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To the Graduate Council:

I am submitting herewith a dissertation written by Jeffrey Russell entitled "Exploring Students' Experiences with Expressive Writing." I have examined the final electronic copy of this dissertation for form and content and recommend that it be accepted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, with a major in Educational Psychology.

Ralph Brockett PhD, Major Professor

We have read this dissertation and recommend its acceptance:

Lisa Yamagata-Lynch PhD, Jennifer Morrow PhD, Stergios Botzakis PhD

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Exploring Students' Experiences with Expressive Writing

A Dissertation Presented for the
Doctor of Philosophy
Degree
The University of Tennessee, Knoxville

Jeffrey Alan Russell
August 2019

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my daughter Ella, my wife Jennifer, my family, and to the almighty God who gave me this wonderful opportunity.

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Along this entire doctoral program and dissertation journey, I have been inspired and blessed to have so many wonderful people help me achieve my goal of completing my dissertation and attaining my PhD. Below is a list of the key players in my journey.

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Abstract

Expressive writing is defined as a therapeutic writing technique that individuals can use to engage in the process of expressing one's emotions through writing about a past traumatic experience (Bryan & Lu, 2016; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Although there has been considerable empirical evidence showing that expressive writing can have a strong, positive effect on physical health as well as some evidence that there are benefits for mental health (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Baikie, Geerligs, & Wilhelm, 2012; Hirai, Skidmore, Clum, & Dora, 2012; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), there is a lack of knowledge about the experiences that individuals have when participating in the expressive writing process. Furthermore, the expressive writing literature lacks exploration of the process in a community college setting. The purpose of this study was to examine how students make meaning of their experience with the expressive writing process. Using an exploratory, qualitative approach, seven participants from a community college completed two expressive writing exercises about an obstacle they had faced while attending college. The seven participants were interviewed after the process, and each interview was transcribed and analyzed. Six themes emerged from the analysis of the interview data: "Affirmation of Accomplishments," "Relief and Relaxation," "Awareness of Future," "Writing Concerns," "Organization and Chronological Order of the Writing Process," and "Reflection." Each theme provided multiple perspectives of the experience to give a clearer picture of the mechanisms involved in the process of expressive writing, an in-depth view of the expressive writing process, and a stronger understanding of the meaning behind the experience of expressive writing. The implications for practice include how expressive writing could help community college students learn from stressful events in their academic career, process their thoughts and emotions, reduce anxiety, and gain a new perspective on their goals through the

process of reflection. Finally, recommendations for future research are addressed, such as exploring emotion words, comparing different social, race, and gender characteristics in different community college populations, and exploring how grammar and punctuation skills can affect the expressive writing process.

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: Introduction	1
Statement of the Problem.....	4
Purpose of the Study	5
Research Question	6
Theoretical Framework.....	6
Significance of the Study.....	8
Positionality Statement	9
Delimitations.....	12
Limitations	12
Outline of Study.....	13
CHAPTER 2: Literature Review	14
Overview of Background and Early Research	15
Expressive Writing Paradigm.....	18
Theoretical Framework Behind the Expressive Writing Paradigm.....	19
Disinhibition Theory	20
Cognitive-Processing Theory.....	21
Self-regulation Theory	23
Exposure Theory	24
Effects Associated with Expressive Writing.....	25
Physical Health	26
Mental/Emotional Health.....	27
Effects of Expressive Writing in the College Classroom	29

Possible Limitations using Expressive Writing in the College Classroom.....	33
Conclusion	43
CHAPTER 3: Methodology.....	44
Research Design.....	44
Sample.....	46
Convenience Sampling	47
Participants and Site Selection.....	48
Setting	49
Data Collection	50
Interviews.....	51
Observation/Field Notes	53
Data Analysis	53
Ethical Considerations	54
Trustworthiness.....	55
Conclusion	56
CHAPTER 4: Findings.....	57
Profiles	58
Bob.....	58
Monica	58
Trinity	58
Joe	59
Finegan.....	59
Lisa.....	59

Axel.....	60
Major Themes	60
Theme #1: “Affirmation of Accomplishments”	60
Theme #2: “Relief and Relaxation”	64
Theme #3: “Awareness of the Future”	69
Theme #4: “Writing Concerns”	73
Theme #5: “Organization and Chronological Order of the Writing Process”	78
Theme #6: “Reflection”	82
Summary of Findings.....	87
CHAPTER 5: Discussion and Conclusions	89
Overview of the Study	89
Theme #1: “Affirmation of Accomplishments”	89
Theme #2: “Relief and Relaxation”	93
Theme #3: “Awareness of the Future”	95
Theme #4: “Writing Concerns”	97
Theme #5: “Organization and Chronological Order of the Writing Process”	99
Theme #6: “Reflection”	101
Implications for Practice	103
Recommendations for Future Research	106
REFERENCES	120
APPENDICES	128
Appendix A.....	129
Appendix B	131

Appendix C	132
VITA.....	133

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Writing about personal experiences has often been used in many therapeutic and academic settings to help individuals improve physical and psychological health (Baikie, Geerligs, & Wilhem, 2012). Over the last 30 years, literature on expressive writing has been largely documented as detailing the numerous physiological and physical benefits lasting up to at least 6 months among different populations, such as graduate students, cancer patients, and businessmen coping with job loss (Krypan et al., 2013). Expressive writing is a therapeutic writing technique that individuals use to engage in the deep process of expressing one's emotions through writing about a past traumatic experience (Bryan & Lu, 2016; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986).

