

## Guided vs. Open-Ended Journals: A Comparison of Two Reflective Writing Models for Undergraduate Service-Learning Experiences

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### ABSTRACT

Reflection is a key component for integrating meaningful collegiate service-learning experiences with a student's personal and professional growth. The purpose of this mixed methods study was to compare two types of reflective journal writing (guided and open-ended) utilized in undergraduate Communication Disorder courses. A comparison of pre- and post-Service-Learning Survey (SLS) data and reflective journal writing samples indicated value for both types of written reflection.

Service-learning acts as a bridge between classroom and community; it is a valuable tool to increase student learning (Molee, Henry, Sessa, & McKinney-Prupis, 2010.; Sedlak, Doheny, Panthofer, & Anaya, 2003; Warren, 2012;). A deeper understanding of course content is developed through service-learning by providing students opportunities to consider their experience and how it is relevant to their coursework and beyond (Ash, Clayton, & Atkinson, 2005; Hatcher, Bringle, & Muthiah, 2004; Molee et al., 2010). Bridging the gap between class content and real-world experiences is arguably one of the more challenging components in developing meaningful service-learning assignments; this connection is not automatic for students. For this reason, one of the key responsibilities for an instructor incorporating service-learning into collegiate courses is developing appropriate opportunities for meaningful reflection. Peters (2011) identified reflection as "the cornerstone of the service-learning experience." Reflection is deliberate thought regarding one's experiences; one considers the learning objectives driving the experience during reflection (Bringle & Hatcher, 2003).

While reflection is a significant component of the service-learning experience, criterion for reflection is challenging to quantify. Eyler, Giles, and Schmiede (1996) developed "The Four C's" to help guide reflection practices within service-learning. The Four C's standards suggest that reflection is: *continuous* (ongoing; before, during and after experiences), *connected* (to both academic and intellectual experiences),

*challenging* (helping students learn in a different manner), and *contextualized* (linking the experience with course content) (Eyler et al., 1996). Using these guidelines, several options exist for incorporating valuable reflection opportunities.

One method for including student reflection in service-learning experiences is journal writing (Collier & Driscoll, 1999; Mills, 2001). Journal writing allows students freedom and is a way for students to personalize their experiences and connections to class content (Bradley, 1995; Fisher, 1996; Mills, 2001). In addition, reflective journals demonstrate evidence of critical thinking (Sedlack et al., 2003); in particular, this is specifically documented within the Communication Disorders (CDIS) field (Chabon & Lee-Wilkerson, 2006; Goldberg, Richburg & Wood, 2006).

Various types of reflexive journal writing exist; one example of journal writing that can be used for reflection within service-learning experiences is a guided journal. For the purpose of this study, the guided journal was one in which students were assigned specific topics/prompts related to course content that they connected to their service-learning experience (Peters, 2011). Journal topics were presented to the students prior to the experience, so they were able to review the topics before interacting within the community. This format was implemented with the intent of guiding the students' experiences towards key components of the course in which they were enrolled.

Another form of reflective writing related to service-learning experiences is an open-ended journal. Within this study, open-ended journals required more active connections on the part of the student to link class content to his/her service-learning experiences. For open-ended journals, students were required to "keep double-entry journals in which they describe their service-learning experience, personal thoughts, and reactions on one side of a page and link those to the course concepts, readings, PowerPoint presentations, and other types of course content on the opposite side of the page" (Peters, 2011). This type of journal was implemented with the intent that students would independently relate their experiences to key concepts from the classroom.

Each of these reflective journal-writing conditions (guided and open-ended) were intended to positively impact student learning. Participation in service learning experiences utilizing these reflective writing opportunities was anticipated to result in greater self-efficacy, or confidence in one's capabilities to understand and apply course content. Student self-efficacy towards class content was considered in the current study, as self-efficacy is related to student motivation and achievement (Bandura & Locke, 2003). Those with higher self-efficacy are more motivated to work harder, for longer, and handle related situations better emotionally than those with lower self-efficacy for the task at hand (Zimmerman, 2000). The goal of each of these service-learning courses was for students to not only learn concepts discussed in class, but to also witness and apply information from class about the topics of interest (i.e. normal language development, adolescent language development and disorders). With greater self-efficacy of course content, students would likely be more motivated to put forth the effort required to comprehend and apply concepts from class. Demonstrating higher post-service learning experience self-efficacy for course content would indicate greater achievement as related to comprehension and application of course concepts.

