

The Impact of Reflective Journaling on Student Well-being: A Case Study

Ji Young Shim, Adrian Matt Zytoskee, & Bushra Khaliq Khan

American University of Sharjah

Abstract

The global mental health crisis, exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted students' educational experiences and overall well-being, drawing considerable attention across various research fields, particularly in teaching and learning. In response, we explored the effectiveness of reflective journaling in supporting student well-being in a first-year composition course. We employed reflective journaling, integrating practices from composition studies, medical education, and psychology, to help students process their experiences and improve psychosocial health. Thirty-one students from the American University of Sharjah in the UAE participated in weekly reflective writing activities for one semester, with their well-being assessed through pre- and post-surveys. Paired *t*-tests of the pre- and post-well-being surveys indicated significant improvements in relating to others, new possibilities in life, personal strength, and appreciation of life after regular journaling activities. These findings suggest that reflective journaling can be a valuable tool for supporting student well-being and promoting deeper engagement with personal and academic experiences. Future research should explore its application across various educational contexts and disciplines to further understand its benefits and potential for supporting students in times of uncertainty and ongoing global challenges.

Keywords: reflective journaling, first-year composition, well-being, Middle East, English as a Second Language

1. Introduction

Mental health challenges, such as anxiety and depression, have long been prevalent among students globally. For instance, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, epidemiological surveys documented a 12-month prevalence of psychological disorders at 31% among college students (Auerbach et al., 2018). However, the COVID-19 pandemic, which emerged in December 2019 and rapidly spread worldwide, has significantly intensified these issues. Studies have shown that the pandemic adversely affected student mental health, leading to an increased prevalence of Major Depressive Disorder (MDD) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder (GAD) (Son et al., 2020). By early 2020, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) had reported its first fatalities, leading to the closure of schools and universities and a rapid transition to online education. More broadly, learners all over the world faced heightened uncertainty, prolonged lockdowns, and an impersonal style of learning, all of which have exacerbated existing mental health concerns (Fawaz & Samaha, 2021; Sheppard, 2021).

The gradual shift from online back to face-to-face learning after an extended period of lockdown did not alleviate the harsh emotional consequences of the pandemic as students and teachers continued to face the reality of “collectively living in a mass trauma event and experiencing ever-deepening denial,

grief, rage and distrust” (Godbee, 2022, para. 7). Furthermore, beyond the direct effects of COVID-19, a range of concurrent crises continue to pervade the global stage. Severe environmental crises, the rise of global tension relating to geopolitically entangled conflicts, and the submersion of students into digital realities, often resulting in psychosocial disruption, left students in deep states of uncertainty, anxiety, and despair. As Black and Walsh (2021) observe, young people are increasingly viewed as a “lost generation” submerged in uncertainty (p. 331), a generation whose “imagined and desired futures” exist under threat (p. 339). Put simply, widespread global instability has had serious consequences on learners’ personal and educational experiences in terms of their psychosocial and academic well-being. Such circumstances have reinforced the need for educators to draw attention to and address learners’ well-being within classroom settings (Hall, 2021; Walker, 2020).

Given their potential to provide college students with a reflective space to explore these challenges, first-year composition courses are particularly well-suited for incorporating a curriculum that prioritizes well-being. By creating opportunities for students to process their personal and social realities, these courses can provide a supportive environment that encourages holistic development and resilience (Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000; Berman, 2004; Molloy, 2016). Building on this foundation, and drawing upon research and practices from composition studies, medical education, and psychology, we investigated how reflective journaling influences students’ well-being in a first-year composition course at a university in the UAE.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Traditional Definitions and Employment

Before outlining our research, we first define “reflective journaling” and examine its traditional and interdisciplinary approaches. John Dewey (1910) first described *reflection* or *reflective practice* as an “active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge” (p. 6), bridging individual perceptions with larger conversations. Broadly defined, reflection is a process that facilitates the integration of knowledge, experience, and action into deeper understanding.

Since its conception, reflective practice has been widely used in higher education in a variety of fields such as sociology (Welsh, 2024), business (Ono & Ichii, 2019), English (Nunn & Brandt, 2016; Yancey, 2016), and Teaching English as a Second Language (Huang, 2021) as a method to enhance formal learning and integrate learners’ personal understandings into their educational journeys. Building on this idea, Boud (2001) suggests that reflection, as part of learning, is important in that “[a]ll learning builds on existing perceptions and frameworks of understanding,” which is why “links must be made between what is new and what already exists” (p. 11-12). In essence, the traditional concept of reflection is integration of educational experiences and knowledge into a broader conceptualization with the goal of greater academic understanding and growth.

