

The Conditional Efficacy of Embedded Reflective Learning Journals in Promoting Critical Thinking in Higher Education

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INTRODUCTION & AIM

Introduction

- Reflective learning is named a core graduate competency, yet it is usually embedded indirectly and rarely taught or assessed directly.
- Without deliberate practice and assessment, we cannot assume students develop the skill.

Aim

- Test whether weekly learning journals, once built into formal assessment, act as a direct tool for critical thinking and knowledge construction.

Research Question

Is a learning journal an effective tool for stimulating students to reflect on their learning? If so, how, and if not, what are the drawbacks?

METHOD

Design — mixed methods

- 134 students across 6 university courses kept a weekly learning journal via the Canvas LMS.
- Assessed on depth of reflection and personal growth
- Students nominated their four strongest entries for grading, preserving agency.

Analysis

- Qualitative coding of 124 final reflections in MaxQDA for recurring themes.

Built-in comparison

- Some courses weighted journals at 20% with a two-page minimum; others used a general homework score.

Table 1. Study sample and final-reflection response

Course	Enrolled	Journals
Technical Communication & Presentation	12	10
Speech & Presentation	43	38
Leadership & Conflict Management	16	15
Innovation & Entrepreneurship	14	14
Current Topics in Int'l Business	27	26
Advanced Leadership Communication	22	21
Total	134	124

Selected references

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RESULTS & DISCUSSION

134

Students in 6 courses

124

Reflections analysed

92.5%

Final reflection completed

Three recurring themes emerged from the reflections

- 1 Organizing thoughts**
Students objectively consolidated each week's learning.
- 2 Curiosity & motivation**
Intrinsic motivation grew as students wrote more.
- 3 Critical thinking**
Self-examination led students to form their own views.

Selected Student Perspectives

"I started to think about why I am learning this... I thought about class materials critically."

"Writing a learning journal is the way of thinking critically and making your own opinions."

"I can concentrate more in class than before. The idea that I have to write the journal makes me focus."

Benefits Word Cloud



Challenges Word Cloud



The benefits were conditional on class design

Grade weight + length rule

- Deeper & authentic reflection
- Superficial entries discouraged
- Value recognised earlier

Optional / low-stakes task

- Shallow or fabricated entries
- Weaker task engagement
- Value recognised slowly

Key challenges: time pressure, unfamiliar critical-thinking demands, a wish for individual feedback

CONCLUSION

- Journals are effective but conditionally realised. Benefits appear only when journaling is assessed and guided, not optional.
- Students need several weeks to value structured self-questioning, so regular inclusion and scaffolding in a course's design matter.
- With clear expectations, grade weighting, and rubrics, reflective journals build metacognitive awareness and genuine knowledge construction.

FUTURE WORK

- Randomly assign students in one course to journaling with or without a graded rubric to test whether structure deepens reflection.
- Test whether AI-generated feedback on entries gives students the guidance they wanted without weakening genuine reflection.