A Phenomenological Approach to Teaching Reflective Writing

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Abstract

When students are developing their academic literacy, the complex relationship between developing their own voice and referring to the work of others is central. Reflective writing is first-person writing in that it starts with a description in context of personal experience. In our academic contexts, we can also emphasize the post-descriptive stages of analysis and evaluation of our own experience which can be informed by reference to relevant literature. In this paper, we attempt to provide a new insight into reflective writing from the recent philosophical past. We outline a potentially relevant contribution from the philosophy of phenomenology, especially in the way it explores the essential relationship between a so-called 'subjective' first person voice and 'inter-subjectivity' and 'objectivity'.

Reflective writing is justified as a pedagogical activity or as a professional training activity if it helps 'us' make sense of our own experience, with a view to making the next experience more satisfying or successful. Our own reflection in this paper on the experience of reflection itself attempts to respect the tradition of confronting first-person experience with external knowledge. We conclude (and so attempt to argue) that there is value in using the arguments from a philosophy that calls itself a (or the) philosophy of life. Using our own hermeneutic readings of examples from our own students' reflective writing, we attempt to ground and enrich a *potentially* valuable holistic activity which can transcend subjectivity and take learning well beyond the classroom.

Introduction

At the ESBB inaugural conference in 2014, the relationship between voice, agency and competence were discussed (Nunn, 2015, Sivasubramaniam, 2015, Unger, 2015). When students are developing their academic literacy, the complex relationship between developing their own voice and referring to the work of others is central. Reflective writing (the focus of this paper) may appear to be based on first-person experience in that it normally starts with a description in context of personal experience. However, it does not limit itself to mere description as the ultimate aim is to learn how to make future personal and interpersonal experiences more rewarding and successful. In an academic context, the post-descriptive stages of analysis and evaluation of one's own experience can be informed by reference to relevant literature. In our context, reflection on one's ability to listen effectively, for example, would start with a description of an actual experience. This experience would then be informed by reference to texts on active listening techniques. This stage represents an intersubjective stage of reflection as it is informed by reference to 'others'.

As reflection in its common everyday sense of serious thinking or careful thought is closely linked to improving understanding, it makes sense to consider how we might improve the way we reflect in a learning context. This entails reflecting on the meaning of reflection itself. In the literature of phenomenology, there is a close link between the philosophy of life and reflection as "life itself is ordered toward reflection" (Gadamer 2004 [1975], p. 229).

Smith (2013, p.1) defines phenomenology as "the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view". Heigham and Croker (2009, p.15) suggest that "[t]he purpose of phenomenological study is to reduce individual experiences of such phenomen[a] to a description of the basic 'essence' of that experience." They also argue that phenomenology "underpins all qualitative research, because of its interest in understanding and representing the subjective experience of participants".

However, as emphasized by the phenomenologists of the 19th and early 20th century, first-person, subjective perception is only a starting point. Gadamer (2004, p.78) argues that "our perception is never a simple reflection of what is given to the senses". An understanding of the inevitable intersubjective side to reflection is explained in Gadamer (2004, p. 29) as "[d]etaching oneself from the subjective", which is nonetheless the inevitable starting point of any reflection on personal experience.

According to Eucken (1919, p. 66), individual reflection is only a means to a greater more collective end. Community knowledge is able to enhance individual efforts and the reverse is also true, so a holistic conception of 'truth' or reality can exclude neither. Eucken's aim is to

"at the same time associate philosophy and life more closely" [Our translation of: "Zugleich Philosophie und Leben enger miteinander verknüpfen"].

The essence of the relationship is that first person perspectives are an inevitable first step. Subjective perception while unavoidable is transcended through a reflective process that also embraces intersubjectivity. As Vallack (2010, p.111) expresses it: "[i]t is essential to Transcendental Phenomenology, that the researcher exceeds mundane subjectivity through intersubjectivity. In other words, the first-person experiences undergo a metamorphosis and become universal insights." Ultimately the act of recording subjective first-person accounts leads to the creation of a phenomenological object:

> The most "all-embracing" subjectivism of first-person research data may reveal, through transcendence, a deep intersubjectivism which is recognised through the collective unconscious as a universal, phenomenological object. (Vallack, 2010, pp.113-114)

The meanings of subjectivity and intersubjectivity can also be linked to objectivity. When Larkin, Watts and Clifton (2006, p. 106) suggest that "…it is not actually possible - even if it might be desirable - to remove ourselves, our thoughts and our meaning systems from the world, in order to find out how things 'really are' in some definitive sense", they underline the difficulties of arguing that we are capable of pure (so-called objective) reasoning. A common theme of phenomenologists is the view that so-called objective, and therefore apparently 'objective' impersonal, reasoning cannot be detached from those who reason. Davis and Steinbock (2014), with reference to the work of Max Scheler, argue that the affective or emotional inevitably precedes reasoning. Accepting this entails the view that claims of objectivity in any examination of experience are very difficult to substantiate. Every analysis or evaluation of real experience starts with some affective premises which may be seen as personal biases or hidden assumptions. This is particularly important when we consider our experience of others: "there is an affective or emotional understanding of others prior to any intellectual or rational understanding" (Davis and Steinbock, 2014, n.p.).

