Entering into Dialogue with the Taboo: Reflective Writing in a Social Work Human Sexuality Course

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Abstract: This paper examines a unique reflective writing assignment used in an undergraduate social work course on human sexuality. We ask what new understandings reflective writing mediates (Vygotsky, 1978) regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender relations –oft– neglected topics within pre-professional academic programs. One goal for this assignment was to mediate future social workers' abilities to differentiate between thoughts and feelings, and we evaluate the degree to which students did so in their writing. By adapting Hatton and Smith's (1994) framework for analyzing reflective writing, we also distinguish between descriptive and dialogical reflection, identifying and analyzing examples of both within the students' writing. Findings suggest that students engaged primarily in descriptive reflection, but also engaged in some dialogical reflection. We argue that both are useful but that the latter mediates deeper and more useful learning. We present recommendations for enhancing reflective writing assignment design in pre-professional academic programs.

Keywords: Reflective writing; anti-homophobia work; social work; pre-professional programs; assignment design

Writing offers a potentially powerful reflective tool for students in pre-professional programs. Yet reflective writing about the issues of gender and sexuality has not been studied extensively. These issues are also frequently unaddressed in a range of pre-professional programs (see, for example, Fredricksen-Goldsen, Woodsen, Luke, & Gutierrez, 2011; Vavrus, 2009; McNair, 2008). This is a significant gap, as students who have not reflected on these issues may be more likely to approach their work through the lenses of stereotypes and assumptions, and more likely to reproduce inequities (Kumashiro, 2002).

This study focuses on an attempt to address this gap in a university social work class, through a reflective journal writing assignment. The study examines the role that reflective journal writing played in mediating (Vygotsky, 1978) students' reflection on several key aspects of sexuality: sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender relations. Sexual orientation refers here to "the gender(s) that a person is attracted to emotionally, physically, sexually, and romantically" (Carroll, 2010, p. 279), while gender identity refers to the gender or sex with which one identifies. Gender relations refers to the structures of roles, practices, and relationships into which people enter in relation to gender and sex (Connell, 2009). As the participants in this study noted repeatedly in their writing, these topics are often considered taboo within the cultural context of this study (the United States). Although we recognize that the word taboo has discipline-specific meaning within archaeology (Fowles, 2008), we use it here in the way our participants did: to refer to topics deemed improper or unacceptable to discuss socially. We were particularly interested in the effect that writing might have in mediating reflection on topics that students told us they had not often had the chance to talk about.

This paper examines students' journals through a model adapted from Hatton and Smith's (1994) analysis of students' reflective writing in a teacher education program. We argue that the journal assignment mediated several levels of reflection, all of which are potentially useful, but some of which appeared to result in deeper learning. Higher levels of reflection may have been hampered by students' tendency to engage in argument writing. For this study, Hatton and Smith's model was adapted to account for this attention to argument-based writing.

The journal writing was assigned with the goal of engaging students in reflection about human sexuality, and to allow the instructor to assess the course as a part of a professional academic program. However, like many reflective writing assignments, it did not define reflection for students, nor was the assignment developed in reference to a particular theory or definition of reflection. Thus we contemplate how students responded to a reflective writing assignment without the concept being grounded in a particular theory. We forward recommendations for enhancing reflective writing assignment design in pre-professional academic programs.

To better understand how reflective writing can mediate change in regard to gender- and sexuality-related issues, this study draws from literature on the nature of reflection to answer the following research questions:

1. What do students do in response to writing assignments that ask for, but do not explicitly define, reflection?

2. In what ways do students use writing to reflect on issues related to gender relations, sexual orientation, and gender identity?

3. What is the role of argument in their reflection and in their writing?

4. In what ways, if any, does student writing reveal that students are shifting or reconsidering views or coming to new understandings / insight during the process of writing and over the semester?

1. Reflection: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Much contemporary theory on reflective writing can be traced to John Dewey (1910), who described reflection as arising from uncertainty. "Demand for the solution of perplexity," he writes, "is the steadying and guiding factor in the entire process of reflection" (p. 11). Having noted this "perplexity," a person engaged in reflection moves between observations and the ideas or thoughts that they inspire. Rather than accepting those ideas or thoughts right away, "[t]ruly reflective thought" evaluates them in light of observations (Dewey, as cited in Hickman and Alexander, 1998, p. 138).

Contemporary literature on reflection draws on and extends Dewey's definition. In his description of an assignment based on Dewey's writing, for example, Josefson (2005) describes reflection as an exploration to resolve "some perplexity or disequilibria" (p. 764). Psychological literature likewise describes self-reflection in terms of a questioning stance—as "motivated by the curiosity or epistemic interest in the self" (Trapnell and Campbell, 1999, p. 297, as cited in Boyraz, Horne, & Sayger, 2010, p. 244). Scholars have also delineated other thought processes associated with reflection, including critical thinking skills such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation (Hume, 2009; McGuire, Lay, and Peters, 2009). Reflection is seen as offering students a place to apply theory to practice (McGuire, Lay, and Peters, 2009; Josefson, 2005; Rai, 2006) and to draw meaning from experience (McGuire, Lay, and Peters, 2009).

Dewey's definition also focuses on challenging one's preconceptions—"checking . . . habitual modes of understanding" (as cited in Hickman and Alexander, 1998, p. 147). Likewise, contemporary research on reflection focuses on the ability of reflective thought to help students better understand their own "values, assumptions, and blind spots" (Tsang, 2007, p. 682) and consider challenges to them (Hume, 2009; Josefson, 2006; Moon, 1999). Mezirow (1998) distinguishes between *reflection* and *Critical Reflection on Assumptions*. The former, he writes, "can mean many things," including "simple awareness of an object, event or state . . . awareness of a perception . . . or

imagining alternatives" (p. 185-186). The latter, which he suggests is a higher form of thought, involves re-evaluating an "assumption or presupposition" (ibid).

