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

Liz McKenzie, Rebecca Turner & Ken Gale
Plymouth University
Accepted 18th March 2016

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

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

This paper derives from an action research project which explored the uses of writing as a means of professional development with a group of Higher Education (HE) practitioners working in a UK Further Education (FE) College (Gale et al, 2013).
The focus here is on reflective writing, as reflection and reflective practice have become widely associated with professional development in education (Schön, 1987; Day 1993; Forde et al, 2006). Writing has become established as a means of engaging in reflection through narrative storying of practice (Bleakley, 2000; Bolton, 2005). However, concerns have been expressed about the ways in which reflective writing may be implemented, through instrumental, prescriptive routines and an individualistic focus (Boud and Walker, 1998; Kilminster et al, 2010). This paper explores how prior conceptions of reflective writing and professional development can inhibit meaningful reflective writing, but also how supportive, collaborative practices can open up spaces in which (genuine) personal and professional development can take place. In doing so it also demonstrates how our use of an action research approach allowed the research to evolve during the writing workshops.

The use of reflective writing for continuing professional development

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

The growth of reflection for professional development across the fields of education, social work, medicine and nursing since the 1980s has led to the need for evidence of its use and effectiveness. Professionals in many sectors are required to keep
some form of written record of their reflection, such as a personal log, journal or portfolio, often in electronic form (Kilminster et al, 2010), occasionally collaboratively constructed (Hughes, 2005). Reflective writing is also used within teacher education programmes to provide opportunities to relate theory and practice and link to professional standards (Bain et al, 2002; Griffin, 2003). These uses of writing illustrate how it may be conceptualised as simply evidencing the skill of reflection within a defined context, rather than as the means of attaining reflection in its own right (Charon and Hermann, 2012).

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

For many teachers within UK Further Education, who undertake their teaching qualification whilst already teaching, there is little time for more than a superficial engagement with reflective writing, many reporting they don’t have time to reflect after completing their qualification (LSDA, 2003). Teacher education within the sector has been shaped by the introduction of professional standards (FENTO, 1999), their revision, the introduction of Qualified Teacher status for the Lifelong Learning Sector (QTLS) (LLUK, 2006) and subsequent revision following the Lingfield report (2012). The standards were expressed through sixty-nine tightly
specified statements, just one of which acknowledged reflection as a means for the
evaluation and development of practice. Consequently teacher education
programmes for the FE sector have been constrained by compliance with these
prescriptions (Brand, 2007; Lucas et al, 2012). Therefore although FE practitioners
might be expected to have encountered reflection and reflective writing, their
experience is likely to be within a prescriptive format i.e. being directed to reflect on a
particular aspect of practice and provide reflective writing to fulfil a specific course
requirement. Hence it is unlikely they will use reflective writing regularly or in the
ways Bolton (2005) and Charon and Hermann (2012) envisage as a means to
reflect, rather than to evidence that reflection has taken place.

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

The situation is even more complex for HE in FE practitioners who have the
additional requirements to engage in scholarly activity and research (Child, 2009;
Gale et al, 2013; Hillier & Morris, 2010). There has been a longstanding tradition of
the provision of HE in UK FE colleges, reflecting their recognised status as centres
of vocation or work-focused training, and their ability to widen access of HE to
underrepresented groups (Parry, 2009). A renewed government focus was placed
on the provision of HE in FE (DfES, 2003), supported through the introduction of
Foundation Degrees. These represented a work-focused, sub-degree level
qualification that would be delivered primarily in FE colleges; with the opportunity to
progress on to the final year of an honours degree through the accredited institution
(HEFCE, 2000). Following this there was clear direction for those involved in the
provision of foundation degrees to be engaged in staff development relevant to their
HE teaching, with activities such as research and scholarly activity included within
these recommendations (HEFCE, 2009). These recommendations were made by
the HE funding body, however, the majority of HE in FE staff are employed by an FE
college, therefore expected to adhere to the staff development requirements of the
college. Consequently this imposition of staff development by the IfL and LLUK is
even less relevant to the development needs of HE in FE practitioners, since it is
invariably directed at the main business of the institution, namely FE, rather than
supporting their HE teaching (Turner et al, 2009). Thus for teachers within FE, but
particularly for HE in FE staff, CPD frequently represents an externally directed
process over which they have little or no control and which has limited relevance for
them personally or professionally.

