

Reflective writing inquiry in work-integrated learning through students' voices and dialogic feedback

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Reflective writing is recognized as a valuable tool in work-integrated learning (WIL) programs, yet there is limited research on students' voices. This study explores what reflective writing means to WIL students and why it is important to them. Using categorical narrative analysis, this research examined 200 reflective essays from international students in their final semester of an interdisciplinary project-based WIL program, focusing on 20 essays rich in descriptions. Composite narratives were constructed to synthesize shared experiences. Findings reveal that students perceive reflective writing as a safe, imaginative process that enables them to develop their voice and self-authorship. Two main themes emerged: taking a bird's eye perspective and writing about myself: dialogic voice is confidence. The open-ended nature of the reflective writing allowed them to explore past experiences, distill non-technical skills, and improve self-awareness.

Keywords: Reflective writing inquiry, work-integrated learning, student voice, self-authorship

Reflective writing inquiry is beneficial to many students in work-integrated learning (WIL) programs. Research shows that reflective writing can be a valuable process-based structure, because reflective inquiry can aid students to develop their professional voice, identity, employability and skills (Bates, 2004; Dean et al., 2012; Doel, 2009; Howard, 2009; Martin & Hughes, 2009). Reflective writing as “a cause of psychological development” (Garretson, 2010, p. 52), can enhance psychological growth and self-awareness in students by helping them gain deeper self-knowledge, explore their thoughts/experiences, and craft their professional identities (Garretson, 2010). What's more, reflective writing is an opportunity to give concrete meaning to one's inner processes, mistakes, successes, anxieties, and worries that otherwise would remain disjointed and worthless (Artioli et al., 2021).

It is important to note that while reflective writing can be structured or unstructured; both are productive. For this inquiry, student-authored structure is in focus which is the freedom given to students to decide the content, format, and themes of their reflective writing, allowing them to focus on aspects most relevant to their experiences. Howard (2009) found that students can generally distill and articulate some of the transferable skills from their professional experience, tacit knowledge, values, assumptions, and attitudes by making them more explicit and meaningful. However, this learning process in the institutional context of WIL remains ambiguous and problematic (Thomson et al., 2017).

Therefore, there is a need to investigate what reflective writing means to students. This research aims to fill a gap in the current WIL research noted by Jackson (2014), who wrote that “evaluation of WIL programs in enhancing skill development remains predominantly outcomes-focused with little attention to the process of what, how and from whom students acquire essential skills during work placement” (p. 350). Overall, student voice is missing in WIL research and practice at the time of this research (Eames & Bell, 2005; Fernsten & Fernsten, 2005; Fielding, 2004; Pretti et al., 2020; Thomson et al., 2017). As Thomson et al. (2017) stated, “the lack of evidence of the inclusion of students in the design, conduct, and analysis of WIL provides an invitation for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTLE) scholars to redefine the role of students in this space” (p. 22). In this research, students are the

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co-researchers of their learning experiences; their research is grounded in their own reflective writing inquiry, through which they can author their educational experiences and professional development. Therefore, this study aimed to explore what reflective writing means to WIL students and why it is important to them.

REFLECTIVE AND DIALOGIC WRITING INQUIRY

Reflective writing is an integral and essential part of WIL programs assisting students to understand and author their learning experiences (Clarke & Burgess, 2009; Clarke et al., 2010). Much of the existing research focuses on outcomes rather than on the reflective process itself, which leaves the experiential and self-authored aspects of student learning underexplored (Jackson, 2014). Generally in WIL, learning is a social and active process of experiential engagement in a collegial “community of practice” (Coll et al., 2009, p. 15). Yet, this engagement is often a complex, multifaceted, and messy everyday experience (Dewey, 1933) that needs a safe space for individual reflection. Dewey (1933) emphasized that reflective thought is a “sole method of escape from the purely impulsive or purely routine action” (p. 15). Thus, the learning process is not always self-evident because knowledge should be reflected on and transformed by the learner from the learner’s experience (Kolb, 1984). As Huxley (1932) wrote, “experience is not what happens to a man [sic], it is what a man does with what happens to him” (p. 5). Reflective dialogic inquiry with the self, experience, and others is one of the critical and creative transformations that helps the individual to own their experience, to do something with it, that is to learn (Biesta & Miedema, 2002).

Reflective writing can embrace free writing about self without any predetermined or imposed structure of meaning (Garretson, 2010). What this means is that the structure is self-emergent rather than set in stone. Pride (2018) wrote that imposed writing answers a teacher’s question or prompt in a predetermined manner, whereas reflective writing is authentic and self-determined. He/she wrote that this free writing is about the writer’s trust in their own “words that were trapped deep within [her] protected, emotional spaces...” (Pride, 2018, p. 3). Instead of answering external questions that may not be related to one’s emotions and experiences, free writing allows the writer to raise their own questions that are meaningful, important, and interesting to the writer. Hence, the main difference is that the structure in reflective writing is decided and organized by the writer/student rather than by the teacher. In this way, writing is no longer an evaluative tool, but a process of self-authorship, self-discovery, and meaning-making.

