Title
Efficacy of reflection journals for student learning in an online environment

Purposes
Across eight online classes, students were required to write a one-page meaning-making reflection at the end of each week of class. This was an opportunity to critically evaluate new information learned that week, tie it to course materials and analyze how the information helped in becoming a better professional. The reflections were instructed to be free of jargon and not overly technical. The aim was for the students to continually build knowledge from week-to-week (i.e. a living document/diary), have a record of their thoughts, feelings, attitudes and "ah-ha" moments at the end of the term, as well as to give the instructor insights into student learning processes and the impact of components of the courses.

Perspectives or theoretical framework
This presentation draws from the constructivist learning model (Schell & Janicki, 2012) as applied to online learning. The constructivist learning model rejects the notion that teaching must be from the expert to the learner. Rather, the learner may “construct” their own knowledge and learning through idea formulation. Reflection journals force students to critically think and actively describe what they have learned (Guthrie & McCracken, 2010). Further, reflection journals facilitate a student-centered learning tool within the online environment and oppose the didactic nature of student-teacher interface typical in online course system.

Detailed methods
Across the 2013-2014 academic year, eight nine-week online undergraduate courses had weekly reflection requirements related to all learning materials and assignments, as well as other learning moments. Reflections were required seven of the nine weeks. The two weeks excluded were the mid-term exam week and the final exam week. Students were required to write a minimum of 500 words for adequate reflection. This was a total of 56 weeks of student reflections, from 107 students resulting in 5992 reflection papers or about 3,000,000 reflective words reviewed by the instructor over the course of the year.

Results
These reflection exercises were met by students with wide-spread thoughtfulness and interest after the initial learning curve of how and why “diary-style” reflection journals were useful as a pedagogical instrument. The instructor discovered the rich, casual and meaningful dialogues on learning were powerful tools for monitoring and adapting the course to meet and exceed stated student learning outcomes.

Recommendations
Student reflection journals have a pedagogical place in an online learning environment. They facilitate intellectual and emotional responses. Reflections develop a constructivist learning paradigm, wherein the student takes the lead in learning. The main recommendation is to incorporate reflection journals into online learning environments as a tool for student learning outcome success.

References: