



MY EXPERIENCE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE WRITING AS AN EDUCATION ACADEMIC AND TEACHER:

THE START OF A MOST REMARKABLE JOURNEY — A JOURNEY I COULD NEVER HAVE FORESEEN JOAN WILLIAMS

Battered by a successful re-write of my PhD, yet invigorated by the transformation it facilitated, I struggled to find the confidence to write academically for publication. I did not know what was getting in the way. I did know that my stagnation was causing distress and depression, and so one day I wrote something for me. I became the story and the story teller. Through writing, I expressed the pain I was feeling and my need to write. I wrote then:

I am unsure of where my life and work are leading or where I will go next, but I know that I must write. Having found a powerful voice through the combination of reading, writing in 1st person, dialogue, reflection and reflexivity, and felt the surge of empowerment and self-assurance that the process brings, I yearn to be immersed once again in the experience and be nourished by those feelings. I know for me it will be tough and I fear starting the process.

I begin cautiously, fluctuating between great excitement in writing and fear of negative consequences and failure. I hear the old familiar voice that battered me throughout my schooling and the PhD shouting: 'You can't do it, you can't write, it won't be good enough, you're not good enough!' This triggers nausea, a familiar friend. It causes me to procrastinate – create excuses and STOP.

However, the depressive consequences of not writing seem too grave, and so I must find courage, overcome the voice holding me back and inertia keeping me stuck. Through writing, I dig deep and begin to explore with critical eyes, the origins of the fear that grips me like a vice, curtails the joy of living and learning in the present moment and writing academically.

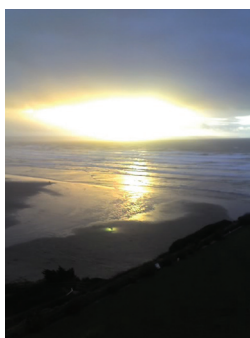
This may or may not lead to publication, but I will go where it leads and enjoy the journey without concern for the destination.

Writing of many kinds, in many places and spaces, is helping me find the courage to discover and strengthen that new wise voice from my depths that tells me I can do anything.



For me: the promise of a new dawn and a rainbow

Going deeper with reflective writing



Reflective writing takes me to my depths, shows me the vibrant colour of my being.

My writing helps me also to explore, get to know and integrate my darker shadow side. It brings light to the shadow world.



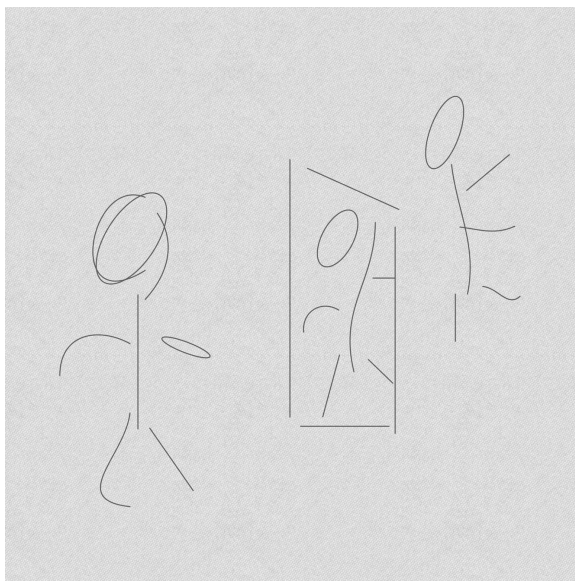
Figure 3.1 A Möbius strip

Try this; it may lead you towards your preferred routine for writing:

1. Choose a time when you will not be interrupted, and a space that you enjoy (when I can, I like writing in the early morning after I run, with a cappuccino, in the café at the gym).
2. Take your emotional temperature. Allow your thoughts to drift in and out (I usually close my eyes, take a deep breath and check in with my mind and body).
3. Write whatever comes to mind for 6 minutes without stopping or re-reading, follow the flow of thoughts and allow your hand to guide.
4. Notice what comes to the forefront of your mind as you write. Keep writing for as long as the flow of thoughts last and your hand keeps moving across the page, or for as long as you have time. (In a trance-like state, I usually do not notice when 6 minutes is up.)
5. Read your writing, alter and adapt what feels right for you. (I am always amazed at the significance of my writing and how little editing it requires.)
6. Notice what connections are being made. Note any reflections that occur to you as you read. (I find these lead to more writing when there is time.)