A phenomenological approach encourages us to factor in the inevitable bias related to any reflections by starting with a first-person description not only of 'what happened' or 'what was said' or even 'what was thought' but also of what we felt about what happened or was said. In other words the likelihood of bias or partial knowledge are so great that a suspension of judgment is required. A reflective process is a means of suspending judgement on our experience by revealing our affective apprehensions in order to minimize bias.

A more radical view is expressed by Husserl (1927, cited in Vallack (2010, p. 113)):

> Subjectivism can only be overcome by the most all-embracing and consistent subjectivism (the transcendental). In this (latter) form it is at the same time objectivism (of a deeper sort)…" (Husserl, 1927, p.34).

Regen (2012, p. 291) relates phenomenology to a hermeneutical approach to interpreting text:

> Gadamer suggests hermeneutics is not a method but a fluid set of guiding principles aiding the human search for truth in the concealed forgetfulness of language. The analytic of Dasein means that research participants' narrative of their life experience, of say cancer care is in a sense not only their individual experience but also experience valued in relation to the universality of the Dasein concept.

Dasein (Heidegger, 1996 [1953]) is roughly translatable as the experience of existence or 'being'. While our experience is individually mediated, the Dasein concept is also a universal that we all have in common. It is in this sense perhaps that Weberman (2000 p.46) provides a defence of Gadamer's position that "objectivity is not possible because the object of understanding is not determinate, but rather constituted anew by each act of understanding". Assuming, from our phenomenological insights, that every act of understanding is initially mediated within the 'self', we become aware that it is very difficult to claim objective knowledge, in the sense that it exists independently of individual understanding, but our common experience of Dasein makes intersubjectivity both possible and essential.

In Nunn, Deveci and Salih (2015), we cite Vessey (n.d) on Ricoeur's "Oneself as Another" in relation to subjectivity and intersubjectivity. This citation is of equal significance to reflective writing, given that reflections as defined pedagogically later in this paper are initiated by a personal narrative:

> We are subjects in others' stories, others are subjects in our stories; others are authors of our stories, we are authors of others' stories. Our narratives are essentially interwoven with other narratives. We are characters in other narratives—we are our parents' child, our partner's partner, our friends' friend—and they are characters in our narratives. Also, through our discussions and interactions with others we facilitate the articulation and direction of their narratives, and they ours. All this is to say that our identity is never simply our own. It is embedded with relations with others and we do not have ultimate control over the nature of these relationships, much less the nature of our identity.

Gadamer (2004 [1975], p.166) refers to the nature of understanding our experience through 'transcendental reflection' in a holistic sense as reflection *after* the experience: "[i]ts construction of the totality of all determinants of thought is by no means the thinking out of some arbitrary view of the world, but desires to bring into thinking the absolute a posteriori character of experience, including experiment. This is the exact sense of transcendental reflection."

In the relationship between the subjective, the intersubjective and the objective, first-person perspectives are an unavoidable first step in the search for truth as all knowledge is inevitably filtered through our own consciousness. Assuming this to be the case, our consciousness of 'self' still has an inevitable intersubjective consequence in that we cannot assume we are alone in our 'subjective' inquiry. We are aware in a Cartesian sense of our own existence, but must also accord the same awareness to others. Subjectivity, while unavoidable can therefore also be transcended. Inter-subjectivity is hence linked to subjectivity and by extension is difficult to separate from objectivity, what is termed after Husserl "the intersubjective constitution of objectivity" by Beyer (2013). Ultimately the act of recording subjective first-person accounts is said to lead to the creation of a "phenomenological object". In this paper, we examine examples of reflective writing by students as phenomenological objects. We also use the phenomenological insights into the relationship between subjectivity and intersubjectivity to deepen our understanding of the various ways in which reflection can be shaped.

Phenomenological reflection

Schmitt (1967, p.142) points out that "phenomenological reflection is a very special kind of reflection". According to Schmitt, when practicing a phenomenological approach, we reflect about 'examples' rather than 'facts'. One feature of reflection is 'bracketing' or 'parenthesizing', (Husserl, 1960 [1931], pp. 60-61), which we have so far provisionally paraphrased in non-specialized language as suspending judgement. By 'bracketing' our subjective experience is (even if only temporarily) transformed into an 'object' to reflect upon.