Although we align with traditional reflective practices, we emphasize a distinct approach. Our use of reflective journaling remains consistent with the traditional concept of reflection as an exploratory tool; however, our orientation differs significantly. Instead of solely guiding students to reflect on coursework for academic success, we designed our reflective practices to help students explore their own psychosocial journeys with the goal of providing them a tool in support of their well-being.

Our approach aligns with composition theorist Robert Yagelski's (2011) concept of "writing as a way of being." Yagelski argues that "mainstream writing instruction, because of its obsession with the text (especially the form of the text), not only ignores much of what is important about an act of writing but also fails to harness the truly transformative power of writing, which lies in the experience of writing rather than the text produced as a result of that experience" (p. 7). We embrace this embodied pedagogy, emphasizing that reflective writing can be more than a tool for assessing discipline-specific contexts and academic performances; it is a pathway for making sense of the world. To enhance clarity and distinguish our approach from broader reflective practices, we will use the term *reflective journaling* for the rest of the article, the term we also used with our students.

2.2 Interdisciplinary Definitions and Employment

At its core, our case study's innovative reflective journaling pedagogy is grounded in writing practices from three distinct fields: composition studies, medical education, and psychology. Each of these disciplines offers unique insights into reflective journaling, shaping its role as both an expressive and analytical tool.

The first pedagogical approach we incorporated is *freewriting*, which emerged during the renaissance of composition studies in the 1960s and 1970s, a period that shifted emphasis from the final product to individual writing processes (Belanoff et al., 1991; Elbow, 1978; Murray, 1968). In essence, freewriting involves writing continuously without pause to edit, second guess, or conform to writing conventions. By freeing students from anxieties surrounding grammar and ideological correctness, writing becomes an act of exploration, catharsis, discovery, and creation. Freewriting and other writer-centered practices emphasize writing as an ontological act, a means of navigating the world with greater clarity and agency, to engage the whole person, by connecting personal and professional dimensions (Anderson & MacCurdy, 2000; Spear, 2014; Yagelski, 2011). Although this orientation is not new to composition studies, it has remained on the fringe due to traditional theoretical frameworks emphasizing disembodied voice and reproduction of academic ideologies (Johnson, 2000).

The second practice we integrated into reflective journaling is *reflective writing* from medical education, where the term retains a more specific meaning than in composition studies. In medical education, students reflect on their experiences with patients, colleagues, supervisors, as well as their own psychosocial journeys toward the goal of developing empathy, mitigating burnout, and promoting greater self-awareness (Perris et al., 2023; Shapiro et al., 2006). Typically, this writing is not evaluated beyond awarding credit for participation, an approach we adopted in our study. This freedom is critical because when students feel their language or ideas are being evaluated, writing becomes performative rather than exploratory (Charon & Herman, 2012). Like freewriting, reflective writing in medical education encourages a lack of rigid structure and careful crafting. However, unlike traditional freewriting, reflective writing in medical education often begins with a prompt or theme, guiding students to explore their psychosocial journeys, educational experiences, interactions with patients, and how these experiences intersect with their personal lives (Peterkin, 2011).

Thirdly, we drew upon *expressive writing* techniques from psychology, which frame writing as a tool for personal benefit rather than a means of producing a polished product. Examples include a cancer patient journaling about medical treatment, a student processing emotions after a traumatic event, a

parent writing a letter to their inner child, or an alcoholic compiling a gratitude list. Like freewriting in composition studies and reflective writing in medical education, expressive writing provides physiological and psychological benefits by allowing individuals to process their biopsychosocial experiences and perspectives (Guo, 2023). A seminal study from the 1990s, which was “replicated across age, gender, culture, social class, and personality type,” found that “[w]riting about important personal experiences in an emotional way for as little as 15 minutes over the course of three days brings about improvements in mental and physical health” (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999, p. 1243). While expressive writing may have therapeutic benefits, it is critical to distinguish it from therapy itself. Teaching students expressive writing techniques is not equivalent to conducting therapy, as any therapeutic value gained by the writer is a direct result of their own explorations rather than a facilitator intervention. Writing instructors are not therapists, nor should they attempt that role (Valentino, 1996). However, they can be empathetic educators who provide students with a spectrum of writing tools, including those in support of well-being.

