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Students' journals: A useful pedagogic notion that can reshape Palestinian EFL learners' perceptio

Of writing

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Abstract

This paper discusses the various kinds of students' journals that could be available for Palestinian EFL learners to use them in their writing classes. It also provides some examples of journal entries that can stimulate the journal keeping process. Besides, the paper sheds light on how journal keeping can reshape Palestinian EFL learners' perception of writing. Finally, the paper concludes with an account of the various benefits a student may accomplish by keeping a journal.

الملخص

مذكرات الطلبة: فكرة تعليمية تعيد تشكيل مناهج الطلبة الفلسطينيين في كتابة اللغة الانجليزية
يتناول البحث فكرة تشجيع الطلبة في الجامعات الفلسطينية على عمل مذكرات كتابية في اللغة الانجليزية تؤدي الى تعميق مهاراتهم الكتابية واللغوية وتنميتها، لتكون حافزا لهم على تطوير قدراتهم الكتابية واللغوية ، وتاصيل عادة الكتابة لديهم ويعرض البحث نماذج حية من المذكرات التي قام بعض الطلبة باعدادها وفق تجربة تطبيقية قام بها الباحث من خلال تدريسه لمساق الكتابة وتحققت الاهداف التي توخاها

Introduction

When I was an undergraduate student, I recall that I attended a history lecture which was delivered by the chairman of the Department. At the end of the lecture, a student stood up from his chair and asked the professor this question: "What is history?" Everybody in the room burst into laughter except the professor, who waited until every one in the room was silent again then, he answered the student's question as follows: "History, I believe is the record of the past in the present for the future." A condensed, precise, and comprehensive definition that I can never forget.

Keeping a journal, could be the same as writing the history of a particular period that one may refer to at any time in the future. This paper sheds light on the various kinds of students' journals that can be available for Palestinian EFL learners to use in their writing classes. The paper also provides examples of journal entries that can be used as clear evidence of some students' journal keeping practice, how journal keeping could reshape those learners' perception of writing, and the various benefits individual students might accomplish by keeping a journal.

To the best of my knowledge, few EFL teaching-learning environments in Palestine expose learners to the notion of keeping any kind of journals. To be honest, the first time I heard of the word 'journal' with the implication of recording a variety of entries was only when I studied the course *Linguistics & the English Teacher* at the graduate level. However, as a school boy, I recall that my teachers used to ask me to keep two "notebooks", one for homework-- in which I used to practice writing, and the other was meant to be a more formal document which was always kept with the teacher. But, as pupils, we had never kept writing journals as

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such. Therefore by keeping a journal, and learning more and more about journal keeping I became very much interested in the subject so that journal writing

became one of the requirements for course evaluation that I often include in my course syllabuses at Hebron University.

Kinds of Journals

Walley (1991: 149) maintains that "journals have historically been used in three ways: as a writer's journal, a diary, and a learning log". This claim illustrates the argument that each form can be distinguished as a different kind of journal according to the purpose for keeping a journal, the entries endorsed in the journal, and the person keeping it. Bailey (1990: 251) uses the terms "diary" and "journal" interchangeably as "first-person account of language learning or teaching".

A diary journal, for instance, is more characterized by personal entries. These entries tend to foster free writing, and thus aim at encouraging students' creativity. Personal entries such as writing a poem, a short story, a personal letter, etc., are writing activities that are mostly performed outside the classroom and, therefore, can foster creative writing. Since diary entries are exclusively personal, the teacher must honor the writer's right to privacy (Walley, 1991). Protection of the writer's ideas and feelings is also an essential practice which is necessary to establish a climate conducive to diary writing. The teacher shouldn't give himself/herself the right to read student-writers' personal entries unless s/he is given permission to do so by the writer. Such honest behavior on the part of the teacher secures a confidential atmosphere for student-writers' creative writing abilities. In case the diary entries are a more comprehensive journal, the teacher can always ask the student-writer to fold the pages, only then s/he can read them.