Many expressive writing studies have provided evidence of positive effects on physical and emotional health (Baikie et al., 2012; King & Miner, 2000). Some of the positive effects are lower rates of health care use (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), improved immune response (Booth, Petrie, & Pennebaker, 1997), and improved physical conditions, such as a reduction in asthma attacks and rheumatoid arthritis (Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, & Kaell, 1999). Evidence also supports improvement in emotional and psychological health when participating in expressive writing. Some studies support the view that expressive writing can help reduce stress, anxiety, and depression (Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan, Marx, & Epstein, 2005; Sloan, Marx, Epstein, & Lexington, 2007). Additional expressive writing studies have shown other benefits, such as improved test scores (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009) and a decreased viral load in HIV patients (Booth et al., 1997). In Frattaroli's (2006) meta-analysis of expressive writing, results showed that individuals who participated in two, 15-minute expressive writing

sessions in one week showed increased health benefits over the next few months. Also, Frattaroli's (2006) study showed that expressive writing not only benefits physically healthy populations, but it benefits individuals with physical health problems such as breast cancer or HIV (Bryan & Lu, 2016). Often cancer, fibromyalgia, or HIV patients experience improved perceptions of social support, sense of well-being, and cognitive functioning (Bryan & Lu, 2016). However, some studies suggest that expressive writing has a larger effect on physical issues rather than psychological issues (Frattaroli, 2006). Some results are less consistent with individuals who suffer from severe psychological distress (Frattaroli, 2006).

In expressive writing, individuals write about a stressful experience and the emotions they feel about the event (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Sloan & Marx, 2004). The writing is often done over a number of consecutive days about one traumatic event or a number of different events (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Sloan & Marx, 2004). Many studies on the effects of expressive writing have received widespread attention, but the causes and underlying mechanisms are still under debate (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009). Sloan and Marx (2004) discussed three possible models to help explain the potential benefits associated with expressive writing. First, the emotional inhibition theory claims that an individual can release stressful emotions that result in a reduction of stress and improvement in physical health (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Sloan & Marx, 2004). Second, the cognitive adaptive model is a theory suggesting that individuals have stored traumatic memories in a nonverbal, nonlinear fashion, which affects the processing of the traumatic event (Sloan & Marx, 2004). To learn about or understand a traumatic event, expressive writing allows an individual to describe the experience in a basic written format that can be understood (Sloan & Marx, 2004). The third model is the emotional processing/exposure model (Sloan & Marx, 2004). In this model, the individual develops a fear

response to a traumatic event (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009). When memories or cognitions of the traumatic event arise, an individual may have a fear response that was similar to the original event. By using expressive writing, the individual is exposed to the event in a safe place where emotions about the event can be reduced simply by confronting the problem and writing about the circumstances (Baikie et al., 2012). As a result, anxiety is reduced.

Although there are the different hypotheses on how expressive writing functions, one overall assumption is that individuals can construct a narrative in their own words about a certain traumatic event. According to Ramirez-Esparza and Pennebaker (2006), many individuals constantly strive to make sense of certain events in their lives. Expressive writing is a way for them to understand the events by constructing a narrative to express thoughts and ideas (Ramirez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2006). The attempt of creating a narrative and being able to freely express one's ideas and thoughts about a stressful, difficult circumstance is part of the reason for the reduction of negative emotions and the improvement of mental and physical health (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Smyth, 1998). The effort to construct a narrative is more important to improved health than the attempt to create a beginning, middle, and end to the narrative (Ramirez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2006). Stressful events are often difficult to deconstruct and reconstruct for meaning, but expressive writing can encourage cognitive processing that helps an individual gain a new perspective that is consistent with self and worldviews (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Pennebaker, 1989). When an individual makes the attempt to construct a narrative, he or she begins the process of learning self-regulation (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002). Expressive writing helps enhance self-regulation because the individual feels a sense of control over the stressful event (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002). Individuals who use expressive writing to

construct their narrative also feel that they have control over the language of the writing (Ramirez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2006).

Statement of the Problem

Although considerable empirical evidence has shown that expressive writing can have a strong, positive effect on physical health as well as some evidence that there are benefits for mental health (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Baikie et al., 2012; Hirai, Skidmore, Clum, & Dolma, 2012; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986), there is a lack of knowledge of the experiences that individuals have when participating in expressive writing. Furthermore, the expressive writing literature also lacks exploration of the expressive writing process in a community college setting.

