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Journal for postgraduate Human Resource  
Management Diploma students and their employers**

Item Type	Chapter in book
Authors	Maiden, Barbara
Citation	Learning and Teaching Projects 2004/05
Publisher	University of Wolverhampton
Download date	2026-03-16 06:03:51
Link to Item	<a href="http://hdl.handle.net/2436/2959">http://hdl.handle.net/2436/2959</a>

# An evaluation of the perceived value and effectiveness of the Continuous Professional Development Journal for postgraduate Human Resource Management Diploma students and their employers

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## Background and rationale

This research was undertaken with groups of both first and second year Postgraduate Human Resource Management Diploma students within the Wolverhampton Business School. As part of their assessment in the first year they are required to undertake a work based project and accompanying reflective journal in order to develop a holistic approach to using their theoretical learning in practice. In the second year they are required to continue the process of maintaining a development journal to meet professional requirements and to build on their reflective practice. A pilot study and other associated research (Firth & Maiden, 2005) indicated that there was little enthusiasm or genuine engagement with the process of maintaining a learning journal and it appeared that students were missing a valuable learning opportunity.

There has been considerable emphasis in a variety of professional fields on encouraging and extending individuals' contributions through the acquisition of innovative and distinctive skills and competences in their working lives (Covey, 1992; Rousseau, 1995; Watson & Harris, 1999; Wood, 1992). This search for personal and professional development has been reflected in higher education through the widespread and consistent interest in the implementation of learning journals as a method for inculcating the values of the reflective practitioner. Following on from the work of Schön (1983; 1987) and Kolb (1984) some writers contend that we cannot learn from experience without paying attention to reflection (Burnard, 1991; Morrison, 1996). Consequently learning journals have become the educational paradigm, unchallengeable in the certainty that they offer 'good medicine' for students. Whilst as educational practitioners we appear to be largely convinced of their efficacy, the other key stakeholder, the students and their employing organisations, appear to have some anxiety and scepticism about the experience.

The literature puts forward a strong case for journals as a mechanism for enhancing the learning process by enabling individuals to comprehensively and systematically clarify their ideas and experiences, identifying themes and patterns and making sense of their feelings (Boud and Walker, 1998; Holly & McLoughlin, 1989; Moon, 1999, 2000). This did not always accord with the learning journal offerings submitted for assessment on the HR Diploma where often students provided a fairly superficial range of entries and discussion. Clifford (2002) Park (2003), and McManus (2001) all conclude that the learning journal has good potential to increase student interest and engagement with the course material but do not address the problems of overcoming initial barriers. Much of this literature focuses on the perceived benefits of learning journals from the perspective of the educational practitioner rather than presenting any empirical research from the perspective of the student practitioners themselves. Most of the research findings relating to the use of learning journals makes mention of the difficulties that students have in undertaking this process but the studies are almost all in retrospect at the conclusion of the period of study and very few soundings have been taken on commencement.

The perceptions of students at the commencement of the programme would seem to be critical if a satisfactory level of engagement resulting in greater independent learning is to be achieved in a limited time frame. Before making progress in improving the capability to reflect and gain value from the learning experience we need to understand the stakeholder perceptions and what perceived barriers need to be overcome. The aim of this research therefore was to deepen understanding of the perceptions of both students and their employing sponsors about the usefulness and problems they considered relevant to the completion of a learning journal.

## The research

The objectives of the research were to:

- Establish what both students and employers considered to be the value attached to the keeping of a learning journal.
- Understand the students most critical barriers to maintaining a learning journal.
- Determine whether there were differences in these perceptions as students progressed through their programme of study.

A qualitative methodology was chosen to gain a broad understanding of the views of participants. Students were introduced to the nature of the research and participation was voluntary and anonymous in the case of the questionnaires. In order to enable triangulation to take place and add to the credibility of the findings data were collected in a number of ways:

- Two focus groups of 10 students were set up, the first to generate themes for further investigation and the second to discuss evidence from questionnaires and interviews.
- Questionnaire, including open and closed questions to first year postgraduate students (51 respondents) second year postgraduate students (23 respondents) and students undertaking a similar programme through a further education (FE) institution (21 respondents) These were completed early in Semester 1.
- Questionnaire, including open and closed questions to student employers (22 respondents). These were completed at the end of Semester 1.
- Follow up semi structured taped interviews of 30 minutes duration with 6 first year students, 6 second year students and 6 employers. Undertaken from January until May 2005.
- Examination of 6 learning journals submitted for assessment in June 2005.

## The outcomes

For the purpose of this report only the key points from the data collection methods have been reported.

### Focus Group

The focus group discussion highlighted a number of issues for further exploration. There was agreement that the learning journal was seen as a chore and students thought that they would only be keeping it because it was a required element of assessment. Interestingly they all thought it was a useful opportunity to reflect on their experiences but did not envisage continuing with it once the course was complete. 'Time' was suggested as the main constraint and some were 'uncertain as to what they might usefully include'. It was suggested that they would feel more able to just maintain a list of events relating to the extension of their job knowledge. Several of the group suggested that they were natural reflectors and therefore the task might be easier for them. The responses from the group were used to construct a more detailed questionnaire.

## Questionnaire – Year 1 students UWBS and FE cohort

Responses indicated (62%) that both in the UWBS and the FE students, a learning journal was not a new experience although only 21% were required to keep one for work purposes. Most saw the journal as a way of recording formal training and work projects whilst less than 40% thought it was a mechanism for exploring their feelings and emotions in a learning context. This suggests a fairly pragmatic strategic approach to the journal. It was interesting that 51% of the group considered themselves to be reflectors (using Honey & Mumford learning styles inventory) yet this seemed to have little impact on their preference for using a learning journal and did not match with the entries when the learning journal sample were examined.

