# Learning Journals as a Tool For Developing Active Learning Among Early Childhood Education Students

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## ABSTRACT

The study was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of using learning journals in developing active learning among Early Childhood Education students in the context of competency-oriented teacher training reform. The study employed a mixed-methods approach with 45 students enrolled in the course *Learning and Psychological Development of Preschool-Age Children* at Kien Giang College of Education. Data were collected through pre- and post-intervention surveys, pedagogical observations, analysis of learning journals, formative assessment, and student feedback. The study aimed to examine changes in several indicators of active learning among Early Childhood Education students after 12 weeks of using learning journals, while also exploring changes in self-assessment and self-regulation, as well as the advantages and difficulties experienced by students in maintaining the journaling activity.

The results show that several indicators of students' active learning increased following the implementation of learning journals. The proportion of students who regularly prepared for lessons increased from 46.7% to 66.7%; 91.1% of students reported feeling interested or very interested in the course; 97.8% actively participated in speaking and discussions; and 100% rated learning journals as effective or highly effective in supporting self-assessment and adjustment of their learning. The findings indicate that learning journals can support several indicators of active learning while also creating opportunities for students to engage in self-assessment and self-regulation activities. The study proposes expanding the use of learning journals in teacher training courses, integrating them with formative assessment and regular instructor feedback to improve training quality, while continuing to validate the model on a larger scale and across other training disciplines.

**Keywords:** learning journals; active learning; reflection; self-assessment; Early Childhood Education students.

## INTRODUCTION

In the context of fundamental and comprehensive reform of education and training, teacher education institutions are shifting strongly from a content-based approach to a competency-oriented approach. Current teacher education programs not only provide professional knowledge but also aim to develop self-directed learning, reflective thinking, self-regulation, and lifelong learning competencies—core competencies that enable future teachers to adapt to the requirements of educational reform and respond to the increasingly high demands of society.

To achieve this goal, renewing teaching methods and forms of assessment in ways that promote the learner's role as an active agent has become an urgent requirement. However, teaching practice at Kien Giang College of Education shows that a proportion of Early Childhood Education students still engage in learning in a passive manner, are not proactive in preparing lessons, participate infrequently in classroom discussions, and have not yet developed habits of self-assessment and adjustment of their learning processes. These limitations directly affect the development of the professional competencies of future teachers.

Research findings indicate that learning journals can support several indicators of active learning while also creating opportunities for students to engage in self-assessment and self-regulation activities (Schön, 1983;

Zimmerman, 2002). Numerous international studies have shown that learning journals are associated with the development of self-directed learning, reflective learning, critical thinking, and increased learner engagement in the learning process. However, in Vietnam, particularly in Early Childhood Education teacher training, there are still relatively few studies evaluating the effectiveness of this tool in developing students' active learning and self-directed learning competencies.

Although the role of learning journals in reflection and self-regulation has been addressed in previous studies, there are still few empirical studies in Vietnam examining changes in indicators of active learning among preservice teachers when journals are implemented as a structured reflective tool combined with regular instructor feedback.

Based on the requirements of teacher education reform and teaching practice at Kien Giang College of Education, this study examines changes in several indicators of active learning after the use of learning journals in the course *Learning and Psychological Development of Preschool-Age Children* among Early Childhood Education students. The findings contribute practical evidence regarding the effectiveness of a competency-oriented teaching tool and suggest the potential for integrating learning journals as a form of learning support and formative assessment to improve the quality of teacher education in the context of current educational reform.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Active Learning among University Students

Active learning is reflected in learners' initiative, self-motivation, and active participation in the process of acquiring knowledge. Learners not only receive knowledge but also proactively prepare for lessons, exchange ideas, apply knowledge, and self-assess their learning outcomes. According to Bonwell and Eison (1991), active learning is a process in which learners simultaneously engage cognitively, behaviorally, and emotionally through activities involving analysis, discussion, and critical argumentation.

In higher education, promoting active learning is closely associated with organizing learner-centered teaching and learning activities that enable students to actively explore knowledge, collaborate, and self-regulate their learning processes. According to Pintrich (2004), active learning is closely related to self-regulation; learners who are able to set goals, select strategies, monitor their progress, and self-assess tend to achieve better learning outcomes.

