

MODULE 3

REFLECTIVE WRITING STRATEGIES

Journals not only help protégés keep track of what practices work or do not work in their teaching environment, but also allow them to track their own growth and development.

—Putting the PRO in Protégé (2001)

CONTEXT

Reflective writing provides another opportunity for protégés to examine their practice, think about what works and what doesn't, and come up with new ideas.

This module contains a wealth of information about a reflective writing strategy called dialogue journaling. It explains the responsibilities you and your protégés have in making this strategy successful. The module also gives you the tools you need to use this approach in your work.

LEARNING OUTCOMES

By completing this module, you will learn:

- Key ingredients of effective dialogue journals
- How to support and encourage protégés to write about their work with children
- How to use reflective writing as a professional development strategy.



INTRODUCTION TO THE MODULE

As a Mentor-Coach, you can use reflective writing strategies to further support protégés in their work. Reflective writing provides another opportunity for protégés to examine their practice, think about what works and what doesn't, and come up with new ideas.

Reflective writing and reflective conferences share the same three phases:

- Reflecting on an event
- Learning from insights
- Planning next steps

Protégés who are less comfortable with verbal communication may prefer this method of reflection. They may also find that reflective writing is a powerful complement to the Professional Conferencing Process.

DIALOGUE JOURNALS

Journal writing helps protégés think about and assess their practice and progress every day. Journal writing requires Mentor-Coaches and protégés to “stretch their reflective practice muscles.” The process guides protégés to analyze their teaching, assess children’s learning, identify challenges, develop new strategies, and assess the effectiveness of those strategies. Also, journal writing can:

- Strengthen written communication skills
- Support protégés who are more comfortable expressing themselves in writing.

One type of journal writing is called a **dialogue journal**. A dialogue journal is a written, reflective conversation between two people. Mentor-Coaches can use a dialogue journal to build upon and extend reflective conference conversations with protégés. Studies show that adult learners greatly enjoy and benefit from this form of journaling, especially if they understand how to use their journals.

Dialogue Journals

- Are written, reflective conversations between two people
- Build on and extend reflective conferencing
- Meet the unique needs of certain adult learners.

Questions for Discussion

1. Have you used dialogue journals in your work with staff?

2. How has this strategy been successful?

3. What challenges have you encountered?

RESPONSIBILITIES OF MENTOR-COACHES AND PROTÉGÉS IN DIALOGUE JOURNALING

Both Mentor-Coaches and protégés contribute to successful dialogue journaling. Protégés are active participants and often take the lead in starting the written conversation. As a Mentor-Coach, you should provide clear guidelines to help your protégés understand why, when, and how to write in their journals. You may need to get the written conversation started if protégés are new to this approach. As a Mentor-Coach, you will play an active role in keeping the journal going by writing questions and comments that stimulate further thinking and dialogue.

See **STEP-Doc 3.3a: Guidelines for Dialogue Journals** for more strategies and pointers for keeping this journaling process going smoothly.

What Mentor-Coaches Can Do:

- Provide clear guidelines to help the protégé understand why, when, and how to write in their journals.
- As in conferences, let the protégé take the lead in the reflective, written conversation.
- Write back to protégés. Be encouraging and supportive in responses to journal entries.
- Encourage protégés to make their journals their own. In addition to formal entries, suggest they include quotes or pictures that inspire them. They can also jot down new ideas and thoughts about readings.
- Assess protégés' growth by looking at their entries over time. Help them see their growth.

What Protégés Can Do:

- Write about challenges and/or triumphs in their work.
- Reflect on their experiences, ask questions, and come up with ideas for trying something different.

EXERCISE 1: SAMPLE JOURNAL ENTRY

Rose and Namiko's First Journal Entry

Read this journal entry. Note the struggles of the protégé and how the Mentor-Coach responded.

October 1 (entry by Rose, the protégé)

So, I feel rotten. I haven't started this journal yet. I didn't want to just hand in a blank book. Sorry! I know we talked about me keeping a journal. But, I don't know what to say. My mind feels as blank as this page. Plus, I don't know if I'll have time to write entries every day like we planned. Yikes! You can see I ripped a page out of here. Well, that's because I started writing. But, when I looked at what I wrote, I saw that it was really bad. Just: "We made muffins today. We went outside at the usual time. Blah blah." Well, you said not to give a blow-by-blow description. But, that's what I ended up doing. This is harder than I thought it would be. I don't know what to do to make this work...HELP. I feel like a failure.

