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## University students' perceptions on dialogue-journal writing in a networked society

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**Abstract.** Diese Studie untersucht, was kanadische Studenten auf der Hochschulstufe beim Schreiben von Lerntagebüchern in Muttersprache und Fremdsprache wahrnehmen. Viermal im Semester wurde in zwei Kursen, einem Konversationskurs für Deutschlernende im zweiten Jahr und einem fortgeschrittenen, in der Muttersprache unterrichteten Kulturkurs, eine Umfrage durchgeführt, um festzustellen, ob der Kursinhalt die Nützlichkeit eines Lerntagebuchs unterschiedlich beeinflussen und sich die Einsichten der Lernenden im Laufe der Zeit verändern würden. Während die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Mitglieder der zwei Lerngemeinschaften verschiedene Vorteile wahrnahmen, erhöhte sich zwischen der ersten und der letzten Umfrage die durchschnittliche, positive Beurteilung von Lerntagebüchern in beiden Klassen.

**Abstract.** This study examines students' perceptions of dialogue journal writing in a post-secondary L1 and FL environment in Canada. A survey was administered four times in two courses, a second-year German conversation course and an advanced cultural studies course taught in the L1, to determine the extent to which perceived benefits of dialogue journal writing differed in the two course contexts as well as whether learners' perceptions of dialogue journal writing changed over time. Results show that, whereas perceptions of specific benefits varied between participants in the two classes, the mean rating of dialogue journal writing increased in both classes from the first to the final survey.

**Schlagwörter:** Lerntagebücher, Schreiben im Fremdsprachenunterricht, Wahrnehmungen Studierender, neue Medien

### 1. Introduction

In the 1980s and 1990s the dialogue journal became a popular teaching and learning tool that promoted extensive writing and dialogic interaction within specific educational settings. Whether used in the elementary-school classroom or among adult learners, in first-language (L1), second-language (L2), or foreign-language (FL) environments, among disabled learners, or learners coming from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, dialogue journals, it was claimed, provided a space where learning could take place in a non-threatening way, thereby empowering learners to think critically about their learning environment and educational experiences (Bode 1989; Peyton 2000). The first comprehensive study of dialogue-journal writing began in the classroom of a sixth-grade teacher, Leslee Reed, in 1979 (Staton 1988b). In the following decades the use of dialogue journals and the corresponding research on its use increased significantly in many areas – most notably in the field of English as a Second Language (ESL) – so that by 1988 Jana Staton (1988b) noted that dialogue journals were “now becoming a part of the most major ESL

programs across the United States and abroad” (xi-xii). By 2000, there existed over two hundred published works on dialogue journals (see bibliography compiled by Peyton & Staton 2000).

With the increase of personal computers, the revamping of language laboratories to computer-based stations, and vast changes in new technologies, especially in the area of networked communication, dialogue journals appear to have fallen by the wayside to make room for computer-mediated interaction. Since most of the students entering post-secondary education today use networked communication in one form or another in their every-day lives, many post-secondary instructors have found ways to incorporate new technologies, such as threaded discussions, chat sessions, websites, blogs, and wikis, into their courses. These and other forms of digital media encourage communication across time and space and, in certain instances, promote cross-cultural communication as well as collaborative writing and idea sharing.

This article examines the value university students place on dialogue journals in post-secondary learning in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Do university learners perceive any benefits in using dialogue journals for processing course material, whether in an L1 or FL context? Do they view writing-to-learn as a beneficial way to process course content in general? To what extent do these learners find dialogue-journal writing beneficial in L1 and FL settings? What do they view as the major differences in using dialogue journals in a cultural studies class taught in their native language versus dialogue-journal writing used as a way to improve foreign language proficiency? Do post-secondary learners recognize any value in using dialogue journaling in the age of computer-mediated communication (CMC)? These questions raise the issue of whether the use of dialogue journals that seems to have peaked in the 1980s and 1990s was just a passing fad, whether dialogue journals have been effectively replaced by other forms of extensive writing and writing-to-learn activities, especially those facilitated by new media, and whether there are still positive outcomes in using dialogue journals at the post-secondary level today.

This study analyzes learners’ perceptions of the process of writing in a dialogue journal in two university-level courses in a mid-sized comprehensive university in Western Canada – one taught in the L1 and the other in a foreign language. Participants in each of the two courses completed four surveys throughout one 12-week semester. The major aim of this study is twofold:

1. to determine how perceptions of dialogue-journal writing differed in each specific course context (writing to learn in an L1 vs. an FL environment);
2. to examine whether there was a change of attitude throughout the semester (from the first to the fourth survey) regarding the efficacy of dialogue-journal writing at the post-secondary level, that is whether participants’ opinions changed over time.

The survey addressed specific questions related to the value of using dialogue journals in university courses today, including which aspects of dialogue journals learners find most beneficial, students’ opinions on dialogue journaling compared to using other types of new media, whether they perceive a difference in writing their journal by hand or typing their journal entries, and their overall satisfaction with writing in a dialogue journal in their respective courses. The specific course contexts are described in further detail in the fourth section of this article. First, however, a description of dialogue-journal writing, its history in classroom learning, as well as an overview of the research pertaining to its use in L1, L2, and FL learning is in order.

## 2. Dialogue-journal writing

Dialogue journals can be used in L1, L2, and FL learning environments. According to Jana Staton dialogue-journal writing is defined as “the use of a journal for the purpose of carrying out a written conversation between two persons [...] on a regular, continuous basis. The frequency of writing, the external form (a bound notebook), and even the participants may all vary in different settings” (1988a: 4). The main attributes of this type of writing are that it is continuous, that it takes place over an extended period of time, and that it is interactive, with each writer taking regular and equal turns. Another characteristic of dialogue-journal writing is that the focus is on communication, not form. The conversation partner (who is often the instructor) is an active participant engaged in the conversation

itself. Therefore, the focus is on the negotiated content and meaning of the interactions, rather than on the accuracy of the written product. In L2 and FL learning, the dialogue-journal partner is often the instructor and/or a native speaker from one of the target cultures studied, who can help guide the conversation as well as model correct vocabulary, grammar, orthography, and syntax.

