What happens when we journal?

By Melody R. Bynum Pickle, Ph.D.

When we journal, we capture moments of time in words, drawings, and symbols. Capturing these moments in the pages of a journal is an important way people make meaning, preserve memories, share experiences. Journals are developmental pathways in which people can come to know their minds, grow into who they can become, and sow knowledge and insights into the larger world.

Journaling is a way for us to know our own minds because the primary way that people understand their world, make sense of their world, and consciously understand their reality is through language. An individual’s ability to fix or attach a meaning to a linguistic sign enables him or her to master a meaning, reflect on a meaning, and transfer learning from one situation to another.

Journaling allows us to master a meaning (or know something) because it allows us to articulate our thoughts and know our own minds. Vygotsky (1986) says that we cannot know something until we are ready to articulate it in words, and we are not ready to articulate it in language unless our experiences have led us to this readiness. Vygotsky calls this readiness “the zone of proximal development”. Journaling creates for us a zone in which we can know ourselves by capturing our thoughts on paper for us to read, reflect, and revise. We can learn from the pages of a journal because it brings together the three primary ways we learn.

We learn in the following three ways: (1) We learn by doing. (2) We learn by the depiction of an image. (3) We learn through symbolic representation or language (Emig, 1983). When we write, we simultaneously physically write the text, see the image drawn before us, and create a linguistic symbol. This powerful use of both hemispheres of the brain means that our brain and body are both connected to this writing moment. When we write, we “freeze time,” as Frank Smith (1994) terms it, and immediately create a past and present. The frozen slices of time that we capture in language mean that thought and language are operating at the same time, always powerfully influencing each other.
When we stop and write, we are able to know our own minds and see what we think as we make meaning for ourselves.

Journaling not only helps us to articulate knowledge but also allows us to grow. Because journaling encourages reflection, it helps people grow mentally, emotionally, spiritually, environmentally, and in every human aspect. Journals are valuable because they allow us to create a tangible and visual record of our experiences. The initial process of recording thoughts and experiences in a journal is important because it is capturing moments, recording memories, as well as starting the process of reflection that is crucial for thinking, learning, knowing and growing.

People who keep journals often say that seeing the physical journal sitting on a bookshelf brings back a flood of memories. For other journal keepers, holding the physical journal in their hands even without opening it brings back the specific memories. In either case, the physical journal is a significant part of memory, reflection, and growth from the experiences.

The power of the tangible journal is that it allows people to re-read, re-think, and re-live past moments in their lives. Extended reflection or re-reflection allows us to not only re-live or re-experience the past but also continually reflect which allows the possibility for continued thinking and growing from the captured experiences. In this way, the written word encourages prolonged scrutiny of what we have written and thus encourages more private thought and personal growth (Britton et al, 1975, Ong, 2001). Therefore, what we write is not as important as just writing.

Journal writing not only helps us know who we are and grow into who we can become but also allows us to sow the seeds of our meanings, reflections, and insights. Writing enables us to become conscious of who we are as people and who we are in relationship to our environment. It allows us to become conscious of the role we play in our own lives and in the larger world.

According to Jerome Bruner (1990), we understand our lives and our connection to the world and the larger culture through constructing personal narratives. We connect the experiences of our lives by structuring narratives that make meaning and create continuity with our life experiences. As a narrative culture, “Our sense of normative is nourished in narrative, but so is our sense of breach and of exception” (Bruner, 1990, p.
Therefore, the construction of language in the form of narrative is essential for making meaning and constructing the reality of our lives. Journals help us do this. Journaling is valuable because language has the ability to shape our lives, our experience, and the ways in which we understand our world. In order for journals to be useful, it is important to remember the journal is free to be what the journal writer needs it to be. When a journal is a safe space for writing, thinking, musing, drawing, and painting, it is a valuable, indispensable tool. Journal writing enables us to distance ourselves from our experiences which encourages us to reflect on our experiences, know our thoughts, grow from our thoughts, and sow meaningful narratives within which we can make sense of the story of our lives. When we better understand our own stories through journaling, we can influence our own narratives and purposefully shape our own lives - lives we live and share with others.

**Bibliography**


**About the Author**

Melody R. Pickle holds the Ph.D. from Indiana University of Pennsylvania. Her dissertation, *Writing’s Place In Outdoor Experiential Education: A Study Of How Outdoor Educators Use And Value Writing In Experiential Education Settings* is the source for this piece. She has taught composition at two Universities, developed and taught a graduate technical writing, and tutored writing. Her current research includes how to incorporate experiential education techniques into composition pedagogy and
developing curriculum that assists outdoor education programs in utilizing writing to meet state requirements. Currently, she lives with her husband in Bastrop, Texas where she is researching, writing, and raising their son.