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Future-Focused:

Educating in an Era of Continuous Change

Reflect-revise-reveal: A learning journal journey in experiential education

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Bridging the knowing–doing gap remains a formidable challenge in large foundational higher education courses. This study examines the integration of structured reflective learning journals, grounded in experiential learning theory, within a first-year economics curriculum to foster metacognition, student engagement, and authentic knowledge transfer. Weekly guided prompts invited learners to connect course content with personal insights and real-world applications, while a peer review intervention was later introduced to scaffold evaluative judgement and deepen reflective practices. Across three semesters, consistently high participation and improved performance outcomes were observed, particularly with the inclusion of peer review, suggesting that reflective writing supported by peer review cultivates meaningful engagement and enhances critical thinking. This paper highlights reflective practice and peer review as a potential catalyst for meaning-making and learner growth in contemporary higher education.

Keywords: reflective learning journals, experiential learning, peer review, student engagement, metacognition, economics education, case

1. Introduction

The gulf between and doing is real and helping students cross that gulf forms a fundamental challenge for instructors who seek to encourage students to learn and apply course material toward practical and useful ends (Van Manen, 1977). Experiential learning advocates have long encouraged the use of "concrete experience, observation and reflection, abstract conceptualisation, active experimentation, and application" (Chickering, 1977) to improve our learning outcomes.

In higher education, particularly in large foundational courses, promoting deep and sustained learning remains a persistent challenge. To achieve this objective, current literature suggests that reflective practices, when intentionally embedded into course design, can help students synthesise their experiences, articulate insights, and apply abstract concepts to novel contexts (Park, 2003; Roberts, 2008). Reflection not only consolidates learning but also fosters autonomy and a sense of personal relevance, both of which are essential to cultivating adaptable, self-directed learners.

Building on these principles, this paper examines the use of structured reflective learning journals within an introductory economics course, and the potential influence of peer review on the participation and efficacy of journal-keeping. We explore how including peer review among regular opportunities for guided reflection can support student engagement, reinforce learning objectives, and promote meaningful connections.

1.1. Background

Courses focused on experiential learning encourage students to engage with course material on multiple cognitive levels, and usually involve revisiting learning objectives with a variety of learning devices (G van Merriënboer et al., 2025; Kolb, 2014). Our discussion focuses on two learning devices, personal reflection journals and peer review.

Much has already been written about the importance of personal reflection within a learning process. Instructors across many disciplines use learning reflection journals (LRJ) to motivate introspection and self-review. Social interaction and learner reflection have been demonstrated to enhance self-efficacy for class performance and skilled activity in the course curriculum (Cajiao & Burke, 2016; Varner & Peck, 2003). Learning journals can increase student interest and engagement and encourage and empower students'

assumption of responsibility for their own learning (Park, 2003). Personal learning journals can assist students in modular programmes of study to minimise fragmentation and loss of continuity across curricular and personal disconnections (Morrison, 1996). But while individual reflection increases internalisation of course principles, reflection itself seems to be a skill that improves in efficacy with practice (Dart et al., 1998; Roberts, 2008).

As an additional device to encourage student engagement and consideration of course learning objectives, peer review has also been thoroughly explored in educational literature. This description from Nicol et al. (2014) provides a great summary of the desired outcomes and observed benefits of peer review in courses: "The findings show that producing feedback reviews engages students in multiple acts of evaluative judgement, both about the work of peers, and through a reflective process, about their own work; that it involves them in both invoking and applying criteria to explain those judgements; and that it shifts control of feedback processes into students' hands...". Numerous studies confirm that peer assessment, especially in a computer-mediated framework, improves student performance across a wide variety of contexts (Double et al., 2020; Li et al., 2020), and may be as good as or even better than teacher assessment toward producing positive formative effects on student achievement and attitudes (Boase-Jelinek et al., 2013; Topping, 1998).

1.2. Course Description

ECON 152, Principles of Economics, is an introductory, first-year course that all Economics majors in the Business School at the University of Auckland are required to take before advancing to Stage II courses. The course is divided into eight learning modules spread throughout a 12-week semester. Each module addresses six to eight specific learning objectives which form the foundation of the course. All learning activities and assessments are focused on these objectives.

