The Learning Response Log: An Assessment Tool

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My eleventh-grade students and I are in a partnership to learn. I see myself as the guide and my students as the explorers of their own worlds of meaning. I no longer hear, “I knew this material, but you didn’t ask what I knew” or “I knew a lot more than what you asked on the test” or “Why didn’t you ask this?”

To address student requests for fairer, more complete assessment of their learning, I have moved from curriculum-driven goals to student-driven ones. I attempt to foster higher-order thinking skills through the students’ use of learning-response logs and learning opportunities that require reflection and self-evaluation.

The writings of Jean Piaget, Nancie Atwell, Louise M. Rosenblatt, James Moffett, and Robert J. Marzano affirmed my efforts to move my students, in the words of Annette N. Bradford, “from concrete/situational thinking to abstract/categorical thinking” (Hayes et al., eds., 1983, 18). They have inspired me to turn over the responsibility for and the demonstration of thinking and learning to my students. The direction of my teacher-planned activities arise not from the curriculum guide, but from the needs I observe in the classroom. Ulric Neisser (1967) tells us in Cognitive Psychology that “memory stores information about processes rather than about content. Mental activities can be learned; perhaps they are the only things that are ever learned” (295). How, then, could my students and I use their learning-response logs to assess the “mental activities” that arise from thinking, writing, speaking, and listening in a collaborative environment?

LEARNING LOGS DEFINED

For me, the term log is most appropriate for the record of the journey I envision my students taking. The definition of a log as the daily record, the full record, a record of performance, and a report on the construction of something seemed particularly apt for the record of students’ thinking throughout the year. I reason that the use of logs by scientists, by airplane pilots, and by sea captains is applicable to my students’ personal quest for knowledge. Subsequently, in my English classes, the students use their logs to record their learning and thinking, taking me along with them as they explore the meaning they make as they use and develop higher-order thinking skills.

I use the logs to introduce, to develop, to apply, and to evaluate classroom instruction and student learning. For the students, the logs serve as a personal record of their preparation and effort to learn, their reflection on their meaning making, and their extension and reformulation of knowledge. For evaluation purposes, the logs become the source of self-evaluation of students’ own strategies and efforts to learn, the source and the place for personal evaluation at the completion of every assignment, and at the end of each nine weeks and semester. Their understanding of our partnership allows students “to unbattle” their thoughts, as one of them explained his efforts to express himself.

STRUCTURING THE LOGS

To begin, I instruct the students during the first week of school to set up double-entry logs with facing pages in their binders: the left page for assignments, notes, daily work, and homework; the right for personal responses in the form of memories, realizations, explorations, extensions, associations, and evaluations. I explain that the recording of their learning will be a year-long project and will receive the same grade value as a regular test.

Each day class begins with two to four questions or prompts on the board for students to answer or complete in their logs. I urge them to complete the prompt or the question even if they are not sure of their answers. My goal is to encourage students to explore their thoughts.

The questions concern the students’ realizations, their difficulties with projects,
their own questions, or their techniques or strategies. All prompts or questions relate to the students or what the students are doing. Initially, I grade the logs weekly. Once students understand what I want from them, I grade the logs from two of my four classes every week. Alternating classes each week lessens the stress of grading.

I find support for the concept of a year-long journey in learning and thinking from Robert Marzano's (1991) agreement with E. Jacques (1985) that knowledge development skills take much longer than either teacher or student may realize, maybe even longer than a year (48). A case in point is Joseph, a student of two years ago, who wrote to tell me this year, "I am still learning from your hints in my log when I was in your class."

**STUDENT VOICES AND RESPONSES**

An essential benefit of the learning-response log is the creation of an environment where students feel more free to express their concerns and to experiment with learning. Once students are given respect for their voices in the classroom and a safe, private way of expressing them, their responses can be quite pointed. As one of my former students Jule wrote in his log:

"I don't think you know what you are doing. I've never been in a class like yours before. Why can't we work exercises out of the book? I don't like all this writing and thinking. You're the teacher. It's your job to tell me."

My student's comments stayed with me, and so did he to complete the course. In fact, in his final May 19 self-evaluation, he stated, "I've learned more than I expected and that is good. I've even learned to speak and write in a better manner." Monica R. Weis SSJ (1983) reminds us in her article in *The Writer's Mind* that "students desperately need to be reassured that their groping for ideas is a wonderful, albeit painful, phenomenon of language that allows them to shape their own world according to their own intuitive patterning" (32). Comments such as Jule's cause me to re-examine my purpose and to reflect on what we are doing and to evaluate the instruction and guidance I am giving the students. Even when their comments are painful, I find them valuable to my understanding. Had this student never expressed his true thoughts, my efforts to involve him successfully in what we were doing might have failed.

My students require a full nine weeks, some a full semester, of work in their logs and reminders in my responses before they begin to see themselves as thinkers, readers, and writers. Opportunities for self-evaluation hasten this perception. Getting them to use and demonstrate higher levels of abstraction is not easy; however, I avoid providing students with sample responses I think appropriate, using their responses instead as examples of abstraction.

Particularly helpful in my search for meaning through my students' writings is James Moffett's (1968) assertion that "we are constantly processing new experience up through the cycle of sensations, memories, generalizations, and theories" (25). Accordingly, I prefer to respond with what is good about their responses, such as "Good conclusion. How can it be important to you?" or "Excellent perspective. What will it mean to you when you read or write?" encouraging them to push further with their explorations.

