



The effects of creative, expressive, and reflective writing on career learning: An explorative study

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether creative, expressive, and reflective writing contributes to the formation of a work-life narrative that offers both meaning and direction among students in higher education. The content of writing done by students who participated in a two-day writing course at the start (or in preparation) of their work placements and of a control group who did not take part in the course were compared. Writing samples were analysed using the Linguistic Index Word Count program (Pennebaker, Booth, & Francis, 2007) and an instrument based on Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010). Results show writing promotes the development of career narratives.

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1. Introduction

The labour market of the 21st century is characterised by increased complexity (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005), individualisation (Beck, 2000; Giddens, 1991) and insecurity (Pryor & Bright, 2011). In recent decades, narrative theories and approaches to career guidance have been developed in order to address the career challenges of our era and are intended to help individuals develop a career identity (Kuijpers, Meijers, & Gundy, 2011; Meijers, Kuijpers, & Gundy, 2013). Such an identity takes on the form of a well-structured story, based on life themes, that explains “how the self of yesterday became the self of today and will become the self of tomorrow” (Savickas, 2005, p. 58) and is “not factual truth but narrative truth; meaningful to the individual in terms of experience, understanding of the world and of future possibilities” (Reid & West, 2011, p. 4). It also takes into consideration the fragmented nature of self and society, whereby the self, as it relates to career, is defined as a dynamic multiplicity of positions or voices regarding work (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).

We propose that creative, expressive, and reflective writing can offer ways for students to construct work-life stories that provide both personal meaning and societal direction (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012). Here meaning refers to the necessity of exploring and constructing what is personally meaningful in relation to existing work roles (Wijers & Meijers, 1996) and highlights the importance of a dialogue with oneself and the role of emotions in work-life choices (Meijers & Wardekker, 2002). Direction refers to the ability to make a choice, articulate a preference, and take action based on what an individual deems to be his/her contribution to community and society. In short, the creation of a career narrative – whether this takes shape in a conversation with a career counsellor or is the result of career-writing activities – must allow an individual to contribute to society in ways that are personally meaningful.

In this study, we hypothesise that a two-day creative, expressive, and reflective writing course can foster career learning (i.e., the construction of a work-life story that provides both meaning and direction). There are several reasons why writing might support the construction of a career identity, one which is focused on adaptation to a changing landscape (Savickas, 2013, p. 150).

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of work, grows from actual experiences (Kuijpers et al., 2011), and is in part co-constructed through a dialogue. In the first place, writing is an inherently narrative and dialogical process, in the same way that narrative career counselling is. The writer always addresses a real or imaginary audience and what ends up on the page talks back to the writer (Kellogg, 1994); in this way a conversation occurs in tandem with the text taking shape. Second, writing, under particular circumstances, can be helpful and even therapeutic in processing life experiences (i.e., traumas and transitions) and constructing meaning (Pennebaker, 1996). An important reason for this seems to be that writing helps individuals to name affective responses. Lieberman et al. (2007) showed that putting feelings into words (i.e., affect labelling), as compared with other forms of encoding, lessened the response of the amygdala and other limbic regions to negative emotional images. Lastly, writing has proven to be one of several effective “instructional strategies that require students to build up their prior knowledge and find direct relevance of new knowledge” (Balgopal, Wallace, & Dahlberg, 2012, p. 70); *writing to learn* has been found to enhance “meta-cognitive and self-reflective skills” (Balgopal, Wallace, & Dahlberg, 2012, p. 71). In the literature three types of writing are distinguished: creative, expressive, and reflective/reflexive writing.

Creative writing (Bolton, 1999; Hunt & Sampson, 2002) for personal development refers to the writing of fiction or (fictional) autobiography for therapeutic purposes or to gain self insight. Indeed as Donald Winnicott (1971, p. 13) concurred, “the creative process is intrinsically self-developmental (...) in the creation of artwork the creative artist opens up the possibility of being transformed”. Academics and practitioners of writing for personal development have found that “fiction is a way of exploring a professional problem that is inaccessible or problematic by any other means” (Bolton, 1994, p. 54).