This perspective is also consistent with the competency-oriented approach in Vietnamese higher education, which emphasizes the development of learners' self-directed learning, independent research, and reflective competencies (Ministry of Education and Training, 2021). For Early Childhood Education students, active learning not only improves learning effectiveness but also contributes to the development of reflective competence and the ability to adapt to educational reform requirements.

### Learning Journals and Reflective Learnin

A learning journal is a tool that supports learners in recording, reflecting on, and self-assessing their learning processes in order to enhance their awareness of their own learning. Unlike conventional note-taking, learning journals direct learners toward reflective activities through which they examine their learning experiences, identify limitations, and adjust their learning approaches accordingly.

According to Schön (1983), reflection is a process through which learners reflect on their experiences in order to adjust their perceptions and actions. Moon (2006) argues that maintaining learning journals helps connect experience with new knowledge, promotes deep learning, and develops critical thinking. From the perspective of Vietnamese education, Nguyễn Cảnh Toàn (2002) emphasizes that self-directed learning is a process through which learners actively acquire knowledge through independent study, self-monitoring, and self-adjustment of their learning activities. Thus, learning journals are not merely a means of recording information but also a tool that supports reflective learning and contributes to the development of self-directed learning and lifelong learning competencies.

**Learning Journals as a Tool for Promoting Reflection and Self-Regulation**

Numerous studies have confirmed that learning journals are effective pedagogical tools for developing self-directed learning, reflective thinking, and active learning among learners. According to Schön (1983), through reflective practice, learners regularly examine their experiences, identify strengths and limitations, and adjust their learning activities. Learning journals support this process by encouraging learners to record, analyze, and self-assess their learning after each class session, thereby fostering active and responsible learning habits.

From the perspective of self-regulated learning, Zimmerman (2002) argues that effective learners need to be able to set goals, monitor progress, self-assess, and adjust learning strategies. Learning journals address these requirements by helping students establish goals, reflect on what they have learned, identify difficulties, and develop improvement plans, thereby fostering self-directed learning and lifelong learning competencies.

Recent studies have continued to confirm the effectiveness of learning journals in higher education. Zafeer, Li, and Maqbool (2023) found that combining reflective practice with journal writing improves learning outcomes, develops critical thinking and self-reflective competence, and enhances learner engagement. Journal writing also provides opportunities for learners to connect knowledge with practical experiences, thereby improving learning effectiveness and the capacity for lifelong learning.

From a constructivist perspective (Piaget, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978), learners actively construct knowledge through experience and reflection. Empirical studies have also shown that learning journals contribute to the development of self-awareness, critical thinking, and the ability to apply knowledge to practice (Dyment & O'Connell, 2011). In Vietnam, Nguyễn Văn Cường and Meier (2014) also emphasized the role of modern teaching methods in promoting self-assessment, reflection, and the development of self-directed learning.

Thus, reflective practice, self-regulated learning, and constructivist theory provide a theoretical basis for affirming the value of learning journals in developing students' active learning and professional competence.

From a psychological perspective, learning journals are not merely recording tools but also provide opportunities for students to recall and evaluate their learning processes, identify gaps between goals and actual performance, and consequently identify difficulties and adjust their learning activities. This process of reflection and self-regulation is expected to contribute to the formation and reinforcement of indicators of active learning, such as proactive lesson preparation, participation in learning activities, and self-assessment of the learning process.

**Research Gap and Research Objectives**

Although learning journals have been addressed in numerous studies as tools supporting reflection, self-assessment, and self-regulation in learning, several issues remain to be clarified. First, previous studies have primarily focused on the role of journals in reflective activities, learning outcomes, or certain psychological aspects of learners; meanwhile, changes in indicators of active learning when journals are used as structured reflective tools have received relatively limited attention. Second, in teacher education, particularly in the education of Early Childhood Education students, the use of learning journals in association with self-assessment, identification of difficulties, improvement planning, and instructor feedback still requires further investigation in specific educational contexts. Third, in Vietnam, empirical studies on learning journals among university students remain relatively limited, particularly studies that monitor changes in learners before and after a relatively extended implementation of learning journals.

