

Implementing Reflective Journals to Promote Mental Well-being in Education

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Abstract: *With increasing concerns about university students' mental health, it is crucial to find methods that address both their academic progress and emotional well-being. One promising approach is reflective journaling, which gives students a structured way to express their feelings, build self-awareness, and support their mental health. Despite its potential, there is limited research on how students perceive reflective journaling and its effects on their mental well-being. This study explores the experiences of six undergraduate students from a public university who engaged in reflective journaling as part of their academic work. The interviews revealed that journaling encouraged positive thinking, improved self-awareness, provided a safe space for emotional expression, reduced anxiety and overthinking, enhanced control and perspective, and strengthened problem-solving abilities. The findings highlight that reflective journaling serves as both a learning tool and a mental health resource, helping students develop resilience and holistic growth. Further research could examine its use in various disciplines and design prompts tailored to specific challenges students face. Universities might integrate reflective journaling into their mental health strategies to better support students academically and emotionally.*

Keywords: Reflective Journaling, Mental Health, Assessment Tool, University Students, Emotional Well-being

1. Introduction

The increasing recognition of mental well-being as a critical component of holistic education has prompted educators and researchers to explore innovative assessment tools (Umnyashova, 2019) that not only evaluate academic performance but also foster emotional and psychological development (Horton et al., 2021). Among these tools, reflective journals have emerged as a promising method for enhancing students' self-awareness and resilience (Pleschová, 2020). According to Sohal et al (2022) journaling is a widely used tool in the management of mental illness and become a powerful tool for fostering and enhancing reflective practice in higher education, serving as a key component of broader metacognitive strategies aimed at transforming traditional learning methodologies (Bruno & Dell'Aversana, 2017; Sohal et al., 2022). It is a valuable instrument for educators to evaluate the mental health of students, as it enables individuals to engage in self-reflection and simultaneously raises awareness of mental health among students, thereby fostering a supportive educational environment (Bulan & Lagria, 2020; Burgund Isakov et al., 2022). Reflective journaling, through both written and visual expression, empowers individuals to explore their emotions, identify behavioural patterns, and track their mental health journey, fostering self-awareness, personal growth, and

constructive discussions with trusted individuals or professionals (Hussein, 2018). This process is especially critical in today's fast-paced, stress-inducing academic settings, where mental well-being often takes a back seat to performance metrics.

This is similar in nursing education where reflective journaling enhances students' comprehension of mental health issues and supports their personal mental well-being (Hwang et al., 2018). When integrated with creative expressions, it cultivates a profound understanding of patients' experiences and suffering, thereby promoting more holistic care in nursing practice (Hermanns & Haas, 2016). Additionally, research indicates that reflective journaling can facilitate the comprehension of patient responses to treatment by promoting critical thinking, which is an essential component of effective clinical reasoning and decision-making (Cook et al., 2018; Zori, 2016).

Mental health issues among students in Malaysia have garnered increasing attention in recent years, particularly considering the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. A significant body of research indicates that mental health problems, including anxiety, depression, and stress, are prevalent among university and secondary school students in the country. For instance, a study by Aziz et al. (2023) reported alarming rates of moderate to severe depression (53.9%), anxiety (66.2%), and stress (44.6%) among university students, highlighting the urgent need for effective mental health interventions. This situation is exacerbated by high academic expectations from families, which contribute to increased stress levels among students (Fareh et al., 2023). Limited access to mental health resources and stigma associated with seeking help often discourage students from addressing their mental health concerns. The digital era also adds pressure, with the pervasive use of social media sometimes amplifying feelings of inadequacy and isolation (Watat et al., 2018). Additionally, financial constraints faced by students from low-income families can compound stress and anxiety, as they struggle to meet both academic and personal needs (Tran et al., 2018). Moreover, the lack of a robust mental health education curriculum in schools and universities further limits students' ability to recognize and manage mental health challenges effectively.

In Sabah, Wider et al. (2023) noted that secondary school students experienced heightened stress due to the transition to online learning, which was often accompanied by excessive homework and a lack of physical classroom interaction. Similarly, Muniandy et al. (2022) found that the pandemic led to a significant rise in anxiety levels among students, indicating a deterioration in their mental health status. The National Health and Morbidity Survey (NHMS) 2017 reported that one in five Malaysians suffers from depression, with students being particularly vulnerable (Mutalib et al., 2021).

