

Farrukh Nahid Akhtar, 2018

Volume 4 Issue 2, pp. 875-892

Date of Publication: 28th August 2018

DOI-<https://dx.doi.org/10.20319/pijss.2018.42.875892>

This paper can be cited as: Akhtar, F. N. (2018). Transformative Life Writing™: A Framework for Embedding Student Soft Skills? Reflections on the Highs and Lows of Delivering a Transformative Curriculum. PEOPLE: International Journal of Social Sciences, 4(2), 875-892.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. To view a copy of this license, visit <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/> or send a letter to Creative Commons, PO Box 1866, Mountain View, CA 94042, USA.

TRANSFORMATIVE LIFE WRITING™: A FRAMEWORK FOR EMBEDDING STUDENT SOFT SKILLS? REFLECTIONS ON THE HIGHS AND LOWS OF DELIVERING A TRANSFORMATIVE CURRICULUM

Farrukh Nahid Akhtar

Kingston University, Department of Social Work and Social Care,
London, United Kingdom

F.Akhtar@sgul.kingston.ac.uk

Abstract

The objectives of this reflective paper are two-fold. Firstly it considers the increasing marketization of UK HE and the subsequent need to embed student soft skills explicitly within curricula. Secondly, it introduces Transformative Life Writing™ (TLW) (a framework of transformative learning) and considers its usefulness as a medium of developing student soft skills.

The author uses an auto-ethnographic approach to reflect on her experiences, of delivering a transformative curriculum by using TLW – a system that can facilitate profound personal and professional development through specific life writing tools. The rewards and challenges of using this approach are discussed, including the educator's use of self and other strategies to create a safe environment in which students maximise their engagement, own and explore their emotional intelligence.

It is argued that Transformative Life Writing can be an effective tool in increasing student awareness of their soft skills, and in increasing their confidence and self-esteem. This is especially so for vulnerable students, or those who consider themselves as having difficulties in engaging inter-personally with others. However, the paper highlights the needs of HEI's to

appropriately support educators in its delivery, especially in relation to the emotional labour involved.

Keywords

Transformative Life Writing; Transformative Learning; Curriculum; Emotional Intelligence; Soft Skills

1. Introduction

The last twenty years have seen rapid changes in the landscape of UK higher education institutions (HEIs). The increased focus on graduate skills in the job market, has led to an expansion of higher education, and its marketization (Molesworth, 2010). As the student numbers have increased and become more diverse, there has been a shift towards broadening and enhancing curricula to reflect this diversity and to enhance student experience at university (HEA, 2006). At the same time, there has been an increased demand from employers for graduates with appropriate soft skills. This paper reflects on one educator's attempt to embed student soft skills more firmly in to the curriculum by using the framework of Transformative Life WritingTM (TLW) (Klassen, 2004).

The author uses an autoethnographic approach in the discussion of TLW. This method acknowledges the researcher, or in this case, the author's experience as central to the process of making sense of others' stories or narratives (Adams et al, 2015)

2. Changing Context of UK HE

In the 1950's, only three percent of the adult population attended HE in the UK. This rose to eight percent by the 1970's, 40 percent by 2000 and 50 percent by 2011. This massive expansion (which is also reflected globally) has placed increasing pressure on public funding, leading to the introduction of capped fees in England in 1997 which were increased from £1000 to £3000 in 2006 and then to £9000 in 2010 (ONS, (2016).

Continuing changes in funding, with the recent lifting of the cap on student numbers have led to HEI's facing financial pressures and aggressive competition for students. Students who were previously likely to have attended post-1992 universities are being enticed to more 'prestigious' institutions (Moran and Powell, 2018). This is having a knock-on effect on the recruitment strategies of post-1992 universities. All of this is happening within the context of Britain leaving the European Union, and a significant fall in incoming international students, as well as part-time and mature UK students (ONS, (2016).

At the same time, the UK has seen the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) which has been aligned with the National Student Survey (NSS)

(Department for Education, 2017). Apart from recognising and rewarding excellence in teaching, and keeping students better informed, the TEF is also aimed at better meeting the needs of employers.

The business sector and health and social care professionals have added 'soft skills' into the mix of desired attributes sought in graduates. These include attributes such as having the ability to work in a team, being self-motivated, having a positive self-image, integrity and honesty. Grant & Kinman (2013) add the importance of emotional resilience. Cotton (2000) attempted to identify employability skills and attributes holistically, under three headings: basic skills, higher-order thinking skills and affective skills. All the three categories were found to be essential for maximising employability in students (Nirmala, Kumar, and Senthil, 2018). Students themselves are becoming more aware of the relevance of employability skills and over 50% actively work on them as part of their undergraduate studies (Neves, 2016).