From my experience over the past four years, I believe that the depth of the students' responses depends on my ability to motivate and to direct their thinking to their own processes. An appropriate assignment, I have learned, can come from any regular assignment. The key is to stimulate student thinking by requiring a different contextual frame than the routine one they expect to use, e.g., asking for an explanation of why their actions or choices are right, instead of why they are wrong. Citing L. B. Resnick (1987), Marzano (1991) reminds us that higher-order thinking cannot be measured by the complexity of the task, but rather, by the control and the exploration we exert over what we are doing and how we are doing it. Marzano calls these cognitive behaviors *dispositions* “because they ‘dispose’ one to behave and think in certain ways”; that is, when we are engaged in higher-order thinking, we try to be correct in what we do, we are conscious of our thinking in a given situation, and we function “at the edge rather than the center” of our abilities (7). In short, we must assist students to develop the habit of using dispositions, the dispositions, according to Marzano, of *self-regulation*, of *critical thinking*, and of *creative thinking* (62–63).
THE MAP DRAWING ASSIGNMENT

One example of a routine assignment turned effective is one asking students to draw maps to their homes. Once the maps are drawn, student partners sit back to back, giving one, then the other, the directions so that each partner attempts to duplicate the other's map without the benefit of the usual words such as "road." Instead, the artist must tell the partner, "Draw a straight line two inches long at the far right corner of the paper." The unexpected causes the students to give special thought to what they are thinking, saying, and hearing.

Students' entries in their logs about this assignment are revealing of Marzano's dispositions.

Log entry 1—Damian

We had to use our imagination a lot to try and figure out what the partners were talking about so we could get more accurate map. It was a fun assignment. I think it helped me by practicing my imagery [sic] skills. The first thing I thought of when I was explaining the map was to try and explain it as if I didn't know what it looked like. I did that to get a feel of what the other person was thinking, being that he hadn't seen the map. I wouldn't change the strategies I used.

Log entry 2—Resha

I think what we did today was kind of hard. Even though I knew where [my partner] lived and she knew where I lived, our maps didn't come out right. I had to use my brain a lot while trying to tell her where to set streets and buildings without telling her what they were. I think we need to have more assignments like this one because they make us think of a lot of different ways to describe things to other people. It made us use our senses a lot more than we usually do, too. It was kind of hard, but I liked it.

Log entry 3—Renetta

I learned that my communication only works one way. That way is so that the other person can understand or comprehend easier than I can comprehend myself. The skills that I used were geometry, communication, writing, artistic, thinking, etc. I liked the assignment because it was very interesting and kinda fun.

For their final evaluation in May, Resha and Renetta chose their responses to the map-drawing assignment as one of their ten entries best illustrating their use of higher-order thinking skills. As Renetta, one of the students explained in her final self-evaluation at the end of the year, "After this assignment I began the process [italics are mine] of learning how to think of what I am trying to say, approve it, and say it.'

I conclude from the sample entries that the three have distanced themselves from their tasks and have observed their own strategies. They are aware of their thinking, they seek accuracy in what they are doing, and they are internalizing the elements of writing and pushing the limits of their own abilities.

The successful adaptation of the map-drawing assignment to one that predisposes students to use Marzano's dispositions is also due to the collaboration required, the personal nature of the assignment, the feeling of ownership of the topic because of its familiarity even though I made the assignment, and the use of an artifact other than the usual written one, i.e., a map instead of a paragraph or an essay. All of these elements contribute to a successful activity.

USING LOGS FOR EVALUATION

With the learning-response log as the mainstay of my class, I am able to offer my students choice and ownership of assessment and a voice in what their assessment will ultimately be. In addition to the reflection required by their responses in their logs, students evaluate themselves and their learning in their logs and on evaluations I give them in lieu of "regular tests," as one student put it. Their grades come from their ability to communicate their understanding at their level of achievement. A degree of student choice runs through whatever teacher-designed evaluation I may present to them. They choose which of their essays will be graded. Their research topics are their own,
and their literary analyses are based on their choice of topics.

At the end of any project, students complete a self-evaluation in their log and review it when I return their papers, recording any differences in our opinions and their agreement or disagreement with the grade. In most cases, I gain a greater appreciation of students’ efforts and a deeper respect for them from reading their responses. More often than not, we are in agreement as to what the grade should be. My students know the grade they deserve, and they know whether or not they have the proof to validate it.

From the students’ daily explorations and project evaluations in their logs and their reflective self-evaluations cumulatively at grading periods, I receive valuable information that I use to compile the sense of achievement I am understanding from each student. Explaining the purpose of the self-evaluations to researcher Ruth Davidson (1995), one of my students, Lynn, explained:

She wants to know our opinion and she wants to communicate. That’s what we’re trying to learn this whole year—communication, and it’s that metacognitive deal—how to think for yourself. She wants us to learn how to evaluate ourselves before we turn [work] in. She’s like real independent and she wants everybody to learn how to do everything for themselves. On every assignment she lets us evaluate what we think we should get as a grade. (37)

Students use the record of their work and learning in their logs to evaluate themselves and to examine their strengths and weaknesses, sharpening their critical thinking skills as they reformulate their knowledge of themselves and their world. In almost all cases, students’ mental calculations of their achievements parallel mine. When there is a difference to their disadvantage, I re-examine what the students have accomplished and confer with the students to understand the frames through which they see their work. The success of our partnership is further affirmed when the students’ ACT scores on verbal skills in the fall come back higher.

Works Cited

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