Journal Writing among Older Learners: An Article Critique

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This qualitative study explored the past and current journal writing practices of 15 older adults with focus on the perceived benefits of keeping a journal in later age. Michael Brady, Professor of Adult Education and Senior Research Fellow, and Harry Sky, Rabbi Emeritus and Senior Consultant, are both affiliated with the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute at the University of Southern Maine. The literature review captured the reader’s attention and imagination as it introduced diary writing in ancient China and Japan, preceded to St. Augustine, and covered travel diaries and ships’ logs. Moving into contemporary times, diary writing became important to psychology and psychotherapy, the Women’s Movement, and personal spirituality. The authors conclude with a brief review of the published work of four older diarists.

Brady and Sky advertised for participants in the Institute’s monthly newsletter, inviting participants who had been keeping a journal for at least three years. Fifteen members of an Institute for Learning in Retirement in Portland, Maine, were identified and interviewed by the two authors. The interviews averaged 45 minutes in length and were tape recorded and transcribed. The authors independently read the narratives, looking for themes.

The authors collected three socio-demographic variables: gender, age, and educational background. Twelve of the subjects were female. The average age was 69.2 years, with a range of 57 to 81 years. Thirteen held a college degree eight held a graduate degree. The authors point out that the self-selecting of the participants attributed to the sample not being representative of the socio-demographic makeup of the general membership of the institute.
The journal writers began their writing at a wide range of ages, some in their youth, some in retirement. The writers were also split in their preference for using computers/word processors or writing in longhand. Some liked to write early in the morning and others at the end of the day. Some kept one journal, while others kept separate journals for separate subjects. The writers were also divided in their opinions about sharing their writings with their family and friends.

Brady and Sky asked the participants to talk about the benefits they experienced as journal writers and found that there were three recurring areas of benefit. The authors labeled these benefits *coping, the joy of discovery, and the nurturing of voice and spirit.*

*Coping* includes such functions as self-therapy, sorting out relationship issues, record keeping, helping to make decisions, compensation for poor memory, and preserving sayings of the grandchildren. More than half of the participants mentioned the benefit of the *joy of discovery,* which relates to being aware of one’s own progress in life, increasing one’s powers of observation and seeing in greater detail. Participants are more focused because they know they will be writing about their observations later. The third benefit, *nurturing the voice and spirit,* is achieving voice and learning that one has something important to say. Some participants incorporated journal writing into their daily quiet time and found that writing helped them nurture their spiritual lives. They referred to moving to new levels of consciousness or spiritual plateaus.

The authors conclude with implications for those working with older adults, urging them to use personal writing to allow older adults to find significance in their life experiences.