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# Exploring the merits of including an optional reflexive writing workshop within a compulsory undergraduate module

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## Abstract

There is some evidence that reflective writing can have positive learning and teaching outcomes. Although there is some discussion in the literature about the merits of stand-alone creative writing workshops, to our knowledge there is not much evidence on the effects of a reflective writing workshop offered as part of a formal university module, with the aim to enhance and complement learning and encourage students to connect with the wider scholarly community through their writing. Brief testimonials were analysed using thematic analysis. The writing workshop appeared to provide a space to write freely while negotiating power structures in academia, a space to develop an individual writing voice and a writing habit. The publishing part of the workshop was also not taken up as much, which emphasizes the importance of focusing on the process rather than product in education.

## Keywords

university students, writing workshop, reflexivity, reflection, public engagement, authenticity

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## Introduction

Writing formal academic essays and reports is a key part of most academic courses. This type of writing enables students to acquire valuable academic skills such as writing concisely, laying out and backing up arguments with evidence. However, some scholars are concerned that asking students to write exclusively in a formal and impersonal language, without encouraging them to reflect on their learning experience, can lead to inauthentic writing (McDermott, 2019) and lower motivation and creativity (Amabile, 2017; Banegas et al., 2019). Furthermore, writing to pass a university module is typically a solitary experience, which does not typically encourage students to connect what they are learning with other aspects of their lives and the wider community. These factors could have negative effects on student creativity and overall development and could conceivably lead to a more superficial and consumerist approach to studying and learning (King & Taylor, 2020).

There are additional reasons why we need to re-think our teaching and search for new ways to engage students. Firstly, the student population is becoming increasingly diverse and has a variety of needs and aspirations. Furthermore, when teaching in compulsory modules, educators may have to make extra effort to increase students' motivation for studying, as students might not be intrinsically interested in the topic of the compulsory module. On top of that, the Covid-19 pandemic created new challenges for students and staff. For example, some universities substituted the typical semester teaching with compressed and online teaching, which challenged students' engagement and motivation (Harkin & Nerantzi, 2021).

Including reflection/reflexivity can help make the learning experience more authentic, active (Dyke, 2009; Howe & Wig, 2017), and creative (Amabile, 2017). Similarly, trying to communicate one's writing to the wider community can help bring the topic to life for students and make it more relatable and purposeful. Including a more authentic activity can increase motivation for learning (Nachtigall et al., 2022). Therefore, the first author of the current paper, who was the module leader for a core 2nd year undergraduate Cognitive Psychology module, decided to include opportunities for students to engage with the material in a more reflexive and authentic way. More specifically, a writing workshop was offered that encouraged reflective and free flow writing, with the view to publish media reviews, book reviews and reflexivity on studying (cognitive) psychology at university level.

## Authenticity

It can be challenging to create educational tasks that do not just have positive cognitive, but also motivational outcomes for the students. Educators typically have to construct simple tasks, especially in the early years of study. The reason we must do that is because the students do not have all the skills they need yet to deal with very complex tasks as they appear in the real world, and so we tend to present them with more simplified tasks that allow the students to build up their skills. However, this process can sometimes demotivate students, as the tasks can be difficult to relate to. In contrast, more authentic (and complex) tasks tend to increase motivation for learning (Nachtigall et al., 2022). Including more authentic tasks, alongside more traditional tasks, could potentially increase motivation for learning, and counteract any negative motivational outcomes of less authentic tasks.

According to Nachtigall et al. (2022), there are four different dimensions to authenticity: resembling real-life experiences, emulating the work of professionals, creating a community of practice, and engaging learners in personally meaningful activities. In the activities suggested in the current paper, there were elements of all these dimensions, with special emphasis on engaging learners in personally meaningful activities and emulating the work of professionals. Additionally, the students were encouraged to write for a real audience, which has been shown to have positive effects on motivation (Banegas et al., 2019). In summary, including a more authentic task could increase creativity and motivation.

Creative authenticity is another very relevant concept here. Vernon and Paz (2022, p. 1) have defined creative authenticity as “an ongoing process of learning to create through intrinsically motivated, self-aware and self-affirming actions and rationales”. This is important, because as Amabile (2017, p. 1) has suggested, “people will be most creative when they feel motivated primarily by the interest, enjoyment, satisfaction, and challenge of the work itself – and not by external pressures”. According to advocates of creative authenticity, it is important to make the learning experience personal and meaningful to each student and include elements of creative authenticity throughout the curriculum to reduce any implicit biases that might hinder students’ development. It is also important to focus on developing the students’ strengths, rather than only highlighting their limitations. Creative authenticity also aims to encourage marginalised groups to authentically relate their backgrounds to their learning. One of the aims of the workshop described in the current paper was to encourage the students to do just that; to relate to their learning authentically and reflexively, and create writing that reflects this.