However, analysis of 267 syllabuses from the best European Union higher education institutions, (according to the QS World University Rankings) found that courses respond to only half of the 'ideal knowledge worker profiles' asked for by businesses (Leon, 2016).

Taken together, this research indicates that about half of students appreciate the need to actively prepare for and build on their employability skills, and also that HEI's across Europe are only meeting employer's expectation about half the time. This suggests a much greater scope to integrate soft skills (referred by Cotton (2000) as affective skills, but also known as career skills) into the curriculum.

It can be seen that the focus of HE has changed from being seen as somewhere where knowledge could be gained, for its own sake, to being a place where knowledge and skills are acquired for material gain. A curriculum that focuses only on academic skills, loses the potential to enable students to develop the very soft skills that will increase their chances of employment (Andrews & Higson, 2008). On the other hand, a curriculum that encourages deep, transformational learning has a far greater potential to meet to produce graduates who are rounded in academic, social and life skills (Cotton, 2000)

3. Transformational Learning Theory

Mezirow (1991) distinguished between learning that was transmissional (transmitted from educator to student), transactional (requiring interaction and critical inquiry by the student) or transformational (fundamentally altering the student's prevailing perspective and leading to changes in their actions).

Transformational learning theory was founded by Mezirow (1997), initially as a ten step description of adult learning. Within this, he developed a model to explain how

transformational learning happens. He described learners as having beliefs, expectations and assumptions that form the basis of their behaviour. These come together to form 'habits of mind', which often operate automatically, without individuals being aware of them.

Through an 'activating event', a learner becomes aware that the beliefs they currently hold are limiting. This leads to a critical reflection of the assumptions and points of view that constitute that belief. As a result, the learner becomes open to considering alternative perspectives, perhaps revising their perspective and taking up a new position and taking action in light of their learning (Cranton, 2002).

What is important to note is that it is the student that has agency in this process. Educators may provide material that acts as the activating event, and will undoubtedly need to provide a safe enough environment to encourage students to take appropriate risks. However, a student may choose to remain in the realms of critical enquiry, rather than going one step further and actively challenging their own beliefs and being open to alternatives (Brookfield, 2000).

This presents various difficulties in educator's being able to assess the impact of their materials of students. Cranton states, 'We cannot teach transformation. We often cannot even identify how or why it happens. But we can teach as though the possibility always exists that a student will have a transformational experience' (Cranton, 2002, p.70-71).

4. Transformative Life Writing

Transformative life writing (TLW) (also known as Life Writing for Transformation™ (LWT)) is a framework created by Joanne Klassen (Klassen, 2004). It offers a range of resources to facilitate the dual processes of facilitating life writing, and personal transformation.

Writers are introduced to a range of tools that can enable them to bypass their inner critics, to open up channels of creativity and develop strategies for sustained writing. There are also resources that can enable deep personal transformation. Klassen's text (Klassen, 2004) is set out as an easy to use handbook that individuals can work through at their own pace.

TLW workshops are designed to be safe and inviting spaces that appeal to all of the VARK learning modalities (visual, aural, read/write, kinaesthetic) (Fleming and Mills, 1992); spaces where participants are systematically given access to a range of stimuli and invited to choose from them. 'Rituals' - specific processes completed in a prescribed way - are used to add consistency, cohesion and safety to the workshop experience. For example, the first 20 – 30 minutes of any workshop contains a number of routines, including an opportunity for all

participants to do some personal writing and to share something with the rest of the group. Each workshop offers participants time to work alone, in pairs, in small groups or the group as a whole. The ending always follows the same process.

The facilitator moves the group along, introducing them to one of a range of ‘tools’. These consist of a range of models that students are asked to actively engage with through activities or writing. The tool of an ‘Anatomy of an experience’ serves as a helpful foundation to unravelling the others. It is based on the premise that ‘*We may not be able to control the events of our lives, but we author our experiences. When we change one aspect, we transform the experience.*’ (Klassen, cited in Akhtar, 2012, p.52).

The premise here is that our values and past experiences act as a filter, a lens through which we assess or interpret an event. These beliefs will trigger specific thoughts, feelings, physical sensations or behaviours that will determine our reaction to the event and thereby the outcome. By changing one aspect of this process, the learner can alter their experience of the event. The different TLW tools provide a range of ways in which learners can do this.