In describing how she used dialogue journals with her sixth-grade students, Leslie Reed (1988) outlined the benefits of the dialogue journal for establishing rapport, building community, discussing academic subjects and how they are taught and assessed, and on communicating with each student individually, thus individualizing instruction to meet students' needs. Furthermore, researchers have shown that users of dialogue journals often exhibit a wide range of language functions and rhetorical strategies in their written exchanges (Shuy 1988a). This type of extended written communication over time is not only helpful for emerging L1 writers, but can be used in any course context at any level of instruction as a way to process course material, formulate thoughts, share ideas, and to give and receive feedback.

In L2 and FL language writing (as well as among emerging L1 writers), dialogue journals provide a space for extensive writing practice. From early on, L2 writing research, especially in the field of ESL, has studied the efficacy of dialogue-journal writing. This research suggests that dialogue-journal writing individualizes instruction in multilingual and multicultural settings common in ESL classrooms (Peyton & Reed 1990; Reed 1993), helps build L2 fluency and confidence (Peyton, 2000), focuses ideas and content that can be transferred to other types of writing (Blanton 1995; McGrail 1996; Peyton 1988; Ulanoff 1993), and may even be conducive to learners' attempts to try out new morphological and syntactic features (Weissberg 1998) as well as enhancing their grammatical accuracy (Peyton, Staton, Richardson & Wolfram 1990; Weissberg 1998). The oral nature of this type of writing, a conversation between two people taking turns, has been noted (Shuy 1987, 1988b) as well as the similarity of input features by the conversation partner to that of oral foreigner talk in which the interlocutor attempts to simplify the lexical and syntactic features of the language (Kreeft, Shuy, Staton, Reed & Morroy 1984). One of the salient features of dialogue-journal writing is that it occupies a space between traditional language modalities, and it is perhaps this feature that makes it so beneficial for language learning in general. In the words of Weissberg: "It is [...] useful to view journal writing as a kind of cross-over genre, more speech-like than most school writing, more writing-like than speech, but combining the best features of both modalities" (2000: 51).

Much of the research on dialogue-journal writing emerged in the fields of L1 literacy studies and ESL writing. Very little research has been conducted in FL writing research on traditional dialogue-journal writing. Yet, as Reichelt has pointed out, the specific contexts surrounding FL writing are much different from those of ESL writing in the U.S. (and I would also add parts of English-speaking Canada):

One main difference is that, unlike ESL students, FL students are rarely if ever called upon to write in the target language (TL) in classes outside FL departments. Further differences stem from several sources. First, much ESL research is done in contexts in which the TL is the language of the broader community, which is not the case for FL writing research. Second, many ESL teachers are native speakers (at least in the research reported) whereas many FL teachers are not native speakers of the TL. Third, in contrast to other TLs, English plays a unique role as a world language, including that of the medium of higher education in many cases. (2001: 578)

Nonetheless, FL researchers have gained insights about dialogue-journal writing from L1 and L2 research, even if the academic environments differ greatly. Of the 32 studies on writing outlined by Reichelt in her overview of FL writing research, only two deal specifically with traditional dialogue-journal writing (Baudrand-Aertker 1992; Martínez-Lage 1992), and a further two (Florez-Estrada 1995; Ittzes 1997) deal with traditional journaling vs. writing on the computer (Reichelt 2001: 594-598).

The first study mentioned by Reichelt is Baudrand-Aertker's doctoral dissertation that examines the writing proficiency of 21 third-year high school students of French before and after writing in their dialogue journal two times a week for an entire school year. Baudrand-Aertker concludes that the increase in students' writing proficiency scores attests to the efficacy of dialogue-journal writing in developing writing ability. Martínez-Lage's study of the differ-

ences between student writing in self-selected dialogue-journal writing versus teacher-assigned composition topics, the second doctoral dissertation on dialogue journals mentioned by Reichelt, focuses on the writing of 23 university students enrolled in second-year Spanish. Martínez-Lage maintains that the writing produced in students' dialogue journals shows a higher rate of grammatical accuracy and syntactical complexity than the teacher-assigned compositions. Another doctoral dissertation that focuses on FL journal writing is Bonzo's 2005 dissertation, which studies self-selected versus teacher-assigned spontaneous in-class journal writing in four third-semester German courses on the post-secondary level. Bonzo's research results suggest that students write more when they self-selected their writing topic than when the topics were assigned, and that this greater fluency, in turn, appears to positively affect writing complexity (2005: 99-101).

Almost all of the research on FL dialogue-journal writing from the mid-1990s onward, with the notable exception of Bonzo's study, focuses primarily on writing in a computer-mediated environment or comparing traditional dialogue-journal writing to writing in new media. It seems that just at the time when FL researchers began to focus on FL writing in more detail (markedly later and with less frequency than L1 and L2 researchers), the medium of writing began to gradually shift from a paper-based to a computer-mediated setting.

