Students benefit from e-Journaling or using Web Journals in an Online Grief, Loss & Bereavement Course

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Abstract: Web Journaling or e-Journaling is an online tool that is a useful education technique for fostering critical thinking skills. Journaling is also a beneficial resource to encourage learning and enhance self-reflection. Journaling online can provide the personal connection often thought to be missing in the online environment by building ties between online students with their instructor. In addition, if student journals are open to each other, this sharing helps create a personal connection between the students, builds rapport and aids in forming an online community. Graduate students in a university bereavement studies course used an e-journal for the duration of the 16-week semester. These graduate students benefited short-term and long-term from keeping a weekly e-Journal and completing a series of assignments on journaling. Short-term benefits included enhanced self-reflection and learning, building a community and practicing sympathy. They also experienced online journaling as an educational tool to process grief and loss emotions. Longer-term benefits included being exposed to a resource that could be use to deepen or enhance a spiritual practice for those working in ministry, counseling or helping professions. Journaling could also be used with or recommended as a helpful technique with future clients, patients or parishioners in grief.

Journaling and Journaling in Education

Journals have been defined as "the permanent records of thoughts and ideas that an individual has processed and clarified through the act of writing or otherwise recording their experiences." (Killion, 1999) *Journaling* can be defined as "the purposeful and intentional use of reflective writing to further mental, physical, emotional and spiritual health and wellness" (Adams K, 2001) or as "a means for recording personal thoughts, daily experiences, and evolving insights" (Hiemstra, 2001, p. 20). Author Norbet Platt wrote about journaling that "The act of putting pen to paper encourages pause for thought, this in turn makes us think more deeply about life, which helps us regain our equilibrium" (Gonyon, 2004, p. 338). Platt's thoughts underscore the benefits and positive impact of journaling in a personal setting.

Writing in a journal (journaling) can also be a beneficial tool in an academic setting. Journaling as a pedagogical tool for learning has been used in the classroom for the last 30 years or so (King & LaRocco, 2006). *Reflective practice* (Blake, 2005) or *Reflective journaling* (Epp, 2008) are other terms used instead of *Journaling* in educational and professional settings.

After discovering journaling to be a effective tool for checking students' understanding of core concepts, promoting reflection on connections between theory and practice, enhancing insight and promoting critical thinking, teachers, instructors and professors have integrated journaling as a learning tool into different academic and professional courses (King & LaRocco, 2006). Some of the discipline utilizing journaling in the classroom include: social studies, mathematics, engineering, sciences, education (King & LaRocco, 2006), adult education (Flores-Isom, 2007; Hiemstra, 2001) athletic training (Walker, 2006), nursing (Blake, 2005, Cohen, 2002, Daroszewski et. al., 2004, Epp, 2008), medicine (Ashbury et.al, 1993, DasGupta & Charon, 2004, Rosenbaum et. al., 2005), pharmacy (Bouldin et. al., 2006), radiation therapy (Milinkovic & Field, 2005), counselors (Haberstroh, et. al. 2006), death education (Doll et. al., 2008) and ministry and health care professionals (Epple, 2006).

In addition researchers in different health disciplines have reported reflective journaling has the potential for encouraging professional communications by developing skills in communication, critical thinking, self-learning, self- and social awareness, empathy and sensitivity to cultural differences (Bouldin, et. al., 2006).

Journaling in Death Education and Bereavement

Teachers of death- and bereavement-related courses look for methods and tools to help their students learn about these subjects and feel more at ease sharing their thoughts, beliefs and experiences. Past and present losses and the grief associated with them often surface as students study these challenging, sensitive and emotionally-laden subjects. Painful emotions become additional challenges for students and instructors to manage. Instructors can help students taking death- and bereavement-related courses in coping with their own losses by providing them with beneficial tools and resources. Journaling is a learning tool that can aid students in managing loss (Doll et. al., 2008).

