

Not Just “Gym” Anymore: The Role of Journaling in Physical Education Courses

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Abstract: In this article, the author explores the use of journaling in high school physical education classes. An assistant professor of health and physical education, the author seeks to assist high school instructors with preparing students for the demands of college, both physical and intellectual. The author gives specific instructions on how best to incorporate journaling into the high school curriculum so that students will painlessly increase their writing skills while engaging in enjoyable self-discovery and self-improvement.

Keywords: college preparation, journaling, physical education

“**Y**ou want me to write a paper in gym class?” This is often the sentiment health and physical educators encounter when trying to implement their college or university’s writing-across-the-curriculum policy. Being mindful of the rapidly approaching college requirements, high school teachers might consider the beneficial method of journaling. This can be used to prepare students for the demands of a college physical education course and help students reach their personal health goals.

Instructors in many educational realms, such as outdoor education, science, math, and engineering classes have successfully used journaling (Hampton and Morrow 2003; O’Connell and Dymont 2003; Ross 1998). Journaling is also known to physical educators as a useful technique to assist with exercise and fitness programs (Deters 2002; *Running and FitNews* 2001). For example, an article in the newsletter *Running and FitNews* cites the following: “You are much more likely to discover training flaws or uncover a tendency to overreach or overtrain if you keep a daily record of your training experiences” (3). It has also been used to help with adherence to a diet plan (Kent 1998; Knittel 2003; Stedman 1998). In physical education classes, the journal can be used to guide the student toward reaching

particular health goals. It can also be an effective way to improve student writing. To find success with journaling, the following guidelines should be followed:

1. At the beginning of the term, the instructor should give a brief lecture on the principles of goal setting. At the end of the lecture, instructors should ask students to identify, in writing, three goals related to their health and wellness. To aid the students, they should give their lists of goals to the instructor for review.

2. The first entry of the journal should state the goals and then describe in detail the student’s long-term plan to reach these goals. For example, if a student has a goal of increased cardiorespiratory endurance, he or she would write out a workout plan for the upcoming weeks answering questions such as: When and where will the workouts take place? How often will he or she reassess his or her endurance level and make increases to the workload? Similar questions should be tailored for each of the student’s particular goals to help him or her be as thorough as possible.

3. The students should then embark on their plans and should be encouraged to keep daily records of their progress toward their goals. To ensure that the students make regular entries in their journals, however, instructors should ask them to bring their journals to class once a week. Instructors should allow ten minutes of class time to begin an entry. This is meant to prompt the students. Of course, they will most likely not finish writing within the time allotted, but they can be asked to finish the entry at home.

4. Each entry should be dated and relate the student’s experiences with regard to each of the goals. For example, if a student has a goal of exercising three times per week, but found that he or she exercised only once that week, the student should write about what happened

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that week that interfered with the plan. What other obligations affected his or her ability to exercise? What were his or her competing goals? What motivated or held back him or her? Did he or she have any rewarding results?

5. Instructors should encourage students to personalize their journals by adding motivational pictures, quotations, or anything else that they find inspiring.

6. To make sure that students are on the right track and that scaffolding (building toward the final structure of the writing assignment by employing the use of bibliographies, outlines, and drafts) is taking place, instructors should collect the journals midway through the semester. At this point, the journals should not be graded. Instructors should simply make comments about whether or not the students are adequately completing the assignment. Instructors should encourage and challenge students with questions and comments about their reflective thinking.

7. At the end of the semester, students should write about whether they think they have reached the goals. If they feel they have done so, they should state what methods worked for them. If they feel they did not, what would they do differently in the future?

8. Instructors often require students to present their findings to the class in the form of an oral presentation. The instructors need to reassure students that they do not need to share personal details if they are uncomfortable doing so. This allows students to demonstrate how they can state their situations without revealing personal information. They should summarize their goals, their plan, and the outcome. They should be prepared to do peer review and take questions from their classmates.

Instructors should encourage students to handwrite their experiences and ideas in their journals to emphasize

the personal nature of journaling. However, before turning in the final journals, they should transfer what they have recorded in their spiral-bound notebooks to a typed format. At this point, the students will need to attend to their more formal writing skills, including grammar, spelling, and audience. It should also be made clear to them that they will not be graded on their success or failure in meeting their stated health goals but rather on their ability to communicate what worked and what did not work for them during the project. The real goal is for the students to learn something about themselves and their health while also learning to express that experience succinctly and clearly. If high school physical education teachers can effectively implement journaling, their students will not only improve their knowledge of their own health issues but will also have a relatively painless way to hone their writing skills. The overall result will be students who perform better academically and are better prepared to meet the demands of college-level courses. Once the students get over the shock of learning that, yes, they do have to write in physical education class, they may be surprised to find that they actually enjoy it.

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