



# Revising the Journal

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## INTRODUCTION

This proposal makes recommendations for improvement of the current Sugar Labs Journal activity. The Journal activity is described on the One Laptop Per Child website as, “an automated diary of everything a child does on his or her laptop.”<sup>[1]</sup> The current Journal activity works by automatically recording one-line entries of other Sugar activities a child has worked on. While beneficial for children to locate previous work and evaluate preferences, the current Journal is limited to these few capabilities:

- Linking to previously recorded activities
- Recording the time spent on each activity
- Noting other Sugar users who simultaneously used that activity
- The denotation of favorite activities by clicking a “star”

What	Who	When
☆ The Tortoise and the Hare	✕ ✕	2 minutes ago
☆ Russian Tortoise - Wikipedia, ...edia	✕ ✕	5 minutes ago
★ A photo of my cat	✕	yesterday
★ This fantastic story abou ... wrote	✕ ✕ ✕ 6	yesterday
☆ image clipping	✕	yesterday
★ Our school	✕ ✕	2 days ago
★ A movie of my family	✕	3 days ago
★ Uruguay - Wikipedia, the free...pedia	✕	1 week ago
☆ History of Uruguay	✕ ✕ ✕	1 week ago
☆ My homework assignment	✕	1 week ago

*“The Journal activity is an automated diary of everything a child does with his or her laptop.” -OLPC*

## Potential

The Journal activity has the potential to provide far greater learning opportunities than it currently allows, especially in the area of reflective writing. In keeping with the Sugar ideology that learning is born of experience through exploration, the improvements outlined in this proposal would encourage independent exploration through written expression in an environment that is free from red grading pens.

<sup>[1]</sup> One Laptop Per Child. (2010). *Journal*. Retrieved from: <http://wiki.laptop.org/index.php?title=Journal>

## OBJECTIVES

The objective of this proposal is to outline recommendations for improved Journal activity functions. The recommended changes would add the following aspects to the Journal:

- An editable prompt bank
- The generation of activity-specific, reflective prompts at the completion of Sugar activities, which would allow reflective input about their session
- An input box, to allow reflective work to be saved
- The capability to share written reflections with peers, in order to receive feedback

These added functions would allow children to reflect on their work, while concurrently improving their written communication skills. Written communication skills are an essential part of the learning process. Incorporating these improvements would add the capability for children to create unique, reflective entries about their Sugar Labs experiences, in a manner that upholds constructionist ideals.

*“The Journal...is a place to reflect upon and evaluate your work.”*

*-Sugar Labs*

## CONSTRUCTIONIST FRAMEWORK

Constructionist theory holds that “learners are particularly likely to create new ideas when they are actively engaged in making external artifacts that they can reflect upon and share with others.”<sup>[2]</sup> A written record of reflective thoughts *is* a tangible artifact which can be shared with others. Creating such a record is not only a means of expression, but a means of learning the norms of effective communication through experience.

Minsky pinpoints “exploring, explaining and learning”<sup>[3]</sup> as some of “a child’s most obstinate drives.”<sup>[3]</sup> Sugar Labs activities allow children to explore and learn. However, revising the Journal activity to allow the addition of writing-to-learn reflections with each Journal record, will provide an opportunity for children to also engage in the “explaining” aspect described by Minsky.

Likewise, the *Features* page and the *Teachers* page of the Sugar Labs website provide descriptions of the Journal and its capabilities. The *Features* page describes the Journal as “a place to reflect upon and evaluate your work,”<sup>[4]</sup> while the *Teachers* page describes it as “a place for reflection and assessment of progress.”<sup>[5]</sup>

<sup>[2]</sup> Thurmond, A.M. (1999). *Seymour Papert and Constructionism*. Retrieved from: <http://userwww.sfsu.edu/~foreman/itec800/finalprojects/annmariethurmond/home.html>

<sup>[3]</sup> Minsky, M. (2010). *Questioning“General” Education*. Retrieved from:<http://web.media.mit.edu/~minsky/>

<sup>[4]</sup> Sugar Labs. (2009). *Sugarlabs.org*. Retrieved from:[http://www.sugarlabs.org/index.php?template=page&page=about\\_features](http://www.sugarlabs.org/index.php?template=page&page=about_features)

<sup>[5]</sup> Sugar Labs. (2009). *Sugarlabs.org*. Retrieved from:<http://www.sugarlabs.org/index.php?template=page&page=teachers>

The Journal activity does, in fact, automatically record a single line pertaining to the activities used. However, this falls somewhat short of allowing “reflection and assessment” of any real depth. Other than clicking on a star to signify a favorite activity, it also lacks any significant “evaluative” capabilities. The additional capability to input written reflections would allow students to analyze and think critically about their work as well as its implications moving forward.

