

The Scholarly Notebook: A Qualitative Investigation of Students' Academic Journaling Practices in Higher Education

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Abstract

This qualitative research delved into how postgraduate students, in two Higher educational institutions from South Africa utilise academic journaling techniques for their studies and personal development purposes. Using qualitative methods, the study involved conducting semi-structured interviews with fifteen participants code-named S1 to S15. Data analysis uncovered four major themes indicating four groups of journaling practices used by the participants. The four major themes included: academic journaling, reflective journaling, digital journaling, and creative journaling. Participants indicated that academic journaling techniques were used to record coursework and research experiences, while reflective journaling was employed to capture personal growth and emotional well-being throughout their learning journey. Concerning the theme of digital journaling, data revealed that some students opted for digital platforms such, as Microsoft OneNote and Google Docs over the traditional pen-and-paper method, for documenting their experiences. Moreover, the theme of creative journal writing suggested that many participants integrated written reflections, with components and innovative methods by employing tools like markers, stickers, and sketches to document their experiences. The findings from this research contribute to our understanding of how graduate students incorporate journal writing practices to support their academic development, in university settings.

Keywords: Reflective journal, critical reflection, learning experiences, metacognition, personal and professional growth

Introduction

The current study investigates the journaling practices of students in higher education, exploring the motivations, approaches, and perceived impacts of maintaining a scholarly notebook. The importance of students' academic journaling practices in higher education has received considerable focus in recent years, as the emphasis is its capacity to enhance students' academic achievements, psychological health, and personal development (Stevens & Cooper; 2023; Robb & Voorhees, 2023; Kozoil, 2021; Lockman and Schirmer 2020; Schippers et al., 2020). The increased acknowledgment of the significance of reflective practice in higher education has resulted in an increasing focus on adopting journaling among students, particularly in professional development programming memes. Lockman and Schirmer (2020) highlight the significance of integrating evidence-based strategies, such as reflective writing, into online and hybrid learning settings to improve student involvement and academic achievements. Baresh's (2022) suggests that using reflective journaling increases the writing abilities of Libyan undergraduate students, introspection, and

linguistic competence. In their research Stevens and Cooper (2023) present a detailed manual on the significance of journal keeping, elucidating how journaling can be utilised for learning, teaching, gaining professional insight, and facilitating positive transformation in individual learning styles. Their work emphasises the adaptability of journaling as a tool for personal and academic development, in line with the wider body of literature on the advantages of this activity in higher education. Additionally, Guo et al. (2020) argue that journaling in project-based learning enables problem-solving and increases individual development.

Journaling is a means by which students can share their interaction with the curriculum, content delivery methods, learning tasks, and their learning journeys throughout the programme. Within this framework, the academic notebook, also known as a reflective journal, serves as a beneficial instrument for students to record their educational encounters/experiences, delve into their vocational/career development, and establish connections between theoretical concepts, research, and practical applications of their studies. This study examines the journaling practices of students enrolled in Postgraduate Human Resource Management (HRM) programmes at the University of Technology and master's degree students from a private higher education institute in Cape Town, South Africa. Postgraduate students are expected to participate/engage in theoretical and research-intensive learning activities that require critical self-reflection, the examination of case studies, and formulating strategies for self-improvement in learning and critical thinking.

Although the advantages of journaling have been extensively recorded, a knowledge gap exists regarding the precise methods and encounters of students who captured their learning experiences through different journaling practices, within the context of higher education in South Africa. In the researchers' schema incorporating journaling into the teaching and learning processes can enhance learning outcomes, and foster critical thinking abilities, and overall academic performance, particularly within the social sciences, project-based learning, and research. The major objective that guides the current study is: How does journaling enhance postgraduate students' reflection on their learning journeys, personal development, and academic achievement? By addressing this question, the study seeks to provide a deeper understanding of the role of journaling in the teaching and learning of students in higher education. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks and empirical findings of previous research (Bradley & Nash, 2011; Guzzetti & Gamboa, 2005), this investigation aims to uncover the nuances and complexities of students' journaling practices, ultimately contributing to the

scholarly discourse on the use of reflective writing in higher education for students' academic achievements.

Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

This study is located within the social constructivist paradigm. The social constructivist paradigm is relevant for grounding the current study because it offers a strong and suitable perspective for examining students' journaling behaviours in higher education, enabling a comprehensive and detailed comprehension of this phenomenon. Lombardo and Kantola (2021) define social constructivism as a theoretical paradigm highlighting the socially produced aspect of reality, knowledge, and meaning. Social constructivism asserts/holds that individuals develop meaning and comprehension of the world by engaging with others and their surroundings. For Saleem, Kausar, and Deeba (2021) social constructivism holds that the individual's understanding of events, and encounters is influenced by the social, cultural, and historical environments in which they are immersed. Brau (2020) posits constructivism recognises that knowledge is collaboratively generated through the interactions between the teacher and the participants. Thus, by employing a social constructivist framework, this study examined the intricate and diverse characteristics of students' journaling activities, revealing the numerous social, cultural, and institutional influences that impact their learning experiences (Kratochwil & Peltonen, 2022). Social constructivism is thus relevant as the framework of the current study because the researchers want to understand from the students' reflective journals, how they interact with the course content, learning facilitation methods, how they learn and construct meaning, and any suggestions to improve content delivery. Social constructivism applies to the current study because it specifically emphasises the comprehension of students' subjective experiences, and viewpoints, creating significance through their journaling practices.