### Writing for public engagement

Public engagement activities can help break down barriers between experts and non-experts. Public engagement writing involves publishing writing that is not the formal peer-reviewed papers. It can include writing reviews of books, plays, radio programmes while making connections to academic literature, as well as personal reflections on academic issues. These are typically published in magazines and online blogs. Academics and students have suggested that public engagement activities, including writing, can improve writing and communication skills, foster relationships with the outside world and even help to change it for the better (Cooper, 2015; Grant, 2021; Moriarty, 2016). Research is most of the time funded by taxpayers’ money and so researchers and scholars should ideally contribute to the public understanding of research. Furthermore, public engagement writing, along with other forms of public engagement, could inspire more individuals to become scholars.

However, sometimes public engagement activities can be perceived as inferior to academic work by academics and members of the public alike (Moriarty, 2016). Asking scholars to engage early on in their career with public engagement writing could help cultivate a more positive attitude towards public engagement. Undergraduate students are essentially going through a process of being transformed from non-experts to experts; engaging with public engagement writing during this crucial transitional time could not only help with their scholarly development, but also with creating scholars that are happy to combine formal academic work and public engagement later in their career. Furthermore, students’ public reflections can be a very important source of inspiration and valuable information for implementing changes in a sector that is undergoing vast

changes. It is also a way of connecting students that have studied at different times and in different disciplines and thus creating a community across time and space.

Indeed, Wong and Moorhouse (2018) have suggested that writing reflexively for a wider audience could increase creativity, motivation for and authenticity of writing. This is because the writer is forced to ask themselves questions about the audience, its reactions to the writing, and consider ways to make the writing read and understood by the audience; this encourages the writers to engage in a creative relationship with the audience.

Negotiating the publication of their writing directly with the editors could empower students to take more agency over their writing. Furthermore, the iterative process of reviewing a manuscript with an editor can provide a very fruitful opportunity for learning, which is not usually given to students when submitting assignments. One caveat of writing to publish is that this aspect of the workshop encourages students to focus on the product rather than the process (Bayat, 2016), which could encourage a more consumerist approach to learning (King & Taylor, 2020). The current reflexive essay aimed to explore this conflicting issue.

### Reflection/reflexivity

As mentioned earlier, public engagement writing can include a form of reflection on one's academic practice. Reflection and reflexivity are both relevant concepts here. According to Cunliffe and Easterby-Smith (2004, p. 2), while reflection refers to "giving order to situations", reflexivity is a more elaborate dialogic activity where the status quo can be challenged and even changed by the individual involved in reflexivity. When referring to previous studies, the term used will depend on the term that the authors used in their paper.

There is some evidence that reflective/reflexive writing can be beneficial for learning and teaching. Dyke (2009) suggested that reflection can promote ethical and authentic learning, while Edwards et al. (2002) claimed that reflexivity allows individuals to effectively negotiate their lives, as it enables critical evaluation of the underlying assumptions of social structures and challenge of the status quo. According to experiential learning theory, reflective learning can help students become active learners who can combine new knowledge with their experience to create a novel, personal and constantly-under-construction learning experience (Howe & Wig, 2017). Similarly, Epstein (1999) suggests that reflecting on one's practice and learning can enable practitioners to integrate personal values, beliefs, and attitudes with those of the professional culture. This intersection between personal and learned information could conceivably result in increased engagement and more authentic writing; it could even decrease consumerist approaches to studying (King & Taylor, 2020). A workshop that encourages students to write reflexively for public engagement in relation to (cognitive) psychology topic and/or learning experience could facilitate this integration.

Reflecting on one's learning and practice can also promote deeper and more autonomous engagement with the course material (Li & Yuan, 2022), possibly because reflection can facilitate the formation of associations and integration of information which can lead to deeper learning (Mann et al., 2007). Similarly, Howe (2016) suggested that reflective writing can facilitate and enhance the process of becoming an independent learner and promote active and student-centred learning. Furthermore, keeping a reflective study

diary can enhance motivation and comprehension, as cognitive off-loading on the paper can help scaffold self-regulated learning (Nückles et al., 2020). A workshop that encourages reflection on the learning material could help students establish such a beneficial reflective writing habit.