Furthermore, Baxter Magolda and King (2007) describe self-authorship as the capacity to define one’s beliefs, identity, and social relations independently of external dictates. Self-authorship involves three dimensions: epistemological (how individuals come to know and understand their experiences), intrapersonal (how individuals perceive and define themselves), and interpersonal (how individuals perceive and define their relationships with others) (Baxter Magolda & King, 2007). In WIL, reflective writing provides a medium for self-authorship by allowing students to articulate their learning experiences on their own terms (Pride, 2018). This autonomy is pivotal, as it empowers students to take ownership of their personal and professional development (Pretti et al., 2020). However, Baxter Magolda and King’s (2007) research does not specify how or whether this process of self-authorship is dialogic, and how students come to their own authentic voice in this act of self-authorship.

Dialogic Reflective Inquiry

The concept of inquiry often refers to the search for truth through questions and questioning (Klefsstad & Hoel, 2013). The reflective process does not have one meaning because meanings emerge through the personal, intentional, and imaginative dialogue with the self in/through writing; the individual learner should be the creator of meaning, for it to be authentic and educational (Matusov & Marjanovic-Shane, 2017). Imagination allows students to connect the dots between what happens to them and what to do with an event (Matusov & Brobst, 2013). The dialogic aspect is metacognitive because the student engages in a reflection on one's experience through writing as speaking with herself/himself (Hilton & Lemons, 1992, p. 198). This process can make students more aware of their own decisions, responsibilities, and, ultimately, education.

It is important to note that many students may not be willing, or may be reluctant, to take ownership of their educational experiences and dialogue. As Marjanovic-Shane (2013) said

In taking full ownership of the inquiry takes time and takes enormous mental focus, energy, and time away from everything else, and it just might not be possible in the practical way. It might be a great contradiction in many students' lives that the world does not stop for their desires (as cited in Matusov & Brobst, 2013, p. 10).

Thus, reflective writing as a weekly assignment may provide a safe space for students to engage with their experiences and, perhaps, take more ownership of their lives and the world around them.

Student Voice

Reflective writing inquiry gives voice to students' experiences and learning. Clearly, to give implies a power play, in which voice, or what is regarded as voice, can also be taken back; the voice is a sociological concept rather than a psychological one (Bakhtin, 1981; Cornejo, 2012; Matusov, 2011). That is why it is important to define what voice means in the context of this research and reflective, dialogic writing inquiry in WIL. Generally, the term 'voice' refers to students' "decision-making processes, recognizing not only the legitimacy of their perspectives and opinions but also the importance of students having an active role in shaping educational practice" (Thomson et al., 2017, p. 23). However, there is a lack of practical examples and an abundance of conceptual confusion in the literature as to how these decisions are made and in what context (Seale et al., 2014). This decision-making process is full of tensions and complexities that are underreported in the research literature (Seale et al., 2014; Shugurova, 2019). Many tensions are associated with students' perception of their own voices. They often wonder if they can genuinely express what they think or what the teacher wants them to think; they are not used to exploring their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in a dialogic manner without external templates and expectations (Shugurova, 2019).

Dialogic Feedback

Central to effective reflective writing is the concept of dialogic feedback. Dialogic feedback refers to an ongoing, reciprocal communication process between educators and students that fosters deeper reflection and understanding (Nicol, 2010). Unlike traditional feedback, which is summative and often evaluative, dialogic feedback is developmental and supports learners in refining their reflections iteratively (Dean et al., 2012). Recent studies underscore the value of dialogic feedback in enhancing the reflective writing process and facilitating professional growth. Pitt and Winstone (2020) and Winchester-Seeto and Rowe (2019) found that dialogic feedback creates a supportive environment

where students can openly explore their thoughts. For this process to be authentic, it requires partnering with students in supporting them to come to their voice through reflective writing inquiries. In the context of reflective writing inquiry, the partnership should create non-hierarchical relationships between students and facilitators, so that there is mutual understanding, questioning, and trust, including genuine disagreements and agreements or none of the above (Seale et al., 2014).

Furthermore, it should help students gain responsibility for their learning and promote self-regulation (Cooper et al., 2010). According to Pintrich and Zusho (2002), self-regulation is an active self-determined process through which the individual learner can develop their own professional goals and steps to achieve these goals. For feedback to be effective, it needs to be an ongoing, iterative, and participatory process that encourages students to develop meaning and evaluation of their learning (Evans, 2013). The focus is on students' understanding and the enrichment of this understanding through open-ended dialogues (Black & McCormick, 2010; Carless et al., 2011; Steen-Utheim & Wittek, 2017). According to Crimmins et al. (2016), dialogic assessment involves a structured commentary on students' written work with a focus on two key strengths and two areas for development. The student is invited to express and write their interpretation of this feedback and raise their unique questions about it for one-on-one dialogue with the teacher/facilitator about it. Dialogue as a means for this iterative process is supposed to enrich a mutual sense of partnership and support the conscious development of self-regulation.