Students' Journaling Practices in Higher Education

The journaling practices of higher education students encompass various aspects, including reflection in and on learning, critical thinking, problem-solving, emotional expression, integration of theory and practice, personalised learning, and personal development. Journaling has emerged as a valuable tool in supporting students' academic endeavours and personal growth. Reflective writing and journaling are now widely acknowledged as useful educational techniques in higher education (Alt & Raichel, 2020; Alt et al., 2022; Jarvis & Baloyi, 2020; Baresh, 2022; Sudirman et al., 2021). In the researchers' schema, guided reflective journaling allows students to

critique disciplinary and pedagogic content knowledge, express the benefits of the teaching and learning processes, illuminate challenges, and suggest areas for improvement where applicable. Alt and Raichel (2020) conducted a longitudinal study examining the influence of reflective journaling on the metacognitive awareness of students in higher education. These scholars found that practicing reflective journaling can greatly improve students' metacognitive abilities, such as their capacity to strategise, monitor and assess their learning styles.

In their study, Robb and Voorhees (2023) explored the use of journaling to develop a growth mindset among students at an urban community college. The researchers found that regular journaling helped students reflect on their academic experiences, recognize their progress, and cultivate a more positive and resilient understanding of their learning processes. Relatedly, Schippers et al. (2020), found that writing about personal goals and plans, regardless of the goal type, can significantly boost academic performance. The benefits of journaling extend beyond academic achievement. Kozoil (2021) investigated the impact of journaling on mental health, highlighting its potential to alleviate stress, improve emotional regulation, and foster self-awareness. These findings are consistent with the work of Bradley and Nash (2011), who advocate using scholarly personal narrative (SPN) manuscripts, for personal exploration and academic growth. Moreover, Guzzetti and Gamboa's (2005) research on the online journaling practices of adolescent girls provides insights into the evolving nature of journaling in the digital age. Their study reveals the potential of digital platforms to facilitate journaling and enable students to engage in reflective writing practices that can support their academic pursuits.

Alt et al. (2022) conducted a study to investigate the correlation between reflective journal writing and lifelong learning abilities, building upon their prior research. Their investigation revealed that students who actively participated in reflective journaling were high in critical thinking, problem-solving, and self-directed learning proficiencies. In their study, Jarvis and Baloyi (2020) examined scaffolding approaches in reflective journaling to promote higher-order thinking abilities in undergraduate students. Their research revealed that offering students organised direction and feedback as they engage in journaling can facilitate their transition from descriptive to more analytical and evaluative modes of thinking. The scaffolding method enables students to actively participate in more profound levels of critical analysis and solution-oriented thinking. Baresh (2022) conducted a comprehensive literature study using reflective journaling to enhance the writing skills of Libyan undergraduate students, considering an international perspective. The author suggests that reflective journaling

augments students' linguistic competency, self-articulation, and comprehensive academic writing skills. Baresh (2022) privileges customised implementation tactics that consider the cultural and educational background in reflective writing. Similarly, Sudirman et al. (2021) investigated the efficacy of reflective journal writing as perceived by English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners in Indonesia. The findings showed that reflective journaling can enhance students' language proficiency, and boost their metacognitive awareness, self-regulation, and personal development. The authors emphasise the need to establish a nurturing learning atmosphere and offer students abundant chances to participate in journal writing. Engaging in reflective journal writing as one of the journaling practices, for example, can improve students' metacognitive awareness, foster lifelong learning skills, and facilitate the development of higher-order thinking abilities.

Progress Tracking as a Journaling Practice in Higher Education

Engaging in the practice of journaling in line with the course content, lesson plan and objectives can bolster students' motivation and improve students' academic achievement (Harris, 2023). Effective goal setting and progress tracking of students' progress by lecturers are widely acknowledged as crucial elements of self-regulated learning in higher education (Harris, 2023; Zimmerman et al., 2023; Wolters & Brady, 2021; Winkelmes et al., 2023). This highlights the necessity for students to establish precise goals on how to deal with assigned subject tasks, monitor their progress, and adjust their learning techniques accordingly. The author proposes that the utilisation of reflective journaling can enhance the process of self-regulation, allowing students to have a greater understanding of their abilities, limitations, and areas in need of enhancement/improvement or remediation.

Considering the above, Zimmerman et al. (2023) investigated the notion of self-regulated academic study time, which encompasses establishing precise objectives, strategic planning, and continuous monitoring of one's advancement. The authors contend that integrating these tactics into a journaling routine can assist students in cultivating crucial time management and self-directed learning abilities. Wolters and Brady (2021) provide additional insights into the significance of self-regulation in the time management of college students. According to their analysis of the literature, it is shown that successful students can proficiently establish objectives, organise their study schedule, and monitor their advancement. In their study, Winkelmes et al. (2023) provide the Transparency Framework, a pedagogical strategy that highlights the significance of clearly communicating learning objectives, evaluation criteria, and

feedback procedures to students by lecturers. The authors emphasise the possibility of integrating goal setting and progress tracking into this framework, as it can enable students to assume a more proactive role in their learning journey.

