



This is a peer-reviewed, post-print (final draft post-refereeing) version of the following published document, This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Reflective Practice on 1st March 2014, available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/14623943.2014.883310> and is licensed under All Rights Reserved license:

**Marsh, Claire (2014) 'It's quite weird to write ... you feel like a nut job': the practical and emotional consequences of writing personal reflections for assessment in psychology. Reflective Practice, 15 (2). pp. 190-202.
doi:10.1080/14623943.2014.883310**

Official URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2014.883310>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14623943.2014.883310>
EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/3770>

Disclaimer

The University of Gloucestershire has obtained warranties from all depositors as to their title in the material deposited and as to their right to deposit such material.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation or warranties of commercial utility, title, or fitness for a particular purpose or any other warranty, express or implied in respect of any material deposited.

The University of Gloucestershire makes no representation that the use of the materials will not infringe any patent, copyright, trademark or other property or proprietary rights.

The University of Gloucestershire accepts no liability for any infringement of intellectual property rights in any material deposited but will remove such material from public view pending investigation in the event of an allegation of any such infringement.

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR TEXT.

“It’s quite weird to write...you feel like a nut job”: The practical and emotional consequences of writing personal reflections for assessment in psychology

Claire L. Marsh

School of Natural and Social Sciences, University of Gloucestershire, Cheltenham, UK

Claire Marsh, Senior Lecturer in Forensic Psychology, School of Natural and Social Sciences, University of Gloucestershire, Francis Close Hall Campus, Swindon Road, Cheltenham GL50 4AZ

Tel: (+44) 01242 714584/ Email: cmarsh2@glos.ac.uk

Claire Marsh is a Senior Lecturer in Forensic Psychology at the University of Gloucestershire, teaching primarily on the MSc in Forensic Psychology but also contributing to modules in their undergraduate BSc Psychology provision. Claire joined the University in July 2010, after six years of working as a Crime Analyst/Researcher for the National Crime Agency (previously NPIA).

“It’s quite weird to write...you feel like a nut job”: The practical and emotional consequences of writing personal reflections for assessment in psychology

Setting the tone for reflective writing – should the first person, populated approach that currently dominates be ethically questioned? An active voice is recommended to enhance ‘power’ and emotional investment in reflection, but often presents practical difficulties for students conditioned in ‘scientific’ depopulated ways. Beyond the practical, being instructed to employ a personal tone could exacerbate the emotional risks involved for vulnerable students.

Ethical questioning is an area of reflection and teaching that has been largely neglected. The current paper responds to this gap, discursively considering the impact of requiring students to reflect using the first person and how this could intersect with emotionality components, located within the experiences of MSc Forensic Psychology students. Six students that had recently undertaken a reflective practice assignment volunteered to take part in a semi-structured interview about their experiences. For some students the themes of personal pronoun use and emotionality intersected, whereby at deeper levels of analysis the emotional impact was compounded by first person usage. Assessing the risk of enhanced vulnerability to psychological discomfort, implementing practical strategies to mediate this and the support procedures followed when requiring students to reflect are reviewed.

Keywords: reflective practice; reflection; emotion; psychology; assessment; ethics

Introduction

“The purpose of reflective writing is personal...It is clearly nonsense to try to write reflectively in the third person, or take yourself out of the account”

(Jasper, 2003, p.150)

Jasper has surmised the established position on writing reflectively, that by advising our students to use the first person in their written accounts we are helping them accept their role within the critical experience. This is something that is widespread throughout reflective literature but also an instruction I have personally added to assignment briefs for my students and disseminated in the 'classroom'. The implications are that the use of the first person will encourage students to 'own' their reflections, afford them greater weight or 'power' (Germano, 2005; Moon, 2004), and locate them as individuals within the core of their writing (Crème & Lea, 2008). This dominant practice for reflective assignments, however, can be perceived by the student as a reversal of entrenched academic practice. They have learned through years of instruction that to wield a personal pronoun is "forbidden" (Crème & Lea, 2008, p.132) and that they must adopt the hallmark academic tone that remains passive, objective and unemotional (Germano, 2005). Psychology's historically perceived positivist ambitions have perhaps exacerbated the tendency to train our students, in particular, to write 'scientifically' and mastering the dialect and tone of the discipline has been lamented as an essential skill for students to hone (Schwartz, Landrum & Gurung, 2011). This is the conventional rhetoric of a depopulated writing style, frequented by passives that divorce the actor from the discourse, in order to achieve 'scientific' status and be recognised by our own 'community' (Billig, 2011). As such, taking the student perspective, this is highly likely to cause confusion (Moon, 2004) and frustration (Crème & Lea, 2008), effectively requiring them to 'un-learn' for one assignment what has taken them years to perfect. Beyond this practical dilemma of using personal pronouns, there are also potential personal ramifications for some students; by preventing them from distancing

themselves psychologically and emotionally could there be damaging consequences, such as re-experiencing personal trauma and eliciting negative mood states? Ethical questioning of our academic practice is an area that has received relatively limited consideration within the literature (Ghaye, 2011; Haney, 2004), despite its clear relevance and importance to the topic.