METHODOLOGY

This study addressed the research question: What does reflective writing mean to WIL students and why is it important to them? The WIL program in this study was a 14-week, full-time placement in a simulated professional workplace environment, running 15 hours per week. Students from various disciplines, including IT, Human Resources, Business, and Project Management, participated in project-based learning designed by industry experts. Subject matter experts (SMEs) supervised students through consultations rather than direct instruction, aiming to foster independent, team-based, self-directed project work. As part of their professional development, students completed weekly 500-word reflective writing tasks, totaling 12 reflections over the program. These tasks had no imposed structure; students could reflect on any experience of their choice, not necessarily related to their WIL placement, using any narrative form or media. Yet, the students were required to write reflections, but they could write about anything as part of their WIL or choose any situation or eventful experience from their past to reflect on. While the structure or content was not mandated, the practice of writing reflections on a weekly basis was mandatory. The full grading scale was not used. To pass they had to submit a reflection. To fail, not submit. The reflections were not graded but provided with feedback. This feedback focused on three key areas:

1. What skills the student learned from this experience and why,
2. Why they chose this particular event to reflect on,
3. A conversation about the value of the chosen experience.

This approach to feedback aligns with the dialogic feedback model proposed by Nicol (2010), encouraging deeper engagement with the reflective process and helping students to make connections between their experiences and their developing professional skills.

Procedure

To explore the meaning of students' reflections, a categorical narrative analysis was employed, examining both the students' reflective essays and the facilitators' dialogic feedback (Scheffelaar et al., 2021). This method was chosen to capture the students' voices and experiences in their own language and discourse, allowing for a rich exploration of their perceptions and the value they derived or did not derive from the reflective writing process. The reflective essays used in this study were collected as secondary data after the completion of their term.

During this WIL program, 200 international students submitted their weekly reflective essays, resulting in a total of 200 reflections from their final week of the program. These essays were stored in the institution's learning management system. Once the term ended and all grades were finalized, the researcher requested access to the anonymized essays for research purposes. Before granting access, the institution's data management team removed all identifying information from the essays, including names, student ID numbers, and any other personal identifiers. The anonymized essays were then transferred to the researcher in a secure, encrypted format. The use of these essays for research purposes was approved by the institution's research ethics committee as a secondary use of non-identifiable information, in accordance with the Tri-Council Policy Statement on Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (TCPS 2, Article 5.5B). The essays were collected approximately one month after the end of the term, ensuring that all academic processes were completed and that the use of the data would not affect students' grades or academic standing. As per institutional policy for the secondary use of non-identifiable data, explicit consent from individual students was not required. However, students were informed at the beginning of the term that their anonymized work might be used for research purposes. From this large pool of 200 reflections, 20 essays were selected for in-depth analysis based on their rich and thick descriptions of experiences. This sampling was purposeful (Pintrich & Zusho, 2002) with a focus on the uniqueness of students' stories without any generic and cliché-like style. The selected 20 were rich in meaning and reflected broader common, collective themes that were observed in all 200 essays. The focus was not on writing quality per se, but on the depth and richness of reflection. 'Quality' in this context referred to the extent to which students explored and articulated the meaning of reflective writing in their WIL experience, rather than technical writing proficiency. Essays were chosen based on their potential to provide insight into the research question, with rich and thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973).

While this approach allowed for a focused analysis of reflective depth, it's important to acknowledge potential biases inherent in this selection process. The researcher's perspectives and experiences may have influenced which essays were deemed rich and thick in description (Geertz, 1973), potentially leading to selection bias. To mitigate this, the researcher employed several strategies. First, a clear set of criteria for richness such as students' unique expressions, voice, metaphors and ways of speaking, was established before selection, focusing on the depth of reflection on the experience rather than writing quality. Second, the researcher engaged in reflexive journaling throughout the selection process, documenting decision-making rationales to maintain transparency and allow for later scrutiny.

Analysis

To answer the research questions, a categorical narrative analysis was utilized to explore students' reflective essays. According to Scheffelaar et al. (2021), narrative analysis helps investigate individuals' experiences by focusing on their unique, subjective meaning, interpretation, and meaning-making

processes in their lives. Bruner (1990) wrote that narrative analysis focuses on “how protagonists interpret things” (p. 51). In this view, each story is unique, and each student is not only a protagonist but an author of their learning and success.