Expressive writing can refer to writing about personal or emotional topics or instruction aimed at getting reluctant writers to put their thoughts on the page. In this article, however, the term expressive writing refers to a concept used primarily by researchers who have, for the past three decades, been studying the therapeutic effects of writing in the wake of traumatic events and the emotions associated with those events (for an overview see Pennebaker, 2011). Theories as to why writing helps have grown out of these studies and also ideas about how to identify healthy writing from writing that has little or no effect (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Pennebaker, 2011). Pennebaker states that the process of writing itself is key, as “*having a coherent story to explain a painful experience was not necessarily as useful as constructing a coherent story*” (Pennebaker, 2011, p. 11 *italics original*).

Reflective/reflexive writing refers to writing practices that are intended to “take us out of our own narrow range of experience and help us to perceive experiences from a range of viewpoints and potential scenarios” (Bolton, 2010, p. 10). These may include non-fiction and creative exercises and involve ‘reliving and rendering’. In reflective writing, the explicit use and value of using metaphors is also recognised (El Sawad, 2005; Mignot, 2004), just as it is in career learning (Amundson, 2010). Reflexive writing is not the same as reflective writing. While the latter could be said to involve taking something into oneself – a topic, an event, a relationship – for the purpose of contemplation or examination, the former involves ‘doubling the self’ (Hunt & Sampson, 2006, p. 4) or acknowledging the self as multi-voiced, “so that we are both ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ ourselves simultaneously and able to switch back and forth fluidly and playfully from one position to the other, giving ourselves up to the experience of ‘self as other’ whilst also retaining a grounding in our familiar sense of self” (Bolton, 2010, p. 4). Although reflective and reflexive writing differ, we will use the term reflective writing to refer to both for the purposes of this article.

As is shown elsewhere in greater detail (Lengelle & Meijers, *in press*), the chief difference between counselling approaches and writing is that students or clients who are writing construct as they write and commit their stories to the page themselves and may later share these texts with a facilitator using the work as ‘objects’ of reflection and dialogue, while the story told in career counselling is recorded and articulated by or put together with the help of the counsellor as a result of listening and conversing with the client.

Although narrative approaches – of which writing approaches are a part – are being touted as promising alternatives to the predominantly cognitive career guidance approaches that still dominate in schools (Kuijpers et al., 2011), research on their effectiveness has only recently begun in earnest (Bimrose & Hearne, 2012; Reid & West, 2011; Vilhjalmsdottir & Tulinius, 2009). No research has been done into how writing for transformative purposes might contribute to the practices of career guidance counsellors and teachers, although professionals employ writing exercises as an adjunct to their other career guidance practices (Parker, 2002; Taylor, 2013) and have used it to explore their own career identities (Simpson, 2011). And although a study did explore the uses of therapeutic writing in the face of lay-offs and labour market re-entry rates (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994), both the explicit practice of using writing approaches to foster narrative career construction and the research evaluating its effectiveness are new contributions to the field of career learning.

2. Problem and method

In this study we hypothesise that a two-day creative, expressive, and reflective writing course can foster the construction of a work-life story that provides both meaning and direction. We explored this hypothesis by analysing texts received from an experimental and a control group of third-year students at a Dutch university.

2.1. Participants

A group of 20 third-year bachelor students were recruited for the study; 16 of those who signed up participated in the course. These students were about to embark on their work placements (though several had done an earlier work placement or had recently begun a placement; start dates varied in response to employer schedules). We also recruited 20 third-year bachelor

students to be part of the control group of which 19 participated; these students were also preparing for or recently engaged in work placements. Students were recruited on a voluntary basis from various departments (e.g., communication studies, facility management, European studies) and intakes were done to record basic information such as age, date of birth, and gender. We note that these students were likely more motivated to engage in and to take the course than the average student.

The average age of both groups was 23 years; in the experimental group there were 2 males and 14 females and in the control group there were 4 males and 15 females. This skewing of gender numbers can be attributed to females generally being more open to expressing their feelings. Researchers have found that across varying cultures, men can express their feelings very effectively when forced to do so, but women do so more readily (Pennebaker, personal e-mail June 7, 2013). One explanation for this may be that when women 'talk about their feelings' in one form or another serotonin levels rise (Mieras, 2010) though research has shown that both groups benefit from emotional disclosure (Pennebaker, 2011). It is also the authors' experience that in courses focused on writing for personal and professional development, on average 2 men participate for every 10 women.

Students in the experimental group agreed to commit to a total of 4 course days as part of the research (the second 2-day course scheduled at the completion of their placement). In this article we report the results of the first 2-day course. As mentioned, 16 students attended the first 2-day writing course, although one student could not attend day two and completed only the first 2 of the 3 writing assignments used for analysis.