These range from becoming aware of how each story from our past, adds a pearl to the *String of Story Pearls* that makes up the narrative of our lives. The stories may be *Turning Points*; or *Valleys* (the low points in our lives) or *Peaks*, the high points. They will include people who have been our *Unsung Heroes*, who have made a profound difference to our lives, without ever expecting any thanks; or *Lighthouses*, special people, without whom we could not have got through the toughest of times. There is space to consider the *Stepping Stones* of one’s life, but also it’s *GEMS* (the Greatest Ever Moments to Savour) (Klassen, 2004).

TLW workshops (if facilitated appropriately) offer a rich learning environment in which participants often establish strong empathic connections to peers, in a short space of time. It is cathartic to share personal stories, as well as write about them. However, the emphasis is not on simply regurgitating stories, but on using the transformative tools to re-evaluate limiting beliefs. As the workshops progress, participants are offered an opportunity to connect with their *Inner Influences* – the chorus of voices inside them, and to learn to listen to the wisdom of each one. They are invited to connect with their *SOBS* (the Same Old Baloney Stories) and *SINS* (*Self-Inflicted Nonsense Stories*) that perpetually hold them back in a negative spiral. They have the opportunity to work through the *Transformative Process*, a step by step approach that enables participants to move to a more empowered position.

The onus in the workshops is on participants taking responsibility for their learning, and for their emotional well-being. Each activity is on an ‘invitation, not expectation’ (Akhtar, 2012) basis. They are told that their safety and emotional well-being is paramount.

TLW aligns well with transformative learning theory. Participants have agency at all times. They have access to a range of stimuli, any of which can act as a trigger to a memory or activating event. Through the course of the workshops, participants become more aware of their ‘habits of mind’ and their limiting beliefs. As they experiment using the different tools, they have an opportunity to re-consider any limiting beliefs that formed the basis of the lense through which they interpreted a specific event. For example, a woman in one workshop let go of huge feelings of guilt over her break-up with her boyfriend. By working through the *Transformative Process*, she realised that the heaviness that was crippling her was actually guilt that she was *not* feeling guilty about the break-up. This in itself was a confirmation that she had made the right decision. She realised she was only responsible for herself and felt a huge release in letting go of profound feelings of self-blame. For her, the workshop had been truly transformative.

5. Embedding TLW into the Curriculum

For the past few years, I have been fortunate enough to have been given the opportunity to embed Transformative Life Writing™ as a 30 credit module within the first year of a three year degree programme. The module is called ‘Developing the Personal and Professional Self’. In this section, I reflect on the highs and lows of delivering a transformative curriculum.

Some initial information about myself: I am an experienced TLW facilitator, who was trained by the founder of the method, Joanne Klassen several years ago. I have been running workshops with a range of different people, from a diverse ages and backgrounds.

Partly as a result of widening participation, partly due to the national changes in HEIs, it could be seen that there was a need for a curriculum that could provide students with an opportunity to develop their soft skills. It was noticeable that more students with a wider range of special needs were applying and being accepted for degree courses (Macaskill, 2013) but it was also that the student body appeared to be more emotionally vulnerable. Brown’s (2016) research for the Britain’s Higher Education Policy Institute confirmed these suspicions – that students generally are more vulnerable than young people who do not go to HE, and who do not face their specific challenges.

It was thought that providing an emotionally containing and safe space that actively explored essential student soft skills would provide students with a helpful transition to HE

and would also better prepare them for placement opportunities whilst studying, and for work beyond graduation.

The module guide stated: 'It is an interactive module which includes small group workshops. Students use creative tools to develop critical skills in active listening, in speaking authentically, and in giving and receiving verbal and written feedback...'

Workshops were run in groups of fifteen, to maximise safety and interaction between students. In any workshop, students worked with the whole group, in smaller groups of about four, and also in pairs, as well as doing individual (private) writing. The workshops were carefully set up to ensure that they appealed to all the VARK modalities (Fleming and Mills, 1992).

6. The Highs: Students Making Sense of their Own Stories, Developing their Emotional Intelligence and Managing the Transition to HE

In facilitating these sessions over a number of years, there were inevitably many highs and lows. Beginning with the highs, it was a privilege to witness the slow but sure development of students over the course of an academic year. In reflecting on my perceptions, their verbal feedback during sessions and written feedback in module evaluations and reflective commentary assignments, I consider the following themes: students making sense of their own stories, developing their emotional intelligence, managing the transition to HE.