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Another kind of journals is the learning log. "A learning log" maintains Walley (1991: 149) "encourages reflection and interaction with curriculum content." Hence, it is capable of kindling academic achievement by providing opportunities for student writers to clarify thinking and record meaningful facts and events. Learning logs are not confined to writing courses; however, they can be utilized in almost every pedagogical environment. Learning logs should be creatively used with variety. For instance, teachers can use them for monitoring student- writers' progress. Thus, they should sustain motivation.

Indeed, Learning logs are different from diaries in that the former are written for the teacher to examine, suggest certain modifications in an acceptable way, or applaud the work using comments and phrases of encouragement. Blaton (1987: 113) asserts:

Students' learning logs are different from journal entries in several ways: They are written at home, after every class or reading, not in class; the topic is always our ESL class and writing, not whatever is on people's minds. Also the logs are written for me to read, unlike the journals written for writers' eyes only.

One shouldn't forget that different modes of journal endorsements are favored by different educators. Blaton (1987) seems to prefer writing at home on weekly basis. Fulwiler (1990), on the other hand, favors a scaffolding procedure starting by "a five-minute journal-write" activity at the beginning of each class as a stimulating factor for more classroom activities. The teacher may, therefore, ask a student to read what s/he has just written in order to initiate class discussion and grouping. Yet, a third type of teachers may "plan a five-minute writing task in the midst of the 50-minute class to give focus to an idea or problem" (Fulwiler, 1990: 209).

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Learning logs at the basic writers' level could be initiated by "on-the-spot" entries such as creating lists of important items in a lesson by following specific directions provided by the teacher; for example, list five things/ideas you remember/like most in today's lesson. Such activities can be shared with other students and the teacher inside the classroom. At the same time, they make the writing climate an enthusiastic one to basic writers.

In order to encourage students to write and share their writing experience with the rest of their classmates, the teacher should also keep a journal in which s/he writes simultaneously with his/her students. This method, on the part of the teacher, creates a sense of equality and democratic pedagogical atmosphere. Consequently, students will be encouraged to activate their writing abilities.

A third category of journals is the writer's journal. According to Walley (1991), this kind of journal encourages children to record events and thoughts that stimulate ideas for later more complete works. Free writing is the dominant characteristic of writers' journals. Indeed, free writing is one of the most productive ways a teacher can follow to foster his/her students' writing abilities. The following free-writing samples could be representative samples from student-writers' journals at Hebron University. A female student writes in her diary:

Today many strange events happened. In the morning, I met an old friend. This changed my opinion about her because of her bad behavior with other people. I respected her for her cleverness and success in her studies. But I was not able to go on admiring her selfishness and her disrespect for other friends so I gave her up. Now and after two years she is in front of me. And just in the morning we were face to face. Some questions came into my mind at once. What can I tell her? Why are we meeting a gain? Do I long for seeing her or she is no more a friend?

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Although we quarelled two years ago and our friendship came to its end I was able to hide my ironic feelings towards our funny, childish and at the same time, misrable case and could shake hands with her friendly that she and I were surprised because we were able to control Our feelings. (See Appendix A)

Another student writes:

What to Write Here?

As writing is a process where the first step is thinking of what to write, I thought of a topic to develope in sometimes. I would who to look into the short comings of this society which after a deep look into it I wondered if there were any good points to talk about. just have a look at society from the social angle. I searched for a place to put my self in. I found myself rejected by all people in it. (See Appendix B)

Free writing should therefore be encouraged as an ongoing natural process the same as we do with any school requirement including mathematics, science, or physical training. However, teachers can focus on language learning in journal writing without letting students feel that they are being directly corrected. For example, the teacher can correct a spelling or a grammatical mistake by rewriting it in a context with an attractive color on either the board or at the margin of the student's journal.

Student writers' journals can be shared with both peers and teachers alike. For instance, a student can publish a piece of writing that s/he likes to share with peers in the shcool magazine. Publication can foster the writing process. Thus, students can publish poems, short stories, dialogues, jokes, cartoons, etc., in the school wall-paper or magazine. Message boards, on the other hand, is another

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effective means that results in useful communicative writing. Students, therefore, should be encouraged to communicate by writing messages to the teacher and to each other. However, one necessary step that a teacher should follow to encourage student writers' journals is to comment on students' journals by using words of encouragement and praise.