What's the context?

This paper aims to explore the notion of using first person, practically and emotionally, within critically reflective writing, located within the experiences of students undertaking a reflective practice assignment for a Masters in Forensic Psychology. The inclusion of a reflective practice assignment within the MSc programme is indicated to reflect its increased prominence within professional contexts and is compatible with trends for assessment of reflection becoming more commonplace within higher education (Spiro, 2011, as cited in Wharton, 2012). The 'self-reflective practice report' is embedded within a compulsory module titled 'Professional Skills'. This module is designed to enhance competence and integrity within forensic settings and the report comprises the only assessment point for this module. The students are video-recorded, interviewing a 'mock' offender, tasked with eliciting information regarding their offending behaviour. This session is then used as the focus of their self-reflection, whereby students provide an in-depth analysis of two-three critical incidents (of their own choosing) from this experience. They received statements regarding self-disclosure (limits to confidentiality etc.), as recommended for good ethical practice to help students reach informed decisions regarding the level of disclosure engaged in (Haney, 2004). They also attended a three hour reflective practice session that incorporated information pertaining to theory and research, as well as a range of opportunities to engage in participatory activities tailored to develop their reflective skills. Activities

were designed to develop engagement with reflective writing in a structured, non-deficit focused manner (e.g. reflecting on a situation where they had successfully resolved an anxiety-provoking issue, using prompts such as ‘what was it you did that caused this success?’). Students were also assisted to appreciate different levels of reflection through engaging in ‘The Park’ exercise (as presented in Moon, 2004). Building on this, students’ capacities to determine whether writing responded to assessment criteria were amplified by grading a ‘mock’ student reflection. They used a hand-out that deconstructed the criteria, requiring them to award a mark to each (e.g. critical edge; conceptual thinking) and grade it overall. This resource then served as a self-assessment proforma.

Students were subsequently invited to take part in a semi-structured interview regarding their experiences. From the fifteen full-time forensic psychology students undertaking the module (all female), six participated and interviews ranged between 17.63 and 37.30 minutes in duration ($\bar{x} = 24.85$ minutes). Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim to allow for illustrative quotes to be presented. This paper aims to reflect on the themes of personal pronouns and emotionality that appeared to intersect meaningfully in discourses. It is acknowledged that having delivered the session myself and having assessment responsibilities represents a potential impact on students’ responses, for example in terms of demand characteristics and social desirability. I made it clear to respondents during the consent process that their participation was entirely voluntary and was divorced from their assessment as an attempt to minimise these impacts; however, this is unlikely to have removed the effect of dual agency absolutely and interpretations are therefore considered tentative.

The practicalities

The majority of students mentioned writing in the first person. This experience, for some, closely paralleled the grappling frustration and confusion noted in previous literature (Crème & Lea, 2008; Davies, 2012; Logan, 2012; Moon, 2004). They expressed the extent to which their prior learning experiences had conditioned them to write in a formal, third person tone and that writing their reflective assignments required self-editing. The use of 'I' seemed to be, as noted by Davies (2012, p.750), going "against the grain", as can be seen within these illustrative quotes:

I think writing it up was very difficult because you're so used to writing third person academically and suddenly you're asked to write first person and it doesn't come back as naturally as you'd expect

...you're taught so much don't put I, don't put me, you're always looking for alternatives to put in so when it comes to writing in the first person it's just a struggle

I felt like it was the opposite of everything I have previously done

One student noted that although this took adjustment initially, this transition was a relatively uncomplicated one:

I forgot to put 'I' and...I had to go back...I think because it's instilled in you not to do that you just get into the mode...it got loads easier, it only took me a few sentences and it was fine

Some students did not hold the conception of using personal pronouns as a challenge and found the experience liberating. The distinctiveness of this type of assignment compared to traditional assessment types appeared an advantage for these students:

