



Teaching Method

***Working with Reflective Essays
and Project Diaries***

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Description of method

Project diaries are particularly insightful in project based courses and can be used in any courses. They require relatively little effort and provide students with a meaningful way to reflect on their own work over time in a structured manner. In addition, they provide critical insights into the learning of students for outside observers and act therefore as a meaningful evaluation tool. They also require next to no technological preparation, training or supervision from an administrative perspective.

- Students are asked to keep a diary of their activities in the course.
- Ideally they would take 5-10 minutes after each session (on site or at home, in group or alone) to write down the following (and anything else they deem could be important):
 - What they worked on,
 - Which methods they used,
 - Which problems they experienced in the methods,
 - How they experienced the teamwork.
- At the end of the course they group their notes by meaningful project steps (not by day, that would be too detailed) and reflect the problems they had again from hindsight, usually compiling 8–12 pages.
- It is possible to provide students with a mandatory template or require a specific format for the diary and reflection. However, diaries tend to become more interesting and personal if just students are only provided with mandatory content elements, with open form and additional additional content.

It is important that problems and emotions are noted down as they are





experienced, because writing all this down from memory at the end of the project lacks detail and misses insight in the original motivations, as actions tend to get rationalized in hindsight. As a particular phenomenon in creative processes the final result often tends to seem so obvious to students, that they feel they should have known this from the start and just wasted time with the research and ideation process. They ignore that they had been at a totally different level of knowledge at the time of the first project briefing and cannot imagine the state of “not knowing” what they learnt during the project.

Why to use

Diaries are used for a number of purposes:

1. Get different perspectives of the same project work
2. Discuss and solve problems in team collaboration
3. As a means of evaluating and improving courses
4. As basis for individual grading team work
5. Making students aware of their learning process and use it as basis for consultations

Purposes 1–3 are especially valuable in the context of creative online collaboration. As teachers we can observe in a project what the students do and how they do it. We observe them succeeding and making mistakes, but we do not get deeper insights into why certain things are difficult, why certain mistakes are made. To get those insights, we need further methods, e.g. consultations.

In user experience research, diaries are used to capture recent experiences when running field tests. Their purpose is to get insight about the motivation of actions and the mental models they derive their actions from. In teaching, they fulfil the same purpose: Document the individual project experience and the “why” behind their activities in the project.

In student teams that have a high level of mutual trust, diaries may be used to reflect the methods and the teamwork between the students.

If students feel not comfortable of exposing their diaries to others, the





teacher can act as a mediator, highlighting and discussing prevailing issues.

As a side effect, writing a diary encourages students to reflect and integrate knowledge, strengthening the depth of the competencies acquired through the course.

How to analyse

Reading and discussing project diaries without any elaborated method already can be of great value. However, if it is intended to use diaries as a source on how to improve a course and the learning process, a basic approach to qualitative content analysis is needed:

1. Agree on what you want to look for in the diaries. One way is to look for utterances of emotion like joy and frustration. Another way is to look for negations or problems in the process, i.e. anything they could not do. A further way can be to define categories up front, like presence, trust etc.
2. Read through the diary and note down all passages (a few words to max. 3 sentences) that match the criteria you have agreed upon in step 1. Put them into a table, adding a personal note each about why you think that passage is relevant.
3. Using the table, try to summarize each row in one keyword.
4. Try to cluster the keywords into 5–7 categories.
5. Summarize and discuss your findings along the categories you identified.

This approach is common practise in applied user experience research. However, if you intend to use the diaries for scientific research, be sure to apply a more rigorous methodology.



How to interpret and use for improving online collaboration

Once you have found your problem categories, you can use the resources on the OnCreate web page (and any other resources on online collaboration) to find fitting solutions — or design solutions on your own.

If you have the opportunity to enter a dialogue with your students on the diaries, you can collaboratively reflect the process in-depth and search for solutions as a team.

Example

Ideation


Defining the problem – Brainstorming

Following the DESIGN THINKING METHOD we deepen the process of ideation in the following team meeting in Magdeburg (6 May). We present and discuss our two „Points of Views“ (POVs) based on the „5 Whys“-Method for „street art“ and „biking“. We also do a deeper BRAINSTORMING, individual and collective to get a deeper understanding of the two topics. We focus on the the two issues by integrating the aquired knowledge based on the research process gathered during the online period. To visualize our ideas/problems we create two sketching boards. As a result of the brainstorming we try to identify „the“ problem by looking at both issues considering

- the inspiration factor
- the public value
- the market opportunity
- the data aggregation and
- the gravity of the problem.

The session ends with disappointment because we cannot agree on one topic. Our main points of disput are:

- the lack of a concrete objective
- the lack of relevance
- the lack of a defined target group and
- the danger of stereotypes.


(Photos: M. Mollenhauer)

Literature

Cox, Elaine (2005): Adult Learners Learning from Experience: Using a Reflective Practice Model to Support Work-based Learning. *Reflective Practice* 6 (4):459–72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14623940500300517>.