SHARPENING YOUR FOCUS ON GOVERNING PRACTICE USING A STRUCTURED PROFESSIONAL JOURNAL

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Contents

1. Introduction

This project is based on the notion of a 'solicited diary' i.e. a diary that people (in this case, clerks to college governing bodies, staff governors or student governors) have been asked to keep for a specific reason (in this case, to record observed aspects of governing body meetings or other key events in governing colleges[1]). This approach was the theme of on-line *Module 4: Creating and Using a Professional Journal* (written by the author) which was one of four[2] on-line modules under the heading 'Re-energising Governing of Colleges and Training Providers' funded by the Education and Training Foundation 2016/17.
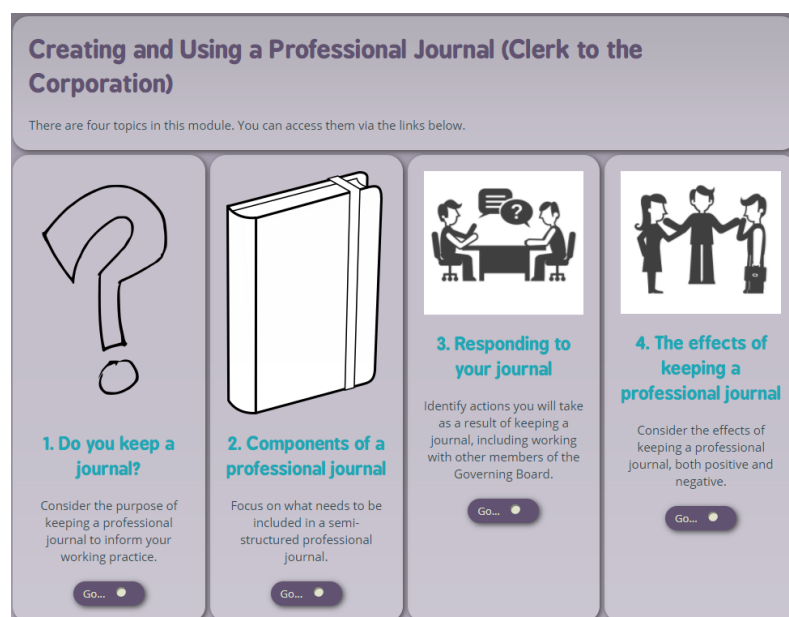
Between November 2016 and March 2017 there were 38 visits to Module 4. This number of visits includes both multiple visits and individual visits. These online modules are also on offer during 2017/18.

Creating and Using a Professional Journal (Clerk to the Corporation)

There are four topics in this module. You can access them via the links below.

1. Do you keep a journal?
Consider the purpose of keeping a professional journal to inform your working practice.
Go...

2. Components of a professional journal
Focus on what needs to be included in a semi-structured professional journal.
Go...

3. Responding to your journal
Identify actions you will take as a result of keeping a journal, including working with other members of the Governing Board.
Go...

4. The effects of keeping a professional journal
Consider the effects of keeping a professional journal, both positive and negative.
Go...

Module 4: Creating and Using a Professional Journal (online)

There is a significant literature which explores the use of journal keeping as a research and professional development technique. Particular reference will be made to the works of Moon, J (2006) *Learning Journals: A Handbook for Reflective Practice and Professional Development* and Bartlett, R & Milligan, C. (2015) *What is diary method?* There are examples of journal keeping by teaching, social care, and health professionals by the above authors. This study is the first of its kind which applies the principles of journal keeping to the governing of colleges, with application by the clerk to the corporation as governance professional and governors themselves.

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[1] Participants in this study extended the application of their professional journal to committees using a risk-based approach to select which committees to focus journal interest in.

[2] The full list of modules offered on-line under is:
- o   Module 1 – Values, Vision and Strategic Direction
- o   Module 2 – Reporting, Decision Making and Accountability
- o   Module 3 – Governor Induction, Senior Staff Performance Management and Stakeholder Relationships
- o   Module 4 – Creating and Using a Professional Journal

2. Aims

The aims of this Education and Training Foundation funded project are as follows.