Narrative analysis is also a highly interpretive and imaginative activity. As Riessman (1993) found individual meaning-making is not an isolated event or an act of solipsism but a revelatory space in which “culture speaks itself” (p. 5). This means that each student’s narrative is shaped by a broader sociocultural context of their learning and living experiences and by their unique authentic voice about these experiences. Thus, in narrative analysis, there is no one definition of what is and is not a narrative (Riessman, 1993). For example, Gubrium and Holstein (2012) explain that narratives can be speech acts, utterances, interviews, stories, or conversations. Furthermore, there are many different types of narrative analysis, such as holistic, categorical, dialogic, and arts-based (Gubrium & Holstein, 2012). Students’ narratives may indeed be stifled since writing is one of the pedagogical approaches. However, students were given various options to write something other than an essay, including recording their reflections and being creative about their representation and self-expression.

Students’ weekly reflections and stories are the data of this narrative analysis. These stories were not conventional essays; these were reflections, stories, and vignettes that students wrote to delve into their experiences and to distill important meanings, skills, and insights. The conceptual category essay was never a predetermined criterion for data collection and selection. As Scheffelaar et al. (2021) wrote, “stories as the data help to analyze the description of common themes or categories across the stories, characters, or settings” (p. 6). These themes can reveal a deeper understanding and context about a shared problem or a phenomenon (Scheffelaar et al., 2021), such as the value and meaning of reflective writing inquiry for students’ professional development in WIL. The selected stories were then inductively coded not based on any predetermined criteria but through a grounded theory approach (Butina, 2015; Charmaz, 2006). Following Charmaz (2006), initial coding attempted to “see actions in each segment of data rather than applying preexisting categories to the data” (p. 47). In doing so, the researcher attempts to understand the students’ narratives in their own voices. Hence, coding was an act of immersion into the data without any presupposed assumptions by paying close attention to each student’s voice and language. According to Butina (2015), coding is “re-reading the transcripts and identifying recurring words, ideas, or patterns generated from the data” (p. 194). This is an immersive process that allows understanding of the students’ idiosyncrasies and experiences by highlighting their significant meanings as these were expressed in their unique ways of writing, speaking, and learning.

Like Butina (2015), coding was conducted manually with the help of a highlighter. Specifically, the excerpts were highlighted with the key ideas, and a code was assigned. In total, 50 codes were generated. Then, a master code sheet was developed and the emergent codes were analyzed through memo writing about each one of them and distilling them into theoretical categories (Butina, 2015). In a memo, a coding process was documented, including the researcher’s subjective way of thinking about emergent codes. According to Saldana (2013), memo writing helps “dump my brain . . . about the participants, phenomenon, or process under investigation by thinking and thus writing and thus thinking even more about them” (p. 41). Through codes, students’ experiences and their authentic self-authored stories were understood much better as well as their meanings, so that the researcher could answer the research question (Saldana, 2013). The categories were based on the explicitly coded meaning that each student was trying to convey or create in their reflective essays. If there were doubts about the subjective meanings, the reflection was written to situate that doubt and perplexity in a broader context of dialogic feedback. For example, one of the main questions for clarification was: “What was the student trying to express? What are some of the most significant, authentic meanings

that the researcher perceives from their writing?” Then, the literature review was utilized to deepen the emergent understanding of reflective writing inquiry and dialogue in a professional WIL context as well as to conceptualize students’ experiences (e.g., Daudelin, 1996; Schon, 1983; Sykes & Dean, 2013). The categories helped to see and analyze various relationships and dependencies among categories (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2011). For example, the category of learning emerged from the codes of self-learning or learning about the self as well as the codes of personal and professional uniqueness, understanding the self and others, and listening to the self and others. The relationality between these codes is about the students’ growing self-awareness through learning and writing about their learning and distilling insights from their experiential events.

Lastly the main two themes were developed from the categories to deepen the theoretical interpretation of the categories by asking “What is this [i.e., each category] about?” (Morse, 2008, p. 727). For example, the category of learning/self, became two themes: writing about myself and becoming a better person. Then, the second theme of ‘becoming’ merged with the theme of ‘writing’ due to many conceptual overlaps and redundancies. Consequently, the themes were generated by re-reading and re-writing the memos in a broader context of theorization (e.g., student voice, dialogic feedback, and reflective writing inquiry), and dialogic feedback on their essays.

Boxes 1 and 2 are the composite thematic categories that represent the collective voices of the students from the 20 selected reflective essays. Each box is constructed from multiple students’ reflections, capturing shared experiences and insights while also preserving the uniqueness of individual expressions and contributions. By synthesizing their voices, the thematic boxes offer a richer and more layered understanding of their experiences, highlighting both the common threads and distinctive idiosyncrasies across their reflections.