Integrating goal setting and progress tracking into journaling can boost the benefits of reflective journaling in fostering metacognitive awareness and lifelong learning abilities, as reported by Alt and Raichel (2020) and Alt et al. (2022). The focus of Jarvis and Baloyi (2020) on the significance of scaffolding in reflective journaling is equally applicable to assisting students in establishing and overseeing their objectives. The lecturers can assist students in advancing from simple goal setting to more advanced methods of monitoring and assessing their progress by offering organised direction and feedback. In the research conducted by Baresh (2022) and Sudirman et al. (2021), they investigate the effectiveness of reflective journaling in enhancing the writing abilities of Libyan undergraduate students and promoting metacognitive awareness among English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners, respectively. Both instances demonstrated the significant value of incorporating goal setting and progress tracking into the journaling process. Undoubtedly, goal setting and progress tracking have great promise as essential elements of reflective journaling in higher education. By integrating these self-regulatory techniques into their journaling, students can cultivate vital abilities for academic achievement, including time management, critical thinking, and self-directed learning.

Problem-Solving and Decision-Making as a Journaling Practice in Higher Education

Journaling offers students a platform to navigate intricate challenges, examine alternate answers, and record their decision-making procedures (Guo et al., 2020). This can be very beneficial in project-based learning or when conducting case study analysis. Acquiring proficient problem-solving and decision-making abilities is an essential aspect of higher education. It equips students to tackle intricate challenges encountered in the process of learning. academic and professional environments (Halabieh et al., 2022; Alfares, 2021; Jarvis & Baloyi, 2020; Argelagós et al., 2022; Kusakli & Sönmez, 2024). Halabieh et al. (2022) emphasise the existing educational challenges encountered by higher education institutions, such as the necessity to foster problem-solving and critical-thinking skills in students. The authors highlight the significance of incorporating inventive teaching methods, such as incorporating reflective journaling, to tackle these difficulties. Additionally, Alfares (2021) examined the impact of problem-based learning on the self-perceived ability of students to solve

problems in higher education. The study results indicate that integrating problem-solving techniques into the learning process, with the use of reflective journaling, can greatly improve students' self-assurance and proficiency in addressing intricate difficulties.

In their study, Jarvis and Baloyi (2020) investigate the application of scaffolding strategies in reflective journaling to enhance the cultivation of advanced cognitive abilities, such as problem-solving and decision-making, in undergraduate students. Their research showcases the efficacy of offering organised direction and feedback to students while they engage in the process of journaling. This approach allows students to advance beyond merely describing their experiences to engaging in more critical and evaluative kinds of reflection. In their study, Argelagós et al. (2022) investigated how online task-centered instruction contributes to the development of information problem-solving abilities in higher education. The authors propose that the inclusion of reflective journaling in this strategy can further augment students' capacity to discern, assess, and employ pertinent knowledge to resolve intricate challenges.

Kusakli and Sönmez (2024) examine the impact of problem-solving and decision-making education on the proficiency of nurse managers. Although the study specifically examines a professional setting, the results emphasise the effectiveness of specific interventions, such as reflective journaling, in enhancing problem-solving and decision-making skills among higher education students. Bellaera et al. (2021) investigate the preferences and methods employed by educators who teach critical thinking at the university level. The authors highlight the significance of offering students the chance to participate in reflective journaling to enhance their problem-solving and decision-making abilities. Duschl (2020) emphasises the importance of practical reasoning and decision-making in the field of science education. According to the author, incorporating reflective journaling into the learning process might assist students in effectively navigating the intricacies of scientific problem-solving and enable them to make well-informed decisions grounded on facts.

McLaughlin et al. (2022) investigate the incorporation of design thinking instruction and learning in higher education in their study. The authors emphasise the capacity of reflective journaling to facilitate the cyclical problem-solving and decision-making procedures inherent in design thinking approaches, showcasing the significant contribution of reflective journaling in nurturing problem-solving and decision-making abilities among university students. By implementing structured journaling activities, educators can empower students to actively participate in advanced cognitive

processes, enhance their belief in their abilities, and efficiently negotiate intricate difficulties. Utilising scaffolding approaches, task-centered instruction, and incorporating design thinking ideas can effectively augment the influence of this journaling activity on student learning and growth.

Emotional Expression and Regulation as Journaling Practices in Higher Education

By integrating these abilities into their journaling practice, students can improve their self-control, mental and physical health, and overall scholastic achievement. Literature has increasingly focused on emotional expression and regulation in higher education. It has been suggested that incorporating these practices into students' journaling activities can have potential benefits. Several studies (Jarvis & Baloyi, 2020; Blau et al., 2020; Warriar et al., 2021; Cheung et al., 2021; Nückles et al., 2020; Al-Refae et al., 2021; Cañabate et al., 2020; Shafiee Rad & Jafarpour, 2023; Hoffmann et al., 2020) have highlighted this potential. According to Jarvis and Baloyi (2020), reflective journaling involves using scaffolding. This can enhance the cultivation of advanced cognitive abilities, such as emotional articulation and control. Blau et al. (2020) examine how technology-enhanced collaborative courses contribute to developing digital literacies, self-regulation, and perceived learning in students. Their research indicates that including emotional expression and regulation in the course designs can improve students' overall academic achievement and well-being.