### 3. Writing in the age of computer-mediated communication (CMC)

It is interesting that the very words that were used to characterize dialogue-journal writing are often used today to describe various CMC activities – both asynchronous CMC, such as electronic journaling or emailing, as well as synchronous CMC usage like online chatting. For example, L2 and FL researchers have discussed networked discourse as a means for building student/teacher relationships (Bloch 2002) and fostering community in linguistically and culturally diverse academic settings (Belcher 1999), and, similar to dialogue-journal research, have shown that CMC often generates a greater variety and quantity of language compared to in-class oral interaction (Kelm 1992; Kern 1995; Warschauer 1996). Additional benefits include increased opportunities for language communication outside of the classroom (Beauvois 1998; Blake 2000), gains in oral proficiency (Payne & Whitney 2002; Satar & Özdener 2008) as well as learner confidence after CMC activities (González-Bueno & Pérez 2001). The extent to which traditional divisions between language modalities are disrupted or redefined through CMC has been discussed in terms of networked communication that facilitates bi-modal or multi-modal communication (Blake 2005; Thorne & Reinhardt 2008). Similarly, the use of CMC changes the way we view speaking and writing in general (Collot & Belmore 1996; Yates 1996) and communicative practices associated with new emergent digital communication genres have been shown to vary to a large extent from their analogue textual counterparts (Thorne & Reinhardt 2008).

Given these similarities between dialogue journals and various types of CMC, it seems logical to draw on new technologies in ways that encourage the benefits of dialogue journaling, but with the convenience and sustainability of CMC. If learners were given a choice, would they automatically choose to use new technologies instead of hand-written journal entries? Would they want to replicate journal writing in a CMC environment or would they prefer other types of CMC experiences, such as email (or threaded) discussions, live chat sessions, blogs, or wikis? Does the medium of the writing and exchange matter to learners? Are there variations in expectation regarding the medium or differences in the nature of the medium (such as the public feature of certain forms of CMC) that play a role? How do learners view the benefits of dialogue-journal writing in post-secondary learning?

The goal of this study is not, as other researchers have done (Florez-Estrada 1995; González-Bueno & Pérez 2000, 2001; Wang 1996), to examine the differences between dialogue journaling with email journaling, nor is it to summarize ways in which technology has influenced L2 and FL writing (see Warschauer 2007 for a summary). Instead the purpose of this research is to examine post-secondary learners' perceptions on the role that dialogue journals might play in L1 and FL classrooms in the age of CMC. Since writing research has moved away from traditional dialogue-journal writing, it can be indirectly assumed that the use of dialogue journals has declined in post-secondary learning today. The objective here is to provide a means for continuing discussions begun thirty years ago on the role of dialogue journals in post-secondary education in the context of the information age.

#### 4. Methodology

For this study a survey (see appendix) was administered four times during a 12-week semester (January – April 2009) in two courses at a mid-sized Canadian university. One of the courses was a fourth-semester German conversation course and the other was a fourth-year special topics course taught in the students' L1 entitled "The Power of Propaganda and the Politics of Persecution: Literature and Film of the Holocaust and *Third Reich*". While the dialogue journal was a requirement in each of these courses, participation in the study was voluntary. Of the registered students in the course, 26 out of 34 students in the German conversation course and 22 out of 26 students in the cultural studies course participated in the study.

The reason students in these two classes were chosen to participate in the study was because they offered two completely different environments for extensive writing: one in the context of FL writing and the other for processing course material in a course taught entirely in the L1. Therefore, it was not only the language that was different (L1 vs. FL) but also the content and goals of the writing. On the part of the instructor (who is also the investigator of this study), the rationale for implementing dialogue journals in a FL conversation course, for example, was to increase the time learners spent thinking and formulating ideas in the FL, to individualize learning in a large, multi-level language class,<sup>1</sup> and to build fluency in the FL that could hopefully be transferred to students' oral communication skills. The goals that guided the instructor's choice for using dialogue journals in this particular cultural studies course taught in the L1 included providing students with a means for processing course material, a format for expressing emotions, and a space for continuing class discussions that were particularly tense or controversial. In addition, journal writing provided a way to "check in" with the students, either about their progress on their seminar paper or to gauge individual students' distress signals regarding the course content, given the emotionally intense nature of the course readings (mainly Holocaust narratives).

The guidelines for dialogue-journal writing in each of the courses under study were the same in terms of frequency (once a week), form (hand-written composition book or folder containing typed pages), and types of participants (classmates and instructor). Assessment of the journals was based on the quantity and the content of the writing – not on the grammatical accuracy or the style of the writing. Because of instructor workload issues, journal writing was modified in each of the courses to allow learners to dialogue with other learners in their respective class as well as the instructor. Each of the courses met for 150 minutes each week: three 50-minute sessions in the conversation course and one three-hour block, with appropriate breaks, in the cultural studies course. Students brought their dialogue journals to class once a week and responded to a classmate's journal entry during the first ten to fifteen minutes of class on that day. Class participants were encouraged to rotate, rather than exchange, their journals (so that the person's journal in which they were writing did not belong to the person who was writing in their own journal) and to change correspondents each week. The journals were collected three times during the semester, with the instructor continuing the dialogue during those weeks. This modification is significant because it meant that the correspondents changed rather than stayed constant throughout the extended period of dialogue-journal writing and that the individuals involved in the written conversation were not taking equal turns, neither in terms of the number of entries contributed nor in terms of the quantity written, since the amount of class time provided each week did not allow for entries of great length. The instructor's entries were also shorter than those expected of learners each week – but the length of the responses was proportionally similar in each course.<sup>2</sup>

The guidelines for journal writing in each of the courses varied in terms of language, length, and desired content. The FL learners in the conversation course were expected to write at least one page a week in German either in a composition-size journal or in a folder containing typed entries on a general theme that was related to weekly class discussions. A list of these ten themes was supplied at the beginning of the semester and included mainly descriptive topics focused on students' everyday lives (e.g., describing their free time activities, living situation, an interesting trip they had taken), but also literary analysis (e.g., reactions to a poem), meta-learning (e.g., summarizing the learning that took place over the course of the semester) as well as one open topic. Learners in the cultural studies course were expected to write four pages every week, two pages before and two pages after each class session, in English (although the option was given to students with advanced FL proficiency to write in German). The content of the entries in the cultural studies course was left entirely up to the students. The length of the instructor's responses was longer in the cultural studies course, where students were expected to write four pages, rather than one, per week.