Reflecting on one's practice can be facilitated by a supportive environment, authentic context, and accommodation of a wide range of learning strategies, mentoring, and group discussions (Mann et al., 2007). Creative writing workshops can provide such an environment, where reflection/reflexivity can be nurtured and encouraged. Creative writing workshops can help improve writing, critical thinking, and meta-cognition for students with a variety of needs and backgrounds, and can become places for transformation, where writers' identities emerge (Howe, 2016). Furthermore, creative writing workshops have been shown to enhance creativity, problem-solving and academic writing skills (Senel, 2018) as well as encourage positive attitude towards writing (Jabali, 2018). It is conceivable that a workshop that encourages writing reflexively for public engagement, an activity that has strong creative elements, could also result in some of these positive outcomes.

### Key aims

The key purpose of the writing workshop discussed in this paper was to encourage the students to connect with the material of the formal Cognitive Psychology module in a creative and reflective/reflexive way, to increase engagement and deeper learning (Li & Yuan, 2022; Mann et al., 2007). It was hoped that the writing workshop could transfer enthusiasm and reflexivity to the formal module, reduce any alienation felt for the topic, and increase motivation. The instructor (Author AEP) aimed to create a space where all participants could develop reflective/reflexive writing in an encouraging environment (Bayat, 2016; Gilbert, 2021). Another key aim of the workshop was to encourage students to publish their writing, therefore engaging with a wider audience. We were also hoping that students would see themselves as independent writers, and perhaps come together to create a writers' community (McDermott, 2019). To our knowledge no other paper has reflected on the effects of a writing workshop that encourages public engagement reflections as part of a formal university module. The current paper provides an initial exploration of the experiences and outcomes of this unique writing workshop.

## Reflexive approach

### The wider context

Author AEP was the organiser and instructor of the workshop. Authors HJL, VL, and MH were students that participated in the workshops during term time. They were studying for a BSc in Psychology, and they were going through the second of the three years of their degree. An additional student from the same cohort participated in the workshop at a different time and did not contribute to the testimonials in the current paper. There were 320 students at the unit that could have participated in the workshop.

### The workshop

The workshop took place online, as did the formal Cognitive Psychology module. The instructor (Author AEP) created a space in the module's Moodle page that included the material for the workshop, such as an introduction, advice, tips and links to relevant journals and magazines. This is how the workshop was pitched to the students, this message appeared at the Moodle label of the workshop:

There is more to academic life than coursework and marks. We all know that the coursework marks don't fully represent a student's potential. There are many opportunities to get involved in writing and publishing, which help you gain skills, develop your academic profile, and become part of the MMU Psychology community and beyond. Formal academic writing (relevant to academic essays and reports) and less formal, personal writing (relevant to the current writing workshop) can be complementary and can both help you engage actively with the material of the course. Of course, this is completely optional, and if you are too busy now, you could engage with it at a later time.

The students were reminded in forum messages that they could participate in the workshop. The workshop was offered weekly for six weeks, and each session lasted an hour. The participants did not have to do any preparation, but there were links and readings provided with advice, suggestions, and published writing from fellow students.

The meetings took place online in Microsoft Teams. The first author had their camera on, and some of the students/participants did too. All participants conversed through microphones, and occasionally through text in the chat function of Microsoft Teams. After the last workshop had ended, student/participants were invited by email to write their impressions about the workshop and were given the option to become co-authors in the current paper. Again, it was made clear that both writing and becoming a co-author were entirely optional.

A typical session had the following structure: A short introduction from the first author regarding the aims of the workshop and writing tips and resources available, followed by a discussion on everyone's interests and what we could write that day. After that, all participants muted their microphones to focus on free-writing for five minutes. When that came to an end, we reconvened to either read what we wrote, or just describe what it was about. We discussed the merits of the book/programme, which gave the opportunity to discuss our interests. We also reflected on what it was like to write in a reflective way, and how it compared to writing for a formal assignment. Finally, students were encouraged to publish the finished articles and suggestions were given as to where to do so.

During the workshops, participants were encouraged to consider writing a review of a book/programme that had made an impression on them and potentially link it to a relevant journal article they came across in their studies; or a commentary on their experience of studying during the pandemic. We also discussed potential writing outlets, such as journals, magazines, and psychology-related websites the students could publish their writing in, such the British Psychological Society's flagship magazine 'The Psychologist'. The aim was to make students aware of differences in focus and style between different magazines and journals, and to encourage them to adjust their writing to fit a certain writing outlet. Students were encouraged to email editors to ask whether an article would be of interest. The students were given some instructions on how to approach editors. For example, they were told that in some cases it is more advisable to email the editor and propose a piece, and only write it if the editor agrees, while in other cases it was appropriate to write the piece and then submit it.

With the student who showed interest after the workshop had finished (not an author in this article), we focused on developing and publishing a book review across all sessions. Although the social element of interaction between students was missing from this

workshop, there was a continuation and accumulation of work on a certain writing piece, while the students that participated in the group sessions wrote a different piece each week.