Against this background, we designed the present study to explore how reflective journaling contributes to the well-being of students enrolled in a first-year composition course at a university in the UAE. We further hypothesized that regular engagement in reflective journaling could enhance the overall well-being of first-year writing students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Participants

Our study included 31 students (10 male and 21 female) enrolled in a 100-level academic writing course at the American University of Sharjah in the UAE during the Spring 2023 semester. This course introduces students to critical writing and information literacy, covering genres such as argument/persuasion essays, evaluation essays, and short research essays. To ensure consistency, we selected participants from three sections taught by the same instructor, the second author of this paper. Although 58 students were enrolled, only 31 consented to participate in the study.

All participants demonstrated advanced English proficiency, scoring above 6.5 (out of 9) on the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) or 80 (out of 120) on the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). As a result, all participants were classified as advanced ESL (English as a Second Language) speakers. Their proficiency levels ensured they could engage with academic texts and express their ideas effectively in written and spoken English.

3.2. Materials

To investigate the role of reflective journaling on our learners’ well-being, we adopted and modified the Post-Traumatic Growth Inventory (PTGI) by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996), creating a well-being survey that included both a pre-test and post-test inventory, unlike the PTGI’s single-inventory design.

We confirmed the internal consistency and test-retest reliability of the original PTGI, which has been used across various populations who had experienced traumatic events, including language teachers following COVID-19 (McIntyre et al., 2020). For our study, we adapted the PTGI and renamed it the *Well-Being Survey* (WBS). While all questions from the PTGI were retained in the WBS, we slightly modified the wording of the answer choices as follows:

0 implies – I do not feel this way.

1 implies – I feel this way to a very small degree.

2 implies – I feel this way to a small degree.

3 implies – I feel this way to a moderate degree.

4 implies – I feel this way to a great degree.

5 implies – I feel this way to a very great degree.

As part of our intervention, participants completed a total of 11 reflective journaling activities throughout the semester, submitting one entry per week. The instructor provided a prompt for each session, inviting students to write freely in response. The first ten prompts were broad and open-ended, allowing students to reflect on their experiences and record their thoughts at the beginning of class. For each prompt, the instructor gave participants six minutes and encouraged them to write a minimum of five to six sentences. If they were uncertain about what to write, the instructor advised them to write whatever came to mind, regardless of the prompt. Instructions emphasized that “the only way to do it wrong was to not be writing.”

The final reflective journal was more comprehensive, framed as a letter to the instructor. In this letter, the instructor asked the students to reflect on their experiences throughout the semester, addressing both personal and academic aspects beyond the scope of the writing course. Interestingly, in this final letter, most students spent more time commenting on the reflective journaling component than on any other aspect of the course.

3.3. Research Design and Data Analysis

We administered the WBS twice, at the beginning and at the end of the semester, incorporating 11 reflecting journaling sessions over 15 weeks. This approach established one independent variable (reflective journaling) and one dependent variable (well-being), facilitating a pretest-posttest design to examine the impact of reflective journaling on the students’ well-being throughout the semester. The instructor and the teaching assistant (third author) supervised both surveys, which students completed in a pen-and-paper format during class sessions.

We checked the reliability of the WBS by measuring Cronbach’s coefficient alpha, ensuring it was above 0.7, the suggested value by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). The internal consistency was .844 for Pre-WBS and .776 for Post-WBS. In addition, all individual items had a corrected item-total correlation value above .20, thus making all of them eligible for analysis.

4. Results

We examined whether reflective journaling improved the well-being of college students enrolled in a first-year composition course. We hypothesized that consistent engagement in reflective journaling would improve their overall well-being. To test this, we conducted a paired *t*-test for data analysis. Before proceeding, we verified two assumptions of parametric testing. We used the Shapiro-Wilk test to assess normality and found no significant departure from normality in all pre- and post-survey data (See Table

1). We also used Levene's test to examine variance homogeneity, which confirmed that the variances were homogenous ($p = .64$).

Table 1

Tests of normal distribution of the collected data

	Kolmogorov-Smirnov ^a			Shapiro-Wilk		
	Statistic	df	Sig.	Statistic	df	Sig.
Pre-WBS	0.15	31	.095	0.97	31	.448
Post-WBS	0.10	31	.200*	0.97	31	.549

Note: *This is a lower bound of the true significance.

a: Lilliefors Significance Correction

Once all the assumptions were met, we conducted a paired t -test comparing the two mean scores obtained from 31 participants for Pre-WBS and Post-WBS. Results of the paired t -test indicated a significant difference between Pre-WBS ($M = 3.2$, $SD = 0.4$) and Post-WBS ($M = 3.8$, $SD = 0.4$), $t(30) = 8.3$, $p < .001$, as shown in Tables 2 and 3, respectively. To put it differently, our participants reported significantly higher levels of their perceived well-being after experiencing reflective journaling. Thus, our hypothesis was confirmed.