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The same survey was distributed to participants in each course on the second, fifth, ninth, and twelfth week of the semester. If a participant was absent during any of these days, the survey was counted as missing. Similarly, if any question was filled out wrong, that question in that particular survey was not counted. The surveys were used to discover what aspects of dialogue-journal writing university students found beneficial in their specific course contexts as well as to determine whether there were perceived differences as to the benefits of dialogue-journal writing in an L1 and FL instructional setting and to examine whether participants' opinions changed over the course of the semester. Investigating the ways in which learners perceive dialogue-journal writing to be beneficial in a post-secondary learning environment in the age of CMC is also interesting as many instructors have moved away from implementing dialogue-journal writing in favour of various types of computer-supported social networking. Therefore a look at students' attitudes on the preferred format of journal entries (handwritten vs. typed) as well as their opinions on the type of interactive writing medium regarded as most beneficial (dialogue journals compared to forms of CMC) is also a focus of this study.

## 5. Results

The first two survey questions analyze learners' perceptions of the benefits of dialogue-journal writing (see Table 4 in the appendix). The first question asks participants to identify all the items that they feel are beneficial, whereas the second question asks them to rank the top three qualities of dialogue-journal writing. Tabulated results show that each of the ten items listed was considered beneficial by at least some of the 48 participants (26 in the German conversation class and 22 in the cultural studies class), regardless of course or survey number. In addition, three dialogue-journal writers in the German conversation course noted additional positive features: to think in German (survey 1), to improve speed and comfort with writing (survey 1), and to discuss topics that would typically come up in a discussion with a native speaker (surveys 2 and 3). Similarly, four participants in the cultural studies course supplied additional advantages of dialogue-journal writing: to allow class participation without speaking in class (survey 1), to engage with the course readings (survey 1), to internalize course material (survey 1), and to react without pre-editing (survey 2). One of these four participants, who was one of three students in the course to write part of the dialogue journal in German, also listed the opportunity to practice German in a cultural studies course taught in the L1 as a benefit.

Examining the data for the first question, there are four items in the list of benefits in each class that at least half of the participants marked in all four surveys. Only one of these was the same for each course: to get thoughts down on paper. The other three differed between courses. Additional benefits marked by at least half of the participants across surveys in the German conversation course include: to improve writing ability, to learn vocabulary and new terminology, and to try out new writing structures, styles, or techniques. In the cultural studies course additional positive features included: to continue class discussions, to express emotions, and to process course material. Other items that were marked by at least 50% of the 48 participants in at least one of the surveys, but not sustained across surveys, suggest interesting shifts in each of the two courses. The benefit of dialoguing with classmates was perceived as a benefit of dialogue-journal writing by a majority of participants in each of the two classes in the first survey (52% of 25 participants in the German conversation course and 59% of 22 participants in the cultural studies course), but this was not sustained over time. In the FL class the percentage stayed the same in the first and the third survey (where  $n=25$  and  $n=23$  respectively), but dropped in the second (36% where  $n=22$ ) and fourth surveys (33% where  $n=24$ ); whereas the percentage of participants who marked dialoguing with classmates as a benefit in the cultural studies course decreased over time, dropping to 43% in the second survey (where  $n=21$ ), to 40% in the third survey (where  $n=20$ ), and to 30% in the final survey (where  $n=20$ ) distributed on the last day of class.

Additionally, the perceived benefit of processing course material fell in the German conversation course from the first survey (72% where  $n=25$ ) to the remaining three surveys (23%, 26%, and 29% where  $n=22$ ,  $n=23$ , and  $n=24$  respectively) and the benefit of being able to write about one's own life and experiences fell from the first two surveys (having been marked by 52% and 55% of the participants) to the remaining two surveys (marked by 39% and 25% respectively). In the cultural studies class the benefit of dialogue-journal writing to interact with the instructor was marked by less than 50% of the participants in surveys one and two (45% and 38% where  $n=22$  and  $n=21$  respectively), but increased in the final two surveys to 65% (where  $n=20$ ) in survey 3 and 75% of 20 participants in survey 4.

The second question of the survey lists the same ten benefits and has participants rank what they consider to be the top three benefits of dialogue-journal writing (see Table 5 in the appendix). . The items that were consistently marked by at least 50% of the participants on all four surveys in question 1, also received the top rankings in question 2. For the German conversation course, the items that received the most top 3 rankings on all four surveys (where n=25, n=22, n=23, n=24 respectively) were: to improve writing ability, to learn vocabulary and new terminology, to try out new writing structures, styles, or techniques, and to get thoughts down on paper. The items that were consistently ranked as most beneficial in the cultural studies course (where n=22, n=21, n=20, n=20 respectively) included: to get thoughts down on paper, to process course material, and to continue class discussions. The benefit of expressing emotions also received a significantly high ranking in surveys 2 and 4 (but lower than the three items already mentioned) in the cultural studies course, as did the benefit of interacting with the instructor in the final survey.

The next two survey items relate to participants' satisfaction level in using dialogue-journal writing in their respective courses compared to various other possible CMC experiences. The third question relates to whether the format of the interaction (hand-written vs. typed entries) makes a difference in their learning and the fourth question asks participants to choose one format, either a dialogue journal or a specific type of network-based written interaction, they believe would be most advantageous to their learning.

More participants in each of the courses checked that they would prefer to write hand-written rather than typewritten entries in all four surveys (see Table 6 in the appendix). .<sup>3</sup> Some students stated no preference in the format of the entries – but this number was consistently less than those preferring hand-written entries across surveys. In the German conversation course 52.0% of the participants preferred hand-written entries in the first survey (where n=25), 69.6% in the second survey (where n=23), 52.2% in the third survey (where n=23), and 62.5% in the fourth (where n=24). The percentages of participants in the cultural studies course preferring hand-written entries were 54.5% in the first survey (where n=22), 66.7% in the second (where n=21), 50.0% in the third (where n=20), and 65.0% in the final survey (where n=20). Most participants preferred hand-written journals, but many (23.8% - 48.0% across surveys and courses) also revealed no preference between writing by hand or typing their entries.