7. Making Sense of their Own Stories

The therapeutic and health benefits of life writing are well documented. Journal writing has been seen as an adjunct to talking therapies. Epple (2007) notes that psychotherapists Freud, Jung, Milner and Proffoff were enthusiastic proponents. Research has backed up claims around the emotional and physical well-being of regular journal writers (Pennebaker, 1990, Weiner and Rosenwald, 1993). Autobiographical writing encourages one to develop a relationship with oneself (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011).

However, not all forms of journaling or life writing are created equal. One can spew out volumes of pent up rage on to the page, and this may serve as a temporary relief, but does not guarantee learning or transformational change. Cameron's work (1992) is noteworthy here, in providing a step by step programme to facilitate change. One of her suggestions is that of writing first thing in the morning (Morning Pages). This fits in with concepts around freestyle writing: a way of writing without thinking, uninterrupted and unhindered by worries

relating to grammar, content or punctuation (originally put forward by Brande (1934) and Elbow (1975)).

TLW uses the concept of freestyle writing, and also writing for Just Five Minutes (J5M) (Klassen, 2004). Students regularly comment on these writing exercises. Like others before them, they discover how their creativity can be unleashed, and pent up worries dissipated. Interestingly, students with specific educational needs also find the exercises surprisingly easy to do, despite their heightened anxiety around the act of writing (which some have developed phobias about).

The power of connecting to one's stories cannot be underestimated. The very act of remembering a story can change its nuances and provide an opportunity for re-evaluating its meaning (Foote, 2015). In connecting to their stories, many which have never been recounted before (verbally or in writing), and in using the TLW tools alongside these exercises, students are able to re-evaluate past events and re-frame them. For example, one student, who was noticeably depressed at the start of the course gradually opened up as it progressed. Her reflective commentary discussed how using the transformative tools had enabled her to view her life and specific events differently. She no longer identified herself as someone who inevitably struggled through life. She learned to reframe past events, and to embrace her strengths and inner wisdom in overcoming them. Other students regularly show similarly significant change, in their own unique ways. Some students can begin the year paralysed by fear at the prospect of speaking to anyone, and speak clearly and calmly by the end of the course. This re-affirms Prescott's (2011) point about educators not underestimating the value of such exercises.

8. Developing Emotional Intelligence

The aim of this module to provide students with a base level of soft skills regularly bears fruit, often in unexpected ways. I have observed a range of these skills developing over the years and have located them under the umbrella term 'emotional intelligence'. As the course attracts a wide range of students, often from impoverished backgrounds, a significant minority of students begin the course fearful of the emotional content of the module. I have heard comments such as, 'I don't like feeling anything', 'I prefer to work alone – I don't *do* relationships' or 'It's hard for me to talk about *stuff*'. There may also be statements of special needs around issues such as severe stuttering, severe dyslexia or dyspraxia with a provision for a note-taker, as the student is unable to write in class. In such cases, I ensure that I meet with students individually, so that I can work best to their needs.

What I continue to find incredible, is that it is often these very same students who make the most significant progress. A student with a severe stutter chooses to talk in the sharing circle. He has a note taker, but still wants to hand write his J5Ms. The student who prefers to work alone, because they don't 'do' relationships writes, at the end of the year, about how powerful it was to receive positive feedback from others, and to realise that their peers also suffer from a lot of similar hang-ups. There is more similarity in the room than anyone anticipated. They share many of the same struggles.

Thus, over the course of an academic year, students become aware of a fuller range of their emotions and learn how they can name and speak them. In my view, they learn how to manage their emotions better and learnt how to express themselves more appropriately. The student who challenged another student to a fight in a large lecture theatre learns to unpick this event, over the course of two semesters. She moves beyond fight or flight to a more nuanced understanding that challenging situations can be dealt with in a range of ways.

Other students write about how they have developed a better understanding of how their behaviour impacts on others, and how in turn, they have become more tolerant and less judgemental. Morrison's model of emotional intelligence (cited in Akhtar, 2013) springs to mind – where knowledge of oneself can lead to better intra-personal emotional regulation, and thereby a better insight into others – and inter-personal emotional regulation.

The knock on effect of such transformative learning is that students' ability to communicate and their social skills improve, they are better equipped at group work. As they open up, more of their authentic self is available (Cranton and Carusetta, 2004). They are more present in the room. They are significantly better equipped in soft skills than when they started the module.

