Published in final edited form as:

Am J Sex Educ. 2013 ; 8(3): 160–171. doi:10.1080/15546128.2013.828340.

What Would Your Journal Say if It Could Talk Back? Using Dialogue Journals as a Technique in Adolescent HIV/STI Prevention and Sexual Health Promotion Programs

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Abstract

Dialogue journaling is a technique that is useful for enhancing the goals of sexual health promotion and HIV/STI prevention programs with 14 to 17 year old at-risk youth. Included is a detailed lesson plan on how to implement dialogue journaling in this context; a discussion of advantages and concerns about using them; and future implications for its use.

Keywords

adolescents; dialogue journal; diary; facilitation strategy; interactive journal; sexual health education; sexuality; HIV/STI prevention

Goal

During the past 12 years, facilitators at the Preventive Intervention Research Center for Child Health (PIRC) at Albert Einstein College of Medicine, Bronx, New York, have used dialogue journaling in sexual health promotion and HIV/STI prevention programs with 14 to 17 year old at-risk youth. Youth are at-risk because they live in an economically poor area with high rates of HIV and STI infection and teen pregnancy. Dialogue journaling provides invaluable information to facilitators about the extent to which each program lesson is achieving its goals. After each lesson, facilitators ask participants to answer a predesigned question in their journal. Questions are designed to reinforce the goals of each specific lesson. Facilitators review each journal after each lesson to assess achievement of the objectives (see Procedure).

Objectives

Dialogue journaling is helpful to address seven common challenges: (1) assess participant understanding of the material; (2) ascertain whether participants personalize the messages; (3) individually address their unsafe behavior; (4) answer everyone's individual questions; (5) obtain feedback on group dynamics and logistics; (6) build a connection with

participants; and (7) hear the voices of less vocal participants. Below, each of these issues is explained along with a discussion of how dialogue journals help address each (see Rationale).

Rationale

Dialogue journaling is an ongoing conversation that happens in writing, where a student and educator communicate regularly throughout the course of a class or group. It provides educators with a glimpse of what is going on in a student's mind. Journal entries allow educators to ascertain, through a student's own words, their level of mastery of material (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Students can write as much as they like and educators respond by offering encouraging comments or questions (Peyton & Staton, 1993a; Hubbs & Brand, 2005; Arthur, 2001). Dialogue journaling has been used in a variety of educational settings and has been used with literacy learning (Peyton & Stanton, 1993b; Werderich, 2006) and with students with emotional and behavioral needs (Regan, Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005; Regan, 2003). It has also been used to help build a positive relationship between educator and student (King, Vidourek, Davis & McClellan, 2002). Further, it can be an effective tool to use in conjunction with the experiential learning process (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). In a review of the literature, Hubbs and Brand (2005) found no studies that qualitatively or quantitatively studied the effectiveness of dialogue journaling for these outcomes. However, the effectiveness of dialogue journals has been shown on expressive writing with students with emotional and behavioral disorders (Regan, Mastropieri & Scruggs, 2005). No research is available on the effectiveness of dialogue journaling in HIV/STI prevention and sexual health promotion programs.

Advantages of Dialogue Journaling in HIV/STI Prevention and Sexual Health Promotion Programs

In the discussion below, there are boxed examples of how dialogue journals can be used for each of the seven challenges.

Assessing Understanding of Material

One important function of journals is to assess students' understanding of the material and concepts that facilitators presented. If the journal answers reveal significant misunderstanding of the presented material, facilitators can clarify the points of the previous lesson during the beginning of the next lesson. If only a few participants misunderstand the material, facilitators can individually clarify the points by responding to the participant in the journal, speaking to the participant privately, or both.

Personalizing the Message

Facilitators use journaling as a way to help participants personalize program messages and apply what they learned to their own lives. Journal questions give every group member an opportunity to personally reflect on the lesson and receive personal feedback from the group facilitator.

