

Students' Engagement in Personal Writing

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ABSTRACT

There has been a rise in the number of mental health problems that college students are suffering as a direct result of the increased levels of stress that are present in the university environment. Students can effectively communicate their emotions through writing activities such as maintaining a diary, writing poetry, or engaging in introspective writing. On the other hand, educational institutions in Indonesia continue to overlook research questions about how students can improve their mental health through the use of personal writing. The purpose of this study is to investigate how children utilize writing as a means of effectively expressing their feelings and preserving their mental health. Researchers from Universitas Muhammadiyah Semarang recruited thirty students from the second, sixth, and eighth semesters to participate in the study. A quantitative and descriptive method was utilized in the investigation. To collect the information, we conducted a survey consisting of a single question. After engaging in activities that involved personal writing, the majority of participants in the survey reported feeling more emotionally balanced and experiencing lower levels of stress. The study's findings revealed this. The act of writing helped them become more self-aware, which in turn enhanced their emotional intelligence and problem-solving abilities. The results of the study suggest that students may be able to improve their mental health via the use of personal writing rather than through the use of pharmaceutical therapies. Instruction in reflective writing should be provided to students at educational institutions to promote the mental health of children.

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1. INTRODUCTION

ELT learners today face numerous challenges that impact their academic and emotional well-being. Because today's educational climate is competitive and ever-changing, these difficulties include scholastic pressure, the exploration of one's identity, the fulfillment of societal expectations, and emotional turmoil; all of these difficulties become more intense during transitional periods, such as the beginning of university life. The academic sector, which formerly concentrated solely on intellectual ability, is increasingly addressing students' underlying mental health issues. Arvidsson et al. (2021) found that students are much more uncomfortable due to the combined pressures of performance expectations and socio-emotional changes. Concern, exhaustion, or emotional detachment are common ways in which this suffering shows up.

Another factor that has contributed to the complexity of this scenario is the long-term psychological effects that the COVID-19 epidemic has had. The rapid switch to online learning, prolonged social isolation, and uncertainty about the future all contributed to an environment that resulted in many students feeling emotionally trapped. It was a pervasive feeling among the students. The traditional kinds of assistance, such as on-campus counseling, family visits, and peer involvement, were either restricted or unavailable during this period. Peer engagement was also a type of support that was specified. Access to professional mental health therapies, such as counseling and therapy, continues to be uneven, even though these treatments are vital in addressing these challenges from a mental health perspective. A significant number of students are prevented from requesting assistance when they are in the greatest need of it due to obstacles such as financial constraints, social stigma, and inadequate institutional resources.

As a result of this complicated setting, personal writing has arisen as a means of self-care and emotional resilience that is both quiet and powerful. Journaling, letter writing, poetry, and introspective narratives are all examples of kinds of writing that fall under the category of personal writing. A strong emphasis on self-expression and reflection characterizes personal writing. Personal writing places a higher focus on authenticity, emotional honesty, and a conversational style (Bolton, 2006). It contrasts with academic writing, which requires organization, reasoning, and a formal tone. It provides people with the opportunity to transition away from communication that is dependent on performance and instead engage in a conversation with themselves that is non-judgmental and personal. Students who frequently experience the need to repress their feelings in academic contexts find that personal writing provides them with a unique opportunity to be vulnerable and gain a deeper understanding of themselves.

A human response to an emotional event has always been the driving force behind writing, even in its most fundamental form. Individuals have historically turned to written language as a means of organizing their ideas and discharging their feelings. It can be seen in everything from ancient diaries to letters that were never mailed. During the epidemic, it was evident that many found themselves returning to writing on an intuitive level. Many of the youngsters turned to writing as a means of dealing with the limited opportunities for physical engagement and the frequently distant emotional assistance they received. Writing has become a viable means of coping with issues such as anxiety, loneliness, and loss (Jubhari et al., 2022; Wijayatiningsih et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2023). It may be accomplished through the use of digital journaling applications, private notebooks, or creative blog postings. There is clear evidence that an increasing number of people are engaging in personal writing techniques, such as expressive blogging and journaling. Writing becomes a much more significant psychological aid for managing stress and solitude.

Not only does writing for oneself have therapeutic benefits, but it also helps one become more clear-headed. Writing about feelings helps students recognize patterns in their reactions, gain an understanding of their mental health, and consider other perspectives on the problems they are currently experiencing. It functions as both a mirror and a map, reflecting the experiences that individuals have had on the inside while also directing them toward a deeper level of comprehension. This is important in education because emotional excess may hamper learning, motivation, and relationships (Kian Tan, 2014; Teng, 2024; Zhu & Doo, 2021; Zimmerman, 2008).

