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Learning Experiences in Expressive Writing to Improve Psychological and Emotional Wellbeing*

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Abstract

Purpose: People must express their feelings and thoughts to maintain mental health and stability. Expressing one's emotions, experiences, and thoughts in writing relieves inner feelings, promotes self-exploration, and improves individual well-being, resulting in a pleasant state on physical, mental, and social levels. This study aims to reveal the learning experiences of university students who participated in a self-expressive writing course to improve their well-being. **Method:** To explore the learning experiences of university students who took a self-expressive writing course, this study used qualitative research methods to analyze the students' written reflection notes. **Results:** Self-expressive writing was found to resolve university students' negative emotions, regulate their emotions, improve their self-reflection and self-awareness, contributing to their problem-solving skills and ability to set new goals, and strengthen their social communication. The meaning of this class experience can be summarized as healing, awareness, reflection, change, and growth. **Conclusion:** The results of this study provide concrete data on expressive writing classes and are valuable when designing the writing programs.

Keywords : Self-Expression, Expressive Writing, Wellness, Writing Program, Writing Development, Qualitative Research

JEL Classification Code : E44, F31, F37, G15

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1. Introduction

The rapidly changing and diverse 21st century is an era of wellness and healing that emphasizes mental, physical, and emotional harmony. Well-being encompasses the physical, emotional, and social well-being of an individual and refers to the pursuit of a happy and fulfilling life. A prerequisite for maintaining a state of well-being is an individual's ability to communicate. Communication includes self-communication, communication with others, and communication with the world. To improve communication, individuals should be interested in writing to express their experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Self-expressive writing can be a useful life skill that supports individual well-being. Authentically writing about oneself allows individuals to reflect on their inner lives and improves their ability to communicate with their neighbors and the world.

Research on the effects of expressive writing has been conducted in various populations and contexts. These studies provide evidence that expressive writing improves positive emotions and self-esteem. Focusing on Korean studies, in the educational field, studies have been conducted with foreign university students (Park, 2015), university creative writing students (Kang, 2016), college students (Choi, 2019), high school students (Yoon, 2022), and students with intellectual disabilities (Lee, 2013). Other contexts include studies with migrant women (Won, 2010), and Marine Corps soldiers (Hong, 2023) and in hospital settings with cancer patients (Park, 2011), breast cancer patients (Park & Yi, 2012), intensive care nurses (Yoo & Park, 2023).

Most existing research has focused on identifying the learning outcomes of expressive writing in educational contexts in terms of enhancing writing competency. Thus, efforts to connect writing to a well-being perspective or demonstrate the value and importance of writing from a well-being perspective have been weak.

This study explored the nature of the learning experience of expressive writing within the context of university students' active pursuit of psychological and emotional well-being in the transition period from adolescence to adulthood. University is a time when students have a specific interest in well-being because of their expanding personal experiences and desire for happiness while establishing an adult self-identity. The aim of this study was to shed light on university students' learning experiences by exploring the learning effects and outcomes of taking an expressive writing course to improve their psychological and emotional well-being.

2. Characteristics and Instructional Content of Expressive Writing

2.1. Characteristics of Expressive Writing

Writing can be categorized as transactional, literary, poetic, or expressive writing according to its purpose and function (Britton et al., 1975).

"Self-expressive writing is writing that sincerely expresses one's feelings, such as one's thoughts and feelings, and aims to reflect on oneself and grow" (Hong, 2023, p. 7). Expressive writing includes self-expressive (Choi, 2007; Lee, 2021; Park, 2011; Shin, 2016), reflective, self-reflective (Ko, 2014), autobiographical (Lee, 2015), healing, and self-healing writing (Lee, 2014). Various terms can be used to refer to expressive writing; however, these terms all share the aim of "realizing one's essence by reflecting on one's life through inner confession" (Ko, 2018).