The aforementioned kinds of journals, indeed, are not restricted to native student writers. EFL learners can make use of such journals and the various kinds of entries that might be included in them. Palestinian students can benefit a lot from receiving practical training in using the above kinds of journals. Of course, one should not forget that the teacher can always introduce any modifications that s/he finds suitable for a particular journal situation. Such modification are usually determined by the kind of journal s/he intends to use for their students.

Effect of Journal Keeping on the Teaching-Learning Process

A thorough survey of the available literature on journal writing shows that different writers viewed a variety of uses for journals of all kinds. Porter et al. (1990: 240) conclude:

The journal encourages students to go beyond learning course content in isolation and to strive to link this information to theories and knowledge beyond the particular assignment and the particular course. The journal, thus, enables students to develop a professional approach toward learning and to write as members of the larger language learning community. In sum, it teaches them to do what we do as professionals- to work to integrate new ideas with what we already know and to talk with each other as we do so.

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On the other hand, Porter et al. (1990) note that using academic journals encourages the teachers and students to make connections between the content of the taught courses and their own performance in the teaching-learning process. Diaries, for instance, provide an account of personal language learning or teaching in courses such as history. The diarist systematically records events, details, and feelings about his/her current language experience in the diary. S/He revises the

journal entries for the public version of the diary, clarifying meaning in the process. Finally, the diarist studies the journal entries looking for patterns and significant events. Also, other researchers may analyze the diary.

Diaries have a positive effect on the learning process. For instance, an evolving self-assessment seems to be a natural part of the process. Brown (1985:121-134), in her examination of the diaries kept by sixty-one adult learners of Spanish, notes that many second language learners "gave evidence in their journals of being aware of their progress." Brown asserts that the awareness could be acquired without the journals "but writing it down made it very evident." She concludes that "the journal keeping, itself, makes a difference in the learning situation." Thus, it is clear enough that the diaries reveal a similar pattern of awareness. Indeed, Gebhard (1993), Gebhard and Woo (1992) emphasize that one important effective factor in keeping a teaching-learning journal is teachers' and learners' "awareness raising." Deen (1987: 15-16) also emphasizes "diary's awareness-raising function." According to Deen, keeping a diary helped me very much in clarifying my thoughts and feelings about learning and my way of handling problems that came forth from doing real learning. Butler-Wall (1979: 6) notes that keeping a diary helped her "to store out recurring issues, important

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questions, and points to keep an eye on in the future." Butler's insightful comments on the uses of diary studies confirm that,

one of the uses of diary studies is to clarify issues... These issues emerge when one looks at the data again and again, to see what is included, what is left out, and what kind of language is used, what kind of perspective is taken, what kinds of reactions are noted, what kind of tone is adopted, what kinds of connections are made, what the emulate weights are, what the parts add up to, what protections can be posited, and what the cycles can reveal. (13)

Thus, in reworking, rethinking, and interpreting the diary entries, teachers and students can gain powerful insights into their own classrooms behavior and motivation. These insights may include classroom interaction, initiating activities, and other important reactions.

An important use of diary/journal keeping stems from the assumption that an ongoing self-evaluation is an urgent demand across the curriculum. Therefore, it is obvious that the mechanism of diary keeping and diary study can be a useful and invaluable instrument for an ongoing self evaluation and thereafter, self development. Murray (1968), Langer (1986), and Emig (1987) almost maintain that connection between learning and writing is "a discovery process." In this respect, writing can be used to explore ideas, generate and connect them, change preconceived notions, and connect abstract ideas and experiences.

However, according to Cooper (1986: 364), writing is perceived as a "social activity." He claims that "real audience is obtained by dialogue journals." People, therefore, share similar /same interests in writing. By exchanging dialogue journal entries, whether in the conventional ways or by using the E-mail facility, students

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and teachers can develop a sense of being members in the community and thus obtain the community as an audience.