It is important to note that member checking was not possible due to the anonymized nature of the reflections. This limitation in the research process means that the themes developed represent the researcher’s interpretation of the data without direct verification from the participants. As the sole researcher, who was also a facilitator and coordinator in the WIL program, the potential for bias in the analysis is acknowledged. This dual role presented challenges, including the possibility of overemphasizing certain aspects of the data or interpreting it through the lens of program objectives.

FINDINGS

Taking a Bird’s Eye Perspective

For all participants, reflective writing was an imaginative and mindful step back in time and space by recalling a memorable, enjoyable, or problematic experience. The writing experience could have been about anything: an event, situation, project work, high school situation, or idea. This did not have to directly relate to the WIL experience because by reflecting on their previous life experience, students can distill some of the non-technical skills and insights that may be helpful to cultivate in and through the WIL project to attain their career goals. What makes this process mindful is an open-ended focus on the self and self-authorship. Garretson (2010) explains that both reflective writing and mindfulness share the same focus on one’s unconditional and non-judgmental self-acceptance and self-importance.

BOX 1: Taking a bird's eye perspective: Students' journey into reflective distance.

I can take a bird's eye perspective, go back in time, and bring back the amazing experiences unfolding in front of me by fully reflecting on our past, writing about it, and thinking about it. Reflective writing's main goal is to assist you in learning from a specific practical experience. Reflective writing makes me feel more positive outcomes from daily situations, giving me the imagination and thinking of setting and achieving goals overall; it's a great thing to write down what you are thinking. It helps me to share my experience and what I learn from that experience. It helps me to take a look at my mistakes and how I can improve that. Thus, I learned a lot about myself, mainly what mistakes I made and how to correct them. This is the first time I had the opportunity to write about myself. I thought about ideas and sometimes I would not have any ideas at all. I had to dig for ideas. Up until now, I never thought that I could find any ideas or learn anything about, from and by myself. For me, I was writing about my valuable, amazing experiences which made me more aware of my weaknesses, mistakes and shortcomings. Initially, I was interested in writing only about amazing things but I realized that I need to know my weaknesses. Writing can be tough, this free writing was tough in this way. However, I am now a little upset because this one is my last reflection I am writing for my submission. No doubt I can write it after my classes too but I can't share or send this to anyone. At least today I know Dr Olga is reading my life through these activities for the last time. I can share my feelings with someone directly or indirectly by writing. After this, there will be nobody who is going to force me (like have to share my memories before Monday 8am) to share my experiences. I am literally laughing now, initially, I did not like it but now it is a habit for me. Yes, I can write a whole reflection on this. Now, I can take a bird's eye perspective on everything I do, see things differently, express my feelings how I want to, and imagine the future I want. I appreciate that my teachers include reflection in assignments because it gives us a chance to take a bird's view perspective or to step back and review our ideas and learn thanks to the backscattering of important meanings, feelings, and memorable moments. To sum up, reflection is looking back to make the view forward even more obvious.

As evident in this narrative, students made their authentic decision to take a bird's eye perspective to examine their previous experiences, any experience they find important for them. This importance was mainly about their feelings; how they feel about their own experience and what it means to them. Overall, the bird's eye perspective is, ultimately, a mindful process of self-acceptance through self-authorship that allows students to become aware of their experiences so that they can imagine and create their desirable skills by learning from their past mistakes, weaknesses, challenges, and memories. This process of skills development from within the self is crucial in a WIL context. As Nielsen et al. (2023) wrote, the goal of WIL is and should be "to plan for career development and self-directed learning" (p. 1.1). Self-direction is not given or abstract; it is an emergent, reflective process of self-acceptance and self-authorship.

Writing About Myself: Dialogic Voice is Confidence

The reflective writing process is mainly about self. Self-authorship is the student's voice (Caldicott et al., 2020; Shugurova, 2020a, 2020b; Smith, 2022; Vatne & Søndena, 2020). Yet, what does it mean to students? Writing is not necessarily about the topic or a proper English language form but the process of immersing yourself in the language of self-expression and, thus, dialogic self-authorship (Smith, 2022). For example, Smith (2022) explains that students should:

be given more opportunities to work with instructors and academic mentors and advisors who support students' interests or stakes in academic discourse. The priority here is on dialogue that is generated when there is a surprise, interest, or stakes in the discourse, where what someone

says matters and is important to them, and when the student feels their values, ideas, and perspectives are addressed by the curriculum. (p. A79)

The data show that this meaningful process is highly important to students because they are not worried about their grades or their teachers' expectations or any other external necessities. In this open-ended bird's eye view, students write about themselves in any creative, innovative or another way they see fit. This dialogic voice encourages students to express themselves and, in doing so, to gain self-confidence.

