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SERIES

Pocket Journals for Promoting Writing Competency

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Teaching Goal

I am in my first year of teaching various English classes at Kwansei Gakuin University. Overall, the students are capable, but one issue is the occasional lack of motivation of students with the writing course. This is often evidenced by poor-quality compositions which show little creativity, thought, or consistent flow.

The problem then is to get students to consciously engage in the act of writing. For this, I tried to look for the answer by reminding myself of psychologists Edward Deci and Richard Ryan's [Self-Determination Theory](#), which looks at autonomy, competence, and relatedness as factors for motivation.

Approach

Journal writing is not a new idea, but it is one that has increasingly become less common to be written on paper and so a revisit of the methodology is in order. Paired with explicit instructions and feedback, journal writing can become an effective tool in one's teaching arsenal.

This idea was crystalized while watching the movie *Tick, Tick...Boom!* I noticed the main character, Jonathan Larson, a famous playwright played by Andrew Garfield, always brought a [small notebook](#) to jot down his thoughts and ideas. Famous authors such as Mark Twain and Ernest Hemmingway were also known to do this.

I introduced the idea of carrying a notebook as extra credit in my writing classes. First, I showed them the clip from the movie. To establish additional rapport, I showed the class my own pocket journal which I use to write down new Japanese vocabulary words that I learn.

I then distribute the notebooks. It must be said that a nice fountain pen notebook can make

writing an amazing experience. Sadly, I do not have the budget to give those out to the students.

The journal's size is the most crucial point. If it is too small you won't be able to write enough sentences but if it is too big it won't be portable. It must fit in your pocket so you can bring it out whenever and wherever. Therefore, the ideal measurements to follow are width 82 x height 105 x thickness 15mm.

Going into detail, I inform the class that they would be responsible to fill the journal on their own (promoting autonomy), be self-aware of grammar and basic composition (raising competence) and would be compelled to interact with people and the world around them for content (highlighting relatedness). The students need to write at least a page every other day.

In addition, I impress upon them the need to have a stake in it and to personalize the notebook. Essentially, the notebook is an extension of their thoughts and feelings.

Finally, I teach the grammatical features and style characteristics of expository or narrative writing as done through journal writing. After this, the students are encouraged to write as much as they want to as long as it is written in English.

I usually ask for the following items:

- any short stories or jokes
- newly encountered vocabulary
- drawings with written descriptions
- reminders, tasks, shopping lists
- short, mid-term, or long-term goals
- poem or a haiku
- opinions on current events

EXAMPLE 1 EXAMPLE 2

You can also provide further scaffolding by asking students to use [Bloom's Taxonomy](#) with action verbs such as contrast, relate, rate, and express. I usually print this out for them.

Some might suggest asking students to submit a journaling task digitally through their smartphones, but I have a compelling reason why the paper form is better. For one, bringing

out a small pad to write something is what makes the writing experience more exciting and fulfilling. The goal is to teach them to embrace the ritual and spontaneity as any moment can be a chance to write something meaningful and creative.

After four to five weeks, I usually set aside a class for them to break into groups and discuss the things they have written.

For the assessment, my current workload of 10 classes does not allow me sufficient time for in-depth feedback and so I moderate my checking. I mostly rely on word count but will also check for creativity and proper grammar/spelling if time permits. But despite not having done a more comprehensive check on writing skills, I can say with confidence students have come out with a better appreciation and foundation of understanding of writing.

Pros and Cons

Pros: In the beginning, most of the students were puzzled on why they had to write a journal on paper. This is to be expected in this digital age. Eventually a lot of students began to form a habit of writing, as evidenced by longer entries and submissions from some of the participants. There is also less pressure because this is submitted at the end of the semester.

Furthermore, it was easier to check pocket journals. Our learning management system also has a journaling function, but I find it hard to correct and give feedback with it. In addition, with artificial intelligence (AI) essay technology, this written form prevents possible plagiarized submissions.

Cons: Not all the students will be on board. Others will lose interest, and several will even lose their notebooks. In one instance, I had to remind one student to write more legibly. Another consideration is cost, the cheapest pocket notebook is only a hundred yen, however if you plan to implement this for all your classes with your own budget the costs can become quite substantial. Therefore, you can choose to offer this selectively only to students who need it and to those willing to do it.

I implemented this activity mainly for the writing class, but this could be applied to other classes. Despite the downsides, most students seemed to enjoy it and found the simple act of carrying a small notebook traditional yet productive. Although we must make the most out of technology for learning, ultimately, going back to the basics can sometimes be the best solution.

Students should write with purpose but most of all, enthusiasm. Having a small notebook achieves this. By turning an in-class exercise and bringing it outside of class and making it part of their daily lives, writing has become more accessible and tangible to them.

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