Critical thinking was identified to be associated to students' mental health (Kamarulzaman & Ibrahim, 2024). One method to improve critical thinking in students is to require them to compose reflective journals. Although its usefulness may be hindered by the unfamiliarity among several students and educators (Ramli et al., 2013), reflective journaling has gained traction as an educational tool in Malaysia, particularly within higher education institutions. Reflective journaling serves as a means for students to articulate their thoughts, feelings, and experiences, fostering deeper learning and personal growth (Horton et al., 2021). which are the components of critical thinking (Ennis, 2013). Reflective journaling was found to improve students' professional growth and strengthen the pedagogical framework in journalism education (Aripin et al., 2014). In addition, the COVID-19 pandemic has further emphasised the significance of reflective journaling as a coping mechanism for students who are confronted with unprecedented stressors. Research indicates that students have utilized journaling to

navigate their feelings of anxiety and isolation during this period (Foong & Yit, 2021). For instance, a study by Muniandy et al. (2022) found that reflective practices, including journaling, played a significant role in managing mental health concerns among students during the pandemic.

Despite increasing mental health challenges among Malaysian university students, particularly considering the COVID-19 pandemic, there remains a lack of research on the effectiveness of using reflective journaling as an assessment tool to enhance students' mental well-being. This gap in understanding the potential of reflective journaling as an assessment tool for fostering resilience and emotional regulation highlights the need to explore its role in supporting mental health among undergraduate students. Reflective journaling has been shown in some studies to promote self-awareness and provide students with a safe space to process their emotions (Oliver et al., 2021), which can be especially beneficial during stressful periods such as examinations or personal crises. Additionally, incorporating reflective journaling into academic programs could encourage students to develop coping mechanisms that fosters mindfulness and stress reduction, potentially serving as a complementary approach to existing mental health support services (Nelms Edwards et al., 2019; Pomfret & Medford, 2007) and critical thinking skills, which are essential for navigating both academic and personal challenges (Raterink, 2016). Furthermore, exploring the cultural appropriateness and adaptability of reflective journaling in Malaysia's diverse educational context could provide valuable insights into its broader applicability. The lack of structured frameworks for integrating reflective practices in academic settings further underscores the importance of addressing this research gap.

Thus, the study aims to explore students' perceptions of reflective journaling as an assessment tool and its potential in promoting mental well-being. Specifically, the research seeks to understand how students experience the process of journaling and its benefits for emotional regulation, self-awareness, and personal development. This study holds significance for educational institutions looking to integrate mental health support mechanisms into academic programs. By exploring how reflective journaling can be used as both a mental health intervention and an assessment tool, the study provides valuable insights for educators, counselors, and policymakers interested in fostering holistic student development. The findings could encourage universities to adopt reflective practices that not only improve academic outcomes but also contribute to the emotional and mental well-being of students.

2. Research Method

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative research design to gain in-depth insights into students' perceptions of reflective journaling and its role in supporting mental health. A phenomenological approach was chosen to explore the lived experiences of students engaging with journaling, allowing the researcher to understand how journaling influences their emotional well-being and academic journey.

Participants

The study involved six undergraduate students from a public university, comprising four males and two females. The participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure they had prior experience with reflective journaling as part of their academic assessment. Participants were diverse in terms of their academic disciplines, ensuring a range of perspectives on the role of journaling in different fields.

Data Collection

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews, allowing for flexibility in exploring students' experiences while maintaining focus on the research objectives. The interviews were conducted face-to-face and lasted between 45 minutes to an hour. Open-ended questions encouraged participants to reflect on their experiences with reflective journaling, their emotional and cognitive responses, and the perceived benefits or challenges of the practice.

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was utilised as the primary method to analyse the interview data, following a systematic approach to identifying, organising, and interpreting patterns within the responses. This method involved several stages, beginning with data familiarisation, where the researcher immersed themselves in the transcripts through repeated readings to gain a comprehensive understanding. Next, initial codes were generated to capture salient points across the dataset, focusing on aspects related to emotional, cognitive, and academic outcomes of journaling. These codes were then grouped into broader themes through a process of pattern recognition, allowing for the identification of recurring concepts and insights. The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the data and contributed meaningfully to the study's objectives. Throughout this process, the researcher employed reflexivity to mitigate bias and maintained a rigorous approach to ensure that each theme was grounded in participants' accounts, ultimately providing a detailed and reliable thematic framework for understanding the impact of journaling on students' experiences.

3. Findings and Discussion

The interview data reveals several key themes illustrating how reflective journals as the assessment tool support emotional well-being. The themes emerged are the encouragement of positive thinking and self-awareness, opportunity for emotional expression and release, managing anxiety and overthinking, providing a sense of control and perspective, and supporting mental health through problem-solving skills.