I quite enjoyed talking about myself a little bit...I found it quite fun because it's different to what you're normally doing when you're writing essays

I found it quite refreshing to be able to write 'I'... I think that with all other types of assignments you have to be quite formal and ridiculously formal stuff, like referring to the author - meaning me...it seems ridiculous to me

This latter quote analogises the statement made by Jasper (2003), and also Fulbrook (2003, p.239) rebuking the process of utilising such expressions as 'the author' as being "inarticulate and juvenile". It could be construed that these students had no difficulty emerging from the "curtain of the passive" (Germano, 2005, p.20) and found it easier to take ownership for their own authorship. That these students' approaches are indicative of the 'elaborative' writers discussed by Lavelle (1997) – they enjoy communicating their narratives *because of* the personal significance and their willingness to immerse themselves both in the cognitive and affective dimensions of their writing. Alternatively could we perceive that the issue relates more to study skill application in that those who try to transfer their learned approaches to all contexts (Lea & Street, 2006) could benefit from developing their ability to adapt style to task and medium (Logan, 2012), working along the continuum of writing modes (Crème & Lea, 2008)? Soysa, Dunn, Dottolo, Burns-Glover and Gurung (2013) argue psychology students should be capable of writing for varying purposes and audiences, that this is part of being 'psychologically literate'.

There is some support for the notion that this issue could be a practical, skills-based one in that it extended beyond the use of 'I' per se to managing levels of formality. Students noted the complexity of balancing the use of 'I' with some of the requirements of writing reflectively such as integrating conceptual thinking from psychological literature, a difficulty that was personally experienced by Davies (2012)

when writing about her own involvement in a child protection context. She noted negotiating the academic and the autobiographical was a complex juxtaposition of personal and impersonal. The students also noted difficulties refraining from extending the informality to 'chatty' styles:

...to write in the 'I' term and try to keep it a bit formal...I wanted to be more informal and more chatty because...that's the way you think it through in your head...and you just want to write it...I had to change it to make it sound a little bit more formal and get rid of some of the chattiness

I still felt confused about how to combine personal reflection with theory...I struggled with the need to combine reflections with theory in a way that sounded academic and not a chatty 'dear diary' tone

...it took me ages to figure out how we put the literature in...how do we make it so it flows or it sounds right?

These student comments are indicative of my personal experience of previous questions students have posed in sessions and on electronic assignment forums. This practical skill of balancing formalities recurs annually as an area that is problematic and where students seek concrete exemplars to follow. Reading Logan's (2012) action inquiry approach on her own experiences of advising students to employ personal voice and their need for 'ground rules', it would appear this difficulty is wider spread. Given that this act of formality balancing was not homogeneously exigent across all students (as detailed below by one student's experience), it suggests that we may need to consider supporting some students not just with the process of 'how to' as it applies to reflective writing but also with developing skills to flexibly accommodate their writing modes. This may be particularly relevant to specific disciplines (e.g. psychology) that

are dominated by the passive voice traditions and only relatively recently began accepting epistemological multiplicity.

...obviously you try and balance, writing about yourself but writing about the literature as well and yeah it's just a bit of the balance

This evokes the question of how do we support them, how much guidance should we give? This notion of providing an exemplar or a template, as is frequently requested from students, is another area of debate. Not providing sufficient information clearly will be a hindrance (Boud & Walker, 1998), but providing them with examples might suggest a 'right' way to reflect that they merely seek to replicate (Brooman & Darwent, 2012; McGarr & Moody, 2010). It therefore appears plausible to suggest that students generate their own examples, that rather than giving them something that 'shows how it's done *properly*' we invest time into allowing practice with this mode of writing without necessarily tying this to reflection. For example, for my students continuing their destined route to becoming forensic psychologists could involve writing professional reports (e.g. expert witness reports, crime analysis reports) likely to adopt this formal meets populated approach, so rectifying this skills deficit could have wider merit. This could be communicated to students as part of them becoming "psychologically literate" (Soysa et al., 2013, p.98).