Based on this research gap, the present study focuses on examining changes in several indicators of active learning among Early Childhood Education students after using learning journals for 12 weeks. In addition to quantitative data collected before and after implementation, the study also draws on journal content, observations, and student feedback to examine manifestations of self-assessment and self-regulation, as well as the advantages and difficulties encountered in maintaining the journaling activity. On this basis, the study aims to clarify the potential of learning journals as a tool supporting reflective and self-regulated learning in teacher education.

The specific objectives of the study were:

- To describe and compare several indicators of students' active learning before and after 12 weeks of using learning journals;
- To analyze manifestations of self-assessment and self-regulation reflected in the journal-writing process;
- To explore the advantages and difficulties experienced by students in maintaining learning journals and, on that basis, propose implications for the use of journals in Early Childhood Education teacher training.

# METHODOLOGY

### Participants and Contex

The participants consisted of 45 second-year Early Childhood Education students at Kien Giang College of Education. The study was conducted within a professional course and lasted 12 weeks. Students participated voluntarily, were informed of the purpose of the study, and were assured of the confidentiality of their personal data. During the study, students completed learning journals following a standardized structure and received feedback from the instru

### Research Design

The study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative research to examine changes in several indicators of active learning after the implementation of learning journals among Early Childhood Education students. Quantitative data were collected through questionnaires administered before and after the implementation of learning journals; qualitative data were collected from learning journal content (completed over 12 weeks), pedagogical observations, and student feedback in order to supplement, compare, and explain the research findings.

The above process was designed to establish a cycle of reflection and self-regulation in which students set goals, recorded and recalled their learning processes, self-assessed their outcomes, identified areas requiring improvement, and adjusted their learning plans for the subsequent stage.

### Research Subjects and Duration

Research subjects: The study examined active learning among 45 second-year students, Cohort 46, academic year 2025–2026, majoring in Early Childhood Education and enrolled in the course *Learning and Psychological Development of Preschool-Age Children* at Kien Giang College of Education. Students participated in the survey voluntarily; the data were used solely for research purposes; personal information was coded and kept confidential; and participants had the right to refuse or withdraw from the study at any time without affecting their academic results.

The learning journal activity was implemented continuously for 12 weeks, corresponding to 4/5 of the course's teaching period. After each class session, students completed a learning journal following the instructor's guidance. The instructor read, commented on, and provided periodic feedback to support students' reflection, self-assessment, and adjustment of their learning processes.

### Data Collection Instruments

The study employed a combination of quantitative and qualitative data collection instruments to examine changes and student experiences during the use of learning journals. Quantitative data were collected through pre- and post-intervention questionnaires using 3-point and 4-point Likert scales, focusing on several indicators of active learning, such as lesson preparation, learning interest, and participation in discussions; information on students' self-assessment and self-regulation of their learning processes was also collected. Qualitative data were collected through pedagogical observations throughout the implementation period, analysis of learning journal content, and student feedback after the completion of the course.

In addition to serving as a source of research data, learning journals were also used as a form of formative assessment. After each class session, the instructor commented on, provided feedback on, and scored the journals according to established criteria to encourage students to maintain reflective activities and self-regulate their learning. The learning journal instrument used in the study was developed by the author and implemented in the educational practice of Kien Giang College of Education. This instrument was recognized by Kien Giang College of Education as an institutional-level initiative, thereby acknowledging the practicality and applicability of the solution in educational activities. This recognition was considered information concerning the development and application process of the instrument, whereas the effectiveness of learning journals in the study was examined on the basis of the empirical data collected and analyzed in the study. The combination of multiple data collection instruments helped enhance the reliability, objectivity, and verifiability of the research findings. The system of data collection and assessment instruments and their timing of use is presented in Table1.