Some scholars suggest that creative writing workshops should have a non-judgmental and egalitarian atmosphere (McAbee, 2020), where a community can be established through dialogue, openness and trust between educators and students. Educators should not be prescriptive in terms of how students should write (Gilbert, 2021). Furthermore, Bayat (2016) suggests that it is important to focus on the process rather than on the product of writing; focusing on the process can encourage individuals to experiment without fearing criticism or failure. Similarly, Gilbert (2021) suggests that creative writing workshops with a nurturing and playful environment could encourage, empower, and motivate participants and help them make novel connections. The writing workshop discussed in the current paper aimed to create the nurturing, friendly, egalitarian, and playful space described above, where students were engaged in writing on topics they were intrinsically interested in, to encourage reflective/reflexive writing with the view to publish the writing.

Schneider (2003, cited in McAbee (2020)) made several suggestions on how to create an effective writing workshop in a non-hierarchical spirit, where all participants can interact as equals. The writing workshop outlined in the current paper incorporated most of these guidelines. For example, all participants wrote a piece and discussed their writing. Students' drafts were not criticised during the workshop, in fact the positives attributes of the writing were highlighted. The instructor (AEP) read their own writing to the students, while giving the option to the students to either read out or just describe what they wrote. This was done to make sure that students did not feel that they were put on the spot. The students were given the freedom to write what they were interested in. Finally, although the instructor did not pursue learning in a new area, they showed vulnerability by reading a very first draft of what they were writing, a piece of writing that was by no means polished.

## Testimonials

Author AEP kept a diary of the writing workshops, in which they reflected on the workshops, and formed the basis of the current paper. This gives to this project an element of participant observation methodology.

Furthermore, in the spirit of students publishing their writing, student/participants were invited to write about their experience of the workshop and to participate as authors in the current paper. All quotes that appear in the 'Outcomes' section were derived from the students' testimonials.

## Author HJL

I have always had a passion for writing and, before starting university, I would regularly write blogs and lengthy social media posts in the context of my job as a health and fitness coach. Since I became a student again, I had noticed that I had started to second guess myself as a writer; I would start to write something, which, not too long ago I would have found easy to rattle off in just a few minutes, but find myself hesitating over the wording of it, or the tone of it or even whether the content is precise enough. In the process of learning the ropes within academic writing, I felt like I had lost an element of my creativity – I had noted relatively early on that individuality in your writing is not

something that is celebrated or encouraged. I was attempting to combine both into one, but the juxtaposition between the two styles of writing started to leave me feeling like an amateur at both, master of neither.

I was questioning whether I'd ever be able to write informally again, now that I'd entered the world of academia it felt like I'd signed an invisible contract to leave behind my love of blog-style writing, full of sarcasm and idioms and instead commit to the ever-so-serious nature of scholarly writing, citing and referencing everything I wrote.

After seeing a post on our university intranet site calling for students who had an interest in developing their creative writing, I decided to go along to see how it would be possible to develop both skills simultaneously. I learned quickly that Aspa also shared a love for creative and informal writing and that she had managed to find a way to incorporate both styles of writing into journals and publications by writing reviews and personal experience pieces, keeping the style relaxed and conversational but still relevant to psychology.

Having the opportunity to attend these sessions has helped me see that it is possible to incorporate a sense of individuality into some aspects of scholarly writing, without negating the quality of it. This has been such a valuable insight for me and something that I plan on implementing wherever is possible throughout my academic journey. After all, psychology is all about people, and I feel that it is valuable that those who are able and keen to add to the field academically are able to do so whilst maintaining an element of their individual voice.

### Author VL

The workshop reminded me that I have my own voice. During this time at university, we must back up our arguments with evidence. This chance to write so freely with myself as the narrator or just being able to express an opinion or experience without having to reference or guidance has been liberating! It is also a nice way to reflect and share what you have chosen to write about. Writing about a book you read can help you learn something new about the writer or explore interests that do not surface as readily in a conversation. It has helped improve on my own personal writing that's not academic and I will continue to use what I have learnt!

### Author MH

The workshop provided an opportunity for me to look beyond my academic assignments. It taught me to write in a totally different way compared to formal assignments. One of my favourite parts of the session was the five-minute exercise where we openly wrote about a topic. It allowed me to focus and reflect on topics that I enjoyed, such as my learning experience before and during lockdown or writing a few phrases about my favourite novel. The project leader advised and inspired me to do something I didn't know I really enjoyed. It was one of the best things that I did last year. I am going to keep practising my creative writing.

