

# Student Responses to Empathic Exercises Using Dialogue Journal Writing

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As part of a self-reflective practice and using the Experiential Learning Cycle, the instructor observed students failing to make empathic connections with people different from them. The instructor sought to introduce the practice of empathy through assigning weekly Dialog Journal Writings (DJW). The instructor offered thoughts and opinions on his own life experiences and students wrote a journal in reply containing their thoughts and experiences, guesses about the instructor, and questions for the instructor. This paper summarizes the student feedback upon completing the journals from follow-up surveys of 78 students. Students reported increased English language skills, cross-cultural awareness and an increased ability to use empathy to make guesses about others. Students found the empathic requirements of the journals to be most challenging to complete but nearly all recommended the activity for other students.

## INTRODUCTION

The study of empathy spans multiple disciplines and has little consensus on a definition (Cliffordson, 2001). Simply put, “Empathy is the process of ‘putting yourself into someone else’s shoes,’ of reaching beyond the self and understanding and feeling what another person is understanding or feeling...” (Brown, 1973, p. 235). Ickes (1997) refers to “empathic inference” as a complex process where “...observation, memory, knowledge, and reasoning are combined to yield insight into the thoughts and feelings of others” (p. 2). This process is termed *cognitive empathy*, while emotional responses to another’s emotions is *emotional empathy* or *affective empathy* (Lawrence et al., 2004). Banissy et al. (2012) hold that “Empathy is a multi-faceted concept consisting of our ability not only to share emotions but also to exert cognitive control and perspective taking in our interactions with others” (p. 2034). It is precisely this conscious act of perspective taking that distinguishes empathy from sympathy (Elliot et al., 2011). Decety and Jackson (2004) propose that one of the major functional components of empathy is “self-other awareness” where “even when there is some temporary identification, there is no confusion between self and other” (p.75).

Teaching empathy has implications for the English Language Teaching (ELT) field as well. “To speak a second language authentically is to take on a new identity. As with empathy, it is to step into a new and perhaps unfamiliar pair of shoes” (Guiora et al., 1975, p. 48). Dewaele and Wei (2012) found that frequent use of multiple languages positively correlated to measures of cognitive empathy. Not only is empathy important as an extension of language learning, but also for

developing students as global citizens. Beasley-Murray (2015) contends that global citizenship education will “encourage students to think in terms of the differences in culture, values, power, and perspective that cut across our common world, and learn how to negotiate them with respect but not indifference” (p. 43). This respect is possible with empathy according to Green (2011) because “Empathy is a statement of our readiness to understand the motives and worldviews of other people and to respect them even if we do not agree with them. Empathy enables us to be attentive to people who are extremely different from ourselves, people who hold views that are contradictory to our own, even if they are our enemies” (p. 153).

In this research, Dialogue Journal Writing (DJW) was used as a means of teaching empathic skills. DJW is a written interaction between teacher and student, with the goal of exchanging “ideas and information free of the concern for form and correctness...” (Peyton & Reed, 1990, p. 3). While journaling has various benefits including increased motivation (Howard, 2017) and self-efficacy (Baleghizadeh & Mortazavi, 2014), DJW allows students to “...gain new perspectives and broaden their perspectives” (Terada, 2019, p. 6) due to interaction with the instructor. DJW can foster critical thinking, as Bhushan (2014) maintains “Often it is in the act of writing a response that actual learning takes place, and ideally, this is how critical thinking develops” (p. 74). A versatile activity, DJW can be used for structural approaches, communicative approaches or critical approaches encouraging student empowerment (Orem, 2001). In addition, teachers have a chance to make empathic connections to students as DJW offers a glimpse into students’ lives and concerns (Isserlis, 1991).

## **FRAMEWORK AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

The formation for this study came through reflective practice using the Experiential Learning Cycle as a part of Experiential Learning Theory: “experience, observation and reflection, abstract reconceptualization, and experimentation” (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, p.3).

### **Experience**

Several activities I conducted in ELT classrooms in a Japanese university relied on students adopting unfamiliar points of view. One was a listening exercise of a Zainichi Korean woman discussing her identity (Lavidadeizumi, 2013). The other was a historical account written from opposing points of view (Merryfield & Timbo, 1983).

### **Observation and Reflection**

I noticed students did not deeply consider the feelings of a person with an experience different from theirs. They had trouble eliciting emotions or thoughts of the people involved in a historical story as well. Upon reflection, I realized the importance of students learning empathic skills as a part of their foreign language study. Cultural knowledge and instruction alone would not suffice when students demonstrated a lack of ability to connect with people different from themselves as well as little desire to understand them. It was by terming this lack of desire as “apathy” that led to my assumption that “empathy” was missing.