Address Unsafe Behavior

Journals can be used to help move the participants towards healthier choices. Participants sometimes describe sexual situations that they do not recognize as risky or seem unprepared to address. Facilitators point out these risk situations to the participant, then respond privately by suggesting healthier practices. Facilitators also point out factual inconsistencies and may use what they learn in a non-identifiable way as teachable moments during the review of the next lesson.

Answer Individual Questions

Participants use the journals to ask questions about a topic that was discussed in the lesson. There are many reasons that students may not raise questions during a lesson, but the two most common are related to lack of time and participant discomfort. In the journals, facilitators receive questions about participant concerns or fears about both past and current risky behavior. Facilitators receive non-program specific questions such as, “Where can I find a job?” as well as questions on common sexual health myths. The questions asked in the journals can serve as a record of myths and concerns about sexual behavior that face adolescents. Facilitators may then incorporate these concerns directly into their programs in the future.

Feedback on Group Dynamics and Logistics

Journals are a place for facilitators and participants to communicate about issues that arose within the group. For example, participants express thoughts and feelings about issues regarding group dynamics, food/refreshments (e.g., food allergies, likes, dislikes) and logistical program issues. Through the journals the facilitators can learn about issues that may not have come to their attention otherwise.

Building a Connection between Facilitator and Participant

Many participants use the journals to connect more personally with the facilitators and the program. The journals provide a place for a one-to-one interaction to occur between facilitator and participant that might not be able to occur as part of the larger group level program. Students seem to appreciate being seen as individuals rather than simply as members of a group.

Hear the Voices of Less Vocal Participants

Journals are an excellent way to hear the voices of less vocal participants, who are uncomfortable speaking in the group to express themselves. Without the use of journals, facilitators may not hear from these participants.

Issues to Consider in Using Dialogue Journaling

Confidentiality, Reportable Issues and Intervention Strategy—Facilitators may learn about a serious mental health emergency or reportable issue that the participant shares in a journal entry. Participants should be told at the start of the program how facilitators will handle these situations. Facilitators must have a written plan in place that guides their response to these issues, including what interventions facilitators can make independently,

and who is on call to help with assessment, reporting or referral. PIRC has such a policy for emergency situations as well as a list of mental health and health experts available to help facilitators address emergency issues (Bauman, Sclafane, LoIacono, Wilson & Macklin, 2008).

Facilitators explain the concept of confidentiality and how it relates to the journals during the first lesson of program. Facilitators explain that they are the only ones who will read the students' responses, and that participant confidentiality would be broken only if they say that they were going to hurt themselves or someone else or say that someone else is harming them in some way. Facilitators also explain that they will not use identifying information, but that they might use what is written in the journals to help clarify points and understanding in the program.

Confidentiality concerns are one of the reasons why facilitators decided to distribute journals during the last 10 minutes of each lesson and collect them before participants leave. The concern is that if journals were available during the entire lesson, other participants could pick up someone else's journal and read it during a break or during an activity. Facilitators also do not allow participants to keep their journals at the completion of the program, also due to confidentiality concerns. Facilitators do not want someone to be able to access a participant's journal where they write explicitly about their sex lives and other personal information. Journals are stored in locked filing cabinets at PIRC and identifying information is removed from the journal once the program is complete.

Variations in Literacy among Students—Journals can be used successfully in programs that serve low literacy populations with some adaptation. Participants in PIRC's groups have at least a 5th grade reading level. Facilitators allow participants to write in slang and are not concerned with spelling or grammar. Facilitators should make sure they respond in a way that participants can understand, at the literacy level of the participant. Responses should be written neatly and in a handwriting that participants can read. For example, facilitators discovered that some participants cannot read script and can only read print.

Writing is Hard for Some—Although journaling can be a great tool, it is not for everyone. In PIRC's programs, journaling is used as one of several tools to achieve program goals. Participants should never be forced to write something. Facilitators may write encouraging words on blank pages. Typically, participants will begin writing something.