Researchers have shown the importance for healthcare professionals to learn empathy, reflect on experiences and discuss attitudes relating to death; these skills are particularly important for those who will be caring for the dying. Reflective activities such as journal writing can be used by instructors as one way of enhancing end-of-life care. (Rosenbaum et. al., 2005). Reflective writing or journaling is an established method used to teach medical students empathy and to encourage more empathetic interactions with patients in their care. (DasGupta & Charon, 2004)

Doll and colleagues used journals with college students as a pedagological tool to facilitate students writing about and sharing their death experiences. They found that students in death-related classes were more willing to discuss death issues in written format than in the more traditional face to face classroom setting; one reason is that journal writing helps students who have difficulty expressing themselves verbally in the traditional classroom. (Doll et. al., 2008)

Methods

Building on research conducted by instructors in the fields of nursing, counseling, medicine, death and bereavement, e-Journaling was selected by the course professor-researcher as a pedagological tool to utilize in an online graduate course in grief, loss and bereavement.

Three online classes of graduate bereavement students taught by the professor-researcher for a University were studied over three different semesters. The graduate students were evaluated using online course surveys and e-journals maintained within Blackboard course management system. All students were expected to keep a weekly online journal housed within the course management system during the 16 week semester. In additional all students were expected to complete three separate journaling assignments, which involved readings, presenting published articles about journaling or e-Journaling and experimenting with different journaling techniques.

During the first week, all of the students took a survey developed within the course management system to determine, as a group, the type of journal they would keep as a class during the course. Each student was given the opportunity to choose whether the journaling part of the course would be made public and shared with the entire class or if the journal would remain private and shared only with the instructor.

At the end of the course students were evaluated again with another course survey about their e-journaling experiences in the graduate bereavement course. During this final survey, permission was sought from the instructor to use their comments in future research papers with the caveat that "Anything that would be cited would have names and specific identifying details removed" (Dyer, 2008, Ending Course Survey). Only one student declined to allow the instructor to "use my general journaling responses about the journaling experience in a future paper about the benefits and drawbacks of using journaling in an on-line course" (Dyer, 2008, Ending Course Survey). The comments from this student were not included in this paper. Comments made by other students in journal posts and survey entries have been anonymously included.

Results

Short-term results from course surveys, assignments and student comments demonstrated that the students benefited in several ways from e-Journaling or keeping a web journal during the duration of the 16 week semester.

Results from Beginning Survey

Students answered the following question in an introductory survey given in the first week of the semester: "Do you want to make posting the journaling part of this course public, posting to the group, or would you prefer keeping the journal postings private, only to the instructor?" (Dyer, 2007-9, Beginning Course Survey).

Students in each of the three different semesters of this online bereavement course decided independently to create a journal open to all of the students in the course. All of the students surveyed from the three sections decided that the journal entries would be public, or that it did not matter whether they were public or private. No student opted for the journal entries to remain private.

On the introductory survey, students were invited to share their thoughts about making the journal entries public or private. Comments made by several of the students indicated that they were aware of the educational benefits of creating an open class e-journal. These thoughts were summed up by one student who wrote in the comment section of the introductory survey:

> My sense is that most of us are drawn to this field due to our own poignant experiences with loss and grief. And, my experience thus far has been that people are open, maybe even compelled, to share their stories. For me, sharing allows me to hopefully help others. And, "hearing other's stories" helps me to see mine from a slightly different vantage point.
>
> I believe we have an opportunity to learn more broadly and more profoundly from one another if we make our journal entries "public." (Anonymous Student, 2008, Beginning Course Survey).

These comments summarized many of the inherent reasons the instructor chose to include an e-journal as an educational tool and resource in the course.

Based on the survey results a group e-journal was created during each of the courses for all of the students to use. A thread in the course discussion board became the course collaborative e-journal, the place where students shared their weekly journal posts and journal assignments. Students were invited to comment on each other's journal posts.

Comment Results from Trying Different Journaling Technique Assignment

As part of a journaling assignment students were asked to examine and try different journaling techniques. All of the students that completed this journaling assignment found techniques that they believed might be beneficial for themselves or for future patients, clients or parishioners. Several of the students wrote that they felt <u>all</u> of the techniques studied were excellent and might be used in different situations depending on the individual person and on the circumstances.

Results from Ending Survey
Students were surveyed again at the end of the semester during the last full week of the course about their experiences with the journaling experience and assignments.

The vast majority of students surveyed (83.34%) in the ending survey agreed with the following statements (Dyer, 2008, Ending Course Survey):

- My journaling experience was a beneficial part of this course.
- My journaling experience was beneficial to my learning about myself.
- My journaling experience was beneficial to my learning from my classmates.
- My journaling experience was beneficial to building an online community (getting to know my classmates).
- I am glad that the journal entries were public.