Warriar et al. (2021) suggest that harnessing emotional intelligence competencies, such as emotional expression and control, has the potential to promote a supportive learning environment and contribute to the sustainable development of higher education institutions. In their study, Cheung et al. (2021) investigated the correlation between expressive writing and the state of well-being in Chinese emerging adults. Their findings indicate that emotion regulation plays a fundamental role as a mechanism in this process of journaling. This study proposes that integrating emotional expression into journaling practices can positively influence students' overall psychological well-being and adaptation. However, Nückles et al. (2020) present a viewpoint that focusses on self-regulation in the context of journal writing in higher education. They highlight the importance of emotional expression and regulation in improving cognitive load and promoting self-regulated learning. The authors contend that reflective journaling can function as a beneficial instrument for cultivating these crucial skills. Al-Refae et al. (2021) examined the impact of a mobile intervention that combines self-compassion

and mindfulness-based cognitive techniques on the emotional regulation and adaptive coping mechanisms of university students.

A separate investigation conducted by Cañabate et al. (2020) examined the use of emotional self-regulation through introjective techniques in the context of physical education. The study emphasises the wider range of uses of these strategies in several academic fields, including education. The authors propose that integrating emotional expression and regulation into journaling can have a positive impact on students' overall well-being and academic achievements. Cañabate et al. (2020) and Shafiee Rad and Jafarpour (2023) investigated the impact of treatments targeting well-being, grit, emotion control, and resilience on the writing abilities of second language (L2) learners. The study found that the process of writing in a journal can enhance students' ability to control and manage their emotions, leading to improvements in their academic performance and language abilities. In addition, the study conducted by Hoffmann et al. (2020) offers a structured approach for instructing students in managing their emotions within educational settings, highlighting the significance of implementing research findings into practical applications in the process of journaling. The authors propose that including emotional expression and regulation into journaling activities can be an effective method for fostering social and emotional development in higher education environments.

Integration of Theory and Practice as a Journaling Practice in Higher Education

Journaling in professional programming memes, such as Human Resource Management, can facilitate the connection between academic concepts and practical applications, hence enhancing students' comprehension of journaling (Lockman & Schirmer, 2020). Hence, the convergence of theory and practice in higher education has been a primary subject of academic discussion, with scholars highlighting the significance of connecting these two realms through the use of reflective journaling techniques (Patton, 2023; Brewer & Cunningham, 2023; Colomer et al., 2020; Magolda & King, 2023; Bean & Melzer, 2021; Henning & Roberts, 2023; Prøitz & Wittek, 2020; Tijsma et al., 2020).

Patton's (2023) edited volume on culture centres in higher education emphasises the crucial role of combining theory and practice to advance identity formation, social equity, and inclusive learning environments. The author proposes that engaging in reflective journaling can be a beneficial method for students to examine the connection between theoretical frameworks and their practical implementation. In their research,

Brewer and Cunningham (2023) highlight the need to connect theoretical knowledge with practical application by incorporating study abroad programming memes into the curriculum. The authors contend that engaging in reflective journaling can enhance students' capacity to establish significant correlations between their international experiences and the academic material they encounter in the classroom.

Colomer et al. (2020) investigate the use of reflective learning in higher education, emphasising the significance of active teaching methods that promote transformational practices. The authors propose that the incorporation of theory and practice through the use of journaling can enable students to develop a stronger sense of engagement, critical thinking skills, and problem-solving abilities. Magolda and King's (2023) edited volume emphasises the importance of connecting theory and practice in higher education, as demonstrated via learning partnerships. Reflective journaling is proposed by the authors as a means for students to cultivate self-authorship, which allows them to effectively traverse the challenges of integrating theoretical knowledge with practical experiences. The study conducted by Bean and Melzer (2021) highlights the significance of writing, critical thinking, and active learning in promoting the amalgamation of theory and practice in the classroom. The authors contend that reflective journaling can serve as a potent instrument for students to amalgamate and implement theoretical notions in their academic and professional endeavours.

Henning and Roberts (2023) emphasise the importance of converting theoretical frameworks into practical implementations in the field of student affairs assessment. The authors propose that engaging in reflective journaling can help students connect theoretical knowledge with practical application, especially in the field of student affairs and student development. In their study, Prøitz and Wittek (2020) explore the current conflict between theory and practice in PhD programming memes and highlight the possibility of reflective journaling as a means to tackle this issue. The authors emphasise the significance of providing students with chances to actively participate in critical reflection and combine their academic knowledge with real-world experiences. Consistent with the findings of Prøitz and Wittek (2020), Henning and Roberts (2023), and Tijsma et al. (2020), the systematic review of community service learning in higher education highlights the need to combine theory and practice by using reflective journaling. The authors suggest design principles that can be used to guide the development of these transformative learning experiences through journaling. These experiences can be made even better by using reflective journaling activities.

Personalized Learning and Growth as a Journaling Practice in Higher Education

Journaling offers students the opportunity to customise their reflective practices according to their specific requirements, preferences, and learning methods, thereby fostering self-directed learning and personal growth (Bradley & Nash, 2011). Reflective journaling has been recognised as a valuable tool to support and enhance personalised learning in higher education. Researchers have highlighted the potential in this approach, as evidenced by studies conducted by Li & Wong (2023), Walkington & Bernacki (2020), Alamri et al. (2021), Shemshack & Spector (2020), Zhang et al. (2020), Stevens & Cooper (2023), Chen et al. (2021), and Colomer et al. (2020). Li and Wong (2023) present an extensive analysis of the characteristics and patterns of personalised learning, emphasising the need for learner-centred methods that accommodate individual requirements and preferences. The authors propose that incorporating reflective journaling can be a beneficial strategy in facilitating this personalised learning experience.

