*Guidance on Writing a Diary*

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Introduction

Writing a Diary is an exercise in extended reflection on experience. It involves at least three aspects of Kolb’s learning cycle:

having a concrete experience,

reflection on that experience

the development of a new, or adjustment of an old, theory (what he calls abstract conceptualisation)

Moreover, if similar experiences are repeated within relevant period of reflection it might also involve a fourth – active experimentation. This would involve the application of a new theory of action, thought, feelings or values to a new experience relevant to the first one. According, a diary entry should involve at least three element (with active experimentation possibly coming up in a late entry, allowing for further reflection, abstract conceptualisation, etc):

Content

What?

Here you want a clear, focused and engaging description of experience or at most two experiences. Choose an experience/experiences which most engage you and/or are which lend themselves to deep reflection and theory development: something that was, for example, shocking, pleasing, embarrassing, disappointing, unexpected, etc and/or which made your change your views, values, ways of doing things etc; something that lead to self-appraisal, some form of change and/or personal growth (in emotions, understanding, values, experience, etc). You are strongly advised to discuss one or two issues in great detail than skate over a few in superficial detail.

So what?

This involves deep reflection on what the experience(s) meant in terms of ideas, emotions, skills and capacities, and/or values. Ask yourself what did the experience mean to you, what did you learn, how did you feel before, during and after the experience, what went well or less well than you expected or could be expected. In short, ask yourself how has the experience changed me, my ideas, my values, my future plans, etc? What did you think/feel before and how do you think feel now; how does it compare with what you already know from previous experiences, what others have told and what you learnt through study, how did such learning help you understand (or not understand) your experience? Here you can reflect on the implications for further study, for your clinic experience, future career, etc. In other words, what does the experience(s) tell you about legal education, legal practice, justice, ethics, society, other people, etc.

Now what?

What does your reflection means for the future:

what will you do, think or feel differently?

how can you about making further improvements or changes:

what literature can you read, course go on, what person can you speak to – or indeed what do these already consulted sources tell about what you need to do?

General

* Ensure that the diary entries are well-written, well-punctuated, grammatical, clearly structured, free of typos, etc. You should strive for the same levels of written communication as is required in essays, clinic letters, pleadings, etc,
* Ensure that diaries are submitted for comments, that you respond to comments and that invitations to read further or otherwise gain information are taken up.
* Ensure consistency in quality and quantity of reflection.

Favourable Features of Diaries

* Discussion of experiences that lends itself to deep reflection on relevant topics
* Honest, open and *non-defensive self-appraisal*
* Curiosity
* Awareness of and thinking through perspectives other than one’s own
* *Signs of* Personal growth – change in thoughts, feelings and values as well as knowledge
* Symbiosis between experience, theory and learning
* Use of what taught and what read in reflection
* Strong sense of how experiences lead to new outlook on law, society, other people, being a lawyer, and being a human being

Unfavourable features

* Badly written, eg unclear, ungrammatical, stream of consciousness writing, repetitive and waffly
* Bland and descriptive
* Over or well-under the word limit
* No submission for comments
* No response or very thin response to comments

Marking Criteria

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Unsatisfactory | Satisfactory | Competent | Good  | Excellent |
| Length | Very brief, no response to comments | Mostly uses full word length in initial entries and provides some responses | Mostly uses full word length in initial entries and responses  | Use full length, full response to all comments | Use full length, full response to all comments |
| Style | Very Bland, highly descriptive, opaque | Mostly bland description, not very clear | Clear but mixture of bland description and more engaging writing | Clear and costly engaging | Crystal clear and highly engaging |
| Presentation | Ungrammatical, littered with spelling mistakes, typos | A substantial number of typos, and grammatical, spelling errors | A few typos, and grammatical, spelling errors | No grammatical, spelling errors, and only a few typos | Free of all errors |
| Structure | Stream of consciousness, repetitive | Some structure but mostly stream of consciousness and some repetition | Largely well-structured , with some lapses | Well-structured , albeit occasionally a bit “flabby” | Clear narrative structure, concise and succinct |
| Analysis | Description only, no attempt to learn from experience | More description than analysis | Mixture of description & analysis;  | Good balance between analysis & description; some use of learning from other sources (eg reading, other classes) | Deep analysis and very insightful; excellent use of learning from other sources |
| Reflection on personal development,  | Description only,  | Mostly descriptive one or two insights into personal development, but largely rigid and defensive attitude to change and no self-disclosure | Fair amount of reflection on personal development, with a few good insights and some openness to self-disclosure and change | Some good insights into personal development and openness to change | Extremely insightful about personal development, open to change |
| Reflection on law, justice, ethics, professionalism and future career | Description only, no reflection | Mostly descriptive but one or two insights into law, justice etc | Fair amount of reflection on law, justice etc | Some good insights into law, justice etc | Extremely insightful about law, justice etc |

Note:

the above categories of unsatisfactory, etc roughly correspond to a fail, 3rd, 2.2, 2.1 and a first.

the various elements are not equally weighted. For instance, elements relating to substance (analysis and reflection) are far more important than those relating to presentation. Thus really insightful entries with a few typos and even grammatical and spelling errors may still gain a first class mark; on the other hand, even well structured, perfectly written and lengthy entries which are bland and purely descriptive will struggle to fall into more than the “satisfactory” category, unless there is at least some reflection.

Further Reading

Gibbs, Learning by Doing: A Guide to Teaching and Learning (1998) (electronic access)

Maughan And Webb, Lawyering Skills And The Legal Process (2005), Ch. 2 Esp, Pp. 44-46