Research has produced mixed results regarding the efficacy of reflection for both professional preparation and personal well-being. However, that research suggests the powerful potential of reflection. For example, some studies of student writing in pre-professional programs have reported relatively superficial reflection (Killeavy & Maloney, 2010; Wopereis, Sloep, & Poortman, 2010), while others have found reflective writing to lead to meaningful learning (Spaulding & Wilson, 2002; Lee, 2008). In their review of literature on reflective writing, Dyment and O'Connell (2010) wrote that the most successful assignments seem to share "clarity of expectations" (p. 235), scaffolding / teaching of reflection, instructor response, and regular practice with journal writing. Vavrus (2009) studied teacher candidates' writing through a narrative lens rather than focusing on reflection, but his students appear to have engaged in reflection through narrative. He found that:

> "all teacher candidates expressed increased confidence in being able to consider issues of gender and sexuality as a legitimate part of their teacher identity. Most came to see responsiveness to gender and sexuality for their students as an extension of what they had previously embraced as multicultural inclusion." (p. 388)

Psychological literature, meanwhile, has found that when reflection is differentiated from rumination (a more repetitive and "passiv[e]" focus on one's feelings (Ayduk & Kross, 2010, p. 842)), reflection can lead to empathy (Joireman, Parrot, & Hammersla, 2002) and "psychological growth and maturation" (Staudinger, 2001, p. 154).

Interestingly, both bodies of literature emphasize the importance of being able to step back, achieving distance from the events or questions about which one is reflecting. This ability is also important to Hatton and Smith (1994), who distinguished between more and less sophisticated levels of reflection by teacher education students based in part upon their ability to "ste[p] back" and "mul[l] about" (p. 48) the questions raised by their own observations. Ayduk and Kross (2010), in fact, describe psychological distance as accounting for the difference between reflection, which contributes to psychological wellbeing, and rumination, which does not.

2.   Reflective Writing Considered Through Sociocultural Theories

Students' journal writing was analyzed through the sociocultural theories of Vygotsky and Bakhtin. Vygotsky (1978) held that people learn through the mediationg effects of the sociocultural environment and of tools—such as writing. The "writing to learn movement" (Bazerman, 2005, p. 57) of the 1970's, sparked by Janet Emig and James Britton, drew from Vygotsky's theories to describe the meditational properties of various types of writing. Writing mediates learning by externalizing thought, "making thinking visible and tangible," (Tynjälä, 2001, p. 47). In the case of reflective writing, this

externalization makes possible two benefits. First, it enables the specific insight gained through reflection on a given subject. Second, Vygotsky held that the process of externalizing certain "habits of mind" (Miller, 2003, p. 304) should lead to the internalization of these habits. In this case, that "habit of mind" would be the internalization of reflective thinking. While this study does not follow students after the course to examine the degree to which they did internalize reflective habits of mind, Vytogsky's theory offers a compelling rationale for the use of reflective writing in pre-professional programs.

This study focuses on the first potential benefit noted above: the insight that students stand to gain by reflecting on specific issues. Pérez Echeverría and Scheuer (2009) write, "External representations [such as writing] are essential to construct knowledge, refine it, modify it, share and appropriate it" (p. 13). Externalizing thinking through writing makes possible the "develop[ment of] thinking and transforming [of] ideas" (Tynjälä, 2001, p. 304), partly because it requires students to elaborate their beliefs and ideas in ways that will be clear to readers (Tynjälä, Mason, & Lonka, 2001). Writing also enables students to situate their beliefs in relation to those of others (Pérez Echeverría and Scheuer, 2009). This process may lead both to greater self-understanding and to a deeper knowledge of the broader dialogue—the greater polyphony (Bakhtin, as cited in Morris, 1994, p. 89)—within which they are positioning themselves.

Indeed, Bakhtin's notions of polyphony and dialogism are also central to this study, for reflective writing can be considered a form of interior dialogue (Tsang, 2009; Tynjälä, 2001). Bakhtin's notion of dialogue complements Dewey's definition of reflection: Bakhtin emphasizes an active understanding characterized by openness. "The person who understands," Bahktin wrote, "must not reject the possibility of changing or even abandoning his already prepared viewpoints and positions" (as cited in Marchenkova, 2005, p. 173). This study sought evidence of such openness in the students' writing.

Hatton and Smith (1994) developed criteria for their analysis of reflective writing by teacher education students. The criteria did not fit participants' journal entries perfectly, in part because Hatton and Smith's participants were reflecting on their own first days in the classroom, while the students in this study had not yet begun to practice social work. We adapted Hatton and Smith's criteria to fit the context of this study, to include additional elements from the literature on reflection, and to account for striking elements of the students' writing. One element of this adaptation includes the diagram below, created to reflect the hierarchical nature of the categories as suggested by Hatton and Smith. The absence of lines demarcating each section of the pyramid reflects the perception that, rather than fitting into separate "boxes" or categories, reflective writing lies along a hierarchical continuum.

The diagram also allowed for the incorporation of argument writing, which Hatton and Smith do not address. Referring to the diagram, argument is represented by the lightly shaded triangle that overlaps, or is possible within, the upper elements of the

hierarchy. Its base rests in descriptive reflection, however, as argument may correspond most often with descriptive reflection. Despite the adaptations described above, Hatton and Smith's criteria proved extremely helpful, and quoted sections in the diagram are taken directly from their work. Their original criteria are included in Appendix 1.
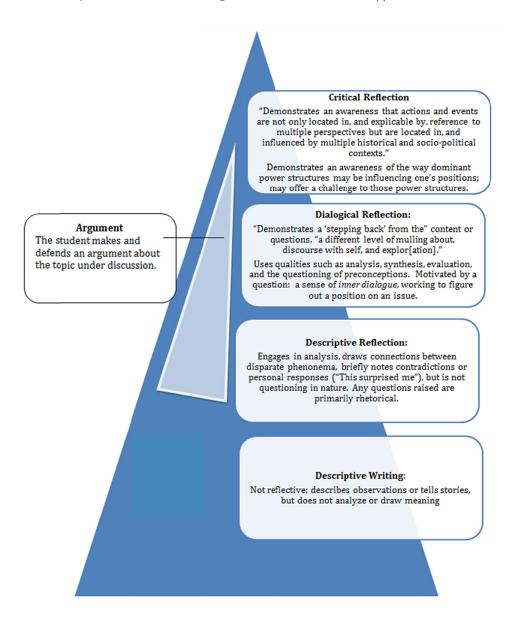
Critical Reflection
"Demonstrates an awareness that actions and events are not only located in, and explicable by, reference to multiple perspectives but are located in, and influenced by multiple historical and socio-political contexts."