### Exploring the testimonials

The paper used an interpretative approach. According to this approach, knowledge of reality is a social construction (Eliaeson, 2002). Interpretivists search for meanings and motives that underline individuals' actions such as behaviour and interactions with others in the society and culture (Whitley, 1984).



Author AEP read through the above students' testimonials and identified the main themes using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) using NVIVO. First initial codes were identified, which were then reviewed, and overarching themes were identified and further reviewed.

It is important to note that, given that the testimonials were very short in length, it was not possible to conduct thorough analysis. However, this flexible method was ideal for discovering some important outcomes and experiences from the testimonials. These results are very preliminary. Due to the short length of the testimonials, there were not always quotes from all participants supporting each subtheme. It is also interesting to note that, initially an additional theme was developed, called 'positive and negative emotions', but it eventually became part of the second theme.

## Outcomes

The main overarching themes that were discovered from the students'/co-authors' testimonials were the following: (1) benefits of the workshop and of reflective writing, (2) formal vs informal writing; reflecting on power structures in academia, and (3) forming a writing habit (see Table 1)

**Table 1.** Table of themes and subthemes.

Theme	Subtheme	Authors that contributed to the (sub)theme
Benefits of the workshop and of reflective writing	Helping students find their individual voice	Authors HJL, VL, MH
	Foster personal interests	Author MH
	Learning through reflexive/public engagement writing	Author VL
	Sharing with others	Author VL
	Sparked interest in reflexive/PE writing	Author MH
Formal vs informal writing; negotiating power structures in academia	Formal academic writing	Author VL
	Formal education sometimes discourages PE writing and enhances self-doubt	Author HJL
	Trying to combine formal and informal writing	Author HJL
	Look beyond academic assignments and write in a different way	Authors HJL, VL, MH
Continue reflexive/PE writing after workshop has finished		Authors HJL, VL, MH

## Benefits of the workshop and of reflective writing

Given that the students/participants were asked by the instructor (AEP) to write their experiences of the workshop, it is not surprising that a big part of the testimonials

focused on the perceived benefits of the workshop. As can be seen in Table 1, the strongest subtheme, in the sense that it appeared in all students' testimonials, was 'helping students find their individual voice'.

The students/co-authors noted:

Having the opportunity to attend these sessions has helped me see that it is possible to incorporate a sense of individuality into some aspects of scholarly writing, without negating the quality of it. (Author HJL)

The workshop reminded me that I have my own voice. (Author VL)

One student/co-author also mentioned about the freedom they experienced:

This chance to write so freely with myself as the narrator or just being able to express an opinion or experience without having to reference or guidance has been liberating! [...] It has helped improve on my own personal writing that's not academic (Author VL)

The above testimonials suggest that participating in the workshop seemed to enhance confidence for and attitudes towards writing.

Other subthemes were also identified for this theme, but only in one participant at a time. Author VL mentioned the opportunity given to share the writing in the group:

It is also a nice way to reflect and share what you have chosen to write about.

Author MH suggested that the workshop encouraged students to focus on topics they were intrinsically interested in, as well as to express themselves openly:

One of my favourite parts of the session was the five-minute exercise where we openly wrote about a topic. It allowed me to focus and reflect on topics that I enjoyed, such as my learning experience before and during lockdown or writing a few phrases about my favourite novel.

Author VL also mentioned the opportunity to discover things through writing reflexively about them:

Writing about a book you read can help you learn something new about the writer or explore interests that do not surface as readily in a conversation.

The workshop also seemed to spark an unexpected interest in public engagement writing:

The project leader advised and inspired me to do something I didn't know I really enjoyed. (Author MH)

### Reflexive/reflective writing as a way of navigating power structures in academia

The testimonials suggested that reflective writing in the workshop was associated with positive emotions, while formal academic writing with negative emotions. This workshop gave participants the opportunity to explicitly negotiate their identity as writers in relation to both types of writing. This result illustrates that negotiating our own

individuality in relation to the formal academic way of writing can be challenging. It is important to note that the students did not reject formal academic writing, but merely pointed out some of its negative points, especially those relating to power structures. One of the authors alluded to the discipline involved in academic writing:

During this time at university, we must back up our arguments with evidence. (Author VL)

Author HJL, who had done reflexive/reflective and public engagement writing before, felt that formal academic writing and instructions discouraged them from writing for public engagement in a more personal way, and it sparked self-doubt.

Since I became a student again, I had noticed that I had started to second guess myself as a writer; I would start to write something, which, not too long ago I would have found easy to rattle off in just a few minutes, but find myself hesitating over the wording of it, or the tone of it or even whether the content is precise enough. In the process of learning the ropes within academic writing, I felt like I had lost an element of my creativity – I had noted relatively early on that individuality in your writing is not something that is celebrated or encouraged. I was attempting to combine both into one, but the juxtaposition between the two styles of writing started to leave me feeling like an amateur at both, master of neither.