In this way, among other possibilities, we are open to the possibility that a previous action or belief was in fact misunderstood or wrong: "Reflection involves questioning – more specifically questioning something that I believed before or regarded as properly done" (Schmitt, 1967, p.142). From our holistic perspective, we would argue that we also need to accommodate the assumption that an experience was only partially understood and that reflection will provide new ways of seeing and therefore understanding it. In this sense, reflection is highly relevant in an academic context. We move from what we apparently 'know' to a newer understanding that can create 'new' knowledge or motivate improved practice.

The aim of labelling something as a 'phenomenon' worth reflecting on is to go beyond the mere 'facts' of experience itself. Schmitt (op. cit., p. 143) underlines the non-empirical nature of the 'object' being reflected on. Importantly, Schmitt identifies the extraction of what is essential (the essence) from the (bracketed) experience. A reflection on a single subjective

experience goes beyond the details of the experience itself in that it extracts something essential which can enable us to better understand not just this experience but the phenomenon itself, whether it be 'listening', 'teamwork' or interaction itself. To this extent, reflection is understood to be both the enhanced understanding of the experience and the process that leads to that understanding. It represents "an active interior state that uses cognitive, affective, imaginative, and creative means to perceive, represent in language and thereby undergo one's lived experience [and is] recognized as a narrative and *narrating* avenue towards presence, identity, self-awareness, intersubjectivity, and ethical discernment" (Charon & Hermann, 2012, p.3, italics in original).

Reflection is justified as a pedagogical activity or as a professional training activity if it helps 'us' make sense of 'our own' experience and has potential to make the next experience more satisfying or successful. An appeal to philosophy is therefore more than just an exercise in theoretical gymnastics. The deeper the reflection can go, the greater is the potential for extracting something essential that has value for future experience.

In this piece we propose 'reflection' as a phenomenological activity in order to enhance 'reflective writing' as a teaching and learning activity. Both narrating and the narrative generated are considered of value. Our position is not that students should reflect to enable evaluation of either the process or product of reflection, but that writing can assist students in the development of reflective capacity:

> Not report but discovery, writing unlocks reservoirs of thought or knowledge otherwise inaccessible to the writer. Representing one's experience in language is perhaps the most forceful means by which one can render it visible and hence, comprehensible. Writing is how one reflects on one's experience. It is as if that which is experienced has to be somehow "gotten outside" of the person so that it can be apprehended and then comprehended. (Charon & Hermann, 2012, p.3)

In this paper, we do not follow the typical generic structure of a pseudo-scientific experimental research paper with research questions, results and discussion of results. Instead we attempt to confront phenomenological theoretical background outlined in some detail with some actual examples from students' work. Our own reflection attempts to respect the tradition of confronting first-person experience with external knowledge. In this way, our phenomenology view is confronted with examples from students' reflective writing as a means of exploring the potential value of phenomenology as a means of better understanding reflective writing as a learning task.

Describing experience: an initial example

To facilitate our more abstract discussion which continues below, a brief pause to present an example helps situate the discussion. To go beyond subjective experience, examples "both serve[s] as an illustration and have evidential functions" (Schmitt, 1967, p.141). In text sample 1 below, a first-year engineering student from the UAE is reflecting on her own ability to use active listening having read a seminar text on this topic. This extract is the first descriptive phase of the reflection. In 173 words and 10 sentences, the student chooses 19 uses of the first person, 15 of which are the first-person singular subject pronoun 'I'. The predominant voice is the active voice.

Text sample 1

> Listening has been one of my weaknesses. I am known as the speaker but when it comes to listening I always find myself drifting away. To me it didn't seem to be a problem and I didn't worry about it because it never hurt anyone else. However since I started university it has been one of the most important skills that I cannot achieve effectively, especially during lectures. Even though I try to give my full attention to the professor I drift off most of the time the professor is talking. Because of this I realized I miss important information. There is one class that I find very hard to listen effectively in, which is Chemistry 101. The professor's voice is so calm and low that I find it hard to concentrate on what he is saying. Furthermore I have studied everything before and feel like it is not important to pay attention because I sometimes think I know everything. This is an example of poor listening and I want to change it.

This is an example of the descriptive phase of academic reflection, which differs from personal reflection in that in general it takes place for a specific learning-related purpose (Moon, 2006, cited in Ryan, 2011). However, to lead to learning, academic reflection "must ultimately reach the transformative level for deep, active learning to occur" (Ryan, 2011, p.101); more broadly, the goal of such reflection "should be to develop not only one's knowledge and skills, but also habits of mind that allow for informed flexibility, ongoing learning and humility" (Epstein, 2008, p. 1048). The descriptive phase is therefore one phase in what is often construed as a reflective cycle (Gibbs, 1988; Kolb, 1984) framework or hierarchy (Moon, 2007; Valli, 1997) or process (Grace, Pilkington, Rush, Tomkinson, & Willis, 2006).