Demonstrates an awareness of the way dominant power structures may be influencing one's positions; may offer a challenge to those power structures.

Dialogical Reflection:
"Demonstrates a 'stepping back' from the" content or questions, "a different level of mulling about, discourse with self, and explor[ation]."

Uses qualities such as analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and the questioning of preconceptions. Motivated by a question: a sense of *inner dialogue,* working to figure out a position on an issue.

Argument
The student makes and defends an argument about the topic under discussion.

Descriptive Reflection:
Engages in analysis, draws connections between disparate phenonema, briefly notes contradictions or personal responses ("This surprised me"), but is not questioning in nature. Any questions raised are primarily rhetorical.

Descriptive Writing:
Not reflective; describes observations or tells stories, but does not analyze or draw meaning

Figure 1: Levels of Reflection. Adapted from Hatton & Smith (1994)

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design, Setting, and Participants

This instrumental case study (Creswell, 2006, p. 74) examined a semester-long reflective writing assignment for a human sexuality social work course taught at a private university in the Northeastern United States. The student body at this university was primarily White and of traditional college student age in the US (18-22). The instrumental case study design allowed us to examine a bounded case (the social work course) to explore "one issue or concern" (ibid): the use of writing by students in a pre-professional program to explore issues related to sexuality. The goals of the course were: a) to cultivate in students a comfort level talking about sexuality, b) to better understand issues that would affect their future work with clients, and c) to reflect upon the relevance of those issues to their own lives. Human sexuality was presented with a focus on positive sexual health, which portrayed sexuality as a multidimensional phenomenon with biological, psychological, and social perspectives, as well as elements involving politics, human rights, religion, and love (Edwards & Coleman, 2004). All students were asked to reflect on course material as it related to their thoughts and feelings in the journals that were analyzed for this study.

Four (N=4) out of twenty-four students volunteered to participate in this study. Each participant was compensated with a ten-dollar gift card to either the campus bookstore or coffee shop. The four participants, one male and three females, represented a range of ages and life experiences: Maria and Chris were freshmen; Rachel was a junior who described herself as "middle-aged;" and Lauren was a senior. Only Rachel described herself as a non-traditional student in terms of age. Human subjects protocol restricted us from gathering more information from students or from meeting with them. However, additional information that each participant chose to reveal in journals and in e-mails will be discussed in the findings section, as this information helps to understand the range of responses to the journal assignment.

3.2 Reflective Writing Assignment

All students kept a journal in which they wrote about one of the topics covered each week. Sixteen journal entries were to be completed. Journals were submitted at the end of the semester. The entries were not graded, although completion of the assignment counted toward a students' class participation grade.

Each journal entry was limited to one-page, single-spaced text, following a defined format that aimed to differentiate student "thoughts" from "feelings." The format encouraged students to recognize and manage thoughts and feelings regarding sensitive topics as a way of maintaining their "objectivity," a foundational skill for social work. This format reflected one that social workers often ask clients to use when writing about problems they face, to help clients think about their problems more precisely. The writing assignment format offered students a chance to gain experience drawing these distinctions themselves.

The format consisted of three (3) sections:

- Section 1: Identifying in one or two sentences any subject relevant to human sexuality that they felt compelled to discuss, which was addressed that week in a class lecture, video presentation, or in assigned readings;
- Section 2: Describing in one well-developed paragraph their thoughts or beliefs about this subject;
- Section 3: Describing in one well-developed paragraph their feelings or reactions about this subject.

The assignment sheet offered a sample of how students might approach each section. This sample suggested that if a student had identified sex trafficking as a subject in Section 1, then in Section 2 the student might explore connections between the textbook reading and a documentary he or she had seen on the issue of sex trafficking. In section 3, the student might explore his or her disgust at the practice.

3.3   Procedures for Data Collection

The four participants were instructed to email each week's journal entry to the first author. To maintain confidentiality, each participant created an anonymous e-mail account from which to submit each week's entry. The first author received all emails and was the only researcher to see the e-mails or any raw data, as per human subjects protocol. The instructor (second author) never viewed any of these e-mails or raw data, and he did not know which students were participating until after grades for the course were submitted.

Data also included observations of three three-hour classes and PowerPoint slides for other class sessions, and a review of course materials. Class observations were processed as field notes (Fretz, Emerson, & Shaw, 1995).

3.4   Data Analysis

The primary data analysis focused on student writing. We also read transcriptions of interviews with the professor and class observations as well as information that students included in their e-mails, noting points of relevance and context that enhanced analysis of the writing. In addition, we read sections of the course textbook that focused on specific issues about which students were writing. This helped us understand to what they were responding and how they were working with and extending ideas presented in the textbook.

Journals were analyzed when received, so analysis continued throughout the semester. We annotated the journals, noting issues of concern for each student and patterns both within and across the writing of individual students (Stake, 1995, described by Creswell, 2006, p. 163). We completed analytic memos (Creswell, 2006, p. 290) and categorical aggregation (Stake, 1995, as described in Creswell, 2006, p. 163) related to themes and patterns that arose in the journals. We also began to develop codes as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994) to describe broad themes:

possible new understanding, *exploratory writing*, *drawing connections*, *questioning preconceptions*, *personal connection*, *connection to social work*, and *reference to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender relations*. We then narrowed our analysis, coding the journals with the adapted criteria from Hatton and Smith (1994). Examples of writing that was coded according to each level within this adapted framework are included in Appendix 2. We were particularly concerned with capturing sections where students' goal seemed to be to put forward an argument, as we had begun to suspect that argument-writing affected the type of reflection in which the students engaged. We defined the limits of this code according to two criteria: we looked for claims put forward by students, and we looked to see whether the student's purpose in a given section of the journal seemed to be to convince the reader of this claim. We did not code as argument lines where students put forth a claim (or opinion) briefly, with no elaboration, and then moved on to other topics. Rather, we looked for moments when a student made a claim and attempted to support it with some type of grounds (Toulmin, 2003) or at least to elaborate upon it.

We compared and contrasted coded data, both within and across the writing of different students. For example, we sought to see where and with what results each student engaged in each kind of reflection. We examined what came before and after moments coded as each type of reflection: for example, did descriptive reflection seem to lead to dialogical reflection? Did students engage in dialogical reflection as a step toward making an argument, or did they start with argument?