## **Abstract Reconceptualization**

This reflection allowed me to form my research questions: “How can I teach students empathy in an ELT setting?” and “How can I encourage students to connect with a person different from themselves?” My first ideas centered on facilitating a language exchange with foreign students, but a simpler solution presented itself. Students had access to their instructor, someone from a different generation and life stage living in their country as a foreigner. Students and teacher could bridge the cultural and generational gap by exchanging ideas and communicating with empathy.

## **Experimentation**

I implemented a Dialogue Journal Writing (DJW) system for students of an Intensive English course meeting 3 times a week in a private university in western Japan. The course covers reading, writing, speaking and listening with an emphasis on preparing first- and second-year students to use English in an academic setting. Each week for 10 weeks, I prepared a journal of my thoughts and experiences. They covered a variety of topics, from my experiences with cultural differences to how my way of thinking has changed through marriage and parenthood (see Appendix A). Students received these on Monday and were given until Friday to submit them. Each journal response by the students contained three parts (see Appendix B):

- A) The student’s thoughts and experiences: After sharing my thoughts, I would provide a prompt for them to share if they had a similar experience or to share their opinion.
- B) The student’s guesses about the instructor: Students were to make suppositions about the instructor (What experiences do you think I had? Why do you think I have these opinions or thoughts?). The goal of this section was for students to practice empathic inferences and perspective taking as a function of cognitive empathy.
- C) Questions for the instructor: I would provide written responses to the questions. Students could then choose to continue the discussion in future journals, providing a back-and-forth dialogue.

## **METHODS**

This study seeks to understand how students perceived and reacted to empathic exercises in DJW. Survey data detailing the students’ reactions and opinions to the DJW was taken from the eleventh and final journal (see Appendix C). Students were asked 1) what they learned from doing the journals, 2) if they recommend doing these journals to other students and why or why not and 3) which of the three parts of the journals (thoughts, guesses, and questions) was the easiest and which was the hardest and reasons why.

Survey results were taken from four intensive classes, two of second year and two of first-year university students. A total of 78 surveys were collected. Written permission for student responses to be published maintaining anonymity was obtained for all surveys used in this study (Appendix B). Responses were analyzed and grouped by theme. All student responses are published as originally

written and uncorrected for grammar or spelling to maintain the student's original voice and avoid unnecessary editing or reinterpretation by the researcher.

## RESULTS

Students provided a wide variety of responses regarding what they learned through the DJW process.

### Language Skills

A majority of students noted improvements in their writing skills. One student reported reading improvements as well:

*"...reading speed became faster. Even though I was reading regularly I was glad to see if I could understand quickly as I was reading regularly."* (2<sup>nd</sup> year female)

Through reading the instructor's journals, students were exposed to new vocabulary.

*"I learned a lot of English words. When I wrote journals, there were some words that I didn't know. I searched the word and took notes. I could develop my vocabulary through writing journals."* (2<sup>nd</sup> year female)

Several students reported an increase in their ability to use previously learned vocabulary:

*"My vocabulary didn't increase but I learnt how to make long paragraphs in my vocabulary"* (1<sup>st</sup> year female)

*"When I was examinee, I tried to write an essay writing with using difficult words. Therefore, I couldn't write it well and was bad at making it...but I started to try to think by myself without a dictionary thanks to your plan of this class."* (1<sup>st</sup> year female)

Some students commented that journaling affected their conversation skills:

*"Also, the journal topics are reality so we can learn real speaking like a conversation"* (2<sup>nd</sup> year male)

*"All journals had guessing and questions, so I could know how to carry on a conversation"* (2<sup>nd</sup> year female)

A significant number of students conveyed improvement in their ability to express opinions:

*"In addition, I was aware of writing my clear opinions because I wanted to persuade you every time. I learned how to tell my ideas."* (2<sup>nd</sup> year female)

*"It is different from just writing the fact to summing up my conclusion. Therefore, I think I could practice to summarize my opinions for doing these journals."* (1<sup>st</sup> year female)

*"I think that your journal homework is different from past English homework I had experienced. I read your journal and can write things I think freedom. Firstly, I think it is very difficult. However, it is fun than I had thought!" (1<sup>st</sup> year male)*

### **Self-reflection and Critical Thinking**

Dialogue journals provided an opportunity for critical thinking about student's opinions and examination of new opinions:

*"It was the first time for me to read to other people's opinions in English, and to write opinions on their thoughts.*

*In addition, I feel that it is easier than before to relate topics that I have never experienced to my experience. Through this journal, I could know what I was thinking by writing opinions and asking questions about your way of thinking. In other words, I knew myself by knowing other people." (1<sup>st</sup> year female)*

*"I learned from exchanging journals that thinking in my mind and writing my thoughts down are two different things. I could take a look at myself though verbalizing my thoughts every times." (2<sup>nd</sup> year female)*

*"Until this semester, I just read the text and journal which a English teacher and the writer gave to me, so I didn't get anything at all by reading. However, this time I could get various things by reading journal and considering my feeling. That is I learned the skills that consider matter." (2<sup>nd</sup> year male)*

### **Cross-cultural Understanding**

Students expressed learning by exposure to new ideas and ways of thinking in the journals:

*"I learned to think of other people, different ways of thinking and experiences I had never done before" (1<sup>st</sup> year male)*

Journals taught this student two things:

*"First is don't be afraid about differences. Second is importance of guessing and understanding of differences....I think I could more understand about differences and other peoples than I took Intensive English class." (1<sup>st</sup> year male)*

One student was forced to examine his stereotypes:

*"Thanks for you, I can desolate stereotype. If you did not tell me journals, I could not notice that I have many stereotypes for many things." (1<sup>st</sup> year male)*

### **Connection with the Instructor**

Students benefited from interaction with the instructor provided by the journals:

*"First, I can understand about you through this journal. It was good and it was like conversation." (1<sup>st</sup> year female)*

*“By exchanging journals, you can easily and efficiently communicate with your teacher.” (1<sup>st</sup> year female)*

*“Also, I got a valuable thought from your answer to my questions” (1<sup>st</sup> year male)*

### **Empathic Skills**

Students affirmed that the practice of guessing and imagining what the instructor thought or experienced improved their empathic inference skills:

*“I think I can improve my guessing ability. When you give us the journal, we should guess your feeling or action.” (2<sup>nd</sup> year female)*

*“In conclusion I can improve not only the English writing skill but also skill of imagining other’s thought!” (1<sup>st</sup> year male)*

*“Your experience made me think about cultural differences, gender and so on. In addition, I became stronger at guessing what other people were feeling and expressing what I want to say through doing the journals.” (1<sup>st</sup> year female)*

One student used empathy to understand the instructor’s thoughts on living in a foreign country.

*“Thanks to this, I could come to think about others. For example, in each section, I thought in your shoes...I understood that you could accept everything of Japan because I could think in your shoes.” (1<sup>st</sup> year female)*

Others realized that the empathic skills used in the journals could have a real-life application for cross-cultural communication:

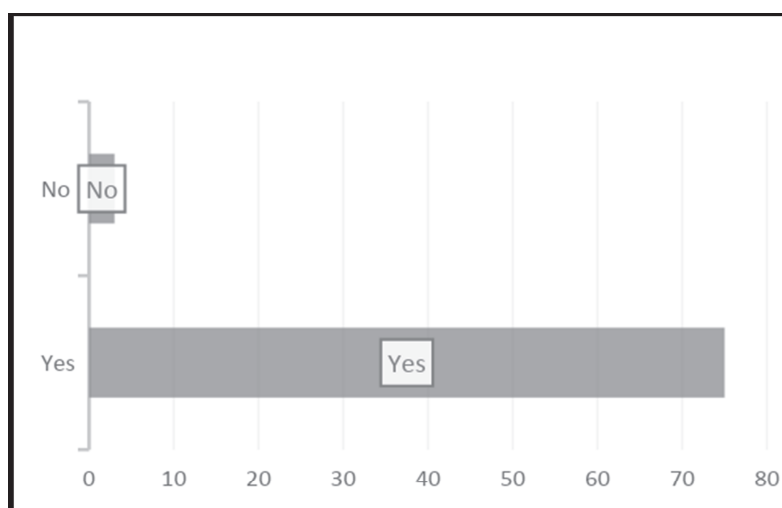
*“...I think that by knowing and sympathizing with the experiences of others, I can communicate well with people of different languages for the first time because I try to adapt myself to them. I think this homework allows me to respect and listen to others.” (1<sup>st</sup> year male)*

*“I learned the importance of thinking about other people’s feelings and background...I remembered my experience that I communicate with foreign students, and I thought whether I really could think about their feeling and culture background. Although they thought about my feeling, I didn’t think them feeling. I’m sorry for them.” (1<sup>st</sup> year female)*