Coercing emotion

Could this be more than a skills-based problem for some of these students? Could remaining "grammatically absent" (Billig, 2011, p.9) rather than merely being an entrenched practice, offer them a protective buffer from emotionality? The link between reflection and emotion is well established. Some authors not only believe it is an essential part of learning from reflection on experience (e.g. Boud & Walker, 1998;

Mortiboys, 2012) but they also recognise the act of reflection as emotional in itself (Ghaye, 2010; Sparrow, 2009; Thompson & Pascal, 2012). Service (2012, p.171) recalled the “emotional turmoil” of recognising that you have been operating using assumptive processes that require change. In addition, Hubbard, Backett-Milburn and Kemmer (2001) described the process as “emotional labour”, signifying the difficulty of embracing the feelings associated with revisiting and analysing practice and beliefs. This notion of feeling uncomfortable was manifested within the feedback received from my students:

...such a hard thing that sort of look at yourself in the mirror and think I need to change...to confront it

Because it's you analysing yourself it's just not the same as normal analysis...if you do negatively criticise yourself it is still difficult to do it and write it down and see it in a document and think oh my god someone's going to read this

Realising what you do, then writing about it and seeing it for yourself...you kind of realise your downfalls

I would say it is uncomfortable...to identify the patterns that made me feel uncomfortable that it wasn't just one incident, I could see it in a couple of others...it was challenging and quite draining at times to kind of look at yourself

...hard at the time to look at yourself...because you know you're going to be opening up things especially if you're quite a closed person anyway and you don't really write these things down

This discomfort appeared to be related not just to the task of reflection but to the written aspect of it, as one student noted seeing it “in a document”, and to our insistence

that a first person approach was required prescribing an 'active', populated voice. The quotes below illustrate this link between writing style and the impact it may have had:

...essays and things like that it's very detached, you do it, it's in, you don't think about it

The more in-depth you go, the more ...personal it becomes, the harder it becomes to write...you are more conscious as you're writing it...and you think 'oh *I* really did this'...and I think that's hard...I was like well I don't know whether to talk about this or not because I ...not almost scared but you kind of don't know if you want to go to that level

...because if you write in third person you detach yourself, whereas if you're writing in first you have to acknowledge you've done that as a person

The second quote aptly represented the experience of the students that found the exercise particularly difficult emotionally. Here, she was discussing her experience of employing a framework to guide her reflection and recollecting how descriptive elements were manageable, but that the 'deeper' the task became, where she was looking at patterns in her behaviour over time and relating it to aetiological aspects from her past, the more emotionally charged it was and this appeared compounded by the use of personal pronouns. Therefore, this clearly presents a level of "personal risk" (Hanson, 2011, p.301), and assessment of this risk presents a striking oversight in our discussion of employing reflective practice in higher education. Haney (2004) noted a gap in the literature regarding the teaching of psychology for discourses related to ethical decision making and this is a key point within that.

There is an inherent power imbalance here (Haney, 2004). In this instance the assignment is worth 100% of the mark for a core module that a student is required to pass. These students are aware, from reading and classroom delivery, that the

assignment could invoke strong emotions and challenge their self-perceptions but have no ability to withdraw their participation. If this were a research study presenting our participants with the same level of risk for psychological harm, with comparable levels of power imbalance, would we deem it ethical? Are we, in effect, coercing them to disclose personal and potentially traumatic experiences with subsequent personal risk? During the delivery of the session it is noted that reflective practice should avoid the confessional or wallowing (McGarr & Moody, 2010) and that they should only disclose if purposeful, deeply personal information not being equal to deeper reflection. However, we also put forward arguments that engaging with the emotional and being 'tuned in' to how emotions influence us and our behaviour is important, and by the nature of the assignment brief (Birden & Usherwood, 2013; Wharton, 2012) they are compelled to analyse negative aspects of their actions. The task demands them to engage emotionally to provide their assessors what they perceive we expect – we have rendered emotional distress a demand characteristic. According to this small group of students, this could present significantly more of a problem for some than others:

I've got an internal locus of control and when I came out of the interview I thought it had gone so badly that all I did was think negatively...it's all my fault sort of thing and I didn't want to re-experience that negativity so I took steps to avoid it...I didn't want to engage with the assignment and that was part of the difficulty...I think the internal thing...if you share that, it might be something you tend to avoid

...when I got to the analysis...I didn't want to spend time getting into something like that because I felt I'd end up criticising myself even more

I found it more challenging than most people in that class...I think it might be a personality thing...obviously everyone's experiences are different... I think that as a fellow student you know looking around the class I could go round and go 'I bet you found it easy', I think it's quite easy to identify certain people once you know the personalities and...there would have been at least half that would have been okay with

that aspect; whereas I know a few more girls that are a lot more conscientious about themselves and their experiences have been far different...but the lecturers don't know that

I felt like a bit of a head case writing it [laughs], it's quite weird to write...you feel like a nut job...it depends on your personality with some people they're more critical of themselves

The students that found this difficult expressed comparable concerns about initially engaging in and applying deeper levels of reflection, with a number of them referring to avoidance of the task and worries about having to 're-experience' negativity. This is also noted in the literature, for example, Sparrow (2009) comments on the reflecting process as a re-feeling of emotions from the event, which will impact on the reflector's current mood state. Sparrow overviews the impact that this emotional state, aroused by the mechanics of reflection, could have on cognitive processes, stating that if this induced mood is low this could reduce problem solving capabilities and impact on evaluative assessments. Low mood is matched by thought and memory retrieval functioning, so the individual will recall and attend to stimuli that are congruent with that mood (Philippe, Lecours & Beaulieu-Pelletier, 2008; Sparrow, 2009). As such, a student re-experiencing self-perceived negative critical incidents will be reliving the depressing feelings they had at the time, but also (supported by the reflection process) retrieving memories of other depressing life experiences, so intensifying the negative thoughts. Therefore, if the overall experience of carrying out reflective practice is highly aversive for these students, leading to deleterious impacts for their self-perceptions, this could have ramifications for future behaviour academically and professionally as there are links with behavioural outcomes (Philippe et al., 2008). This could even explain the students' behaviour in delaying and not wanting to engage in reflection as the elicitation of intense negative feelings, inducing

associated networks of multiple negative memories can result in very harsh self- and situational judgments and defensive avoidance (Levine et al., 2001; Philippe et al., 2008).

The relevance of vulnerabilities

The experiences of these students highlight the differentiated nature of reflection and emotionality as they endured it. Clearly not all students will share these risks for negative outcomes and it is possible that those who volunteered for interview represent a sample bias. This brings forth the relevance of vulnerabilities, with the students themselves attempting to make sense and develop hypotheses for why they, in particular, found the task psychologically demanding. As one comment highlights above where there may be individuals that are prone to these risks (e.g. more negative experiences to draw from) the “lecturers don’t know that”. We might not know it but should we be planning for it? We plan our teaching and learning to incorporate equality of opportunities for individuals with physical and/or learning difficulties, so why are we not sensitive to the relevance of psychological vulnerabilities? Why are we not asking if there are those who may be vulnerable should we be exposing them to these risks at all, particularly where empirical evidence of performance improvement through reflection has been doubted (White, Fook & Gardner, 2006)? These discussions make it important to assess the potential for risk.

The capsule of university life can present a distinct ‘Petri dish’ for examination of mental health vulnerabilities. Students are subject to the same mental health risk factors as other people their own age (e.g. peak risk for onset of schizophrenia and bipolar disorders), but are then exposed to stressors such as financial difficulties and reduced support networks – rendering them more vulnerable than their general

population peers (Royal College of Psychiatrists, 2011). We know that some mental health disorders show significant and even enhanced levels within student populations, such as eating disorders (RCP, 2011). Mood disorders, such as depression, have been demonstrated to emerge at university amongst previously symptom-free students (Andrews & Wilding, 2004). We also know they may be more susceptible to undergoing certain traumatic life events, such as experiencing unwanted sexual contact which is raised in female (RCP, 2011) and male students (Turchik, 2012). According to the RCP (2011), those who provide mental health provision to students are reporting increasing demand for services. The levels of students enrolling in psychology with disabilities and requiring support is also on the increase and has been recognised by the Improving Provision for Disabled Psychology Students project (Craig & Zinkiewicz, 2010). In relation to mental health needs, psychology graduate courses have been shown to have very high levels of stressors (e.g. El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh & Bufka, 2012). Comparing the 1.12 percent of postgraduate psychology students that disclosed a mental health problem in 2008/9 with the 0.5 percent for all students that disclosed (Higher Education Statistics Agency, 2010, as cited in Craig & Zinkiewicz, 2010), the inflated trend for psychology is clear and, being based on disclosure, is likely to be a gross underestimate (and/or reflect higher reporting trends). Psychology courses may even attract people that have experienced psychological difficulties or negative life experiences as their attempt to self-analyse (Craig, 2010; Haney, 2004).

This enhanced potential of vulnerability to the negative impacts of reflection becomes further ethically complicated when considering dual relationships. The nature of the assignment and potential for our students to present with these vulnerabilities could lead to students disclosing deeply personal experiences, a situation unlikely to occur with other assignment types. As Haney (2004) wrote, they may hold inaccurate

perceptions regarding the treatment expertise of their assessors, perhaps using it as a help-seeking opportunity. As lecturers, we are unlikely to be sufficiently equipped to respond and may find ourselves in a difficult position regarding our duty to react to disclosures. We have effectively coerced them into disclosing as the nature of the task makes it apparent that they have to seek weaknesses in their thoughts, feelings and behaviours and make links to previous actions and aetiology in order to reach sufficient depth of analysis. If we accept that there is a sub-group of these students that will then be re-experiencing more negative emotions, recalling negative memories from their potentially traumatic pasts and due to any concurrent problems (e.g. current disorders) may be at a reduced capacity to cope with these issues – is this exploitative or harmful and could this be avoided or minimised?

Engaging with their emotions in this context should be sufficiently beneficial to these students for their learning and future professional practice. The reflective assignment by allowing students to select their own critical incidents is emphasising a student-generated approach to learning, which should increase their interaction with material stimulating higher-order intellectual skills (Soysa et al., 2013) and metacognitive thinking (Otienoh, 2009). This should aid understanding and memory retention (Sternberg & Williams, 2002, as cited in Haney, 2004), and is consistent with transformative processes (Norton, 2009). In addition, MSc Forensic Psychology students are generally aiming to follow the British Psychological Society's route to becoming professional psychologists and undertaking critically reflective and reflexive practice forms part of achieving this status, rendering the assignment more 'real world' applicable (Norton, 2009). Moreover, the ability for the reflective endeavour to allow them to analyse their own assumption processes and biases (Thompson, 2011) could have significant implications for the future protection of those they work with (e.g.

offenders or victims). Recognising the impact of their emotions is also an aspect that could promote their own future well-being, if they make the reflective loop to action. For example, the role of the Forensic Psychologist working with offenders to address their offending behaviour and supportive cognitions, or conducting analysis of serious sexually motivated offences on a daily basis exposes these professionals to traumatic material. The literature tells us that psychologists can be in danger of burnout, vicarious traumatisation and other potential consequences (e.g. alcohol and substance abuse) that can have considerable personal and professional impact – cementing the importance of monitoring their own wellbeing and self-care (El-Ghoroury et al., 2012). Reflecting at this stage could develop these students as future resilient and ethical practitioners.

I would argue that reflective practice with this potentially vulnerable group has a pivotal place not just for their own wellbeing but for protecting the vulnerable groups they may be working with in future. This means practically considering how we manage the risks within the university context of mandating their involvement in this assessment. First, I will reiterate the recommendations of Haney (2004) that students need to be assisted to make informed choices about disclosing. We could make this more concrete, requiring them to generate hypothetical examples of information that would breach confidentiality or analysing case studies, for example. We should also develop our own policies for disclosure and referral networks with university support services, making these transparent to the student to reduce likelihood of the student help-seeking through disclosure and providing faculty clear procedures to deal with the ethical ambiguity that can result.

As writing is a highly personal process, where people hold their own clear preferences (Lavelle, 1997) and given the dearth of empirical evidence that writing in a first person, active way actually impacts on depth of reflection but could, it is

tentatively suggested here, exacerbate psychological discomfort, then perhaps we should allow them to choose their own ‘voice’? We could present the rationale behind populated writing and encourage it (supporting their practical abilities) but not mandate it, or sanction against it in marking. We can still place an emphasis on emotional aspects and reiterate the role of emotionality within reflection, but make it clearer to students that this is to benefit them by *reframing* their experiences and point them in the direction of evidence that shows the positive benefits of emotional writing (e.g. Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003). Making students aware that the ability to analyse and manage your emotions can be related to positive social outcomes, such as work role performance (Mayer, Roberts & Barsade, 2008). Educating them on how emotions can navigate our daily experiences and be drawn from adaptively to respond to negative events (Algoe & Fredrickson, 2011).

The way that we deliver sessions should highlight and try to counter the demand characteristic of negativity by providing clearer definitions for critical incidents, ones that challenge the idea of a “traumatic crisis” but draw focus towards something that perplexes or renders uncertainty (Hickson, 2011, p.833). We should place an emphasis on balanced critical evaluation as negative emotions, where appropriate, should be looked at as part of the full range of emotional responding, but students should also focus on assessing their positive experiences and emotions. We could incorporate basic information and practice on how to self-generate positive emotions, grounding this in discussion of how this may benefit cognitive and perceptual capabilities, enhance coping and resilience (Algoe & Fredrickson, 2011; Mortiboys, 2012; Philippe et al., 2008; Sparrow, 2009). This should help prevent the overly critical or deeply personal disclosures that appear to be associated with gratuitous negativity levels (Gilbert, Lieberman, Morewedge & Wilson, 2004, as cited in Algoe & Fredrickson, 2011). By

removing the overly negative emotional focus that can prevent the student drawing effectively from the tools of reflective practice, they should be capable of seeing positive ways in which their behaviour can change and augment levels of self-efficacy (Smith, 2011). In this sense, reflection is driving our students' capacities to enhance their positive emotional experiences and move away from deficit models of reflection, towards strengths and positive action (Ghaye, 2010). As one of my students put it:

...not get too cut up about it, I mean you don't have to be really heavy on yourself.

Conclusion

Engaging in an ethical dialogue about our use of reflective practice and pre-empting both the practical and emotional difficulties that we are making compulsory for our students to experience is essential. Not all students will respond in the same way to the same task and just as we adapt our lecture materials for people with learning difficulties, check our rooms are accessible for those with mobility problems, we should consider that requiring some to reflect comes with potential for greater psychological risk. It is our responsibility to embed sufficient support systems and to continuously question practice on academic and ethical grounds. In developing my practice as a lecturer this has been one of my main learning points, the need to understand how our students experience the learning opportunities we provide them. Coming from a forensic psychology perspective, I am aware that in group interventions with offenders often for an offender the challenges and advice of their fellow group members will have a greater impact on their responsiveness to change than the challenges of their psychologists. In that vein I am going to conclude with some well reasoned advice that my students offered to future cohorts about to undertake the challenge of reflective practice and hope

that these peer messages will motivate them to consider the emotional investment worthwhile.

...you may not want to uncover some of the things that you find but it's going to be good for you in the long run.

...it might be hard at the time to look at yourself...but it's beneficial in the end.

References

- Algoe, S. B., & Fredrickson, B. L. (2011). Emotional fitness and the movement of affective science from lab to field. *American Psychologist*, 66, 35-42. Doi: 10.1037/z0021720
- Andrews, B., & Wilding, J.M. (2004). The relation of depression and anxiety to life-stress and achievement in students. *British Journal of Psychology*, 95, 509-521.
- Billig, M. (2011). Writing social psychology: Fictional things and unpopulated texts. *British Journal of Social Psychology*, 50, 4-20. Doi: 10.1111/j.2044-8309.2010.02003.x
- Birden, H. H., & Usherwood, T. (2013). "They liked it if you said you cried": How medical students perceive the teaching of professionalism. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 199, 406-409. Doi: 10.5694/mja12.11827
- Boud, D., & Walker, D. (1998). Promoting reflection in professional courses: The challenge of context. *Studies in Higher Education*, 23, 191-206.
- Brooman, S., & Darwent, S. (2012). A positive view of first-year undergraduate reflective diaries: Focusing on what students can do. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 13, 517-531. Doi: 10.108/14623943.2012.670618
- Campbell, R. S., & Pennebaker, J. W. (2003). The secret life of pronouns: Flexibility in writing style and physical health. *Psychological Science*, 14, 60-65.

- Craig, N. (2010). Mental health issues and higher education psychology teaching. *Psychology Teaching Review*, 16, 16- 23.
- Craig, N., & Zinkiewicz, L. (2010). *Inclusive practice within psychology higher education*. York: The Higher Education Academy Psychology Network.
- Crème, P., & Lea, M. R. (2008). *Writing at university: A guide for students* (3rd ed.). Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Davies, P. (2012). 'Me', 'me', 'me': The use of the first person in academic writing and some reflections on subjective analyses of personal experiences. *Sociology*, 46, 744 – 752. Doi:10.1177/0038038512437897
- El-Ghoroury, N. H., Galper, D. I., Sawaqdeh, A., & Bufka, L. F. (2012). Stress, coping, and barriers to wellness among psychology graduate students. *Training and Education in Professional Psychology*, 6, 122-134. Doi: 10.1037/a0028768
- Fulbrook, P. (2003). Writing in the first person – time to change. *Nursing in Critical Care*, 8, 229–230.
- Germano, W. (2005). Passive is spoken here. *Chronicle of Higher Education*, 52, 20-24.
- Ghaye, T. (2010). In what ways can reflective practices enhance human flourishing? *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 11, 1-7. Doi: 10.1080/14623940903525132
- Ghaye, T. (2011). *Teaching and learning through reflective practice: A practical guide for positive action* (2nd ed.). Oxon: Routledge.
- Haney, M. R. (2004). Ethical dilemmas associated with self-disclosure in student writing. *Teaching of Psychology*, 31, 167-171. – Doi: 10.1207/s15328023top3103_2
- Hanson, K. (2011). 'Reflect' – Is this too much to ask? *Reflective Practice*, 12, 293-304. Doi: 10.1080/14623943.2011.571862

- Hickson, H. (2011). Critical reflection: Reflecting on learning to be reflective. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 12, 829-839. Doi: 10.1080/14623943.2011.616687
- Hubbard, G., Backett-Milburn, K., & Kemmer, D. (2001). Working with emotion: Issues with the researcher in fieldwork and teamwork. *International Journal of Social Research Methodology*, 4, 119–137. Doi: 10.1080/13645570116992.
- Jasper, M. (2003). *Beginning reflective practice*. Cheltenham: Nelson Thornes Ltd.
- Lavelle, E. (1997). Writing style and the narrative essay. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 67, 475-482.
- Lea, M., & Street, B. (2006). The 'academic literacies' model: Theory and applications. *Theory Into Practice*, 45, 368-377.
- Levine, L. J., Prohaska, V., Burgess, S. L., Rice, J.A., & Laulhere, T. (2001). Remembering emotions: The role of current appraisals. *Cognition and Emotion*, 15, 393–417.
- Logan, A. (2012). Improving personal voice in academic writing: An action inquiry using self-reflective practice. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 13, 775-788. Doi: 10.1080/14623943.2012.732937
- Mayer, J., Roberts, R., & Barsade, S. (2008). Human abilities: Emotional intelligence. *Annual Review of Psychology*, 59, 507–536.
- McGarr, O., & Moody, J. (2010). Scaffolding or stifling? The influence of journal requirements on students' engagement in reflective practice. *Reflective practice*, 11, 579–591.
- Moon, J. A. (2004). *A handbook of reflective and experiential learning: Theory and practice*. Oxon: RoutledgeFalmer.

- Mortiboys, A. (2012). *Teaching with emotional intelligence a step-by-step guide for higher and further education professionals* (2nd Edition). London: Routledge.
- Norton, L. (2009). Assessing student learning. In H. Fry, S. Ketteridge & S. Marshall (Eds.), *A handbook for teaching and learning in higher education: Enhancing academic practice* (3rd Edition) (pp.132- 149). Oxon: Routledge.
- Otienoh, R. O. (2009). Reflective practice: The challenge of journal writing. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 10, 477-489. Doi: 10.1080/14623940903138332
- Philippe, F. L., Lecours, S., & Beaulieu-Pelletier, G. (2008). Resilience and positive emotions: Examining the role of emotional memories. *Journal of Personality*, 77, 139 – 176. Doi: 10.1111/j.1467-6494.2008.00541.x
- Royal College of Psychiatrists (2011). *Mental health of students in higher education*. London: RCP. Retrieved from <http://www.rcpsych.ac.uk>
- Schwartz, E., Landrum, R. E., & Gurung, R. A. R. (2011). *An easy guide to APA style and format*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Service, B. (2012). Keeping the faith: How reflective practice can turn emotional turmoil into a positive outcome in the context of doctoral study. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 13, 16-182. Doi: 10.1080/14623943.2011.626029
- Smith, E. (2011). Teaching critical reflection. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 16, 211-223. Doi: 10.1080/13562517.2010.515022
- Soysa, C. K., Dunn, D. S., Dottolo, A. L., Burns-Glover, A. L., & Gurung, R. A. R. (2013). Orchestrating authorship: Teaching writing across the psychology curriculum. *Teaching of Psychology*, 40, 88-97. Doi: 10.1177/0098628312475027

- Sparrow, J. (2009). Impact of emotions associated with reflecting upon the past. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 10, 567-576. Doi: 10.1080/14623940903290554.
- Thompson, N. (2011). *Promoting equality: Working with diversity and difference* (3rd ed.). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Thompson, N., & Pascal, J. (2012). Developing critically reflective practice. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 13, 311-325. Doi: 10.1080/14623943.2012.657795
- Turchik, J. A. (2012). Sexual victimization among male college students: Assault severity sexual functioning and health risk behaviours. *Psychology of Men and Masculinity*, 13, 243-255. Doi: 10.1037/a0024605
- Wharton, S. (2012). Presenting a united front: Assessed reflective writing on a group experience. *Reflective Practice: International and Multidisciplinary Perspectives*, 13, 489-501. Doi: 10.1080/14623943.2012.670622
- White, S., Fook, J., & Gardner, F. (2006). *Critical reflection in health and social care*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.

Peer reviewed version