Throughout this process, we triangulated by seeking multiple examples of findings from across the writing samples and by cross-checking findings and questions against data from class observations, interviews, and artifacts such as the textbook. This enabled us, for example, to note that Rachel appeared at one point to have modeled a paragraph of her own writing after a paragraph in the text (described below), but to have added details beyond those provided in the text. This suggested that some of the understanding that Rachel demonstrated in this journal may have been discovered during the writing process.

4. Findings

4.1   The Students: A Range of Approaches to Reflection

While each student engaged, over the course of the semester, in a range of approaches to writing, clear patterns emerged regarding each student's predominant approach. We focused in particular on whether students' writing was characterized by argument or by exploratory questioning and whether students focused on personal issues or issues relevant within the wider society.

Approach 1: Lauren's personal, exploratory writing.

Lauren tended to approach her topics in an exploratory manner, particularly when an issue raised a personal question for her. Exploring forms of difference (in terms of culture, sex, sexual orientation, etc.), she often encountered tensions between a general openness toward difference and some rather traditional views that she discovered she held. Through her writing, she explored these tensions rather thoroughly. For example, when she read that women are more likely than men to soften their opinionated statements, she recognized this pattern in her own communication habits and explored potential drawbacks of this style. Only after this exploration did she write, "I find I am not tempted to speak" in a more direct manner because doing so does not leave enough room for the other person to object or to voice another opinion. Thus, while Lauren affirmed her manner of communication, she did so only after exploring genuine questions about the impact of gender and alternate approaches to communication, and she arrived at a well-thought-through rationale for her own communication habits.

Approach 2: Rachel's socially-oriented argument writing.

While Lauren's exploration sometimes evolved into argument, as in her journal about her own communication patterns, Rachel's writing more frequently began with argument. For example, she began an entry focused on sexuality among older adults this way: "I think that old age should not be considered an obstacle for sexual activity."

While she did engage in some rhetorical questioning and speculation in this entry, her primary purpose seemed to be to support her claim, to which she returned later: "Society needs to change its attitude, and change it quickly, because our elderly population is growing rapidly." Rachel generally took a less personal approach to the journals, tending to focus on the wider society. She paid particular attention to two themes: the role of media and technology in shaping social interactions, and her belief in the significance of increased openness about and research on sexuality.

Approach 3: Chris' socially-oriented, exploratory writing.

Like Lauren, Chris tended to begin his writing with exploration. Like Rachel, he focused on the implications of course content for the wider society, drawing personal connections primarily when they would help him understand those wider implications.

For example, Chris wrote about his parents' marriage and divorce, but as a way of exploring research results about cohabitation before marriage, rather than as a way of better understanding his own family's experience. His writing was quite analytical: he noted contradictions and drew connections between course content and his own prior knowledge. Though he wrote that he disliked politics, Chris was the only student to explicitly reference political and religious forces that influence knowledge about sexuality.

Approach 4: Maria's personal diary-writing.

Maria, also a freshman, approached the journals differently from the other three students. She sent six entries, about half of what the students should have written. She wrote as one might in a diary, describing a range of personal experiences, often with little explicit connection to course content (though her writing was perhaps more analytical than one might expect in a diary: she analyzed her relationships with others and her own future goals). At the center of her writing lay two issues with which she appeared to be consumed: her mother's recent death and her uncertainty regarding a future in social work. Sometimes she connected these issues broadly to course content, as when she moved from a description of her relationship with her mother to a discussion of why parents and children have difficulty talking about sexuality. Other times, she did not, writing (in powerful prose) about a party she went to one weekend or about her relationships with family members. She finished her second entry by writing, "So I think that this all relates to your class in a very specific way…and I don't really feel the need to explain." On one hand, the explication of implicit knowledge is largely the point of writing-to-learn, and the frequent absence of such explication may suggest that the writing did not mediate much course-specific learning for her. On the other hand, even without direct reference to course materials, she did at times explore course themes in ways that seemed personally significant and that may have mediated deeper insight on those themes. The writing, then, may have helped bridge the issues in Maria's life with course content.

4.2   Types of Reflection: A Progression through Levels of Thought

For the sake of space, this paper focuses on the two middle levels of our adaptation of Hatton and Smith's types of reflective writing: *descriptive reflection* and *dialogical reflection*. The students almost never stayed in "descriptive writing" without moving to some sort of reflection; likewise, they rarely engaged in critical examination of power structures and relations. Though critical reflection is clearly an important skill, such analysis did not feature prominently in this course, a fact that is generally reflected in the journals.

Descriptive reflection: Facilitating meaning, connections, and movement.

As in Hatton and Smith's study, most of the students' writing could be characterized as "descriptive reflection." These sections included moments when students noted personal reactions to course content; drew connections between disparate bits of knowledge; drew meaning from observations; and, sometimes, worked toward an argument.

Hatton and Smith (1994) describe the progression from one category of reflection to the next as evidence of a "perceived developmental sequence" (p. 46), and indeed, descriptive reflection may mediate learning in ways that are more limited than dialogical reflection. Students engaged in the former may not be (or at least, not as

clearly) exploring novel questions or considering their own assumptions. Yet this type of reflection does have value. Furthermore, it represents possibilities, moments when mediation could help students engage in higher forms of reflection.

For example, descriptive reflection includes moments when students considered the significance of their observations, as well as moments when they drew connections between disparate pieces of information. For Maria, such connections seemed to help her engage with course material to the degree that she did, by connecting material with her thoughts about her mother and her own future. She wrote, for example, "My Mom knew everything about me. Including my sexual relations with my two boyfriends. This is exactly the reason why I can't understand why people never talk to their kids about sex or anything that has to do with it." She did not exactly explore questions about this observation (i.e., why don't parents talk to their kids?), but she did speculate about the impact of such silence: "When something becomes so taboo that one's parents wont [sic] talk about it, all one is going to want to do is that." Given the centrality of her mother's death in Maria's life at that moment, the writing process may have provided a space in which she could draw connections between that event and course content.