In 2024, we reformatted the course to be broadly consistent with Kolb's Experiential Learning philosophy, increasing active learning and student engagement with course material during both lecture and tutorial sessions (Kolb, 2014). We employ a "flipped classroom" methodology and provide course content through recorded videos and assess readiness through definitional knowledge-check questions prior to in-person lectures (Reidsema et al., 2017). In-person lectures provide students the opportunity to apply what they learned before class and guide them through a rigorous series of exercises, case studies, discussion questions, and learning activities. To fulfil the cycle within a Lewinian Experiential Learning Model, we use weekly, one-hour, in-person tutorial sessions to run simulations, games, experiments or other group activities designed to create first-hand experience of the principles discussed in each of the modules. To close the learning loop, each week, students are asked to record their observations and reflections in response to three prompts in a personal learning journal.

In each weekly journal entry, students are asked to respond to the following three prompts, with points allocated according to a published rubric included with the assignment description:

1. How did this week's tutorial's learning activities relate to the learning objectives of the associated module? (2 points: Identify the learning objectives of the learning activity and the module. Describe the connection between the activity and the module content.)
2. What is the most important idea you have learned in your Econ 152 lectures and tutorials in the last 7 days? (1 point: Describe an economic concept from this week and why it's important to you.)
3. How does what you've learned in Econ 152 lectures and tutorials in the last week apply to "real life"? (2 points: Describe why this principle is important in decision- making. Describe how someone would apply this principle when making a decision.)

Students are informed that we expect them to spend about 15 minutes writing in their learning journals each week and that they should write 2-4 sentences in response to each question. However, there is no maximum for what they write.

2. Treatment

In 2024 Semester 1, we asked students to submit their learning journals each week, and these were graded by the teaching team. In 2024 Semester 2, we asked students to turn in their learning journals twice during the semester, at mid-term and at the end of the semester. Again, all grading of learning journals was accomplished by the teaching team. In 2025 Semester 1, students were asked to turn in their learning journals at midterm and end-of-semester, and we asked the students to grade two other students' learning journals at mid-term and provide feedback regarding marks given. The final submissions at the end of the term were graded by the teaching team.

We employed an online facilitation tool called FeedbackFruits to administer the peer review and marking process. This online application embedded easily into our learning management system, and it effectively fulfilled the steps and processes recommended by Knight and Steinbach (2011) to create a viable peer feedback device. All journals were marked according to the same published rubric. However, to incentivise peer review, the mid-semester journaling points in 2025 Sem 1 were split 50/50 between journaling and providing peer review. Students that completed a journal submission marked two other submissions. Each completed review earned them half of the peer review participation points, regardless of content. Only students who submit a learning journal can participate in the peer review.

3. Student participation and performance outcomes

To evaluate student engagement and outcomes from the LRJ activities, we analysed descriptive statistics for each submission round across both semesters (see Table 1). Submission rates were consistently high, ranging from 82% to over 94%, indicating strong student engagement with the reflective writing process regardless of semester or submission point. A slight decline in participation was observed in Semester 1, 2025, coinciding with the introduction of FeedbackFruits as the submission platform. This may suggest that the additional technological requirement introduced a perceived barrier for some students. Notably, however, end-of-term submissions in the same semester, completed without FeedbackFruits, did not show an improvement in participation. While participation dipped, it is important to note that the reduction was less pronounced compared to earlier semesters, suggesting a more stable pattern of engagement overall.

Table 1
Descriptive Statistics for Learning Reflection Journals (LRJs)†

Learning Measure	S1 24 P1	S1 24 P2	S2 24 P1	S2 24 P2	S1 25 P1	S1 25 P2
Enrolment	174	174	278	278	176	176
# of Submissions	164	158	255	248	147	145
% of Submissions	94.25%	90.80%	91.73%	89.21%	83.52%	82.39%
Average Grade (out of 25)*	21.09	21.69	23.91	21.65	22.99	23.08
Median Grade (out of 25)*	23.45	23.80	24.50	24.00	24.38	25.00
Standard Deviation*	4.98	5.05	2.19	3.33	3.00	2.59
Minimum Grade (out of 25)*	3.50	0.50	5.00	6.00	9.38	14.00
Maximum Grade (out of 25)*	25.00	25.00	25.00	25.00	25.00	25.00
% A Grades (≥85%)*	66.46%	74.05%	93.33%	55.65%	84.35%	70.34%
% Below C (<60%)*	14.02%	10.13%	0.78%	3.23%	4.08%	0.69%