9. Managing the Transition to HE

The transition to higher education is now rightfully receiving a greater profile, for students in general (Brown, 2016) but also specifically for minority students – whether this social intersection is based on race, ethnicity, gender, disability or sexuality (Dillon, 2011; Lehman, 2013).

Baxter and Britton (2001) refer to 'habitus dislocation' – the dissonance between the lifestyle and experience that has been left behind and the cultural milieu of an HEI.

After a few initial tentative weeks, students quickly make strong connections with others. I have wondered if TLW reduces the need for 'social capital' in this important transitory year (Lehman, 2013). The workshop style minimises inequality, encouraging everyone to have an equal time in speaking and listening. The structure of the workshops

naturally minimises differences, opening up the possibility to connect with others more easily.

This can provide a forum for students to check out cultural norms and to unpick the habitus of the university. Other modules, lecturers styles (especially mine) are examined mercilessly, as are individual students' habits and mores. My sense is that in having permission to speak authentically about their transition to HE, the strangeness dissipates. The institution becomes less 'other' (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi, 2012) and there is a sense of journeying into the vast unknown terrain, together rather than alone.

As can be seen, the highs of delivering a transformative curriculum are a total privilege to witness. And just as there are some memorable highs, there are also some noteworthy lows.

10. Managing the Lows: The Role of the Educator

This section is much harder to write. It is the shadow side. I could begin again, with 'instructor privilege' (Adamson and Bailie, 2012) or discuss in detail the plethora of ethical issues that need to be considered in teaching a transformative curriculum. But I cannot avoid it any longer, and so here it is, what Owenby (2002) refers to the 'dark side to learning communities'. This refers to the unspoken, and often hidden agendas and power issues in groups. The 'groups' could refer to university or department wide issues, which students may or may not be aware of, of the individual workshop, or small groups within a workshop.

TLW is aligned with social pedagogical methods (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011) in that the role of the educator is minimised to enable power to be more equally distributed among the student group. The educator will also share some personal information, in an appropriate manner, but in a way that may seem unusual in traditional learning situations. At one level the facilitation style may seem very light touch, but it is simultaneously deeply containing. There is the deliberate creation of space, so that students will feel freed to take up greater responsibility for their learning, but at the same time, there is the intentional holding on to specific facets, to maintain the safety within the room. This delicate equilibrium, because it is so delicate, can be at risk of collapsing.

11. Managing Student Dynamics

Managing student dynamics and agendas is a common cause of stress and anxiety in teaching. Within TLW, there are additional facets to consider. However much equilibrium one tries to create, the reality is that power imbalances do exist between staff and students, and between students themselves (Adamson and Bailie, 2012). There is a line that cannot be

crossed. I remember the start of a series of sessions with students that had a surreal quality about them. I had a sense of the group going through the motions of the exercises without a real connection to them. I could feel the fear in the room, and all my efforts at dissipating it were to no avail. Finally, I was informed by some distressed students that a couple of their peers were terrorising many of the participants in the workshop. To my horror, I discovered that I had asked the student that was being hounded the most, to work alongside her persecutor. Noddings (2005) points out that one can only provide care if another is willing to receive it. Educators need to be aware of complex dynamics, including individual students' relationship with them, with other students, with themselves and with that specific subject (Lysaker and Furuness, 2011).

However much an educator tries to create a positive learning environment, there will be issues and agendas we are unaware of. Students determined to misuse their power may feel they have been given license to do so, in an environment where they are apparently given permission to 'speak their truth'.

12. Emotional Labour

Teaching is exhausting. Irrespective of the size of the student group, the act of holding that group, and carrying them, intellectually and emotionally through a range of materials, from the weakest to the academically strongest, drains one of energy. A large part of this is due to the emotional labour involved in this process.

Emotional labour is the act of having to conceal or manage one's actual feelings for the purpose of delivering an effective service and has been linked to teaching within HE within the context of the marketization of HE where students are seen and perceive themselves to be customers buying a service (Constanti and Gibbs, 2002; Ogbonna and Hattis, 2004; Berry and Cassidy, 2013). Emotional labour exerts a huge impact on educators and contributes to burn out (Kinman et al (2010) but is invisible: it is a taken for granted skill that HEIs expect academics to use for the benefit of both students and HEIs, (often at the cost of the lecturer's well-being) but is unseen and not evaluated in any way (Constanti and Gibbs, 2002).

