

Ten years of a Future Leaders Programme reflective journal



John Cox
University Librarian
James Hardiman Library
National University of Ireland
Galway
john.cox@nuigalway.ie

The Future Leaders Programme (<http://tinyurl.com/paqpjdg>, accessed 23 February 2016), developed by the Leadership Foundation for Higher Education in collaboration with SCONUL, UCISA and the British Library, commenced in 2006 (Stevenson, 2006). It has attracted around twenty participants annually since then, selected following an application and interview process. The programme was initially targeted at professionals in library, ICT and related activities with proven management experience, the aim being to deepen understanding and develop leadership ability and potential. In its early years the format was two residential modules of four and five days, supplemented by three action learning sets for smaller groups within the overall cohort, with a capstone day at the end. More recently, the number of residential modules has increased to three and the target audience has been extended to finance and procurement and student services. Coverage has evolved, but there has been a continuing focus on the personal foundation of leadership as a basis for further exploration of strategic leadership and organisational change (Fallon et al. 2011).

The first module has always emphasised personal leadership qualities and has tended to make a strong impression on participants, challenging them to examine their own leadership behaviours and impact on others (Cox et al. 2006). There is a particular emphasis on self-awareness, enquiry and on raising the quality of thinking, drawing on a range of tools and frameworks. One of these is the reflective journal which participants are urged to maintain in order to capture their learning and to stimulate a deeper engagement with leadership development. Reflection is strongly promoted throughout the programme and can take many forms, of which the journal is but one. Experimenting with different approaches to reflection makes sense (Raven, 2014) and it is not uncommon for a journal to be commenced but discontinued in favour of different methods better suited to individual preferences and situations. I was a member of the first group to undertake the Future Leaders Programme in 2006 and commenced a reflective journal then. Ten years later, the journal is still active and this article describes the process involved, with a particular focus on the impact on learning, leadership and personal growth, insights gained, and changes in thinking and practice following the compilation of a decade-long documented archive of reflection.

Process

There is no set process for writing a reflective journal, although guidance is available (Moon, 2006, Smith, 1999, 2006, 2013). The common elements are reflection and enquiry, focused on learning from past events and experiences. Beyond that, it is up to the individual: the process that I have evolved is based on personal preference and, after ten years, habit. Perhaps oddly, my frequency of writing was quite irregular and occasional while I was participating in the Future Leaders Programme in 2006 and early 2007, possibly as there were so many other activities to attend to during the programme. At the start of 2008, however, I established a practice of writing weekly, initially to help focus my efforts on an upcoming promotional opportunity. The weekly habit has endured since, primarily because I actually want to write a reflection each week as it has proved so beneficial. My practice is to write at the weekend, when there is some distance between the past and coming weeks. Saturday is my preferred day, and timing has varied over the years from late afternoon to, more recently, mid-morning. The latter slot precedes the day's football and the frustrations of following Everton, which can distort the perspective I may bring to the journal later in the day!

An entry usually takes me about 45 minutes to write. There is some debate about the merits of using a PC or a pen, but handwriting seems to be favoured as it can help to slow things down a bit and enhance the quality of reflection. I have used an A5 notebook which allows easy portability, which is handy for making entries at different locations. While the peace and quiet of my study at

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home provides an ideal environment, I have also written at airports, on trains and in the back of the car among other locations. Entries typically run to four pages, written largely in an informal narrative style rather than using a series of bullets, symbols or drawings as others might prefer. One of the attractions of the journal is that its entries are unplanned. I am never sure of what I will write about, and the blank page provides an opportunity to take an unexpected direction. As a result it feels like an escape from the often scheduled nature of the working week and its need for focus on known priorities. It can be a real surprise after ten minutes of sometimes frenzied writing to read what has emerged. The framework of each entry is a consideration of what happened in the past week, mostly at work but also outside, coupled with a preview of the coming week. One disadvantage of the written approach, apart from my dire handwriting, is that entries are not searchable. I date each entry and rely on memory to locate a previous reflection according to when it occurred.

Benefits

The process of writing a reflective journal requires some investment, so what are the benefits? Just as individual preferences influence the process adopted, so there is a degree of subjectivity in the benefits perceived. Many of the gains I describe below match with experiences commonly reported by others (Moon, 2006, Raven, 2014, Smith, 1999, 2006, 2013), but some are more specific to me. A key point is that benefits will accrue from a truly reflective engagement with the journal, not simply a recording of events.

Insight

There is something more powerful about writing one's thoughts than just thinking them. For example, the act of describing a problem in an email often generates a possible solution in the course of writing. Similar things happen when creating a journal entry because writing calls for, indeed forces, a higher level of concentration and engagement. The distance from events that a weekly entry enables is helpful and makes it possible to see events differently from when they occur, and to frame them in wider contexts.

Meaning

Related to the above, the madness of the working week can make it difficult to make sense of what is going on. Individual events can get lost in the blur of meetings, emails, deadlines and obligations. Probably the most common experience I find in writing a journal is the identification of an event, such as a conversation, which, on reflection, carries far more significance than I had realised. Similarly, the act of writing a preview of the week ahead often identifies possibilities and interconnections not immediately evident from skimming an online calendar.

