My journey with learning logs

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Two studies show that learning logs and the oral sharing of them can be effective and motivating.

My first encounter with learning logs was 14 years ago. It was my first semester of graduate school, and my reading professor required us to do a learning log on the book *Content Area Reading* by Vacca and Vacca (1989). The type of learning log we were to use was the T-chart, where you divide a regular piece of notebook paper down the middle with a vertical line. On the left side, you jot down notes from the text that drew your attention, and on the right, you write your reaction or comments about the reading. Page numbers go in the left-hand margin.

There was nothing spectacular or new about that. Learning logs, or reading response logs, have long been established as an effective reading strategy that helps students learn from text (Atwell, 1987; Blough & Berman, 1991; Calkins, 1986; Commander & Smith, 1996; Kuhrt & Farris, 1990; Reed, 1988; Sanders, 1985). Vacca and Vacca (1999) stated, “When teachers integrate writing and reading, they help students use writing to think about what they will read and to understand what they have read” (p. 261). Vacca and Vacca (1999) stated, “When teachers integrate writing and reading, they help students use writing to think about what they will read and to understand what they have read” (p. 261). McIntosh and Draper (2001) stated, “We have found that students are willing to write more when we respond to what they have written” (p. 555).

I have also learned the importance of responding to my students’ logs. I have found that the more I write in response to students, the more they write to me. This is congruent with the findings of McIntosh and Draper (2001) who stated, “We have found that students are willing to write more when we respond to what they have written” (p. 555).

Because I was now required to record something on paper from my reading, I did the learning log. As I began skimming through the beginning of the text, I found that certain headings did catch my attention. This concept of reading a textbook for interest changed everything for me as a reader. That book became the first textbook I ever read in its entirety, and I knew then that when I became a college teacher, which was my goal, I would ask my students to do learning logs. I’ve since learned from the literature that establishing a purpose for reading is extremely important for students to gain more information from text (Harris & Sipay, 1990; Paul & Elder, 2003; Vacca & Vacca, 1999).

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My college students wrote wonderful, thoughtful comments to the text and started asking me questions in their logs they wouldn’t have asked in class. The learning logs were helping me know what my students were learning and what I needed to discuss more in class, but I had 100 students that first semester, so that was 100 learning...
logs a week for several weeks. I still wanted to use the learning logs because we were both learning so much from them, but I started requiring fewer, shorter logs. I generally read only the right side of the page (the side with their comments) so I was able to read and respond to them fairly quickly.

However, something was still missing. I was getting great responses from my students about the text, but I also wanted us to talk about the text together in class. One day, on a whim, before I passed around the assignment folder for the students to turn in their learning logs, I asked each student to share one thing from his or her learning log. I asked for a volunteer to go first. From there, other students jumped in and said things like, “I’ll go next because I wrote about the same thing.” Even when students talked about the same topic, they had different responses to it, so the discussions were deeper. As with any class, the more quiet students waited until last, but I asked that every student share once.

I was amazed at the in-depth discussion of the text that day. I hadn’t lectured; it wasn’t a question-and-answer period; it was a give-and-take discussion of ideas based on the text reading with students sharing ideas back and forth. It shouldn’t be surprising that adding social interaction to the learning process would make learning more meaningful for students. Many researchers have stressed the importance of social interaction to learning (Harvey & Goudvis, 2000; Kaiden, 1998; Smith, 1998; Vacca & Vacca, 1999). Gee (2001) contended, “reading and writing cannot be separated from speaking, listening, and interacting, on the one hand, or using language to think about and act on the world, on the other” (p. 714).

Paratore and McCormack (1997) compiled an entire text, Peer Talk in the Classroom: Learning From Research, based on the findings of researchers on the significance of talking to learn. In a chapter in that book, Almasi and Gambrell (1997) stated, “Participation in peer discussions improves students’ ability to monitor their understanding of text, to verbalize their thoughts, to consider alternative perspectives, and to assume responsibility for their own learning” (p. 152). They further contended, “Increasing students’ opportunities to engage in peer-led discussions also increases their opportunities to learn from and to support one another’s learning” (p. 152).

The strategy of combining social interaction with the written learning logs worked so well that the next time I planned it ahead of time. I told students they would again be sharing one entry from their learning log with the class. They needed to bring their books to class because, as each student would read their chosen sentence(s) from the text aloud, I wanted us all to read along silently. It was just like the learning log only it was oral. Again, the discussion of the text was thorough. We discussed an entire chapter. They brought up almost every main point I had wanted to make.

Because the purpose of any course is to teach the content, I use every opportunity to stress the important points from the text and weave them into the discussion. I come into the class knowing what I want the students to learn from the text, so I am watching for opportunities to embed that information in the discussion. If no one brings up a particular point I want students to know, then I bring it up. I have a list of the important points either in my mind or written down.

**College students’ perception of the strategy**

As a teacher, I have been very pleased with how well the strategy of written learning logs and oral sharing of them works with my students, but I was curious to see if students also felt it was beneficial. Although the effectiveness of learning logs has been well documented in the literature, as mentioned previously, I wanted to know if the added element of social interaction was also effective in helping students learn. In order to find out, I constructed a short 12-question survey. I used the strategy several times in each of my five
classes and asked a colleague to use the strategy several times in one of her classes. I surveyed a total of 123 students, a group composed of 84 undergraduate students and 39 graduate students.