Walkington and Bernacki (2020) evaluate the research on personalised learning, highlighting the significance of matching theoretical frameworks with practical developments. According to the authors, the utilisation of reflective journaling can improve students' self-awareness, metacognition, and capacity to adapt their learning strategies to their own requirements. Alamri et al. (2021) examines the learning technology models that facilitate personalisation in mixed learning environments in higher education. Their research indicates that the inclusion of reflective journaling can assist students in navigating the individualised components of these learning environments and cultivate a stronger sense of control and responsibility over their educational experience.

In their study, Shemshack and Spector (2020) performed a comprehensive analysis of the existing literature on personalised learning terminology. They emphasised the wide range of conceptualisations found in the literature and emphasised the importance of developing a more cohesive and unified knowledge of the topic. The authors propose that reflective journaling can function as a beneficial instrument for students to investigate and comprehend the individualised aspect of their learning experiences. Zhang et al. (2020) consolidate the study on the execution of personalised learning, highlighting the significance of considering contextual aspects and student characteristics. The authors contend that the utilisation of reflective journaling might

enhance students' active involvement in the personalisation process, hence promoting profound learning and development.

The research conducted by Stevens and Cooper (2023) emphasises the importance of engaging in reflective writing to enhance both personal and professional growth. The authors propose that incorporating personalised learning methods into journaling practices can enable students to assume a more proactive role in structuring their educational experiences and attaining their specific objectives. In addition, Chen et al. (2021) conducted a comprehensive examination of the research on personalised language learning. They emphasise the potential of reflective journaling as a tool to enhance language proficiency and promote more profound involvement with the learning material. The authors highlight the significance of customising journaling methods to suit the distinct requirements and inclinations of language learners. Colomer et al. (2020) investigate the application of reflective learning in higher education, highlighting the transformative capacity of active teaching methods that foster individualised progress and advancement. The authors propose that including reflective journaling in the learning process can be a potent mechanism for empowering students to assume responsibility for their education and attain their goals.

Comprehensive Journaling Practices

Considering the contents of the preceding sections, it can be contended that Journaling has become a flexible and potent instrument for personal and academic development. Four main categories of journaling practices can be identified: academic journaling, reflective journaling, digital journaling, and creative journaling. These methods provide considerable advantages to students, allowing them to participate in the establishment of goals and monitoring of progress, expression and control of emotions, resolution of problems and making decisions, blending theoretical knowledge with practical application, and individualised learning and development about journaling. Academic journaling refers to the methodical documentation of one's learning experiences, thoughts, and comments concerning academic curriculum or research topics. Engaging in this activity facilitates the integration of theoretical knowledge with practical application, enhances comprehension of course material, and fosters the development of critical thinking and analytical abilities (Baresh, 2022).

Conversely, reflective journaling promotes metacognitive awareness among students, enabling them to purposefully contemplate their learning processes, recognise their strengths and weaknesses, and formulate methods for self-improvement (Alt & Raichel, 2020; Alt et al., 2022). This process facilitates emotional expression and

regulation, as well as problem-solving and decision-making skills. Furthermore, the proliferation of digital technology has given rise to the practice of digital journaling, whereby students can document their experiences, ideas, and reflections through a range of digital platforms and tools. Implementing this approach enables increased adaptability, ease of access, and possibilities for individualised education and development (Chen et al., 2021; Shemshack & Spector, 2020). Lastly, creative journaling fosters students' emotional expression and regulation, as well as enhanced problem-solving and decision-making skills, by encouraging them to express themselves through various artistic mediums, such as drawing, painting, or collaging (Cheung et al., 2021; Colomer et al., 2020).

Student participation in these four primary journaling practices encompasses a variety of activities that facilitate their personal and academic growth. Goal establishment and progress monitoring empower students to strategically organise and oversee their educational trajectory, while emotional expression and regulation facilitate the processing of their experiences and the management of their emotional welfare. The development of problem-solving and decision-making skills is facilitated as pupils successfully negotiate obstacles and make well-informed decisions. The conjunction of theory and practice strengthens the link between scholarly knowledge and practical implementation, while individualised learning and development enable students to customise their journaling methods according to their specific requirements and objectives.

Research Design and Methods

The current study is premised on the qualitative, interpretive research methodology and a case study design. The researchers found the qualitative approach suitable for interrogating students' journaling practices in higher education, focusing on one university of technology in South Africa. The choice of the qualitative approach was influenced by the researchers' philosophical positioning regarding the ontological, epistemological, and axiological assumptions in research (Grass, 2024). These assumptions are useful in terms of positioning qualitative social scientists. Ontologically the researchers believe that reality is co-constructed by the participants and the researchers (Seager, 2018). Thus, meaning is constructed from people's experiences rather than discovered, resulting in multiple, multifaceted realities versus a single reality espoused within the quantitative, positivist paradigm (Park, Konge & Artino, 2020). Epistemologically, the researchers believe that there are multiple ways of knowing. In examining the students' journaling practices in higher education, the

belief is that the creation of multiple realities emanates from the involvement of various individuals (Moore, 2021) and that knowledge is constructed, interpreted, and experienced from these social interactions (Dovetail Editorial Team, 2023). Thus, the selection of the participants for the current study is driven by the notion that these informants will provide rich descriptions of the study. Axiologically, the researchers believe that qualitative research is value laden. Thus, as we interpret the results of the current study, our values will be included in the analysis of information obtained from the participants. We cannot separate ourselves from the study and the participants. Rather, the process of intersubjectivity epitomizes our research interaction with the participants.