Impact

Writing about the past week makes me consider the use of time, how I spent it, what I achieved (or did not) and whether I used my position as University Librarian to maximum effect. Sometimes there will be a realisation that I got involved in things I could have left to others or that I did not make the best use of an opportunity; linkage between these two situations is often apparent, prompting actions in terms of managing personal energy optimally. Using my time and position more effectively has become a major focus over a number of years of reflection. Thinking in weeks rather than days undoubtedly helps and encourages longer planning horizons.

Accountability

Writing a weekly entry is like having a meeting with oneself and it is hard to escape the truth on the pages of a reflective journal. Honesty comes to the fore and the journal combats any tendency to gloss over issues or situations or to pretend that all is well when it is not. The processes of self-evaluation and questioning my actions are healthy. They make me confront reality, try new approaches and learn from experiences, both positive and negative. The

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journal has also been important in developing my values and striving to stay true to them.

Therapy!

The journal is a safe place for expressing emotions. Tact and diplomacy are called for throughout the working week, but this can be difficult. The outlet that the journal provides for recording my feelings about situations, and sometimes individuals, is very welcome. More often than not, the act of getting my frustrations down on paper can itself be sufficient in moving me to a more constructive approach. I may find (perhaps some time later!) that my comments were based on a misreading of the situation which was more complex than I had understood.

Preparation

I find that writing the journal is a good way of preparing for challenging situations, one recent example being the introduction of a new staff structure. This needed a clear approach in terms of selling the proposals to staff and users. As I reflected on this one weekend, I realised the need to appeal to hearts and minds as much as to explain in terms of numbers and rationale and this took me down a new and productive route of preparation which I had not previously intended. Written reflection can open up the wider dimensions of a situation, including more consideration of the perspectives of others, and inform different approaches.

Correction

The use of the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator on the Future Leaders Programme showed me that I tended to be judgmental and that my intuition was not well developed. The journal has provided an opportunity to challenge my initial judgment and to see beyond the immediately obvious. In one instance, what appeared to be a lack of support for a new open access policy by a university leader actually contained a lot of good advice on how to engage others. Situations may repeat themselves over time, and having written about such encounters previously can improve my intuition, with older journal entries providing a resource for applying past learning to similar or related later events (Cartwright, 2004).

Changes

Keeping a reflective journal has prompted some lasting changes over the years, particularly, as noted earlier, in relation to using time and energy to maximum effect. Thinking and planning in weeks is one example already mentioned. Another has been getting up earlier to prioritise a quality hour when my brain is freshest. I usually focus that hour on writing. This was initially for work purposes, but has more recently been for myself as I realised that I had unintentionally dropped the habit of professional writing which I always enjoyed earlier in my career. Re-reading end-of-year entries over a period of time made me appreciate a growing resentment at giving too much to the job and the organisation and the need to reclaim something for myself through writing or other professional opportunities. This has also influenced me to switch off email when on leave so that I can recharge properly.

Perspective

Perhaps the most valuable benefit of sustained written reflection is a better sense of perspective. As already noted, there are often valuable insights into the perspectives of others. There is also a sense of reassurance over ten years that major challenges arise regularly enough but can be surmounted through team effort. It becomes easier to accept the bad days and weeks as part of a series of ups and downs which include lots of good times that need to be appreciated fully too. I use the journal pages to remind me of my massive good fortune in having a challenging and enjoyable job and a wonderful family life. Ultimately, leading a university library is an important responsibility but there is a lot else going on in the world!

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Challenges

The focus of this article is on the benefits of maintaining a reflective journal but it is important to acknowledge some drawbacks too. Written reflection can result in over-analysis of an issue, both on the pages of the journal and afterwards. Paralysis by analysis is a risk and I have learned to compartmentalise the writing process, giving it maximum concentration but moving on to a different activity with a new focus once an entry is completed. There is also a danger of engaging too much with one's own perspective and it is essential to balance this through conversations with others, a point sometimes suggested in the entries themselves. The blank page is more inviting to some than others, and may deter those less inclined to write about their experiences. At the risk of oversimplification, introverts may embrace written reflection more than extroverts, although the latter may gain at least as much from keeping a journal.

Perhaps the biggest challenge is to find the time, and indeed the mental energy, to write a reflective journal on a regular basis. The working week is packed and meaningful reflection needs good quality time. Weekend time is precious and the idea of giving up 45 minutes, as I do, to reconnect with the previous week and to consider the one to come is probably unappealing to most readers. There are alternatives during the week, perhaps at either end of the day, and a series of shorter entries may work better for some than a single detailed writing session. Ultimately, there has to be a desire to reflect in writing if a journal is to be sustained over a period of time. That desire will only be there if the journal is delivering benefits, and these are most likely to come if there is a meaningful engagement with the process at times most favourable to generating new insights.

Conclusion

Writing a journal is one approach to reflective practice. It needs a level of commitment and investment but offers plenty of reward, including professional and personal development. I am surprised to find that my journal has reached the age of ten, having probably intended to try it out for a while as one of many experiments during the Future Leaders Programme. It has stood the test of time and proved to be a valuable legacy of that programme. I hope it will continue to be a good companion for the next ten years!

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