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Reflective writing: I wouldn't start from here – examining a professional development initiative to enhance the scholarly activity of English HE in FE lecturers

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1 **Reflective writing, I wouldn't start from here: examining a professional**
2 **development initiative to enhance the scholarly activity of English HE in FE**
3 **Lecturers.**

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7 Abstract

8 This paper explores the nature of reflective writing through the experience of the
9 researchers in running a series of writing workshops with a group of Higher
10 Education practitioners working in a UK Further Education College. The focus here
11 is on reflective writing, which was chosen to start the sequence of workshops, as it
12 was perceived as a form of writing with which the participants would be familiar,
13 given its role in the education and development of teachers within the sector. Our
14 assumption was that this familiarity would facilitate the writing process and
15 participants would readily respond by engaging in reflective writing. However in
16 practice this proved not to be the case, despite being introduced to a variety of
17 different forms of writing over a series of workshops it took the participants longer
18 than we expected to begin to write. This led us to question our assumptions about
19 the starting point for the writing workshops and what they might achieve. The paper
20 draws on field notes made during the writing initiative and data gathered through
21 focus groups and interviews with the participants, as well as extracts of their writing
22 to examine their experiences. Different conceptualisations of reflective writing are
23 identified and their implications are explored in relation to the participants'
24 engagement with writing and their experience of professional development.

25 Keywords: Continuing Professional Development, Collaborative Writing, Scholarly
26 Activity, Action Research

27

28 This paper derives from an action research project which explored the uses of writing
29 as a means of professional development with a group of Higher Education (HE)
30 practitioners working in a UK Further Education (FE) College (Gale et al, 2013).

1 The focus here is on reflective writing, as reflection and reflective practice have
2 become widely associated with professional development in education (Schön, 1987;
3 Day 1993; Forde et al, 2006). Writing has become established as a means of
4 engaging in reflection through narrative storying of practice (Bleakley, 2000; Bolton,
5 2005). However, concerns have been expressed about the ways in which reflective
6 writing may be implemented, through instrumental, prescriptive routines and an
7 individualistic focus (Boud and Walker, 1998; Kilminster et al, 2010). This paper
8 explores how prior conceptions of reflective writing and professional development
9 can inhibit meaningful reflective writing, but also how supportive, collaborative
10 practices can open up spaces in which (genuine) personal and professional
11 development can take place. In doing so it also demonstrates how our use of an
12 action research approach allowed the research to evolve during the writing
13 workshops.

14

15 **The use of reflective writing for continuing professional development**

16 There is a long tradition of reflective writing for professional development across a
17 variety of fields, such as nursing, social work, teaching, counselling (Holly, 1989;
18 Moon, 1999; Bolton, 2005). However despite such wide usage it cannot be assumed
19 that this is underpinned by shared understandings. The literature offers differing
20 views of the nature of reflection and its role in professional development (Jay and
21 Johnson, 2002; Tummons, 2007), which is acknowledged as leading to some
22 uncertainty amongst students regarding what they are required to do (Bolton, 2001;
23 Moon, 2004; Mair, 2012). Similarly there are different approaches to reflective
24 writing, ranging from individual journals and collaborative blogs to structured frames
25 and closely directed tasks (Holly, 1989; Hughes, 2005; Mair, 2012). Thus reflective
26 writing is frequently used to evidence and assess an assumed underlying skill of
27 reflection (Sen, 2010) rather than as a means of reflection in its own right (Charon
28 and Hermann, 2012).

29 The growth of reflection for professional development across the fields of education,
30 social work, medicine and nursing since the 1980s has led to the need for evidence
31 of its use and effectiveness. Professionals in many sectors are required to keep

1 some form of written record of their reflection, such as a personal log, journal or
2 portfolio, often in electronic form (Kilminster et al, 2010), occasionally collaboratively
3 constructed (Hughes, 2005). Reflective writing is also used within teacher education
4 programmes to provide opportunities to relate theory and practice and link to
5 professional standards (Bain et al, 2002; Griffin, 2003). These uses of writing
6 illustrate how it may be conceptualised as simply evidencing the skill of reflection
7 within a defined context, rather than as the means of attaining reflection in its own
8 right (Charon and Hermann, 2012).

