

Expressive Writing and Community College Students: Making Meaning of Their Experiences in Life and Academics

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Abstract: Many college students face numerous academic, social, and economic obstacles that can affect their ability to succeed in their coursework. Expressive writing could be used to help college students overcome these obstacles and make meaning of their experiences to improve their academic lives. With expressive writing, community college students can learn from stressful events in their academic career, process their thoughts and emotions, reduce anxiety, and gain a new perspective on their goals through the process of reflection.

Keywords: community college, qualitative research, expressive writing, transformative learning

Community colleges are becoming an important option for college students due to rising four-year university costs, and more students are using community colleges as a pathway to a four-year university (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Many community college students face numerous academic, social, and economic obstacles that can affect their ability to succeed in their coursework (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Due to these obstacles, many students face circumstances ranging from limited income, domestic problems, health issues, and homelessness (Horton, 2015). Issues such as lack of support from family, cultural and racial differences, and financial stressors can also adversely affect the mental health of community college students (Horton, 2015). Since research on student pathways and outcomes in a community college setting is limited, positive interventions to improve community college student success are also limited (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Given the challenges community college students face, expressive writing research is a low-cost intervention that could help students overcome obstacles in their academic and personal lives.

Expressive writing is a therapeutic writing technique that individuals can use to engage in the deep process of expressing one's emotion through the writing of a past traumatic experience (Bryan & Lu, 2016; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Many expressive writing studies have provided evidence of positive effects on physical and emotional health (Baikie et al., 2012; King & Miner, 2000). When using the expressive writing paradigm, individuals write about a stressful experience and their emotions about the event (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Sloan & Marx, 2004). The writing is often done in consecutive days about one traumatic event or different events (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Sloan & Marx, 2004).

Although there has been considerable empirical evidence that expressive writing can have a strong, positive effect on physical health as well as some evidence that there are benefits for mental health (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Baikie et al., 2012; Hirai et al., 2012; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986;), there is a lack of knowledge of the experiences that individuals have when undertaking the expressive writing paradigm.

Furthermore, the expressive writing literature also lacks exploration of the expressive writing process in a community college setting.

The purpose of this study was to examine how community college students make meaning of their experience with the expressive writing process. By gaining a better understanding of the students' experience with using expressive writing, this research uncovers some of the strategy involved in how expressive writing works, and it gives an in-depth view of how expressive writing could be used at community and undergraduate colleges to improve retention, critical analysis, reflection, and motivation. This study also shows how the expressive writing process works through the eyes of the participant and discusses the connections between expressive writing and transformative learning. The research question guided the study: How do students make meaning of their experience with the expressive writing process?

Literature Review

Expressive writing was originally designed as an intervention to reduce stress and anxiety and to improve physiological and psychological health (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Some of the benefits included reducing post-traumatic stress disorder in female caregivers (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002), helping repair broken marriage and close relationships (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002), helping unemployed corporate businesspeople find jobs (Spera et al., 1994), and lowering levels of stress for severe migraine headache patients (McKenna, 1997). Expressive writing was also convenient, mobile, adaptable, and simple for the participants (Lepore & Smyth, 2002). Although there still lies some uncertainty to how expressive writing works, four major theoretical perspectives have been used to explain the process: (a) disinhibition theory; (b) cognitive processing theory; (c) self-regulation; and (d) exposure theory. Also, previous studies on expressive writing have shown there are possible ties to writing and the positive transformative effects on the human body physically and mentally (Hudson & Day, 2012; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Overall, the literature suggests that expressive writing can be an effective tool to improve an individual's well-being and physical health yet their limited qualitative evidence to prove it is effective (King, 2001; Pennebaker, 2006; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan et al., 2007; Smyth, 1998).