Table 2

Descriptive statistics for pre-WBS and post-WBS

		Mean	N	SD	SD Error Mean
Pair 1	Pre-WBS	3.23	31	0.41	0.74
	Post-WBS	3.75	31	0.44	0.80

Table 3

Paired t -test comparing pre-WBS and post-WBS

Paired Differences						Significance			
		95% Confidence Interval of the Difference							
Mean	SD	SD Error Mean	Lower	Upper	t	df	One- Sided p	Two- Sided p	

Pre-WBS & Post-WBS	-0.52	3.35	0.06	-0.65	-0.39	-8.32	30	<.001	<.001
--------------------	-------	------	------	-------	-------	-------	----	-------	-------

We categorized the 21 items in the WBS into five factors based on the framework established by Tedeschi and Calhoun (1996). These factors include (i) relating to others (7 questions), (ii) new possibilities in life (5 questions), (iii) personal strength (4 questions), (iv) spiritual change (2 questions), and (v) appreciation of life (3 questions). In the current study, we independently analyzed each factor to determine whether participants reported improvement in different areas of well-being. Results are shown in Table 4.

Table 4

Paired analysis for five factors of WBS

	Paired Differences			Significance					
	Mean	SD	SD Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	One-Sided <i>p</i>	Two-Sided <i>p</i>
				Lower	Upper				
Factor 1: Pre-WBS & Post-WBS	-0.57	0.50	0.09	-0.75	-0.39	-6.39	30	<.001	<.001
Factor 2: Pre-WBS & Post-WBS	-0.61	0.50	0.09	-0.80	-0.43	-6.78	30	<.001	<.001
Factor 3: Pre-WBS & Post-WBS	-0.67	0.52	0.09	-0.86	-0.48	-7.20	30	<.001	<.001
Factor 4: Pre-WBS & Post-WBS	-0.16	0.72	0.13	-0.43	0.10	-1.24	30	.112	.224
Factor 5: Pre-WBS & Post-WBS	-0.331	0.63	0.11	-0.56	-0.10	-2.93	30	.003	.006

We found that except for Factor 4: spiritual change, our participants significantly improved in all the other areas of (i) relating to others ($p < .001$), (ii) new possibilities in life ($p < .001$), (iii) personal strength ($p < .001$), and (iv) appreciation of life ($p = .006$).

5. Discussion

5.1. Contextual Validation of Results

In this study, we explored the effects of reflective journaling on the well-being of 31 students in a first-year composition course. We found that regular reflective journaling significantly improved students' overall well-being, aligning with research across multiple fields. Studies from composition studies, psychology, and medical education have similarly demonstrated the benefits of reflective journaling for well-being.

From composition studies, we found supporting evidence in a study involving 451 students in a first-year writing course focused on personal journaling, including "unstructured free associations". This study found that "74% of students felt more positive about themselves as a result of their personal writing, with many reporting . . . increased confidence, self-awareness, and assertiveness" (Allen, 2000, p. 260). Research in higher education also highlights the benefits of reflective journaling for educators. A longitudinal case study of four higher education professionals found that journaling helped them organize their work, reflect on experiences, and manage the complex demands of their roles. These professionals reported that journaling enhanced self-awareness, work-life balance, and personal growth, stating that "journal-keeping practices foster not only a deeper way of knowing but also a way to take control of their experiences" (Cooper & Stevens, 2006, p. 363).

We also found relevant teacher research conducted by Jeffrey Berman and Jonathan Schiff (2000), who assessed students' reactions to weekly reflective journaling in a course on writing about suicide. An anonymous end-of-semester survey revealed that all 17 students found the diary writing valuable. Sixteen students reported honesty in their entries, 15 confirmed adequate confidentiality safeguards, and none felt coerced into sharing personal experiences. Additionally, 14 students said writing about conflicts improved their understanding and coping, and 4 believed writing about suicide decreased their vulnerability to it. All students recommended continuing the diary assignment for future classes.