Author HJL felt that the workshop gave them the opportunity to combine formal and informal writing, rather than pit them against each other. So in a sense, the writing workshop helped resolve the conflict between personal and formal writing, and made it more possible to integrate the two:

Having the opportunity to attend these sessions has helped me see that it is possible to incorporate a sense of individuality into some aspects of scholarly writing, without negating the quality of it. After all, psychology is all about people, and I feel that it is valuable that those who are able and keen to add to the field academically are able to do so whilst maintaining an element of their individual voice.

For the students that had not done much informal non-academic writing, the workshop gave them the opportunity to go beyond academic assignments, and write in a different way:

The workshop provided an opportunity for me to look beyond my academic assignments. [...] It taught me to write in a totally different way compared to formal assignments. (Author MH)

This is an important issue in terms of student diversity; one of the reasons that the writing workshop described here was created was to provide opportunities for engagement for those students that were looking for extra activities, beyond the activities of the formal course. Writing reflectively and for public engagement could provide such an outlet within any academic course. Overall, students felt free they could write about psychological topics they had a personal interest in, without having to conform to formal academic writing practices.

## Developing a writing habit / Continue writing after the workshop had finished

All three student co-authors mentioned that they would continue writing reflectively after the workshop had ended, which indicates that the workshop might have helped establish a writing habit:

Having the opportunity to attend these sessions has helped me see that it is possible to incorporate a sense of individuality into some aspects of scholarly writing, without negating the quality of it. This has been such a valuable insight for me and something that I plan on implementing wherever is possible throughout my academic journey. (Author HJL)

It has helped improve on my own personal writing that's not academic and I will continue to use what I have learnt! (Author VL)

It was one of the best things that I did last year. I am going to keep practising my creative writing. (Author MH)

## Discussion

### Benefits of the workshop and of reflexive writing

The participants/co-authors felt they were given the opportunity to write about their own interests and develop an individual writing voice and identity (Howe, 2016). They were told by the instructor that their voice and interests mattered and were worthwhile. The testimonials tentatively indicate that offering a reflexive/public engagement writing workshop can enhance writing confidence (Gilbert, 2021).

There is some evidence that meta-cognitive reflection can have benefits for formal academic writing and learning (Li & Juan, 2022; Nückles et al, 2020) as well as for the development of professional skills (Bolton, 2006; Epstein, 1999; Mann et al., 2007). The confidence acquired from reflective writing could enhance students' confidence in their ability to critically evaluate published academic studies.

The testimonials also suggest that the students felt a sense of freedom to pursue their interest, and there was an indication that the workshop sparked an interest in reflective writing, which suggest that attitudes to writing were improved, which agrees with previous studies (Bayat, 2016; Jabali, 2018).

One of the authors also commented on the benefits of writing reflectively and sharing their reflections with others, which hints to the notion of creating a 'community of writers' (McDermott, 2019). Note though that only one of the student co-authors referred to this.

### Formal vs informal writing; reflecting on power structures in academia

Students mentioned that they enjoyed the experience of writing about their interests and found the experience of writing reflexively, liberating. This suggests that the writing workshop created a friendly, encouraging, and egalitarian atmosphere that scholars have suggested is very important for writing workshops (Bacigalupe, 1996; Gilbert, 2021; McAbee, 2020).

Furthermore, the students' statements allude to power structures within academia that they feel they must navigate through compromise. Academic language and structures can

perpetuate power imbalances. Academic writing tends to require a level of detachment, objectivity and formality that can discourage reflexivity, developing an individual voice, and connecting to one's own interests. This highlights the tension of developing students' academic voice to the detriment and marginalisation of other 'voices' (Frawley et al., 2020). The testimonials suggest that the writing workshop allowed students to question the underlying assumptions and power structures of academia (Bolton, 2006; Dyke, 2009; Edwards et al., 2002; Epstein, 1999). The writing workshop offered a space where staff and students could interact as equals, explore their different practices and attitudes, and co-create an intercultural space, thus potentially promoting cultural competence (Frawley et al., 2020).

Another important outcome identified was the opportunity to actively combine personal experience with what they were learning in their course to create something new, as suggested by the experiential learning theory (Howe & Wig, 2017) and the advocates of the importance of creative authenticity (Vernon & Paz, 2022). This was particularly visible for author HJL. This author was already an established reflective writer and, before the workshop, had encountered difficulty in reconciling that identity with the identity of an academic writer, and their confidence in their writing had been challenged. The student was encouraged to reflect on the conflict between these two identities and attempt to reconcile them. This agrees with Epstein's (1999) suggestions that during the development of professional identity, reflecting on one's practice can help comprehend and integrate personal and professional values, beliefs and attitudes.