Skill Level of the Facilitator—Facilitators who use dialogue journaling should have strong skills in sexuality education so they can address the diverse questions and misconceptions that arise. They should be knowledgeable about adolescence as a stage of development so they can respond appropriately at the cognitive and emotional stage youth are in. They should be culturally competent in the populations served, so they can understand and interpret student questions. In addition, they should understand effective ways of facilitating and motivating behavior change. Finally, they must have a thorough understanding of the program and its boundaries.

Other Role Relationships between the Facilitator and the Student—Dialogue journaling sometimes results in students divulging personal behavior or fears to the facilitator. When a sexual education program is offered by a facilitator who is also a student's school teacher or who has another role responsibility to the young person, the confidences shared through dialogue journaling may pose conflicts for them. For example, they may be uncomfortable interacting with students in these other traditional roles after having frank conversations about sexual behavior, or they may be required to take action if they learn about student behaviors that break organizational rules. This "dual agency" can result whenever staff in traditional roles add sexual health education to their repertoire. However, dialogue journaling may exacerbate this problem. In facilitators at PIRC's experience, the opposite is more likely -- students are more guarded in what they share in journals when the facilitator is an authority figure. Thus, facilitators consider the strengths and limitations of this technique, and should adapt the technique to fit their needs and concerns.

Timing

Facilitators distribute the journals during the last 10 minutes of a lesson. Otherwise they can be a distraction if participants write when they should be paying attention. Facilitators collect them before participants leave at the end of the lesson. Facilitators use journals for the entire length of the program and their purpose is explained during the first meeting. Facilitators allow each participant to finish their thoughts even if the activity takes longer than the given 10 minutes. This timing works well when lessons occur once per week and are at least one hour long; their benefits may wear out if lessons occur more frequently or are much shorter.

Intended Audience

This activity was designed for use with at-risk adolescents aged 14-17 years. Dialogue journaling was used in programs that contain lessons on values, healthy relationships, sexual anatomy, HIV/STIs, forms of protection (abstinence, barrier methods, and hormonal methods), gender norms, drug use and sexual risk, as well as communication skills, and contain an internship component where participants serve as peer educators. All lessons were co-facilitated and the information is presented through experiential learning and uses techniques such as large and small group discussions, separate gender group discussions, icebreaker activities, role-plays and other interactive approaches.

Materials Needed

A small notebook for each participant to use throughout the program and a pen or pencil to write with. Newsprint with a predesigned question for the given lesson.

Procedure

1. Before the Lesson: Question Design

After each lesson, facilitators ask participants to answer a predesigned question that reflects the goal of the lesson in their journal. Questions are designed to reinforce the goals of the

lesson. Question design is an iterative process of trial and error. If questions fail to elicit the kinds of responses expected or are misunderstood, facilitators review the question with participants during the beginning of the next lesson. Facilitators then change or reframe the question and use the revised version the next time the lesson is implemented with a new group. Facilitators prefer using specific questions compared to free writes (anything the participant would like to write about) to better target and support the lesson's goals.

2. During the Lesson: Participant Journal Writing (10 min.)

Distribute a journal to participants and instruct them to put their name on it. Explain that journals remain at the program location and the facilitators are the only ones who read them. They will not get to keep them at the end of the program. Tell participants that the journals are confidential, which means the information they write in their journals is kept private. The only time facilitators may have to break confidentiality is if they disclose that they are being physically or sexually abused or if they are going to hurt someone else or themselves. At the end of each lesson, facilitators will post a predesigned question for participants to respond to in their journals. The questions reflect some aspect of the material presented in the training that day. Inform participants that answering the journal questions can help the facilitators figure out if they understood the material that was presented in the training. Tell participants they can also use the journals as a place to ask the facilitators questions that they may feel uncomfortable asking in front of the entire group. Facilitators will respond in writing in the journals or use overall themes in journals to help reflect at the beginning of their next lesson. They will never divulge any personal information when doing this.