2.2. The course

The writing for personal development workshop can be seen as an intervention aimed at generating an internal as well as an external dialogue (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012) with students about work they were about to explore and do in order to foster the creation of a work-life narrative that would contribute to meaning and direction. As such, the dialogues stimulated through the writing were intended to lead to beginning career narratives that reflected students' wishes and plans, both upon embarking on the work placement and at its completion six months later.

The course was taught by one of the researchers and attended by another, who assisted and recorded observations of the process. Students received a course booklet with various exercises for trying creative, expressive and reflective writing approaches and each exercise was thoroughly explained and done onsite in a classroom setting. Before embarking on the writing course or even introducing themselves, each student was asked to write for 20 min about their work placement and how they believe it tied in with their course of studies and career plans. The course started at 9 a.m. and ended around 4 p.m. each day.

Students participated in proprioceptive writing (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002), poetry writing, life and fiction writing, dialogue writing, and The Work (Katie, 2002). The order and methods used are described in more detail elsewhere (Lengelle & Meijers, *in press*). The exercises can be categorised as either creative, expressive, or reflective, and were frequently combinations thereof. The students were aware that the theme of the course was career learning, but researchers did not reveal the types of responses they hoped to see.

2.3. Data collection

In the experimental group, we were able to analyse all three texts by 15 of the 16 participants. The experimental group wrote before the start of the course, at the end of the first day using the proprioceptive method, and at the end of day 2 of the writing course. One student was not able to attend day-2 of the course, however we analysed and coded the first and second writings by this student and included them in our results where possible. In the control group, all 19 students submitted texts for analysis. Participants from both groups were asked to write about the same topic. The prompt for all the writing that was collected was as follows:

"Please write for 20 min about the work placement you are about to do and the significance of that work placement for your career and course of study".

The writing all participants did at the start and at the end was in response to the prompt above and no further instructions were given about form or content. The control group wrote in response to the prompt only once (at the start of the research). Several of the students from this group handwrote their pieces in a classroom at the university and these pieces were mailed to us. Others wrote on the computer and emailed the writings to us directly. All the pieces by participants in the experimental group were written by hand in the classroom where the course was held and these pieces were typed by the researchers.

Besides the writing assignments, all research participants also completed the Luck Readiness Index (LRI) developed by Pryor and Bright (2011). This test is intended to measure how able individuals are to make use of unplanned events; it assesses eight dimensions: flexibility, optimism, risk, curiosity, persistence, strategy, efficacy, and luckiness and aims to provide insight into the well being of clients as they make career choices in an uncertain economy that presents both chaos and opportunity. The experimental group completed the LRI after the 2-day course; the control group did so at the time of their invitation into the research alongside the 20-minute writing prompt. The results of the LRI will not be discussed here.

After the work placements, the experimental group will do another 2-day course and the same writing samples will be collected from them as in the first measurement. The control group will be asked to do another 20-minute writing session based on the same prompt as at the beginning, which will only be adjusted to refer to *post-work* placement reflections. In addition, a copy of work placement (self) reports will be collected from the experimental and control groups as well as an open-ended

questionnaire completed by the work-place mentor regarding the perceived abilities and engagement of the student they are responsible for guiding.

2.4. Instruments and procedures

Two instruments will be used to analyse the writing done by students: the Linguistic Index Word Count (LIWC) by Pennebaker et al. (2007) and an instrument developed by Winters, Meijers, Lenggelle, and Baert (2012); Winters et al. (2013) based on the Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010).

LIWC was developed in response to questions about which words and changes in a text actually reflect a positive change in a developing narrative. The program counts and categorises all the words in a particular text (e.g., pronouns – self/other, prepositions, positive emotion words like joy and enthusiasm, negative emotion words like anger, sadness, anxiety). Through the various studies that have made use of the program, Pennebaker (2011) concludes that a meaningful narrative is one which is in the process of being constructed (and not already set). This is shown in the switching of pronouns used between one piece of writing and the next and an increase of cognitive and causal words in a text or story. The switching of pronouns, more specifically means that if a student starts a piece using “you”, “she” and “they” quite frequently but later uses “I” and “we” pronouns more often (and then perhaps moves back again), there is likely a narrative taking shape that Pennebaker (2011, p. 13) would identify as “healthy writing” and implies someone is doing the “work to construct a meaningful story” (Pennebaker, 2011, p. 15).