Within the context of running TLW workshops, the degree of emotional labour required to facilitate a workshop is significantly higher than in traditional teaching situations. As workshop sizes are small, this means that an educator may have to run several workshops per week, to cover the whole cohort. So running TLW workshops is resource heavy and exerts a heavy emotional toll on educators. As 'customers', students may have bought into the concept of 'buying' a degree, but they will inevitably have differing views about the idea

of being ‘transformed’. This is especially so if they have spent much of their lives building strong defences from difficult feelings. In a small group, one lone voice of dissent can impact profoundly on everyone, leading to other students also becoming defended.

I will give an example to illustrate this point. An emotionally troubled young woman was clearly struggling with the material. She had not participated in any of the activities of the day and in the closing circle declared that ‘this module is shit and I haven’t learned anything at all today’. The mood in the room immediately changed from being relaxed and energised to toxic, all the students visibly reeled from her comments and fell into silence. There were a couple of uneasy nervous giggles.

The voice in my head wanted to shout, ‘And whose fault is that? You’ve been sitting there like a lemon, not even trying!’ However, as with every other participant, I thanked the student for her comments and asked the next student to speak. The remainder of the group mumbled quickly and the class ended.

I knew I needed to find a way to salvage this situation, but in a way that respected the ground rules of people speaking their truth, and trying to speak authentically, with all voices being equal. The issue percolated at the back of my mind, disturbing my sleep and equanimity. The following week, I began the workshop by re-visiting the ground rules, and asking students to consider the true meaning of speaking authentically, suggesting that it was OK to be honest, but not in a way that could impact negatively on someone else’s learning. There seemed enthusiasm for this stance and an easing in the room. The student who had made the comments nodded at me, as if to say, ‘OK, I get that. Thanks.’

As the weeks progressed, I, along with the rest of the group witnessed her genuine attempts to speak in a way that took into account others’ feelings. What emerged was someone who struggled to find her place in the world, often not understanding unspoken rules, and resorting to spewing out her frustration inappropriately. She commented on her progress in her reflective commentary assignment at the end of the course. She recognised that as a result of her learning, she felt more confident, better prepared for her upcoming placement. It was validating for me to read these comments. They affirmed the hard won progress. But the emotional labour demanded of me had been immense. Ironically, it was the level of safety in the room, that had given her permission to rant in the first place. On hindsight, I am also struck by her determination to stay with the themes that emerged, and not be subsumed by shame (Edgington, 2016).

This student’s learning was palpable, as was her progress. Reading her assignment provided a brief moment of triumph. Intrinsic satisfaction is the sum of such fragments, and

so it is all the more important to hold on to the fact that not all students will make such connections. For some, learning may be delayed, or they may not recognise their progress till they are on placement or in work (Yearwood, Cox and Cassidy, 2016).

Transformative learning that integrates student soft skills into the curriculum can have phenomenal results but the emotional labour involved cannot be under-estimated. At times, the results are the only thing that justify the level of emotional labour involved. Any one brave enough to consider embarking into such territories may wish to prepare themselves for another aspect of the dark side of learning communities (Owenby, 2002). An unintended consequence of creating transformative learning spaces is that it can trigger significant academic envy (Hudak, 2000). This may become another aspect of emotional labour that has to be defended against.

13. Summary and Recommendations

To maximise student employability HEI's need to look at embedding the development of student soft skills into the curriculum. While some attributes such as developing team work skills and self-motivation can be subsumed into the general curriculum, qualities such as having emotional intelligence and resilience are not so straight forward. Transformative Life WritingTM as a method is well placed to offer a means of increasing student emotional intelligence and resilience. This paper introduces TLW and highlights its potential as a medium of transformation.

However, it is not an easy option, requiring HEI's to ensure that educators are offered appropriate training and support by recognising the emotional labour involved in delivered well-facilitated sessions. This way of working will not suit all educators, and so requires careful selection. Educators should ideally work in pairs in delivering TLW sessions.

Work may also need to be done in ensuring that students are aware of the value of developing their soft skills and how this increases their employability. If possible, such modules need to be optional opt-in modules, or as offerings as part of the wider university portfolio of student enhancement programmes. If this is the case, then work will need to be done to ensure that specific faculties or departments publicise these opportunities and integrate them into their curricula.

14. Some Final Comments from Students

This paper concludes by offering comments from students about the impact that TLW workshops had on them. They are taken from module evaluation forms and mid-module reviews.