9 Bolton (2005:46) describes writing as a 'first order activity' that provides a means of
10 creating understandings, of clarifying thought, rather than just being a way of
11 recording them. Her view of reflective writing aligns with Richardson and St Pierre's
12 (2005) conceptualisation of writing as a 'method of inquiry', a means of exploration
13 and discovery, of deliberation and analysis. Holly (1989) suggests that the power of
14 writing derives from its capacity to plug into tacitly held knowledge, since in order to
15 write we have to clarify, order and express implicit understandings and make them
16 explicit. Bleakley (2000) similarly argues that writing offers new ways of
17 conceptualising experience and a means of accessing tacit knowledge.
18 Furthermore he suggests that if writing is a vehicle for reflective practice, then the
19 form of writing employed will define the nature of the resultant reflection. Given the
20 rise of performativity and the audit culture which increasingly define the role for
21 reflection, there is a risk that the writing activities prescribed will not allow reflection
22 to move beyond instrumental and technical-rational outcomes (Ball, 2003; Bleakley,
23 2000; Kilminster et al, 2010). This is particularly likely when such activities do not
24 capitalise on the benefits offered by collaborative engagement.

25 For many teachers within UK Further Education, who undertake their teaching
26 qualification whilst already teaching, there is little time for more than a superficial
27 engagement with reflective writing, many reporting they don't have time to reflect
28 after completing their qualification (LSDA, 2003). Teacher education within the
29 sector has been shaped by the introduction of professional standards (FENTO,
30 1999), their revision, the introduction of Qualified Teacher status for the Lifelong
31 Learning Sector (QTLS) (LLUK, 2006) and subsequent revision following the
32 Lingfield report (2012). The standards were expressed through sixty-nine tightly

1 specified statements, just one of which acknowledged reflection as a means for the
2 evaluation and development of practice. Consequently teacher education
3 programmes for the FE sector have been constrained by compliance with these
4 prescriptions (Brand, 2007; Lucas et al, 2012). Therefore although FE practitioners
5 might be expected to have encountered reflection and reflective writing, their
6 experience is likely to be within a prescriptive format i.e. being directed to reflect on a
7 particular aspect of practice and provide reflective writing to fulfil a specific course
8 requirement. Hence it is unlikely they will use reflective writing regularly or in the
9 ways Bolton (2005) and Charon and Hermann (2012) envisage as a means to
10 reflect, rather than to evidence that reflection has taken place.

11 A series of UK government reforms have resulted in increased regulation of the FE
12 sector with subsequent reduction in professional autonomy (Orr, 2009). In addition
13 to the restructuring of teaching qualifications within the sector (Lucas, et al, 2012),
14 from 2007 teachers within the sector were required to undertake and document 30
15 hours of continuing professional development (CPD) annually (Orr, 2009). This was
16 envisaged as a desirable professional requirement to ensure practitioners constantly
17 update their knowledge and skills (LLUK, 2008). While reflection was identified as
18 integral to this updating, it was represented through the lens of LLUK requirements
19 rather than reflection that leads to risk taking or innovation (Bolton, 2005). However
20 the Lifelong Learning United Kingdom requirement for all publicly funded institutions
21 to provide the requisite hours of CPD for their staff meant that this frequently became
22 staff development, based around institutional needs rather than individual
23 professional development (Orr, 2009). In the wider context of central regulation of
24 the sector (Lucas, 2004) it has become another box to be ticked in service of
25 managerialist accountability (Orr, 2009). However many FE practitioners enter
26 teaching as established professionals in their subject area and hence are often
27 subject to competing professional development requirements, with those from their
28 original profession overlaid with teaching (Spenceley, 2006).

29 The situation is even more complex for HE in FE practitioners who have the
30 additional requirements to engage in scholarly activity and research (Child, 2009;
31 Gale et al, 2013; Hillier & Morris, 2010). There has been a longstanding tradition of
32 the provision of HE in UK FE colleges, reflecting their recognised status as centres

1 of vocation or work-focused training, and their ability to widen access of HE to
2 underrepresented groups (Parry, 2009). A renewed government focus was placed
3 on the provision of HE in FE (DfES, 2003), supported through the introduction of
4 Foundation Degrees. These represented a work-focused, sub-degree level
5 qualification that would be delivered primarily in FE colleges; with the opportunity to
6 progress on to the final year of an honours degree through the accredited institution
7 (HEFCE, 2000). Following this there was clear direction for those involved in the
8 provision of foundation degrees to be engaged in staff development relevant to their
9 HE teaching, with activities such as research and scholarly activity included within
10 these recommendations (HEFCE, 2009). These recommendations were made by
11 the HE funding body, however, the majority of HE in FE staff are employed by an FE
12 college, therefore expected to adhere to the staff development requirements of the
13 college. Consequently this imposition of staff development by the IfL and LLUK is
14 even less relevant to the development needs of HE in FE practitioners, since it is
15 invariably directed at the main business of the institution, namely FE, rather than
16 supporting their HE teaching (Turner et al, 2009). Thus for teachers within FE, but
17 particularly for HE in FE staff, CPD frequently represents an externally directed
18 process over which they have little or no control and which has limited relevance for
19 them personally or professionally.