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to compare the use of two types of reflective journal writing assignments for service-learning experiences in undergraduate Communication Disorders classes. It was hypothesized that:

- a.) Reflective journal writing would have a positive impact on students' self-efficacy towards course content.
  - a. It was anticipated that students engaged in service learning experiences using a reflective writing journal would demonstrate improved course content self-efficacy from pre- to post-service learning experience, as this learning opportunity would lead to students feeling more confident in their understanding of course concepts following the opportunity to see the concepts in action (service learning experience) and actively reflect upon these experiences (journal writing).
- b.) Students would perceive open-ended journals as more beneficial towards learning as compared to those utilizing guided journals.
  - a. It was anticipated that students assigned to the open-ended journals would indicate greater learning as this type of reflective writing was believed to foster more independent, critical thinking as compared to the guided journal format (where topics were pre-selected for participants).
- c.) Students' reflective writing would be stronger and more closely related to course concepts when utilizing the guided journal format.
  - a. It was anticipated that students assigned to the guided journal writing condition would demonstrate writing more closely aligned with course content as they were provided specific topics to write about and apply to their service learning experiences (as compared to the open-ended journal condition where students were responsible for making these connections independently).

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The current study received Institutional Review Board (IRB) human subject approval prior to recruitment of participants. A total of 47 undergraduate college students at a small, Midwest university voluntarily participated in this study; one participant was removed from the study following limited contributions (i.e. an incomplete journal assignment). Participation required students to be enrolled in one of two CDIS courses with service-learning components (Course 1: Normal Language Development; Course 2: Adolescent Language Development and Disorders); the same instructor taught both courses. The majority of the participants were female (97%), and they ranged from sophomore to graduate-level status. All students enrolled in the two CDIS service-learning courses were invited to participate; students were not required to participate in the study, however, the service-learning experience and written reflections were required for successful completion of the courses. See Table 1 for a summary of participant demographic information.

Table 1

*Participant Demographics*

	Gender (% female)	Major field of study (% CDIS)	Under-class Enrollment (% freshman, sophomore status)	Upper-class Enrollment (% junior, senior or graduate status)
Course 1 (n = 28)	100% (n=28)	92% (n = 26)	18% (n = 5)	82% (n = 23)
Course 2 (n = 19)	94% (n = 18)	100 (n = 19)	0% (n = 0)	100% (n = 29)

**Procedures**

At the beginning of the semester, participants completed the Service-Learning Survey (SLS; see Appendix for SLS items) which included a self-efficacy rating scale demonstrating student confidence regarding concepts from the class, as well as open-ended questions intended to identify expected learning outcomes, and attitudes towards service-learning prior to this experience. Expectations for the service-learning assignment (i.e. placements, expectations, time commitments) were established, and then participants were randomly assigned to a reflection assignment (guided or open-ended journal writing) with explanation and examples demonstrating each type of reflection and clarification regarding reflection assignment expectations (see Table 2 for directions provided to participants for each journal writing condition). Following random assignment, 22 participants were assigned to complete guided reflection journals (Course 1: n = 12, Course 2: n = 10; see Table 3 for examples of guided journal topics provided), while 25 participants were assigned to complete open-ended reflective journals (Course 1: n = 17, Course 2: n = 8).

Over the course of the semester, students completed their service-learning assignments and engaged in reflective writing utilizing their assigned format. Following completion of assigned service-learning hours and electronic submission of reflection writing assignments at the end of the semester, students again completed the SLS (see Appendix for survey items). The post-service-learning experience SLS included the original self-efficacy scale showing participants' confidence in course content, as well as open-ended questions demonstrating knowledge gained from the experience and participants' impressions of the experience. In addition, the post-service-learning experience SLS included a reflection rating which included 4 statements; students responded to these items using a five-point scale ranging from Strongly Agree to Strongly Disagree (see Appendix for reflection rating items). The statements (and scale, in general) were based on the "Four C's" (Eyler et al., 1996) of service-learning reflection and required students to consider the *continuity*, *connection*, *challenge* and *contextualized* quality of their assigned reflective journal assignment. This data informed the researcher of participants' assessment of the assigned reflective writing assignment

and allowed for direct comparison of participants' impressions from each condition (open-ended and guided journal writing).