Results of the fourth question indicate that a large proportion of participants prefer dialogue-journal writing to an email (or threaded) discussion on the internet, a live internet chat session, a personal blog in which classmates could post comments, or a wiki created in small groups (see Table 1). This was consistent across courses and surveys. In fact, after the first survey, no participant ranked collaborative writing involved in creating wikis in either class, and no learners in this particular cultural studies course viewed live internet chat sessions as most helpful to their learning. All in all, a high proportion of participants viewed dialogue-journal writing to be most beneficial, and the percentages increased over time in each of the two courses: from 52.0% to 62.5% in the foreign language course and from 63.6% to 85.0% in the cultural studies course.

Table 1: Preferred medium for writing

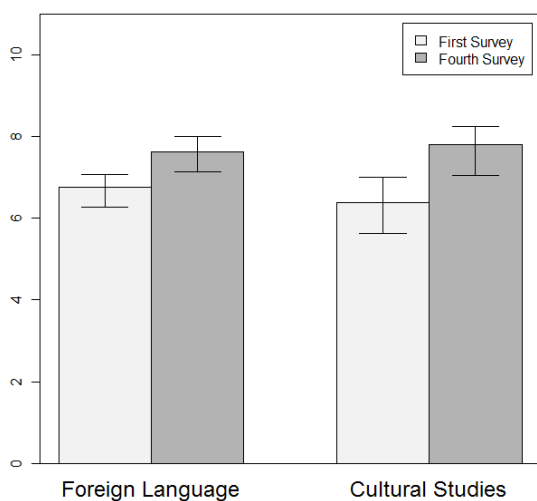
		Survey 1	Survey 2	Survey 3	Survey 4
FL	dialogue journal	13 (52.0%)	13 (59.1%)	14 (60.9%)	15 (62.5%)
	email discussion	4 (16.0%)	2 (9.1%)	5 (21.7%)	4 (16.7%)
	live chat	4 (16.0%)	2 (9.1%)	2 (8.7%)	2 (8.3%)
	personal blog	3 (12.0%)	5 (22.7%)	2 (8.7%)	3 (12.5%)
	wiki	1 (4.0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
	total responses	n=25	n=22	n=23	n=24
	CS	dialogue journal	14 (63.6%)	15 (71.4%)	17 (85.0%)

email discussion	3 (13.6%)	3 (14.3%)	2 (10.0%)	1 (5.0%)
live chat	1 (4.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
personal blog	3 (13.6%)	3 (14.3%)	1 (5.0%)	2 (10.0%)
wiki	1 (4.5%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)	0 (0%)
total responses	n=22	n=21	n=20	n=20

The final survey question asks participants to rate, on a scale from 1-10 with 10 being the most helpful, the extent to which they find dialogue journals beneficial for enhancing their learning in their respective courses. The percentage of participants who provided a rating of 8 or higher increased in each survey in each of the two courses. In the conversation course, 40% of learners rated the benefit of dialogue journals for enhancing learning with an 8 or higher on the first survey (where n=25), 41% of participants provided this rating on the second survey (where n=22), 59% in the third survey (where n=22), and 64% of the learners provided a rating of 8 or higher by the end of the course (where n=22). The percentage of participants in the cultural studies course who provided a rating of 8 or higher was 41% in the first survey (where n=22), 52% in the second (where n=21), 63% in the third (where n=19), and 65% in the fourth (where n=20).

Another way to look at the results from question 6 is to analyze the mean rating for each course over time. Figure 1 shows the mean rating in each course on the first and final surveys. In terms of statistical means, the mean score in the FL course increased from 6.76 in survey 1 to 7.64 in survey 4 (where n=25 and n=22 respectively). In the cultural studies course, the mean score increased from 6.39 in survey 1 to 7.80 in the final survey (where n=22 and n=20 respectively). To place statistical confidence intervals around these means, the bias-corrected accelerated (BCa) bootstrap method was used. This method was chosen because of its robustness to assumptions of underlying data structure as well as sample size. R (version 2.10.1) was used to calculate the mean scores as well as 85% BCa bootstrap confidence intervals for these mean values (see Efron & Tibshirani 1993 for a discussion of bootstrap methods). In the first survey the intervals in the FL and cultural studies courses were 6.28 to 7.08 and 5.64 to 7.00 respectively. In the final survey the interval in the FL course was 7.14 to 8.00 and 7.05 to 8.25 in the cultural studies course.

Figure 1: Mean rating of dialogue-journal writing



BCa Bootstrap 85% Confidence Range, Bar Height is Mean, Scale 1 - 10.



Since there may be differences between participants in the values placed on each rating, that is, since there is no set standard on what a specific rating means, it may be helpful to also look at individual ratings in each of the courses and whether they change over time. Tables 2 and 3 show each participant's initial rating (column 2) and whether the rating changed in the final survey and by how much. A positive number in column 3 indicates that the rating either stayed the same or increased and a negative number shows that it decreased by the number provided in the column. In the German conversation course, ratings stayed the same for five of the 26 participants (19%), decreased for five participants (19%), and increased for sixteen participants (62%) in the study. In the cultural studies course, two individual's ratings stayed the same (9%), two decreased (9%), and the remaining eighteen participants (82%) increased their ratings. In the FL course the increase in ratings vary from an increase of 1 to an increase of 4 from the participants' first to their final survey. The range of increase in the cultural studies course varies from 0.5 to 6.

