Evaluating Nature Journals

Measuring growth without squelching creativity requires a special kind of yardstick

by Mike Moutoux

Grade levels: K-5
Subject areas: nature studies, language arts
Key concepts: holistic evaluation
Professional skills: evaluating students’ journals

Ideally, nature journals are cherished records of the wild places and things we have encountered and our personal reactions to them. The freedom to explore what is all around me and what’s inside me is exactly what I wish for as a writer, and it’s exactly the kind of freedom I want to give to everyone else either inclined or assigned to write. Our challenge as teachers and mentors is to give students some idea of the scope of their freedom and encourage them to explore and express using all the skills and gifts they have.

First, let’s consider the difference between a diary and a journal. They look the same, and each has an air of privacy about it, but they are different. A diary is often a chronicle of a love life; a journal is a chronicle of a life we love. In my journals, I hope you see the results of that love all laid out in a big mess. Sometimes there is a drawing, other times pages and pages of free writing. Here and there is a quote I’ve found and written down. You will also find lists, poems, and ideas for future projects all bound together in just the happiest mess you can imagine. Neatness, grammar, and most other rules of writing don’t apply in journal writing, because they take away the best freedom of all: freedom to think. My journals are where my ideas begin to take shape.

Nature inspires writing, and I believe a pen will get us further in the wilderness than a compass. And whether we are talking about nature or the wilderness of the mind, getting in can be harder than getting out. I can’t imagine asking someone to take a close look at their surroundings without arming them with a blank book and a pencil. What if they see something unusual or beautiful? What if they have a question or an idea? What if they feel the beginning of a poem, as Robert Frost described it, as a lump in their throat? Keeping a nature journal helps me to pay attention to the natural world and increases the pleasure I find in the outdoors. I don’t know if it’s possible to evaluate that joy, but I do believe it’s possible to measure a writer’s thinking if you study a journal carefully. Evaluating students’ nature journals can give teachers an exciting look at the young minds they are working with and also give feedback about the general atmosphere of a classroom. Once in a while, writers will want to take a risk, but they need to feel safe before they will take a chance and your classroom should be that safe place.

Nature journals have great potential as learning tools, but much of that potential may be missed if we don’t have some way of grading them. No grade spells “relief” for many students, the very ones that need more from us as teachers. But how do we measure growth and provide feedback when one child creates a drawing, one produces a list of terse observations, and another writes an essay? Measuring growth while allowing individual response to an experience requires an unusual yardstick, a device that gives credit for all kinds of seeing and thinking.

Following are some ideas that can help in evaluating the odd collection of observations, notes, lists, drawings, and essays that are often found in nature journals. We want to give our students a lot of room to discover, think, and take creative risks, while encouraging them to fill those blank pages. The challenge for us as teachers is to make sense of and, somehow, compare all those apples and oranges.
Evaluative criteria
1. Does the writer express curiosity?
   - Asks questions
   - Describes discoveries
2. Is there evidence of metacognition?
   - Comparisons to previous entries
   - Additions to lists, observations
   - Validations for or arguments against previous statements
   - Reflecting on someone else’s thinking
3. Is there evidence of right-brained thinking?
   - Use of metaphors or similes
   - Discoveries of relationships or connections
   - Intuitive understandings or conclusions
   - Use of artwork to document or decorate
4. Is there evidence of left-brained thinking?
   - Sequential or linear entries (lists, organization of information)
   - Conclusions based on facts or direct observations
5. Is the student sharing personal reactions to events or observations?
   - Expressed emotions
   - Vows to take action
   - Resolutions
6. Is the student processing information?
   - Using previously learned information to draw new conclusions
   - Using newly learned words or concepts
   - Connecting information (current events to history, seasons to cycles, etc.)
   - Validating or challenging information

There are certainly other ways to grade student journals; the main thing is that your students understand what it is you will be looking for in their pages. You may wish to use these criteria to create a rubric with a scoring system that reflects the specific outcomes you are working toward. Remember to keep it simple so that you don’t get bogged down with work and so that students themselves can understand what is expected and even judge their own efforts as their journal pages get filled. One idea for lower elementary grades is a scoring system using smiley faces instead of a numerical score; the more effort shown, the more smiley faces given.

You’ll see that journals must be looked at holistically: a single day’s work or a single journal page is simply not enough to evaluate all six of the criteria I suggest. This means you might be collecting journals only once in awhile, so I suggest that you not grab them all up at once. Once a week, collect a portion of them to grade so that you see every journal at least twice in a grading period.

Use sticky notes to provide feedback instead of writing on the pages. Encourage students to expand on their ideas, and give lots of positive feedback as you evaluate their thinking. As writers, they should be looking for “The Truth,” that elusive knowledge that gives meaning to everything. And they should look for this truth with both sides of their brains, because when they do that they are really giving it all they’ve got. Randal Marlin, a professor of philosophy, put this quite nicely when he said, “The pursuit of truth is like picking raspberries. You miss a lot if you approach it from only one angle.” Encourage your students to use all of their talents, not just the few they feel best about. Now and then, suggest that they revise or rewrite something and this time use all their research, grammar, and usage skills so it is ready to share with the rest of the world. And let them share.

Finally, allow students to see your work as well. You are keeping a journal for your own growth and enjoyment, I hope! Letting them see your work builds trust and shows them that paying attention to their surroundings is not simply a requirement for a passing grade: it’s a way of life. That’s a very powerful message.

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