Table 2

*Directions for Each Journal Writing Condition*

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Guided Journal Writing Directions	“Your particular journal assignment involves responding to a variety of topics posed by the instructor. You will want to familiarize yourself with these topics prior to visiting your community organization in order to observe/pay special attention to topics posed for your journal entries. Following each visit within the community agency, you will then be required to complete journal entries to receive credit for this portion of the service learning assignment.”
Open-Ended Journal Writing Directions	“Your particular journal assignment involves completion of a double-entry journal. This requires you to complete your journal in a T-note style where one side of your document will include a summary of your observations from each visit, and the opposite side will link comments you made to class content. This format encourages connections to be made between classroom discussions, lectures and the textbook to actual individuals you interact with throughout the community.”

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Table 3

*Sample Topics Provided to Participants Assigned to Guided Journal Condition*

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Course 1 Sample Topics	Course 2 Sample Topics
<p>When interacting with children who are learning to use language to communicate, what do you see driving their efforts? Do you see this development from more of an emergentist view or a functionalist view? Explain and provide examples from your interactions.</p> <p>Based on your interactions, identify which model of language development (or components of various models) makes the most sense to you now. Identify examples of what you saw in the children to lead you to defend your opinion.</p>	<p>If you were to complete an assessment on one of the adolescent's that you have observed, what would it include? (What formal/informal assessment tools would you utilize?)</p> <p>Share how your adolescence compares to that of the adolescents that you have worked with over this semester. Think about the different areas of development that we have discussed, different experiences you may have had, etc.</p>

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With the infant population, identify the level of intentionality witnessed in one (or more) of the children. Describe what you saw/experienced that lead you to this conclusion.

Analyze your experience this semester. What have you enjoyed and learned from this experience? What would you change? Any suggestions for me should I use this assignment in future classes?

Did you find yourself using infant-directed speech (IDS) when working with the infant population? How about other adults in the area? What did you notice about the use of IDS and how this impacts the infants? Include what was said and a description of how it was said. What preschool language-learning strategies did you witness when interacting with this population? Provide specific examples.

What new ideas, opinions, thoughts do you have about working with the adolescent population since participating in this service learning experience?

Based on your experiences with this opportunity, what are some of the biggest challenges present when working with adolescents?

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*Note.* Course 1 placements included local developmental daycare centers where students assisted teachers in daily tasks and engaged with children of varying ages allowing them to witness developmental aspects of communication. Course 2 placements included local community-based organizations which provide services for disabled individuals and/or at-risk youth and adolescents; this opportunity supported these community services while allowing students the opportunity to engage with and provide support for adolescents (while also observing their development and communicative skills).

In addition to pre- and post-SLS data, participants' reflective journal writing entries were analyzed. Two raters (the researcher and a graduate assistant trained to analyze the writing samples) assessed each participant's journal entries using a rubric created for this study (see Table 4 for rubric content). The Service-Learning Reflective Writing Rubric (SLRWR) was used to analyze each of the students' journal entries (10 total required for each class, reflective journal assignment) according to four areas: 1.) Course Content (relationship to concepts from class), 2.) Concept Clarity (clear definition of concepts with thorough explanation provided), 3.) Examples (specific examples used to express ideas), and 4.) Overall Writing (appropriate writing mechanics used throughout). Ratings were completed on all journal entries for each participant following the completion of the course.

Table 4  
*Service-Learning Reflective Writing Rubric*

Journal	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Course Content:										
<b>2 points:</b> Relates directly to concept(s) covered in class										
<b>1 point:</b> Relates indirectly to concept(s) covered in class										
<b>0 points:</b> Does not relate to concept(s) covered in class										
Concept Clarity										
<b>2 points:</b> Content clearly defined, thorough explanation										
<b>1 point:</b> Some content clearly defined, lacking thorough explanation										
<b>0 points:</b> content not clearly defined										
Examples Provided										
<b>2 points:</b> specific examples used to express ideas										
<b>1 point:</b> limited examples used to express ideas										
<b>0 points:</b> no examples provided										
Overall Writing										
<b>2 points:</b> appropriate grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. used throughout										
<b>1 point:</b> 1-3 errors in any of the above areas										
<b>0 points:</b> more than 3 errors										

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## Results

### Self-Efficacy in Course Content

Participants in each course assigned to each journal condition completed pre- and post-service-learning self-efficacy scales related to their confidence with course content. The self-efficacy scale (adapted from Bruning, Dempsey, Kauffman, McKim, & Zumbunn, 2013) utilized a 100-point scale in which participants rated their confidence towards key aspects of course content. In order to compare participant self-efficacy ratings between the two courses, repeated-measures ANOVA were completed. This analysis revealed there was not a significant difference between pre- and post-service-learning experience measures of student self-efficacy in course content for each class

[F (1, 42) = 3.122, p = .085]. Table 5 provides combined mean pre- and post-service-learning experience self-efficacy ratings.