Table 2: Individual dialogue-journal ratings over time (FL)

	<b>Survey 1 ranking</b>	<b>Survey 4 change</b>
1	8	0
2	6	0
3	7	1
4	6	1
5	6	2
6	3	1
7	5	3
8	8	0
9	7	-3
10	8	1
11	6	2
12	8	0
13	8	-1
14	5	3
15	8	2
16	8	-2
17	8	0
18	5	3
19	7	1
20	7	-1
21	8	-2
22	9	1
23	6	4
24	5	2
25	7	1
26	6	1

Table 3: Individual dialogue-journal ratings over time (CS)

	<b>Survey 1 ranking</b>	<b>Survey 4 change</b>
1	5	1
2	8	1
3	5	-3
4	8	0
5	7	1
6	8	1

7	8	0
8	1	6
9	3	4
10	7	2
11	5	3
12	10	-2
13	3	4
14	8.5	0.5
15	5	2
16	5	2
17	8	1
18	5	1
19	8	2
20	7	2
21	7	1
22	9	1

## 6. Discussion and conclusions

By administering the same survey four times in two different courses, one taught in the L1 and one in the FL, differences in learners' perception of dialogue-journal writing can be analyzed based on the academic context of the particular course. The perceived benefits of journal writing, for example, are related to the goals and objectives of the course at hand. Learners in a FL conversation course often have different expectations, needs, and goals than learners in a cultural studies course taught in their L1,<sup>4</sup> ones that specifically relate to language learning and FL skills development. These differences can be seen in learners' responses to the benefits of dialogue-journal writing across all four surveys. The majority of FL learners who participated in this study saw the dialogue journal as a place where they could practice and improve their writing, try out new writing structures, styles, and techniques, and learn German vocabulary; whereas the cultural studies students viewed dialogue-journal writing as beneficial for continuing class discussions, processing course material, and expressing emotions. Getting thoughts down on paper was the one item that was marked as a benefit by the majority of learners across surveys in each of the two courses.

Looking at the change of perceptions of dialogue journal benefits over the course of the semester, one can see that what learners may have viewed as a benefit in the first survey (after writing their first entry but before exchanging with a dialogue partner) may change in subsequent surveys. In the German conversation course, for example, a majority of participants included dialoguing with classmates, processing course material, and writing about one's own life to be beneficial in the first survey – but this ranking was not sustained over time. This could be because participants' initial expectations of what dialogue-journal writing would be like were not met in the specific ways that dialogue-journal writing was conducted in the course or it could have to do with learners' changing perceptions of dialogue-journal writing over time. An example of this in the German conversation course can be seen in participants' ratings of the benefits of writing about one's own life and experiences. Responses varied from 52% (where n=25), 55% (where n=22), 39% (where n=23), and 25% (where n=24) respectively across the four surveys. In the second half of the course, learners may have felt that writing about their own lives and experiences was not any more helpful than other types of writing or they could have felt that the journal topics began steering them away from this type of writing towards more abstract and analytical topics. Another example is the perceived benefit of dialogue-journal writing for improving writing in general. Whereas 100% of the participants in the first survey in the FL course (where n=25) thought dialogue-journal writing would help them improve their writing, the response decreased to 75% by the fourth survey (where n=24). One of the reasons for this could be that participants expected to receive more detailed feedback from the instructor on their writing. In fact, when asked to write a few sentences on the survey about the benefits and drawbacks of dialogue-journal writing (question 5), twelve individual participants in the German conversation course mentioned that they would have appreciated direct feedback from the instructor on grammar and vocabulary. Perhaps their ratings reflected their disappointment in not receiving such feedback and,

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Helga Thorson (2011), University students' perceptions on dialogue-journal writing in a networked society. *Zeitschrift für Interkulturellen Fremdsprachenunterricht* 16: 2, 204-221. Abrufbar unter <http://zif.spz.tu-darmstadt.de/jg-16-2/beitrag/Thorson.pdf>.

therefore, contributed to the perception that their writing did not improve as much as it could have if their grammatical and lexical errors had been pointed out.

As in the FL course, the number of students who viewed dialoguing with classmates as a benefit of dialogue-journal writing decreased over time across surveys in the cultural studies course (from 59% in the first survey where  $n=22$  to 30% in the final survey where  $n=20$ ). This could have to do with the fact that students were given limited time to write their responses in class, but it could also have to do with the learners' sensitivity to the course content. Three participants, for example, wrote that they did not like sharing their journals with other students because of the personal nature of their entries. It is also interesting that ratings went up in the cultural studies course in the third and fourth survey regarding the benefit of interacting with the instructor (from 45% in the first survey where  $n=22$  and 38% in the second where  $n=21$  to 65% in the third where  $n=20$  and 75% in the fourth survey where  $n=20$ ). This, however, is not surprising since the first interaction with the instructor did not take place until after the second survey was completed. Also, since the journal was a place to dialogue about the final course paper, the benefit of interacting with the instructor in the cultural studies course may have been viewed as particularly beneficial in later surveys.

Survey results related to learners' preferences in hand-written entries compared to typed entries show that participants favoured hand-written dialogue journals in both courses across time. This could have to do with the cognitive processes involved in writing by hand, convenience, or the expectations and feelings associated with hand-written texts, i.e., that they are more private and personal. In terms of learners' preferences in using dialogue journals compared to various types of CMC, results show that participants in these two courses preferred dialogue-journal writing to hypothetically engaging in email or threaded discussions, live chat sessions, blogs, or wikis and that this preference increased from the first to the final survey in each course. Some students' comments, especially in the cultural studies course, suggest that this might have to do with the public nature of CMC and the perception that sharing thoughts and ideas is less personal in a networked forum than with handwritten journals. As one cultural studies student wrote: "A dialogue journal is infinitely more helpful, personal, and constructive than any electronic format (email, forum, blog, wiki) [...] paper is most personal!"