Chris also drew personal connections to course content, writing, "It is pretty common for guys my age to call each other gay or faggots, it is usually not meant to be hurtful to someone of a different orientation. However [the words are] said in a negative way and could be hurtful to someone of a different sexual orientation." Chris went on to describe the gay-straight alliance at his high school: "Ironically, all of the members of the group were heterosexual females. This is what made the video [watched in class] somewhat shocking to me. I know that not all high schools are like mine, and that many students suffer discrimination." He then described research he had read during a previous semester, which showed that "LGBT students are even less likely to seek mental help for problems, for fear of being stigmatized."

What did Chris learn, and not learn, from this "descriptive reflection"? He did not particularly explore his observations. He did not wonder why guys his age "call each other gay or faggots" nor why (or, indeed, whether) the gay-straight alliance at school was composed entirely of "heterosexual females." His observations appear to rest on several unexamined premises—that everyone who appears to be heterosexual is, and perhaps that LGBT students at his high school did not "suffer discrimination." Mediation pushing him to examine such questions and premises might have helped him become more aware of such assumptions.

So this reflection could have been more productive. It does not reflect the "perplexity" that, according to Dewey (1910), marks reflection (see also Josefson, 2005, p. 764). Still, Chris did move from thinking about language use and discrimination to research on homophobic stigma. He began to apply theory to practice (McGuire, Lay, and Peters, 2009; Josefson, 2005; Rai, 2006) and to draw meaning from experience (McGuire, Lay, and Peters, 2009). There is also evidence of some movement between the first sentence and the second—from his point that "guys [his] age" do not intend to

use the words "gay" and "faggot" hurtfully to an acknowledgment that these words "could be hurtful" nonetheless.

What is more, Chris' next paragraph moved *toward* dialogical reflection that resulted in a sense of empathy for students who are harassed because of their sexual orientation. There, he wrote, "I remember having entire days ruined because someone said something mean… Being insulted or mocked for your sexuality is a horrible thought." Here we see him "mulling over" (Hatton and Smith, 1994, p. 48) an implicit question that the video posed for him—"What would it be like to be in these students' shoes?" This exploration of that "perplexity" moves Chris toward an empathic connection to LGBTQ students (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer students). Hatton and Smith (1994) note that students who engage in dialogical reflection frequently start with descriptive reflection, a pattern evident in these entries.

An emerging tension: The role of argument in descriptive reflection.
Moments of writing identified as "descriptive reflection" frequently corresponded with sections identified as "argument." And indeed, argument writing involves several processes identified as part of "descriptive reflection": drawing connections among disparate pieces of information, drawing meaning from experience. Yet the stance taken when making an argument does not always seem conducive to the questioning, exploratory stance that characterizes dialogical reflection.

For example, Rachel approached the "thoughts/awareness" section of an entry on sexual orientation through a frustrated type of argument.

> At the risk of sounding like a new-age hippie…can't we all just get along and love each other? I am sick to death of people discriminating against each other. Nobody chooses the colour of their skin, whether they are male or female, or what their sexual orientation is. If we had a choice, would we choose to represent something that we knew we would face discrimination for? I have such trouble understanding the narrow-minded people who feel that a person's sexual orientation is a choice…It also angers me that most Christian religions are still not accepting of homosexuals…For me personally, I see that the Catholic religion is the most hypocritical. They see homosexuality as a sin, yet they don't seem to have any problem with harboring pedophiles in Vatican City. In my opinion…THAT'S A SIN!!

This entry has the potential to be meaningful for Rachel in some ways. She identified for herself an emotional topic. In the next paragraph, she described a story about a gay friend whose family rejected him, even after death, because of his sexuality. Understandably, then, this topic stirs emotion for Rachel. It seems useful, both personally and professionally, for her to acknowledge these emotions and to get them on the page.

But in terms of learning, we must ask where this journal takes Rachel. She wrote the entire entry in a style similar to that of the excerpt quoted above: she noted attitudes

that she did not understand, but in tones that, through either sarcasm or force of emotion, inhibited any exploration of those attitudes. With mediation, it seems possible that she might have tried to understand the perspectives of the "narrow-minded people" she has "such trouble understanding." She might have been able to explore the possible reasons for the discrimination she describes, the reasons why she does not feel prejudice toward lesbian and gay people, and maybe even the question of whether she *does* discriminate in different contexts or in subtler ways. Perhaps she would have explored how, as a social worker, she would council someone who held positions that made her so angry. Such questions would have required the psychological distance noted above as significant for reflection.

This entry reflects a pattern throughout the journal entries, one supported in Josefson's (2005) experience with his political science students: argument frequently precluded an authentically questioning approach to thinking, and it was even more likely to preclude the "Critical Reflection on Assumptions" described by Mezirow (1998). The primary mode of academic discourse, argument certainly engages students in critical thinking and can help them clarify their positions. And students who truly *engage* with alternate positions from the stance described by Bakhtin, remaining open to those alternate positions, may even take part in dialogical reflection through the process of arguing.

But the type of openness Bakhtin describes involves, as noted above, a temporary stepping back from the argument. It involves a moment of questioning—of critically reflecting on assumptions—during which one asks of the other's argument, *Could that be right? Could I be wrong?* Such a moment could be a part of the back-and-forth process of engaging in a particularly dialogic argument—but such questions are genuinely difficult to ask, and so often, arguments are not dialogic. Indeed, when the purpose of argument is presented, as it often is in academia, as persuading a reader of one's position, such dialogism is not encouraged. The direction of an argument moves outward; the direction of reflection moves inward.

The fact that argument was frequently not conducive to dialogical reflection, however, did not mean that it precluded learning-through-writing. Consider, for example, the following passage from Rachel's writing:

> I feel empathy for men because I think that society often sends mixed messages about what their role is. Women say that they want a strong man with whom they feel secure. We want to be treated like a lady and pampered sometimes, and the man should know when those times are. Sometimes we want a partner who will take charge of a situation that is pulling us out of our comfort zone, sometimes we want to be the one in charge, and the man should know when those times are. We want a man who will change our flat tire and lift objects that are too heavy for us, and we want a man who cooks, cleans, and is sensitive enough to enjoy watching "Steel Magnolias" with us, and again, the man should know when those times are. I feel that women need to better

communicate with men because sometimes they reinforce sexism by utilizing and relaying sexist messages that have been ingrained in them.