Table 5

*Mean Combined Pre- and Post-Service-Learning Experience Self-Efficacy Ratings*

Pre-Service-Learning (n = 46)	Post-Service-Learning (n = 46)
M (SD)	M (SD)
59.13 (17.21)	81.12 (9.71)

Additional analyses were conducted to further explore the data. Post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated that post-test ratings of self-efficacy were significantly higher than pre-test ratings in both classes (Course 1: Mean Difference = 25.89, p = .000; Course 2: Mean Difference = 15.20, p = .0020). Table 6 presents pre- and post-service-learning experience mean self-efficacy ratings across courses.

In addition, post hoc Bonferroni tests indicated pre-test self-efficacy ratings were significantly higher in Course 2 (Mean difference = 14.9, p = .004). The post-test self-efficacy ratings in each class, however, were not significantly different (Mean Difference = 4.216, p = .148). There was also no significant difference between post-test self-efficacy ratings when considering journal condition (Mean Difference = 5.202, p = .069). Table 7 includes mean post-service-learning experience self-efficacy ratings by course and journal writing condition.

Table 6

*Mean Pre- and Post-Service-Learning Self-Efficacy Ratings by Course*

Course 1 Pre-Service- Learning (n = 28)	Course 1 Post-Service- Learning (n = 28)	Course 2 Pre-Service- Learning (n = 18)	Course 2 Post- Service-Learning (n = 18)
M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
53.17 (17.79)	79.75 (7.87)	68.41 (11.45)	83.26 (11.97)



Table 7

*Mean Post-Service-Learning Experience Self-Efficacy Ratings by Course and Condition*

Course 1 Open-Ended Journal (n = 16)	Course 1 Guided Journal (n = 12)	Course 2 Open-Ended Journal (n = 8)	Course 2 Guided Journal (n = 10)
M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
82.76 (6.16)	75.74 (8.35)	85.31 (10.92)	81.62 (13.09)

**Reflection Ratings**

Participants' post-service-learning survey responses included reflection ratings indicating how the students perceived the quality of their reflective journal assignments. One-way ANOVA were conducted to compare participants' feelings regarding the reflective nature of their assigned journal format across journal types (open-ended vs. guided). This analysis revealed no significant differences between the means of student reflection survey ratings for the two journal types [ $F(1, 44) = .023, p = .881$ ]. Table 8 includes mean reflection ratings by journal condition.

Table 8

*Mean Reflection Ratings by Journal Condition*

Open-Ended Journal (n = 24)	Guided Journal (n = 22)
M (SD)	M (SD)
1.55 (.44)	1.53 (.36)

*Note.* Post-SLSs included a 4-item self-reflection section regarding the quality of participants' reflective journal assignment. Response options were provided: Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2), Neutral (3), Disagree (4), Strongly Disagree (5). The low averages across journal condition indicate that participants primarily indicated both reflective journal assignments offered continuous, connected, challenging and contextualized opportunities for reflection.

**Writing Quality**

SLRWR ratings for journal writing quality (e.g. Course Content, Concept Clarity, Examples Provided, and Writing Skills) from both raters were compared to insure reliability. Two-way mixed effects model intraclass correlation coefficients for the SLRWR ratings indicated very high agreement between the two raters (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .975$ ).

One-way ANOVAs were conducted to compare the two raters' assessment of participants' journal entries across assigned journal type conditions (open-ended vs. guided). This analysis revealed no significant differences between the means of each variable for the two journal types [Course Content,  $F(1, 45) = .740, p = .394$ ; Concept

Clarity,  $F(1, 45) = .183, p = .671$ ; Examples Provided,  $F(1, 45) = .097, p = .757$ ; Writing Skills,  $F(1, 45) = .346, p = .559$ . Table 9 provides the combined raters mean writing quality ratings for each SLRWR item.