From psychology, we identified a 2023 meta-analysis of 31 experimental studies demonstrating the efficacy of expressive writing in "reducing symptoms of depression, anxiety and stress," reinforcing its potential as a "tool to heal the wounds with words" (Guo, 2023, p. 272). Similarly, Sloan et al. (2009) examined the long-term benefits of expressive writing for 68 first-year college students, assessing changes in depression, stress, and academic performance at two, four, and six months post-intervention. While they found a reduction in depression symptoms at the two-month follow-up, this effect did not persist at later assessments. Also supporting reflective journaling's positive influence on well-being, trauma writing specialist Marian MacCurdy (2007) synthesized cognitive science studies indicating that "[reflective] writing can have a therapeutic effect on painful life experiences" by "unlocking these experiences from the parts of the brain that store iconic images and allowing us to put words toward difficult moments" (p. 2). These findings suggest that expressive writing may offer therapeutic benefits that require regular practice to maintain its positive effects on mental health over time.

From medical education, we identified a mixed-method study by Narayan et al. (2018), which found that medical students who participated in a reflective writing course experienced significant reductions in emotional exhaustion and depersonalization, two key indicators of burnout. Additionally, qualitative feedback from students highlighted the therapeutic and cathartic value of reflective writing in

supporting emotional well-being. Similarly, Artioli et al. (2021) conducted a qualitative meta-synthesis on health professionals' and students' experiences with reflective writing in educational contexts. They found that reflective writing encourages both reflection and reflexivity, supporting skill development, professional growth, and empathic sensitivity. Participants described reflective writing as a transformative practice that deepens understanding of personal and professional experiences, helping them in “free[ing] themselves from feelings impeding empathy” (p. 11).

These studies collectively support the role of reflective journaling as a tool for enhancing personal awareness and interpersonal empathy, advocating for its broader inclusion in healthcare training for holistic development. Taken together, these findings resonate with our study, supporting the transformative potential of reflective journaling to enhance well-being.

5.2. Qualitative Validation of Results

The quantitative results from our study clearly validate the hypothesis that reflective journaling supports student well-being. However, at the heart of reflective journaling are students' voices, which offer qualitative insights that contextualize and confirm these findings. Accordingly, we now shift our focus to students' final reflections on the overall reflective journaling process. In Section 4, we categorized the *Well-Being Survey* (WBS) responses into five factors based on Tedeschi and Calhoun's (1996) framework. In this section, we present qualitative findings for each category, illustrating how students' reflections align with the survey results.

5.2.1 Relating to Others

We found that multiple students described reflective journaling as a space for considering their relationships and personal engagement with the world. One student reflected, “[Reflective journaling] helped me realize how I could agree with so many different opinions, yet still have my own at the end of the day.” Another noted how reflective journaling clarified her expectations for friendships: “I didn't realize before that I was so freaky about maintaining my peace, and that I could easily drop a friend the second they start to interrupt it or begin to spread their negativity to me.” Others described how writing strengthened their interpersonal skills. One student wrote, “Because I had never had to verbalize my thoughts in this way, I never learned to communicate them to others. By keeping this journal throughout the semester, I became better at communication.” Similarly, another student noted, “Reflective journal[ing] has opened my critical thinking ‘bubble’ as it not only made me think of my academic life and standing but also my social life and the relationships I have with other people and how I conduct them.” All in all, these reflections highlight students' growing awareness and appreciation of their relationships.

5.2.2. New Possibilities in Life

We also found that student reflections aligned with the WBS results in the category of *new possibilities in life*. One student wrote, “The writing we did throughout this semester was essentially helpful for me to grow as a person and to discover the fact that I can experience new things (and even experience things twice) when writing with freedom, with my own opinions, thoughts, and feelings.” Similarly, another noted that reflection helped her “look at things differently” and “gr[o]w as a person by getting out of [her] comfort zone.” One student discovered reflective journaling as a new practice in her life, explaining “I've never been one to do yoga/meditation because I think it looks a bit corny, but the experience of the

reflective journals showed me that you don't need to be in pink tights and awkward poses to reflect on life. A simple notepad and pen will do." Overall, students frequently described reflective journaling as a tool for self-discovery and, consequently, embracing new possibilities in their lives.

5.2.3. *Personal Strength*

Students' reflections also demonstrated growth in the *personal strength* category of the WBS. Many students described how reflective journaling helped them develop resilience and self-awareness. One student noted, "At first, I was skeptical about how much I could learn from writing about my personal experiences, but as I wrote more and more, I began to see how the act of reflection could help me to understand myself better." Another student described the reflective journaling's capability of increasing self-awareness: "The short reflective writings were an excellent chance to examine my thoughts and feelings regarding the course and my surroundings. These writings assisted me in identifying my strengths and limitations and how to address them and get my brain to put millions of thoughts into writing on a given topic. They were insightful, entertaining, and a terrific method for practicing mindfulness." These reflections highlight how students used journaling as a tool for self-discovery, personal growth, and mindfulness.