**Table 1** shows the students' 5 most/least preferred uses of the learning journal

Reasons for keeping a learning journal	
Most useful	Least Useful
1. Evidence of CPD	1. Help commitment to action
2. Record of achievements	2. For exploring solutions to difficult problems
3. To highlight improvements in performance	3. To help clarify problems
4. Improve self awareness	4. To make sense of own and others actions
5. Monitor career progress	5. To speed up personal learning

**Table 2** shows the 5 most/least important perceived barriers to keeping a learning journal

Barriers to keeping a learning journal	
Most likely barrier	Least likely barrier
1. Time consuming	1. Not a reflector
2. Too busy doing my job	2. I don't like writing
3. Work constraints	3. I'm too lazy
4. It's too much work	4. It's not honest
5. Lack of motivation	5. It's of no value to me

The questionnaires returned from Year 2 students provided a very similar range of outcomes and have not therefore been reported separately for the purpose of this report.

## Questionnaire – Employers

All respondents reported that they had at some time kept a learning journal themselves and were familiar with the process. 62% still kept some kind of journal but admitted frequency of entries was scant for example just one or two entries a year. There were only 28% of respondents who were required to keep any journal documentation as an organisational requirement. Reflecting the views of the students, 90% of employers thought it was a useful activity. There was a marked similarity in the reported uses of a learning journal as shown below.

**Table 3** shows the employers' 5 most/least preferred uses of the learning journal

Reasons for keeping a learning journal	
Most useful	Least Useful
1. Track progress on objectives	1. To help clarify problems
2. Record of achievements	2. For exploring solutions to difficult problems
3. Monitor career progress	3. To make sense of own and others actions
4. Evidence of CPD	4. For exploring solutions to difficult problems
5. Help commitment to action	5. Help with time management

It was surprising that given the large positive response to the usefulness of journals that the level of interest and involvement of employers with student learning journals was not great. 63% reported that they did not expect their staff to keep one and never discussed the content. 58% did not see it as part of their role and also thought it was of no benefit to the organisation. A similar number did not have any organisational mechanisms in place to give support to staff. Those that did express an interest and involvement thought it was good to link into the formal appraisal and Professional Development Planning (PDP) process.

### Interviews with students

The qualitative statements and observations from students overwhelmingly supported the questionnaire results that learning journals are seen to have some value but there is a great reluctance to complete and sustain the process even after it has demonstrated some benefits.

*I can see the importance for reflective purposes but personally if I didn't have to do it, I wouldn't.*

*They are time consuming but can be helpful. I don't think people do them as a matter of course but rather because they have to in order to pass a course.*

*'Great idea in theory but difficult to put into practice especially when there is little input from the company.'*

*I know deep down that it is a good process but I don't do it often enough. I lack the motivation. I always seem to be too busy.*

### Interviews with employers

Those employers interviewed gave a more positive view of the learning journal than was suggested by their questionnaire responses.

*It supports succession planning and encourages ownership of personal development thus increasing skills. This has to be good for the organisation.*

*It makes staff feel more valued and therefore aids staff retention.*

However most employers did not feel they had the time to be involved with staff learning journals and it was only likely to increase bureaucracy if a formal system was introduced.

## Benefits

This was an initial exploratory research project which has provided a better understanding of the views of students and employers when they engage with a learning journal. It helps to clarify the key selling points that the parties think that learning journals offer. It is interesting that both students and employers largely see journals in terms of career progression mechanisms and formal recording of tangible events rather than to deepen skills of critical reflection. This does not wholly accord with the views maintained in the literature that journals assist critical reflection and help to make sense of experiences (Alterio, 2004; Brookfield, 1995; Hartog, 2002). The research clarifies that students do not actually think that learning journals are a waste of time but rather that to engage more comprehensively in the reflective process, the barriers of time and integration are important to be tackled. This research would suggest that learning journals need to be made more integral to the students' jobs and course material at university if they are to successfully maintain the process. It is clear that students generally receive little support from their employers in constructing their journals so it will be important to set up an alternative network.

## Evaluation

This research project provided some richer insights into the perceptions of the stakeholders but raises pedagogical questions about how journals can be successfully integrated into a student's workload and become a more natural, internalised process. The evidence demonstrates a positive feeling about

learning journals but does still not suggest reasons for the lack of enthusiasm. If the outcome is viewed so positively, why do both students and their employers not use it consistently? This research does not deal with this concern and further research could usefully explore the context of the student in their place of work.

Feedback on the findings of this research project will be given to both continuing students and to new cohorts in order to engage them actively in a discussion of these issues and how they might be overcome. The module team involved in the delivery of learning journals will be invited to suggest ways of furthering the research by developing new approaches to constructing learning journals.

It raises the question: do learning journals have a more limited role in helping to achieve reflective practitioners and independent learners than is suggested in the literature? If so, then perhaps they have limitations as a means of assessing retention and independent learning.

## Future developments

For the next academic year the module team plan to develop learning journals through construction of an e-portfolio which can provide a readily usable and time saving template for reflection on activities and experiences. As many students work on a PC this might provide a quick link and repository for their reflective moments. It is hoped that this will also lend itself more readily to tutor and colleague involvement in the reflective process and possibly also the student employers.

## Acknowledgements

In addition to all student and employer volunteers, I would like to acknowledge the contribution of Mike Pearson, Programme Area Manager for Management at Sandwell College for his assistance in administering student questionnaires.

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