The results from both the undergraduates and graduates were similar. What pleased me more than anything was the response to the following multiple-choice question: Choose the answer that most applies to you: (a) I read the entire assigned text, (b) I read only enough of the text to complete the learning log, and (c) I did not read any of the assigned text. Not one single student out of 123 answered (c). That means 100% of the students read at least some of the text. That never happens. Seventy-one percent read the entire text while 29% read only enough to complete the log.

Just as I had felt as a student that reading for interest made a difference, so had my students. When asked, 92% of both undergraduates and graduate students reported they understood and remembered the text better when reading for interest rather than when reading for what would be on a test. Ninety percent of these students reported that talking about the text helped them remember the material better, and 94% of them stated that they gained new perspectives from the discussion of the text that they had not thought of previously.

Middle school and high school students’ perception of the strategy

Because I am a teacher of preservice and inservice teachers, I wanted to know if this same procedure of responding to text in writing and orally would be equally effective in middle school and high school classrooms. My university is fortunate to have a laboratory school, so I contacted one of the history teachers and asked her to try the strategy with her students. She assigned the text to one of her ninth-grade classes, asked students to complete the learning logs, and then each student shared one thing from his or her learning log with the rest of class. She tried it once and was so pleased with the results that she invited me to come observe the class when she used it again. I couldn’t write fast enough to keep up with the comments these ninth-grade students made. They responded the same way my college students had. The discussion was rich and covered the material in the text well.

We decided this high school experience might be a pilot for a larger study. The teacher used the strategy three times, and then we constructed a short questionnaire to ascertain student opinions on the effectiveness of the strategy in helping them learn. The results were similar to what I had seen on the college level, so I invited another colleague who is a statistician to join us for our study. We strengthened the survey, and then I found about 10 middle school and high school teachers who were willing to try the strategy three times with their students and then administer the questionnaire.

We ended up with 547 surveys from students in grades 7–12. The responses from the middle school and high school students were not as overwhelmingly positive as those of the college students, but some of the findings were similar. In this study, 54% of the students reported they read the entire assigned text, 44% read just enough to complete the log, and 2% did not read any of the assigned text. That’s still 98% of the students reading at least some of the assigned text as opposed to 100% of the college students.

While 92% of the college students reported they understood and remembered the text better when reading for interest rather than for what would be on a test, 72% of the middle school and high school students reported it helped them to better understand and remember text. Ninety percent of college students reported that talking about the text helped them remember the material better, but only 43% of middle school and high school students felt that talking about the text helped them remember the text better. In contrast, 94% of the college students reported they gained new perspectives from the discussions.
they had not thought of previously, while 65% of the middle school and high school students stated they gained new perspectives from the discussions. This seems to show that both groups felt they learned more from the discussions than they did from actually sharing something themselves.

Discussion

I have learned that motivation to read is very important. I cannot tell from the data I collected why the college students found more success with the strategy than the middle and high school students, but I would guess it is because of who my college students are. They are either seniors about to become teachers or graduate students who are already teachers. They are, for the most part, there to learn. They share a common goal. They are eager to learn ways to become effective teachers. They know what they want to know, so when they read, they know what they are looking for. When I tell them to read the text for what interests them, I know they’ll find something of interest. I am confident that students will learn from the text; I just needed a way to get them to pick it up and read it.

The scenario for the middle school and high school teachers in my study could not have been more different. Generally speaking, middle and high school students are not eager learners. As a rule, most are more interested in completing the assignment for the grade than they are in learning. Whatever the case, 72% of the 547 middle and high school students surveyed reported that reading for what interested them helped them understand and remember text better than when reading for what would be on a test. Well over half of the students, 65%, stated they gained new perspectives from the discussions of the text. The majority of students in both groups seemed to find that reading for interest and participating in a discussion about the text helped them learn from the text. Those may have been the motivating factors in helping them read and understand the text.

Bring text to life

Learning logs and oral sharing are now standard operating procedure in just about every class I teach. The oral sharing seems to bring the text to life (Hurst, 1999). I have found that using them about three times in a semester works well for me. More than that becomes a bore for the students and a chore for me. Learning logs are just one of a myriad of effective reading strategies.

In a recent graduate course, I assigned learning logs but did not plan class time for students to share their responses orally. The class progressed just fine, but I noticed that the students didn’t seem to be interacting as much or bonding as much as usual. It occurred to me then that I hadn’t ever asked students to share anything from their logs, so I assigned the sharing of them for the next class period. The discussion caught like wildfire. They were yearning to talk with one another and to share teaching ideas. They were talking about the strategies they were learning in the text, Vacca and Vacca’s Content Area Reading (2004). Sound familiar? This is where my journey started and where it continues today. Kasten (1997) stated, “Peer talk in the process of reading aids and broadens comprehension” (p. 99). A written learning log, followed by student sharing, is one way I’ve found to encourage my students to read and learn from textbooks and one another.

REFERENCES