This positive narrative development is also demonstrated by the presence of positive emotion words as well as negative emotion words. The absence of negative emotion words or frequent use of them as compared with positive words correlates adversely with “healthy writing”, but the presence of some negative words and therefore the acknowledgement (Pennebaker, 2011, p. 12) or recognition of challenges, indicates a necessary development in constructing a narrative that is meaningful. Although our interpretations are based on word counts and the rates of particular words appearing in the texts, the small number of students participating in our study only makes it possible to speak of observations that refer to trends in a general way; our results should not be seen as statistically significant.

The Dialogical Self Theory (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2010) offers another promising framework for understanding and analysing how expressive, creative and reflective writing can foster the construction of a career narrative. Foundational to this theory is that the formation of an identity is dialogical in nature (Hermans & DiMaggio, 2007; Hermans & Kempen, 1993). The ‘self’ in this context is seen as a kind of ‘polyphonic novel’; although written by one person, the polyphonic novel is spoken by many ‘sub-selves’ referred to as I-positions and, “as different voices these characters exchange information about their respective Me’s and their world, resulting in a complex, narratively structured self” (Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992, p. 28–29). The dialogical self is not static and is inherently transformed by the exchanges amongst I-positions (the internal dialogue with ourselves) and with other people (the external dialogue).

From the perspective of the Dialogical Self Theory (DST), the formulation of a career narrative ideally starts with the formulation of an I-position (e.g., It would be nice to have friendly colleagues), the subsequent broadening of this I-position by means of a dialogue with other relevant I-positions (e.g., when colleagues are friendly, one is able to learn in a safe environment), and runs, via consecutive dialogical shifts, from these I-positions to a meta-position (e.g., working with friendly people, in an inspiring environment is what I need in order to learn essential skills associated with marketing) which combines I-positions in new constellations and shows a present awareness of salient positions. Eventually the formulation of a promoter position becomes possible and indicates career learning that can give direction to the meaning that was found and expressed (e.g., my task now is to expand my network and ask more critical questions) (Winters et al., 2012, 2013).

By inviting “I” positions, we mean that a student is asked to enter a dialogue in a multi-voiced way – whilst experiences may be discussed in ambiguous and contradictory ways (e.g., I like working with seniors; I don’t like working with them when they don’t interact; I like working with them when we are both quiet). The development of the three kinds of positions (I-, meta-, and promoter positions) and in particular the latter two are central to the development of a career narrative (Winters et al., 2012).

All the writings done by students in the course were typed and prepared for LIWC (i.e., misspellings corrected, abbreviations extended, additional periods removed) and DST analysis by the researchers. File names were given to the text samples so that pieces analysed would appear in chronological order.

The material was coded within the DST framework using the coding technique developed and used by Winters et al. (2012, 2013). She trained one of the authors on how to consistently determine the presence of I-positions, extended I positions, meta- and promoter positions. Subsequently two of the authors did the coding and compared their results in order to achieve more internal validity.

3. LIWC results

We hypothesised that the students who participated in the 2-day writing course would show more meaning and direction in their writings after the course, shown in LIWC terms in pronoun switching, an increase in cognitive, causal, and insight words, and a shift in the balance of emotional words. For the latter measure, it is important that positive emotion words (e.g., happy, joy, satisfied) are in the majority, but that there is a presence of negative emotion (e.g., angry, scared, upset) words (Table 1).

Although the first writing done by both groups was done within the same length of time using the identical prompt, the word count (WC) differed between the groups. The experimental group averaged just under 300 words and the control group 400. This

Table 1

Conditions at the start: pronoun, emotion, and cognitive words for experimental and control groups as of the first writing.

	WC	Pro	I	We	You	Oth	Affect	Pos	Neg	Anx	Ang	Sad	Cog	Caus	Ins.
Exp	297	12	10	0	0	0	3	2	1	0	0	0	9	1	3
%		4	3.37	0	0	0	1.11	0.79	0.31	0.01	0.01	0.11	2.87	0.22	0.94
Con	421	10	9	0	0	0	2	1	0	0	0	0	8	1	3
%		2.4	2.02	0	0	0	0.53	0.34	0.18	0	0.02	0.05	1.84	0.29	0.67

Legend: Exp = experimental group; Con = control group; WC = word count; Pro = pronoun; Oth = other; Affect = emotion words; Pos = positive emotion words; Neg = negative emotion words; Anx = anxiety words; Cog = Cognitive words; Caus = causal words; Ins = insight words.

could be due to the handwritten pieces submitted by the experimental group versus the mostly-typed submissions of the control group.