For this exploratory qualitative study, data were collected through an analysis of interviews and observation notes. Each participant completed two expressive writing exercises that focused on an academic obstacle. The prompt used for the expressive writing exercise was a variation of Pennebaker's original expressive writing prompt he used in his initial expressive writing study (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Interviews following the second expressive writing session were conducted and recorded face to face with the participants using an open-ended interview approach. A comparative analysis approach was used to examine the interview data as a collective whole to find similar themes from the participants' answers (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Then, the highlighted words or phrases were coded to establish categories. Themes that emerged from the participants' interviews were identified, and the transcripts and highlighted common words, phrases, and ideas were reviewed. This data organization helped establish emerging themes.

Findings

Findings were identified as themes representing reflections about the participants' experiences with expressive writing exercises. The themes included affirmation of accomplishments, relief and relaxation, awareness of future, writing concerns, organization and chronological order of the writing process, and reflection.

Discussion of Findings

The analysis resulted in six main themes from the transcribed transcripts. The findings are discussed in relation to transformative learning theory and expressive writing theories.

Theme #1. Affirmation of Accomplishments

According to the cognitive-processing theory, the attempt to create a narrative and freely express one's ideas and thoughts on a stressful or difficult circumstance is part of the reason for the reduction of negative emotion and the increase in positive mental and physical health (Smyth, 1998; Lepore & Greenberg, 2002). Another possible connection to the cognitive-processing theory was that participants reported feelings of anxiety, stress, and anger, but the severity of these feelings lessened after they realized their strong accomplishments. For the participants of the study, they wrote about a current or recent obstacle in their learning experience. While they constructed a narrative and reflected on the experience, they not only recognized how they overcame an obstacle but also recognized their accomplishments. By using expressive writing, a learner can integrate, organize, and analyze the experience simply by focusing on the reconstruction of the learner's reality (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006; Mezirow, 1991). The simple act of writing creates an opportunity for questioning and considering other details or factors related to the disorienting dilemma (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006; Mezirow, 1991). By recognizing these details, expressive writing might be used to help individuals make positive connections from negative or stressful events, which may give some insight into how the participants recognize their accomplishments in a positive manner.

Theme #2. Relaxation and Relief

The participants described a calming effect that typically occurred during the writing exercises, while there was a great sense of relief after completing the two writing exercises. These data provide some insight to support that expressive writing has positive effects on physical and mental health, such as reducing stress and anxiety (Frattaroli, 2006; Lepore, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Stanton et al., 2002). This finding partially relates to the expressive writing disinhibition theory. Individuals during the expressive writing process can release emotional tension, which reduces the amount of intrusive, unwanted thoughts that can lead to lower levels of physiological and physical functioning (Lepore, 1997). The main connection between disinhibition theory and transformative learning theory is that the obstacle the participants discussed in their writing was their disorienting dilemma, and the action of questioning and reflecting on the disorienting dilemma created a sense of relaxation and relief. One possible explanation is that releasing negative thoughts by writing about them might help participants recognize positive goals and, thus, feel relieved.

Theme #3. Awareness of the Future

Participants reported that the expressive writing exercises made them feel positive about their futures, particularly when dealing with job possibilities and financial security. Although the participants reported having some anxiety and fear about their futures, the expressive writing exercises helped them realize how much potential they had to succeed in the future. The act of writing could have facilitated the process of transformation to build self-confidence with the participants, and through the process of reflection, the participants expressed feeling positive and ready to take on future challenges.

Although cognitive-processing theory and disinhibition theory may offer some explanation to their experiences of constructing meaning from their narratives, both theories mention nothing about recognizing future possibilities or gaining insight from reflection to look toward future possibilities. The act of writing could have facilitated the process of transformation to build self-confidence with the participants, and through the process of reflection, the participants expressed feeling positive and ready to take on future challenges. Expressive writing could help facilitate the later phases of Mezirow's transformative learning theory by providing the individual with the tools to find their own unity and purpose. Through discourse, exploration, and examination, an individual participating in expressive writing can transition into a course of action for future experiences (McAdams, 2001).

Theme #4. Grammar and Writing Concerns

This theme does not connect to any of the four major expressive writing theories, but the concern about grammar and punctuation in their writing does connect with the limitations in previous expressive writing studies. For many of the participants, the main issue was making sure that their writing made sense, and although good grammar and punctuation was not a requirement for the writing exercises, the participants did feel some anxiety and fear at the beginning of the exercise.