Research Design

The current study adopts the qualitative approach and a case study design. The study is situated within an interpretivist/constructivist paradigm (Fodouop Kouam, 2024). The interpretive paradigm acknowledges that individuals construct their reality of the world based on their interactions with others in their social worlds (Nickerson, 2024). This worldview influences how we intend to design and execute the current study.

Sampling Procedures

Purposive sampling was thus used to select a sample from a population of 250 students inclusive of the two universities. To ensure sample adequacy, the participants selected for the current study are male and female academics employed in both institutions. They have served for over five years in their current positions and are well-qualified in their specific professional careers. However, none of the participants possess the Postgraduate Diploma qualification, which is meant for their professional development and enhancement of teaching skills. The results of the study are context-specific and not intended to generalise findings.

Data Collection

Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews with students enrolled in Postgraduate Human Resource Management (HRM) at the University of Technology in South Africa. The researchers obtained permission from the Ethics Committee to conduct the interviews. An interview protocol, with open-ended questions, which allowed for flexibility, was used to collect data from the selected participants. In-depth, individual interviews were conducted with the selected participants. The questions on the interview protocol were used for all the participants, for consistency. The open-ended questions allowed the participants to create options

for responding and voice their experiences and perspectives about journaling. During the interview, probes were designed while listening to the participants' accounts. To obtain rich information, we immersed ourselves in the social setting, enabling us to learn first how the participants experienced journaling. We were further cautious about the participants' actions being compatible with their words. Data was captured through a tape recorder.

Data Analysis

Data analyses should be based on the research questions and the research design adopted for the current study. The inductive approach to data analysis, germane to qualitative research, was used to organise and code data, generate preferred categories and themes, and finally interpret the findings. The inductive approach was adopted for gathering data because it linked directly to the research problem, research objectives, data collection, the qualitative approach chosen for the current study, and data analysis (Business Research Methodology, 2024). Data reduction and its display including content analysis were used to reach the categories that emerged from the data considering the research questions (Luo, 2022). The coding and categorization of information in the data assisted in discovering possible patterns of words used by the participants, the regularity of such words, and the connections between them (Busetto, Wick & Gumbinger, 2020). The final interpretive report was reviewed to allow the researchers to provide subjective explanations of the data representing the nature of participant retention.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the trustworthiness of the research findings, the researchers were guided by Lincoln and Guba's (1985) explanation of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Through credibility, the research findings of the current study could be assessed. Transferability is described as the extent to which the findings of the current study could be applied or transferred outside of the confines the study (Lincoln and Guba's (1985)). Dependability is a measure of the quality of combined procedures of data collection, data analysis, and findings generated from these. Confirmability is a measure of how well the research findings are sustained by the data that was collected (Lincoln and Guba's (1985)). For this study, the researchers approach trustworthiness by using methods such as member checking, peer review, maintaining a paper trail,

review of their research methods and research study by an expert in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba's (1985).

Ethical Considerations

The researchers ensured that ethical issues (human dignity) were upheld in the study. Major issues involved informed consent from the selected participants with adequate knowledge of the study on reflective journaling. The participants' privacy, confidentiality, and agreement to limit access to private information, anonymity and the researchers' responsibility (remaining anonymous and being sensitive to human dignity) were considered. Thus, informed consent, the right to privacy, protection from harm, and the researchers' involvement in the study were observed (Barrow, Brannan & Khandhar, 2022).

Research Findings and Discussion

This study investigated the diverse journaling practices employed by a sample of participants at two universities in South Africa. The results reveal that individuals engaged in a variety of journaling approaches, including academic journaling, reflective journaling, digital journaling, and creative journaling. Participants reported engaging in multiple forms of journaling, each serving distinct purposes and offering unique benefits. The key themes and associated subthemes are presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Journaling practices: Themes, sub-themes, and operational definitions

Theme	Sub-themes	Operational definitions of the themes
Academic Journaling	- Record and reflect on learning experiences - Organize and plan studies - Summarizing key concepts - Notes taking during lectures - Documenting thought processes while working on assignments	The practice of keeping a journal to enhance learning, performance and development.
Reflective Journaling	- Engagement in self-reflection - Examining personal and academic growth, - Entries about challenges faced	Practice of keeping a journal/notebook for self-reflection, personal growth

	• Lessons learned • Insights gained	and developing self-awareness.
Digital Journaling	• Use of note-taking apps • word-processing software • laptops, tablets, or smartphones.	Practice of a journal using digital tools.
Creative Journaling	• Use of sketches, doodles, collages, emojis	Expressive writing using sketches, and pictures.