October 2 (response by Namiko, the Mentor-Coach)

Whoa! You are not a failure at all. This is a good start. I mean it. Don't feel bad, and don't be so hard on yourself. It's not just up to you to make this work for you. I'm here to help in any way I can. When I first started keeping a teaching journal, I struggled with "not knowing what to say," too. I needed lots of support from MY mentor. I'll tell you, a blank page can be pretty scary. But, I couldn't do without my journal now. Writing helps me focus my feelings and thoughts. It helps me look back at my experiences and see things I could have done differently. My journal writing helps me look at my teaching and mentoring in a fresh way. It also gives me new ideas. I hope that journal writing will help you see your teaching in fresh ways and give you new ideas, too...

I want to tell you some things that are great about your entry. You write about a real struggle for you. Your entry is super honest. It is also very thoughtful. Clearly, you've been thinking a lot about journal writing. You are finding that the writing schedule we decided on may not work for you. Best of all, you are eager to try something new and make this work. My friend, I was ready to give up after my first entry. But, enough about me—I applaud your effort.

Next time, please write about one moment during a day when you talked with a child during an activity. Write a paragraph about that conversation. Tell me what the child said. Tell me what you said. As you look back, tell me how you feel the conversation went. Tell me if there is anything you would do differently next time. Rose, I'd also like to invite you to put a personal stamp on your journal. I like to use colored pens and include photos or pictures that inspire me. Sometimes, I include quotes that I really like. Would you like to do that? Or, do you have other ideas? Also, before you start your next entry, take five minutes and write everything down that is on your mind. That really helps me clear my mind and get "warmed up" to write about my teaching...Then, let's look at your second entry and talk about journal writing the next time we meet. And, let's come up with a writing schedule that makes more sense for you. You're off to a much better start than you think, Rose! I look forward to seeing you very soon.

Discussion Questions

1. What did Namiko write that was helpful?

2. How did Namiko stimulate Rose's thinking?

3. What other things could Namiko have written to support Rose and encourage her journal writing?

EXERCISE 2: RESPONDING TO JOURNAL ENTRIES

You will have a partner for this exercise. The following dialogue journal entries contain reflections from two different teachers, Amy and Carlos, about children in their classrooms. Decide which entry you will respond to. Your partner will respond to the other. Read the protégé’s entry. Using the space provided, write back to the protégé. When you are finished, swap pages with your partner. Read his or her responses and jot down notes, ideas, or questions that you might make. Be prepared to share your ideas with your partner.

Dialogue Journal Entry: Amy

October 20th

I’m trying to work on my goal from our last conference. I’m trying to take more time to talk with children during the day. But, this week I’m feeling really frustrated. This morning, I was in the block corner. A bunch of children were building a house. We were talking about the different parts of the house—the roof, doors, windows, chimney. And, we were talking about who lives in the house. Everybody was really excited and into it, except for Amy. Amy wasn’t paying attention. Then, she started knocking down the blocks and kicking them around. It made me upset, but I tried not to show it. I just can’t seem to get Amy to slow down and join in activities and conversations. She’s spunky and bright and has lots of energy. But, somehow I can’t get through to her. Or, maybe she can’t get through to me? Sometimes it seems like she wants to tell me something but she gets frustrated and acts out. Well, one thing’s for sure. We’re both getting frustrated, and I’m getting stumped.

RESPONSE TO JOURNAL WRITER

FEEDBACK ON RESPONSE

Dialogue Journal Entry: Carlos

May 11th

Carlos is the sweetest little boy. Although he is 2 years old, he hardly speaks, and I worry about him. And, I worry about if I'm being a good teacher for him. I've met his parents, and they're very nice and seem very interested in how Carlos is doing. Today, we were all at the water table. Carlos was hanging back and seemed shy about joining in. I went over and squatted down with him, and handed him a red plastic cup—that was what everybody was doing. They were all playing with different kinds of containers—filling them with water, pushing them under the surface, letting them float on the top. I was asking them questions about what they were doing. When I led Carlos to the water table, he started filling his cup with water, too, but he couldn't join our conversation. I felt bad about that. I pointed to his cup and said, "Carlos! You just filled that with water! What are you going to do now?" But, he just smiled.

RESPONSE TO JOURNAL WRITER

FEEDBACK ON RESPONSE

Discussion Questions

1. What are some of the thoughts that went through your head as you responded to the sample entry?

2. Was it hard to write feedback? How did it feel?

3. Do these entries and the feedback raise any questions for you about your work with protégés—or their work with children?

EXERCISE 3: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT PLAN

Think back on the information in this module:

- Learning about the key ingredients of effective dialogue journals
- Supporting and encouraging protégés to write about their work with children
- Using reflective writing as a professional development strategy.