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

- How writing can be used as a method to inquire into learning
- How this can contribute to individual teaching practice and student learning.
The paper will explore the use of writing workshops to support and develop the use of writing, specifically reflective writing, as a means of professional development amongst HE in FE practitioners. It is written from the perspectives of the team involved in the design and implementation of the CPD programme, as it is the knowledge gained through this process that provides valuable insights into the use of reflective writing for CPD. Drawing on data captured through a focus group and individual interviews we examine how participants’ conceptions of professional development and their prior experiences of reflective writing initially served as barriers which restricted their engagement with the writing process. We demonstrate how this position changed over the course of the initiative, as evidenced by extracts of their writing. Thus, this paper explores the role of reflective writing and also considers the conceptualisation of professional development amongst a group of college practitioners.

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

The project was framed as action research, but as already documented (see Gale et al 2013) it explored collaborative practices within the context of professional development. Action research, often referred to as practitioner research, is a mainly collaborative approach used in education to improve practice (McNiff and Whitehead, 2010). Originally credited to the work of Kurt Lewin it has evolved and diversified, offering a flexible, powerful and empowering technique to understand and develop practice (Somekh and Zeichner, 2009). As such it offered opportunities for us as the researchers to engage with the participants in a collaborative exploration of the nature of writing and understandings of professional development. We also sought to build up ‘thick descriptions’ (Geertz, 1973) of the process we were engaged with. This was achieved by us, as researchers and facilitators of the professional development initiative, capturing field notes of the workshops and our own reflections of the process we engaged with. These field notes were supplemented by a diverse range of ‘data sources’ through which we sought to represent the experiences of the HE in FE lecturers. These included collective and individual discussions (in the form of focus groups and interviews) of participants’ experiences and responses to the initiative, as well extracts of writing, as and when it was produced. This allowed us to remain responsive to the complexities of both
CPD and the context in which we were working. This responsiveness maintained our sensitivity to what was happening, conversations that were taking place and the reactions of the participants to the ideas and activities they were introduced to. Consequently our inquiry very much unfolded and evolved (Bergson, 1991) out of the CPD initiative; the action research lens provided the flexibility to accommodate this (Gale et al 2013).

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

The data

The workshops represented the process by which writing was being explored and developed, but, as mentioned above, the discussions that took place within them also constituted a source of data about the developments that were taking place. Consequently, in addition to the workshops, field notes were captured during and after the sessions on what had taken place, and reactions to the session content (researchers’ and the participants’). Two focus groups were used to stimulate group reflections around the process of writing: this first focus group took place at the beginning of the initiative, as we were beginning to get to know each other and allowed exploration of their experiences in HE in FE, attitudes and experiences to CPD and writing. These themes were revisited toward the end of the initiative. The interviews took place after the second focus group; we explored individual experiences and applications of the knowledge gained through the CPD initiative to practice. The focus groups and interviews also represented a time in which we were able to share our own reflections and interpretations as a means of invoking further responses. This was shaped by St. Pierre’s (1997) concept and use of ‘response
Repeatedly we blurred the boundaries between research participant and knowledge creator, as at times we (the providers of the CPD initiative) became researchers as well as respondents as we moved between the different forms of data we were working with. For each source of data we engaged in careful readings and re-readings to identify the cross-cutting themes that emerged: experiences of writing - professional writing; conceptualisations of reflective writing; reflective writing practices; writing as a means of expression.

The CPD initiative - the writing workshops

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

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

Time was thus an essential component of the project, as participants developed their understandings of different forms of writing, the opportunities offered by the workshops and the group became a mutually supportive environment in which writing could be shared.