"People who engage in self-expressive behavior increase their self-worth, express themselves freely, like themselves, and achieve the goals they choose and desire for themselves" (Hong, 2023). Additionally, Pennebaker & Evans, (2014) stated, "Just writing about a psychologically traumatic experience for 20 minutes a day for four days can lead to significant changes in physical and mental health." He further clinically demonstrated that self-expressive writing can lead to positive changes in sleep habits, work efficiency, and interpersonal relationships.

The advantage of expressive writing is that "writing a story about the writing self, finding meaningful information in the writer's life and experiences, creating content, and revealing one's feelings about what happened to oneself" (Jeong, 2014). Expressive writing can be said to be "writing that has a looser and freer form and structure compared to other writing, such as diaries or letters." This type of expressive writing is considered easily accessible to inexperienced writers who are not interested in or find writing difficult (Jeong, 2014).

"Because expressive writing draws on the writer's own life, the writer doesn't need to have any particular background to write. Expressive writing allows the writer to discover the self in relation to the world and to look at the self objectively, which can lead to self-reflection or even to a new awareness of the self. Expressive writing is important because, more than any other kind of writing, it allows the writer to confront the newly formed self, which is the result of the intense interaction between the writer's self and the othered self in the process of writing" (Kim, 2002). "The new self and the present self can communicate with each other to gain new insights into themselves. This shows that meaningful information about the self can be gained through

expressive writing, which can lead to self-understanding” (Jeong, 2014).

“Expressive writing is closely related to the development of self-identity. Self-identity is formed gradually, influenced by the culture of one's society and social relationships with others. Through expressive writing, writers can recognize and confirm the way they see the world they live in, the way they relate to others, and the way they live their lives, and they can plan how to move forward. It can also facilitate or deepen the formation of a new sense of self as stories about oneself that have been swirling around in one's head are expressed in refined writing. This activity of deeply recognizing oneself and expressing it in writing plays an important role in establishing self-identity” (Jeong, 2014).

2.2. Expressive Writing Course Content

This course focused on developing learners' ability to reflect on themselves and communicate with the world with a sense of self-awareness and self-respect through expressive writing to find meaning in the large and small events (experiences) they encounter as they transition to adulthood. Accordingly, the learning content of the expressive writing course includes 12 topics across three themes: “Self-awareness;” “Joy, anger, sadness, and pleasure;” and “Communicating with the world.” The specific learning content for expressive writing is presented in Table 1.

The objectives, teaching strategies (teaching and learning development processes and teaching and learning methods), learning content, and course assessment were as follows.

The goal of this course was to develop enterprising, open-minded people who can communicate with the world. First, one must be able to express and communicate thoughts, feelings, and experiences in writing. Second, through expression and sharing, individuals can increase their self-esteem by deeply reflecting on themselves and their lives. Third, expressive writing enhances one's understanding of and empathy for others and life overall. Fourth, the true character necessary to live with others, the community, and nature can be cultivated.

The specific goals of the course were as follows: 1) to express personal experiences and feelings through writing; 2) find the meaning in small and large experiences of joy and pain in the growth process; 3) identify the drivers of growth and development by reflecting on the self and my life; 4) promote positive change and growth through expressive writing; 5) communicate and share personal experiences with others through writing; 6) show respect for one's own and others' existence and lives; 7) communicate and share feedback on others' experiences and writing, including empathizing, encouraging others, and providing

advice; 8) develop a positive writing attitude and improve writing skills; and 9) understand their own lives and those of others and cultivate a sense of shared humanity with neighbors and society.

The instructor categorized the teaching and learning process into three phases: introduction, development, and closure. In the introduction stage, the instructor helped learners understand the topic and open their minds. To support interaction with the topic, the instructor used media such as relevant articles, poems, and pictures to fully explain the topic and provide instructions for writing. Develop is the stage of writing and sharing. The instructor supported learners in reflecting on their experience with the topic, drawing on the impact and meaning of the experience, and expressing it in writing.

The instructor also provided support to learners in expressing and presenting their writing to their peers and sharing their feelings and experiences with them. The instructor facilitated feedback activities to encourage the audience to listen to the presenter and exchange feelings, experiences, opinions, and information with them. In the final stage, the instructor helped learners organize their thoughts and write down their reflections.