20 Although the need for staff to be involved with scholarly activity and research had
21 been highlighted, studies (Child, 2009; Turner et al, 2009) have demonstrated that
22 the process of engaging with these activities is problematic due to a number of
23 reasons (e.g. lack of time, experience or institutional support). The process of being
24 research active and scholarly draws on many of the principles inherent to reflective
25 practice such as risk taking, innovation, creativity, critical thinking (Bolton, 2005;
26 Moon, 2004). Therefore we identified that by encouraging HE in FE lecturers to be
27 reflective, we would promote their sense of scholarliness and begin to foster a
28 culture of scholarship and potential research. This goal was taken forward through
29 these following questions:

- 30 • How writing can be used as a method to inquire into learning
- 31 • How this can contribute to individual teaching practice and student learning.

1 The paper will explore the use of writing workshops to support and develop the
2 use of writing, specifically reflective writing, as a means of professional
3 development amongst HE in FE practitioners. It is written from the perspectives
4 of the team involved in the design and implementation of the CPD programme, as
5 it is the knowledge gained through this process that provides valuable insights
6 into the use of reflective writing for CPD. Drawing on data captured through a
7 focus group and individual interviews we examine how participants' conceptions
8 of professional development and their prior experiences of reflective writing
9 initially served as barriers which restricted their engagement with the writing
10 process. We demonstrate how this position changed over the course of the
11 initiative, as evidenced by extracts of their writing. Thus, this paper explores the
12 role of reflective writing and also considers the conceptualisation of professional
13 development amongst a group of college practitioners.

14 **Design – the writing project:** the methodological approach.

15 The project was framed as action research, but as already documented (see Gale et
16 al 2013) it explored collaborative practices within the context of professional
17 development. Action research, often referred to as practitioner research, is a mainly
18 collaborative approach used in education to improve practice (McNiff and
19 Whitehead, 2010). Originally credited to the work of Kurt Lewin it has evolved and
20 diversified, offering a flexible, powerful and empowering technique to understand and
21 develop practice (Somekh and Zeichner, 2009). As such it offered opportunities for
22 us as the researchers to engage with the participants in a collaborative exploration of
23 the nature of writing and understandings of professional development. We also
24 sought to build up 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of the process we were
25 engaged with. This was achieved by us, as researchers and facilitators of the
26 professional development initiative, capturing field notes of the workshops and our
27 own reflections of the process we engaged with. These field notes were
28 supplemented by a diverse range of 'data sources' through which we sought to
29 represent the experiences of the HE in FE lecturers. These included collective and
30 individual discussions (in the form of focus groups and interviews) of participants'
31 experiences and responses to the initiative, as well extracts of writing, as and when it
32 was produced. This allowed us to remain responsive to the complexities of both

1 CPD and the context in which we were working. This responsiveness maintained
2 our sensitivity to what was happening, conversations that were taking place and the
3 reactions of the participants to the ideas and activities they were introduced to.
4 Consequently our inquiry very much unfolded and evolved (Bergson, 1991) out of
5 the CPD initiative; the action research lens provided the flexibility to accommodate
6 this (Gale et al 2013).

7 The project began as a planned series of six writing workshops. It was hoped that
8 the writing workshops would provide a starting point from which practitioners might
9 explore their experiences of writing with the aim of moving their writing forward.
10 However, it soon became apparent that our initial plans for the workshops needed to
11 be reviewed and revised, as, despite engagement and discussion in the sessions no
12 actual writing was forthcoming. The framing of the CPD initiative through the lens of
13 action research provided the flexibility to revisit our approach and address this
14 reluctance to write.