Finally, focus on the teaching-learning process in the communicative approach can be motivated by journal keeping. For instance, both teachers and students can freely exchange views on the teaching-learning process including a student-centered approach, learning needs, and ongoing curriculum evaluation.

Effective Journal-Keeping

Porter et al. (1990: 229) suggest that in order to make the journal most effective, four journal "ground rules" need to be established. First, "the journal is not a personal diary" although students are usually encouraged to write about personal experiences as they relate to the content of the course. Sometimes, in order to motivate students' creative abilities, teachers encourage their students to write their personal free writing passages. Second, "the journal is not a place simply to take notes." On the contrary, a journal is a place "to go beyond notes by exploring, reacting, making connections, and so on" (229). Third, "the journal entries are not intended to be polished pieces of writing" (229). However, the writing task should be free so that students have less trouble with the assignment. Finally, "the journal deserves the same serious attention as any other course assignment, even though it is not graded" (229).

Teacher's Response

The journal/diary entries should be read by the teacher. This gives the sense of importance to students' work. The responses could either be long or short feedback entries. Despite this, some quantity journal-writings need not be read, for

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a teacher assigns extensive writing tasks on a day-to-day basis so as to encourage students develop their writing habit. In this case, the teacher can ask his/her students to provide summaries in which they might include brief accounts of the outlines of their journals' contents. Nevertheless, students at all levels like to see and hear "generic comments" such as "good point", "I agree", "yes", "what a wonderful way to put it!", "an interesting point", etc. "The teacher's responses must be text-specific so as to create ongoing dialogues between him/her and the student" (Rammal, 1995: 56).

Reshaping Palestinian Students' Writing

Through my experience as a student and a teacher of English, I have concluded that the grammar-translation method, though not explicitly emphasized, still is one of our concerns across the curriculum. Therefore, teachers are more likely to be preoccupied with accuracy rather than fluency. Grammatical correctness rather than communicative competence is the teacher's major concern in teaching EFL. For instance, students learn and apply language rules in exercises. However, when they are asked to practically apply the learned knowledge about the language in a communicative setting, EFL students, in general, and Palestinian students in particular, encounter serious difficulties. Therefore, by encouraging our students to keep journals in which they actually write, they will practice communicative objectives of language learning.

As mentioned above, teachers shouldn't be over-occupied with their students' language problems including those related to spelling, structure, and punctuation. Instead, they should always emphasize the communicative approach of language learning for the simple reason that the more a

student practices using the language, the more s/he acquires language fluency in a natural way. Hence, fluency should not be restricted to any particular language skill; instead, it should be a basic requirement for all language skills. Utilizing students' journals to enhance language acquisition, should therefore be the natural goal of the journal-keeping process. For example, a teacher may use journal assignments to encourage students practice all kinds of journal entries on a day-to-day basis such as personal notes, learning material, creative writing, recording observations, and dialogue writing. Such entries can "generate life and independent thought in a sometimes over formal classroom atmosphere" (Fulwiler, 1987:206). Fulwiler, further asserts that "any assignment can be made richer by adding a written dimension which encourages personal reflection and observation" (207).

Another kind of activity a teacher may utilize is a five-minute journal-write. This activity helps in generating classroom interaction. Students, for instance, can read aloud different entries around which discussion might be generated. Fulwiler (1987) suggests using journal-writing for problem-solving. This is, to ask students to write about an idea that they don't understand. Then, students share what they write in an open discussion that may lead to solving the problem.

Teachers can also use students' journals as progress reports, class texts for further discussion, peer-education, records of intellectual growth, and evaluation material of course objectives. Writing logs, says Dodd (1987), constitutes an effective teaching tool in basic college writing courses which can contribute to reshaping the writers' perception of writing. Teachers use writing logs to assist the development of students' free-writing skills. For instance, in my writing classes, I frequently write for five minutes along with my students and exchange my journal

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entries with those of my students. This practice makes my students practice a sense of equality and thus build the required trust between us.