There were several differences between the groups. On average, at the outset of the study, those in the experimental group used the “I” pronoun more frequently, used more positive emotion words and some negative emotion words, including anxiety, anger, and sadness. These students also used slightly more cognitive and insight words than the control group. The ratio between positive and negative emotion words between the two groups was similar however, and the causal words used were about the same for both groups. Neither group used “we”, “you” or “she/he/they” (categorised as “All-other”) pronouns to any notable degree as of the first writing.

Due to the small number of participating students, only explorative observations could be made about the presence or increase in pronoun switching, the appearance of positive emotion words, the reduction of negative emotion words, as well as changes in cognitive, causal, and insight words. We examined those changes by looking at the writing done at the start of day 1 (Exp 1), at the end of day one (Exp 2), and at the end of day 2 (Exp 3). Table 2 below shows the changes we recorded using LIWC. Plus (+) signs refer to the hypothesised effect. In this case either the presence of pronoun switching, the increase in positive emotions, or in the case of negative emotion the appearance of some negative emotion or the increase in cognitive, causal and insight words would be considered the hypothesised or “desired effect”. A zero (0) refers to no change and a minus sign (–) refers to the opposite of the desired effect. Inconclusive (Incon.) results are those where the data fluctuated somewhat but the results were difficult to interpret in any consistent direction. The notation (–/+) indicates that there is a downward movement in positive emotion between Exp 1 and 2 and a positive shift between both or either Exp 1–3 and Exp 2–3. The reverse is shown with a (+/–) if a positive movement started initially and a downward fluctuation between Exp 1–3 and Exp 2–3 followed.

Pronoun switching in the texts by writers over the course of the 3 writings occurred among 12 of the 16 students between either Exp 1–2 and/or Exp 1–3/2–3. In total 7 of the 16 students showed some positive emotion increase by the end of Exp 3. Of the 16 students in this group, 7 showed an increase in the use of cognitive words, 7 an increase in the number of causal words, and 11 an increase in insight words at some point in the writing they did between Exp 1–2 and/or Exp 1–3.

As mentioned before, the presence of negative emotions in a piece of writing that is said to evolve is important, but only if negative words do not dominate the piece; positive words should still be in the majority. Somewhat paradoxically, the “desired effect” with regard to negative emotion words is a reduction of their numbers or the appearance of some negative emotion words where they may have been absent or almost absent. Half of the students showed the desired effect, four showed fluctuations that were difficult to comment on, three had little/no change, and one student had an increase in negative emotion between Exp 1 and 2 (and did not complete Exp 3).

Table 2

Experimental group student results for pronoun switching, changes in positive and negative emotion, and shifts in cognitive, causal, and insight words.

Student #	Pronoun	Emotion	Desired effect	Cognitive words		
	Switching	Positive	Negative	Cognitive	Causal	Insight
1	0	+	+	0	+	+
2	+	+	+	0	+	+
3	0	–	–	–	–	0
4	+	0	+	0	–	+
5	+	+	0	+	–	+
6	+	+	+	+	+	+
7	+	–	0	+	–/+	+
8	+	0	Incon.	+	+	+
9	+	0	Incon.	0	+	0
10	+	+	+	–	–	+
11	0	+	Incon.	0	–	0
12	+	0	+	+	+	+
13	+	0	Incon.	+	–	+
14	+	+/-	+	+	0	+
15	0	-/+	+	0	–	0
16	+	–	0	–	Incon.	–
Desired effects	12	7	8	7	7	11

To illustrate the trends that we have described and tried to capture in Table 2, we reviewed the texts for actual examples as well. These are shown here as anecdotal evidence.

Saloua (#2), a full-time communication student started with 12 first-person (I/self) pronouns and no pronouns in the category All-other, which refers to pronouns such as: “we, you, she/he, they”. Sometimes her sentences were packed in close succession with comments such as, “I want to be part of team; I want to take on responsibility; I want to place myself in a relaxed and formal work atmosphere.”

However, in Exp 2 when she wrote about her upcoming work placement, she used “you” and “other” pronouns several times, “People skills are something you learn because you work with others; the image of your future is something you develop.” It's as if in further written explorations she attempted to look at her life from the outside in; expressing her personal wisdom as if advising herself with “you”. As of the third writing (Exp 3), she switched back to more “I” pronouns once again – another indication of a possible progression.