Take a few moments to reflect on these questions:

1. What did you learn about your knowledge and skills in using dialogue journaling with your protégés?

2. What are some skills you would like to practice? What additional knowledge do you want to acquire?

3. How will this information influence your work as a Mentor-Coach?

Based on your reflections, revisit your Professional Development Plan and make any necessary updates.

WRAP-UP

- Continue on to the next module in this unit (Unit 3, Module 4). You may complete the exercises on your own or with a colleague.
- Before the next facilitated session, be sure to complete Module 1 in Unit 4.
- Note the time and location of the next *Steps to Success* session (Unit 4, Module 2).

STEP-Doc 3.3a: Guidelines for Dialogue Journals

A dialogue journal is a written, reflective conversation between protégé and Mentor-Coach. Given some helpful guidelines to focusing writing, the protégé initiates and directs the conversation by writing about his or her work with children. The protégé reflects on experiences, asks questions, and comes up with ideas to try something different. As the Mentor-Coach, you offer feedback, questions, support, ideas, and resources in writing.

To make this strategy successful, you must first discuss dialogue journaling with your protégé. In your discussion, be sure to cover the key points described below.

Purpose and Benefits of Dialogue Journals. Protégés can use journal writing to take time out to think about their work with children, their successes, and their challenges. Many busy professionals use journal writing to take a breath and reflect on their work. When they step out of the whirl of their busy days, they find they can see things in a new way and come up with new ideas to try. Dialogue journals are helpful because they provide a chance to continue the reflective conference in writing.

Time Commitment. With your protégés, discuss and agree on how often they will write in their journals.

Feedback Schedule. Discuss and agree upon how often and when you will submit the journal to each other for feedback and responses.

Confidentiality. Like much else in mentor-coaching, trust is a key aspect of effective journaling. Let your protégés know that the contents of their dialogue journals are for your eyes only. Make sure they know that you will not discuss their entries with anyone else, including their supervisors.

Content. If you work with protégés who are very experienced, or familiar with journaling, let them take the initiative in choosing a writing focus at the start. If protégés are new to journaling, begin by giving them writing prompts—a focus for their writing or some thought-provoking questions to answer. Sometimes, protégés who are new to journal writing give “blow-by-blow” descriptions of classroom activities instead of reflecting on their work with children. Or, they may not know how to begin the “dialogue”; a blank notebook can be intimidating. Here is an example of a writing prompt:

Is there a child in your classroom who seems to be having a hard time speaking and communicating ideas, feelings, and questions? Why do you think this is? Write a brief description of a challenge you've experienced in working with this child. Is there anything you could have done differently?

Option for Scheduling a Reflective Conference. Encourage protégés to schedule conferences to discuss journal entries or your feedback. Let them know that you will ask them to meet with you occasionally to discuss the journal process or to talk about specific entries. If your protégés write about something that concerns you, schedule a conference to discuss it.

Guidelines for Providing Feedback

Make sure your protégés know that you will not evaluate or grade their journals. Tell them that you are interested in their ideas. Each time you provide feedback on an entry, make sure to emphasize protégés' strengths. Provide positive feedback and encouragement on each entry.

Dialogue journals give you and your protégé another chance to engage in reflective conversations. When you respond to journal entries, don't just tell your protégé what to do. As in a reflective conference, your role is to facilitate the protégé's reflection and to let the protégé lead the conversation.

You might want to refer to Unit 1, Module 2, to think about the role of a Mentor-Coach. You can also use these questions from *Putting the PRO in Protégé*:

- Why do you think that happened?
- What did you want to happen?
- What were you thinking about when this situation occurred?
- What would you do differently next time?

Do not correct the grammar, punctuation, or spelling in dialogue journals. Protégés need to feel free to focus on reflecting and analyzing their work with children.

Some protégés may be worried about their writing skills. If this is the case, be very encouraging. Ask them if they want to work on their writing skills. If they do, help them set goals and provide options for training, support, and resources.

As you keep the journal over time, refer back to earlier entries to help protégés see their growth. Also, encourage protégés to look back at their earlier entries to track their thinking and progress. Point out changes in their self-awareness, their ability to reflect and assess their practice, the success of the new ideas they have tried or their attempts to try new strategies, and the key questions that they ask over time. Praise all of their efforts to reflect on their work in writing and stress their successes.

You have a great opportunity to help your protégés feel successful in their journal writing. If they do, journaling can become a lifelong learning habit that will greatly benefit their practice throughout their careers.