Encouragement of positive thinking and self-awareness

The first theme suggests that reflective journaling cultivates a habit of introspection that allows individuals to recognise the significance of their experiences, as mentioned by a respondent,

"sebab kadang kita tak perasan pun yang benda tu penting... dengan adanya reflective journal, kita akan lebih berfikir dan sedar tentang diri kita sendiri"

"because sometimes we don't realise that something is important... with the reflective journal, we start to think more and become aware of ourselves."
(Interviewee 4 Female)

This notion is echoed by Woodbridge and O'Beirne (2017), who highlighted that reflective journaling offers individuals a valuable platform to articulate their thoughts and emotions, which fosters heightened self-awareness. This structured process of introspection provides a safe space for individuals to explore their experiences in depth, helping them to better understand the connections between their actions, thoughts, and feelings. Individuals are encouraged to identify recurring patterns in their thought processes and behaviours by engaging in this self-exploratory practice on a regular basis. This practice can serve as a foundation for personal development and self-improvement. Shavit and Moshe (2019) also found that pre-

service teachers who consistently maintained reflective journals showed a marked increase in self-awareness. They are focusing more on personal and emotional aspects in their second year.

Moses (2019) further underscores that the encouragement of positive thinking in journaling supports individuals in acknowledging both challenges and achievements, allowing them to reflect constructively. Individuals can overcome negative rumination tendencies, which are frequently connected with stress and anxiety, by selecting and focussing on positive topics. Instead, writing can help them focus on adaptive self-reflection, which promotes resilience and psychological well-being. As MacIsaac et al. (2023) suggest, when journaling encourages individuals to reflect on strengths and accomplishments, it enhances their sense of fulfilment and cultivates a more optimistic outlook. This strategy not only reduces the risks of rumination but also maintains a mindset that prioritises growth, adaptation, and long-term emotional wellness.

Opportunity for emotional expression and release

The second theme emerged implies that reflective journals provide a safe space for individuals to express their emotions freely without judgement as a respondent expressed,

"Bila ada part opinion tu, dia bebas untuk express themselves... untuk luahkan apa yang dia rasa"

"When there's an opinion part, they are free to express themselves... to voice out what they feel." (Interviewee 2 Male)

This theme aligns with Hermanns and Haas (2016), who suggested that reflective journals serve as an essential tool for students to document and navigate their emotional responses. Journaling serves as a therapeutic outlet by giving a dedicated space for individuals to express their feelings, allowing pent-up emotions to be released that might otherwise go unspoken. This process of externalising internal experiences allows individuals to confront and process their emotions in a structured and constructive manner, thereby cultivating a more profound comprehension of their emotional framework.

Shannon (2023) emphasizes that the honesty required in self-reflection through journaling, while initially uncomfortable, is pivotal for emotional release. The act of writing encourages individuals to confront their true feelings, even those that are difficult to acknowledge. This open exploration can be uncomfortable at first, but it is precisely this discomfort that allows for huge emotional breakthroughs, resulting in the release of emotional tension and a stronger sense of clarity. Over time, this practice of open and honest self-expression helps individuals grow more comfortable with their own weaknesses, increasing emotional resilience.

Journaling not only helps with immediate emotional release but also encourages better self-acceptance by creating an environment where unrestricted expression is encouraged. As individuals become more adept at recognising and understanding their emotions, they can approach their experiences with increased compassion and less self-judgment. This shift in perspective allows for a more accepting and nurturing relationship with oneself, ultimately contributing to overall emotional well-being and a more balanced sense of self (Bird, 2022).

Managing Anxiety and Overthinking

The interview data also shows that reflective journaling provides a structured way to address overthinking, a common source of anxiety. By documenting thoughts and evaluating them

objectively, individuals can mitigate the impact of spiralling thoughts as a student respondent said,

"Orang overthinking terlalu takut benda yang akan datang, Dan benda tu effect dia punya mental health...dia takut kegagalan...orang reject dia...taka da orang sayang dia... Saya rasa...maybe reflektif jurnal tu boleh tolong dia untuk hilangkan dia... distract dia daripada fikir lebih-lebih yang apa tu semua...."

"People who overthink are overly afraid of things that are yet to come, and it affects their mental health... they fear failure... being rejected by others... feeling like no one cares about them... I think... maybe a reflective journal could help by giving them a distraction, something to take their mind off all that overthinking."
(Interviewee female 5)

This notion aligns with findings that reflective journaling serves as an effective tool for managing anxiety and overthinking by fostering critical thinking skills (Kamarulzaman & Ibrahim, 2024). Through reflective journaling, students acquire a systematic means to articulate their ideas and emotions, so mitigating the mental disarray frequently linked to anxiety. As a result of this practice, students are motivated to critically assess their emotions and responses, which aids in the differentiation of legitimate concerns from those that are exaggerated. This process assists them in redefining difficult circumstances, thereby reducing overthinking by directing them towards more balanced perspectives. (Lepianka, 2014).

