8

Journals

Journaling is a popular educational tool to encourage student self-reflection as they engage in the learning process. Like personal diaries, journaling assignments are meant to encourage reflection by forcing the student to write down his thoughts and reflections about a topic. The act of writing the journal entry encourages deeper reflection and more formal thought.
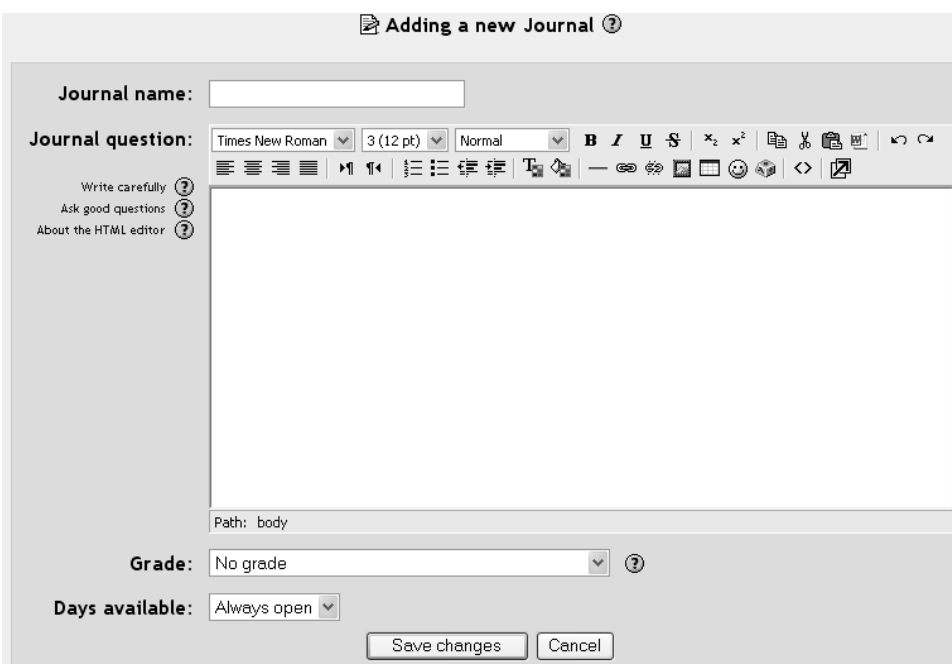
Moodle's journal tool is an electronic journal where students can record their thoughts and reflections. You can use journals to encourage students to reflect on the course and the content in ways which are difficult to do with other tools. The privacy of the journal and the open-ended nature of the response give students a safe space to explore new knowledge.

Creating Journals

Compared to many of the other tools we've discussed so far, creating a journal is relatively simple.

To add a journal to your course:

1. Click Turn Editing Mode On.
2. Select Journal from the Add Activity… menu in the content block where you want to add a journal.
3. Give the journaling assignment a name and a summary, as shown in Figure 8-1.

Figure 8-1.Add a new journal

4. If you are going to grade the assignment, select the grading scale you want to use.
5. Select the number of days you want the journal to be available. The timer starts from the day you create the journal.

You can test your journal by clicking on the name of the assignment in the content block. This will display the journal entry page. This is where students will enter their responses to your journal assignment.

To create a journal entry:

1. Click the name of the journal assignment in the content block on the main course screen. You'll see the Journal summary and a button labeled "Start or edit my journal entry."

2. Click the "Start journal entry" button.

3. You'll be presented with a text area (with the HTML toolbar if enabled), such as the one shown in Figure 8-2. Type your entry and click "Save changes." The entry will be visible to the student each time they click on the Journal assignment