Dirk (#1), another full-time communication student showed an absence of negative emotion words, though he told the researchers and fellow participants that he was an emotional type. His first writing showed neither many positive or any negative references. He spoke of ‘achieving’ his work placement. It was only at Exp 2 that he started to share his joy at his sense of accomplishment, but also admitted to his doubts and vulnerabilities. By the end of day 1 he wrote about being, “tired, feeling some nervousness, and having emotions that don't fit,” but his writing also clearly showed more positive feelings. He reported feeling “happy, surprised, and strong.” By the third (Exp 3) writing at the end of Day 2 the negative emotions had subsided somewhat and his positive feelings were even more apparent, and although, “a doubting voice raged in my head again” he also brought in several other voices to counter this anxiety, “A joker voice is laughing and has faith, plus some humour” and “I also have a phoenix in me; I might burn to the ground, but out of the ashes a stronger me grows.”

Kashvi (#12), a student of Social Pedagogy, showed an increase in cognitive, causal, and insight words. Between Exp 1 and 2 her writing showed an increase in anxiety and anger words and some insecurity about her work placements plans and her reasons for her choice to go to India. As her writing progressed, it was as if her determination about her choices came into focus, “...to explore myself...to make room for new friends and find out how I am like my great grandmother. I feel good that I've decided on this step and I have the feeling that I believe in what I'm doing.”

The number of negative emotion words decreased, pronoun switching was present, and between Exp 2 and 3, terms like, “this means....; so that I can; there is more here than meets the eye...” demonstrated causal connections she began to make more explicitly and allusions to insights she anticipated gaining.

4. Dialogical self theory (DST) results

We also hypothesised that the students who participated in the 2-day writing course would show more meaning and direction in their narratives, which would be shown in the DST analysis by increasing expanded I-positions, meta-positions and promoter positions.

Table 3 shows that the number of I-, expanded I, meta- and promoter positions that the experimental and control groups expressed were the same at the outset. On average both control and experimental groups each expressed 5 I-positions, 3 expanded I-positions, 2 meta-positions and 1 promoter position. It is important to note that in the experimental group 3 (20%) students had started their work placements and in the control group 9 (47%) had. According to findings by Kuijpers et al. (2011), who show that a career identity is the result of a dialogue about concrete work experiences, we expected that the control group would on average be more likely to state meta- and promoter positions as their conversations about work would have given them more tangible experiences to reflect upon. However the first measurement shows us that these groups were in fact remarkably similar and that a difference in word count didn't result in a different number of the various positions.

The numbers however did change among experimental group participants as the course progressed; as compared with the control group, the experimental group expressed more meta-positions after their first day of the course. They also expressed more promoter positions. The proprioceptive writing (Exp 2) which the experimental group did at the end of day one also showed an increase in I-positions and meta positions.

The changes that occurred among the experimental group participants can be seen in Table 4 and show an increase in meta- and promoter positions overall. Of the 16 students who completed the first day of the course, 10 showed an increase in meta-positions between the original writing (Exp 1) and the proprioceptive writing (Exp 2) at the end of the day one. On day two, 8 of the 15 showed an increase in meta-positions by the end of the course, however 7 of the 15 also showed a decrease in meta-positions. And although promoter positions increased for the majority (9/15) of students by day 2 of the course, they

Table 3

Average number of I-, expanded I-, meta- and promoter positions in the control and experimental group.

	Control	Exp 1	Exp 2	Exp 3
I	5	5	5.5	3
I's	3	3	5	2
Meta	2	2	3	2
Promoter	1	1	0.5	1.5

Table 4

Changes in different positions within the experimental group between the first and second writing, between the second and third writing.

Student	Meta	Meta	Promoter	Promoter	Meta	Promoter
	Exp 1–2	Exp 2–3	Exp 1–2	Exp 2–3	Exp 1–3	Exp 1–3
1	0	+	0	+	+	+
2	+	–	–	0	0	–
3	+	x	–	x	x	x
4	–	–	–	+	–	+
5	–	+	+	–	+	–
6	–	+	–	–	+	–
7	+	–	–	0	–	+
8	+	–	–	–	+	–
9	+	–	0	0	0	0
10	+	+	0	+	+	+
11	0	+	0	+	0	+
12	+	+	–	+	+	+
13	+	–	+	+	+	+
14	+	–	–	+	0	0
15	–	+	+	+	–	+
16	+	+	+	+	+	+
+	10	8	4	9	8	8
–	4	7	8	3	2	4
0	2	0	4	3	4	2
x	0	1	0	1	1	1

dropped between Exp 1 and Exp 2 in half of all the cases. By day 2 however, the writing done by students showed an increase in promoter positions in a majority of (9/16) cases.