15

16 **The data**

17 The workshops represented the process by which writing was being explored and
18 developed, but, as mentioned above, the discussions that took place within them
19 also constituted a source of data about the developments that were taking place.
20 Consequently, in addition to the workshops, field notes were captured during and
21 after the sessions on what had taken place, and reactions to the session content
22 (researchers' and the participants'). Two focus groups were used to stimulate group
23 reflections around the process of writing; this first focus group took place at the
24 beginning of the initiative, as we were beginning to get to know each other and
25 allowed exploration of their experiences in HE in FE, attitudes and experiences to
26 CPD and writing. These themes were revisited toward the end of the initiative. The
27 interviews took place after the second focus group; we explored individual
28 experiences and applications of the knowledge gained through the CPD initiative to
29 practice. The focus groups and interviews also represented a time in which we were
30 able to share our own reflections and interpretations as a means of invoking further
31 responses. This was shaped by St. Pierre's (1997) concept and use of 'response

1 data'. Repeatedly we blurred the boundaries between research participant and
2 knowledge creator, as at times we (the providers of the CPD initiative) became
3 researchers as well as respondents as we moved between the different forms of
4 data we were working with. For each source of data we engaged in careful readings
5 and re-readings to identify the cross-cutting themes that emerged: experiences of
6 writing - professional writing; conceptualisations of reflective writing; reflective writing
7 practices; writing as a means of expression.

8

9 **The CPD initiative - the writing workshops**

10 We designed six writing workshops themed around different forms of writing, two
11 workshops considered different practices of reflective writing (Schön, 1987; Moon,
12 1999), one exploring parallel chart writing (Charon, 2008), a fourth introducing
13 observation and two final sessions considering different methods of collaborative
14 writing (Gale and Wyatt, 2010). We assumed that the practitioners would be familiar
15 with reflective and observation writing from their teaching qualification and
16 experience of observations within their current practice. We sought to extend their
17 understandings, by seeking examples of observations beyond teaching practice and
18 introducing collaborative writing as an individual and collective process, whereby
19 individuals write in response to a theme, share and discuss their writing, then make
20 subsequent revisions following Gale and Wyatt (2013). Charon's (2008) concept of
21 parallel chart writing, introduced to enable medical practitioners to document the
22 affective dimension alongside the clinical record, was likely to be completely
23 unfamiliar. By positioning writing in these different ways the workshops aimed to
24 stimulate the participants' interest, challenge their prior experience and offer new
25 possibilities for writing.

26 The workshops were presented to staff as providing an opportunity to participate in a
27 series of collaborative writing activities aimed at promoting and enhancing teaching,
28 learning, research and scholarly activity within a framework of CPD. They were
29 scheduled to take place over a six-month period, as twilight sessions within the
30 College; as the project developed a Saturday workshop was added at a peaceful
31 rural hotel. The duration of the project allowed time for the participants to absorb

1 and reflect on new possibilities for writing before engaging with them practically.
2 Time was thus an essential component of the project, as participants developed their
3 understandings of different forms of writing, the opportunities offered by the
4 workshops and the group became a mutually supportive environment in which
5 writing could be shared.

6 The format of the sessions varied. The early sessions used the work of key theorists
7 (Schön, 1987; Bleakley, 2000; Moon, 1999) to explore conceptualisations of
8 reflection, reflexivity and reflective writing and encourage participants to identify
9 opportunities for reflective writing. Charon's work was used to introduce the concept
10 of parallel chart writing and the contrast between a formal, factual account and more
11 personalised writing. Participants made comparisons with formal college documents
12 and shared ways in which they already added a personal parallel, such as a
13 reflective blog and personal notes to accompany tutorial records and considered
14 other possibilities. For later sessions participants were asked to bring and share
15 examples of writing. Their observation writing included people in a queue,
16 surroundings of a new office and the species student. The collaborative writing
17 sessions began with participants sharing their writing on 'A professional act', each
18 reworked their piece in response to the comments generated in the group.
19 Alongside the writing participants were often invited to read a short article to frame
20 the particular style of writing, thus we sought to integrate the theoretical and practical
21 aspects of each style of writing to stimulate informed discussions around the different
22 forms of writing.