Grace et al. (2006) highlight both the concept of reflection as process and the need to recognize individual variability in the process:

> We […] generally prefer the term 'reflective process' to reflection or reflective thinking, by which we mean a specific course or train of reflective thinking with a given set of characteristics, in order to emphasise that a range of different reflective processes are possible. (Grace et al., 2006, p.5)

This process can include the process of reflective writing, which enables a view of reflection as both narrative and narrating, both of which represent evidence that is of particular value in any academic context.

Reflective Writing

While we find a philosophical angle of value as teachers/researchers trying to determine the value of an academic task and therefore improve the task design, for our engineering students we also attempt to provide a diagrammatic stimulus for the activity.

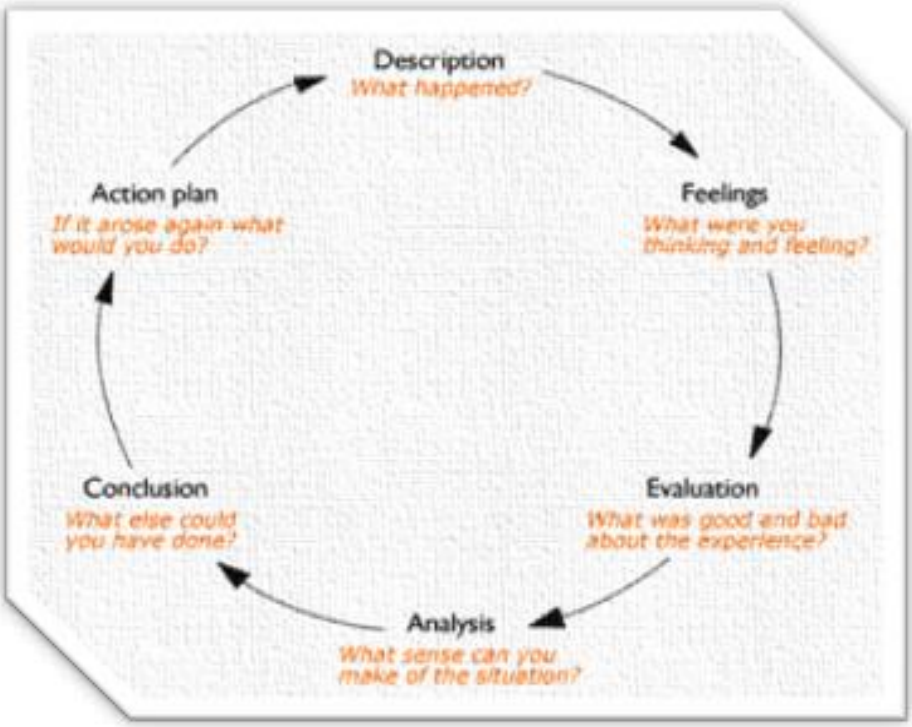

Figure 1: Gibb's (1988) Reflective Cycle

Originally designed for nursing students, Gibb's (1988) reflective cycle provides one simple and coherent visual way of approaching the task. For more advanced students, a different diagrammatic representation can be adapted from Kolb (1984) as in figures 2 and 3 below.

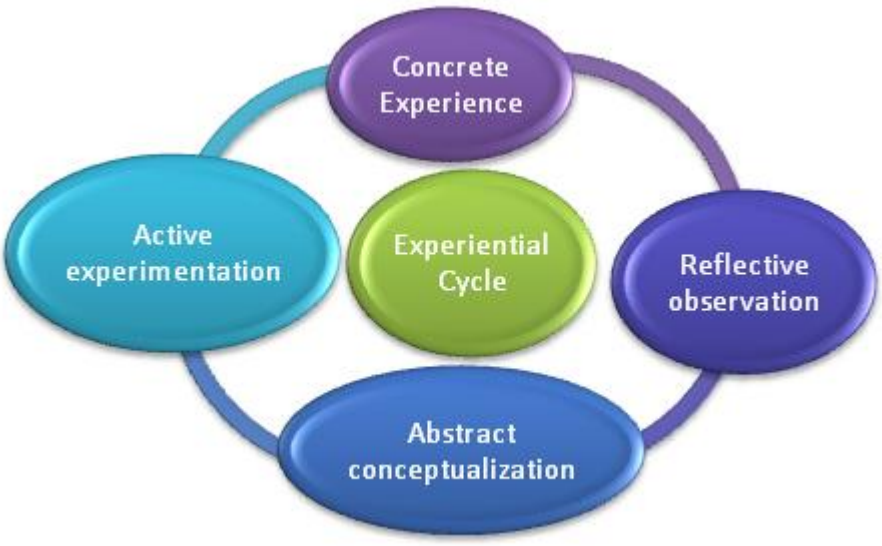

Figure 2: Kolb's (1984) Cycle of Experiential Learning

The adaptation in figure 3 below illustrates a slightly more proactive approach that also helps to emphasize the application of academic literacy to lived experience, as learning is:

> … always grounded in prior experience and […] any attempt to promote new learning must take into account that experience. All learning builds on existing perceptions and frameworks of understanding; therefore, links must be made between what is new and what already exists if learners are to make sense of what is happening to them. (Boud, 2001, pp.11-12)

It follows that "an essential teaching task is to develop connections between the "abstract world" of concepts with the "real world" of personal experiences" (Gitterman, 2004; cited in McGuire, Lay, & Peters, 2009, p.95). In Kolb's model, concrete or "real world" experience is in a dialectic relationship with abstract conceptualization and reflective observation is opposed to active experimentation. In our reflective writing approach, there is a deliberate confrontation between describing one's own experience as first-person narrative and the external or "abstract world" knowledge derived from seminar discussion and literature:

Figure 3 Adaptation of Kolb's (1984) Cycle of Experiential Learning for local use

These visualizations have three stages in common. Typically, in the first stage (1) (illustrated above) a critical reflection starts with a concise description of the experience we wish to reflect on. If we believe learning is also about feelings and motivation (sometimes we refer to 'emotional intelligence'), it is also important to describe our feelings about the experience in question. This descriptive stage provides the 'data' for the following stages. An evaluation and analysis stage (2), is an attempt to make sense of experience. Paul and Elder's (2007, p.4) definition of critical thinking as "the art of analyzing and evaluating thinking with a view to improving it" lends further support to our cyclical approach. In our approach, we ask students to use reference to literature to provide an external perspective and a means of making sense of the experience, because "[r]eflective writing provides opportunities to integrate student thoughts and experiences with academic content. Thus writing and critical thinking may become linked in the teaching-learning process" (McGuire et al., 2009, p.96). This can be related to the idea of suspending judgment or bracketing our initial perspective of our experience (Husserl, 1931) so that we can use external 'community' or 'other' knowledge to enhance the purely personal voice. A final stage (3) is a constructive stage in that, in theory, the first two stages should help us transform future experience (Mezirow, 1990, Brookfield, 1987) to make it more satisfying or successful, so reflection attempts to project into the future in a transformative way: "Reflective learning enables people to reorganize experience and 'see' situations in new ways. In this way,

adult learning is potentially transformative, both personally and socially" (Tusting & Barton, 2006, p.1).

Using Reflective Writing

The skills required for effective reflective writing are not so easy for students to develop. The "complex purposes, high rhetorical demands (Goodfellow & Lea, 2005) and linguistically demanding features" (Charon & Hermann, 2012, p.3; Ryan, 2011, p.101) of reflective writing render it challenging for many. In our context, we are guided in working with students by the experiential cycle shown in Figure 4:

Figure 4 Reflecting on Academic Experience

Outcomes may demonstrate more or less reflection and depth, described by Sen (Sen, 2010, p.81) who refers to Moon's levels of reflective writing (Moon, 2007). Level one reflective writers achieve more description than reflection, while level three writing shows: "description, but it is focused, with particular aspects accentuated for reflective comment. Shows some analysis, some self-questioning." Level four writing, the most sophisticated level, demonstrates: "clear evidence of standing back from the event. Shows deep reflection. Self-questioning but the views and motives of others are also taken into account. Observation that learning has been gained." This is the aim of the task described for students as follows:

The individual writing tasks require you to read, annotate and take notes from the text on the seminar topic (effective listening from seminar one for individual writing 1 and small group communication in seminar 2) ready to discuss it in the class seminar. The aim is to identify the most important concepts or ideas in the text. These concepts will later be used to reflect (see below) on your own experience of your first-year experience (FYE) in that communication skill area. Either before or after the seminar, you should use search engines available in the library (such as EBSCO) to identify another text on the same topic. You should read, annotate and take notes for this text too to prepare for the individual writing task. This will be done in class, but you may bring with you the two annotated texts and your notes. You will be asked to reflect on your own experience as a first-year student in relation to the important concepts/skills identified in the seminar texts so it will be useful to read the description for 'reflective writing' below.