According to Minsky, understanding “useful strategies” and identifying “the most common mistakes” are important parts of developing “negative expertise.”<sup>[3]</sup> Peer review, another vital part of the writing process, provides children with feedback regarding those common mistakes and useful strategies.

*“Sugar provides...affordances for learners engaging in construction and sharing the process and end products with others.”*

*-Walter Bender*

## **SIGNIFICANCE**

Writing is an important, yet abstract skill. Contrary to many other concrete subjects like math or geography, which have only one right answer to any given problem or question, writing can be highly subjective. Where writing is concerned, there is often no right or wrong answer, but rather, any number of suitable ways to phrase the same idea or concept. Writing is abstract in this way. However, the ability to express thoughts and feelings freely could easily be strengthened independently through the Journal activity.

## **Reflection**

Three of the six processes described in Minsky’s “Emotional Machine”<sup>[3]</sup> involve reflection. In addition, making meaningful analogies, recognizing and learning from mistakes and transferring knowledge from one subject to another, are vital cognitive processes developed and strengthened through written reflection and peer review. Implementing changes to allow for peer review through the sharing of “the end product with others”<sup>[6]</sup> allows children to hear how their writing has been perceived. They learn both through reading one another’s work and fusing the collective ideas of several children into one project. Likewise, by setting the activity up to require that children grant permission for peers and teachers to review Journal entries, the privacy of their entries would also be preserved.

<sup>[3]</sup> Minsky, M. (2010). *Questioning “General” Education*. Retrieved from: <http://web.media.mit.edu/~minsky/>

<sup>[6]</sup> Open Education. (2008). Walter Bender Discusses Sugar Labs Foundation. Retrieved from: <http://www.openeducation.net/2008/06/03/walter-bender-discusses-sugar-labs-foundation/>

## APPROACH

At the end of each Sugar activity, the revised Journal would generate an open-ended prompt, such as:

- What was the most interesting thing you learned during your [Etoys] session?
- Where else could you use things you learned in the [Physics] activity?
- Explain why [Tam Tam] is one of your favorite activities.
- What level do you hope to reach by the end of the week in the [Typing Turtle] activity? What can you do to reach that goal?

Prompts would be drawn from a question bank, which could be accessed and edited by teachers. Prompts would be directly linked to the activities worked on during a child's session. A prompt box would open to allow a child to record their thoughts through independent writing. As a child progresses and continues to use the Journal, their work would be preserved in a memory bank for either a selected time period or until the child decides to delete the entry. This would allow children to look back and see the changes in their writing and compare their past thoughts on an activity or idea to their current thoughts. The end product would result in a Journal activity that promotes literacy skills, critical analysis and creativity through written communication.

*“Sugar Labs: help[ing] children ‘learn how to learn’”  
-Sugar Labs Mission Statement <sup>[7]</sup>*

## CONCLUSION

The Sugar Labs Journal activity is an excellent tool for tracking Sugar activity usage, favorites and time spent on activities. However, with some revision, the Journal has immense potential to become an effective tool for writing-to-learn. While exploring and learning remain essential to the educational process, explaining plays and equally essential role. The development of a newer, revised version of the Journal activity, which incorporates these essential qualities through the use of activity-specific reflective prompts would greatly enhance the Journal. Additionally, it will provide the added benefits of reflective analysis at the end of each Sugar session, combined with self and peer review capabilities to every child who uses the Sugar platform.

<sup>[7]</sup> Sugar Labs. (2010). About Sugar Labs. Retrieved from:[http://www.sugarlabs.org/index.php?template=page&page=about\\_overview](http://www.sugarlabs.org/index.php?template=page&page=about_overview)