Additionally, according to Goodman and Henry (2019), by working through their reflections, students become more adept at understanding and managing their responses to stressors, potentially decreasing their anxiety. This reflective practice not only enhances their study experiences by promoting mental clarity and focus but also strengthens their preparedness for future academic and personal challenges. With regular reflection, students develop a toolkit of coping strategies and a resilient mindset that benefits them far beyond their immediate academic setting, ultimately contributing to a more positive and empowered approach to their learning journey.

Providing a Sense of Control and Perspective

The fourth theme that emerged from that interview data suggests that reflective journals empower individuals by enabling them to recognise and evaluate both their strengths and weaknesses as mentioned by Interviewee 6, a male respondent,

"Bila kita buat reflective journal... kita boleh tengok balik kekuatan dan kelemahan kita, ini memberi kita rasa kawalan"

"When we do a reflective journal... we can look back at our strengths and weaknesses, which gives us a sense of control." (Interviewee male 6)

This self-assessment provides individuals with a sense of control, as it enables them to become more aware of their personal strengths and weaknesses. By actively engaging in reflective journaling, they are better equipped to identify challenges and potential solutions, thereby enhancing their ability to make decisions from a balanced and informed perspective. This process of introspection supports individuals in developing a thoughtful approach to their experiences, empowering them to manage their responses and choices more effectively as they encounter various situations (Pleschová, 2020).

Aligned with this, Zhang et al. (2022) demonstrated that reflective journaling positively impacts students' self-awareness by encouraging them to re-evaluate their perspectives and gain greater emotional control. This heightened awareness allows students to shift their viewpoints, a skill that is particularly valuable in adapting to new or challenging situations. Moreover, the reflective process fosters a sense of autonomy and mastery over their writing and learning processes, as students can observe their growth and make strategic adjustments as needed. Through reflective journaling, they gain insights into their learning preferences, identify areas where they may need further development, and strengthen their capacity to handle emotions constructively, which contributes to a greater sense of control over their educational journey.

Supporting Mental Health Through Problem-Solving Skills

The final theme found from that data implies that reflective journals enhance problem-solving skills by encouraging individuals to identify solutions to issues they face, as said by a respondent,

"Reflektif journal membantu untuk cari solution... dan macam mana nak overcome masalah tu"

"Reflective journals help in finding solutions... and figuring out how to overcome the problem." (Interviewee female 5)

The above respond echoed with studies that found that reflective journal writing enhances learners' reflective thinking, which can improve problem-solving skills. Participants reported positive views on journal writing, suggesting it fosters deeper engagement and critical thinking in addressing language learning challenges (Lepianka, 2014; Tahmasbi et al., 2022). Another researcher supported the study and found that implement reflective journaling have a positive impact on the critical thinking development (Gynn, 2024).

In another study where students reported that engaging in digital reflective journaling enhanced their critical and problem-solving skills, as it encouraged self-awareness and deeper learning, ultimately contributing to their ability to analyse situations and develop effective solutions in their language learning process (Silvani et al., 2024). Similarly, it was also found that reflective journal writing enhances problem-solving skills by making students' thinking processes visible, allowing them to articulate and analyse their thoughts. This practice promotes cognitive awareness, self-regulation, and the ability to reflect on and learn from their experiences (Abrouq, 2024).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study aimed to explore university students' perceptions of reflective journaling as an assessment tool and its potential role in supporting mental well-being. Using a qualitative, phenomenological approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six undergraduate students to understand how reflective journaling influences their academic and emotional experiences. Thematic analysis identified several key themes, demonstrating how reflective journaling provides significant benefits such as encouraging positive thinking and self-awareness, offering opportunities for emotional expression, managing anxiety and overthinking, providing a sense of control, and supporting mental health through problem-solving skills.

The findings show that reflective journaling, when integrated as an assessment tool, allows students to cultivate positive thinking and increase self-awareness, which are critical for both personal and academic growth. By creating a structured outlet for students to express their emotions, journaling supports emotional release and enables students to process their feelings constructively. This reflective practice also provides a means to manage anxiety and overthinking, as students document and objectively evaluate their thoughts, promoting a calmer, more focused mindset.