### **Recommendations**

In response to question 2, 75 out of 78 students said they would recommend doing dialogue journals to other students (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1.**  
**Would You Recommend these Journals to Other Students?**



Some reasons given were due to the communication with the teacher:

*“...it is important for students to communicate with teacher. In fact, I was happy to reply from you.”* (1<sup>st</sup> year female)

*“...I was looking forward to your reply. I was motivated by your comment.”*  
(2<sup>nd</sup> year female)

*“In class, we have only a little chance to talk with teacher, but in journal, we can ask the question to the teacher and we can receive the answer.”* (1<sup>st</sup> year male)

Others recommended journaling for the unique experience:

*“There are many things that can be gained by reading other people’s thoughts. I think that journal exchange is a very effective method, because there are rarely opportunities to hear foreigners’ opinion.”* (2<sup>nd</sup> year female)

*“...Japanese education doesn’t carry out this kind of education. I knew empathy is important thing for people. People cannot do empathy even adults. We have to think about other people feeling or something.”* (1<sup>st</sup> year female)

*“...we can refer to other people’s experience and we can learn many things we don’t know.”* (1<sup>st</sup> year male)



Some students found motivation in completing the journals:

*"We can learn English without boring because every time we can think about different situation. I did journal exchange for the first time so, I feel so fresh."*  
(1<sup>st</sup> year male)

*"We all hate to do homework. But if it is fun to read journal, I come to disappear the feeling that hate homework."* (1<sup>st</sup> year male)

Three students said they would not recommend dialogue journals for various reasons. One student disliked the format for communication:

*"I don't like typing so much and I like talking to others so I don't recommend these journals. If u want to know their life, you can talk to your friends and you can get along with them. This journal helps me and teacher know each other so I guess it is good for teachers."* (2<sup>nd</sup> year male)

Other reasons included the difficulty of the content and discomfort with expressing opinions:

*"We have no experience like you so I thought no deeply content."* (1<sup>st</sup> year female)

*"I'm afraid of hurting other people to talk about my explains. Since I want to enjoy talking about something to happy, I want to talk about the happy present situation even in the journal exchange."* (1<sup>st</sup> year female)

### **Easiest/Most Difficult Parts of Journaling**

Out of 69 answers given, 46 responded that sharing their thoughts and opinions was the easiest part of dialogue journaling.

*"It became easier to write by remembering my own experience and applying it to my own action."* (2<sup>nd</sup> year female)

*"It was about me, so it was easy."* (1<sup>st</sup> year female)

19 stated they came up with questions most easily while reading the journals:

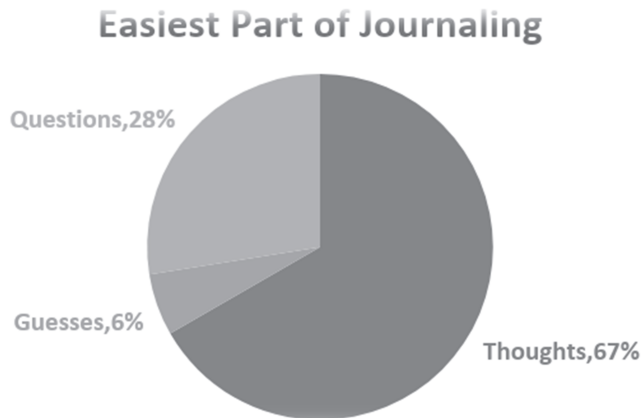
*"There is no answer, just ask what I want to know."* (2<sup>nd</sup> year female)

*"...what is understood in the journal is limited, and various questions come to mind."* (2<sup>nd</sup> year male)

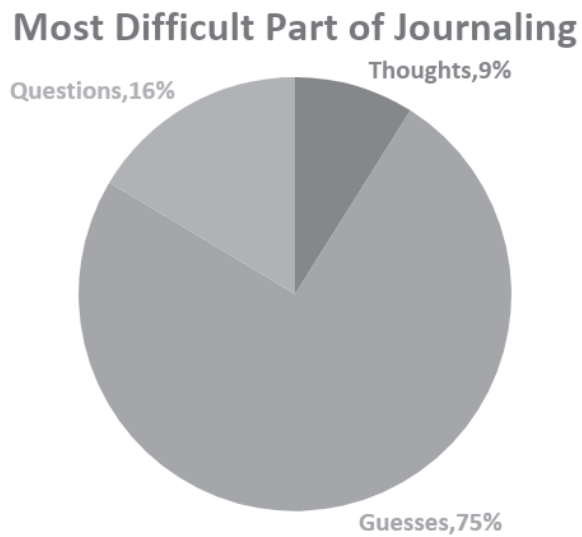
Only 4 respondents found making guesses about the instructor to be the easiest part of the journaling requirement.