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

The participants

The participants were a group of teaching staff from a range of professional backgrounds who were engaged in teaching HE at an FE college within the University partnership. Eight members of staff volunteered to take part in the writing workshops, although not all attended every session. All have been given pseudonyms here. Participation in the sessions and suggested writing activities was optional, individuals attended when they could and shared only what they chose to. This created a supportive space in which individuals came to write, the resultant
fluidity and flexibility contributed to our re-conceptualisation of the group as an assemblage, a constantly evolving, changing, merging of individuals and individualities (see Gale et al 2013). The essence of this grouping being its focus on writing, individual roles and relationships (lecturer, manager, researcher) subsumed as we explored new writing terrains together.

Findings

Conceptualising professional writing.

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

‘Professionally you don’t really have a choice do you? Something’s got to be done and that’s your desk and there’s your computer’ (Matthew, FG1)
They expressed the ways in which they felt their writing was constrained, either by their own criteria, or by policy:

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

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

As well as by the demands of the tasks themselves:

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

**Conceptualising reflective writing**

Interestingly reflective writing was positioned as a professional requirement:

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

This perception of reflective writing as something enforced upon them merits some further discussion within the context of the project. While CPD requirements were externally imposed, originally by their teaching qualification, then more recently through externally driven CPD frameworks to which their college adhered (e.g. IfL, 2010), the writing workshops had been presented as a voluntary form of CPD, yet these opened with reflective writing. Given the tensions that emerged around reflective writing, in hindsight it was not surprising that the participants overtly rejected reflective writing; none of them brought any pieces of their reflective writing to these sessions. Their initial reluctance to write was something which exercised us as researchers, as we appeared to be running a writing project with no writing taking place! However, our familiarity with the complexities of the role of HE in FE practitioners and the pressures on their time (Child, 2009; Hillier and Morris, 2010), suggested these could be inhibiting their writing and this was evident in their discussions (see Gale et al 2013). Consequently we used the responsiveness of the action research approach to build in more opportunities for writing within the workshops themselves and included the Saturday writing workshop away from the
college premises. By directly acknowledging these tensions with participants and
opening up more spaces for writing the participants gradually began to write and
through their writing to reflect, Matthew, in his ‘Professional Act’ piece, wrote:

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

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

*Once upon a time there was a meeting.*

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

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

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

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

*I sort of think of it more as a way of thinking in writing* (Tony FG1)
Sometimes writing though, itself, sparks me off [...] just the putting it down on paper sparked [me] off. (Mary FG2)

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

Or as Matthew expresses, writing as reflection:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Questioning reflective writing practices.

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

- It's part of the agenda that we're supposed to follow these days and therefore
  we may feel that if we don't subscribe to the concept we're somehow
deficient. But I really don't go along with it.  (Tony FG1)
- If it’s kind of being forced on you that you have to do it as part of your PGCE
  or reflective writing it kind of loses its impact  (Chris FG1)

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

- What Chris said just now reminded me that I did quite a lot over the two years
  of PGCE because you had to do it.  (Karen FG1)
- See, I'm not sure that's real reflection, I mean I think as soon as it's imposed
  and I think it ceases to be meaningful  (Paul FG1)
- Well, that's the closest I've come to it really and it was a complete waste of
time.  (Karen FG1)

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

- What we do with students or what we do on PGCE, we have to follow this
  exact formula and I think we’ve kind of taken it to mean only one thing in
  academic circles.  (Mary, FG1)
Also evident here in Mary’s comments, and those of others, was some questioning of their own use of reflective writing in their teaching, as they explored how this might be most effectively taught and also how it was assessed:

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

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

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

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

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

So as the discussions progressed it was evident that the participants had begun to struggle with assumptions about the nature of reflective writing and the applications of reflective writing they encounter in their practice. They began to explore how their understandings of reflective writing are constructed through their experience and perpetuated through prevailing discourses about reflective writing.
And it’s caused everybody so much grief in one way or another, I think, just, I don’t know. I know everybody says, “Oh, I hate reflective writing.” And then you, sort of, pick that up, don’t you? You think, “Oh actually, I hate it too, yes.” It becomes a thing, doesn’t it? (Karen int)

Writing as a means of expression: reading, sharing, discussing and more writing.