Table 9  
*Combined Raters Mean Writing Quality Ratings*

Course Content		Concept Clarity		Examples Provided		Writing Skills	
Open-Ended Journal	Guided Journal	Open-Ended Journal	Guided Journal	Open-Ended Journal	Guided Journal	Open-Ended Journal	Guided Journal
M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)
16.28 (4.20)	15.22 (4.17)	14.70 (4.21)	15.20 (3.82)	15.42 (3.80)	15.77 (3.95)	14.82 (3.65)	14.14 (4.32)

*Note.* Course Concept was rated on a 0-3 scale (3 = relates directly to concepts covered in class, 0 = does not relate to concepts covered in class). Concept Clarity was rated on a 0-2 scale (2 = content clearly defined, thorough explanation, 0 = content not clearly defined). Examples Provided was rated on a 0-3 scale (3 = specific examples used to express ideas, 0 = no examples provided). Writing Skills was rated on a 0-2 scale (2 = appropriate grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc. used throughout, 0 = more than three errors). Maximum scores for 0-3 scales = 30; maximum scores for 0-2 scales = 20.

### Student Reactions

The SLS (pre- and post-service-learning experience) contained open-ended questions aimed at capturing students' beliefs regarding service-learning before and after their experiences. Their responses to questions regarding what they expected to learn from their experience as well as perceived benefits and drawbacks of service-learning were transcribed, coded and emerging themes were identified. Two raters reviewed the qualitative data to insure validity; each individually reviewed and coded the responses, then the two met together with their results and generated common themes. When disagreement occurred, they discussed their differences and reviewed the data and their coding until consensus was achieved. Prior to service-learning experiences, participants from each course, and both journal conditions expressed commonalities. Following the experience, however, differences between participants varied more by course than by journal condition. The themes are explained in the following sections; Table 10 provides a summary of the themes and support for each.

Table 10  
*Summary of Student Reactions*

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>	<i>Journal Condition</i>	<i>Supporting Evidence</i>
<b>“You can only learn so much from a book”</b>	Participants reported enhanced learning from the service-learning experience	Both journal conditions across classes reported greater understanding of course content.	Course 1, open-ended journal: “I learned about how children develop by seeing it with my own eyes. It helped to see it while discussing it in class.”
		Course 2, across conditions expressed increased ability to interact with target populations as evidence of enhanced learning from this assignment	Course 2, guided journal: “This experience gave me more confidence in working with this population.”
<b>“Learning is maximized”</b>	Participants reported benefit from the service-learning experience	Both journal conditions across classes reported application of course content as a benefit of this assignment.	Course 1, open-ended journal: “The biggest benefit for me was being able to relate what we were talking about in class to real life experiences.”
		Course 2, guided journal condition reported benefit in developing relationships and helping others.	Course 2, guided journal: “We can discuss a lot in class, but I think the true learning occurs out in the real world. When you connect the two, learning is maximized.”
<b>“The downfall is trying to fit it into my busy schedule....”</b>	Those reporting drawbacks related to this assignment were primarily time/schedule-oriented	Course 1, across journal condition reported scheduling frustration.	Course 1, guided journal: “I would think it would be most beneficial to have students participate in the service-learning as it would coincide with each chapter.”

issues.  
Others reported no drawbacks associated with this assignment.

Course 1, across journal condition (predominately open-ended journal condition) reported no drawbacks to this experience.

Course 1, open-ended journal: "I don't believe there were any downfalls to the hours or the journaling. I really enjoyed my time there."

Course 2 reports varied greatly. Some guided journal condition indicated time/schedule constraints; some open-ended condition reported limited access to the target population within their experience.

Course 2, open-ended journal: "The only downfall is that some experiences did not allow for interactions with adolescents. This made it difficult to draw connections back to class in the journals."

**"You can only learn so much from a book"** Prior to their service-learning experience, participants across class and journal type expressed similar perceived learning from such an experience. In general, participants expressed belief that service-learning experiences would enhance their comprehension of course material and provide them exposure to the target population relevant to the course content (i.e. adolescents). One participant from Course 1, reported, "I think that I will learn a lot about how kids should be speaking at a certain age. I haven't taken any classes on this yet, so seeing it firsthand should be very helpful. You can only learn so much from a book. I believe you need to experience most of this as well."

As predicted, post-service-learning experience SLS results indicated that participants from both classes and both journal type conditions reported that service-learning lead to greater understanding of course content. One student in Course 1 assigned to the open-ended journal condition explained, "I learned about how children develop by seeing it with my own eyes. It helped to see it while discussing it in class."

Another common theme among Course 1 participants following the experience indicated that students were better able to apply information from class due to their service-learning experience. To illustrate, one student in the guided journal condition expressed, "From this service-learning experience I gained a better understanding...seeing the examples in real-life situations showed me how complex it [language development] really is."