Nevertheless, it is obvious that not only Palestinian student writers, but also other EFL learners encounter a number of rhetorical problems while performing a writing task. Such problems may constitute the major hindrance in communicating the intended message of their written texts. These problems, and many others, come as a natural result of the influence of the source language on the target language. For example, awkward translated structures usually result from the influence of Arabic (L1) on English (L2). Thomas (1989) maintains that the transfer hypothesis assumes that the learners of a second language might apply rules from the first language to the second language. A diagnostic scrutiny of any written text by any Palestinian student will clearly reveal a number of situations in which transfer from Arabic, both colloquial and standard, into the English text occurs. The use of paradoxes, elaboration, analogy, exaggeration, persuasiveness, and repetition are mere examples that could be mended up by ongoing journal-writing practice. Teachers can always ask their students to practice writing in English about their feelings, perceptions of different matters, impressions, and observations. Such practice, which must be followed by the teacher's feedback, will definitely reshape the student-writers' perception of writing in the target language and thus provide them with insights that enable them use writing for communicative purposes. In one of her home assignments, a student writes:

Dear Tom,

There are many important, good, and happy holidays in Al Islam. Ead Al Fetr is one of these holidays. It comes after Ramadan month, and it does not have an accuret date, at the contrary, every year comes in different date.

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In Ramadan we didn't eat during the day, and eat at night. We spend one month doing that, after that, we celebrate by Ead Al Feter, which is consists of tree days. On the first day all people become happy, and wear a new clothes. All men pray at mosque at every morning, then, they visite a closer women and give them some money which called "Edeia".

Some people travel to another country in order to enjoy themselves. For example, travel to Jordan or Egypt, and the others do not leave their country.

Finally, in the first day, or a day befor Ead Al Feter all the rich people give the poor people money in order to be happy two, and buy meat & clothes to their children.

To conclude, Ead Al Feter is one of the most wonderfull holidays in our country, and I hope you visit us and see it one day. Write soon I am eager to heat about your holidays.

Love,

(See Appendix C)

Students' Reactions to Journal-Keeping

By keeping a student journal for the first time, different students provided an endless list of comments. Some students summed up these benefits as follows:

Unconsciously and gradually, states the first student, I have lost my fear of writing. For example, at the beginning, I used to write something then, fearing that the language may not sound correct, I kept changing my mind and losing time in rewriting the text again and again. When I realized that the teacher did not care much for language accuracy, I felt more and more relaxed and thus, more

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confident. I could discover this fact when I compared the earlier with the later entries of my own journal.

A second student said:

Writing helped me think and concentrate more on the readings in that course for which I kept a journal, something not so obvious in a different situation without keeping a journal. However, I am the type of student and reader who writes a summary of whatever I read in order to learn it better. A third student confirmed:

I could discover my innate potentials as a creative writer. This is clear in the personal entries which comprise self-composed poems and articles.

A fourth student added:

The journal gave me extra confidence in myself and abilities as a writer.

A fifth student acknowledged:

I learned to search for good sentences and coherent ones. Not to forget the coherent sentences and meaning depending on my own efforts without being so much guided by the teacher or any higher authority.

A sixth student talked about his experience:

I enjoyed writing all the points that I understood from the assigned reading, not only for this class, but for others as well. Writing my poetry and evaluating my participation as well as those of others inside the classroom was a useful writing experience that I'd like to carry out for the other courses.

A seventh student concluded:

I felt that I have always written thoughts which were mine. Consequently, I am proud of my first journal and will keep it and refer to it at any point of time I feel that I would need to do so.

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Conclusion

To conclude this article, I wish to re-emphasize that keeping a student journal is a useful practice that teachers can adopt as an essential part of course requirements. By keeping a journal, maintain Paul & Elder (1998: 6) *students improve their writing skills and explore feelings and opinions. They feel freer, and therefore less blocked by excessive worry about mechanics and fulfilling the assignment.*

Different kinds of journals can be graded according to the entries the teachers assign to their students during a writing course. For example, teachers who aim at developing their students' writing habit can grade students' journals depending on quantity rather than quality (i.e., the more a student writes the higher the grade). However, personal journal writing is a useful activity that teachers can always adopt as an essential course requirement. On the other hand, teachers

should evaluate students' learning logs and journal home assignments and provide them with the required feedback.