- o To prepare material to aid clerks and governors to use the principles and practice of professional journal keeping independently;

- o To support at least 12 clerks to the corporation in their design, maintenance and use of a structured professional journal

- o To support at least 4 staff governors in their design, maintenance and use of a structured professional journal

- o To support at least 4 student governors in their design, maintenance and use of a structured professional journal

3. Background to Journal Formation
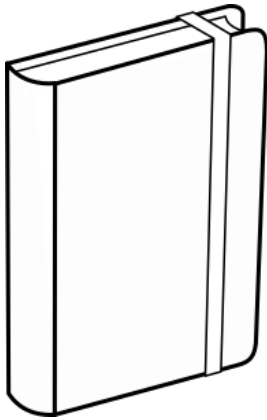
The four principles of journal keeping (after Alaszewski 2006[3], reported in Bartlett & Milligan 2015) are:

1. The journal is defined by *regularity*; in the case of focussing on meetings of the governing body, the regularity is shaped by the corporate meeting calendar. Typically, most college governing bodies meet at least six times per college year

2. The journal is *private*; that's private, but not secret. In this case, the journal is part of the governance professional's working material and as such may be accessed. However, the extent to which the journal is accessed or referred to by others e.g. the chair of the governing body, chair of the audit committee, chief executive, is a matter for the governance professional. Similarly, for the staff governor or student governor, the structured professional journal maybe confidential i.e. not for sharing with everyone, but it is not secret.

3. The journal is *contemporaneous*; in this case, the journal entry for the observed meeting is completed either during or shortly after the meeting event.

4. The journal is a *time-structured* record which is written electronically and is formed on a grid matrix of core governing behaviours and core governance themes. These core behaviours and themes can be selected to reflect local priorities. The journal entry is supplemented by personal reflections, thoughts, feelings, experiences.

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[3] Alaszewski, A. (2006) Using diaries for social research. London: Sage Publications

4. Pilot Study (Dec 2016 – July 2017)

This project had been informed by a pilot study in the use of a structured professional diary by three experienced Clerks to the Corporation. The pilot study operated from December 2016 until July 2017 and a project report has been produced and is appended as an Annex to this Guide. You are advised to read the Pilot Study Report before beginning to design your own version of a Structured Professional Journal.

Whilst the pilot study focused on Clerks, ideas emerged during the pilot study for the application to the structured professional journal to others involved in the governing process e.g. staff governors, student governors, newly appointed governors, senior staff, newly appointed chairs etc.

> "
> Clerk T described the maintenance of a professional journal as a 'very useful, healthy, professional discipline.' S/he listed three main benefits including reflection, seeing the bigger governing picture, and considering how to use identified issues with the Chair.
> "

> "
> The journal is a big part of my new thinking about how we address governing. I've changed how I present draft minutes, agendas and the running of meetings informed in part by issues emerging from the professional journal.'
> "

> "
> 'The professional journal is … where I'm seeing repeating patterns … a bigger landscape…. and this is leading to a better conversation with the Principal and Chair'.
> "

5. What is a Structured Professional Journal?

A structured professional journal for the purposes of this project is the combination of:

- o a grid for recording key governing processes (as determined by the journal keeper, advised by core corporate documentation); and
- o prose notes as supporting evidence, possibly including relevant background information and including any emotional response to certain issues.

Figure 1 shows the basic framework for the design of the journal record. Journal keepers are required to define key 'governing behaviours' and key 'governance requirements' for observation and review.

Meeting date/time	Governing behaviours					
Governance requirements						

Figure 1

Figure 2 shows examples of 'governing behaviours' and examples of 'governance requirements'.

	Clear decision making	Insight and engagement	Pace and ambition	Accountability	Risk focus	Relations with senior staff
Board strategy [strategic objectives]						
Governance code						
Safeguarding & Prevent						
Corporate values						
Equality duty						
English and Maths						

Figure 2

The completion of the journal framework is a matter of choice.

The options are either:

- to complete in prose e.g. **Safeguarding & Prevent /Insight and engagement** 'Governors praised staff for the range of work undertaken to support safeguarding policy'; or

- to complete the grid in code e.g. **Safeguarding & Prevent/Insight and engagement** 'G' – code for Good (in OfSTED terms) with relevant details justifying 'Good' recorded in prose separately.

The important point is to maintain a consistent approach to permit comparisons, trend data, and the development of expertise in journal entry.

Figure 3 (below) provides a worked example of a journal grid and assumes diary notes (including minutes of the meeting) are appended as background, supporting evidence.

Clerk's Structured Professional Journal: Completed Example

This is one way to use the grid – grade each cell with an OfSTED inspection based grade and then summarise the overall theme, plus adding a summary comment at the base.