Academic Journaling

The findings of the study revealed that academic journaling was a prevalent practice among the 15 participants. All participants reported utilizing journal or note-taking books to engage in various academic journaling activities. Participants emphasized the importance of using their journals to record and reflect on their learning experiences. As S1 noted, "Journaling helps me capture the key insights I gain from my coursework and discussions, allowing me to solidify my understanding." Another participant, S10, shared, "I find that taking the time to write about my learning experiences helps me make connections and deepen my grasp of the material." The participants also described using their journals as a tool for organizing and planning their studies. In the words of S9, "Journaling allows me to write out my study schedule, record my progress, and identify areas where I need to focus more attention." In line with S9, S7 revealed, "Having a dedicated journal helps me stay on top of my assignments, readings, and upcoming exams."

Furthermore, Participants reported utilizing their journals to summarize and synthesize key concepts from their coursework. S6 indicated in this case, "Journaling is essential for me to write the most important ideas and theories we cover in my classes. It helps me cement my understanding." Participants indicated that the act of rephrasing and capturing ideas in their own words helps them to grasp and retain what they learnt. S5 indicated in this regard, "I find that the act of writing down and explaining concepts in my own words solidifies my learning." Additionally, analysed data confirmed the value of using journals for notetaking during lectures. In a response that epitomized the views of most participants, S4 commented, "I always bring my notebook to class so I can jot down important points, questions, and insights as the lecturer is presenting the material." S4 then went further to explain that writing down major points enhanced her understanding when reading the learning material provided by the lecturer. As for

S1, "Taking notes in my journal helps me stay engaged and focused during lectures, and I can refer back to them later when reviewing the content."

Participants also described using their notebooks to document their thought processes while working on assignments and projects. S2 revealed in this case that, "Writing my thoughts in a journal allows me to see the evolution of my thinking and problem-solving strategies as I tackle complex academic tasks." Another participant shared, "I find that writing through my thought processes in my journal helps me identify gaps in my understanding and clarify my ideas." Through the act of recording their thoughts and ideas in their diaries, the students acquired substantial insights into their intellectual development. Transcribing their cognitive processes onto paper facilitated the identification of specific areas where their comprehension was lacking or ambiguous, therefore enabling them to concentrate on rectifying those deficiencies. Thus the process of journaling enabled a more profound degree of introspection, enabling the students to express their ideas and strengthen their understanding of the subject matter in a manner that conventional note-taking or other study techniques may not have achieved.

The participants' accounts highlight the valuable role that academic journaling plays in supporting their learning, organization, and intellectual development. The verbatim quotes provided insights into the specific ways in which the participants utilized their journals to enhance their academic experiences and performance. These findings align with the existing literature on the benefits of journaling in academic contexts. For example, the study by Watson (2010) emphasized the value of journaling in improving students' understanding and practice of academic writing. Similarly, the work of Fritson (2008) underscored the positive impact of journaling on students' self-efficacy and locus of control, factors that can contribute to academic success.

Reflective Journaling

Apart from academic journaling, participants also revealed that they participated in reflective journaling. All participants reported utilizing their journals as a means of engaging in self-reflection and exploring their personal and academic growth. S15 indicated that Journaling allowed him to step back and think about his experiences, emotions, and growth as an individual. Additionally, the participants also described using their journals to document and reflect on their personal and academic development over time. S 13 noted in this case, "Journaling has been instrumental in helping me track my progress and see how I've evolved, both personally and

academically." The participants noted further, "Looking back on my journal entries, I can see how I've grown and the lessons I've learned along the way." What this implies is that the practice of reflective journaling enabled the participants to monitor their personal development through time.

Through this practice, participants could Relate their academic experiences with Personal Development. Significantly, the participants recognised that the practice of reflective journaling allowed them to connect their academic experiences with their general personal development. In the words of S11, "Thinking of my coursework and writing down my learning experiences in the journal often leads to a more profound understanding of my own identity and personal growth." S11 went on to explain how he captured his successes and challenges in the journal and how this works as a good way to track his progress. S10 noted, "I can see the connections between my subject of study and how it affects my worldview and my growth as a self-aware person thanks to journaling." It can therefore be seen that the participants showed how their personal and academic growth were connected in a complicated way by writing down their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in reflective diaries. By keeping a diary, they were able to deeply reflect on themselves, learn more about themselves, and find a balance between their academic work and their personal growth.

These findings are consistent with the current body of research on the advantages of reflective journaling, as exemplified by the study conducted by Baresh (2022), which emphasised the crucial function of reflective journaling in augmenting students' self-awareness and individual development. Moreover, the research conducted by Bacon (2014) emphasised the significance of journaling as a means of investigating one's creative and intellectual growth.

Digital Journaling

While it was not widely used, digital journaling emerged as one of the journaling practices. Out of the total, only two participants made use of digital tools for their journaling activities. The digital tools utilized included note-taking apps, word-processing software, and various devices such as laptops, tablets, or smartphones. Though most of the participants never used digital tools, the two individuals who used them reported several benefits from this approach. One of the key advantages was the increased accessibility and convenience of journaling. As S4 noted, "capturing my thoughts and concerns on using my phone, has made it so much easier for me to keep up with my writing." Echoing S4's sentiment, S7 stated, "I love how I can just pull out

my phone and jot down my thoughts whenever inspiration strikes." In addition to the improved accessibility, the participants also highlighted the ability to easily integrate multimedia elements, such as photos and videos, into their digital journal entries. S4 indicated, "I find it enriching to be able to include visual elements in my journal. It helps me capture the full experience and makes my entries more engaging to revisit." Additionally, the participants reported enhanced organization and searchability of their journal entries when using digital tools. In the words of S4, "With my digital journal, I can easily search through my past entries and find specific thoughts or experiences. It's so much more efficient than flipping through pages in a physical notebook."