**Table 1. Data Collection and Assessment Instruments**

| Instrument/Method | Purpose | Data Type | Time of Data Collection |
|---|---|---|---|
| Questionnaire | Pre–post assessment | Quantitative | Before and after the intervention |
| Observation | Classroom monitoring | Qualitative | Throughout the 12-week intervention |
| Learning journal | Reflective analysis | Qualitative | After each class session |
| End-of-course feedback | Collecting participants' feedback | Qualitative | At the end of the course |
| Process assessment | Journal assessment | Quantitative | At the end of the course |

**Development and Use of the Pre- and Post-Intervention Questionnaires**

The pre- and post-intervention questionnaires were developed based on the research objectives and the indicators of active learning identified in the study, focusing on several aspects, including lesson preparation, learning interest, participation in classroom discussion, self-assessment, and self-regulation of the learning process. The same questionnaire was administered at the two measurement points, before and after the implementation of the learning journal, to provide a basis for describing and comparing changes in the assessed indicators. Depending on the aspect being assessed, the questionnaire used three-point and four-point Likert-type scales.

Quantitative data were analyzed according to the nature of the variables and the objectives of the analysis. Categorical variables were summarized using frequencies and percentages, whereas continuous variables were described using means and standard deviations. For the "lesson preparation" indicator, pre- and post-intervention scores were compared using a paired-samples t-test, with the statistical significance level set at $p < 0.05$. The remaining indicators were primarily used to describe the level of the respective behaviors following the implementation period and were presented using frequencies, percentages, and/or means, as appropriate to the type of data.

Given that the study employed a one-group pretest–posttest design, the statistical analyses were intended to describe and examine changes in the indicators within the study sample and were not interpreted as evidence establishing a causal relationship between the use of learning journals and the observed changes.

**Data Processing**

After collection, all data were checked, coded, and entered into Microsoft Excel for compilation and processing using SPSS 20.0.

For quantitative data, the study employed descriptive statistics, including frequencies, percentages, and means, to describe and compare changes in indicators of active learning before and after the implementation of learning journals. The results were presented in tables and charts to clarify the extent of change in each research criterion.

For qualitative data, the study employed thematic analysis. The content of learning journals, observation records, and student feedback was read, coded, categorized, and synthesized into themes reflecting changes in learning perceptions, attitudes, and behaviors. The qualitative findings were used to supplement, illustrate, and explain the quantitative analysis results.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative data analysis enabled a comprehensive examination of changes and student experiences during the use of learning journals while also enhancing the reliability and objectivity of the research conclusions.

**Research Ethics**

The study was conducted on the basis of voluntary participation and informed consent, while ensuring participants' privacy. Students were informed of the purpose, content, and procedures of the study; the collected data were used solely for research purposes and kept confidential. Participants had the right to refuse or withdraw from the study without experiencing any adverse consequences.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

To examine changes and student experiences during the use of learning journals, the study implemented the activity over 12 weeks with 45 Early Childhood Education students enrolled in the course *Learning and Psychological Development of Preschool-Age Children*. The learning journals were designed to develop reflective and self-regulated learning competencies, helping students set learning goals, self-assess their outcomes after each class session, and develop improvement plans for subsequent learning sessions. At the same time, the instructor re

**Table 2. Structure of the Learning Journal Used in the Study**

| Component | Reflective Content |
|---|---|
| **Learning objectives** | Identify the objectives to be achieved after the learning session |
| **Learning content** | Summarize the key knowledge acquired |
| **Difficulties** | Identify issues that remain unclear or challenging |
| **Self-assessment** | Assess the level of achievement of the learning objectives |
| **Improvement plan** | Identify adjustments to be made in the subsequent learning session |
| **Instructor feedback** | Comments and guidance for adjusting the learning process |

The structure of the learning journal was developed based on the principles of reflective learning and self-regulated learning. The six components of the journal form a closed learning cycle in which students not only record what they have learned but also identify difficulties, self-assess their outcomes, and develop improvement plans for the next learning session. A distinctive feature of the model is the inclusion of instructor feedback, which enhances interaction and supports students in making timely adjustments to their learning activities.