While Rachel did not ask questions in a typically "reflective" way, the process of listing contradictions formed a different kind of exploration. Because she employs the common argument technique of offering specific examples, Rachel must engage in a kind of questioning that is not visible on the page: she must repeatedly ask of herself, "In what *other* ways does society send mixed messages regarding men's roles?" The process of answering these implicit questions is often the process of transforming an abstract concept into its concrete manifestations. This process, surely, helps a writer to understand abstract concepts in new ways. The content here also seems important. Rachel was the only participant to consider how gender roles might be oppressive to men. This topic may be less common within contemporary public discourse than a topic such as whether people choose to be gay. Thus, the specific examples that Rachel lists seem more likely to be novel to her than does the notion that people probably do not choose oppressed sexual and gender identities.

To return to Dewey's definition of reflection, there may be two types of perplexity that lead to two types of "stepping back," two types of inner dialogue. First, there is the perplexity perhaps evident in Rachel's argument regarding gender roles: the type that seeks the most effective way to make a point in which one already believes. The process of stepping back to ask oneself, "how can I best marshal evidence and reason to support this claim"—if answers are novel to the writer—certainly seems likely to lead to certain types of "new understanding." Because this process does suggest an inner dialogue, I would categorize it as a step *toward* "dialogical reflection."

True dialogical reflection, however, involves a different kind of perplexity: that arising out of the questioning of one's own beliefs or preconceptions. This type of "stepping back" may be less likely (though not necessarily impossible) to take place when a student interprets her purpose as putting forth an argument. Rather than working against the importance of argument writing, then, this analysis may suggest that reflection, as a precursor to argument, be presented explicitly to students as a separate step if the exploration of beliefs and preconceptions is a goal.

Dialogical reflection: New understandings, new uncertainties.

While all of the students engaged primarily in descriptive reflection, they also all moved at some points into dialogical reflection. Lauren, noting the strict gender roles in her family, expressed her discomfort with the fact that she fully expected to follow such roles, though she believed that they create "an unfair society for women and men." She wrote, "Perhaps I ought to consider more of the roles that come with being a woman." Maria questioned her ability to work with abused children (though she then argued that someone has to take on this challenge). Chris questioned his assumptions that cohabitation before marriage is a good way to test a relationship, given statistics in his text and his divorced parents' experience. Rachel stepped back to wonder and

speculate about the reasons for statistics showing that Americans do not have sex as often as people from other countries.

Interestingly, when Rachel did engage in dialogical reflection, she tended to do so in relation to issues in the wider society. In regards to issues of personal significance, she was more likely to engage in argument or to describe *previous* realizations she had come to. By contrast, personal issues were most likely to spark dialogical reflection for Lauren, Maria, and Chris.

To examine the levels and possibilities of dialogical reflection, it may be useful to consider one entry by Lauren on homosexuality and compare it with Rachel's entry on the same topic. This excerpt, along with several others, were coded as "moving toward dialogical reflection." On the surface, the excerpt reads much like the argument-based sections coded as "descriptive reflection" above, and in some ways, it is indeed similar to those excerpts. Yet it differs in several ways, which will be discussed after the excerpt:

> I recently came to terms with the fact that I have an extremely difficult time accepting the opinions of people who are not comfortable with homosexuals and bisexuals. I recently had various conversations with my friends about how they feel about homosexual relationships. That which frustrates me the most [is] the fact that people believe that it is acceptable to say "I have no problem with gay people, as long as they don't express that they are attracted to me." This statement is entirely contradictory to me. If a gay or lesbian person were to approach me, forgetting the fact that I likely would not be able to determine their sexual orientation, I would not judge them or treat them in a manner any different than the way that I would treat a heterosexual individual. If I were in a situation in which a lesbian woman thought that I was a lesbian and expressed her romantic interest in me, I would have no problem explaining to her that I appreciate her as a person but that I am heterosexual. This sort of conversation would not make me uncomfortable.

Lauren went on to write "an aside" (which took her over the one-page limit) in which she described telling friends how a lesbian couple she knew had met. The "aside" described how Lauren's friends "cringed and had perturbed looks on their faces" when Lauren described the story. Lauren writes, "I did not consider [it] to be disturbing in any sort of way."

On the surface, this excerpt contained an argument, just as did Rachel's. It arose from a frustration similar, if not as strongly expressed, as Rachel's. How was it different? In describing the differences between her response and those of her friends, Lauren was arguing for her own, but she was also working through an implicit question: *why* is my response different? Why do theirs bother me? Why is theirs "entirely contradictory"? She did not state these questions, nor did she answer them explicitly, but her first line – "I recently came to terms with the fact…"– suggests that the purpose of this argument was personal, to explore this "coming to terms." The perplexity here is of the second

sort noted above: not so much *How do I convince a reader of my position?* as *Why is it that I believe I would act differently from the way I see others act?* When Lauren described three times (twice in the quoted excerpt and once in the aside) exactly how her response would differ from those of her friends, she appeared to have been working through something. Compared with Rachel's argument, there was a sense that the question was still fresh for her.

Also, the issue through which she was working is somewhat more nuanced than that through which Rachel was working. If there were implicit questions behind Rachel's argument, they were large-scale questions that have been, within the US context, widely debated in the media and wider society: what is the proper role of religion regarding homosexuality? How should parents react when their children come out? Are people born gay? Rachel drew heavily from the discourse surrounding those debates. It seems less clear, then, that she was working through these ideas in a new way. The implicit question in Lauren's writing feels more fresh: are people *really* accepting of LGBTQ people if they are uncomfortable with same-sex intimacy or attraction?

This analysis is also aided by a note that Lauren e-mailed to the first author at the end of the semester: in response to a brief set of questions, Lauren wrote that this journal "helped me to understand the topic in a new way….Writing the journal helped to clarify some of the ambivalence that I had been feeling toward my friends." This note guided the coding of this excerpt as "moving toward dialogical reflection." Mediation might have enabled Lauren to more explicitly describe and explore the subtle kinds of homophobia that she had sensed among her friends.

Because of the range of topics covered in the Human Sexuality course and the relatively small number of times when students engaged in the most dialogically reflective thought (that is, when they asked an explicit question and then worked through it), most of those excerpts fell outside of the range of this study's focus (sexual orientation, sexual identity, and gender relations). Still, we include one of those moments here to demonstrate the range of reflection in which the students engaged—to show the possibilities that reflective journal writing offers and to consider the ways in which mediation could push such reflection even further.