The instructor organized the teaching and learning methods by leading with a topic, providing writing instructions, writing (e.g., poems, essays), illustrating, presenting (sharing feelings, thoughts, experiences), listening, offering feedback (empathizing, comforting, encouraging, providing advice), and completing activity sheets.

The instructor used various methods of learning assessment to determine whether the learner had achieved the course and unit learning objectives and their level of participation in learning activities. In addition to evaluating weekly writing and assessing learners' communication and participation, the instructor asked the students to write a learning reflection at the end of the semester to qualitatively identify their degree of achievement of the course objectives. In addition, the instructor administered class satisfaction surveys for each unit (weekly) and at the end of the semester to reflect learners' needs and identify their levels of learning satisfaction.

3. Research Method

This study explored the learning experiences of undergraduate students in an expressive writing course offered as a liberal arts elective at a university using a qualitative analysis of students' (N = 53) reflection notes.

The class met for three hours a week for 15 weeks, during which students were required to write 12 different types of texts based on their own lives and experiences in any format,

present these texts in front of their peers, and engage in dialog with each other about the content of their texts (Table 1). At the end of the semester, learners were asked to write a reflection paper on the following: “Write about any changes in your life as a result of participating in the expressive writing class.”

This study analyzed these reflections using a constant comparative method (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998), focusing on how the experience of self-expressive writing on 12 topics affected students’ development of psychological and emotional well-being .

Table 1: Learning Content of the Expressive Writing Course

No	Topic	Learning Activities	Teaching and Learning Materials
Lesson guides and theoretical background			
Writing theme 1. Self-awareness (1)			
1	Finding the meaning of my name and writing a name poem	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning goal: I will write about the meaning of my name to savor and cherish the meaning of my existence. - Lesson: My name is my parents' first gift to me and represents their deepest desires and love for me. Reflect on my existence by writing about the meaning of my name. 	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
2	Write a letter to a protagonist or character with whom you identify	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning goal: Find a person with whom I identify and write about it to reflect on my inner self. - Lesson: Among the things I read, find characters with whom I sympathize or identify, and write about the aspects with which I identify (e.g., situations, characters, personalities). 	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
Writing theme 2. Joy, anger, sadness, and pleasure			
3	A dark period in my life - a long tunnel	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning Goal: Recall a time when you were dissatisfied and identify the meaning of that experience. - Lesson: Reflect on a time of dissatisfaction, how you overcame it, and what it means in your life. 	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
4	What I want to throw away	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning goal: Reflect on my inner self through the tangible and intangible things that I want to throw away. - Lesson: Explore and resolve negative emotions or memories through the activity of writing about intangible and tangible things you want to throw away. 	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
5	A moment when I felt as happy as if I were flying in the sky	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning goal: Increase self-esteem through in-depth reflection on myself and my life - Lesson: Write about a moment when you felt joyful and happy, as if like you were flying. Reflect on what it means to your life. Think about how it affected your life. There are no right or wrong answers; just write from the heart, from how you feel. 	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
6	Childhood - Words that hurt my heart	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Learning goal: To use reflection to find meaning in experiences and increase self-esteem - Lesson: Recall a hurtful comment from your childhood and write about your feelings at the time. Write about how the words that hurt you have affected you over the years, what they meant to you, and how you would respond to them now. 	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire

7	The warmest words of encouragement and comfort I have ever heard.	- Learning goal: Reflect on my life by finding meaning in experiences - Lesson: Identify, reflect on, write, and share the warmest words of encouragement and comfort you have ever heard.	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
Writing theme 3. Communicating with the world			
8	Apologize to those I have hurt	- Learning goal: Reflect on my experiences and life - Lesson: Expressing remorse for things I have done that inadvertently hurt someone	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
9	Sending encouragement to people who need it	- Learning goal: Be interested in and communicate with people and things around me - Lesson: Sending encouragement to people around me who need my warm attention and kind words.	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
10	If I become a parent - to my future children	- Learning goal: Reflect on the role of future parents - Lesson: If you were a parent, what kind of parent would you want to be? What kind of life would you tell your young Cheongjun and children in their 20s to live?	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
Writing theme 1. Self-awareness (2)			
11	Drawing self portrait	- Learning goal: Increase self-esteem by reflecting on myself and my life - Lesson: Draw a self-portrait and write about yourself using three keywords that represent you	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
12	What I would tell myself	- Learning goal: Increase self-esteem by providing support and encouragement to myself - Lesson: Write a story that you would like to send to yourself, who has lived hard and steadfastly.	Related poems and pictures, activity sheets, weekly learning satisfaction questionnaire
End-of-semester wrap-up			
	Summary Write a reflection on learning at the end of the semester	- Review of learning content and activities - Write a study reflection on the subject - Survey on subject satisfaction	Subject satisfaction questionnaire, learning reflection note

4. Results

4.1. Releasing Negative Emotions and Regulating Emotions

Expressive writing is a process based on inner feelings. Through writing, learners uncovered pent-up emotions within themselves. By expressing their negative emotions in writing, they were able to relieve their emotional burdens and repressed feelings. This writing activity helped reduce their stress and improve their psychological stability.

The learners had experienced negative events in their upbringing, both large and small, that hurt them. For example, some had been shy as children because of their parents' strict upbringing, timidity, and sensitivity to their own mistakes, career conflicts with their parents, academic conflicts, family conflicts, lack of parental attention, parental divorce, parental business failure, breakups with opposite-sex friends, conflicts with peers, bullying, and lack

of understanding from people close to them.

It took courage for them to write down their thoughts and experiences, and share their stories with their peers. By writing and talking about dark memories they had locked away, they were able to release the negative emotions connected to these memories of the past. They found comfort when releasing stories that they had kept inside. As the class progressed, students became more confident in telling their stories and wanted to take control of their own narratives.

4.2. Increased Self Reflection and Self-Awareness

Through writing, learners were able to organize and structure their thoughts and experiences, thereby increasing their self-reflection and self-awareness. Through reflection while writing, learners could recognize and explore their values, beliefs, and goals more clearly. Through a better understanding and recognition of themselves, they were able to identify their strengths and weaknesses and find ways to

improve. This led to increased self-awareness, which can affect individual self-acceptance and positive personal growth.

By writing stories about themselves, learners were able to reflect on and discover the meaning and value of their existence, such as who they were, what their identity was, and what was important to them, which led to rich self-awareness and growth.

Through expressive writing, students learned to “know who I am, what I lack, what kind of person I want to be, and what kind of words I want to hear” (YJH), to “become a person who cares and respects others as much as I care for myself” (LHK), and to “realize that it is important to show myself honestly, without worrying about what others think of me” (KSH). Other students stated, “I realized that I am a precious person” (HJW); “We each have our own sorrows, pains, and problems, but we are loved, respected, and valued” (JSY); “I am a strong person [who overcame a breakup with his girlfriend]” (YDW); “I got to know the strengths and weaknesses of my personality” (DWY); “I got away from the illusion that I knew myself well and discovered a new me” (LMJ); and “I realized that I am a person who is easily hurt, a person who is rich in emotions, a person who knows how to love myself more, and a person who dreams of a happy future” (JSH).

4.3. Problem-Solving and Goal Setting

Through writing, learners improved their ability to cope with stressors by analyzing difficult or problematic situations and finding solutions. They were also able to set new life goals and make plans.

By writing about a new topic every week, learners were able to reflect on their past problems, analyze them, and find meaning in their experiences, which allowed them to objectively analyze the causes of stress and the situation. They also learned how to solve problems and cope with similar situations by listening to their peers' experiences, successes, failures, and thoughts. They understood another person's thoughts and intentions by comparing them to their own past situations. By learning, thinking, and empathizing with others' stories, students could respect and understand others' lives, thereby broadening their outlook on life and deepening their understanding of others.