**Learning Journals Promote Learning Initiative and Interest**

**Table 3. Changes in Selected Indicators of Active Learning after 12 Weeks of Using Learning Journals (n = 45)**

| Assessment criterion | Data source | Post-intervention indicator | Result (%) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Preparation before class | Pre- and post-intervention survey | The proportion of students who regularly prepared for lessons increased from 46.7% to 66.7%. | increased by 20% |
| Learning interest | End-of-course survey | Students felt interested or very interested in the course. | 91.1 |
| Participation in speaking and discussion | End-of-course survey | Students regularly or occasionally participated in speaking and discussions in class. | 97.8 |

The results presented in Table 3 indicate that, after 12 weeks of implementing learning journals, several indicators of students' learning activities showed positive changes. For the indicator of lesson preparation before class, the proportion of students who regularly prepared for class increased from 46.7% at pre-intervention to

66.7% at post-intervention, representing an increase of 20.0 percentage points. The paired-samples t-test showed that the difference in the level of lesson preparation between the two measurement points was statistically significant ($t(44) = 3.32$, $p = 0.002$). The level of students' lesson preparation was higher after the intervention than before it ($M = 2.64$, $SD = 0.53$ vs. $M = 2.44$, $SD = 0.55$).

The post-course survey also showed that 91.1% of the students reported feeling interested or very interested in the course, while 97.8% reported that they regularly or occasionally participated in classroom discussion. These findings indicate a positive trend in the assessed indicators following the 12-week implementation of learning journals. However, because the study employed a one-group pretest–posttest design without a control or comparison group, the observed changes cannot be interpreted as evidence establishing a causal relationship between the use of learning journals and changes in these indicators. The findings only allow the conclusion that the observed positive changes occurred during the same period in which the learning journal intervention was implemented.

When considered together with the qualitative data from the learning journals and pedagogical observations, these findings suggest that the journaling activity may have provided a supportive environment in which students could more regularly set learning goals, reflect on, and self-assess their learning processes. Nevertheless, this possibility requires further examination using research designs that include control or comparison groups and larger samples.

**Student Self-Assessment and Learning Participation after the Implementation of Learning Journals**

One of the prominent findings of the study was the development of students' self-assessment competence following the implementation of learning journals. The survey results showed that 100% of students rated learning journals as effective or very effective in helping them identify their level of understanding, identify areas of limitation, and adjust their learning activities. This indicates that students became more aware of the role of self-assessment as an important component of the learning process and the development of self-directed learning competence.

By identifying learning goals, recording acquired content, identifying difficulties, self-assessing outcomes, and developing improvement plans after each class session, students had regular opportunities to reflect on their own learning processes. This process helped learners recognize their strengths and limitations, thereby enabling them to proactively adjust their learning methods and improve the effectiveness of knowledge acquisition. The findings are consistent with De Leon-Pineda and Prudente (2022), who argued that maintaining reflective journals combined with instructor guidance contributes to improving self-assessment competence, the quality of reflection, and the professional competence of preservice teachers.

In addition to developing self-assessment competence, learning journals also contributed to increasing students' participation in classroom learning activities. The survey results showed that 97.8% of students regularly or occasionally participated in speaking and discussions after the implementation process. An important factor contributing to this result was the integration of learning journals into the course's formative assessment. The instructor's scoring and feedback after each journal entry motivated students to prepare seriously for lessons, maintain reflective activities, and complete journals on time. Consequently, reflection was not merely a voluntary activity but became an official part of the learning process, contributing to students' awareness of self-directed learning and learning responsibility.

The findings are also consistent with Dyment and O'Connell (2011), who confirmed that learning journals combined with regular instructor feedback not only develop reflective competence but also promote critical thinking, academic communication skills, and active learner participation. The findings indicate that learning journals are a feasible pedagogical tool in the context of this study and have the potential to support competency-oriented teacher education, contributing to the development of self-directed learning, self-regulation, and continuous professional development among preservice teachers.

**Changes in Self-Assessment and Self-Regulated Learning Based on Journal Data**

**Table 4. Typical Changes in Students' Learning Activities after 12 Weeks of Using Learning Journals**

| Aspect | Pre-intervention indicators | Post-intervention indicators |
|---|---|---|
| Lesson preparation | Infrequent preparation, with unclear learning goals | Proactively prepare lessons according to goals and read materials before class |
| Learning participation | Infrequent speaking and passive participation in discussions | More confident in speaking, actively exchanging ideas and participating in group activities |
| Self-assessment | Limited reflection on learning outcomes | Regularly self-assess and identify content that remains unclear |
| Learning adjustment | No improvement plan after each class session | Able to develop plans to supplement knowledge and adjust learning methods |
| Learning attitude | Highly dependent on instructor guidance | More proactive and responsible for their own learning process |

The findings suggest that learning journals not only contributed to enhancing active learning but also promoted the development of students' self-directed learning and self-regulation competencies. After 12 weeks of implementation, 44.4% of students reported that the journals helped them clearly identify their strengths and limitations, 28.9% indicated that the tool supported adjustments to their learning activities, and 24.4% achieved both outcomes simultaneously. In addition, 97.7% of students rated learning journals as useful or very useful for developing self-directed learning competence. These findings suggest that regular reflective activities helped students develop awareness of self-assessment, proactively adjust their learning methods, and assume greater responsibility for their own learning.

