

“Dear Diary” A Learning Tool for Adults

By Rachel S. Christensen

Lifelong Learning: The Adult Years, 5(2), 1981, 4-5, 31

The adult learner is here to stay. We know from studies exploring the extent of adult learning what a high percentage of adults are actively involved in learning projects. Observers of these learners are recommending that tools be developed to assist lifelong learners in accomplishing learning tasks more effectively.

A particular tool, which has been serving adult learners for centuries, yet about which little is known, is the diary or personal journal. Its most familiar form is as a chronological record of personal or historical events. It is also commonly used as a trip or project log. However, another form of journal recording has emerged in this introspective 20th century in which the content emphasizes one's feelings and reflections on an event, rather than stressing the factual information. It is this approach that can have relevance for lifelong learners.

The Interest in Diaries and Journals

The writing of diaries and journals has been frequently practiced by those involved in a religious life or in the creative arts. We can also turn to such pioneers of modern psychology as Freud, Jung, and Adler to learn from them the significance in recording one's dreams, fantasies, inner thoughts, and feelings. In recognizing the subconscious as an influence in human development, they opened a door for new exploration of personality.

Journal researcher, Tristine Rainer (1978), identifies four pioneers of psychology and literature in this century who helped conceptualize the principles of modern journal writing: Carl Jung, Marion Milner, Ira Progoff, and Anais Nin. These writers and thinkers believed that the personal journal permits the writer to tap valuable inner resources by recording dreams, inner imagery, intuitive writing, and even drawings.

There have been an increasing number of seminars and workshops available to adult learners on journal writing. What is it that is being described? It is, as Rainer titles her book, *The New Diary*. In other words, it is something beyond the popular notion of diary as a chronological entry of events usually made on a daily basis. In this newer form there are no rules of composition. The content, structure, and style are up to the writer. No one will judge or grade this paper and the degree of sharing and privacy is left in the writer's hands. As Rainer (1978) states, "For some people learning to be free in their diaries is a way of learning to be free with themselves." This may explain the current interest in journal writing. The experience of journal keeping frees people to explore and develop their potentials and abilities. These are goals which have been strongly encouraged by the human potential movement and which have foundations in the current interest in self-directed adult learning.

Finding the Inner Self

This tendency toward continued growth and self-actualization is part of the evidence uncovered by Canadian researcher, Allen Tough (1971), in studying the learning projects of adults. He went beyond the initial surveys of adult learning projects to look more closely at how adults approach these projects, what resources they use, and what problems they encounter. His interviews and the subsequent interviews of other researchers with adult learners tell us that self-

teaching is the method most often used. Tough and many others have also found the qualities of self-reliance and self-awareness prevalent among active adult learners.

As we assess the needs of lifelong learners, the journal or diary should be considered as a resource which encourages and enhances self-reliance and self-awareness. It is in the solitude of blank pages that adults can reflect on their life experience, contemplate future directions, and come to trust more deeply their own answers.

Finding the inner self is not an easy task when the modern fast-paced culture provides little space for contemplation. Like the Mad Hatter in *Alice in Wonderland*, we're often in too great a hurry to listen to our inner wisdom. Encouraged by the values of a technological age, we try to produce more at a faster rate. So too in education, where some say, "How can we help adults learn more and how can they learn faster?" Yet isn't there a sacrifice made when you travel by superhighway and miss the beauty of country roads?

Thus, the journal is one means for providing a safeguard against this tendency in our culture. The outer-directed emphasis in our lives can be countered with an emphasis on inner direction by taking time to write and reflect in the journal. As we become better listeners to the inner movement of ourselves, we become less dependent on external definition or advice from the experts, and more affirming of our unique resources and abilities.

Much of our creativity is seeded in unconscious parts of the personality. It is in moments of solitude that insights are able to float to our consciousness and be recognized. In his book *The Courage to Create*, Rollo May (1975) writes of the hesitancy people have in being quiet and alone long enough to listen to inner levels. They are wary of what might be heard. Yet, May finds a "fascinating relationship" between creativity and unconscious phenomena. It is in those moments away from rational thinking that the intuitive self can break through with creative insight. Unconscious dimensions of experience are always at work; still there is reluctance to pause and listen to the messages. If creativity can be tapped from the deeper levels within, then adult learners need to be introduced to ways of using the journal as a means of recording these connections.

Using Journal Writing

How does one begin? My own experience started in high school with a bound book entitled "My Private Life." It still sits on my bookshelf and I treasure the contents, chuckling each time I read it.

Perceptions I now hold firmly were taking root at that time, as evidenced in the entries. Following is a recording made in 1959:

It seemed like going steady was a fad in the winter of '59. Everyone was attached except me. Sometimes I'd wish to be able to go steady with someone, but it would soon pass. Someday I'll find my man; he won't be perfect, but he'll be what I want. If I don't find him, who cares? I will be a rich old maid English teacher.

My interest in journal keeping was not revived until 10 years later when I began a career transition. The approach I took then was to use the pages of a spiral bound notebook as space to develop a "roadmap" for myself during that time of ambiguity and uncertainty about my future

direction. The journal served as a place for me to organize my learning activities between jobs and to evaluate what had been accomplished at particular intervals.

As I became more comfortable in writing these objective entries, self-consciousness waned and there appeared to be more description of feelings and personal reactions to people and events in my life. The realization that my journal would not be open to outside scrutiny also lowered inhibitions. Entries were not made frequently, but often enough to benefit my personal growth. Following are more recent entries from my journal:

(Portion of a letter to friend, 1971)

This is the first time I've had so much unstructured time that it is somewhat frightening; because it is I that must take responsibility for structuring my time and not some outside factor, i.e. school. Needless to say, it is exciting to begin to shape some creative form in the open "canvas" of time that I call mine this year.