Initially, students think from a bird's eye view about themselves which may be a bit disembodied and unexpected; this thinking brings them back to their bodies and the embodied process of writing because it is open-ended, improvisational, and, ultimately, creative. As evident in the students' narrative, the embodied, reflective thinking is the address to the self and/or to me at times. Being heard and listened to is important as well; being in a dialogue with the self and others is the key to authentic and meaningful reflective writing inquiry. The representation of data is done in a narrative way to center students' voices and to create a new dialogue about students' voices; the representation below through lengthy quotes is intentional and used to challenge some of the taken-for-granted writing conventions (see Box 2 for an example).

BOX 2: Student reflections on developing professional voice through self-authorship.

As I said, it is the first time I wrote about myself. Reflective learning was about myself. I vividly recall the day when, during writing a reflection, I discussed a situation in which my uniqueness makes me stand out from the crowd. As a result, as I was writing the reflection, I recalled the time when my prior experiences helped me win the competition. As a result, I am aware of the best and most appropriate way to implement and complete the project. Thus, my team and I were able to create the project that took first place by reflecting on previous successes. This writing has been about my confidence. I am grateful to WIL professors whose excitement and engagement have assisted me in developing and boosting my self-confidence. They are so helpful and I mean till now I felt very free to go and ask them anything regarding my studies or even about my personal doubts in and through writing reflections. They did not give any stress to students. This is the main and very big thing for me so that I felt very comfortable and happy to [write my reflections] willingly [even though I was often unsure and didn't have enough time [due to my part-time employment]]. Like, in the beginning, I was an introvert and was very shy to communicate about myself, not to say to write about myself in any form or shape. With the help of reflections, I stepped out of my comfort zone and wrote for myself knowing I would be supported by WIL professors. The discussions [verbal and feedback on reflections] we held with Olga were very eye-opening and also touched me on a personal level. In my previous education, I wrote for the exam or the [impersonal] teacher. Now, I am writing about myself. I appreciate it because I try to capture my thoughts in sentences. As I was writing, I want to understand what and why I did or felt something in a particular situation or past experience. I want to dig for ideas and meanings, and perhaps even help ourselves to do it better the next time. Now, I am thinking about my lessons learned; I am now able to understand myself and others much better. Understanding others does not mean that we have to agree with others' views, and opinions instead, it means that you have recognized their point of view and you have accepted that it is different from yours. You may have to do the things that others are not happy or you are not happy with that but hopefully you and your team have to understand that. Now I feel confident in facing people and speaking with them. I think this is a huge difference in me. Compared to last week this week I came in with a whole different mentality and I'm thankful for the enlightening experience.

Writing about the self is highly meaningful and important to students when they are supported by their teachers. Facilitator's support has also been shaped by their commenting on students' work via feedback. For example, in written feedback, there has to be an acknowledgment of students' written unique ideas that resonate with the facilitator as well as a provocation to deepen their understanding of a situation or experience. Tellado (2017) found that being valued leads to a greater sense of confidence, especially in a dialogic context of students' 'opinion-sharing and decision-making. As Gogate (2021) explains continuous nourishment of students' ideas and meaning-making processes "opens many doors of dialogue with students which creates trust and confidence in them" (p. 43). However, the data does not reveal anything about trust but reveals the development of confidence in students through reflective writing and feedback. In fact, supportive dialogic feedback validates students' learning and places their voices at the center of their experiential education; feedback creates multiple possibilities for students' responses and dialogues. What's more, their self-confidence emerges from their written expression of their authentic voice (i.e., their accountability for their opinions) as well as the realization of their personal/professional uniqueness.

DISCUSSION

The findings provide rich insights into the practice of reflective and dialogic writing inquiry in WIL contexts, illuminating both its transformative potential and inherent complexities. The emergent themes -'taking a bird's eye perspective' and 'writing about myself: dialogic voice is confidence' - reveal how students engage in a dialogic process with themselves, their experiences, and their imagined readers. Bakhtin (1981) wrote that meaning is created through the interaction of multiple voices. Students' reflections can be understood as a dialogue between their past, present and future selves, their academic and professional identities, and their personal experiences. However, this dialogue is emergent and not finalized; in fact, it should not be finalized by WIL authority figures such as facilitators or professors. In this dialogue between the self in experience, they create meaning, and this meaning is personal, sensitive, and fluid.

The bird's eye perspective metaphor illustrates what Brecht (1964) describes as the distancing effect in dialogic reflection. This metacognitive distancing allows students to engage in what Bakhtin terms outsideness or the ability to step outside one's immediate experience to gain a more critical understanding rather than the habitual immersive understanding. However, this process is not merely cognitive; it's deeply intertwined with emotional and identity work, as evidenced by students' reports of increased self-awareness and confidence. It is, however, unclear why this effect increases their self-awareness and confidence since the data did not generate enough insight to provide a concrete explanation.

