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Smith, A-M, Padt, S and Jones, K (2024) "Catch it, drop it, leave it there": Writing for Wellbeing as a tool for compassionate practice in Higher Education. PRISM: Casting new light on Learning, Theory & Practice. ISSN 2514-5347

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“Catch it, drop it, leave it there”: Writing for Wellbeing as a tool for compassionate practice in Higher Education

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Received: 19/15/2023

Accepted for publication: 04/07/2024

Published in Early View: 09/07/2024

Abstract

This is the story of a series of writing workshops with four undergraduate final year students, in a non-formal, non-graded, non-curriculum space. Students were introduced to ‘writing for wellbeing’ (WfW), using expressive writing strategies adapted from poetry/bibliotherapy practice. Initially intended as a research method for their dissertation projects, the writing workshops evolved into a significant creative space for the students’ own personal development. Shared reflections about our experience of writing together sheds light on the broader potential of WfW as a participatory research method, and as a compassionate approach for writing the self in higher education.

Keywords: therapeutic and expressive writing; wellbeing; compassionate pedagogy; creative research method; personal and professional development; poetry/bibliotherapy

Just where you are – that’s the place to start

Pema Chödrön

Openings in Lockdown

12th November 2020:

This is the initial workshop, a taster session of ‘writing for wellbeing’ for undergraduate dissertation students. We’ve been out of the lecture room and in lockdown since March 2020. On Zoom this morning Anne-Marie (**A-M**), also the first-person narrator in this story) meets four of her students: Sharon (**S**) and Kirsty (**K**) – co-authors of the story; Billie* (**B**); and Ingrid* (**Ing**);¹ We are all in different cities. **A-M** is in a

‘work top’, but offscreen is wearing pyjama bottoms and slippers. Her cat keeps trying to sit on the keyboard.

B: has just woken up and is sitting up in bed.

K: has family pictures on her bedside table.

S: sits in front of her dad’s well populated bookshelves.

Ing: is in her bedroom.

Half-way through the writing activities, **K** says

“I feel like I am getting to know a lot about myself”

¹ *Denotes pseudonyms

After reading a poem together, we do some freewriting from the prompt ‘I used to be ... now I am ...’ using vegetables or fruit as metaphor.

Ing shares her writing: “I used to be a tomato, now I’m a carrot – durable and strong”, and tells us her sister was always the favourite in their family.

After three years of teaching this group of students, the tutor starts to feel like she is getting to know them as people. The tool that enabled this process is ‘expressive writing for therapeutic purposes’ or ‘writing for wellbeing’ (hereafter WfW), a well-established approach to writing the self, rooted in the field of poetry/bibliotherapy (Mazza 2017; Chavis 2014; Hynes & Hynes-Berry 2012), and introduced here to students as a potential creative research method within their dissertation projects.

Some may argue that our job as university lecturers is just to teach, assess and grade, or create employable young people; but I have wondered how much of the heart is lost in that process. Imagine if our day-to-day work as teachers in higher education began from a place of compassion? How might this change the way we teach, the way we interact with colleagues and students? How can we look beyond the grade to equip students with strategies to develop self-awareness and self-compassion? Giving of ourselves and doing so from a *heart-place* potentially demands a different space.

Creating spaces of wellbeing & compassion in Higher Education

Wellbeing and compassion are buzzwords in HE these days; the report ‘Mentally healthy universities’ (UUK 2019) presents UUK’s vision of universities as places that ‘promote mental health and wellbeing’. The dominant narrative frames student wellbeing in direct relation to achievement and academic performance (see Brewster et al 2022; Chi Baik et al 2019). Working, as Schwittay expresses it, ‘within the belly of the beast’ (2021: 7), the pressures of curriculum delivery, targets and grades demand head-led rather than heart-led interactions.

A pedagogy of compassion echoes Freirean ideas of meaningful education that are anti-performative, based on truth and empathy (Freire 1997; Davies 2019). In practice it can also be about embracing the

unexpected (Schwittay 2021) which, in the case of our workshops, was facilitated by the lockdown situation we all found ourselves in. The story here aims to illustrate how we might interact beyond teaching and curricula, creating spaces for tutors and students to talk and write from the heart.

Developing compassion in teaching practice centres around a holistic approach where we are educating ‘the whole person’, described by Schoem (2017: 79) as a space where deep learning is possible when ‘teachers and students come to class as whole persons ... with a loving soul and soulful spirit’. This speaks to a heartfelt approach to research and education.

Following the heart thread, Abery and Shipman Gunson (2016) employ Hochschild’s notion of emotional labour to question how the different facets of our emotional selves are presented in our work. Hochschild’s reference to ‘surface’ and ‘deep’ acting make me think of the layers of persona we present in our professional roles. The emotional self, the soul deep heartfelt being, is too often sidelined for the outer, proper academic self – the tutor’s classroom persona.

Adopting an autoethnographic approach, Davies (2019) digs into his own journey of instilling compassion into his practice and describes the need to ‘unfreeze’ his mind in order to shift any preconceived assumptions or biases (p. 93). This is necessary, he argues, in a higher education context that prioritises performativity and competition over compassion and personal stories.

This is, then, a quest for authenticity. As I (**A-M**) reflect on these workshops, I question how ‘writing in university’ is often an inauthentic process for students and academics alike: with the self ‘removed’. Clearly there are exceptions, such as the creative pedagogy approach used by Gosling, Burke & MacLennan (2020) to foster authentic self-expression.

Writing beyond the grade

It was serendipitous timing that the workshops happened during the second long period of lockdown (between November 2020 and February 2021). It is perhaps one of the reasons why the students asked

for weekly workshops, just for themselves, as they quickly saw the therapeutic value of such a shared writing space that also enabled genuine interactions. As expressed by S: “I think this (...) is a personal approach with more eye for the individual, instead of the whole teacher-student concept. In the end we are all human beings, experiencing similar kinds of challenges and feelings, which this tool of WfW is addressing.”

When I first shared ideas about writing the self to a group of university lecturers at a ‘teaching and learning’ conference, the first question I was asked was “but how would you grade this kind of stuff?”. Therein lies the issue. University courses are so geared towards outcome / grade / product that anything not contributing to that is in danger of being regarded by many (staff and students alike) as optional, extra, superfluous to requirement. Attending to the self may also be seen as self-indulgent.

Students are familiar with reflective writing, as this is a common element in education and social sciences courses. Those reflections are, however, graded or at least form part of assignments. As one student once mentioned (to A-M) “I’m not going to really write from the heart when I know the tutor is grading it. I just need to get the grade”. When we write with an audience in mind, our writing clearly gets edited, crafted, sifted down to what is expected or required. Being invited to write freely, to be shared with nobody, is – for some – an unexpected and liberating experience; it is, as defined by Bolton (2011: 31) writing without ‘performance anxieties’. The workshops described here enabled students to release structure, let go of output, and just write themselves onto the page.

When we write the self, unloading on the page, we may be writing for protection (Wright, 2018), for personal and professional development (Bolton 2014), for mental health and healing (Pennebaker and Smyth 2016), or simply for the joy of writing in search of our authentic selves (Brandeis, 2004; Herring, 2007; Rentzenbrink, 2022).

There are many and interchangeable labels – or ‘different tribes and different languages’ as expressed by Wright (2018) - encompassing how we might write

the self. The range of approaches includes therapeutic journal writing (Thompson 2012; Adams 1990; Cameron 1994/2020); reflective writing (Bolton 2014); creative writing for therapeutic purposes (Goldberg 1986/2016); reflexivity within autoethnographic writings also has therapeutic and personal development outcomes (Ellis 2004; Adams, Jones & Ellis 2015)

Echoing approaches such as Pelias’ ‘methodology of the heart’ (2004), the process within a WfW workshop enables a compassionate dialogue as way of knowing the people behind the students, without expectations of output or grade. It is a process which might take students out of their comfort zone, inviting them to write in a different way.

Interlude: the wondering academic (A-M)

A question posed by Laurel Richardson (1997) accompanies me most days: “How do the specific circumstances in which we write affect what we write? How does what we write affect who we become?”

Well, it depends.

Wearing my University Lecturer Hat, I encourage my students to read and to produce writing that is informed, critical and rigorous. In their quest to achieve good grades, they battle with those demons from schooldays telling them they can’t write, and they learn a new language in order to produce an academic essay.

Wearing my Writing for Wellbeing Practitioner Hat, I create a safe space for my students to write from the heart, to splurge on the page whatever they need to say.

Here, they abandon their ‘student hat’ and return to the self.

Here too, I abandon my ‘lecturer hat’ and return to myself.

Wearing my Anne-Marie Hat, I write a daily journal, create poems while out walking in the world, jot down reflections about my day, my roles, my job in between to do lists and marking. In this hat my feet are firmly grounded, and nobody needs to read my writing.

How many hats does a university lecturer wear?

How many hats does an undergraduate student wear?

As Whitman's poem claims, 'we contain multitudes' (Walt Whitman 1819-1892): our identities are multifaceted, but too often we keep aspects of our selves hidden in order to perform 'the student' and 'the tutor'. Free writing from the heart can loosen us up from those expectations, norms, and bounded identities.

In one world I write poetry,

Laying my heart on the page.

In another world I mark assignments,

Tutting at bad grammar and 'lack of critical thought'.

Squeezed between worlds,

I resist writing for output -

All the while asking my students to write to rule.

A methodology of the heart²

A riddle offered in lieu of methodology:

It was not a research project,

It was not an optional module,

It was not any kind of module.

It was not a course,

It was not graded.

What was it?

It was an outlier.

It was a space apart.

It was serendipity.

It came from four students who asked:

"could we do this every week, just for us?"

It is a story to share.

The story does not fit into an ology.

I (**A-M**) offered a taster WfW workshop for the students, to introduce them to this way of writing before beginning their dissertation projects. The one taster session turned into a weekly (online) workshop over seven weeks in total. The story here is based on the experience of those workshops, which became self-contained, unrelated to the students' dissertation research, and really all about creating space for personal reflection and increased self-awareness.

To be a compassionate educator, we have to get out of our own way, and step away from any attachment to outcome or product. This poses something of a dilemma in the context of the teaching space. These workshops go some way then to providing a solution: create a third space, a liminal space, where output doesn't matter, there are no grades, and nobody needs to read your writing.

WfW as participatory research method

For their dissertations students would be 'insider researchers' in WfW workshops with their research participants; those workshops were followed up by narrative interviews. The workshops referred to in this story were bespoke sessions just for the student researchers.

WfW is a practice that sits within the field of therapeutic writing as outlined earlier; it is not a 'research method' per se. However, with careful preparation and alignment with ethical considerations, it is an approach that can be adapted and adopted for capturing voices and insights in research processes. As such it can be used as a creative portal into qualitative inquiry. The ethos of WfW clearly aligns with autoethnography's quest to begin inward, with the self (Adams, Jones & Ellis 2015:

² 'I speak the heart's discourse because the heart is never far from what matters. Without the heart pumping it's

words, we are nothing but an outdated dictionary, untouched.' (Pelias, 2004: 7)

46), as well as other participatory and creative qualitative approaches such as poetic inquiry (Kara et al 2021). It also echoes the Creative Pedagogy used by Gosling et al (2020): using poems, creating a safe space – the authors conclude that spaces for creativity, expressing the self/emotion, are largely absent from discussions about the role of higher education.

The WfW workshops were designed from established strategies and processes within the field of poetry/bibliotherapy (Alfrey et al 2021; Mazza 2017; Chavis 2011) and Writing for Wellbeing more broadly (den Elzen & Lengelle 2023), involving a triad of interaction between literature (stimulus), participant and facilitator (Hynes & Hynes-Berry 2014).

Inviting participants to free write from short prompts, the workshops usually followed a six stage process (see Hynes & Hynes-Berry 2014 and Chavis 2011) where we might for example (1) read a poem and explore elements within it that speak to us on an emotional level, then (2) respond by freewriting to a word or sentence; (3) sharing reflections thoughts about the process enables a (4) juxtaposition of ideas within the group; this may then help us to (5) reframe ideas and potentially take away an uplifting note to self or positive (6) action. Figure 1 offers an overview of one of our workshops, detailing the process and prompts used.

Each workshop opens with a brief check-in and reminder of the ‘group contract’ around confidentiality, non-judgemental responses, and keeping emotionally safe in the space. As a trained Poetry Therapy Practitioner (see www.iapoetry.org), I (**A-M**) led the workshops; it was important to emphasise to students that whilst the writing could have therapeutic outcomes for them, I was not a therapist, and the workshops were intended as safe spaces for personal and expressive writing. There is also never any requirement to share our writings, though we do share thoughts and reflections about the process of this kind of writing.

18.02.2021 Workshop no.7. Theme: Journeys and Pathways	
1	2 mins freewriting to land in this space: List the words that capture how you are feeling this afternoon – write from one of them
2	Writing from a poem: “ <i>The Journey</i> ” by Mary Oliver Read it aloud – one or two take turns to read it Prompts for 8-minute writing: 1. Choose words or a line that resonate for you, and write from there 2. Use the prompt ‘the only thing I can do is...’ and write from there
2b	Reflections and any sharing
3	Writing (6 mins) from images of pathways in nature Focusing on one image, write from one of these prompts: 3. On my path I will... 4. I’m walking towards ...
3b	Reflections and any sharing
4	Read through the writing you have done today. Where is your golden word? The word that you would like to take away with you today. This word is your prompt for final 2 mins writing.
5	Final thoughts and close of writing session

Figure 1: Outline of a WfW workshop, created by Anne-Marie Smith

In lieu of data: Personal Reflections

A confidential space of trust was created at the student workshops, offering space to collectively share and contemplate the writing process.

Reflections here are shared by **Kirsty (K)** and **Sharon (S)**, co-authors of this story and participants in the WfW workshops. **S** explains the process from her perspective: “writing from a prompt, if that is a poem or a picture – I really like that element, as it can sometimes take you out of your head and view your current situation from a different light.”

This reflects the way that WfW, in a similar way to therapeutic journaling (see Thompson, 2011) can lead to deep insights and a reframing of our thoughts. **K** echoes this, saying “It helped me to learn things about myself, and make sense of situations I was in (and sometimes to find a resolution.”

The writing that emerged from session no.7 (Figure 1) was powerful and led to deep personal insights. **S** interpreted the poem ‘The Journey’ as letting go of fear and finding the courage to be herself. She wrote about her own journey, one that ‘faced wolves and leeches’ (that fed on her fear), but finally reaching ‘calm waters and self-acceptance’.

Reflecting on the WfW method **S** describes it this way: “It is like therapy, as by sharing your stories you help build each other up. If someone felt down, we created a safe space and helped by giving a bit of our own perspective on the same topic.”

In one of the workshops around the theme of self-compassion (Neff, 2011), we drew a big spiral on a sheet of paper and then wrote around the spiral. The spiral slows our minds, by slowing our writing; we used the prompt ‘I look after me by ...’ as a springboard for writing.

K describes her experience: “I started from the inside and unravelled my thoughts as I worked outwards. It helped to slow down my writing and it felt as though I was unpacking a tightly bound idea. At the end I felt as though I’d explored a lot through my writing and (as clichéd as it may sound) – I felt at peace with what I’d written, like a weight had been lifted off my shoulders.”

In another workshop, the poem *Love after Love* (by Derek Walcott) had a profound impact on **S**. From her writing she shared the insights she had gained: “I’ve always been in the sea, swimming around other people’s islands. I never had anywhere to land. Now I

have found my place, my island. It was always about other people, now it’s about me.”

We talked about how we can be a stranger to our self, pass our self by in the mirror and focus too much on other people’s needs. **Sharon’s** writing led us to talk about the value of each having our own mantra or ‘warrior song’ to live by.

Writing in this way can feel quite alien to some students, who work hard to produce academic writing that will get them the grade. Writing the self opens up a whole new terrain; **K** describes this space as ‘reciprocal’ and ‘trusted’, adding that “It was a different space to my other ‘student’ spaces - there were no right or wrong answers, no pressure to say something; just a kind of ‘if it’s there and you want to share, go ahead’ mindset.”

It is revealing that **K** clearly differentiates the workshop space from her ‘usual’ teaching spaces, leading me (**A-M**) to question what is missing from my teaching spaces and think about how I might reconfigure them to help students regard them as reciprocal and safe? Elaborating on this, **K** also refers to the non-judgemental aspect of the WfW space: “I grew increasingly comfortable with opening up about my writing, as I learnt that we had developed a safe space to share such things without judgement.”

S echoes this feeling of safety: “I did feel as if the workshops opened up a more personal space between us. I perceived it as if everybody (by sharing their writing) gave a little piece of their humanity (the ugly, the good and the bad of our thought and emotion realm) to each other.”

The contrast between this approach and the academic writing we demand of students cannot be starker. Where WfW is all about the process, the essay is all about the product. In many ways it seems like we ask students to leave themselves at the door when they enter the lecture room. Creating a non-graded space where students can splurge on the page can bring catharsis and ‘meaning-making’ (Chavis 2011) as well as insights for personal development. Indeed, this is the aim of poetry/bibliotherapy, whose approach encourages participants to ‘really let go and write about (their) deepest emotions’ (Pennebaker 1997).

It is not about fixing things or offering therapy. As **S** puts it: “you don’t always want a response, so it’s good to just put it on paper”. **K** agrees, saying “It was really insightful to take my thoughts from my mind and jot them down on a piece of paper without pausing for grammar, punctuation or even giving a second’s thought to what I was writing. No judgement, just expression.”

This is a process also advocated in other writing for personal development approaches; a notable example is the work of Gillie Bolton who established the ‘six minute write’, a ‘fluid and open way of thinking aloud on the page; as such it cannot go wrong’ (Bolton 2014: 26). This is quiet, peaceful writing for at least six minutes, uninterrupted, alone, writing without stopping, ‘following the flow’ rather than any logic. The short, timed writing activities in our workshops enabled a similar free-flow process.

Journaling on my (**A-M**) experience of facilitating the workshops, I wrote that “this practice interrupts ‘business as usual’ of the lecture, the teacher-learner format – instead, a safe space, a co-creating space, a supportive space, where learning begins from the heart” (**A-M** personal reflections 28.01.21)

It was clear from these students that such safe spaces for self-exploration are needed, and that in the usual course of a university degree there is little room for it - other than ‘reflections’ that might form part of an assignment. **S** highlighted that ‘I feel as though it’s helped me to grow as a person (perhaps not noticeably enough for other people to see), but I feel a sense of peace within myself, and I genuinely think that the writing is the main factor behind that – because it takes my worries and stresses away from my mind and onto the paper. I feel happier. I can tell myself to ‘let it go’ and it’s much easier to do that since the writing workshops’.

S developed further reflections later in her dissertation, citing a workshop participant who said: “I’ve never been afraid to sit with my thoughts, though I have been known to get myself wrapped up in them – causing stress and worry. Since taking part in the workshops, I’ve grown to appreciate the process of writing these thoughts down and (though I’m not stress-free) I find it a much healthier process”.

Self-awareness was reported through having a dialogue with oneself. Another student from the research workshops remarked that during writing, she was ‘talking to myself but using ‘you’ ‘your’ or ‘we’ rather than ‘I’. Almost as though I’m giving someone else advice – yet I know that it’s meant for me’.

Over the seven sessions, we learnt that **S** is training to be a certified meditation teacher and practices yoga every day.

In reflections on her writing, **K** shares the huge love she feels for her family and her nephews, and how she misses her grandad who passed away.

Ing uses the poem she wrote about vegetables to talk about how her sister was always the favourite one.

B struggled with some of the writing, and reveals her love of drawing.

Would we have come to know these facets of each other’s lives and personalities in the context of the large lecture room?

As educators in HE we always seem to be working with established boundaries – whilst boundaries are a good thing, they can also restrict access to genuine relationships or understanding. The separate space of these 7 workshops went some way to break down some of those pre-established norms and boundaries. They also provided students with practical and creative tools they can continue to use in their day to day writing practices.

K has started writing a few times a week now, taking 5-10 mins to respond to “how am I feeling today”. She finds that it helps her make sense of things.

S started running her own WfW sessions with a small group of her friends, discovering new ways to explore emotional issues safely together.

Epilogue

The title of this story came from a comment by **Kirsty**; after some short 2-minute writing exercises she liked the way you could ‘catch’ your thoughts or emotions as they arose, then ‘drop’ them onto the page – and then the liberation of just leaving them there.

Nobody needs to read it.

Nobody is grading this.

This is just what you need to write.

Whatever you write is right.

Alongside my **(A-M)** day to day job as a lecturer, I continue to offer WfW workshops via the University's Wellbeing hub, open to staff and students. Attendees often include staff seeking 'space to do different writing' and postgraduate students wanting a break from thesis writing. Undergraduate students are less frequent attenders, and some have told me they just don't have time for 'this kind of extra stuff'.

As an off-piste activity that is not graded, it is somehow considered less valuable. Writing the self is also an uncomfortable and unfamiliar space for some. Bringing it into the 'mainstream', e.g., creating a WfW module, would mean output and therefore grading. This would deviate from the ethos of WfW, where the emphasis is on process rather than product. Without expectations of grade, in a safe and compassionate space, WfW is a powerful tool for accessing and attending to the self. As summed up by **S**: "from what I have written, I had no idea all this stuff was going on for me, it has been really powerful to learn about myself and what I am going through right now".

Writing retreats are commonly offered to staff and postgraduate students in Higher Education, usually to focus on academic writing – Stevenson (2021) has explored the wellbeing element of 'retreating together', the uplifting feeling of writing together in community. Similar spaces are less available for undergraduates.

But perhaps it is simply enough to find informal spaces to just splurge on the page; to create pockets within the usual day to day life of the university where we can, together, safely write ourselves off the grading and output radar.

Disclosure statement

The author(s) declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Acknowledgements

Anne-Marie would like to thank Sharon and Kirsty for their generous and enthusiastic commitment to this project beyond their student days.

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