- *Working in small groups helps people to open up and feel more comfortable talking aloud*
- *I feel more confident and open to express and talk about myself*
- *This topic took time to get used to as it is a different way of teaching. However I am actually growing more and learning about myself in the lecture the most.*
- *I really enjoy [this module]. I believe that since I started I am able to see a change in myself. Good change. I believe that I've become more aware of my feelings and emotions and how it impacts on others around me.*
- *Attending these lectures are spirit lifting, everyone has a different way of lifting you up.*
- *I enjoy this lecture, it's one of the best. Thank you and keep on encouraging us.*

References

- Adamson, CW and Bailie, JW (2012) Education Versus Learning: Restorative Practices in Higher Education. *Journal of transformative education*. Vol: 10 No. 3, pages 139-156
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344612463265>
- Adams, T. E., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (2015). *Autoethnography: Understanding Qualitative Research*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1–203.
- Akhtar, F (ed) (2012) *Life Writing for Transformation Facilitators' Manual*. Published by Woodbrooke, Quaker Study Centre. Birmingham.
- Akhtar, F. (2013) *Mastering Social Work Values and Ethics*. . London. Jessica Kingsley Publishers
- Andrews, J and Higson, H (2008) Graduate Employability, 'Soft Skills' Versus 'Hard' Business Knowledge: A European Study. *Higher Education in Europe*, Vol. 33, No. 4, December 2008. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03797720802522627>
- Baxter, A and Britton, C (2001) Risk, identity and change: becoming a mature student. *International Studies in Sociology of Education* 11(1): 87-101
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09620210100200066>
- Berry, K. and Cassidy, S (2013) Emotional Labour in University Lecturers: Considerations for Higher Education Institutions. *Journal of Curriculum and Teaching*. Vol2, No 2, Pages 22-36. <https://doi.org/10.5430/jct.v2n2p22>
- Brandes, D (1934) *Becoming a Writer*. New York. Harcourt, Brace and Company.

- Brookfield, S.D. (2000). "Transformative learning as ideology critique". In J. Mezirow & Associates (Eds.), *Learning as transformation. Critical perspectives on a theory in progress* (pp. 125–150). San Francisco, CA. Jossey-Bass.
- Brown, P (2016) *The invisible problem? Improving students' mental health*. HEPI Report 81. Oxford. Higher Education Policy Institute. Available at: <http://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/STRICTLY-EMBARGOED-UNTIL-22-SEPT-Hepi-Report-88-FINAL.pdf> Accessed on 12.5.18
- Cameron, J (1992) *The Artist's Way: The Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity*. New York. Penguin Putnam.
- Constanti, P. and Gibbs, P. (2004) Higher education teachers and emotional labour. *International Journal of Educational Management*, Vol. 18 Issue: 4, pp.243-249, <https://doi.org/10.1108/095135404105> <https://doi.org/10.1108/09513540410538822>
- Cotton, K. (2000) *Developing Employability Skills, School Improvement Research Series Research You Can Use Close-Up Number 15*. Available online at: <http://educationnorthwest.org/sites/default/files/DevelopingEmployabilitySkills.pdf> Accessed on 15.5.18
- Cranton, P (2002) 'Teaching for transformation' *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*. No 3, Spring 2002, P63 – 7.1 <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.50>
- Cranton, P and Carusetta, E (2004) *Developing Authenticity as a Transformative Process*. *Journal of Transformative Education* Vol. 2 No. 4, October 2004 Pages 276-293 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344604267898>
- Department for Education (2017) *Teaching Excellence and Student Outcomes Framework Specification*. Crown Copyright. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/658490/Teaching_Excellence_and_Student_Outcomes_Framework_Specification.pdf Accessed on 9.5.18
- Dillon, J (2011) *Black Minority Ethnic Students Navigating their Way from Access Courses to Social Work Programmes: Key Considerations for the Selection of Students*. *British Journal of Social Work*, 2011, Vol. 41(8), pp.1477-1496 <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcr026>
- Edgington, U (2016) *Performativity and the Power of Shame: Lesson Observations, Emotional Labour and Professional Habitus*. *Sociological Research Online*, 2016, Vol.21 (1), pp.1-15 <https://doi.org/10.5153/sro.3802>