Over the entire 2-day course we see that 8 of the 15 participants had both an increase in meta- as well as promoter positions. The number of meta-positions barely decreased and 4 out of 15 students kept the same number of meta-positions. Promoter positions decreased in 4 out of the 15 writers and 2 did not show a change. As mentioned before, one student did complete the first day of the course only, so we have recorded these results as Incomplete (x) where Exp 3 is concerned. We have used (0) to show no discernible change, (+) to show an increase, and (–) to show a decrease.

All participants from the experimental group were able to articulate a meta-position in one or more of the writings they did and only one participant from that group did not express a promoter position. In the control group 2 students expressed no meta-position in their writings and 3 did not express a meta-position.

What is also noteworthy is that several students from the experimental group expressed some profound insights into themselves after the course, such as discovering that their attraction to joining the military had to do with a family break up and that wanting to help and listen to others had to do with, “coming from a family where there was no communication about feelings and thoughts.” (#7) While those from the control group might mention insights like “I am aware of my fear” or “I am afraid of change” (#25) several of the experimental group members, as shown here, actually described causal connection between desires, fears and their past histories. This group also described additional considerations (e.g., a career which can be combined with taking care of my mother (#10) and determined that the level of schooling that was desired also had to do with “I had to keep studying at the bachelor’s level, because my brothers also did that. (#14) While control group students were often less concrete, “I had to take the challenge because I always wanted to do it.” (#28).

The role of emotions in choice-making also showed up anecdotally among the member of the experimental group (#9) who did not formulate a promoter position. She reported not being able to access feelings about what she wanted to do. In the course setting she repeatedly said, “I don’t know what I want to do; I don’t know” though she had decided on a work placement position that was offered to her. Interestingly in Exp 3 she expressed this meta-position “One voice keeps in my head saying that I would rather have had a work placement at a larger events agency in an organisation that I think is really fantastic.” (#9, Exp 3). Even though she had the same number of meta-positions in Exp 1 as in Exp 3, the “voice” in her head sounded like a more salient meta-position than the one she started off with, which was, “It’s not cool but they were nice people who I would like to get to know.”

5. Discussion

The results of both our analysis methods show that there is support for our hypotheses, however only tentative conclusions can be drawn. In our discussions with Pennebaker, one of the chief designers of LIWC and one of the pioneers of expressive writing research, we were reminded that “the data from previous studies was based on statistical modelling that will probably be rather unstable with individual cases” and that others should therefore “view your feedback as highly tentative” (Pennebaker, personal e-mail May 8, 2013).

When we first received the writings and read them, our impression was that most of the students had started writing about their work placements in an informative and formal way (Exp. 1) but that their proprioceptive writing (Exp. 2) showed increased vulnerability. One of the researchers (an instructor and career mentor at the university where we did the research) joined our

team precisely because she had already noticed that students who had done proprioceptive writing in response to career questions in her classroom several years earlier, expressed themes and questions that she ordinarily did not see in their work placement reports and compulsory reflection exercises. The writing submitted to us in Exp 1, 2, 3 also contained “richer material” in her view and surprised her with its openness and depth.

Students in the experimental group did indeed seem more able to explore questions about their choices, express insecurities, and speak more precisely about what they hoped to get out of their work-placement opportunities. This corresponded with our findings that students in the experimental condition began to use more emotion words and that some negative emotions appeared where previously they had been absent or nearly absent. Most students also expressed positive emotions without an overt increase in negative emotion words, though we note that the “desired effects” overall were modest.

The changes within the experimental group using LIWC were most noteworthy in the area of pronoun switching, which implies a growing change in perspectives quite similar to how expanding I-positions indicate the same in DST. More insight words emerged as well. Causal words, such as “because, infer, thus” did not increase much and in some cases decreased, the same was true with regard to cognitive words, but the use of insight words (e.g., realise, understand, think) increased among 11 of the 16 students. This led us to believe that the writing done by students who took the course contributed to a gain in insights about their work placements and what these might mean to their learning. There were also some impressive self-insights that related to career. Interestingly insight words are often used in the articulation of meta-positions and we saw from our other analysis method that there was indeed an increase in these positions between Exp 1 and 2, Exp 2 and 3 and Exp 1 and 3.