5.2.4. *Spiritual Change*

Unlike other categories, *spiritual change* showed little measurable growth. This result, however, may be misleading, as many students entered the study with an existing high level of spiritual engagement. In other words, many students already viewed their faith (predominantly Muslim) as central to their lives. Examples of this spiritual engagement can be seen throughout their reflections. One student captured this sentiment, writing, "I am the biggest fattest believer in fate and religion and that god has a plan for all of us. Even if the worse of the worse happens to me, all I will think of is how will god's plan turn this very situation into my own benefit." While the data showed minimal change, students' reflections confirm the deep integration of spirituality in their lives.

5.2.5. *Appreciation of Life*

Students' reflections also supported their growth in *appreciation of life*. One student noted, "I really appreciated the short writings we did in class as they made me reflect back on my past experiences and appreciate all that I have. I would not have done that if it weren't for you assigning them, which I'm thankful for." Another, in referencing the writing prompt on gratitude, wrote, "After the gratitude list, I think that I now realize that there is a lot more to be happy about. We live in a fast-paced society and it's very easy to dismiss achievements as insignificant. I think it's more important now to celebrate the small victories." Similarly, one reflection stated, "I think that we as humans tend to fixate on the bad and forget the good. Looking back at my thoughts during random points of the semester is helpful to remember that life is not always bad." A different student mentioned, "[The journaling process] has helped me appreciate the little things in life, and that I do not need anything grand in my life to feel happy or content. I am learning to try and be grateful and do right by myself. I have learned that I do not even need a lot of people around me or have any specific far-reaching career goals, and that it's okay to simply live in the moment and not constantly strive for purpose." Many students expressed similar perspectives, suggesting that reflective journaling helped them cultivate gratitude and a greater appreciation for life.

5.3. Limitations

Overall, our study results indicated that reflective journaling had a positive influence on learners' well-being. Not only did the participants' overall well-being improve, but various dimensions of well-being also showed positive changes, including their ability to relate to others, recognize new possibilities in life, develop personal strength, and deepen their appreciation for life. However, we also identified a few limitations.

First, the participant pool consisted of 31 first-year students enrolled in an academic writing course, divided across three sections. As is common in experimental research, we used a convenient sample based on course enrollment. Despite this, the results still yielded statistically significant findings, and the participant group represents similar educational contexts. However, the participants were predominantly advanced ESL students, making it unclear whether the same effects would be observed in students with lower English proficiency. While our findings may not be automatically generalizable to all settings, readers are encouraged to translate and adapt this study to their own contexts.

The second limitation concerns the implementation of the intervention within a semester-long curriculum. We integrated the reflective journaling practices into the course as part of regular instruction, conducting 11 sessions throughout the semester. Since we embedded the intervention into the curriculum, restricting participation to certain students was not feasible, and some students chose not to participate in the study. Consequently, while all students engaged in journaling, we analyzed only data from consenting participants. However, this approach aligns with established practices in educational research, particularly in pilot studies, and provides a foundation for future research that may explore alternative designs to enhance control.

The third limitation relates to implementing reflective journaling within a graded course. Although we explicitly informed students before each reflection that they could write freely without evaluation (with credit based solely on participation during the timed session), the instructor's role in grading and providing feedback may have influenced their writing. One way to address this concern is to have a separate investigator review students' reflections without involvement in the grading process. However, in non-research-based pedagogy, this approach may not be ideal, as students often value the opportunity to share reflections with their instructor, with whom they have a personal connection. Overall, our findings demonstrate that reflective journaling enhances self-awareness, strengthens interpersonal relationships, promotes resilience, and enhances students' appreciation of life. These qualitative insights correspond with our quantitative results, reinforcing the transformative potential of reflective writing as a tool for well-being.