Theme #5. Organization and Chronological Order of the Writing Process

All participants reported that their experiences with expressive writing helped them organize emotions. Through the process of expressive writing, students can examine thinking patterns or belief systems in a structured way, which allows them to review the processes of their behavior (Hubbs & Brand, 2005). Since expressive writing is written and structured chronologically, the participants found it easier to reflect on how they felt about overcoming their obstacles. Sloan and Marx (2004) believed that expressive writing provides structure, organization, unity, and meaning to past traumatic or stressful experiences participants each reported that their experience with expressive writing helped them organize emotions. By using expressive writing, a learner can integrate, organize, and analyze the experience simply by focusing on the reconstruction of the learner's reality (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). The participants believed that expressive writing helped them organize their thoughts, and because of this, they were able to recognize triggers and emotions they encountered throughout their stressful experiences (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2009).

Theme #6. Reflection

One of the most common ideas was that the exercises helped the participants reflect upon their previous academic stressors and having the time to reflect upon those previous experiences. This theme can be connected to the cognitive processing theory because the participants gained new positive perspectives on their goals and accomplishments through reflection (Pennebaker, 1989; Lepore & Greenberg, 2002). In this mode of self-reflection, the process may lead “to a new way of interpreting the world, and transformation has taken place” (Cranton, 1994, p. 730). For all the participants, reflection was the key to helping them recognize their goals and accomplishments while analyzing their thoughts and feelings during their experience. Overall, the participants reported having gained greater control over their stressful academic experience through the process of reflection, and by doing so, they gained a better understanding of the experience that could help them overcome future issues.

Implications and Future Research

This exploratory, qualitative study offers implications for practice and informs future research. Based on the results of this study, expressive writing could be used to help first-year students recognize their accomplishments and learn from past academic mistakes in a positive manner. Expressive writing could be used in the classroom to help students recognize goals for the class, their academic careers, or future employment. By understanding how they have overcome challenges in the classroom and beyond, students may feel more confident in their abilities to complete their coursework and plan for future opportunities. By providing a simple, low-cost tool such as expressive writing, college students can develop a course of action and discover their abilities through the process of reflection.

Incorporating expressive writing in the classroom also may be beneficial because it could help alleviate anxiety for community college students. Community college students may perform better on tests after completing an expressive writing exercise because of less anxiety and stress. This process could help improve problem-solving, confidence, retention, and academic success. The study also showed that expressive writing is a transformative experience because the participants reflect on an experience, learn from the experience, and recognize their accomplishments and goals for the future from the experience.

Expressive writing is a transformative experience because the participants reflect on an experience, learn from the experience, and recognize their accomplishments and goals for the future from the experience. Through reflection, students can gain a sense of purpose about their experiences in their coursework. By taking the time to think deeply about their issues and the purpose of their coursework, students may become more self-regulated in their approach to coursework, which could improve motivation, retention, and grades. These data provide qualitative support for the theoretical framework of expressive writing, and this data provides multiple perspectives of the experience to give a clearer picture of the mechanisms involved with the process of expressive writing. Overall, the analysis of the interviews shows that expressive writing helps students build confidence by recognizing their goals and accomplishments through the process of reflection. As a part of transformative learning, expressive writing not only can be used to provide meaning to a problem, but it can be used to help students make connections and create possible solutions to their issues.

Future research opportunities include more qualitative studies on community college and 4-year university students to compare the emerging themes. Another opportunity would be to analyze emotion and function words used in expressive writing studies to examine how these words may contribute to the expressive writing process. Another possibility for future research is to analyze different age groups to provide insight into the differences in life transitions and issues in the participants' lives. Additional research on expressive writing with a sample that varies in race, gender, socioeconomic status, and location is also needed. It could provide essential information that shows how social factors affect the expressive writing process. These recommendations for future research may help expand the knowledge of mechanisms that affect the expressive writing process and may provide additional information on why expressive writing can be beneficial in making meaning of traumatic experiences.

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