Looking at participants' ratings of dialogue-journal writing on a scale from one to ten, one can see that ratings of 8 and higher increased across time in each course. Similarly, the mean score increased from the first to the final survey in both courses. BCa bootstrap confidence intervals show that perceived benefits of dialogue-journal writing increased in both the FL language and L1 cultural studies courses.

In conclusion, this study provides evidence that, for many students, dialogue journals are valuable in ways that they believe are not directly replaceable by CMC such as email, chat, wikis, or blogs. Perhaps this result is related to perceived notions of privacy as well as the value learners place on writing by hand. It is important to note that this study was not undertaken out of any sort of wariness on the part of the investigator in using CMC to facilitate post-secondary learning. On the contrary, the primary investigator is an avid user of CMC in and outside of class and believes that there are sound advantages for its use in both the FL and cultural studies classroom, especially in the way that it can facilitate and enhance inter-cultural and cross-cultural communication and understanding. Yet, this study provides evidence that suggests there is value in listening to students' voices about the methods and techniques they believe will help them learn best in particular course contexts.

Further research should focus on specific aspects of dialogue-journal writing that stimulate learning on the post-secondary level (such as the interpersonal and intrapersonal connections that are part of dialogic learning and reflection), the extent to which improvements in L1 and FL may be correlated to extensive writing practice, the place of dialogue journals in stimulating cross-cultural engagement, and the cognitive and psychological issues involved in the process of writing by hand versus interacting in various computer-networked environments. More detailed studies on students' perceptions of dialogue-journal writing versus CMC across language levels, L1, L2, and FL populations, and types of courses and subject matter would also be of interest. Overall both L1 and FL participants in this study appreciated the benefits of dialogue-journal writing in their specific course contexts. Approximately thirty years after the use of dialogue journals was first cited, the participants of this study provide evidence that suggests there is still a place for dialogue journals in post-secondary education in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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## Appendix

### Survey items

1. Which of the following items do you consider to be beneficial about dialogue journal writing? Check **all items** that apply. [Note: Some of these items may not be relevant to the course you are currently taking.]

- to continue class discussions
- to dialogue with classmates
- to express emotions
- to get thoughts down on paper
- to improve writing ability
- to interact with your instructor
- to learn vocabulary and new terminology
- to process course material
- to try out new writing structures, styles, or techniques
- to write about my own life and experiences
- other: \_\_\_\_\_

2. Please **rank the top three items** (1<sup>st</sup> best, 2<sup>nd</sup> best, 3<sup>rd</sup> best) that you consider to be most beneficial about dialogue journal writing.

- \_\_\_\_\_ to continue class discussions
- \_\_\_\_\_ to dialogue with classmates
- \_\_\_\_\_ to express emotions
- \_\_\_\_\_ to get thoughts down on paper
- \_\_\_\_\_ to improve writing ability
- \_\_\_\_\_ to interact with your instructor
- \_\_\_\_\_ to learn vocabulary and new terminology
- \_\_\_\_\_ to process course material
- \_\_\_\_\_ to try out new writing structures, styles, or techniques
- \_\_\_\_\_ to write about my own life and experiences
- \_\_\_\_\_ other: \_\_\_\_\_

3. What format would you prefer most for dialogue journal writing? Check **only one** of the following items.

- hand-written entries
- typewritten entries
- either hand-written or typewritten entries

4. What type of interactive writing would be most helpful to you personally for learning? Check **only one** of the following items.

- a dialogue journal
- an email (or threaded) discussion on the internet
- a live internet chat session
- a personal blog in which classmates could post comments
- a wiki created in small groups

5. Write 1-3 sentences on the benefits and/or drawbacks of dialogue journal writing in this course up to this point in time.

6. On a scale from 1-10 (10 being the most helpful), how beneficial do you find dialogue journals for enhancing your learning so far this semester?

\_\_\_\_\_

**Table 4:** Benefits of dialogue-journal writing

		<b>Survey 1</b> (n=25)	<b>Survey 2</b> (n=22)	<b>Survey 3</b> (n=23)	<b>Survey 4</b> (n=24)	
FL	to continue class discussions	10 (40%)	3 (14%)	3 (13%)	3 (12%)	
	to dialogue with classmates	13 (52%)	8 (36%)	12 (52%)	8 (33%)	
	to express emotions	7 (28%)	4 (18%)	5 (22%)	2 (8%)	
	to get thoughts down on paper	22 (88%)	11 (50%)	14 (61%)	18 (75%)	
	to improve writing ability	25 (100%)	21 (95%)	22 (96%)	18 (75%)	
	to interact with your instructor	9 (36%)	5 (23%)	9 (39%)	8 (33%)	
	to learn vocabulary and new terminology	16 (64%)	16 (73%)	16 (70%)	16 (67%)	
	to process course material	18 (72%)	5 (23%)	6 (26%)	7 (29%)	
	to try out new writing structures, styles, or techniques	20 (80%)	15 (68%)	17 (74%)	14 (58%)	
	to write about my own life and experiences	13 (52%)	12 (55%)	9 (39%)	6 (25%)	
			<b>Survey 1</b> (n=22)	<b>Survey 2</b> (n=21)	<b>Survey 3</b> (n=20)	<b>Survey 4</b> (n=20)
	CS	to continue class discussions	19 (86%)	16 (76%)	15 (75%)	14 (70%)
to dialogue with classmates		13 (59%)	9 (43%)	8 (40%)	6 (30%)	
to express emotions		16 (73%)	17 (81%)	11 (55%)	12 (60%)	
to get thoughts down on paper		20 (91%)	18 (86%)	17 (85%)	17 (85%)	
to improve writing ability		7 (32%)	5 (24%)	5 (25%)	5 (25%)	
to interact with your instructor		10 (45%)	8 (38%)	13 (65%)	15 (75%)	
to learn vocabulary and new terminology		4 (18%)	3 (14%)	2 (10%)	2 (10%)	
to process course material		17 (77%)	17 (81%)	18 (90%)	16 (80%)	
to try out new writing structures, styles, or techniques		5 (23%)	5 (24%)	3 (15%)	3 (15%)	
to write about my own life and experiences		10 (45%)	9 (43%)	4 (20%)	5 (25%)	