As participants began to explore alternative forms of reflective writing they engaged with small writing activities, they were encouraged to read their writing to the group and to develop aspects of their writing in response to comments from other group members. They encountered a different approach to reflective writing; one where the writing is integral to the reflection, where reflection is attained through writing (Charon & Hermann, 2012). As they began to actively question the approaches they had previously encountered and were involved in using with their students, it also became evident that participating in the writing workshops was not just encouraging them to question their practice, but also leading to them making changes, as David and Mary comment:

I would have probably approached things much more prescriptive, like, this is the way to do it [...] I have definitely used it but moving away from prescription and more to like discovery and experimentation (David int)

I would like there to be [changes]. I feel really constrained, well constrained by our external examiners and the expectations if you like, of what people think reflective writing ought to be. (Mary int)

What was also evident was that the workshops had opened up possibilities for a wider interpretation of reflective writing, particularly for Karen, who had started with such negative views:

I think partly it’s the label, isn’t it? It’s trying to divide it up, I mean, every single bit of writing I do is reflective. (Karen int)
so your texts that you give us have a helped a lot in terms of my understanding and transference of that onto them. (David int)

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

Conclusion: reflective writing – where are we now?

We undertook the series of workshops to provide opportunities for a group of HE in FE practitioners to explore the use of writing as a means of professional development, within the context of promoting scholarly practice. Although successful in this one setting it should be noted that this was a small scale time-limited study. So further work could extend the project into further settings and capture the longer term impacts on practice. What became evident from the workshops, the interview and focus group discussions was that prior experience of writing described as ‘reflective’ had led to reflective writing being conceptualised in particular ways. These discussions were invaluable for exposing the prior understandings of reflective writing which inhibited writing in the early stages of the project. The forms of writing being represented as ‘reflective’ were narrow, prescriptive and functional, hence the initial reluctance to engage with ‘reflective writing’. The assumption that reflective writing would be familiar was shown to be simultaneously correct and fallacious. We had introduced reflective writing, a concept that had meaning for all of us, but we had not checked that we held shared understandings, so initially the opportunities provided for writing were doomed to failure as prior conceptions inhibited the engagement with writing. However, through this action research project we introduced new and unfamiliar forms of writing which extended the participants’ conceptualisations of reflective writing. Charon’s (2008) concept of parallel chart writing in particular, was instrumental in opening up new possibilities. The workshops offered a safe space in which the participants became freed to experiment with writing, but more than that they provided opportunities for discussion, sharing and collaboration through writing, enabling powerful learning through professional development to take place. They also began to examine the
implications for this practice in terms of their own teaching and their students’
experience. The project enabled the participants to examine their writing practices
and develop their skills to become more scholarly in their writing. It opened up
spaces for them to engage with the foundations of scholarly practices with actions
such as critical thinking, reflection and creativity becoming a common feature of
workshops as the initiative progressed. Given that scholarly activity is an activity
that needs to be nurtured in this context fostering scholarly writing represented a
safe medium through which to build confidence and knowledge of this activity.

References

Practice Through Journal Writing: impacts of variations in the focus and level of

Ball, S. (2003) The teacher’s soul and the terrors of performativity’, *Journal of
Education Policy, 18* (2): 215 — 228.


Bleakley, A. (2000) *Writing With Invisible Ink*: narrative, confessionalism and

Paul Chapman, Sage publications

Bolton, G. (2005, 2nd Edn.) *Reflective Practice: Writing and professional
development London*: Paul Chapman, Sage publications.


IfL. 2010. “Your Continuing Professional Development.” www.ifl.ac.uk


Lifelong Learning UK (LLUK) 2008. *Access to effective and equitable continuing professional development opportunities for teachers, tutors and trainers in the lifelong learning sector.* London:LLUK.


Somekh, B. & Zeichner, K. (2009) Action research for educational reform: remodelling action research theories and practices in local contexts, Educational Action Research, 17:1, 5-21,