Personal writing is often undervalued in Indonesia despite its cultural significance. Many view the country's rich literary traditions, including poetry, letters, and personal narratives, as art rather than emotional expression (Herpindo et al., 2024; Wang et al., 2022; Yu et al., 2023). The lines between therapeutic practice and artistic expression, however, are often blurry. Keeping this in mind, students may be provided with a long-term and culturally appropriate method of addressing their emotional surroundings through the use of personal writing in educational contexts, especially in the context of teacher education. Teaching candidates should prioritize self-reflection, emotional management, and communication skills. The individual's health and the growth of empathy will both benefit from this throughout their lifetime. It will be advantageous to the individual.

The purpose of this current research is to investigate how personal writing might serve as a tool for providing emotional support to college students in light of the facts mentioned above. The purpose of this study is to gain an understanding of the role that personal writing plays in fostering mental resilience and emotional clarity, particularly in educational settings where professional assistance may not always be readily available. The purpose of this is to advocate for the purposeful incorporation of reflective writing practices into academic life. It is not intended to serve as a therapeutic alternative but rather as a human-centered supplement to the existing support mechanisms.

2. METHOD

This descriptive quantitative study examined how college students cope with emotions through personal writing. The primary purpose was to understand the frequency, formats, preferences, and emotional impacts of each student's writing habits. Researchers used a quantitative approach to collect demographic data (Cresswell, 2014; Cresswell & Plano, 2018). It gave them the ability to recognize trends and tendencies that were associated

with personal writing and emotional well-being. The research participants consisted of thirty undergraduate students from a private university in Central Java, Indonesia. The university is located in Indonesia. To provide a broad knowledge base and a range of maturity levels, the sample consisted of students in their second, fourth, and sixth semesters of undergraduate study. They were chosen at random, in addition to being enrolled undergraduate students for the 2024–2025 academic year. No specific inclusion criteria were used during the selection process. Twenty-three females and seven males aged 20–25 participated in the current study. Surveys on Google Forms employed in collecting the data. This platform was chosen for its usability, accessibility, and protection of research participants' privacy. The online approach provided students with the opportunity to respond at their convenience, encouraging them to disclose information honestly, particularly when it came to sensitive subjects such as emotional well-being and personal expression.

The survey instrument included multiple-choice and Likert-scale questions. These questions asked students about their personal writing experiences and viewpoints. The questionnaire contained many crucial elements; such as the frequency of writing a personal essay. In this section of the survey, students were asked to indicate the frequency with which they engage in personal writing (e.g., daily, weekly, sometimes, or never). Secondly are the different kinds of writing exercises in journaling, letter writing (to oneself or others), poetry, creative storytelling, and unsent messages are some of the forms of writing that students typically engage in. This section highlighted the types of writing that students usually engage in. The third is the writing's influence on one's emotions indicator. After writing, students were asked how they felt, specifically whether it helped them feel relieved, whether it made them feel more in control of their emotions, or whether it made them better equipped to reflect on them. Fourthly, the indicator is having a preference for speaking over writing. In this section, we investigated whether students were more comfortable expressing their feelings through verbal or written communication, particularly when confronted with emotionally charged circumstances. Fifth is the consideration of writing as a method of dealing with stress indicator. It means that the students were asked to score the degree to which they agreed with statements concerning the use of writing as a means of regulating emotions, engaging in self-reflection, and relieving stress.

The descriptive statistical methods were employed to analyze the collected data. Researchers used frequency counts, mean scores, and percentages to analyze the data. This study examined students' writing involvement and emotional effects rather than causality. To identify prominent tendencies and essential insights into the ways and reasons behind why students use writing as a personal coping technique, the researchers examined and analyzed the data. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary, and the institution conducting the research obtained the necessary ethical permission. The participants were provided with information on the study's objectives, and informed consent was obtained through the initial part of the questionnaire. Participants were kept anonymous and comfortable throughout the process. The researchers kept all comments private and collected no identifying information to ensure participants' anonymity and comfort.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to analyze how undergraduate students engage in personal writing, including confessions, tales, poems, and social media postings, and to evaluate the role that personal writing plays in students' emotional expression and mental well-being. The study is based on information gathered from thirty students through the use of a questionnaire that included open-ended questions, multiple-choice questions, and Likert scale questions. The findings can be categorized into five primary areas: the frequency of writing, the genres of writing, the motives for writing, the emotional effects, and the reasons students began writing. Taking all of these factors into consideration, we may gain a more nuanced understanding of how students approach reading personal writing.

1. How often do you publish your writing?

It is clear from the findings that there are varying degrees of involvement in personal writing. According to the thirty students who participated in the survey, eleven of them (36.67%) reported creating personal material on a daily or more frequent basis. This suggests that writing is a consistent component of their emotional routine. This group may view writing as a therapeutic release. On the other hand, four students, which accounts for 13.33 percent of the total, write once a week, while ten students, which accounts for 33.33 percent, write infrequently. It is interesting to note that five students reported never participating in personal writing (16.67%). Since writing is a meaningful exercise for many people, this range suggests that a significant number of pupils either lack the habit of writing consistently or lack the incentive to do so. This disparity suggests that pupils require access to more secure environments or additional support to explore writing as a personal tool.