Adapted from Bolton (2014), p.153.

Reflective writing takes me:



Through the mirror: to an inner space, to look at what is causing my fear of academic writing. The fear that debilitated me after a very successful completion of an excruciatingly painful PhD journey.

Where is the space for peace?

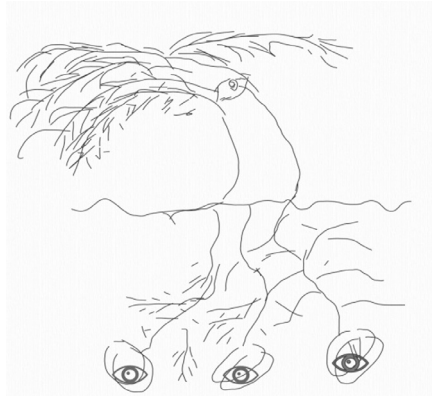
Who knows?

It's there inside, but who looks there?

The broken soul searching for something much more;

A port in the storm.

Through the mirror I go to:



the depths of my being to look around, build firm foundations and a flexible mind and body to withstand any storm. I go to

A place to strip down to bare bones and feel safe,

To take a look around without fear of judgement and ridicule.

It's there inside. It can be found.

Once found and often re-visited,

It becomes the most wonderful short break for the soul.

Reflective and reflexive writing



Reflective and reflexive writing has provided opportunities to learn to love and respect myself. It is exposing my creative abilities, and facilitating a growth in self-confidence, leading to success in many forms of writing. But, each time I go through the mirror, look around and emerge again into the world, I know I will have to return again and again. The process of self-discovery and learning, necessary to reach the fear and integrate my monster, is ongoing.

This space inside is not always easy to inhabit,
It can be a muddy, murky, a turbulent place.
And it often is. Betwixt and Between,
We cannot go back, we know not what is to come,
There is no backwards or forwards, no sides
But there is no judgement.
Whatever happens is OK!
At last, there is no failure.
There is no 'best practice' to follow.
Wonderful new creations and repetitive old patterns dance
Hooray!
A place for the soul to wonder and wander free.

I am now writing reflective personal journal entries, autoethnography, poetry, and songs. I am also singing my songs. And, a book proposal is imminent.

Creativity is blossoming.

I could not want for a more exciting time in my life. Reflective writing and sensitively facilitated reflective dialogue is taking me to great places.

[link to recording]:

My first song

'My hand it writes a song' tells of what writing is doing for me.

My hand it writes a song,
the story of my soul.
A story long begun
to open to the world.

Closed doors open wide and let the sun inside,
I peek out and sneak about to see what passes by.

My hand it writes a song
the story of my soul.
A story long begun,

to open to the world.
I speak out, and shout about the things I want to say,
the page it is my friend,
No judgments lurking there,
Instead,

A strong and guiding hand to 'hold' me on my way.
My hand it writes a song
The story of my soul.

The use of reflective writing in my professional practice

In my experience, students starting a Masters Degree programme often demonstrate superficial levels of reflection. Their writing and talk can be loaded with value judgements and assumptions. Busy day-to-day routines, and a lack of tools to facilitate reflection can mean that deep reflection is jettisoned. My own experience of the value of reflective writing and dialogue led me to make these practices an integral part of the students' contact-time experience in Masters level modules. This is in the hope that they will value the experience and make room for it in their own time.

Here is a process I frequently use:

Free up thoughts, let them
flow on to the page

Allow the hand to write

I get students writing: time for reflective writing can enable students to explore on the silent page and in private, their own perspectives on issues and the values and beliefs underpinning thoughts and actions. I sometimes ask students to explore in writing (10 minutes), the values and beliefs that underpin their approach to research, or I may ask them to make an incident from their practice critical, using Tripp's (1993, 2012) approach to making an incident critical.

