioral psychotherapy students revealed that students were somewhat uncertain about the purpose of their journal assignment and would have benefitted from further explanation at the beginning of the course.

### **Evidence of Reflective Thinking in Participants' Writing**

Participants regularly demonstrated reflective thinking and critically reflective thinking in their journal entries. Entries that demonstrated no reflective thinking were the minority – less than 30%. In contrast, almost 50% of journal entries demonstrated reflective thinking, and the remaining 22% demonstrated critically reflective thinking. These findings provide a counterpoint to literature indicating that highly reflective thinking is uncommon in students' work (O'Connell

& Dymont, 2011). One potential explanation for these contradictory results could be the different populations of students; in this present study, all four participants were older than 25, had already earned undergraduate degrees, had self-selected into a field that heavily emphasizes reflective thinking (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992b), and were at least two years into their program. Thus, they may have been more willing and able than students in other, less reflection-centered fields to produce reflective writing as part of their coursework.

### **Benefits of Descriptive and Introspective (Non-Reflective) Journal Content**

While reflective thinking is clearly an important learning outcome for students' journals, results of this study suggest that even non-reflective journal entries can be beneficial for students' learning and growth. Many of the participants produced journal entries that, in whole or in part, provided a record of their observations. A good example, quoted previously, is a participant's description of an Al-Anon meeting. The participant described the gender makeup of the people in the room and how attendees self-segregated by gender. The participant also described the smell of cigarette smoke that clouded the room. While on the surface this writing is descriptive, and it fails to meet Mezirow's (1991) criteria for reflective writing, it still has value. It provides insight into characteristics and behaviors of some people who choose to attend recovery meetings, as well as an awareness of the environment. For counselors, observations provide an important source of data (Hill, 2010). It is why this group of students had been taught to "say what you hear, say what you see, say what you feel;" advice that they later applied to their journals.

Introspection is another form of non-reflective writing that appeared in journals. Although labeling feelings and other forms of introspective writing are not truly reflective, they are important avenues toward the self-awareness and self-knowledge that are required for effective and ethical counseling practice (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Perhaps not surprisingly, the participant who wrote

about frustration about finding a meeting is the same participant who spoke in the interview about a personal goal to become more comfortable talking about feelings. Thus, for this participant, the journal became an important tool for furthering progress toward a self-identified goal.

### **The Relationship Between Experience and Reflection**

Results from this study support Kolb's (1984) assertion that reflection is spurred by direct experience. Participants mined reflections from a multitude of experiences, including recovery meetings, moments of relapse or near-relapse, and interactions with family members and friends. In addition, journal entries demonstrated Kolb's ongoing cycle of experience-reflection-experience. For example, in the sentence, "I thought about the guys from AA when I was out with my friends and started to have a craving," the participant reflected on one facet of that experience (attending a recovery meeting), which led to in new insights, which the participant later recalled in a different experiential context (social interaction).

### **Instructor Feedback: Benefits and Varying Preferences**

Participants expressed varying preferences for feedback. While one participant would have preferred formative feedback, the other three were satisfied with summative feedback. Several months after handing in their journals, most participants voluntarily recalled specific instructor comments. These clear memories imply the presence of learning through a one-on-one connection, in writing, between student and instructor, which participants clearly valued. Participants commented that re-reading their journals, which often happened while reviewing instructor feedback, led to new understandings. Thus, for instructors assigning a journal for class, it could be wise to build in a mechanism to encourage students to review their journal entries so that they can continue to learn from their own reflections and experiences.

## **Desire for Freedom of Expression**

Participants' preferences were for less structure in the assignment rather than more. It is possible that in the current study, this preference reflected the fact that participants had already completed several journals in previous courses and thus felt prepared for, and appreciative of, a less structured assignment that emphasized personal expression over meeting an exhaustive list of criteria. Participant Four indicated some understanding of how the program's journal assignments might have evolved toward fewer criteria as students moved toward graduation: "Maybe [our professor] allowed us that freedom because we had just completed our second year in the program ... So maybe it was kind of a scaffolding technique that they do."