These findings align with the existing literature on the benefits of digital journaling. For instance, the studies by Gleaves et al. (2007, 2008) have highlighted the increased accessibility and multimedia integration capabilities of digital diaries in higher education settings. Similarly, Madkour's (2016) research on the use of digital dialogued journaling for English language learning has demonstrated a positive impact on improving writing skills. Furthermore, the findings from this study are supported by the work of Nazari et al. (2021), which explored the application of artificial intelligence-powered digital writing assistants in higher education. Their study underscored the advantages of digital tools in enhancing the organization and searchability of written work, a feature that was also valued by the participants in the current study. While digital journaling was not widely adopted among the study's participants, the two individuals who did use digital tools reported several benefits, confirming the need to incorporate digital tools into journaling practices.

Creative Journaling

Unlike digital journaling, which was not widely adopted among the participants, creative journaling was a practice embraced by most of the study's participants. The participants engaged in various forms of creative journaling to unleash their imagination, express emotions, and foster artistic exploration. One of the key sub-themes within creative journaling was expressive writing. As S13 shared, "I find that when I can write freely, without any constraints, it allows me to tap into my deepest thoughts and feelings. It's a powerful way to process my emotions and unlock my creativity." In the same vein, S11 indicates, "My journal is a safe space where I can just let my imagination run wild. I don't worry about structure or grammar; I simply allow the words to flow and see where they take me." In addition to expressive writing, the participants also engaged in visual journaling, utilizing art, collage, and other creative mediums to express themselves. S12 revealed in this case, "I love combining

written reflections with visual elements like drawings, or even cut-out magazine clippings. It allows me to explore my thoughts and feelings in a more holistic and multifaceted way." Participants indicated that the visual component of the journal was incredibly therapeutic. They indicated that it was a way for them to process their experiences and emotions through different creative lenses they sought to foster a sense of artistic exploration and self-discovery. As S12 indicated, "My journal has become a canvas for me to experiment with different artistic mediums and techniques. It's a space where I can play, be bold, and discover new ways of expressing myself."

These findings align with the existing literature on the benefits of creative journaling. The work of Stevens and Cooper (2023) highlights the role of reflective writing in fostering personal growth and professional development, while Smith's (2020) research on innovative creative writing strategies underscores the importance of embracing diverse modes of expression.

Limitations

The scope of this study was restricted to a sample of 15 postgraduate students from two universities located in South Africa. To enhance the comprehensiveness of the study on journaling activities in higher education, it is recommended to increase the sample size and include individuals from a broader geographical spectrum. Potential variations in journaling behaviours across various academic areas were not investigated in the study. An examination of the journaling experiences of students from many academic disciplines could provide useful insights about disciplines-specific methodologies. Moreover, the study documented a momentary depiction of students' journaling habits at a certain moment. Undertaking a longitudinal study could provide insight into the progression of these practices among students during their academic trajectory and the enduring effects on their personal and professional growth.

Suggestions for Future Research

Based on the identified constraints, it is recommended that future researchers adopt a mixed-methods study strategy, which integrates both qualitative and quantitative data gathering and analysis. This could provide a more comprehensive comprehension of students' methodologies of journaling and their corresponding results. Furthermore, an examination of the resemblances and disparities in the methods of keeping journals among undergraduate and postgraduate students, as well as among students from diverse cultural and educational origins, may provide significant comparative observations. Furthermore, the researchers would want to propose intervention studies.

Therefore, the implementation and assessment of journaling-based interventions or programmes in higher education environments could facilitate the establishment of causal connections between journaling habits and student learning, personal development, and academic achievement.

Conclusion

This study offers significant insights into the journaling techniques employed by postgraduate students within higher education environments. The results indicate that students participate in four primary types of journaling: academic journaling, creative journaling, reflective journaling, and digital journaling. These many journaling techniques are great tools for students to guide their academic and personal development paths. Through academic journaling, students record their learning experiences, attitudes, and views on coursework and research activities, therefore promoting the synthesis of theoretical knowledge and practical application. By engaging in reflective journaling, individuals can develop metacognitive awareness, which allows them to reflect on their learning processes, recognise their strengths and flaws, and create methods for developing themselves. The incorporation of digital technologies has enabled students to digitally record their experiences, thoughts, and reflections using various platforms and tools, therefore improving adaptability, availability, and possibilities for individualised learning and growth. Furthermore, the practice of creative journaling has become a method for students to articulate their thoughts and feelings using artistic forms, therefore enhancing their capacity to process emotions and solve problems. The thorough comprehension of these journaling activities enhances the current knowledge base and can assist educational stakeholders in formulating policies, curricula, and pedagogical strategies that encourage the implementation of holistic journaling practices in higher education. Through the cultivation of a journaling culture, educational institutions can enable students to actively participate in continuous learning and promote their broader intellectual and personal development.

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