**Table 5:** Benefits of dialogue-journal writing by ranking (top three rankings combined)

		<b>Survey 1</b> (n=25)	<b>Survey 2</b> (n=22)	<b>Survey 3</b> (n=23)	<b>Survey 4</b> (n=24)
FL	to continue class discussions	2	1	0	1
	to dialogue with classmates	4	3	3	3
	to express emotions	1	1	2	1
	to get thoughts down on paper	10	9	9	11
	to improve writing ability	21	20	18	18
	to interact with your instructor	1	2	1	3
	to learn vocabulary and new terminology	14	14	16	15
	to process course material	6	2	3	2
	to try out new writing structures, styles, or techniques	13	12	12	13
	to write about my own life and experiences	2	1	1	2
		<b>Survey 1</b> (n=22)	<b>Survey 2</b> (n=21)	<b>Survey 3</b> (n=20)	<b>Survey 4</b> (n=20)
CS	to continue class discussions	15	12	12	11
	to dialogue with classmates	3	5	3	4
	to express emotions	4	8	4	7
	to get thoughts down on paper	16	13	12	14
	to improve writing ability	4	3	2	0
	to interact with your instructor	4	2	5	9
	to learn vocabulary and new terminology	0	0	1	1
	to process course material	15	15	13	12
	to try out new writing structures, styles, or techniques	1	1	1	0
	to write about my own life and experiences	2	1	1	2

**Table 6:** Preferred format for dialogue-journal writing

		<b>Survey 1</b> (n=25)	<b>Survey 2</b> (n=23)	<b>Survey 3</b> (n=23)	<b>Survey 4</b> (n=24)
FL	hand-written entries	13 (52.0%)	16 (69.6%)	12 (52.2%)	15 (62.5%)
	typewritten entries	0 (0%)	1 (4.3%)	2 (8.7%)	2 (8.3%)
	either hand-written or typewritten entries	12 (48.0%)	6 (26.1%)	9 (39.1%)	7 (29.2%)
		<b>Survey 1</b> (n=22)	<b>Survey 2</b> (n=21)	<b>Survey 3</b> (n=20)	<b>Survey 4</b> (n=20)
CS	hand-written entries	12 (54.5%)	14 (66.7%)	10 (50.0%)	13 (65.0%)
	typewritten entries	3 (13.6%)	2 (9.5%)	1 (5.0%)	1 (5.0%)
	either hand-written or typewritten entries	7 (31.8%)	5 (23.8%)	9 (45.0%)	6 (30.0%)

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Although the proficiency level of the language learners was not tested for this study, the participants came to this German conversation course with various backgrounds and experiences in using the German language (i.e., heritage speakers and students who had spent time abroad to those who had only three semesters of German language instruction).

<sup>2</sup> Many instructors and researchers have made significant modifications to the way dialogue journals were used and implemented in the early years. Some moved to imposing time constraints on student journal writing (Bonzo 2005; Semke 1984) and/or modifying the amount of response writing. Bonzo's study, for example, employs feedback phrases (2005: 25), rather than any substantial dialogue on the part of the instructor. For the purposes of the present study, participants were given unlimited time to compose their entries and a minimum, but not a maximum, page length requirement. Dialogue journal partners rotated each week, yet their response time was limited. This was done to avoid journals getting lost if their response partners took them home. Although the instructor's entries were not as long as the original entries, the responses attempted to enter into a dialogue with the participant by reacting to the content of the entry as well as posing questions about it. Factors that differed between the L1 and FL group in the present study included not only the language of the written responses, but also the length. Additionally most journal topics for the German conversation course were assigned by the teacher to relate to material covered in the course (there was a specific topic listed each week, one of which was an open topic) whereas participants in the L1 cultural study course were asked to respond to the course readings and discussions but were not given exact topics for each entry. Further research is needed to study the efficacy of each type of modification listed here.

<sup>3</sup> The present study did not use a control group (comparing those who wrote by hand versus those who typed their journal entries) in testing student preferences. Participants were asked to speculate which they would prefer or whether both formats were equally appealing. Students in the two courses were given the choice to submit either hand-written or hard copies of typed entries for their journal. It is interesting that all research participants in the German conversation course decided to write their entries by hand. In the cultural studies course only two participants typed some, but not all, of their entries. All other participants wrote primarily by hand. Since there was one student in the class with a disability that necessitated typing, one student each week was chosen in advance to exchange journals with this student and these entries were typed and emailed in advance. For those students whose journal consisted of a composition book, this typed entry was then taped into the journal notebook.

<sup>4</sup> Students' needs and goals in a FL setting are very different from those of the participants in the other learning environment surveyed. This study focused on students' perceptions of dialogue journal writing, asking the same questions in two different settings. It did not focus on analyzing the concrete differences between the two groups. Further studies could investigate the amount of time students spent writing in their dialogue journals in the two course settings, how they structured their entries, whether they actually used their journals for specific purposes (i.e., continuing class discussions, expressing emotions, practicing new vocabulary or terminology) and whether their writing changed over time. In a FL context, research on the relationship between dialogue-journal writing and FL proficiency (research begun by Baudrand-Aertker 1992 and Martínez-Lage 1992) as well as research investigating extensive writing in the context of CMC (expanding on studies by Payne & Whitney 2002 and Satar & Özdener 2008) is warranted.