***Evaluation** in academic writing often means working out the extent to which something is true. You could therefore try to evaluate the evidence available to you about your own experience and work out how 'true' or reliable your description of what happened and especially your feelings about the experience were. In the case of a reflection it can also refer to what was positive or negative, good or bad, right or wrong, fair or unfair etc. about the experience. This stage could also involve using concepts from our reading on a topic to help you interpret what is significant about your experience.*

***Analysis** often involves breaking a complicated situation, issue or a problem down into manageable parts in order to understand it better and, in the case of a problem, to solve it. It can also mean identifying your own opinions, arguments or claims or separating facts from opinions. (You may prefer to adjust Gibb's cycle and do this before an evaluation.)*

*After the previous stages you may now be ready to come to a well-balanced, honest conclusion about your experience, your own and other people's role in it and what you have discovered through reflection. From what you have learnt, you could then finish by **looking ahead.** How would you approach a similar situation, task or problem in the future? What would you do differently?*

[Based on Gibb's reflective cycle available at http://www.brookes.ac.uk/services/upgrade/study-skills/reflective-writing.html]

The level of detail provided in this task description is a reflection of the "explicit teaching and scaffolded development over time" (Bain, Ballantyne, Mills, & Lester, 2002) considered critical for the effective development of reflective writers (Ryan, 2011, p.101).

Describing experience: some examples of Stage Two of reflective writing

Stage two requires some kind of analysis of the real (or possibly imagined) experience. Critics of a reflective writing process (see for example Dohn, 2011) make the important point that reflective activities, by suspending judgement, assume that an activity that is divorced from the action it is supposed to modify will actually have an impact on practice. Dohn emphasizes the need to shift the focus back to situated practice itself. A written reflection itself becomes a reified product and therefore to be judged competent as a 'reflection', it need not reflect true feelings and may not impact behaviour. If the reflection is reified and perhaps even invented, it would then of course appear to be self-defeating as it might not lead to modified or improved behavior. If we are aware that any finished piece of reflective writing itself inevitably becomes a 'phenomenological object', we are also then aware of a potential drawback. Paradoxically, this might not be such a serious drawback, assuming as we do that accumulated reflective experiences will nonetheless maintain some potential to transform future experience.

Text sample 2 below illustrates the way a student uses a seminar reading text to propose some techniques of effective listening. In this extract, there is no direct link to the student's example of experience. This helps us explain the use of the second person 'you' and the third person 'they'. There is also one example of a first-personal plural 'us'.

Text sample 2

> There are two main parts to becoming an effective listener, reflecting and probing [1]. These two skills are used by many communicators to help them keep us with the speaker and show them that they are listening and understanding every word they say. "Reflecting is paraphrasing back to the speaker what they said" [1]. Not only that but reflecting can also be summarizing what a speaker said [1]. This shows the speaker the dedication you have for them and makes them feel understood and cared for. Probing is another way to show the speaker you understand them. It is when the listener asks questions about what the speaker is saying [1]. These skills can help you become an active listener because interaction with the speaker is important to reassure them you are listening

From sample 2, we cannot conclude that there is an impact on practice, although we do assume that there is a potential being created. It is in text samples 3 & 4 that we see the use made of the reading text to analyze experience. In the two extracts (3 & 4) below one is a first person reflection, the other a third person reflection. In text sample 3, the student uses the techniques in the text to generalize about the whole population of students.

Text sample 3

University students sit through countless lectures where the professor goes on and on about the subject. However do these students listen and take note on every single word their professor says? That is probably impossible. Most students might drift away during a lecture and miss important information being said. Therefore students must use effective listening skills to help them focus and relate to the subject. Probing can be very important for a lecture. If a student does not understand or wants to understand further then they should ask the professor about it. Asking questions will help them relate to the subject more and understand it better. Moreover students can reflect on everything the professor says by writing notes. Note taking helps a student focus and listen effectively because they must pay attention to know what is important to write.

In contrast, the student in text extract 4 uses the techniques in the text to reflect on her own experience. There is a clear first-person voice which we consider to be more authentic. By analyzing her own behavior the student appears to arrive at a better understanding of how to transform her learning in a lecture situation.

Text sample 4

For our Seminar course we were required to go to some workshops, one of what I attended was about "writing a resume" presented by Dr. Nadia. She talked about the steps of writing a resume and what to write in. In the whole timeframe I was writing notes about almost everything and anything, because of that I missed some important information while writing. Even when Dr. Nadia asked questions I didn't even tried to answer and communicate with her, this happens with me in other classes also.

Writing everything does not help much, when I write everything I try to memorize what she said for a moment and skip the next sentences. Here I am not reflecting, reflecting can be by paraphrasing, summarizing or asking a question for clarification or elaboration [1, Pg.2]. From my experience in this workshop I realized that I am not really an effective listener in many different classes which includes only theory, because in these classes I only write even if I did not understand, and read what I wrote or study the whole curriculum before the exam.