Learners said, “The negative experiences in the past are not my fault” (CIS), “I learned the source of my discomfort and stress” (KKS), “I confirmed that my parents' interference is their love and concern for me” (AYW), “I am not the only one who is struggling” (LSB), “I learned how to respect and love myself” (KJH), “It gave me the motivation to run to the future without being tied to the past” (KSH), “It gave me the strength to overcome the difficulties I will encounter in my life” (YJH), “My experiences, both

difficult and joyful, are my driving force” (YDW), and “Writing about the future helped me realize what kind of person I want to be in the future” (PSE).

4.4. Enhanced Social Communication

Learners were able to share their thoughts and experiences with others through their writing and presentations. This allowed them to give and receive diverse opinions, empathy, and feedback, and to feel psychologically and emotionally connected to people with similar experiences to their own. This provided them with a sense of social support and connection, and in turn, a sense of psychological and emotional security.

Listening to other people's experiences, learners also felt a sense of homogeneity as they realized that we are “experiencing the same and different, different and the same.” They also realized that life was about helping each other, and by listening to the experiences of others, they could rejoice with them, grieve with them, support them, and wish them well.

By sharing feedback, learners created trust and cohesion among their classmates. There was a bond of trust in that they were not alone. Expressing stories while writing and exchanging experiences helped them heal and improve their confidence.

Learners stated they were able to accomplish the following: “I know that I am not alone in my problems, but that we all have problems” (LHJ); “I have learned about other people's experiences and thoughts” (YDW); “I have learned to express myself to others” (CIS); “I have learned that if I can respect myself, I can respect others” (AYW); “I have learned that we all have a valuable life, even if we have different experiences” (CSH); and “The world is not a place to live alone, but to live together” (AYW).

5. Discussion

Expressive writing classes can contribute to improving psychological and emotional well-being through exploring and expressing one's experiences and thoughts. In this study, the experience of learning expressive writing helped learners release and regulate negative emotions, improve self-reflection and self-awareness, engage in problem-solving, set new goals, and enhance social communication. Based on these learning experiences of expressive writing, the meaning of a lesson can be derived as healing, self-awareness, reflection, change, and growth, which are discussed below.

1) Healing: Expressive writing classes focused on healing learners' minds by writing and expressing their experiences and feelings, recognizing the dignity of people

through empathy for others' stories, and expanding their understanding of others and the world, which was comforting and empowering.

2) Self-awareness: The expressive writing class was about reflecting on, finding, and gaining awareness of oneself. It was a class where people could learn who they were; discover new aspects of themselves; grow by knowing their strengths, essence, and needs; and know that they were a good person.

3) Reflection: Through reflection, learners could analyze their heart and past heartbreaks and understand them anew from a current perspective.

4) Change and growth: Learners experienced change and growth through experiences such as expressing themselves by writing about their experiences and thoughts; talking to others to give and receive mutual feedback; getting to know their inner self; understanding themselves and others; understanding people; growing, changing, and developing myself; and becoming a better person.

6. Conclusions

Most studies conducted on expressive writing conducted in educational settings have sought to identify the learning effects in relation to the pedagogical aspects of writing (i.e., the enhancement of writing skills). In contrast, this study explored the value of writing from the perspective of college students' psychological and emotional well-being.

This study explored students' learning experiences to determine their psychological and emotional learning outcomes in an expressive writing course. Qualitative analysis of their reflective notes revealed that expressive writing could help learners release negative and regulate their emotions, improve their self-reflection and self-awareness, solve problems and set new goals, and enhance social communication. Expressive writing classes have been shown to have a positive effect on self-esteem as well as an emotionally stabilizing effect by allowing students to reflect on their lives and experiences and express them to others. Based on students' learning experiences fostered through expressive writing, the meaning of the class, which encompasses these experiences, can be summarized as healing, self-awareness, reflection, change, and growth.

This study is unique because it analyzed reflection notes written at the end of the semester. To understand the in-depth experience of expressive writing, it would be useful to analyze a single case of a participant or small group of participants by conducting additional in-depth interviews, which would go beyond the limitations of the data collection in this study. However, the results of this study provide real data on expressive writing classes and can contribute to the design and operation of expressive writing programs.

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