23

24 **The participants**

25 The participants were a group of teaching staff from a range of professional
26 backgrounds who were engaged in teaching HE at an FE college within the
27 University partnership. Eight members of staff volunteered to take part in the writing
28 workshops, although not all attended every session. All have been given
29 pseudonyms here. Participation in the sessions and suggested writing activities was
30 optional, individuals attended when they could and shared only what they chose to.
31 This created a supportive space in which individuals came to write, the resultant

1 fluidity and flexibility contributed to our re-conceptualisation of the group as an
2 assemblage, a constantly evolving, changing, merging of individuals and
3 individualities (see Gale et al 2013). The essence of this grouping being its focus on
4 writing, individual roles and relationships (lecturer, manager, researcher) subsumed
5 as we explored new writing terrains together.

6

7 **Findings**

8 **Conceptualising professional writing.**

9 The participants engaged with all the workshop activities and the resultant
10 discussions were lively, wide ranging, thoughtful and thought provoking as those
11 involved voiced their views and considered different theoretical positions. The
12 workshops encouraged participants to consider their writing practices, the forms they
13 used, when and why they wrote, and these were revisited in the first focus group.
14 The participants grasped these opportunities to discuss familiar aspects of writing,
15 and generating a range similar to those noted by (Lea and Stierer, 2009). This
16 functional starting point also elicited references to different approaches to the
17 physical act of writing, as well as different forms and styles of writing for different
18 purposes and audiences. The two reflective writing workshops stimulated discussion
19 around questions of professionalism, echoing the wider discourses surrounding the
20 professional development of teachers (e.g. Bain et al., 2002; Griffin, 2003), which
21 were continued in the first focus group. These discussions explored ways in which
22 'professional' is theorised involving autonomy, responsibility and integrity (Strike,
23 2000) and practically experienced (Spencerley, 2006), whilst being manifested
24 through instrumental teacher standards (LLUK, 2006) and subsumed within
25 regulated CPD (IfL, 2010). The participants explored conceptualisations of
26 professionalism in relation to their writing; whilst accepting the centrality of writing to
27 their professional role, they considered that this was not something they always had
28 control over:

29 'Professionally you don't really have a choice do you? Something's got to be
30 done and that's your desk and there's your computer' (Matthew, FG1)

1 They expressed the ways in which they felt their writing was constrained, either by
2 their own criteria, or by policy:

3 '[...] we've got to reply to emails within a certain time.' (David, FG1)

4 '[...] to try to make sure that the tone is right and the content is right and if I
5 think that it's appropriate [...]' (Tony, FG1)

6 As well as by the demands of the tasks themselves:

7 'in fact you've got to get yourself into a particular frame of mind, you know, I'm
8 in a report writing frame of mind, marking essays frame of mind, or whatever'
9 (Paul, FG1)

10 **Conceptualising reflective writing**

11 Interestingly reflective writing was positioned as a professional requirement:

12 '[reflective] writing is required now, isn't it, in the professional capacities, so
13 we've got no choice' (Tony, FG1)

14 This perception of reflective writing as something enforced upon them merits some
15 further discussion within the context of the project. While CPD requirements were
16 externally imposed, originally by their teaching qualification, then more recently
17 through externally driven CPD frameworks to which their college adhered (e.g. IfL,
18 2010), the writing workshops had been presented as a voluntary form of CPD, yet
19 these opened with reflective writing. Given the tensions **that** emerged around
20 reflective writing, in hindsight it was not surprising that the participants overtly
21 rejected reflective writing; none of them brought any pieces of their reflective writing
22 to these sessions. Their initial reluctance to write was something which exercised us
23 as researchers, as we appeared to be running a writing project with no writing taking
24 place! However, our familiarity with the complexities of the role of HE in FE
25 practitioners and the pressures on their time (Child, 2009; Hillier and Morris, 2010),
26 suggested these could be inhibiting their writing and this was evident in their
27 discussions (see Gale et al 2013). Consequently we used the responsiveness of the
28 action research approach to build in more opportunities for writing within the
29 workshops themselves and included the Saturday writing workshop away from the

1 college premises. By directly acknowledging these tensions with participants and
2 opening up more spaces for writing the participants gradually began to write and
3 through their writing to reflect, Matthew, in his 'Professional Act' piece, wrote:

4 *From a professional perspective, there are wider issues here and more*
5 *questions to consider: the space between current industrial practice and the*
6 *formal education system; the known spaces we individually inhabit, whether in*
7 *Industry or Education; and the availability of the methods to each of us to*
8 *challenge the accepted order and the existing knowledge, and to explore new*
9 *ideas.*

10 Karen chose to focus on the common experience of meetings, but framed it as a
11 One Act play, with anthropomorphic characters:

12 *Once upon a time there was a meeting.*

13 *The Salamander was late, rushing, held up by the legal meeting and with a*
14 *head full of complications, implications, disasters and maelstroms. And*
15 *wonderment at how such pressures could focus thoughts so clearly onto what*
16 *needed to be done, what was truly important.*

17 Their writing was not limited to the 'professional' sphere, some participants explored
18 otherwise hidden aspects of themselves. For Paul this involved sharing the history
19 of his name, formally christened Paul John Shaw he was known as John within the
20 family in accordance with his mother's wishes, but recounts the Head asking his
21 name when he first attended school with his mother and hence he became Paul:

22 *He asks her my name and she tells him, Paul John Shaw. He writes it on the*
23 *form and then abruptly turns to me and says, "What do you want to be called,*
24 *Paul or John?" For a moment I don't speak. He stares at me over his glasses,*
25 *waiting for a reply. I say, "Paul." Nothing else. My mother looks at me but*
26 *she doesn't say anything. "Paul," he says and he writes it down.*

27

28 The discussions highlighted issues around understandings of reflective writing and
29 its applications in practice, with regard to the participants' own experience. Some,
30 such as Tony and Mary, clearly felt writing had an important role in *facilitating*
31 reflection, in accordance with the views expressed by Richardson (2001) and Bolton
32 (2005):

33 *I sort of think of it more as a way of thinking in writing (Tony FG1)*

1 *Sometimes writing though, itself, sparks me off [...] just the putting it down on*
2 *paper sparked [me] off* (Mary FG2)

3 *For me at any rate it's about solidifying the thought.* (Tony FG1)

4 Or as Matthew expresses, writing as reflection:

5 *the thought isn't complete until it's reached the page, it's the whole process,*
6 *you know, you don't think something and then write it, it's an active process*
7 *isn't it?* (Matthew FG1)

8 While others, such as David and Karen, seeming to place little value on writing,
9 questioning its role for reflection:

10 *I just don't think writing makes you reflective, I just don't think by writing –*
11 *you're not always being reflective.* (David FG1)

12 *Yeah I just do it thinking [...] I can't imagine what I could possibly learn from it*
13 *by writing it down.* (Karen Int)

14 There was evidence too that the participants were questioning their own
15 conceptualisation of the role of writing, articulating new meaning, uses and
16 applications resulting from the discussions taking place in the workshop and also the
17 writing they engaged with:

18 *But do you have to write it? [...] But I wonder if you can stop at the point of*
19 *thinking about it rather than having to write it down* (Tony FG1)

20 Here Tony is overtly speculating about the relationship between thinking and writing,
21 in contrast to his earlier comment about their inseparability. This was a notable
22 change in Tony's perceptions of writing, and over the course of the initiative we did
23 witness gradual changes in the participants' views of writing. Originally the
24 emphasis was on the act or process of writing, indeed, much of the first focus group
25 discussion centred on the act of writing, what they were required to write and their
26 views on writing. In beginning to share their own views and uses of writing, they
27 began to look beyond the physical act of writing to consider the wider activities that
28 shape writing which were explored in subsequent sessions. They began so

1 recognise the significance of reading, observation, discussion and collaboration to
2 the act of writing.

3

4 **Questioning reflective writing practices.**

5 There was also evidence of a reaction against the imposition of having to write, of
6 which the participants had experienced through studying for their teaching
7 qualification and in their teaching role:

8 *It's part of the agenda that we're supposed to follow these days and therefore*
9 *we may feel that if we don't subscribe to the concept we're somehow*
10 *deficient. But I really don't go along with it. (Tony FG1)*

11 *If it's kind of being forced on you that you have to do it as part of your PGCE*
12 *or reflective writing it kind of loses its impact (Chris FG1)*

13 This led to further discussion about the reflective writing they had experienced, with
14 some questioning the nature of reflection and value of the writing they had been
15 required to undertake, as evident in the following exchange:

16 *What Chris said just now reminded me that I did quite a lot over the two years*
17 *of PGCE because you had to do it. (Karen FG1)*

18 *See, I'm not sure that's real reflection, I mean I think as soon as it's imposed*
19 *and I think it ceases to be meaningful (Paul FG1)*

20 *Well, that's the closest I've come to it really and it was a complete waste of*
21 *time. (Karen FG1)*