6. Conclusion

Our study highlights the significant benefits of integrating reflective journaling into first-year composition courses (including those populated by ESL students). More specifically, the findings reveal that reflective journaling enhances students' well-being by promoting engagement with their psychosocial realities. However, we do not advocate transforming the composition classroom into therapy sessions; writing instructors are not therapists. Nor do we suggest abandoning academic writing conventions as instructors have the responsibility to prepare students to think critically in their respective fields. Instead, we

promote an embodied approach to education that integrates students' lived experiences into their academic journeys. As we continue to face unprecedented crises in our homes, schools, and communities, providing students with a writing practice that helps them explore and find meaning in their experiences or, as one student described, "make sense of the madness" is not only appropriate, but also a much-needed pedagogical practice. We propose several approaches for exploring and implementing reflective journaling in future research. The potential for further investigation is vast, with several possibilities including:

Writing Attitudes: Examining how regular reflective journaling impacts students' attitudes toward writing, including their confidence and enjoyment of the writing process. Future studies could explore changes in students' perceptions of writing as a tool for self-expression versus a purely academic task and how these attitudes influence their engagement and performance.

Instructor Implementation and Feedback: Investigating effective strategies for integrating reflective journaling into curricula. Research could explore effective prompt design, facilitation of post-reflection discussions, integration within academic writing assignments, and strategies for providing non-evaluative, non-prescriptive feedback to student reflections.

Effects on Academic Performance: Assessing the benefits of reflective journaling contributes to improved academic performance in writing and other subjects. Longitudinal studies could track students' grades and overall academic progress over time, comparing those who engage in reflective journaling with those who do not.

Effectiveness in TESOL (Teaching English for Speakers of Other Languages) Settings: Investigating how reflective journaling supports language development and well-being among English language learners. Research could examine how reflective journaling aids in language acquisition, course engagement, and psychosocial adjustment to new culture(s) and contexts.

Instructor-Student Connection: Exploring how reflective journaling impacts the connection between instructors and students. Journaling may provide instructors with deeper insights into students' personal experiences, creating stronger relationships, improving classroom dynamics, and instructor well-being and job satisfaction.

By addressing these areas, future research can build on the findings of this study, further establishing reflective journaling as a valuable educational tool while uncovering its broader applications and benefits.

References

- Allen, G. (2000). Language, power, and consciousness: A writing experiment at the University of Toronto. In C. M. Anderson & M. M. MacCurdy (Eds.), *Writing and healing: Toward an informed practice* (pp. 249-290). National Council of Teachers of English.
- Anderson, C. M., & MacCurdy, M. M. (Eds.). (2000). *Writing and healing: Toward an informed practice*. National Council of Teachers of English.
- Artioli, G., Deiana, L., De Vincenzo, F., Raucci, M., Amaducci, G., Bassi, M. C., Di Leo, S., Hayter, M., & Ghirotto, L. (2021). Health professionals and students' experiences of reflective writing in learning: A qualitative meta-synthesis. *BMC Medical Education*, 21(1), 394. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-021-02831-4>
- Auerbach, R. P., Mortier, P., Bruffaerts, R., Alonso, J., Benjet, C., Cuijpers, P., Demyttenaere, K., Ebert, D. D., Green, J. G., Hasking, P., Murray, E., Nock, M. K., Pinder-Amaker, S., Sampson, N. A., Zaslavsky, A. M., & Kessler, R. C. (2018). WHO world mental health surveys international college student project: Prevalence and distribution of mental disorders. *Journal of Abnormal Psychology*, 127(7), 623–638. <https://doi.org/10.1037/abn0000362>
- Belanoff, P., Elbow, P., & Fontaine, S. I. (Eds.). (1991). *Nothing begins with N: New investigations of freewriting*. Southern Illinois University Press.
- Berman, J. (2004). *Empathic teaching: Education for life*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Berman, J., & Schiff, J. (2000). Writing about suicide. In C. M. Anderson & M. M. MacCurdy (Eds.), *Writing and healing: Toward an informed practice* (pp. 291–312). National Council of Teachers of English.
- Black, R., & Walsh, L. (2021). Negotiating vulnerabilities in space and time in the twenty-first century. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, 4(4), 329–343. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s43151-021-00030-y>
- Boud, D. (2001). Using journal writing to enhance reflective practice. *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 2001(90), 9–18.
- Charon, R., & Hermann, N. (2012). Commentary: A sense of story, or why teach reflective writing? *Academic Medicine: Journal of the Association of American Medical Colleges*, 87(1), 5–7.
- Dewey, J. (1910). *How we think*. Heath & Co.
- Elbow, P. (1973). *Writing without teachers*. Oxford University Press.