Similarly, Bacigalupe (1996) suggested that reflexive writing can create a more egalitarian atmosphere and enable the learners to have more control over the rate, depth, and intensity of their learning. More specifically, Bacigalupe (1996) emphasises the importance of 'writing with' the patients within a therapeutic setting, which can create a more egalitarian atmosphere and help reduce any power dynamics between therapist and patient. Given that there is a power imbalance between students and lecturers, writing together could reduce this imbalance. The fact that the students felt empowered to discuss about the power imbalance within academia, suggests that they felt at ease, free to express their opinions.

The student co-authors also noted that it was freeing to write a piece without needing references. It is conceivable that having a space where one can reflect on their own experience in relation to psychological concepts without trying to relate them to the wider scholarly literature, could be helpful for enhancing scientific creativity, certainly at the initial stages of learning about an area or starting a project. That said, as alluded above, the two types of writing are not necessarily mutually exclusive. In the workshop, students were encouraged to write pieces that combine both academic literature and personal experience, but, admittedly, the timescale of the workshop did not permit such a venture.

### Forming a writing habit

Goda (2019) noted that it is important for writing to become a habit and to develop independence in writing; the testimonials suggest that this might have been achieved with the workshop, as all participants mentioned that they would continue writing reflexively after the workshop had finished. There was also some tentative evidence that reflection helped students become more autonomous learners (Li & Yuan, 2022),

motivated to learn and self-regulate their learning (Nückles et al., 2020). Developing a writing habit is a very good way of becoming a more autonomous learner.

### Were the key aims achieved?

Based on the testimonials, there was not much evidence that the workshop made the students connect more deeply with Cognitive Psychology. However, the students were not asked specifically on why they did not write for cognitive psychology and whether the workshop helped them with their formal cognitive psychology essay, so it is impossible to draw firm conclusions. Although initially the instructor/ author AEP had aimed to ask students to write on cognitive psychology, in practice the topics of interest became much broader, in relation to higher education experience and psychology in general. This speaks for the flexible and student-centred character of the workshop. Furthermore, the testimonials suggest increased engagement with the topic of psychology, which is a very positive outcome.

We believe the second aim was met, i.e., we were able to create a welcoming and encouraging space where the students felt comfortable and free to write and reflect (Bayat, 2016; Gilbert, 2021). The third aim, i.e., for students to publish their writing independently, was less successful.

Finally, apart from a mention of the importance of sharing the writing by one of the student co-authors, there was not strong support that the workshop created community of writers (Mc Dermott, 2019), although again it is not possible to be certain of this, as the testimonials were very brief. Perhaps in the next run of the workshop, interactive activities that could include peer reviewing between students, and collaborative writing could strengthen the sense of community among students.

### Limitations and future directions

The current paper is primarily an observational and reflective account, so the findings are very preliminary. The small size of the testimonial did not allow for an in-depth investigation that formal semi-structured interviews would have allowed. There had been no plan regarding researching and writing up this activity, and it evolved through writing about the workshop and interacting with the academic literature and editors. A study with a proactive plan could have recruited participants and collected qualitative and quantitative data and included a control group to evaluate systematically the effect of complementary writing workshops on student experience, attitudes, and skills. Author AEP could have asked for ethical approval and conducted lengthy semi-structured interviews or focus groups.

Furthermore, it is important to keep in mind that reflective writing is not always appropriate or beneficial. For example, individuals could be re-traumatised from writing about traumatic events especially if coping skills have not been taught (Esterling et al., 1994). In our case, the writing workshop took place during the first lockdown of the Covid-19 pandemic, which was a traumatic time for many individuals. Nevertheless, the writing workshop described in the current paper encouraged reflection on fairly positive issues (e.g., favourite book, inspiring topics for the participants). If anything, there was an indication that students appeared to feel more confident and positive about their identity as writers, and the testimonials reflect the positive atmosphere of the workshop.

Similarly, Mann et al. (2007) suggests that reflecting on one's practice is not necessarily beneficial if it is not combined with learning, and it is sometimes considered a waste of

time by learners and practitioners. Reflection needs to be nurtured to develop. For example, Nückles et al. (2020) suggest that a structured and instructive approach is needed for reflective writing to be beneficial, one that includes worked examples and prompts. In our case, the workshop had a rather simple form, without any structured prompts or progression. A more structured and scaffolded approach (Nerantzi, 2015) with a developmental trajectory in which later sessions being more challenging and building on skills developed in earlier sessions could create a more effective workshop.