22 Karen's prior experience of writing referred to as reflective according to externally
23 defined standards, has led her to reject it as having any value. Further discussion
24 explores how the uses of reflective writing tended to conform to a standardised
25 model, as Mary expresses:

26 *What we do with students or what we do on PGCE, we have to follow this*
27 *exact formula and I think we've kind of taken it to mean only one thing in*
28 *academic circles. (Mary, FG1)*

1 Also evident here in Mary's comments, and those of others, was some questioning of
2 their own use of reflective writing in their teaching, as they explored how this might
3 be most effectively taught and also how it was assessed:

4 *It's also quite formulaic isn't it, the way you do it like that and that's why I*
5 *teach my students too that in [names subject area] they've got to reference*
6 *the literature and they've got to shoe horn in to their reflective writing*
7 *standards that we require* (Mary FG1)

8 *It's like this is what it is, this is reflective writing and this is what you have to*
9 *do* (David FG1)

10 What the participants are articulating here are tensions around the interpretation of
11 the nature and purpose of reflection. Schön's (1983) original conceptualisation was
12 as a means for professionals to explore problems arising from practice to seek
13 greater understanding, but not necessarily one which provides clear solutions.
14 However as its popularity has grown and spread across different fields of
15 professional practice it has become packaged as an instrumental process to be
16 followed to attain a resolution to practice situations (Kilminster et al, 2010). Further
17 tensions have been identified by Charon and Hermann (2012) around the use of
18 students' writing to evidence and assess their reflection, which they associate with a
19 particular conceptual model of reflective writing:

20 *something that I was concerned about was the way I get students to write*
21 *reflectively and how we make them reference it and make it look more*
22 *academic than it needs to be perhaps* (Mary int)

23 *And it's so hard to get it across to the students what they're supposed to be*
24 *doing and it's so hard to mark.* (Karen int)

25 So as the discussions progressed it was evident that the participants had begun to
26 struggle with assumptions about the nature of reflective writing and the applications
27 of reflective writing they encounter in their practice. They began to explore how their
28 understandings of reflective writing are constructed through their experience and
29 perpetuated through prevailing discourses about reflective writing.

1 *so your texts that you give us have helped a lot in terms of my*
2 *understanding and transference of that onto them.* (David int)

3 As the workshops progressed and the participants began to write and share their
4 writing and then engage in collaborative writing practices we began to appreciate
5 new understandings of writing as a method of inquiry.

6

7 **Conclusion: reflective writing – where are we now?**

8 We undertook the series of workshops to provide opportunities for a group of HE in
9 FE practitioners to explore the use of writing as a means of professional
10 development, within the context of promoting scholarly practice. Although
11 successful in this one setting it should be noted that this was a small scale time-
12 limited study. So further work could extend the project into further settings and
13 capture the longer term impacts on practice. What became evident from the
14 workshops, the interview and focus group discussions was that prior experience of
15 writing described as 'reflective' had led to reflective writing being conceptualised in
16 particular ways. These discussions were invaluable for exposing the prior
17 understandings of reflective writing which inhibited writing in the early stages of the
18 project. The forms of writing being represented as 'reflective' were narrow,
19 prescriptive and functional, hence the initial reluctance to engage with 'reflective
20 writing'. The assumption that reflective writing would be familiar was shown to be
21 simultaneously correct and fallacious. We had introduced reflective writing, a
22 concept that had meaning for all of us, but we had not checked that we held shared
23 understandings, so initially the opportunities provided for writing were doomed to
24 failure as prior conceptions inhibited the engagement with writing. However, through
25 this action research project we introduced new and unfamiliar forms of writing which
26 extended the participants' conceptualisations of reflective writing. Charon's (2008)
27 concept of parallel chart writing in particular, was instrumental in opening up new
28 possibilities. The workshops offered a safe space in which the participants became
29 freed to experiment with writing, but more than that they provided opportunities for
30 discussion, sharing and collaboration through writing, enabling powerful learning
31 through professional development to take place. They also began to examine the

1 implications for this practice in terms of their own teaching and their students'
2 experience. The project enabled the participants to examine their writing practices
3 and develop their skills to become more scholarly in their writing. It opened up
4 spaces for them to engage with the foundations of scholarly practices with actions
5 such as critical thinking, reflection and creativity becoming a common feature of
6 workshops as the initiative progressed. Given that scholarly activity is an activity
7 that needs to be nurtured in this context fostering scholarly writing represented a
8 safe medium through which to build confidence and knowledge of this activity.

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