- Eichsteller, G. and Holthoff, S. (2011) 'Conceptual Foundations of Social Pedagogy: A Transnational Perspective from Germany'. In Cameron, C. and Moss, P. (eds) *Social Pedagogy and Working with Children and Young People*. London. Jessica Kingsley Publishers.
- Elbow, P (1975) *Writing Without Teachers*. Oxford. Oxford University Press.
- Epple, D.E. (2007) journal writing for Life development. *Advances in social work*. Volume 8 number 2 (Fall 2007) Pages 388-304
- Fleming N.D., and Mills, C. (1992) 'Not Another Inventory, Rather a Catalyst for Reflection' *To Improve the Academy*, Vol.11, 1992., page 137
- Foote, L.S. (2015) Re-storying life as a means of critical reflection: the power of narrative learning. *Christian Higher Education*. 14(3) Pages 116-126
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15363759.2015.1028580>
- Grant, L and Kinman, G (2013) The importance of emotional resilience for staff and students in the 'helping' professions: developing an emotional curriculum. December 2013. HEA.
- Higher Education Academy (2006) *Pedagogy for employability Learning and Employability Series 1*. The Higher Education Academy, April 2006
- Hudak, G.M.(2000) Envy and goodness in academia. *Peace Review* 12: 4 2000, pages 607-612 <https://doi.org/10.1080/10402650020014717>
- Kinman, G., Wray, S., and Strange, C. (2010) Emotional labour, burnout and job satisfaction in UK teachers: the role of workplace social support. *Educational Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*. Volume 31, 2011. Issue 7 Pages 843-856
- Klassen, J. (2004) *Tools for Transformation: write your way to new worlds of possibility in just five minutes*. West Conshohocken, PA: Infinity Publishing.
- Krumer-Nevo, M, and Didi, M (2012) Writing against othering. *Qualitative inquiry*. 28(4) 299-309 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800411433546>
- Lehman, L. (2013) *Habitus Transformation and Hidden Injuries: Successful Working Class University Students*. *Sociology of Education*. 87(1) 1-15
<https://doi.org/10.1177/0038040713498777>
- Leon, R-D. (2016) The Development of the Future European Knowledge Workers. An Academic Perspective. *Management Dynamics in the Knowledge Economy; Bucharest* Vol. 4, Issue. 3, (2016): 339-356.

- Lysaker JT and Furuness S (2011) Space for Transformation: Relational, Dialogic Pedagogy. *Journal of Transformative Education* 9(3) 183-197
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1541344612439939>
- Macaskill, A (2013) The mental health of university students in the United Kingdom. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 2013 Vol. 41, No. 4, 426-441
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2012.743110>
- Mezirow, J. (1991) *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. Jossey-Bass. San Francisco. CA.
- Mezirow, J. (1997). "Transformative Learning: Theory to Practice". *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, 74, 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ace.7401>
- Molesworth, M., Scullion, R., Nixon, E (2010) *The marketisation of higher education*. London. Routledge.
- Moran, H and Powell, J (2018) *Running a tight ship: can universities plot a course through rough seas?*. Shift Learning. London. Available online at
https://uploads.guim.co.uk/2018/01/30/Guardian_HSBC_UUK_Research_full_report_V4.pdf Accessed on 16.4.18.
- Neves, J (2016) *Student Engagement and Skills Development: The UK Engagement Survey*. York. Higher Education Academy.
- Nirmala, K; Kumar, S A Senthil (2018) The Impact of Basic, Higher-Order Thinking and Affective Skills on Graduate Employability. *IUP Journal of Soft Skills*; Hyderabad Vol. 12, Issue 1. (Mar 2018): 7-28.
- Noddings, N (2005) *the challenge to care in schools: an alternative approach to education*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Office for National Statistics (2016) *How has the student population changed?* Accessed online at:
<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/birthsdeathsandmarriages/livebirths/articles/howhasthestudentpopulationchanged/2016-09-20> Accessed on 3.5.18
- Prescott, L (2011) *Life Writing and Life Learning: an Analysis of Creative Writing Students Work*. *Studies in Continuing Education*. Volume 34 number 2 July 2012 pages 145-157
- Psychology: An International Journal of Experimental Educational Psychology*. Volume 31, 2011 - Issue 7 Pages 843-856

- Owenby, P (2002) Organizational Learning Communities and the dark side of the learning organization. *Adult Learning Community*. 95, pages 51-60.
- Pennebaker, J.W. (1990) *Opening up: The healing power of expressing emotions*. New York. Guildford Press Quest Books.
- Weiner W and Rosenwald, G (1993) A moments Monument: The psychology of keeping a diary. In Josselson, R and Lieblich, A (Eds) *The narrative studies of lives*. Vol 1, pp30-57. London. Sage Publications.
- Yearwood, D., Cox, R and Cassidy, A (2016) Connection- Engagement-Empowerment: A Course Design Model. *Transformative dialogues: teaching and learning journal*. Volume 8 issue 3 January 2016 pages 1 to 16.