Course 2 participants, however, reported more of an emphasis on the value of learning to interact with the target population during their service-learning experience. One student in the guided journal condition describe this by stating, "I have a better knowledge now of how to communicate with adolescents. I was also able to view how adolescents interact with each other."

While there were not noteworthy differences across journal type condition for either class, it seems that this difference between classes is likely due to the nature of each of these courses. Course 1 focused on typical language development of children and it makes sense that the students from this class appreciated seeing this firsthand in their service-learning experience. Course 2, on the other hand, was related to adolescent language development and disorders; while these students valued the experience and how it deepened their understanding of course content, another concept stressed in this course is the need for exposure and experience with this population. Therefore, the instructor of this course (the researcher) may have influenced this response from the participants in Course 2. One student expressed this exact sentiment in her response, "I learned that my beliefs about adolescents was not accurate. Honestly, I wanted no part of adolescents, but now I feel I could work with them and be confident in what I'm doing."

**"Learning is maximized"** Again, prior to service-learning experiences, participants across courses and journal type responses were primarily in agreement. Students' perceived benefits of service-learning primarily concerned enhanced learning and the opportunity to apply class concepts in the real world as well as the opportunity to gain community involvement. This was captured in the following students' pre-SLS results: "The biggest benefit is applying the information you learn in the classroom to real world scenarios.... this should give excellent practice for observation and connecting classroom material to what we see at our service-learning site" (Course 1 student); "I believe there are substantial benefits of participating. Service-learning teaches us about interacting with different populations and allows us 'to give back' to the community (Course 2 student).

Once again, participants' beliefs were confirmed following their service-learning experience, as post-experience SLS responses indicated that students from both classes and journal conditions believed service-learning had a positive impact on their learning by allowing them to apply course knowledge in the field. One participant from Course 2 assigned to the guided journal condition explained, "We can discuss a lot in class, but I think the true learning occurs out in the real world. When you connect the two, learning is maximized." This was further explained by student in Course 1, guided journal condition, "The benefits were immense. Being able to communicate and try different techniques from class was very educational and helped me absorb the information better. The experience was practical and gave us the opportunity to gain confidence interacting with kids and hints on what to look for to monitor their language development."

A subtle difference emerged in students' opinions regarding what they learned from their experience, however. Students in the guided journal writing condition in Course 2 differed from others in this regard, as a handful of them expressed educational value in developing relationships and offering help to others through their service-

learning experience. The other participants' (all of Course 1 and the open-ended journal condition group of Course 2) responses addressed the learning and application that occurred. It is unclear as to why this difference emerged; however, the researcher believes that the service-learning placements within the community may have fostered this belief more in Course 2 than in Course 1. Furthermore, within Course 2, differences between the journal conditions may have lead to this difference as well. The guided journal condition may have required less active thinking during the experience (as reflective writing topics were provided), and allowed the participants in this condition to relax and relate more to others throughout their experience. The open-ended condition, however, may have required more active thinking, as the participants in this condition could have been more focused on finding connections to class during their experience as opposed to truly engaging with others throughout their experience (as their reflective writing topics were not provided).

**“The downfall is trying to fit it into my busy schedule....”** Participants approached service-learning assignments positively from the beginning of the semester. Initial concerns about these assignments were primarily time-oriented across class and journal condition. One student in Course 2 indicated, “The downfall is trying to fit it into my busy schedule, but it will be worth it in the end.” Some participants in each class initially thought that there would be no drawbacks to service-learning, and others expressed varied concerns such as not having enough time during the experience, and the quality of learning not being as strong when “required” to complete service-learning tasks.

Following service-learning experience, the responses from all participants in either class and journal condition were quite variable. Little consensus was found; this is where the most differences emerged in student responses. Participants in Course 1 across journal conditions indicated scheduling frustration, as their service-learning experience was not aligned with the schedule of the course. One indicated, “We didn’t learn the material with the visits so we would have to remember or go back in our notes.” While this was inconvenient, from the participants’ perspective, this was beneficial for extending learning, as intended by the instructor. Several participants within Course 1 indicated that there were not any drawbacks to this experience; there were more within the open-ended journal condition that expressed this belief. One stated, “I don’t believe there were any downfalls to the hours or the journaling. I really enjoyed my time there.” Less criticism from this group (open-ended journal condition) may be due to the fact that they were not restricted by provided writing prompts throughout the experience; this freedom may have enhanced the quality of their experience.