Students were also asked to share any final thoughts on their journaling experience. Two students wrote in the comment section of the ending survey that "I felt this experience was very beneficial to this course" (Anonymous Student, 2008, Ending Course Survey) and "It was helpful in getting to know my classmates and their life circumstances" (Anonymous Student, 2008, Ending Course Survey). One student summarized the instructor's goals for using an e-Journal in the comment section of the ending survey, "Sharing the journals publicly was a big part of the community building process. The group experience of this class would have been greatly impoverished if the journals had been kept private" (Anonymous Student, 2008, Ending Course Survey).

One interesting result emerged from the journaling process that of a "Just in Time" technique, or a journaling technique learned in time for the students to put it to use in real life. Several of the graduate students were able to use the weekly journaling techniques they were learning with current grieving families, clients or parishioners. During the course students shared in journal entries that several of the journaling techniques taught or resources presented as assignments were readily put into practice with real people, underscoring the often serendipitous nature of bereavement work.

Discussion

Electronic Journaling or e-Journaling is one teaching strategy that has been successfully implemented in the high-tech environment of online education (Phipps, 2005); The technological approach to journaling can take many forms such as e-mail, web logs, blogs and electronic discussion boards (King & LaRocco, 2006). Journaling online can provide the personal connection often thought to be missing in the online environment by building ties between online students with their instructor (Phipps, 2005). Educators have also found journaling to be essential for successful interaction and engaging students in web-based course when materials are primarily text-only and delivered online. (Zeng & Harris, 2005)

Journaling had been identified as an important teaching tool in this bereavement course when taught face to face by the prior professor. In adapting the bereavement course to be taught online the instructor determined it would be best to utilize an online journal in the online course. An e-Journal was chosen as a pedagological tool to use with graduate students because of the many benefits e-Journaling offers online students; these benefits have been summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Benefits of e-Journaling.

Benefits of Web Journaling or e-Journaling
Enhances traditional face-to-face classrooms and courses offered at a distance.
Gives students who are shy, quiet or afraid of public speaking a chance to participate in course discussions.
Provides an opportunity for learners to express opinions, ideas and concerns about the course materials that might not be shared otherwise.
Gives students more time to organize thoughts before posting them online.
Eliminates problems with deciphering poor handwriting, either the student's or the instructor's comments.
Allows faculty members to encourage, guide and engage students in an academic venue and builds rapport between faculty and students.
Accessible 24/7 for both students for writing and instructors for grading.
Contributes to positive learning experiences.
Helps in problems solving.
Aids in learning and discovery.
Fosters critical thinking skills.
Allows students to develop reflective clinical practice skills.
Gives students the opportunity to use reflection when they are away from the immediate clinical environment.
Expands upon instructor's or faculty's responses to students' learning needs.
Improves student's responses to persons in their care.
Plays a role in successful course outcomes.

(Bouldin et. al., 2006; Cohen & Welch, 2002; Doll et. al., 2008; Phipps, 2005; Kessler & Lund, 2004, Zeng & Harris, 2005)

Utilizing an e-Journal in the university graduate course in bereavement provided a way for the instructor to meet several learning objectives or course goals by:

- Allowing potentially shy or more withdrawn students to open up and express their beliefs, options and experiences.
- Helping students reflect and share their ideas on grief, loss, death, dying and bereavement topics.
- Encouraging learning from the course materials and from fellow students.
- Building and creating an online community by having the students get to know each other better.
- Teaching empathy and sympathetic skills to future bereavement professionals.
- Potentially deepening or enhancing spiritual practice for individuals who work in ministry or other helping professions.

This last point was particularly important objective; the institution offering the course is a Catholic university that strives to create a learner-centered environment committed to the intellectual, spiritual and personal development of its member-students. Finding ways to deepen or enhance a spiritual practice is a key mission for the Catholic university faculty.

Blogs or online web logs were compared with e-Journaling as another potential technique for meeting these course journaling goals. Blogs have been successfully adapted, especially group or community blogs, for pedagogical purposes in online higher education courses. Teachers, instructors and professors of higher education have used a course blog or individual student blogs (Zeng & Harris, 2005). Course blogs are typically created outside of the course management systems using various blogging tools. Unless password-protected for a specific group, the Course blog could potentially be viewed by anyone with access to the Internet.