**FIGURE 2.**  
**Easiest Part of Journaling**



**FIGURE 3**  
**Most Difficult Part of Journaling**



With a total of 67 responses as to the most difficult section of the journals, 50 respondents found making guesses about the instructor to be the most challenging, with many stating the difference in life experience as the reason.

*“...I didn’t experience much the same as you.” (2<sup>nd</sup> year male)*

*“You and I are different gender, different generation and different country which we are from. Therefore, I don’t know what you think.” (1<sup>st</sup> year female)*

Others struggled with the lack of cues to “read” the instructor’s feelings:

*“...guessing means there is no answer. It is hard to choose because there could be a lot of possible answers.” (2<sup>nd</sup> year male)*

*“...I can’t find what you really thought and felt. I sometimes felt that my expectation was different from what you really thought.” (2<sup>nd</sup> year male)*

*“When the topic which I had never experienced was written, it was difficult for me to read your feelings.” (2<sup>nd</sup> year female)*

One student realized that guesses required higher level thinking skills and effort than expressing his own opinion:

*“Only thinking my opinion is not difficult, so it is passive. On the other hand, guesses are active. We have to think we have the same experience.” (1<sup>st</sup> year male)*

Another difficulty was the perception that making guesses could be offensive to the instructor:

*“...I afraid that my guesses could be rude for you. Our cultures and feelings are a little different, so I always worried about it.” (1<sup>st</sup> year female)*

*“I don’t like saying things that some people feel sad or uncomfortable. I know that’s homework for us, but I cared that ‘if my thoughts or words were comfortable for you, what should I do’....However, through your journals, I can say that a little easier.” (1<sup>st</sup> year female)*

Eleven students answered that asking questions posed the most difficult part of journaling for similar reasons to guessing; it required a higher level of thought and there was a danger of offending the instructor:

*“...the most difficult part is asking some questions because I have to pay attention to the point I don’t usually care. When I ask some question to you, I care about even usual information such as experiences and the past.” (2<sup>nd</sup> year male)*

*“...I was worried whether it was a rude question to ask for you.” (1<sup>st</sup> year female)*

Six students reported that expressing their own thoughts was the most challenging part of the journal process.

## DISCUSSION

Students reported a variety of benefits of participation in Dialogue Journal Writing. A majority of students expressed an increase in academic skills such as writing, reading and vocabulary usage. Students also asserted learning through developing critical thinking skills and considering other points of view. Journals added to their cross-cultural understanding and helped them examine stereotypes. Dialogue journals made students practice empathic inference skills of guessing how the instructor felt or what he experienced. Even asking questions involved an empathic function that required more critical thinking than expressing their own opinions. They conveyed that this process was a challenge but were able to improve this skill as the journals progressed. The large majority of participants in DJW found it beneficial and would recommend it to others.

Students commented that dialogue journals gave them opportunities previously unavailable in their education, particularly when preparing for entrance examinations. They appreciated the portion of the journal where they could express their opinions and developed critical thinking and summary skills through the writing process. ELT materials and textbooks used in the Japanese educational context often encourage formation and articulation of students' opinions. According to feedback from this survey, these are worthwhile efforts. The challenge remains, however, to go beyond thinking of one's self and consider how another might think, feel, or experience life. If the goal of foreign language education is to interact with and understand a person from a different background, language skills alone will not suffice. A large amount of cultural knowledge will also not bridge the cross-cultural communication gap unless students can learn to place themselves in the other person's perspective. ELT educators must endeavor to acclimate students to empathic activities and interactions such as DJW.

The effort to introduce empathic activities will not come without its challenges. As reported from the survey, some students felt the very act of making guesses about another person's life violated their privacy or could be rude. One student mentioned the desire to only discuss "happy" topics so as not to ascribe negative feelings to another person. This may be a cultural stumbling block to empathy found at least in the Japanese ELT context. Adachi (2015) asserts that the culture of *amae*, or dependence, hinders Japanese from making empathic connections. Instead, the desire to find sympathy from those with similar experiences is fostered. This idea could be supported by student responses that they could not connect with their instructor because they did not share similarities. In addition to cultural roadblocks, students maintained that empathic inferences required a higher level of thinking than they were used to, and therefore more effort. These challenges, however, can be met in part, as evidenced by the results of this study. While students were required to make empathic responses, they disclosed that they improved their skills with repetition and practice. Steady feedback and

non-judgmental comments from the instructor may ease student concerns their guesses were offensive and are recommended for future practice.