Participants within Course 2 indicated varied limitations regarding their experience; a few within the guided journal condition reported scheduling/time constraints, and a few from the open-ended journal condition reported frustration due to limited access to the target population within their service-learning experience. This was indicated by comments such as, “The only downfall is that some experiences did not allow for interactions with adolescents. This made it difficult to draw connections back to class in the journal.” Overall, there was great variability in the responses regarding

drawbacks to service-learning, and most responses were truly related more to issues with the course as opposed to actual issues with service-learning.

## **Discussion**

The purpose of this mixed methods study was to determine if any substantial differences existed between open-ended and guided service-learning reflective journal assignments. Through the use of quantitative and qualitative methods, a variety of data was collected and analyzed to explore and explain potential differences between these two writing formats.

### **Self-Efficacy in Course Content**

Prior to this study, it was hypothesized that reflective journal writing, in general, would positively impact students' self-efficacy towards course content. This hypothesis was confirmed, as each class showed significant gains in self-efficacy from pre- to post-service-learning experience despite the fact that there were no significant differences between the two journal types. Furthermore, neither reflective journal format was related to greater gains in students' confidence with course content. Participants across class and journal condition also reported greater confidence interacting with the target populations for each class. These findings indicate that both reflective journal types had a positive impact on students' self-efficacy related to course materials.

This finding is important, as one's self-efficacy, or confidence in domain-specific success, has incredible implications for education (Bandura, 1986, 1993). Self-efficacy beliefs have been identified as significant contributors toward student motivation and achievement (Bandura & Locke, 2003). Individuals with higher self-efficacy are more motivated to work towards their goals, which results in better outcomes. With this in mind, it makes sense that educators would strive for improved efficacy among students as related to course objectives. The results from this study indicate that service-learning experience with reflective open-ended or guided journal assignments may help establish such domain-specific confidence in students potentially leading to greater motivation and outcomes within the course.

### **Reflection Ratings**

Participants assigned to the open-ended journal assignment were expected to perceive greater reflective quality in their assignments due to the demands for more independent thinking (less structure) within their assignment. However, participants' responses to post-service-learning reflection rating items related to the quality of reflection within assigned journal types revealed no significant differences between open-ended and guided journal participant ratings. Again, the ratings from both classes showed students experienced positive opportunities for reflection through their assigned journal type, indicating that both open-ended and guided journal writing offered *continuous, connected, challenging* and *contextualized* reflection. With these ratings in mind, again, instructors should consider the use of open-ended and/or guided reflective journal writing assignments within service-learning courses in order to enhance student experiences.

## **Writing Quality**

The quality of participant writing also demonstrated support for each type of journal. Two raters assessed participants' writing using the SLRWR; the average rating across the four categories (e.g. Course Content, Concept Clarity, Examples Provided, and Writing Skills) did not differ significantly between the two journal types. It was hypothesized that students' writing would be stronger within the guided journal format as more structure was provided regarding content. However, the data does not reflect this difference, and again, speaks to the potential value in both journal types being used for reflective service-learning writing assignments. Conclusions from these results suggest the importance of reflective journal writing, whether open-ended or guided, as a positive component for instructors of service-learning courses to implement.

## **Qualitative Findings**

As previously mentioned, participants reported increased self-efficacy for course content as well as enhanced learning through their service-learning experience. Additional themes captured in this qualitative data included: "You Can Only Learn So Much From A Book" (participants indicated the service-learning experience added to their learning in a positive way), "Learning is Maximized" (participants shared that the service-learning experience allowed them to apply information from class to the real world), and "The downfall is trying to fit it into my busy schedule..." (participants revealed few limitations to the service-learning experience beyond time constraints). When closely examining this data for differences across class and journal condition, a few class-oriented differences surfaced (related to the content and focus of the class) yet there were no drastic contrasts between participants assigned to open-ended versus guided journal writing assignments. In general, participants valued the experience and reported the service-learning experience as a positive influence on learning. Other than time constraints and scheduling issues, very few limitations of the service-learning experience were reported, and several participants across class and journal condition reported that there were no drawbacks related to the service-learning experience. In general, participant responses suggest that incorporating reflective journal writing in either open-ended or guided format positively contributed to the service-learning experience.