The emphasis on writing about myself highlights the self-authoring aspect of dialogic reflection. As Lillis (2001) argues, academic writing is not just about conveying information but about constructing a writing self. In the WIL context, this self-construction takes on added significance as students navigate between academic and professional identities. Interestingly, reflective writing is not necessarily about any topic but the self and what each individual author chooses to write about. This writing about the self is unusual for many students. The confidence gained through this process, as reported by students, suggests that dialogic reflection serves not just as a learning tool but as a means of identity formation. Writing about the self implies trusting oneself to write and to find meaning in oneself. This process of self-worth discovery enables students to feel confident not in their expression but in the act of self-authorship. They felt they had something important to share with others and with themselves. As Bakhtin (1990) wrote, "This ever-present excess of my seeing, knowing, and processing in relation to

any other human being is founded in the uniqueness and irreplaceability of my place in the world” (p. 23). When students write about themselves on their own terms, their sense of uniqueness is expressed and actualized. However, it's crucial to note that this self-authoring process occurs within an institutional context, raising questions about the nature of authentic voice in dialogic reflection and its possibilities in WIL. Yet, the notion of authentic voice in reflective writing is problematic, given the power dynamics that may force students to write to obey the authorities; it may create an internal conflict between the desired topic of self-writing and the external need to submit these reflections for feedback albeit dialogic. The students' appreciation of the non-judgmental stance of the facilitator suggests an awareness of these dynamics and the importance of creating a 'safe' dialogic space. The role of the imagined reader -or the imagined future self, in this case, the empathetic facilitator - is central to understanding the dialogic nature of these reflections. As Prior (2001) argues, all writing is inherently dialogic, shaped by both the writer's intentions and their anticipation of the reader's response. In this study, the perceived empathy of the facilitator, including the self, appears to have enabled students to engage more deeply and honestly in their reflections to make meaning that is valuable to them.

Furthermore, reflective writing is one of how students can participate in and contribute to WIL discourses and, in doing so, come to their desired voices by responding to the diverse voices of others. Yet, there are critical limitations of voice because reflective writing as the assignment may limit students' self-expression if the student does not want to write reflectively and sees no value in this activity (Shugurova, 2019). Authentic student voice means that the student can safely write about their experiences without any imposed framework of evaluation and generic writing standards for self-expression and response (Smith, 2022). This means that effective reflective writing should be holistic in practice. For example, Ku and Liu (2009) asked their students to write holistically by focusing on a concrete experiential situation in their placement and to make decisions and develop informed opinions about their chosen, specific situation or learning event. This holistic approach was empowering and valuable because students could feel that they were genuinely included in the social life of their workplace and a broader learning community of practice.

Thus, a reflective writing process should be holistic, which means students can voice their experiences and create their unique meaning in a way that is most authentic to them; holistic in this sense means the intrinsic pursuit of writing reflectively for the sake of exploring a specific experience with the heart and mind. It is also holistic because it integrates multiple dimensions of a student's experience - including their thoughts, emotions, actions, and the contextual factors surrounding these experiences - into a comprehensive process of meaning-making and learning. By holistically reflecting on their chosen experiences through this writing process, students can also identify the non-technical skills and insights that are crucial for their career goals. This process of self-reflection and self-authorship enables them to develop self-directed learning skills, which are essential for their professional development.

IMPLICATIONS

The findings address the current void of students' voices and agency in their WIL placement by providing valuable implications for WIL practitioners and program designers to center students' voices in their professional development through reflective writing. Specifically, unstructured spaces for reflection are highly valuable in the facilitation of this process, rather than the rigid templates or frameworks for guided reflections. This insight supports Pride's (2018) idea that one's self-authorship emerges from the deeply personal writing process within the self and about the self, giving voice to a new professional identity grounded in one's authenticity and lived experience. The uniqueness of the

bird's eye perspective approach demonstrates that students develop more personally meaningful insights when they have the freedom from numerical grades and the freedom to choose their reflective focus and writing style. This requires WIL facilitators to move away from prescriptive approaches and instead create flexible conditions where students feel safe to explore their experiences. The pass/fail assessment structure may have been fundamental in creating this safe space for students. The findings suggest that WIL programs should reconsider traditional grading approaches for reflective assignments, as these can undermine the development of authentic student voices. Removing grade-related pressure enables students to take risks in their writing and engage more honestly with their experiences.

There is a broader need to reconceptualize reflective writing in WIL not just as a learning tool, but as a vital space for professional identity development. Lastly reflective writing should be a choice rather than a chore that students decide to experience or not to experience as well as opt out during the process at any time and should be supported to reflect on the process itself for it to be genuine and truly meaningful to the individual sense of ownership as self-authorship. Facilitators and mentors can leverage this method by positioning themselves as listeners and co-learners, which in turn promotes student empowerment and genuine engagement. Future research should explore ways to further integrate reflective writing into WIL programs while addressing power dynamics and institutional constraints.