From these extracts it is still difficult to know which one benefits the most from reading. The stronger ability to generalize in sample 3 could indicate a better understanding of the text and she is able to relate it to experience coherently even if the experience is not her own. The application of ‘reflecting’ to her own experience by the student who drafted sample 4 appears to indicate an attempt to understand and improve her own listening behavior. We see transformation of future experience as an important outcome of reflective writing, but we need to concede (in line with Dohn, 2011) that it is not possible to assume that actual transformation takes place from the evidence of the reflective product itself.

Reflecting on one's own emergent writing

Considering that each 'finished' piece of reflective writing is a product, a process of developing such products over time can usefully involve reflecting on previous pieces. The purpose of this activity is that we are able to observe from the texts themselves whether the students' reflection on their own writing process does lead to improved writing as their reflection is about improving their own writing. Many students focus on language issues but they rarely only focus on the language as illustrated in text sample 5 below. We would like to have an opportunity of interpreting whether the students are engaging in a true transformational reflection or just providing a graded product instrumentally. Possibly one indication of authenticity is an attempt (1) to justify one's behavior and (2) to communicate with the reader (in this case myself as the instructor). The fact that several students in the extracts below subtly criticize the task time limit is potentially also a sign of authenticity in that the student is able to engage the instructor, hence looking beyond a subjective, inward-looking reflection.

Text sample 5

> In my individual writing my main issue was language it is mainly the sentence construction. Dr. Roger comment on my language "a good level but build paragraphs with combinations of slightly shorter finished sentences" [1]. I think that this issue occurs because I mainly focus on the evidence and answering the question and carry on the writing. My other issue that affects my language score is that I do not plan time to proof read my work again, as I think that my language mistakes could be easily prevented and solved by proof reading. Another problem I faced was within the task. Dr. Roger commented: "you address the whole question but it is thinner on experience". It maybe is due to the rushing I face during the writing as want to finish on time I cut out from some paragraphs.

An attempt to link one's own writing process to intrapersonal, psychological issues can also be interpreted as evidence of authenticity. Text sample 6 below illustrates how a student attempts to describe an affective issue rather than a linguistic one. The language errors might further allow us to infer that what she is describing was actually happening when writing this paragraph.

Text sample 6

> I have scored B in my second writing and that was because of some of the weaknesses. One of the paramount factors is perhaps a psychological issue that I face when writing in a short time period. I panic when someone rushes me out and limits me with a certain time to complete a task. So, even if was acknowledged about what am I going to write, this feeling scatters the thoughts and impede me.

Reflective writing as a phenomenological object

In text sample 7 below are the last lines of a graded reflective writing attempt by one student. We note the appropriate use of epistemic modality (will *possibly* reduce), but inevitably we also have to note that the student did not manage to revise this sentence effectively.

> **Text sample 7**
> Nevertheless, revising what I have wrote steadily and with full concentration will possibly reduce language errors, hence rising my score and most importantly help me in my future writing tasks.

This raises the potential irony of the status of a written (and graded) reflection. The author is able to suggest revision is necessary, but for whatever reason is not able to practice this. A piece of writing does sometimes have a critical edge which to some extent testifies to the authenticity of the student's voice. In text sample 8a, for example, the student fulfils the task but does also appear to send a message about the time-challenged nature of the task.

> **Text sample 8a**
> Firstly, when the first writing task was assigned, the major factor that affected my writing ability was time limitation. As a result, significant errors were observed in the task fulfillment in general and the language in particular. As commented by Dr. Roger, the ideas were lost in using complex sentences such as "The role of effective listening in our social life cannot be ignored any more, as [2] emphasized on the tremendous role that such skill plays in our daily conversations as it illustrates that it will allow people to be more receptive to the innovative ideas that the speaker may have" [1].

In text sample 8b below, the student analyses and evaluates her own behavior as a writer and attempts to illustrate the process of improvement that she engages in.

> **Text Sample 8b**
> On the contrary, my language was not improved as successfully as intended. This can be explained that my prime focus was improving the content and the sentence building rather than the vocabulary. As a result, I tried to prepare for the third writing assignment by retaining the previous progression and mainly focusing on the enhancement of my language. Thus, I started to read more and consult Dr. Roger for further recommendations. Later, the exerted effort was moderately shown as represented in the following paragraph, "In other words, self debate will help you evaluate your reactions mentally before processing them." [3]. Nevertheless, using the appropriate vocabulary is still an issue I need to develop. Quite frankly, working on my strengths has helped me eliminating some of the weaknesses as well as meeting the limited time effectively.

As the instructor is an author of this paper, we can testify that this student did behave as described and did improve.