Furthermore, reflective journaling fosters a sense of control and perspective, helping students recognise their strengths and weaknesses, which empowers them to approach challenges with greater confidence. The practice of documenting reflections also enhances problem-solving skills, as students learn to identify and address issues methodically, supporting mental health resilience and adaptability. Moreover, reflective journaling provides an outlet for self-expression, enabling students to articulate thoughts and emotions they may struggle to communicate verbally, which can be cathartic and reduce feelings of isolation. It also encourages regular self-assessment, promoting a growth mindset by helping students view setbacks as opportunities for learning and personal development. Additionally, the habit of journaling can cultivate mindfulness, as students focus on their present thoughts and experiences, reducing anxiety about future uncertainties. The tangible act of writing can also serve as a grounding exercise, alleviating stress and fostering emotional regulation. Lastly, journaling offers a valuable record of personal growth, allowing students to revisit past entries, recognize progress, and gain motivation from their achievements, reinforcing a positive outlook on their academic and personal journeys.

These insights suggest that reflective journaling as an assessment tool can serve dual purposes: it not only evaluates academic performance but also acts as a valuable support mechanism for mental well-being. By incorporating reflective journaling into assessments, educators offer students structured opportunities for personal growth, emotional regulation, and resilience-building, making reflective journaling an effective tool for fostering holistic student development.

Implications for Educational Institutions Seeking to Improve Student Mental Health

The study's findings have several important implications for educational institutions aiming to enhance student mental health. The sources highlight that reflective journaling can serve as a valuable tool, both as an assessment method and as a mental health resource. The themes emerging from student interviews showcase the multifaceted benefits of incorporating this practice into academic programs.

Reflective Journaling as a Proactive Approach

Institutions can use reflective journaling as a proactive strategy for addressing mental health concerns. Rather than solely reacting to crises, integrating journaling into curricula empowers students to develop coping mechanisms, self-awareness, and emotional regulation skills. This proactive approach can contribute to a more supportive and preventative mental health framework within educational settings.

Fostering a Culture of Self-Care and Reflection

The themes of positive thinking, self-awareness, and emotional expression highlight how reflective journaling can encourage students to engage in self-care and reflection. By normalizing these practices through academic integration, institutions can cultivate a culture

where students feel more comfortable addressing their mental well-being and seeking help when needed.

Supporting Student Resilience

The themes of managing anxiety and problem-solving skills underscore how reflective journaling can bolster student resilience. The ability to process thoughts and emotions, identify strengths and weaknesses, and approach challenges constructively equips students to navigate academic pressures and personal difficulties more effectively. Institutions can integrate reflective journaling to equip students with practical tools for managing stress and building resilience.

Tailoring Reflective Journaling to Specific Needs

The sources recommend further research into various aspects of reflective journaling, including the impact of different formats, prompts, and cultural considerations. This suggests that institutions should consider tailoring reflective journaling practices to the specific needs of their student population. For instance, structured prompts might be more beneficial for students new to journaling, while open-ended entries might suit those with prior experience.

Integrating Journaling with Other Mental Health Services

The suggestion to investigate the integration of journaling with other mental health interventions, such as counseling or mindfulness training, implies that institutions should consider a holistic approach to student mental health. Reflective journaling can complement existing services, providing students with additional tools and support mechanisms. This integrated approach acknowledges the complex nature of mental health and recognizes that multiple strategies are often needed to address student well-being effectively.

Limitations and Future Research Recommendations

While this study provides valuable insights, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study's reliance on participants' self-reported experiences may introduce response bias, as students might have tailored their responses based on what they perceived as desirable or expected within an academic setting. Additionally, the study was limited to students who had prior experience with reflective journaling, which may not fully represent the perspectives of those new to or unfamiliar with this practice.

Future research could consider including students from varied backgrounds, including those with no prior experience in reflective journaling, to assess how initial exposure impacts mental well-being and academic engagement. Further, exploring the long-term effects of reflective journaling across an academic semester or year would provide deeper insights into its sustained impact on mental health and personal development. It may also be beneficial to examine how different journaling formats, such as digital versus handwritten journals, influence students' engagement and the quality of reflection. These insights could guide institutions in designing reflective journaling practices that best meet diverse student needs. Additionally, comparative studies could evaluate the effectiveness of structured journaling prompts versus open-ended entries to determine which approach fosters deeper introspection and emotional growth. Research could also explore how cultural and linguistic differences shape students' engagement with reflective journaling, ensuring that practices are inclusive and culturally sensitive. Investigating the role of peer or instructor feedback on journaling entries could shed light on whether guided reflections enhance the benefits of this practice. Furthermore, future studies might assess how integrating journaling with other mental health interventions, such as counseling or mindfulness training, amplifies its positive effects. Insights from such research

could guide institutions in designing comprehensive, evidence-based programs that cater to the diverse needs of students while promoting mental well-being and academic success.

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