Web journaling or an e-Journal was selected over a blog primarily because of the need for privacy due to the sensitive nature of the topics being studied. A decision was made by the instructor to create an online journal within Blackboard course management system rather than create a public course blog for two reasons. The first is the very personal nature of the field of grief and bereavement and the second is the knowledge that many students in the field entered as a result of experiencing their own losses, grief response. They are often in varying stages of bereavement and processing their own grief. The e-Journal within Blackboard was private within the context of the bereavement course community; it was only available to students of the course and the instructor. The course e-Journal could not be accessed by anyone on the Internet the way a course Blog might have been.

In many classroom settings e-Journals are designed to be confidential, with information just shared between the student and the instructor. One major difference with the e-Journal used in this graduate bereavement course is that the students opted to create a shared or collaborative online journal. The decision to share personal information with classmates ultimately aided in building community by allowing the students to get to know each other better. Several students in different course commented that they got to know their online classmates more intimately than they do in face to face settings. The

graduate students became an online community by sharing difficult and often painful information with each other. By responding to each other's journal posts they practiced empathy and counseling skills with classmates and developed or improved methods that could be used in the future. The students agreed base on the results to their ending survey that their e-Journaling experience provided them with skills and resources that could be used with future grieving clients, patients or parishioners.

As part of their weekly journal posts and in the ending survey students shared insights into using journaling techniques in the future. They demonstrated critical thinking and keen insights into using this technique as a resource and in building an online course community. One student shared in the ending survey the following insight about the journaling process, "I found the journaling assignments to be manageable and helpful. They aided me in better understanding my classmates and getting to know a little bit more about them as human beings. I believed it strengthened team work amongst classmates" (Anonymous Student, 2008, Ending Course Survey).

Conclusion

The university graduate students studied in this research project on e-Journaling experienced short-term, more immediate outcomes and longer-term, potential outcomes. Keeping a weekly e-Journal aided the graduate students in writing about, sharing and reflecting on experiences related to grief, loss, death and bereavement. Students were encouraged to show sympathy and be more empathetic with fellow students; they also experienced managing personal and possible confidential information and learned about being more empathetic firsthand. These are all skills that could potentially be used in the future. In addition the students experienced web journaling or e-Journaling as an educational tool that could be utilized to help themselves cope with and process many of the difficult emotions and sentiments that surface in taking courses in these subject areas.

Short-term, an e-Journal or a web journal can be a learning tool, a resource for self-reflection as well as building the connections and creating online community often thought to be lacking in the online classroom setting. Additional benefits were revealed by the students in their own words. Students demonstrated initially that they understood the short-term importance of creating a community journal and later reiterated this importance with later survey comments. As noted by one student in the ending survey, "Sharing the journals publicly was a big part of the community building process. The group experience of this class would have been greatly impoverished if the journals had been kept private" (Anonymous Student, 2008, Ending Course Survey).

These graduate students were also taught skills that will have longer-term potential benefits. When working with the bereaved is important for students to learn how to work with confidential information, be sympathetic and develop empathy. These were all additional skills gained through using an e-Journal in this course. The students utilized a tool that they could potentially use going forward from the course to create a spiritual deepening for themselves or eventually use with or recommend to future clients, patients or parishioners in grief when they become bereavement professionals.

The main limitation of this study was the sample size (thirteen) and short term tracking of results, only for the duration of the semester. The short-term benefits were demonstrated with these findings presented in this paper. Longer-term benefits such as the impact that learning the skills from e-Journaling will have on the students personally and future grieving people and families were not assessed since tracking results ended with the course. Conducting larger studies, with a greater number of students, or with students from other disciplines would be helpful in confirming the short-term findings from this study. Longer-term studies could be carried out to discover future benefits of using e-Journaling personally and teaching e-Journaling on beneficial skills needed by bereavement specialists for use with future patients, clients and parishioners.

Overall the graduate students appeared to have benefited from using e-Journaling as a tool. The vast majority of students surveyed indicated that the journaling experience was a beneficial part of the course, was beneficial to learning about themselves, was beneficial to learning from classmates and was beneficial for building an online community. Based on the research reviewed, survey results, journaling assignments and experiences with using e-Journaling in an online class, web journaling can be recommended as an effective and beneficial teaching tool for making short-term and potential long-term benefits available to students.

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