- Elbow, P. (1998). *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process*. Oxford University Press.
- Fawaz, M., & Samaha, A. (2021). E-learning: Depression, anxiety, and stress symptomatology among Lebanese university students during COVID-19 quarantine. *Nursing Forum*, 56(1), 52–57.
- Godbee, B. (2022, May 6). *Honoring ourselves and each other through burnout*. Inside Higher Ed. <https://www.insidehighered.com/advice/2022/05/06/problems-burnout-are-collective-not-just-individual-opinion?fbclid=IwAR02cl9Ry2urO7T04bDe6oe0-foc5HzOP2ebu7YTiA2GuC3oLt6n2WmInIM>
- Guo, L. (2023). The delayed, durable effect of expressive writing on depression, anxiety, and stress: A meta-analytic review of studies with long-term follow-ups. *British Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 62(1), 272–297.
- Hall, C. (2021). “How am I supposed to watch a little piece of paper?” Literacy and learning under duress. *Composition Studies*, 49(3), 13–30.
- Huang, L. S. (2021). *Improving learner reflection for TESOL: Pedagogical strategies to support reflective learning*. Routledge.
- MacCurdy, M. M. (2007). *The mind's eye: Image and memory in writing about trauma*. University of Massachusetts Press.
- Molloy, C. (2016). Multimodal composing as healing: Toward a new model for writing as healing courses. *Composition Studies*, 44(2), 134.
- Murray, D. M. (1968). *A writer teaches writing*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Narayan, G. A., Stern, P., & Fornari, A. (2018). Effect of reflective writing on burnout in medical trainees. *MedEdPublish*, 7, 237.
- Nunnally, J. C., & Bernstein, I. C. (1994). *Psychometric Theory* (3rd ed.). McGraw-Hill.
- Nunn, R., & Brandt, C. (2016). A phenomenological approach to teaching reflective writing: *English Scholarship Beyond Borders*, 2(1), 130–151.
- Ono, A., & Ichii, R. (2019). Business students’ reflection on reflective writing assessments. *Journal of International Education in Business*, 12(2), 247-260. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1108/JIEB-08-2018-0036>
- Pennebaker, J. W., & Seagal, J. D. (1999). Forming a story: The health benefits of narrative. *Journal of Clinical Psychology*, 55(10), 1243-1254.

- Perris, K. D., Donahue, E. J., Zytoskee, A. M., & Adsit, J. (2023). Narrative medicine: An interdisciplinary approach to address burnout among the nursing workforce. *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 1(45), 136–151. <http://dx.doi.org/10.55671/0160-4341.1166>
- Peterkin, A. (2011). Primum non nocere: On accountability in narrative-based medicine [First, do no harm: On accountability in narrative-based medicine]. *Literature and Medicine*, 29(2), 396–411.
- Shapiro, J., Kasman, D., & Shafer, A. (2006). Words and wards: A model of reflective writing and its uses in medical education. *Journal of Medical Humanities*, 27(4), 231–244.
- Sheppard, J. (2021). Pandemic pedagogy: What we learned from the sudden transition to online teaching and how it can help us prepare to teach writing in an uncertain future. *Composition Studies*, 49(1), 60–83.
- Sloan, D. M., Feinstein, B. A., & Marx, B. P. (2009). The durability of beneficial health effects associated with expressive writing. *Anxiety, Stress & Coping*, 22(5), 509–523. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10615800902785608>
- Son, C., Hegde, S., Smith, A., Wang, X., & Sasangohar, F. (2020). Effects of COVID-19 on college students' mental health in the United States: Interview survey study. *Journal of Medical Internet Research*, 22(9), e21279.
- Spear, R. N. (2014). Let me tell you a story: On teaching trauma narratives, writing, and healing. *Pedagogy*, 14(1), 53–79. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1215/15314200-234891>
- Tedeschi, R. G., & Calhoun, L. G. (1996). The posttraumatic growth inventory: Measuring the positive legacy of trauma. *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, 9(3), 455–471.
- Valentino, M. J. (1996). Responding when a life depends on it: What to write in the margins when students self-disclose. *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 23(4), 274–283. <https://doi.org/10.58680/tetyc19965504>
- Walker, T. National Education Association. (2021, March 15). *Social-emotional learning should be priority during COVID-19 crisis*. National Education Association. <https://www.nea.org/nea-today/all-news-articles/social-emotional-learning-should-be-priority-during-covid-19-crisis>
- Welsh, S. (2024). Reflections on first sociology learnings: The phenomenology of sociology. *Reflective Practice*, 25(1), 1–10.
- Yagelski, R. (2011). *Writing as a way of being: Writing instruction, nonduality, and the crisis of sustainability*. Hampton Press.

Yancey, K. B. (Ed.). (2016). *A rhetoric of reflection*. Utah State University Press.