4. You can edit your entry by clicking the "Start or edit my journal entry" button again.
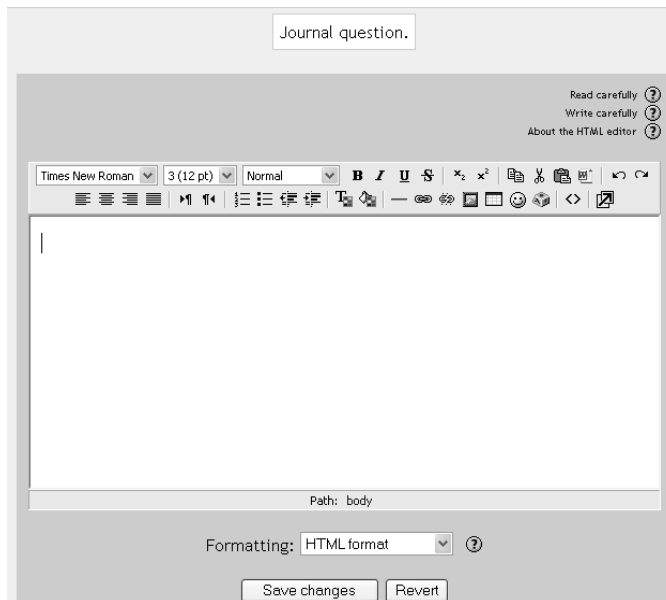

Figure 8-2. Journal entry page

Students can see only one journal entry per journal assignment. If you want students to write multiple journal entries, you'll need to add a journal for each one. For example, if you want students to write one journal entry per week, you'll need to add a journal assignment for every week in the class. Alternatively, you could just add one journal for

the entire class, and students could build on it over the entire course. The grading and reading process could get a bit unwieldy, however.

Managing Journals

Journal entries are visible only to the instructor and the student who wrote them. Once students have begun their journals, you will see a link in the upperright hand corner of the journal assignment page, as shown in Figure 8-3.
You'll see a link labeled "View (some number) journal entries." The number in the link is the number of students who have submitted entries.
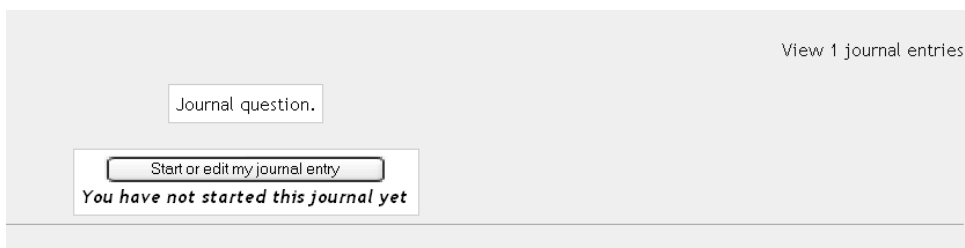

Figure 8-3. Journal page with view entries link

You'll use the link to view the entries and give feedback and grades.

To give feedback and grade journal entries:

1. Click on the journal assignment you want to grade in the content block.

2. Click "View X journal entries" on the journal assignment page.

3. Each journal entry will have a feedback area where you can type your feedback. If you have enabled grading, there will also be a dropdown menu of grade choices (see Figure 8-4). Enter feedback and grades for as many entries as you like.

4. Click "Save all my feedback" at the bottom of the page. You may have to scroll to find the button. Each student will now see their grade and feedback under their entry when they click on the journal assignment in the content block, as shown in Figure 8-5.