(excerpt from 1973)

God, this has been a depressing year at times. Fortunately the waves have gone up as well as down, so my strength and sense of self returns once again with courage. But it seems my lows have been deeper than I've ever known. Yet I think in coming so directly in contact with my fears, I come out with more courage. I wish my identity and life would hurry up and take more form.

(excerpt from 1974)

Looking through this journal for a few minutes each morning is a way of reminding me of my Self—my soul, my reflective, creative part—in the midst of tasks, errands, chores. To keep in touch with Me a bit each day keeps creative energies growing.

Understanding the variety of ways to maintain journals has expanded with each new resource I discover—friends who utilize particular techniques or those who have organized a framework for teaching and encouraging others in the practice of journal work.

The most thorough and concise framework has been developed by Ira Progoff, a psychologist and founder of Dialogue House in New York City. His perspective on the human personality is influenced by C. J. Jung with whom he studied in Europe. His approach to journal work is based on 10 years spent as Director of the Institute for Research in Depth Psychology at the Graduate School of Drew University, where he and his staff collected the life histories of a wide spectrum of persons in order to study adult development. He also drew upon his experience and experimentation with the use of journals, both for himself and in his therapeutic practice.

Having tested, expanded, and refined this framework in hundreds of journal workshops, Progoff's *Intensive Journal* method allows people to start wherever they are and begin to bring focus and clarity to their lives. He describes it as "a method of working privately at the inner levels of our life" (Progoff, 1975). The method is referred to as the Intensive Journal in that it is not simply a passive record of events, but rather an active system of dialogue and feedback among the various sections.

Progoff is critical of the spontaneous method of journal work, the danger being that a person could keep "eloquently moving in circles" forever if the contents are not used in such a way as to bring new self-understanding and forward momentum. He also finds a journal can be limiting when it is used only to reach a pre-decided goal, in that it is "not related to the large

development of life as a whole." When an individual's attitudes are fixed and inflexible, and the goals already chosen, a journal then becomes a "static tool . . . not an instrument of growth but of self-justification" (Progoff, 1975).

It is important to Progoff that this tool be as free as possible from imposition of others' values and that it be used by the learner without assistance from any outside authority, once the method is understood. Diarists must be able to dialogue among the journal sections with only themselves as guides.

Tristine Rainer, mentioned earlier, is less critical of spontaneous entries. She sees the diary as a place for the intuitive and rational to form creative fusion.

She has discovered among all the journals she has collected and read some techniques and modes of expression utilized by the diarists. Many examples are included in her book (Rainer, 1978), illustrating such tools as guided imagery, dialogue, a list, the unsent letter, a map of consciousness. An entire chapter is devoted to dreamwork and what it can tell us about ourselves and our future directions. Rainer points out that re-reading past journal entries can illuminate patterns of development and give us important clues to our interests and desires.

She is especially helpful in identifying common blocks in beginning to write and suggests ways of dealing with them. The judgment we bring to our writing is an important inhibitor. She emphasizes that the diary is no place to be perfect. The less shy we can be about writing our true feelings, the more intimate we can be with ourselves. Which will remove another inhibitor—the fear that what we say on paper will be boring. Over time the diarist will reveal his or her natural writing style and will allow a natural voice to be heard in the contents.

Rainer encourages diarists to use what they already have—their own experience—and get at this in whatever way is easiest. As more is learned about the continued developmental growth of adults, the journal becomes an excellent means for adults to observe and better understand the stages of their own adult development.

Implications for Adult Education

In reviewing literature in the adult education field, emphasis and value are given to one's life experience. Writers such as Ron Gross and Allen Tough are interested in helping adults learn how to learn better. The first step Gross recommends is to Know Thyself. He tells his readers, "Begin to pay attention to yourself as a changing, developing and growing person. Notice how you behave in different situations, how you respond to different people and problems," (Gross, 1977). With this knowledge adults become more clear on what concerns them most, particularly as a learner.

Gross considers the learning log or diary as the most important tool for the learner, especially the learner who perceives his or her learning as lifelong and chooses to pursue learning in varied ways. The journal can be started with whatever is of most interest to the learner at the time—planning career goals, understanding personal relationships, or exploring unconscious realms of experience.

The individual's learning process becomes more apparent as experiences related to a learning project are recorded. Idea fragments swimming around in the head find connections on paper and grow into other new and better ideas. In addition, the diary can be used as an evaluative tool for the learner to review past activities and project future directions.

Although Tough doesn't write directly about a learning log, he does describe effective lifelong learners as being self-aware, self-reliant, and self-directed (Tough, 1971). He recom-

mends that resources and assistance be designed to support these qualities in all adult learners. Tough is quite concerned that adult learners become more competent and confident in their learning. Many of them are excessively modest about their learning as well as weak in self-planning skills. He indicates that further study is needed to help people develop skills at planning and conducting their own learning projects.

The personal journal is one learning tool which can be an integral part of this process. Its application needs to be encouraged among learners as a means for stimulating thought and for planning and evaluating learning projects, as well as an enrichment for one's whole life. In addition, the journal serves to keep adults connected with a true sense of self. In a pragmatic way, the journal never becomes obsolete; it is flexible, inexpensive, and uses what the learner already possesses—his or her own life story.

References

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