2. The Different Forms of Writing Performed by Students

Students straightforwardly demonstrated their preferences when they were asked what form of personal writing they often generate. Eleven students chose to write personal tales or thoughts, making this the most prevalent sort of selection. As a result of this discovery, it is clear that students often employ narrative styles to

explore their feelings and thoughts. The choice of social media postings and short sentences was similarly popular, with six students selecting each option. There is a good chance that these formats are easier to obtain and are more in line with customary modes of communication. Four pupils chose poetry, while confessions were the least prevalent choice, with just three students mentioning them. Although expressive and reflective writing is common, this variety suggests that some types of writing, such as confessions, which require a greater degree of vulnerability, may still be difficult or unpleasant for confident children to engage with.

3. Reasons for having a personal interest in writing

Because the students are so emotionally invested in their writing, the reasons they choose to write have a substantial emotional depth. Personal writing is a type of self-care, as evidenced by replies such as "to keep my heart calm," "to let my thoughts out," and "to express emotions I can't say." Personal writing fulfills at least one of these purposes. It suggests that students write as a means of processing feelings that they find difficult to articulate verbally rather than being driven purely by creative or academic reasons. Thus, writing becomes a private space where individuals may express themselves and release tension. When verbal communication is restricted due to the fear of criticism or the absence of a comfortable and compassionate audience, writing can serve as a therapeutic outlet. This is especially true in situations when the fear of criticism is present.

4. The Motives Behind Starting A Writing Career

The pupils were also asked to recall the first thing that inspired them to put pen to paper. Their responses represented a combination of both extrinsic and intrinsic elements. Others started writing because they were required to do so by their professors, while others wanted to give it a go. Some were motivated to write by the material they read on social media or by their friends. Due to this variation, it is evident that writing often originates from external influences, but it can also lead to a lasting internal engagement. Several students maintain the practice of writing on their own once they have experienced the emotional comfort or happiness that comes from writing.

5. The Effects of Writing on Emotional State

In response to the question of how writing affects their emotions, the majority of students provided affirmative responses, such as "Writing helps me think clearly about problems" and "I feel more relieved after writing." In addition, they were either in agreement or indifferent to the fact that writing enables them to be more honest, understand their sentiments, and express their emotions without having to share them with others. These replies provide credence to the notion that writing may be used as a means of releasing pent-up emotions and as a tool for developing self-awareness. For specific individuals, writing serves as a means to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and uncover new perspectives or answers to personal issues.

All in all, personal writing is a highly emotional exercise that is connected to self-regulation, contemplation, and inner clarity, as demonstrated by the findings, which make it abundantly evident that individual writing is more than simply a creative outlet for pupils. Although not all students participate consistently, those who do discover that writing is a meaningful method for dealing with feelings, finding solutions to difficulties, and communicating things that cannot be spoken verbally. Personal writing exercises have the potential to enhance mental health while also aiding in the development of literacy skills in educational settings.

4. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the current study emphasize the emotional and psychological advantages of personal writing, and the findings of this study are consistent with the body of literature. Personal writing is more than simply a cognitive or linguistic exercise, as demonstrated by the students' answers; it also serves as a powerful emotional release and a practice in reflective thinking. Writing is a routine mode of coping for many of the kids, as evidenced by the fact that more than one-third of the students reported writing independently multiple times each week. Bolton (2006) fundamental work on expressive writing is supported by this study. Pennebaker's work reveals that persons who write about their feelings and experiences frequently report lower stress and greater psychological well-being.

Moreover, narrative writing helps individuals make sense of their identity and the events that have occurred in their lives, was that the majority of the students in this study engaged in writing personal experiences and reflections. The preference for storytelling over poetry or confessions suggests that narrative writing may be a more structured and flexible method for processing emotionally charged material (Jubhari et al., 2022). Meanwhile, young people in today's society regularly use digital platforms as contemporary venues for self-expression and emotional release, are mirrored by the popularity of short phrases and social media posting (Wang et al., 2022).

Previous research has found that the reasons for writing, such as "to calm my heart" or "to express emotions I can't say," are consistent with the motives for writing. A strong connection exists between expressive writing and emotional regulation, as noted by (Lestari et al., 2020; Zhu & Doo, 2021). This type of writing helps individuals label and organize their complex emotions. Furthermore, the concept that writing helps students "think clearly" and "understand what I feel" is reminiscent of the metacognitive advantages highlighted by (Zimmerman, (2013); Zimmerman & Schunk (2015). They claim that writing enhances self-awareness and problem-solving abilities through reflection and that this is a benefit that students can reap from writing. Both intrinsic and extrinsic variables may contribute to the decision to start writing, given the wide variety of reasons people begin writing, which range from social pressure to academic responsibilities. All in all the EFL learners writing had a positive results on their writing personal text to promote their self-engagement in the classroom.

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