Reflective dialogue in pairs follows the

writing. It enables students to share aspects of their reflective writing and provides an opportunity for facilitation to take their thinking deeper. Additionally, it provides the necessary external challenge to enable interrogation of their position on particular issues. This process has been adapted from Brockbank and McGill, 2006:

- the writer shares their thoughts coming out of the writing (3 minutes), their partner listens with all senses and does not interrupt.
- At the end of the 3 minutes, the writer's partner clarifies the message received (2 minutes), to ensure that the writer's message has been clearly heard.
- the partner, through probing questions – reflecting back words and feelings, paraphrasing and summarising – enables the writer to think more deeply about and explore further their thoughts (5 minutes).

Write your way to clearer perspectives

Articulate ideas
Be open to challenge
Be aware of feelings

Back to writing:

(10 minutes) Insights drawn out of the reflective dialogue are then taken back to the private space of reflective writing on an accepting page.

Students tell me this process enhances self-awareness. I notice how much it enriches module group discussions. However, I have learned to warn students that this can cause uncertainty if their ideas are challenged: temporarily they can lose perspective.

The smallest success, the slightest glimpse of enlightenment experience through a six to ten-minute write can encourage students to do more and more whenever they feel. Jane H and Jane G report below from their very first reflective writings:

‘Being given the opportunity in class to write reflectively, and reassured that no one would see or judge my writing, with surprising ease, I began to address questions and

thoughts around issues in my practice. A 6 minute writing exercise showed me that I did not need much time. I was completely surprised by the power of the writing. It enabled me to see ‘the wood for the trees’. Writing that followed took me to the core of my disquiet at work. Reflective writing is opening doors to discovery’.

Jane H

‘When introduced to reflective writing in class I had a ‘light bulb moment’ about my problem reading academic articles. I enjoy reading in the bath, and for my MA read the articles there (because I have three children, and it is a peaceful place). However, I did not want to ruin my ‘me’ time with what felt like unpleasant and challenging articles! I needed to find somewhere else to read these. In a few minutes, reflective writing, allowed me to articulate and explore the issue on the page, which enabled me to identify a barrier and a simple solution. Since then, I have incorporated reflective writing in my life.’

Jane G

Students begin to realise also that reflective writing can happen anywhere and need not require large chunks of time. Noting thoughts that seem significant can take two minutes and can be reflected upon later in greater depth. Worries, concerns and fears can be explored in writing in spare moments over coffee, which can often have a calming effect and facilitate a helpful shift in perspective. Exploring thoughts and feelings about an issue can happen in 20 minutes.

<p>Undergraduates:</p> <p><i>Introductions to combinations of critical incident analysis, reflective writing and reflective dialogue to facilitate reflection in practice.</i></p>	<p>Masters and Doctoral students:</p> <p><i>Introductions to combinations of critical reading, reflective writing, reflective dialogue followed by further reflective writing to:</i></p> <p>unpack meaning, develop understanding, appreciate various perspectives,</p> <p><i>justify an evolving personal perspective when:</i></p> <p>deciding on the most appropriate philosophical approach to research, and / or</p> <p>developing a critical perspective on a professional issue to be explored in depth in an essay, and / or a research proposal.</p>
<p>Overseas students starting UK degree programmes</p> <p>Introductions to reflective writing:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • as a supportive and challenging companion on their journey • to explore the contrasting academic requirements of alternative approaches to learning and teaching. <p>A module that combines academic writing, critical reading and thinking and reflective practices would be invaluable for these students and is something I will be writing for the next academic year.</p>	

Reflective writing can be a student's first stop for dealing with the pressures of study at higher levels. It can be their key to unlocking deeper meaning and understanding of their own life and more specifically the demands of critically reflective practice, and it can facilitate the development of criticality to enhance academic writing at all levels.

A core of reflective practice (through reflective writing and dialogue in pairs and small groups) running through a course or module has the potential to help students overcome the fears and challenges experienced in becoming reflective practitioners and in becoming academic writers.

I am using these practices with all of the above groups and getting closer to understanding how best to combine reflective activities as core components for undergraduate education, and Masters degree programmes for UK and international students.

References

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Joan Williams