Variations could include
- o More Board themes (depending on the local issues and perception of the Clerk)
- o Specific Corporate values
- o Specific Aspects of the Governance code
- o More prose / background information on a separate sheet
- o Record only the 'Requires Improvement' and 'Inadequate' matters

Governing Body: 5 July 2017	Board Indicators/ Behaviours	Engagement and insight	Clarity of decision making	Pace and ambition	Account-ability	Risk focus and response	Comments
Board Themes							
Financial health: achieve surplus as approved in estimates for year to 31 July 2017		G	O	G	G	G	Good strategic consideration on 2017-18 budget and 3 Year Forecast. Governors tested sensitivity analysis and key assumptions. Improved financial reporting to show outturn for year to July 2017 – commended by Governors.
Improve learner retention and achievement in three curriculum areas		O	G	G	G	G	Good paper on Attendance, Retention and Predicted Achievement rates with detailed appendix. Demonstrable improvement in performance with appropriate questions re under-performing areas and quality pressure points.
Capital investment: refurbishment of performing arts studio		RI	RI	G	G	RI	After the refurbishment decision taken to consider the detailed business case at previous board meeting, a more confused discussion by governors not present at the previous meeting. Business case now to be considered by 'working party'.

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Governing Body: 5 July 2017	Board Indicators/ Behaviours	Engagement and insight	Clarity of decision making	Pace and ambition	Account-ability	Risk focus and response	Comments
Board Culture							
Corporate Values		G	G	G	G	RI	The meeting was run in an appropriate manner, Governors have embraced the five core corporate values (repeated on all board reports) but senior staff could make more connections. Risks to the values need some thought.
Corporate Strategy		G	G	G	G	G	The meeting and agenda demonstrated an appropriate balance of strategic and current performance issues. Better reporting of strategic progress with new report format.
Exec Team Performance		G	O	G	G	G	The Management clearly demonstrate grip at this meeting as evidenced by responses to appropriately challenging questions whilst mutual respect and support were also demonstrated
Leadership		O	G	O	G	RI	The meeting clearly demonstrated that the Board and Executive were working effectively as a team in the interest of the students and stakeholders. RI refers to capital investment project (above)
Code of governance		G	G	RI	G	G	The governance of this meeting was consistent with the essence of the Governance code. On this occasion pace and ambition seemed less than previously. Funding limitations for 2017/18 dampened ambition.

Board Performance: Summary

Overall, a very productive meeting (which opened with a Governor Development presentation on Apprenticeship Reforms) that clearly demonstrated improved quality performance, a stabilised financial position and the plans in place to address issues. The meeting tested and demonstrated management and governance engagement with the challenging set of issues that the College faces.

'Outstanding' (O) - timely; scrutiny; challenge; informed comment; clear outcome; governor / management boundary recognised, clear value added/positive impact from the Governing process.

'Good' (G) - timely; some scrutiny; some challenge; comment; clear outcome; governor / management boundary recognised.

'Requires Improvement' (RI) - some weaknesses in the 'good' definition i.e. little scrutiny, little challenge, unclear outcome, governor / management boundary blurred.

'Inadequate' (I) - fundamental weaknesses in the 'good' definition i.e. no scrutiny, no challenge, no outcome, no governor / management boundary.

Figure 3

6. Three Approaches

In the pilot study, three clerks devised and worked with three different ways of focusing on governing processes. These three ways are listed below: -

1. **Professional *Exception* Journal:** designed to specifically focus on selected high-risk aspects of governing e.g. financial health, learner retention

2. **Professional *Oversight* Journal: designed to observe and grade all core aspects of governing practice** e.g. implementation of strategy; compliance with all regulations and relevant legislation

3. **Professional *Positive Indicator* Journal: designed to only record positive aspects of core governing practice** e.g. nature of governor engagement with learner voice report and decisions taken

You could use one of these three approaches, which all relate to governing body meetings, or devise an approach which is more relevant to your local situation e.g. a specific focus on, say, two committees such as Audit and Risk, Quality and Standards.

7. Step by Step

Step 1 — Decide which approach to use (see above) or think of a new way. The examples given assume you will be focussing on meetings of the board. Alternatively, you could decide to focus on committees of interest/concern e.g. the audit and risk committee; finance and resources committee; quality and curriculum committee

Step 2 — Determine your grid of board (meeting) behaviours and board (meeting) themes (see above)

Step 3 — Take notes during the meeting in relation to the themes and behaviours you are looking for

Step 4 — Decide when to complete your journal entries (grid and prose) – one day after the meeting or one week after the meeting

Step 5 — Complete your journal entries, using evidence as much as possible. Consider adding your emotional response too.

Step 6 — Consider what action, if any, you will take in response to your journal entries

Step 7 — Repeat from Step 3 again at the next meeting

8. Mentoring Support

This project provides for mentoring support to assist participants to get the most out of their design and application of a structured professional journal.

The mentoring approach is open; it accepts that there are various ways in which a structured professional journal can be shaped and used. All the mentors involved in the project have experience of the design and implementation of a structured professional diary.

