

Centring Humanity in Academic Writing: Learning Diaries as Windows to Student Experience

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Abstract

This conceptual paper sets out a research agenda to qualitatively explore the relationship between student reflection and metacognition on an academic writing course. Taking a self-determination theory approach to analysing students' learning diaries, the study aims to determine how far the basic psychological needs of competence, autonomy and relatedness are met when self-regulation and autonomy are encouraged. Fostering such a learning environment affords a balance between pedagogical effectiveness and humanistic values.

Keywords: reflective learning diaries, academic writing, self-regulation, self-determination theory

Introduction and Background

This research emerged from observations that students' learning diary (LD) entries demonstrated increased reflexivity following targeted instructor feedback. Students were encouraged to engage in authentic, personal reflection on their academic writing (AW) experiences, transcending superficial accounts of classroom activities to examine transferable learning applicable across their studies. By the second semester of course delivery, the potential for post hoc investigation became apparent.

Academic writing presents universal challenges irrespective of students' linguistic backgrounds or social contexts. Successful writing requires

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mastery of audience expectations, coherent argumentation, and thesis development with substantive support. Single-semester AW courses, constrained to approximately 14 weeks, typically emphasize text production and genre conventions (Hyland, 2008). However, treating academic writing as a skill rooted in deep cognitive engagement reveals important potential for fostering autonomous, self-regulated learners who can transfer reflective strategies to broader learning experiences (Little, 1999). Transparent, honest feedback exchanges between students and instructors facilitate such outcomes.

Reframing Learning Through Reflection

Traditional approaches to Anglo-American academic writing frequently focus on correctness and adherence to discipline-specific conventions (e.g., Hyland, 2006). LDs provide a means of centring human reflection and agency in the AW classroom. Through informal and ongoing personal writing about their AW development, these diaries enhance students' metacognitive awareness and self-efficacy (Glava & Glava, 2011). For instructors, learning diaries provide insights into how individual students navigate their expanding knowledge and emerging academic community membership, while also supporting their developing writer identity (Klimova, 2015).

Theoretical Foundations

Learning environments which acknowledge competence, encourage autonomy, and nurture relatedness enhance learner motivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Students engaging purposefully with learning diary activities can document their developing competence, autonomy, and relatedness, and thus increasing metacognition.

Methodology

Students were instructed to submit four LD entries of approximately 250 words detailing what they had learned each lesson. The 36 winter-semester (WS2024) cohort uploaded monthly entries, while the 36 summer-semester (SS2025) cohort submitted all entries collectively at semester's end. The WS2024 monthly instructor feedback proved valuable for generating meaningful class discussions. The SS2025 cohort's lack of monthly feedback resulted in notably more descriptive, less reflective final submissions. Grading ensured compliance while creating tension with authentic developmental reflection—a conflict requiring sensitive navigation through invitational language, non-judgmental promises, and genuine feedback exchange.

Analytical Framework

Taking a qualitative approach, LD data was analysed thematically with MaxQDA to identify patterns corresponding to Self-Determination Theory's three basic psychological needs (BPNs): competence, autonomy, and relatedness. Table 1 shows example sub-codes for each parent code and where the BPN was satisfied or thwarted. The guiding research question examines how these BPNs manifest in student writing, supported by sub-questions:

- What patterns emerge in autonomy development over time?
- How does competence-building relate to metacognitive awareness?
- What role does relatedness play in academic writing development?

Results: Student Experience and Reflections

Generally, most students took a predominantly descriptive approach to “reflecting on learning”. Some students used the LDs as an opportunity to express dissatisfaction with the compulsory nature of the course – loss of **autonomy**; but then admit to having found some aspects useful and motivating – satisfaction of **competence**:

I attempted to get out of this course, but was informed that it is compulsory and there is no way around completing it. (WS00)
... I think the outline guide will be very helpful when writing my Master's thesis as it is a kind of recipe for how I should write the thesis. (SS19)

Learning from mistakes was taken as a pragmatic method for improving writing – and consequently satisfying the need for **competence**:

I have realised I have been forgetting to add my own voice the whole time. ... despite this realisation being rather frustrating, I am glad that I have still enough space to make all necessary changes. (WS01)

Realisation that some people face similar challenges helps to build a sense of **relatedness** within the group – and wider academic community:

interestingly, a lot of us had made similar methodological approaches to our papers. This showed me that we were all able to apply the knowledge from the course in a similar way. (SS19)

Table 1 presents a preliminary analysis of coded data from the WS2024 diaries.

Table 1. Distribution of student responses coded by SDT’s three basic psychological needs

BPN	Valence	Sample sub-codes	Frequency	% of Total
Autonomy	Positive	Future focus (30); Self-insight/learning (24); New knowledge (25); Self-regulation (12)	94	36%
	Negative	Poster presentation challenges (4); Dissatisfaction with class (1); In-class discussion not helpful (2)	9	3.4%
Relatedness	Positive	In-class discussion/activity (15); Building on prior knowledge (11); Instructor comments (9); Engaging experience (7)	60	23%
	Negative	Repeat of lesson point (4); Time and Space (2)	9	3.4%
Competence	Positive	Competence (32); Self-awareness/confidence (16); Confidence growth (11)	78	30%
	Negative	Struggles (2); Lack of self-confidence (1)	11	4.2%
Total			261	100%

Discussion

The integration of learning diaries served as bridge between “academic discourse” and the human experience of learning. Reading students’ thoughts allowed the instructor to respond flexibly during the course to the group’s needs. This has implications for building inclusivity and responsive learning environments, i.e., creating affective stability which supports metacognition and ultimately self-regulated learning (Efklides & Schwartz, 2024). Deeper reflection and dialogic exchange improved where students were encouraged to express openly and honestly without judgement. Pursing this research agenda can uncover how reflective practice supports the development of self-regulation strategies. Using the lens of SDT’s 3 BPNs, content from the LDs can shed light on how students experience learning in the context of academic discourse.

Conclusion

The explicit use of reflective learning diaries in academic writing course curricula responds to the limitations of product-oriented, decontextualized instruction. Centring student experience through diaries makes the writing process more transparent, supports the development of metacognitive skills, and creates space for honest, constructive feedback. When that feedback is bi-directional, course design can be better tailored to the evolving needs of each new cohort. By foregrounding humanity in writing pedagogy, particularly in increasingly multilingual classes, we not only empower students to become more effective writers but also more autonomous, resilient learners—both within and beyond academia.

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