## **CONCLUSION**

In surveys, students articulated improved language, critical thinking, and empathic skills by participating in a dialogue journal where they made suppositions about and interacted with the instructor. While most students found the inferences to be the most difficult task required of the journals, a large majority would recommend the journals to other students and found them to be beneficial. While further research is needed to explore other empathic activities in ELT classrooms, this activity provided students with multiple benefits of language skills and higher-level thinking and emotive skills. It also encouraged interaction between the student and teacher and provided an exchange of ideas crossing cultures and generations.

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## **APPENDIX A: Dialogue Journal Content Key (Summary with student prompt underlined)**

**Journal 1:** When the instructor was 14, he traveled to Japan for the first time. He found himself on a bullet train next to two smoking, drinking, loud businessmen. His first impression was negative. Are first impressions important?

**Journal 2:** Continuation of Journal 1. After some time, a Japanese woman he didn't know saw his sad condition and gave him a pastry. Are second impressions important?

**Journal 3:** The instructor's thoughts on "What do you like about Japan?" He describes the relationship like falling in love. There is not one clear thing but like in a relationship you come to accept the good and the bad of living in another country. What are your feelings towards new cultures?

**Journal 4:** The instructor described recent job-hunting and what the highest priorities were to him in looking for a job (time with family, salary, quality). What are your priorities (especially in looking for a job?)

**Journal 5:** Related to the school's LGBTQ awareness week. The instructor recalls the first time having friends who came out to him and the shift in perspective it caused. When did you feel challenged by a new perspective?

**Journal 6:** Reflections on the instructor's biggest culture shock: different values of time. A previous employer expected extra time to be given to customers. What do you think about how you spend time and giving time to others?

**Journal 7:** Life doesn't go according to plan. The instructor reviews expectations of marriage and childrearing and realities that were different. What do you expect out of life and how do you feel if reality is different?

**Journal 8:** Some things are so different than you expect once you "cross the line", that they are difficult to explain. The instructor talks about how his perceptions of marriage, child rearing, and living in another country were very different after he crossed the line. What experiences were very different after you crossed the line?

**Journal 9:** Thoughts on the Japanese culture of "reading the atmosphere"; adjust one's self to the expectations of others. Is reading the atmosphere mostly an act of considering the other person's feelings or merely self-protection?

**Journal 10:** The instructor details an experience where he imagined what the life of a stranger he saw was like and how he felt sorry for him. Students were given the task to choose one stranger during the week and make guesses about them in a similar way.

**Journal 11:** A survey on reactions to the journals.



## APPENDIX B: Journals: Intensive English

Each week I will give you a journal entry with some of my thoughts, experiences and questions for you. Write a reaction of **at least 200 words**. Please include this content in your journals:

### Reaction to my journal:

#### A

What did you think about the topics?

What are your opinions?

Did you have any similar or different experiences?

Hint: Use language such as: I think, In my opinion, I believe, etc.

### Guesses

#### B

What can you guess about me?

What kind of experiences do you think I had?

Why do you think I have these opinions or thoughts?

Hint: Use language such as: I guess, I suppose, Maybe, You might, You could, etc.

### Questions:

#### C

What questions do you have for me?

What questions do you have about the topics?

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I would like to use this journal exchange as part of my research. If I publish part of your journal and reactions **I will not include your name to protect your privacy.**

\_\_\_\_\_ **Yes I give permission to Daniel Andrzejewski to publish my journal and reactions, without using my name.**

\_\_\_\_\_ **No, I do not I give permission to Daniel Andrzejewski to publish my journal and reactions.**

Sign \_\_\_\_\_ Date: 2019 \_\_\_\_ 月 \_\_\_\_ 日

## **APPENDIX C: Journal 11**

This is our last journal for our class. Look back on the last 10 journals and your experience of writing, reading and reading feedback from them. Please answer in as much detail as possible:

1. What did you learn from doing these journals?
2. Would you recommend other students to do this kind of journal exchange? Why or Why not?
3. What was the easiest part of journaling (sharing your thoughts, making guesses about me, asking questions)? What was the most difficult part? For both questions please explain why.

Thank you!