Although LIWC has been used extensively with college populations and has been applied to examine the results of writing in a career context (Spera et al., 1994), its main focus has been on examining the effects of expressive writing (i.e., writing about traumatic life events). And even though we argue that writing narratives about our lives or careers happens primarily in the face of challenging life situations that create the opportunities for learning and new insight (Meijers & Lengelle, 2012), our writing prompt did not encourage students to explore emotional topics directly as most expressive writing studies do. The course itself did allow students to explore emotions and life stressors, but the writing we collected did not emphasise this directly. It is imaginable that had we prompted the students to write “about their deepest feelings involving their work placement and career” as Pennebaker might have worded such a request, our results may have shown hypothesised changes more clearly.

Interestingly, the students in the experimental group did at the outset use more emotional words as compared with controls. This could be explained by the fact that they were the group who chose to take the course and therefore may have been more willing to delve into their feelings to begin with or had more affinity with writing. It is also possible that the face-to-face interaction and reception of participants in a group setting, might already have set the stage for more openness and sharing. As explained above, our analyses showed that the groups differed slightly at the start. We will be able to explore further differences between the groups after the work placements, when the second course has been completed and the next series of writing samples have been collected. As mentioned before, we will also be able to look at those samples along with work placement self-reports and written feedback collected from work-place mentors.

The presence of meta- and promoter positions among members of the experimental group showed modest increases. In particular between the first and second writing, the increase in meta-positions is evident. This might be attributed to course participation as well as the use of proprioceptive writing (Exp 2), where students are asked to “listen to what wants to be written”, to “write what they hear” (Trichter-Metcalf & Simon, 2002, p. 33–34), and to ask the proprioceptive question, “What do I mean by?” This reflective writing exercise may also explain why there was a relative decrease in promoter positions between the Exp 1 and Exp 2; it is as if the majority of students postponed their more action-oriented intentions (i.e., promoter positions) in favour of reflection. By the end of this 2-day course, more than half the participants expressed more meta- and promoter positions; it can therefore be said that their writings showed evidence of beginning narratives.

As seen from the example we used in looking at the nature of meta-positions (i.e., expressed by student #9 under [LIWC results](#) section), it may not be enough to count I-positions, meta- and promoter positions to determine if there has been a move towards a more meaningful narrative. It could also be valuable to look at the quality of the actual positions expressed. There may be a way to define and differentiate between them and to determine on that basis too whether writing helped a student to develop a career identity that adds meaning and opportunities for direction.

6. Conclusion

This initial phase of our study shows modest indications that creative, expressive, and reflective writing might contribute to career learning, helping students to construct their narratives and thus career identities that may enable them to contribute usefully to society in a way that is personally meaningful to them.

It is also clear that further research is required to examine the changes in students' narratives as they learn creative, expressive, and reflective/reflexive writing techniques to explore themselves, their career plans, and their life experiences. Subsequently bringing such methods into the field – if studies show that writing indeed offers the hypothesised benefits – would require that teachers and career professionals be trained in what kinds of writing exercises and approaches would be most useful for career learning. It would also be worth exploring in more depth what skills and qualities practitioners would need to develop and cultivate to make it a successful endeavour.

Lastly, it is important to note some of the weaknesses of our research. Both DST and LIWC analyses show a subtle movement towards more awareness (i.e., more insight words, more meta- and promoter positions) and the development of alternate perspectives (i.e., switching pronouns and the expansion of I-positions). However, this study involved only 35 students and

therefore the evidence to support our hypothesis is not sufficient to draw more general conclusions. Also, the 2-day course format we chose may not be the best way to make use of creative, expressive, and reflective writing for career learning. As earlier studies (Kuijpers et al., 2011) have shown, talking about concrete work experiences is the essential element to career learning, and therefore it is conceivable that it would have been better to have students take part in an ongoing online writing program where they used writing to explore real-life problems during their work placement, instead of only doing so before and after.

Perhaps, the necessity of writing our story for career learning is best summed up in the words of David Whyte who identifies career as “a pilgrimage of identity” and sees work as “a form of self-knowledge; it was understood as a result, an outcome, a bounty that came from paying close attention to an astonishing world and the way each of us is made differently and uniquely for that world (Whyte, 2001, p. 6)”.

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