† Column labels indicate the study period: S = Semester, 24/25 = Year, P1 = Mid-term submission, P2 = End-of-term submission

* Calculated statistics are based on submitted Learning Reflection Journals only.

Average and median scores remained consistently high across cohorts. While participation rates declined in Semester 1, 2025, the overall scores improved. The increase in mid-semester scores may partly reflect the automatic points awarded through the peer review process. Importantly, however, Semester 1, 2025 also showed an improvement between the mid-semester and end-of-semester LRJ submissions that was greater than in previous cohorts. This pattern lends support to the argument that peer review activities can enhance student performance. To illustrate this, Figure 1 provides the distribution curves of the change in normalised scores earned between midterm and end-of-term LRJ submissions, indicating a small

but statistically significant improvement in performance when students are asked to review each other's work. Moreover, a regression analysis (see Table 2) indicates that performance improvement is most pronounced for A and C-level students.

Figure 1.
Differences in journal scores: with/without peer review.

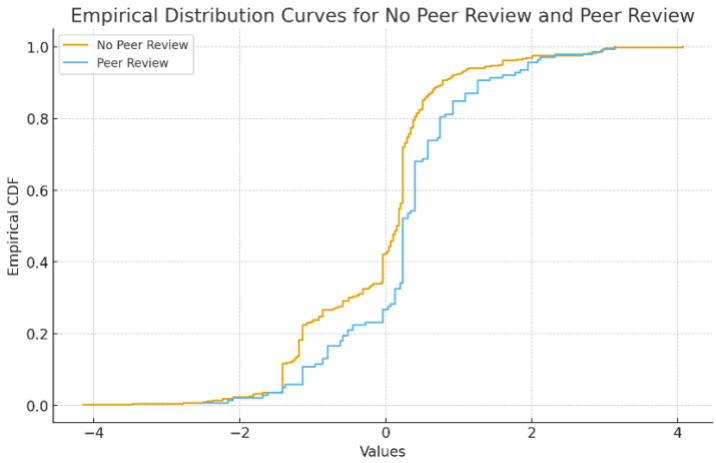

Table 2.
Regression results predicting normalised change in LRJ grades (OLS).

	(1)	(2)
	LRJ Grade change	LRJ Grade change
Effect of Peer-Review Introduction*	0.336***	
	(0.095)	
Effect for A-level students		0.459***
		(0.094)
Effect for B-level students		0.191
		(0.133)
Effect for C-level students		0.472**
		(0.231)
Effect for D-level students		0.071
		(0.876)
Number of Students	533	533

Notes: Robust standard errors are in parentheses.
*Controlling for overall student level fixed effect.

4. Concluding Remarks

This paper reflects our evolving approach to integrating reflective learning journals and peer review into a large undergraduate economics course, with the aim of enhancing student engagement, metacognition, and alignment with course objectives. Grounded in experiential learning theory, the prompts and rubric were designed to help students connect classroom activity with conceptual understanding and real-world application.

Across three cohorts, we observed strong participation and positive performance, particularly in the early stages of the semester. Peer review was associated with higher final scores, with the greatest improvements among students at both the top and bottom of the distribution. This supports the view that reflective learning is itself a skill that strengthens with practice and feedback, and it may be

particularly helpful for students seeking extra input to improve. Performance patterns within each cohort also reveal the shifting nature of motivation and workload, raising questions about how best to sustain reflective practices across a semester.

Though grounded in the context in the context of economics education, the design principles—scaffolded prompts, low-stakes grading, and alignment with weekly learning objectives—are broadly transferable. As higher education continues to respond to complex challenges, such strategies can support learners who are not only knowledgeable but also self-aware, adaptable, and capable of critical thought.

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