3. After the Lesson: Facilitator Review Process (60 min.)

The facilitator review process takes approximately one hour when groups number about 20 students. Typically, one facilitator reads all the journal entries the same day as the lesson to identify any emergent or serious issues that need to be addressed before the next lesson (See *Confidentiality, Reportable Issue & Intervention Strategy*). Both facilitators should read and respond to every journal entry. This assures that participants know that both facilitators equally take the time to read and comment on their thoughts. Participants sometimes get upset if only one facilitator always responds and/or one facilitator is writing more. Facilitators need to consult with each other to decide who will respond, when they respond, and how much they respond, so each participant feels that his/her thoughts are heard by both facilitators. However, if time is an issue; facilitators can alternate who reviews each participant's journal each lesson.

Facilitators must carefully consider how to respond to a participant's journal entry. Facilitators have several options – they may respond privately in the journal, they can speak to the participant privately, and/or they can address the issue with the whole group (keeping confidentiality) during the following lesson. Written responses include a mix of answers, facts, advice and questions designed to get the participant thinking (and not necessarily to get a response back). At times, participants will write journal entries that might be difficult to respond to. It is important to respond in a way that is appropriate for an adolescent audience. Facilitators often utilize adolescent friendly websites for sample responses to

difficult questions, facts and age appropriate wording (e.g. www.sexetc.org, <http://www.plannedparenthood.org/info-forteens>, www.goaskalice.columbia.edu).

After reading and responding to the journals, the facilitators meet to discuss themes and issues that emerged and to decide on what to discuss with the group at the beginning of the next lesson.

4. Beginning of the Next Lesson: Facilitator Review with the Large Group (10 min.)

Facilitators take the first 10 minutes of a lesson to review the previous lesson's work.

Commentary

Facilitators at PIRC have found dialogue journaling a valuable tool in HIV/STI prevention and sexual health promotion programs. First, it provides direct, interpretable evidence about how much students learned in a lesson, identifies idiosyncratic misinformation, and provides a private venue to correct these. Second, it helps facilitators individualize and personalize messages that are hard to do in group sessions. Third, it provides a way to build a more personal connection with youth, which is an important tool for motivating behavior change. And fourth, it provides a window into the thinking of students who are less vocal in class. No research is available on the effectiveness of dialogue journaling for these purposes; research on the tool, including its effectiveness and limitations, would be a useful contribution for curriculum and program development. However, facilitators who have used the tool are enthusiastic about it, and it can be recommended as an important and powerful teaching and learning tool in the contemporary sexuality educator's toolbox. This article discussed experience using dialogue journaling in HIV/STI prevention and sexual health promotion programs with 14-17 year old youth. It may be of value with other populations, age groups and health topics and other interventionists are encouraged to adapt this technique to fit their individual needs.

Acknowledgments

Project Safe: Reducing Risk Among Adolescents was funded by a NIMH grant 5R01MH061144 (Laurie J. Bauman, PhD, Principal Investigator); It Takes 2: Reducing Risk Among Highly Vulnerable Youth was funded by a NIDA grant 5R01DA019095 (Laurie J. Bauman, PhD, Principal Investigator); A Parent and Adolescent HIV and STD Risk Reduction Program, NIMH grant R34MH085556 (Ellen J. Silver, PhD, Principal Investigator); Risk, Roles and Relationships: Project Prepared, was funded by a NICHD grant R01HD062079 (Laurie J. Bauman, PhD, Principal Investigator); StaySafe: Reducing Risk Among Adolescents was funded by a NICHD grant R01HD41733 (Laurie J. Bauman, PhD, Principal Investigator); I would like to acknowledge those who have helped with this article, especially Laurie J. Bauman, Ph.D., Ellen J. Silver, Ph.D., Marni Loiacono Merves, LMSW, MA, Ken Wilson, Psy.D., all program facilitators and the members of the PIRC writing group.