## **Limitations**

While this study provides valuable information regarding the use of reflective journal writing in undergraduate Communication Disorders service-learning courses, there are limitations to the findings. This study includes a limited sample as far as size ( $n = 47$ ) and diversity (97% female, 95% academic major in Communication Disorders, etc.) are considered. Furthermore, the results of this study are limited as there was not a control group; having a control group would help clarify if students' beliefs (specifically self-efficacy ratings) and learning were impacted by the reflective journal condition alone, or if participation in the class without such experience would have led to similar findings. Each journal type has its own limitations as well; guided journals are limited in that the topics provided may not align with students' experiences, and open-ended journals lack structure that insures key course concepts will be considered during reflection. Furthermore, the quality of students' service-learning experiences was also a



limitation within this study in that the experience did not always clearly align with course content, requiring students to struggle to complete their reflective journals in a manner that demonstrated knowledge of course concepts.

Future research in this area should explore results across larger samples with more diverse students (across gender, location, field of study, courses, etc.) and the use of a control group to provide more concrete evidence supporting the use of open-ended and/or guided reflective journal use within service-learning experiences.

## Conclusion

The results of this study provide preliminary support for the use of guided and open-ended journal writing as a means for reflection during service-learning experiences within undergraduate Communication Disorders courses. The data collected provides promise that both of these journal types may lead to increased self-efficacy with course content, perception of quality reflection opportunities and sufficient writing quality demonstrating valuable learning within service-learning experiences.

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## Appendix

### Service Learning Survey Items

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#### Course 1:

Self-Efficacy Rating Items    Confidence About Identifying Typical Language Development Skills in Children

Students differ in how confident they are about identifying typical language development skills in children of various ages. In relation to typical language development, rate how confident you are that you can do each of the following by indicating a probability of success from 0 (no chance) to 100 (complete certainty). The scale below is for reference only; you do not need to use only the given values. You may assign any number between 0 and 100 as your probability. I am able to explain typical development of the components of language including semantics, syntax, morphology, pragmatics and phonology.

0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
No Chance	Very Little Chance		Little Chance		50/50 Chance	Good Chance		Very Good Chance		Complete Certainty

1. I am able to explain different theories and models of oral and written language development.
2. I am able to explain social, cognitive, neurological and physiological bases of language and communication.
3. I am able to identify skills involved in the progression of typical oral and written language development from birth to adulthood.
4. I am able to explain similarities and differences in first and second language acquisition.  
I am able to identify cultural differences in language acquisition and use.

#### Course 2:

Self-Efficacy Rating Items    Confidence About Identifying Adolescent Language Development & Disorders

Students differ in how confident they are about identifying components of adolescent language development and disorders. In relation to adolescent language development and disorders, rate how confident you are that you can do each of the following by indicating a

probability of success from 0 (no chance) to 100 (complete certainty). The scale below is for reference only; you do not need to use only the given values. You may assign any number between 0 and 100 as your probability.

0	10	20	30	40	50	60	70	80	90	100
No Chance	Very Little Chance		Little Chance		50/50 Chance	Good Chance		Very Good Chance		Complete Certainty

1. I am able to explain typical adolescent development of the components of language including semantics, syntax, morphology, pragmatics and phonology.
2. I am able to explain different theories and models of oral and written language development in adolescents.
3. I am able to explain social, cognitive, neurological and physiological bases of language and communication in the adolescent population.
4. I am able to identify skills involved in the progression of typical oral and written language development during adolescence.
5. I am able to explain similarities and differences in bilingual adolescents' language development.
6. I am able to identify cultural differences in adolescent language development.

Course 1 &  
Course 2

Pre-Service Learning Experience Survey Items

What do you think that you will learn from this service learning experience?

What do you believe are the benefits of participating in service learning experiences?

What do you believe are the downfalls of participating in service learning experiences?

Post-Service Learning Experience

The assignment fostered continuous reflection (before, during and after service experience).

## Reflection Ratings

The assignment fostered connected reflection (it is linked to classroom experiences).

The assignment fostered challenging reflection (it required you to think in new ways).

The assignment fostered contextualized reflection (it relates well to the course content, and the service experience).

## Post-Service Learning Experience Survey Items

What did you learn from this service learning experience?

What do you believe were the benefits of participating in this service learning experience?

What do you believe were the downfalls of participating in this service learning experience?

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*Note.* Self-Efficacy Rating items were based on a 100-point scale. Participants completed self-efficacy ratings regarding their confidence in course content knowledge pre- and post-service learning experience. Pre- and post-service learning experience survey items were open-ended questions. Post-service learning reflection ratings utilized the following response options: Strongly Agree (1), Agree (2), Neutral (3), Disagree (4), Strongly Disagree (5).

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