



**Compendium of effective practice in directed independent learning**



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# Using reading diaries in independent learning

Dr Sara Wasson

[s.wasson@napier.ac.uk](mailto:s.wasson@napier.ac.uk)

English and Critical Theory (full-time, face to face, with some blended learning), Edinburgh Napier University

**Description**

Reading diaries (and optional ‘reading question’ diary prompts) are used to encourage year three English, and English and Film BA (Hons), students to develop their self-directed learning. Since critical theory can be daunting, the independent study – that is, extensive theoretical reading – is often experienced by students as a formidable task, so the idea was to provide a support structure to enable them to not only be able to persevere despite the challenge, but also to increasingly see themselves as confident interpretative agents, able to engage with and challenge the texts from their own position.

To help them do this, for the last few years, students have been asked to use reading diaries to structure their engagement with the material as they study. The module handbook says:

If there are certain passages that bewilder you in the reading, use the diary to analyse that sentence piece by piece, trying to get it into your own words. Use the diary to try out your ideas. It is a safe place, where we don’t need to see perfection – what we want is to see the thought processes that you personally go through when you face that particular passage. We strongly recommend that you keep a reading diary for all your reading on this module.

Specific reading questions as optional prompts for each theorist on the module are also offered.

Students are encouraged to choose their own platform for recording their reading diary entries, for example, a handwritten notebook, a blog accessed through smartphone, a website, or a word document, or any other format that feels right to them. They are encouraged to take ownership of it and personalise it. This flexible and student-centred format is useful for students with disability/accessibility requirements, as well as for students with prolonged commutes who, of necessity, may have to read and reflect while in transit: the goal is to have the diary be part of the reading experience as it occurs, rather than added later. International students have also found it particularly helpful that the diary gives a space that can be used specifically for reflecting on cultural difference in their engagement with the text at hand.

The module leader ensures there is a wide range of support for this approach, given that it is a novel format for most students. First, lecture and tutorial time is dedicated to discussing the format, and the kinds of cognitive processes that go into creating such a diary are modelled. Sample diary entries are also offered, which students analyse in class. In class discussion, the example’s reflective component is examined, noticing how the hypothetical student highlights her uncertainty and takes the reader with her through her thought processes as she engages with the text.

During these discussions, students regularly notice and comment on the way that the student in the example deliberately focuses her attention on a passage she does not understand, in contrast with usual strategies many students feel pressured to adopt when writing assessments. In the interests of scoring well, in traditional assignments some students understandably feel it is safer to stay with familiar theory with which they are already confident, rather than to explicitly seek out other work that puzzles them. This form of reading diary asks students to deliberately invert that trend, encouraging them to seek out areas of confusion, and rewarding the risk involved in doing so.

As the first assessment on the module, early in the term, students are asked to provide extracts from two of their reading diary entries. The prompt is as follows:

Choose two half-page extracts from any of the readings prescribed on the module … Write two short reading diary entries of approximately 750 words each in which you take us into your own thought processes as you try to understand this passage. Show us your thought processes as they unfold, and draw links to other topics on the module and outside the classroom to help yourself make sense of/apply the ideas.

A key element of the support is the banded assessment criteria, in that these explicitly identify the qualities of a successful diary and differentiate it from a traditional essay. The crux of these criteria is the way they do not penalise misunderstanding the theory, but rather emphasise the value of detailed reflection, drawing links to other ideas/texts, and rewarding originality and ambition in the analysis – that is, explicitly rewarding risk.

The assessment associated with the diary is both formative and summative, and is closely integrated with the subsequent assignment on the module. For the diary assessment to mesh with the reassurance that it is genuinely a safe space for students to engage with ideas they are not sure they understand, it is essential to ensure that misunderstanding the critical theory does not affect the grade, but detailed formative feedback about any such misunderstanding is given. Clarifying misunderstandings is particularly important since the reading diary is designed to lay foundations for the final essay, a more traditional, argumentative piece where accurate grasp of critical theory is most definitely assessed. Yet, for the reading diary, the priority is encouraging students to learn the skills of dwelling with difficulty in their reading experience, and embracing risk in engaging with challenging material, moving out of the ‘comfort zones’ of familiar critical approaches.

**Effectiveness**

After using this strategy, it was noticeable that students’ grades increased in the final conventional essay assessment. It also seemed striking that students came to class better prepared, and that in the final essay they seemed inclined to take more risks, in the sense of being willing to engage with theory that was relatively new to them that trimester (instead of staying in safer, better known waters). This adventurousness is applauded and the reading diaries made this difference.

Student evaluations are very positive with 95%-100% of the class agreeing that the assessments and learning experience as a whole are worthwhile, well supported and helpful. External examiner comments have included:

The module is innovative and inspiring in its formulation of an assessment structure. I particularly enjoyed reading the diary entries and I find this to be an engaging and encouraging model of assessment, helping students to appreciate their own processes of learning and perception.

The use of reading diaries is very effective.

This is an excellent module, one that I find to be pedagogically exemplary. The attention to detailed, careful guidance for students in the module handbook noteworthy and the assessment rationale is well-conceived.

[The diaries are] a real testament to the value of this mode of assessment.

In addition to conventional questionnaire feedback, students have also been given the opportunity to use visual feedback to capture how their confidence with the theory changes as a result of the diaries and in-class support: students were given the opportunity to draw a sketch in response to a carefully-constructed prompt inviting them to describe their level of confidence with regard to the material. The sketches showed a striking improvement in confidence with the theory, and also demonstrated a high correlation between increased learner confidence and an increased sense of themselves as active readers.

**Promotion**

The explicit goal in using the diaries is to enhance confidence in engaging with difficult reading, and to nurture appetite for textual challenge.

In communicating the value and potential of this approach, the module leader emphasises both the academic goals (competence in using critical theory) and the value of the associated emotional skills: that is, the capacity to endure challenging reading and consciously choose to actively dwell with difficulty.

From the opening class, the module staff emphasise that the (hopefully) transformative learning experience will occur during the students’ independent learning, in their preparatory reading before class – those moments working alone, working through the reading questions, and compiling the reading diary, are where the challenging, frustrating, and inspiring encounters with these seminal critical ideas will occur.

Staff talk candidly about how even researchers specialising in critical theory (like themselves) must labour and dwell with difficulty when working with these texts; staff model the kinds of cognitive process and specific strategies that one can use to make sense of challenging extracts. And staff drive home the idea that the emotional and practical capacity to handle textual difficulty is a vital transferrable skill, central to success on other undergraduate modules, as well as in postgraduate work and careers more generally.

This technique has been disseminated and promoted in a range of avenues, including internal staff conference presentations, staff workshops, a paper at a national pedagogical conference, and the national ESCalate newsletter of the HEA Subject Centre for Education.