Qualitative data from learning journals and pedagogical observations also reflected clear changes after the intervention. Students became more proactive in setting learning goals, preparing for class, actively exchanging ideas during group activities, regularly self-assessing their learning outcomes, and developing improvement plans after each class session. These changes were consistent with the quantitative analysis presented in Table 3, thereby complementing the quantitative findings and suggesting that learning journals may support certain indicators of self-directed learning and self-regulation—core competencies of future teachers.

**Difficulties and Conditions Supporting the Maintenance of Learning Journals**

In addition to the positive findings, the study also identified several difficulties, including students' lack of time to maintain journal writing (44.4%), difficulties in expressing reflective content (26.7%), and a desire to receive more feedback from the instructor (20.0%). This indicates that the ability to maintain and maximize the value of learning journals depends not only on learner participation but also on the instructor's role in providing guidance, feedback, and organization. Therefore, journal templates should include clear reflective questions, regular feedback should be maintained, and journals should be linked to formative assessment in order to motivate students to sustain reflective activities. This shows that journals do not automatically generate reflection; their effectiveness depends on reflective ability, time, and instructor feedback.

The findings are also consistent with the study by Segalo and Dube (2022), in which the authors argued that the use of reflective journals in teacher education contributes to the development of self-assessment competence, critical thinking, and professional reflective competence. Similarly, this study shows that learning journals are a feasible pedagogical tool that can be easily implemented in teacher education courses and have the potential to support self-directed learning, self-regulation, and lifelong learning. On this basis, the author proposes that teacher education institutions integrate learning journals into competency-oriented courses, combined with periodic feedback and formative assessment, to improve learning effectiveness and respond to educational reform requirements.

## CONCLUSION

The findings show that the implementation of learning journals over 12 weeks was accompanied by

improvements in several indicators of active learning among Early Childhood Education students, while also supporting self-assessment and self-regulated learning. The journal structure, consisting of goal setting, recording content, identifying difficulties, self-assessment, developing improvement plans, and receiving instructor feedback, created opportunities for students to engage regularly in reflective activities.

This change can be explained, at least in part, through the mechanisms of reflection and self-regulation. Recalling and evaluating the learning process helped students identify strengths, limitations, and difficulties and consequently adjust their learning activities. Journal data showed that 44.4% of students identified strengths or limitations, 28.9% adjusted their learning activities, and 24.4% achieved both outcomes. These findings suggest that journals may support a cycle of self-monitoring, self-assessment, and adjustment, thereby contributing to the reinforcement of active learning.

Combining learning journals with formative assessment and regular instructor feedback is an important condition for maintaining reflective activities and supporting students in adjusting their learning. Therefore, teacher education institutions may consider integrating learning journals into selected competency-oriented courses while also providing students with guidance in reflection and self-assessment skills.

However, several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings. First, the study employed a one-group pretest–posttest design involving 45 students in a single course at Kien Giang College of Education; therefore, causal relationships cannot be established, and the generalizability of the findings is limited. Second, some of the data were collected through students' self-reports and may therefore have been influenced by participants' subjective perceptions. Third, the study did not include a control or comparison group and did not employ longitudinal follow-up to determine whether the observed changes were sustained over time.

Future studies should increase the sample size, recruit participants from multiple teacher education institutions, and, where feasible, include a control or comparison group to strengthen the ability to control for potential confounding factors. Combining self-reported data with more objective indicators, such as the quality of learning journals, attendance rates, learning-task performance, or independently assessed classroom participation, could also provide more comprehensive evidence. In addition, a longitudinal design would help determine whether changes in active learning, self-assessment, and self-regulation are sustained after the completion of the learning journal implementation.

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