Final Discussion and Conclusions

We designed this paper partially as a phenomenological reflection on our own experience of teaching reflective writing. Our aim was to provide an original description and analysis of one type of academic reflective activity based on phenomenology. While we have made phenomenology a focus, emphasizing the inevitability of subjectivity and bias and ways to both acknowledge and mitigate these, reviewers have noted resonances with other approaches with which they are more familiar. Rather than integrate these comments as part of our own narrative, we prefer to present them as written by reviewers and then integrate them into our own discussion, hence further emphasizing the relationship between the subjective and the intersubjective which is enacted in this kind of dialogic review after the works of expert 'others' have been cited as literature and as review comments. Adamson (review comment), for example, suggests:

> If reflection is a means to help a collective 'us', then personal reflections could possibly be enhanced by a more 'collaborative autoethnographic' (CAE) approach to the recall of experiences (Chang et al, 2013). CAE can work in tandem with the "internal conversation" (Archer, 2003) commonly associated with individual reflections.

We have emphasized and supported our view that reflective writing is potentially a powerful tool for transformative learning. In line with this view, our discussion of our examples has also indicated that the subjective description of experience is only a starting point. 'Collaborative auto-ethnography' is therefore a useful concept that underlines the importance of recognizing that the 'other' also has a subjective self. Collaboration could also provide more of a guarantee of transformation rather than a potentially self-delusive claim of transformation. The constant interaction between the self and the self, and the self and the other, provides the best hope of transformation.

Our own reflection of our own experience of reflective activity as a learning tool has also made us aware of the possible drawbacks of relying too heavily on reflective writing. In our context, we teach engineers critical thinking skills primarily using project-based learning. In this approach, students conduct semester–long projects emphasizing teamwork and it is the team rather than the individual that is graded in project reports and final presentations.

In addition to its own intrinsic merits, reflective writing is intended to provide a balance as students can no longer depend on their team in this individual writing component, although we believe that they will have benefited and learnt from team colleagues. The balance between the

two approaches is therefore important in our context. Dohn's (2011) detailed paper has cast doubt on reflective activities that are dissociated from situated experience, emphasizing the need for concurrent reflection in and during professional behaviour. In our own reflection, Dohn represents an absent 'other' in the form of an academic reference. Nonetheless, we do not abandon our assumption that suspension of judgement and distancing oneself from a lived experience does have benefit to those who engage in it genuinely, assuming that an effort is made to bring it to bear on real experience. We see phenomenology as a philosophy of life that acknowledges the inevitability of subjective and affective processing as a starting point to any reflection. We have considered phenomenological reflection to be far more than a cognitive exercise and either more than metacognition or a more affective approach to it. We assume that teachers and trainers engage with their students and that reflection does not take place in unverifiable isolation.

Detailed review comments by John Unger have also helped us better understand that the strengths of reflective writing may lie in its potential for improving our understanding of our own imperfect and limited first-person perceptions of experience. For this improvement to occur, it is necessary to understand that writing is not only intrapersonal:

> Intersubjective, daring, exposing – the writing act, when coupled with the reading act, permits deep congress of self with other and as a corollary, self with self. The passage of the account of self "through" the receiver is critical to the enterprise and transforms writing and reading from something unilaterally "ratable" to something reciprocal. (Charon & Hermann, 2012, p. 3)

The relationship between the subjective and the intersubjective remains complex. Despite its intersubjective nature, a personal reflection is still authored individually and the author has to take sole responsibility for completing the task. On the other hand, the intention is to enhance future subjective *and* intersubjective experience.

We have argued that reflection has value in itself as a phenomenological exploration of experience. At the same time, we need to remain aware that any pedagogical approach practiced in isolation has limitations. Once reflective writing becomes the end product of a required learning 'task', there is a risk of students taking it purely instrumentally. Their graded product of reflection has all the appearances of representing a process of reflection, but if the aim has become just to produce a successful product for a grade, the reflection on actual experience may become secondary or may even be by-passed by students inventing examples. This is not necessarily to suggest that the examples of experience can be seen as, or even need to be, 'accurate' or 'true' in any objective sense. As phenomena are seen as 'essences'

(Schmitt, 1967), there may be a sense in which imagined experience has its own deep-seated sense of reality, as is always claimed for literature for example. Even so-called 'real' experience, once narrated, is reconstructed or reinvented. Once written down it becomes an object in its own right. Authenticity of reflection has therefore been raised as an issue, particularly because the activities we report are graded. We concur with Unger, that text sample 6 appears to be our strongest example of authentic transformative activity that embodies well the essence of this particular reflection.

We conclude that reflective writing is a useful activity in itself, but may also be seen as just one potentially useful activity that needs careful implementation in each context in which it is used to address some of the issues raised. In our course, while our belief is that it is potentially essential as a counterbalance in courses that emphasize the intersubjective as teamwork, it is not an end in itself. It is used in our context as a valued activity in itself and to complement a *team-based* research activity that leads to a full *team-written* research report.

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