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Sample Question from a Lesson on Gender Norms

Today we discussed how males and females have many differences and similarities when it comes to sexual relationships. Tell us about something you learned from today's discussion and how it may make you think and/or act differently when it comes to your sexual relationships.

Real Excerpt from Participant Journal

"Today I learned that guys can really prove a girl wrong because all guys are not the same and all girls are not the same. We all think differently and guys do too. The only way to know one another is to communicate."

Sample Facilitator Response

I am glad that you learned that not all guys and girls think alike. And you are right the best way to get to know someone is to communicate. We will be discussing communication next week so hopefully this lesson will help make communication in relationships easier.

Sample Question from a Lesson on HIV/STIs

How at risk do you feel you are for HIV/STIs? Do you feel you are at high risk or low risk? Why?

Real Excerpt from Participant Journal

“Well honestly I never worried about it because I only had sex with one person that always checks himself. So I basically don’t feel like I’m in any risk...But speaking about it shows me that I need to go and check!”

Sample Facilitator Response

I am glad to hear that you understand that you need to get checked for HIV/STIs. I have attached a list of local teen friendly establishments where you can get tested. Please let me know if you have any questions. What else can you do to help lower your risk for HIV/STIs?

Sample Question from a Lesson on Protection

Please tell us about a time where you had difficulty using a condom and why?

Real Excerpt from Participant Journal

“I had difficulty putting on my boyfriend’s condom when we was both drunk. I had a few drinks. He had about the same and we both met up wanted to have sex. He suggested we use a condom but it was a real long time to put it on. And we forgot about it but he made sure he pulled out before he ejaculated in me.”

Sample Facilitator Response

Thank you for sharing this with us. Using a condom can be difficult when you are drunk because you might do things that you typically would not do while you are sober. Pulling out can reduce someone’s risk of getting pregnant, but it is still risky because many guys don’t have enough control to pull out in time, especially when they’re so close to ejaculating. A girl can get pregnant even if a guy ejaculates just a little bit of semen near the opening of her vagina or just inside of her vagina. It is also possible that sperm may be found in pre-ejaculatory fluid (pre-cum). Keep in mind that pregnancy isn’t the only concern here. STIs can be transmitted too when a guy pulls out with no other barrier method used (male condom or female condom). Pulling out is better than doing nothing, but there are many methods of birth control and STD prevention that are much more effective. Please feel free to discuss this with (Co-facilitator) or myself for more information.

Participant Question from a Lesson on Sexual Anatomy

Sometimes I get hard for no reason. Is this normal?

Sample Facilitator Response

Yes it is. Getting hard (an erection) can happen without any reason at all and does not always mean that a guy is sexually aroused or turned on by someone or something in particular. These happen a lot for boys when they go through puberty and then they happen less often, but will still happen, into adulthood. Please let us know if you have any more questions.

Real Excerpt from Participant Journal

“I don’t know if I want to stay in this program. I came because it was something I was genuinely interested in it...but now every week is so frustrating. And, I know it’s good to be the single voice, but it gets frustrating and I don’t know if I can or want to deal with it.”

Sample Facilitator Response

Thank you so much for sharing this with us. You have so many great points and great ideas. I hope you decide to stay in the group. Please see us after the group today so we can discuss more about this and how we can help make this program something you want to be a part of.

Real Excerpt from Participant Journal

“Something that I learned in today’s discussion was that girls act real all the time, but sometime they be hiding things from us. This will probably make me act different.”

Sample Facilitator Response

Good job with your journal question. You have great thoughts and ideas and we would love to hear more from you during the lessons.

Sample Facilitator Response to a Participant Who Did Not Write

We noticed that you did not write anything in response to the journal question today. We would love to read your thoughts and value what you have to say.

Sample Facilitator Review Statement

After reviewing your journals from the last lesson, we saw that people in the group thought that it was OK not to use condoms if you trust your partner. We would like to get some thoughts on this from the entire group.