The workshop described in the current paper was designed to have high levels of authenticity. Interestingly, some scholars suggest that authenticity does not always have positive educational outcomes and should not be the main focus when developing academic writers (Badley, 2008; Nachtigall et al., 2022). For example, Nachtigall et al. (2022) note that whilst some highly authentic educational activities can lead to enhanced motivation, the cognitive outcomes of the activity can be relatively low. This might be because most authentic activities tend to be high in complexity, but low in instruction, which could potentially make the activity less effective in terms of cognitive outcomes.

On the other hand, less authentic activities typically have the opposite problem, they have a lot of instruction and scaffolding, but the students sometimes find them tedious and difficult to relate to. In fact, this is the problem the workshop in the current paper was trying to address. Nachtigall et al. (2022) suggests that it is important to find the sweet-spot between complexity (as emphasised by activities high in authenticity) and instruction (as emphasised in more traditional teaching, where simpler tasks are used), in order to increase both motivational and cognitive outcomes. The idea of the workshop described here was to address this balance, by including a highly authentic optional activity within a traditional educational environment. The testimonials suggest that the activity somewhat increased motivation.

Interestingly, Banegas et al. (2019) showed authenticity of the audience in an activity where university students are encouraged to write in order to publish, increased motivation only for more proficient 2nd and 3rd year students, and not so much for 1st year students, some of whom refrained from publishing their writing. This suggests that authentic tasks might be more appropriate for more advanced study. In the current paper, the students were in the 2nd year of study. The hesitation to publish suggests that writing to publish is perhaps an activity more suited for 3rd year students, where the students have all the skills they need to work on complex and more authentic tasks. That said, the testimonials suggest that the workshop did inject some positivity and motivation to the students, by reminding them that there was a way to connect with the material they learned in a more personal way.

Although one of the workshop's aims was to encourage students to get in touch with editors and negotiate the publishing of their writing, this part of the workshop was not taken up much by the participants. This could be partly due to the short timescale of the workshop, and the busyness of the semester. It also brings to mind the importance of focusing on the process rather than product (Bayat, 2016). The emphasis of the workshop on the product went also against the advice by Bolton (2004), which suggests that initially, (therapeutic) writing should be free from criticism and from any constraints, and from any notion of audience.

However, there were some publications. One of the participants (Author HJL) did write a reflection in an internal publication for students in the department. Furthermore, another

student (not one of the authors) that wrote the book review, uploaded the book review they wrote on Reddit, where the author of the book and other readers posted their comments and feedback. Websites such as Reddit were not recommended in the workshop, but in retrospect they are excellent for fostering what McDermott (2019) called a 'community of writers'. Internal publications and Reddit can be excellent stepping stones for developing publishing impactful and academic writing. In retrospect, such outlets might have been more beneficial for the students at the second year of studying. These publications allow students to connect with the immediate community and gently introduce them to the idea of writing to publish.

## Closing Remarks

In summary, in this paper we reported a reflexive writing workshop within a compulsory unit, that encouraged students to write reflexively about their educational experience, with the view to publish their writing. These workshops offered a safe and non-judgemental space for students to engage with the writing process and find their own voice. The preliminary results suggested that the writing workshop encouraged students to get in the habit of writing in a reflective and creative way, to find and have confidence in their own voice. It also allowed the students to reflect on the challenges they face with formal academic writing, which reflects power structures within academia. There was some indication that the students were able to better integrate their individual values, beliefs, and attitudes with those of the academic culture (Epstein, 1999; Vernon & Paz, 2022). As a result, we feel that this highly authentic activity increased students' motivation for learning and potentially counteracted negative motivational outcomes of the formal educational experience.

Nevertheless, this paper is merely observational and reflective. As Howe (2016) suggests, we need rigorous studies to assess the effectiveness of writing workshops and the effect of student-centred activities with emphasis on writing, critical thinking, building of identity, and communication skills, in which the student can study a topic they are interested in.

The writing workshop described here could be easily adopted for other disciplines and professional areas at university level when additional activities are needed, e.g., during a personal tutoring session. This paper is important because it explores the use of an alternative space within university study to be creative and develop interests and writing style within the formal academic space. This is crucial within a wider context of universities undergoing significant changes and constantly seeking ways to engage their diverse student population and enable them to be adaptable a rapidly changing world (James & Chrissi, 2019). We hope that we have shown that it is possible to create a space for experimentation and creativity where students and staff feel safe to reflect on their practice and attitudes, find common ground, and develop their writing voice.

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