LIMITATIONS

Some of the main challenges or limitations lie in the broader institutional context of students' reflective writing inquiry and power dynamics. First, students could not fully author their learning experiences because they were not used to taking ownership of their professional development. The institutional requirement of reflective writing as coursework may have influenced the authenticity of student responses. Ideally, as suggested by Matusov and Marjanovic-Shane (2017), students should have a choice of participation or non-participation in predetermined coursework. This hierarchical power dynamic represents a significant limitation that warrants investigation in future experimental studies.

Second, the idea of learning from experience and doing it independently was new to all participants. Many expected their facilitator to direct their writing focus rather than making autonomous decisions. This dependency mindset poses a challenge for WIL facilitators, as it requires additional effort to explain the value of reflective inquiry and the significance of self-authorship. The novelty of the approach may have influenced how students engaged with the process.

Third, while the composite narrative approach allowed us to synthesize key themes, it necessarily reduced the granularity of individual experiences. The decision to focus on 20 reflections from a pool of 200 means that some nuanced, personal and subjective perspectives may have been overlooked and, even, silenced unintentionally. Additionally, member checking was not possible due to the anonymized nature of the data, limiting our ability to verify interpretations with participants.

CONCLUSION

Reflective writing inquiry is highly meaningful and valuable for students if it is authored and led by students' ideas, stories, and experiences, as well as by broader supportive dialogic feedback from WIL facilitators. What reflective writing means is different for different students. The unique, pluralistic subjective nature of reflective writing should be supported in WIL as a safe space for self-authorship. This meaning is not and should not be monolithic since it is highly complex and holistic because

students actively develop themselves and create their desirable futures. Hence, reflective writing inquiry is one of the holistic processes through which students can “navigate life challenges” and prepare for their careers (Caldicott et al., 2020, p. 224).

Student-authored reflective writing is emergent and generative in the highly personalized and subjective act of writing and in dialogue with themselves. All in all, the reflective writing inquiry-based process benefits students because they can voice their imaginative and mindful learning about themselves and their past and future experiences. Through this act of self-authorship, students develop a valuable sense of confidence. They no longer ask, “What will this new journey after graduation be for me?” even though they may not know the answers, they feel confident in creating their futures. What’s more, they will have developed assurances and more ideas about how to manage and lead themselves through this new stage of their professional career journey. Also, they learned to express themselves and write about their ideas and opinions, and, in doing so, they can see and envision their possibilities. This bird’s eye view empowers them to perceive and create themselves not only as the authors of their past and present experiences but as the leaders of their lives.

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About the Journal

The International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL) publishes double-blind peer-reviewed original research and topical issues related to Work-Integrated Learning (WIL). IJWIL first published in 2000 under the name of Asia-Pacific Journal of Cooperative Education (APJCE).

In this Journal, WIL is defined as:

An educational approach involving three parties – the student, educational institution, and an external stakeholder – consisting of authentic work-focused experiences as an intentional component of the curriculum. Students learn through active engagement in purposeful work tasks, which enable the integration of theory with meaningful practice that is relevant to the students' discipline of study and/or professional development (Zegwaard et al., 2023, p. 38").

Examples of practice include off-campus workplace immersion activities such as work placements, internships, practicum, service learning, and cooperative education (co-op), and on-campus activities such as work-related projects/competitions, entrepreneurship, student-led enterprise, student consultancies, etc. WIL is related to, and overlaps with, the fields of experiential learning, work-based learning, and vocational education and training.

The Journal's aim is to enable specialists working in WIL to disseminate research findings and share knowledge to the benefit of institutions, students, WIL practitioners, curricular designers, and researchers. The Journal encourages quality research and explorative critical discussion that leads to the advancement of quality practices, development of further understanding of WIL, and promote further research.

The Journal is financially supported by the Work-Integrated Learning New Zealand (WILNZ; www.wilnz.nz), and the University of Waikato, New Zealand.

Types of Manuscripts Sought by the Journal

Types of manuscripts sought by IJWIL is primarily in two forms: 1) *research publications* describing research into aspects of work-integrated learning and, 2) *topical discussion* articles that review relevant literature and provide critical explorative discussion around a topical issue. The journal will, on occasions, consider good practice submissions.

Research publications should contain; an introduction that describes relevant literature and sets the context of the inquiry. A detailed description and justification for the methodology employed. A description of the research findings - tabulated as appropriate, a discussion of the importance of the findings including their significance to current established literature, implications for practitioners and researchers, whilst remaining mindful of the limitations of the data, and a conclusion preferably including suggestions for further research.

Topical discussion articles should contain a clear statement of the topic or issue under discussion, reference to relevant literature, critical and scholarly discussion on the importance of the issues, critical insights to how to advance the issue further, and implications for other researchers and practitioners.

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Reference

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