The amount of mentoring support can, to some extent, be varied to meet the needs of participants. However, the basic model of support is based on the following framework

1. **Starting the Professional Journal (session 1 – October 2017)**

This session assumes that participants will have read this Guide and the project report from the Pilot Project and will be shaping their own ideas about the kind of structured journal they wish to begin with.

2. **Implementing and Revising (session 2 – December 2017)**

This session aims to support the general progress of the professional journal and consider any revisions and improvements.

3. **Consolidating and Reflecting (session 3 – February 2018)**

Reflecting on the experience and the process of maintaining the professional journal. Consider possible extensions to the use of the journal.

Contact

If you would like to make contact about any aspect of this project you can

- o Contact your Mentor (when allocated)
- o Contact Joss Kang, Project Director on joss@touchconsulting.net
- o Contact Ron Hill, Project Lead on ron.hill@stir.ac.uk

Mentors

Caroline Gillam has worked as a Clerk in a general FE/HE college for five years having previously worked (before children!) in research policy at a University and in the management and development of academic and vocational qualifications for various awarding bodies.

What I gained from the pilot?

"It has made me look at the College's governance in a new, more sharply focused light. I've amended the way we construct agendas and minute meetings and I believe the flow of papers and information has improved. But for me the biggest impact has been in the quiet, structured reflection that recording and engaging with my journal has brought. I see patterns emerging over time, record good practice and think about problematic areas and ways to improve."

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Ruth Reavley has over 20 years' experience in governance, including the last five as Clerk in one College in the FE sector. Always in not-for-profit organisations, she has been employed in governance for the Church of England, for a Primary School Local Governing Body, and for a Multi-Academy Trust, and has acted as volunteer clerk or as trustee for an Almshouse Charity and for a couple of Educational grant-giving charities. She has chaired a children's choir, and is now a governor of an Independent Day and Boarding School.

What I gained from the pilot?

'The discipline of keeping a professional journal improved my ability to reflect effectively, and to identify specific areas for deeper consideration. Having a mentor to listen and comment helped me to innovate and adapt the format to one that met my needs and interests, and to develop skills in journal keeping. The benefits have shown particularly in my thinking and work on board assessment and improvement. My interest continues to be in investigating and tailoring what I can contribute as clerk to support the improvement of an already high-performing governing body.'

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Craig Williams has over 25 years' experience in the education, training and employability sector across a range of senior operational and strategic roles with work based learning, careers, local authority, voluntary and public-sector service organisations. In addition, Craig has 15 years' experience as an FE governor as Vice Chair and Chair of Committees and has Clerked in four FE Colleges

What I gained from the pilot?

"I find journal keeping to be a very good professional discipline that brought additionality in terms of recorded and reflective 'food for thought' (in governance behaviours, my work with Chairs and in emotive reflections) and I continue to tweak the framework to suit my needs and circumstances. I am now keen to share my experiences and support other Clerks (or Staff / Student Governors) with their governance development via this useful methodology and the learning involved with this reflective discipline."

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9. Supporting resources

Video [7:02]
Accompanying video to this guide – 'Sharpening your focus on governing practice using a structured professional Journal Guide'.

Link: http://bit.ly/2zC5IyE

Governance Newsletters
Fortnightly editions of the 'Supporting Governing' newsletters are housed within the 'Governance Newsletter 2017' section of the Education and Training Foundation's website. The newsletters cover a range of governance issues and feature editorials by Dr Ron Hill, as well as guest blogs. They also feature a range of governance CPD opportunities. The link to sign up to receive the newsletters direct to your inbox is available here

Link: http://bit.ly/2xn2I9c

Journal template
You can download a Professional Journal template pre-populated with board indicators and themes, or you can adapt to suit your organisation's context.

Link: http://bit.ly/2hoa9VY

On-line modules
A series of four online modules designed for Governors, Trustees, Non-Executive Directors, Clerks and Senior Leaders involved in the governing of vocational education and training. Each module can be accessed as a stand-alone module, or with the other modules.

- o Module 1 – Values, Vision and Strategic Direction
- o Module 2 – Reporting, Decision Making and Accountability
- o Module 3 – Governor Induction, Senior Staff Performance Management and Stakeholder Relationships
- o Module 4 – Creating and Using a Professional Journal

Link: http://bit.ly/2yivuXV

Professional Development Opportunities
A range of blended, face-to-face and online courses available to book onto for members of the strategic leadership community.

Link: http://bit.ly/2hmSMbH

The Leadership Hub
The Leadership Hub is designed to support the development needs of leaders, managers and those involved in governance across the Education and Training sector. It includes a range of resources including reports, research publications, videos and CPD opportunities.

Link: http://bit.ly/2wbALji