## **Practical, Personal, and Ethical Challenges**

Using a journal in an academic setting does have its challenges. Participants cited limited time as a practical concern. These findings mirror those of Greiman and Covington (2007), whose participants cited difficulty finding time to journal as the most common barrier they encountered. Perhaps worth further study is a participant's previously cited hypothesis about how concerns such as limited time may disguise deeper issues with the journaling process. Instructors assigning journals may be wise to explore underlying reasons students may not be comfortable with journaling assignments.

Notably, for all that has been written about the potential difficulty in evaluating students' journal entries, participants in this study expressed few concerns with the process. When asked their opinion about the journal comprising 25% of their overall grade in the course, participants' reigning sentiment was that it was appropriate because the journal was such an important aspect of the course. They also indicated that the rubric made sense and allowed them freedom to write

about what mattered most to them rather than “just answering to make sure they check that box” (Participant One).

Self-censorship was evident for some. For one participant, self-censorship was connected to concerns about trust: “Finding that balance of, well, what do I want to share and what do I want to keep with myself... Because I trust my professors, I’m like, ‘OK, well I can give this much to them’” (Participant Three). Notably, even though the participant feels a sense of trust, the outcome is not complete openness, but rather a lesser degree of self-censorship. Not all participants reported censoring themselves, however. One participant was clear that writing offered a kind of freedom of expression that was not available in other forums such as in-class dialogues or online discussion board posts. This range of approaches warrants further consideration. Differences could be related to personality factors, levels of comfort with writing, past experiences with journaling (in both personal and academic settings), and more.

### **Limitations and Directions for Further Research**

The results of this study provide a phenomenological snapshot of four master’s-level counseling students’ experiences keeping a journal for a content course in a CACREP-accredited counselor education program. The findings reinforce some of the existing literature, such as concerns about self-disclosure. In other areas, such as the quality of reflection, the findings challenge the existing literature. For example, these participants’ journal entries consistently demonstrated reflective thinking and critically reflective thinking. In addition, participants’ interviews and journal entries indicate that non-reflective journal content, such as description and introspection, may be more valuable to student learning than previously thought.

However, there are a number of limitations. Despite multiple recruitment strategies, this study had a small sample size. All participants were volunteers who described themselves as



reflective individuals and received full points on the assignment. This study would have benefitted from the viewpoints of additional participants who did not identify as reflective and/or did not receive full credit. Despite measures to protect confidentiality and a lack of ties between the researchers and the participants' university, such students may have declined to participate out of concern that their critical viewpoints could have been traced back to them and have a negative impact on their success in their graduate program.

With research indicating that counselors think reflectively throughout their careers (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1992b), this study has important implications for how counselor educators approach reflective thinking. The participants' experiences and writings suggest it is important for instructors to design high-quality experiential learning opportunities for students to reflect upon. In addition, the preferences of these advanced master's-level students indicate instructors may want to tailor the assignment structure and method of giving feedback based on students' level of familiarity with reflective writing.

The results indicate many directions for further research. Specifically, more knowledge is needed of how counseling students develop as reflective thinkers, and how and whether assignments such as journals contribute to this growth. Counselor educators would continue to benefit from greater knowledge of how best to incorporate this skill development in their training programs. Possible areas for future investigation include instructor feedback on students' journals and its impact on student satisfaction and learning, to what degree (if any) re-reading journals deepens student learning, and the use of journal and other reflective assignments in content courses versus clinical courses.

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## Appendix

### Semi-Structured Interview Questions

1. Tell me about the behavior change experience you completed as part of your Addictions Counseling course this summer.
2. What was it like to keep a journal during the experience?
3. How did you decide what you were going to write about in your journal?
4. You were asked to cover many topics including the successes and challenges of your behavior change, reflections on the recovery meetings you attended, and experiences within your family system. How did that go for you?
5. In what ways, if any, did keeping a journal contribute to your learning?
6. If you had to take the class over again, would you do anything differently with your journal?
7. Your journal was evaluated using a rubric, and it comprised 25% of your overall grade. What are your thoughts on how your journal was evaluated?
8. Tell me about any other feedback you got from your professor on your journal.
9. What do you think are some reasons counseling professors assign journals for their courses?
10. Anything else you'd like to share?