If you need to edit your feedback, change the grade, or grade new assignments, you can click on the "View X Journal Entries" link again and simply resave all your feedback.
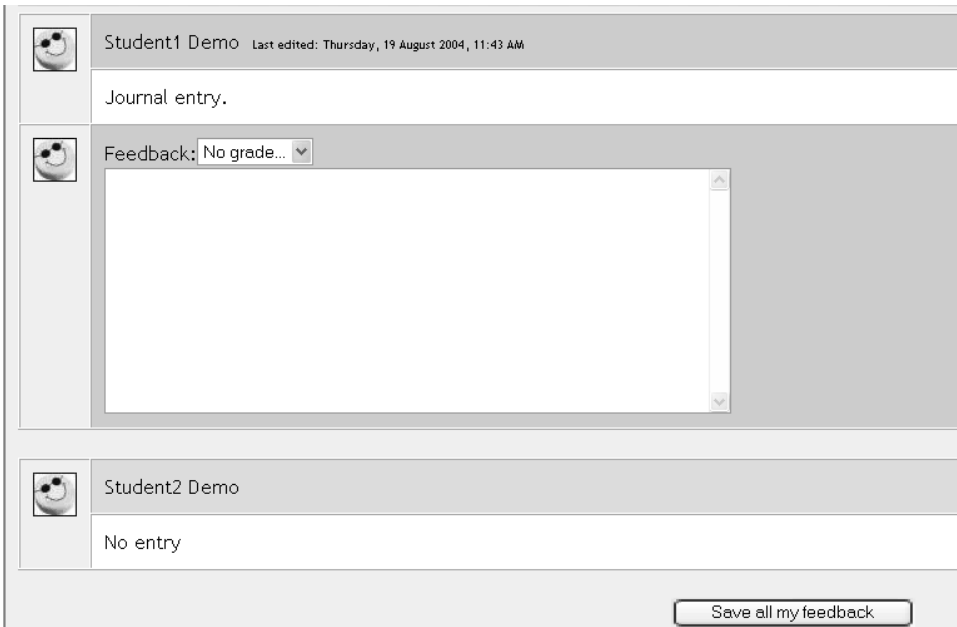
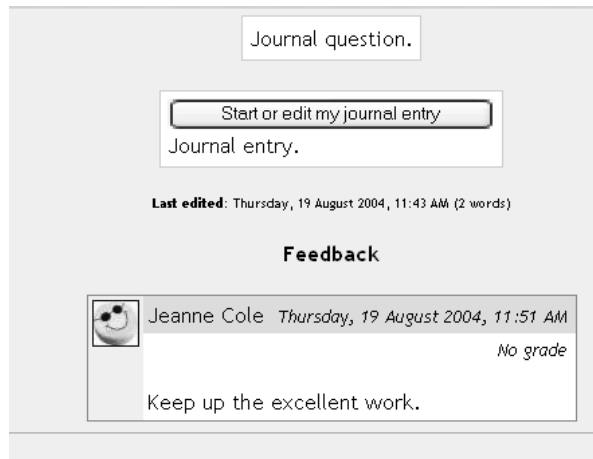*Figure 8-4. Journal feedback page*

Figure 8-5. Entry feedback

Effective Journal Practice

Journals can be a powerful tool for student self-reflection and engagement. To be effective, however, they have to be integrated with the course goals. Be clear with students about why they are journaling and what you hope to see in their journals.

Journal Basics

When you create a journal assignment for students, be very specific about what you want them to write about. Many academic journal assignments suffer from a lack of specificity. Many of the assignments I received as a student were so vague I had difficulty completing them. They were frequently based on page counts, with very few prompts to help guide my thinking. Many of my journal assignments were written the day before they were due. I would sit down with a notebook and three different colored pens, writing each day's entry in a different pen to make it look like I had been writing all along.

Tip: Take advantage of the opportunity for rapid feedback presented by online journals. I was able to get away with writing my entire journal the night before because they were collected only twice a semester. The instructor didn't want to stop us from writing by collecting our journal notebooks too often. Online journals avoid this problem and allow you to give frequent feedback of journal entries.

Even the most open-ended, self-reflective journal can benefit from some prompting or scaffolding. Many students don't have experience writing journals, especially in an academic setting. Giving students interesting prompts can stimulate their thinking and make your journal assignments much more effective.

Just as important as a good prompt is good feedback. The private nature of journals places all of the feedback responsibilities on you. Giving feedback on a personal reflection is a difficult task, and it requires sensitivity. Students may be trying out new ideas for the first time, and they are probably not confident in their responses. Consider your feedback as a gentle nudge to encourage students to elaborate their ideas further or change the direction of their thinking.

If grades are part of the feedback, you should be clear what you are basing your grade on. Is it grammar and spelling? Length? Evidence of certain kinds of reasoning or support? Giving grades based on content may stifle students into giving rote answers based on the lecture or the textbook. Leave that sort of assessment for a quiz or essay. You'll need to

find a balance between giving points for simply completing a journal entry versus making a judgment about quality.