Here, Chris responds to the text's claim that divorce rates are higher among couples who cohabitate before marriage. The question that Chris poses and explores is italicized below. That question feels undergirded by a related question: *Could cohabitation make a couple more likely to divorce?*

> *I have always wondered how the relationship changes between two people when they are married or cohabitating.* I was raised to believe that living together before you are married is wrong, although I certainly do not believe this today. It seems to me that if you live with someone before you get married, you get a chance to "test" your relationship. I have always thought it would be better to live together and have things break down at that point then get a

divorce years down the road, after things like children and finances are involved. I was surprised to hear the divorce rate is higher among those who cohabitate first. I know my mom lived with my father before they were married. Obviously that outcome supports what we learned in class.

Chris went on to speculate about the reasons for divorce and about the ways in which living with someone else "would be very difficult":

"You have to balance all of your own lifestyle, thoughts, and feelings with that of another person. I cannot imagine how much more complicated this would be in a relationship, where there are much more intimate feelins [sic] and emotions involved. At my age…[I] don't think I am mature or compromising enough to do so."

Here, Chris posed a question, noted the preconceptions with which he came to the reading (and the preconceptions that had come before *those* ones—the beliefs with which he was raised), and then considered reason on one side and evidence on the other. After exploring the question in relation to divorce, he returned to the original cause for "wonder"—how would cohabitation, regardless of marriage, change a relationship—and he speculated about the ways in which that would be difficult.

In regards to that question, Chris' speculation resulted in some rather insightful self-awareness, as well as awareness of the potential influences of cohabitation on the dynamics between two people. These insights seem potentially significant both on a personal level and a professional level, for a social worker who may, for example, work with couples.

Regarding the implied question, about cohabitation and marriage, the excerpt did not quite live up in full to Dewey's 1910 definition of reflection: "active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it and the further conclusions to which it tends" (p. 94). Chris noted a challenge to his preconception and then moved on to a new topic.

This movement may be natural in as unstructured a process as reflective or exploratory writing, particularly since the place he moves to involves the useful thought described above. But it is also characteristic of many moments in the journals—moments when students posed authentic, dialogic questions, explored those questions to a point—and then stopped, left in uncertainty. Dewey suggests that reflection should lead students through the stages included in Josefson's assignment, including conjecture, analysis, and synthesis. Below, we will consider ways that the students could be helped through the moments of uncertainty to which reflection leads them.

Still, it seems that, particularly for short, frequent writing assignments, the importance of new uncertainty should not be downplayed. Preconceived notions about gendered expectations, cohabitation, and other issues have been troubled by the students—not answered, but opened up, perhaps for further thought. For a one-page reflection, troubling a preconception seems an impressive result. Sometimes new

insight comes in the form of an "a-ha!" moment when "it all makes sense." But surely the opposite is also new insight: the moment when we realize that what we thought made sense might not.

5. Discussion and Implications

What new learning is evident in the students' writing? Because we were unable to interview the students, our answers to these questions are inferential. The first author e-mailed the students with several questions about the experience of completing the journal writing, but only Lauren responded to the question about writing leading to new understandings.

Still, tentative inferences, at least, can be drawn. Because Lauren engaged in the most dialogical reflection—the most reflection about ideas and concepts clearly new to her and the most questioning of her own assumptions—her writing may have led to more new insight than that of the other students. New insight regarding sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender relations were not as evident in Rachel's writing, nor was it evident that she examined any preconceptions. But it is possible that through the process of writing, including argument, she was able to draw ideas together in more fully formed ways: to better understand, for example, the specific ways in which gender roles are oppressive for men.

Rachel also took on an extended exploration of a topic that recurs in many of her entries: media's influence upon sexuality. Early on, most of her observations could be termed "commonplaces" (Bartholomae, 2004, p. 70)—expressions and ideas commonly available within the wider discourse (e.g., the media sets unrealistic expectations about beauty). But Rachel's last two observations felt more novel, focusing on media's depiction of single people and of sexuality among older adults. Perhaps the requirement to write, but the freedom to follow a particular issue across the semester, created the opportunity for deeper insights.

While not exactly a "new understanding," Chris' journal writing provided him with a space, and a requirement to, engage with sexuality, a topic that he admitted made him "very uncomfortable." This very engagement may be significant for him. Chris' focus on drawing connections and on noting contradictions also led him to some important observations about cultural attitudes toward sexuality. Significantly, Chris used the writing process to draw empathetic connections to LGBTQ people in two separate journals, wondering and speculating about their experiences and drawing connections to his own. He also questioned his own preconception regarding cohabitation before marriage and, perhaps, regarding the impact of homophobic language.

Maria's writing focused on different topics from those of the other students, and any insight that she may have gained also differs in focus. She did not address sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender relations in her writing. She did seem to work through some of her doubts regarding social work, reaching a new level of commitment

to and confidence regarding work with abused children. Maria's grief over her mother and her concern regarding her future seemed to consume her thoughts, and may have made it difficult for her to engage in the kind of reflection on course content that the other students demonstrate. Still, as noted above, her journals often move from these concerns to matters at least tangentially (and occasionally closely) related to course content, perhaps helping her work her way between the two.

What insight can we draw from this analysis? First, reflective journal writing does offer the potential to mediate students' thinking about course content in new and useful ways. This mediation may be particularly important regarding a topic as intensely personal, as taboo, and with as many connections to values, belief systems, power structures, and preconceptions, as sexuality.

Yet, dialogical reflection was relatively rare. In conversations after the semester, the second author and course professor expressed some disappointment with the quality of the students' writing overall, calling some of the thought "superficial." He also, it should be noted, considered "dialogical reflection" as described here a more complex type of thought than he felt he could expect in an introductory-level course. As described above, this framework was adopted as an analytic tool to describe what students did when they were asked to reflect rather than as a way to describe the instructor's goals for his students. Still, his dissatisfaction with the quality of reflection is echoed in research by other educators who have asked students to engage in reflective writing (Hume, 2009), suggesting that it may still be useful to examine ways to help students engage in deeper levels of reflection.