Teachers at all levels, therefore, should motivate their students to develop the writing habit by keeping journals. Finally, as it has been discussed above, keeping a journal, as a personal experience, taught different students how to reshape their perception of writing, developed their language proficiency, and provided them with the opportunity to learn how to keep different kinds of journal

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APPENDIX A

On Your Owni

Time: 3:10

Write a composition in which you explain an important event in your country to a friend in the United States.

Dear Tom,

There are many important, good, and happy holidays in AL Islam, Ead AL Fetr is one of these holidays . It's comes after Ramadan month, at the contrary, every year comes in different date.

In Ramadan we didn't eat during the day, and eat at night . We spend one month doing that , after that, we celebrate by Ead EL Feter, which is consists of tree days. On the first day all people become happy, and wear a new clothes . All men pray at mosque at early morning , then, they visite a closer women and give them some money which called "Edeia"

Some people travel to another Country in order to enjoy themselves. For example, travel to Jordan or Egypt , and the others do not Leave their Country.

Finally, in the first day , on a day befor Ead AL Feater all the rich people give the poor people money in order to be happy two, and buy meat & clothes to their children.

To concluded , Ead AL Feter is one of the most wonderfull holidays in our country , and I hope you visit us and See it one day . write soon . I am eager to hear about your holidays .

Love,

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APPENDIX B

25th Feb.

1996

10:00PM

Today many strange events happened. In the morning, I met an old friend. This friend changed my opinion about here because of her bad behavior with other people. I respected her cleverness and success in her studies. But I was not able to go on admiring her selfishness and her disrespect for other friends. So I gave her up. Now and after two years she is in front of me and just in this morning we were face to face. Some questions came into my mind at once. What can I tell her? Why are we meeting again? Do I long for seeing her or she is no more a friend? Although we quarrelled two years ago and our friendship came to its end I was able to hide my ironic feelings towards our funny, childish and at the same time, miserable case and could shake hands with her, finally that she and I were surprised because we were able to control our feelings. On this day I traveled by car as usual I go by car from our street to the market and from the market to the university and vice versa. In each car I get I hear the same song that that is sung by my favorite singer "AbelHaleem Hafez" This song's title is 'Fee yume min el ayyam' or some day I was surprised and at last I smiled and asked myself if it was just a coincidence or all the drivers took a decision to make this day a special one for this song. At last when I came home my mother was cooking a kind of food which I like. I was too hungry after a long day at the university

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APPENDIX C

Monday
27th. May 1996
10:00pm

What to Write here?

As writing is process where the first step is thinking what to write, I thought of a topic to develop in sometimes. I would like to look into the shortcomings of this society which after a deep look into it wondered if there were good points to talk about. Just have a look at society from social angle. I searched for a place to put myself in. I found myself rejected by all people in it. I know it, by nature, not a social creature, but still if the world around me was a bit different or better I would adapt myself to it. I noticed that if I wanted to be socialized I should retreat to the back and change myself negatively and to the state I never wished myself to live in. I don't like the society of women those creatures who pretend to be good while they are by nature the most hypocrite creatures God ever created. I don't hate them but I loathe them. They are the source of corruption in the society they talk about each other in a bad way when they pretend to love each other. Each one is jealous of the other even if the other is supposed to be a friend. There is no place for friendship or loyalty or faithful emotion in women's dictionary. All they care about is having a husband who can see no body good except his wife. A going-wrong scale by which they measure life values if they have got any. Those empty creatures are the imps I hate and will never be able to go along with them. I want to give you a real evidence that women are not good just when faced by a problem, search for its roots - - - you will find that it was first created by a woman who made it encrease and encrease untill it remains a-too complicated unsolved trouble. I can now believe the saying that says " women confine Satan in a bottle ".