You may want to consider creating a new scale (see Chapter 12) for your journal assignments, incorporating other feedback instead of a grade. You can create a scale indicating what a student has done well and what could be improved, without assigning a traditional letter or number grade to the entry. This may be a way to critique an entry without passing judgment on its personal contents.

Creative Journal Practices

Moodle's journal tool is very simple to learn and can be put to some interesting uses. Journals are a chance for students to reflect on an issue at a deeper and more personal level. They can also provide a private means of backchannel communication between you and the students.

One-minute responses

Effective feedback is important for learning. This is true for both the teacher and the student. One-minute response papers are an easy way to get informal feedback from students about a lesson or activity. Usually, the instructor gives the students a few prompts to get a quick read on the effectiveness of the lesson.

I tend to use three questions when asking for a one-minute response to a lesson:

- What was the muddiest point in the lesson?
- What was the most important point?
- How useful/ interesting was the lesson?

Obviously, there are many more prompts you could use to get the feedback you want from your students. You may want them to reflect on how they feel about the class itself or about a test, or ask other questions about how they perceive various aspects of your course. Or you could ask them for quick answers to more specific, content-related questions you know students frequently have problems with.

> *Tip: One of the most effective geography classes I've seen uses one-minute responses on a daily basis. Every class, the instructor hands out a page asking students what they didn't understand, what the strongest point was, and what they wanted to know more about. The instructor then takes a few minutes at the beginning of every class to address the issues raised in the reflections from the day before.*

To create a one-minute response in a journal assignment, simply place the questions you want your students to answer in the journal question area when you add the assignment to the class.

Reflection on content

Frequently, students don't have a safe place to experiment with the course content and try out new ideas before they are assessed on their understanding or recall. Students need to try out new knowledge before they can truly integrate it into their current understanding. Giving students a journal assignment encouraging them to think specifically about the content, rather than self-reflection or interpretation, can be a valuable tool for promoting deeper learning.

These types of assignments can be effective before, during, or after a given topic or unit is presented. Before a lesson, ask students to record what they already know about the topic, or how earlier course material might tie in with the lesson. During a lesson, ask students to summarize what they are learning, or how they are feeling about their understanding of the material. After a lesson, have them explain how they would tell someone else about the topic in their own words, or what they learned that was different from what they knew before.

Content-reflection assignments require good, specific writing prompts that allow students to engage with the material in new ways. Ask specific questions about controversial or interpretive issues. For example, "If you had been president, would you have ordered the atomic bomb to be dropped on Japan at the end of World War II?" is a better content question than "What is your reaction to the US dropping the atomic bomb on Japan at the end of World War II?"

Brainstorming, drafting, and pre-writing

The best way to learn to write is to write, often. Students faced with academic writing are often apprehensive about the process and the substance of their writing. Writing teachers frequently use journal assignments to get students to start writing in a safe space. You don't have to be a writing teacher to use journals to improve your students' written work. Early in the writing process, students often need to try out ideas, formats, and reasoning before they are ready to address the assignment as a whole. Journal assignments can

prompt students to practice their writing skills and get feedback before they attempt to write an essay or research paper.

To use a journal assignment to scaffold the writing process, create a journal students can use well before the final product is due. Give a due date for the assignment to help structure the task. You don't want to be in a position of critiquing thesis statements the day before an essay is due. Ask students to develop a certain aspect of their writing in the journal. They could develop a thesis statement or discuss their research and evidence. You could even ask them to outline a paper directly in the journal entry field.

Once they've completed their pre-writing assignment, be sure to give detailed, constructive feedback. Good feedback will help students develop their ideas before they are overwhelmed by the process of writing the paper itself.

Summary

Journals can be an important tool for allowing students to reflect on their own knowledge and experiment with new ideas in a safe haven. The journal module allows students to write their journals online, so you no longer have to sift through a pile of journal notebooks.

One of the keys to effective journal assignments is your feedback. Be careful when choosing the type of feedback and grading you use in your journal assignment. You want to encourage students to experiment with new knowledge, not just repeat what they've heard for a decent grade.