Research on reflective writing suggests several types of mediation that might help students to engage in more dialogical reflection. For example, McGarr and Moody (2010) point to the importance of careful definition and explanation of the term *reflection*. Several studies also recommend certain forms of scaffolding, including instructor feedback (Lee, 2008; Tynjälä, Mason, & Lonka, 2001; Spaulding & Wilson, 2005), examination of models (Spaulding & Wilson, 2008), and written or oral reflection on reflection (Bain, et al., 1999). Participants in this study specifically said that they would have appreciated instructor feedback on their journals. Feedback could have helped students to see questions available for exploration: for example, *How would I work with a client who holds homophobic beliefs that I have difficulty understanding?* Class discussion and feedback focused on the relationship between argument and different types of reflection could also have helped students to engage, in specific assignments, in one rather than or before the other. Josefson's (2005) assignments asked students to engage in specific stages of reflection before moving toward argument. While the instructor did not read journals during the semester, he said during interviews that he would consider doing so in the future. Moon (1999) suggests that if such feedback is too time-consuming (a real possibility), educators might ask students to choose the sections or entries on which they would most appreciate instructor feedback.

Sociocultural theory offers other paths through which to mediate dialogical reflection. The theory rests on the notion that we learn through sociocultural interaction. Several authors (Tynjälä, 2001; Tynjälä, Mason & Tonka, 2001) describe the importance of supporting efforts to learn through writing with class discussion or with dialogic approaches to reflective writing, such as asking students to respond to one another's writing via e-mail (Kaplan, Rupley, Sparks, & Holcomb, 2007). When he spoke during interviews of planned revisions to the future sections of this course, the course instructor was considering ways to vary his instructional methods so as to increase discussion among students.

This study has several limitations, foremost the lack of in-depth information regarding students' perceptions of the assignment. The study also examines an assignment not designed specifically to elicit reflection through the lens of reflective writing. On the one hand, this fact allows for an examination of how students respond to one of the many writing assignments that use but do not unpack the term *reflection*. On the other hand, it analyzes how well students performed at a task they may not have been trying to perform at all. For this reason, it would be interesting to conduct similar analysis on the writing of students who had been asked to engage in specific types of reflection. Finally, the study is small, including only four students—and perhaps the students who were most motivated, given that they volunteered for the project. Studying the writing of an entire class might offer a fuller picture of the range of ways in which students reflect in writing.

Teaching is a constant act of revision—based on, appropriately enough, reflection. Ultimately, this study offers insight regarding two primary pedagogical issues. The examples of student writing examined speak to the significance of providing opportunities for students to reflect on issues related to sexual orientation, gender identity, and gender relations. Throughout the journals, students reflected on a range of issues that they told us they considered taboo and had not often explored. Their writing led to empathic connections across difference, to new questions regarding gender roles and relations, and to insight regarding the relevance of sexuality to students' personal lives and to the wider society. Given that sexuality plays such a central role in both arenas, the issues examined here seem crucial for pre-professional students within any field. Secondly, this study offers insight into students' engagement with reflective writing, with particular attention paid to the role of argument. Within an arena focused, as much of academia is, on the significance of argument writing, these findings suggest that attention be paid as well to helping students examine their preconceptions and work toward thorough explorations of their own positions.

Acknowledgements

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Appendix 1

Hatton and Smith's "Criteria for the Recognition of Evidence for Different Types of Reflective Writing"

Descriptive Writing
- Not reflective.
- Description of events that occurred/report of literature.
- No attempt to provide reasons/justification for events.

Descriptive Reflection
- Reflective, not only a description of events but some attempt to provide reason justification for events or actions but in a reportive or descriptive way. For example, "I chose this problem-solving activity because I believe that students should be active rather than passive learners."
- Recognition of alternate viewpoints in the research and literature which are reported. For example, Tyler (1949), because of the assumptions on which his approach rests suggests that the curriculum process should begin with objectives. Yinger (1979), on the other hand argues that the "task" is the starting point.
- Two forms:
     a. Reflection based generally on one perspective/factor as rationale.
     b. Reflection is based on the recognition of multiple factors and perspectives.

Dialogical reflection
- Demonstrates a "stepping back" from the events/actions leading to a different level of mulling about, discourse with self and exploring the experience, events, and actions using qualities of judgements andpossible alternatives for explaining and hypothesising.
- Such reflection is analytical or/and integrative of factors and perspectives and may recognise inconsistencies in attempting to provide rationales and critique, for example, "While I had planned to use mainly written text materials I became aware very quickly that a number of students did not respond to these. Thinking about this now there may have been several

- reasons for this. A number of students, while reasonably proficient in English, even though they had been NESB learners, may still have lacked some confidence in handling the level of language in the text. Alternatively, a number of students may have been visual and tactile learners. In any case I found that I had to employ more concrete activities in my teaching."
- Two forms, as in (a) and (b) above

Critical Reflection

- Demonstrates an awareness that actions and events are not only located in, and explicable by, reference to multiple perspectives but are located in, and influenced by multiple historical, and socio-political contexts. For example, "What must be recognised, however, is that the issues of student management experienced with this class can only be understood within the wider structural locations of power relationships established between teachers and students in schools as social institution based upon the principle of control" (Smith, 1992).

Appendix 2

Code from Adaptation of Hatton & Smith (1994)	Sample from Journals
Descriptive Reflection	Chris: *"Ironically, all of the members [my high school's gay-straight alliance] were heterosexual females. This is what made the video [watched in class] somewhat shocking to me. I know that not all high schools are like mine, and that many students suffer discrimination."* (Chris draws a personal connection between his experience and course content.)
Argument Writing	Rachel: *"I believe that the pressure that women are under to look good is causing problems in other areas of their lives. For some, it will come in the form of eating disorders, for others, it may be debt, depression, and relationships that lack quality."* (Rachel works, here and in the surrounding paragraph, to persuade readers that the pressure she describes causes specific problems for women. She puts forward and elaborates upon a position.)
Dialogical Reflection	Chris: *"I have always wondered how the relationship changes between two people when they are married or cohabitating. …It seems to me that if you live with someone before you get married, you get a chance to "test" your relationship. ... I was surprised to hear the divorce rate is higher among those who cohabitate first. I know my*

mom lived with my father before they were married. Obviously that outcome supports what we learned in class." (Chris questions and explores a pre-conception that has been troubled by course content.)