Community colleges are also becoming an important option for college students due to rising four-year university costs, and more students are using community colleges as pathway to a four-year university (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Many community college students face numerous academic, social, and economic obstacles that can affect their ability to succeed in their coursework (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Due to these obstacles, many students face circumstances ranging from limited income, domestic problems, health issues, and homelessness (Horton, 2015). Also, many community college students are first-generation students or older adults who have left the workplace to further their skillsets, and often these students have unrealistic academic expectations, low self-efficacy, and inadequate study skills (Horton, 2015). Issues such as lack of support from family, cultural and racial differences, and financial stressors can also adversely affect the mental health of community college students (Horton, 2015). Since research on student pathways and outcomes in a community college setting is limited, positive interventions to improve community college student success are also limited (Goldrick-Rab, 2010). Given the challenges community college students face, expressive writing research could

help improve the student's academic and personal lives. Also, more research on expressive writing in a community college could help determine whether the low-cost writing intervention would improve overall academic success.

This line of inquiry comes after studies suggested that individuals must experience emotions during the expressive writing process to gain beneficial outcomes for improving physical and mental health (Hirai et al., 2012; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan et al., 2005; Sloan et al., 2007). Although individuals must experience emotions to reap the benefits of expressive writing, there is limited research that discusses what the writer may experience during the writing process (Hirai et al., 2012). Also, the literature is limited to focusing only on the effects of self-regulation and well-being rather than documenting any of the experiences that led to the participants' health benefits during the expressive writing process (King, 2001). In previous studies, potential explanations such as confronting inhibited emotions, processing the emotions of an event, or repeating exposure to a cathartic event (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Hudson & Day, 2012) have been used to explain how and why expressive writing works, but these explanations lack an understanding of how individuals may interpret or respond to creating a narrative (Hudson & Day, 2012). Participants' experiences may help give some insight into the application of expressive writing (Baikie et al., 2012; Hirai et al., 2012; Hudson & Day, 2012).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine how students make meaning of their experiences by participating in expressive writing. In this study, the researcher explored the students' experiences through interviews to better understand what obstacles these students face in a community college setting. By gaining a better understanding of the students' experiences

with using expressive writing, this research uncovers some of the strategy involved in how expressive writing works, and it gives an in-depth view of the expressive writing process.

Research Question

The research question explored in the study is: How do students make meaning of their experiences with the expressive writing process? This exploratory qualitative study using an analysis of interviews provides an understanding of the experience of expressive writing. The data from the research also provide multiple perspectives of the experience to give a clearer picture of the mechanisms involved with the process of expressive writing.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework that provided the basis for this study was transformative learning theory (Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 2000). Transformative learning is a process in which adults examine and question previously held assumptions and beliefs (Mezirow, 2000). Since 1978, Jack Mezirow's theory of transformative learning has evolved into a complex description of how adults learn to reason and assess judgements (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009). Initially, Mezirow introduced this concept in a study in 1978 to explain why there was a rising number of women returning to higher education (Mezirow, 1978; Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Santalucia & Johnson, 2010). Mezirow called this process of change reframing in perspective (2000). By examining previously held assumptions and beliefs, adults can modify their future expectations to help them become a better fit within society (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow, 1978, 1991, 2000). Previous studies on expressive writing have shown that there are possible ties to writing and the positive transformative effects on the human body physically and mentally (Hudson & Day, 2012; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011).

Another aspect of the transformative learning theory that ties into the goals of expressive writing is self-reflection and understanding the meaning of an experience (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Within the framework of transformative learning theory, meaning is “constructed through experience and our perceptions of those experiences, and future experiences are seen through the lens of the perspectives developed from past experiences” (Taylor & Cranton, 2012, p. 556). One major component of the learning process is critical self-reflection (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow 1991). When an individual’s assumptions are changed by people, events, or experiences, the individual may examine his or her assumptions through critical self-reflection to determine whether there is validity to the individual’s behaviors and actions (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow 1978, 1991, 2000, 2003; Taylor & Cranton, 2012). In this mode of self-reflection, the process may lead “to a new way of interpreting the world, and transformation has taken place” (Cranton, 1994, p. 730).

The researcher worked with participants to explore the meanings of their experiences with expressive writing. Also, the participants examined and reflected on previous incidents that led to a transformative experience. A constructivist viewpoint was used which is within the framework of the transformative learning theory (Gergen, 1985). In constructivism, individuals create knowledge from their experiences and their ideas, and the realities that are created by the individuals are influenced by one’s background, culture, and worldviews (Glesne, 2011). In the current study, a constructivist viewpoint between the researcher and the community college students is used to explore their experiences with expressive writing.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this study was to expand the understanding of an individual’s experience during the expressive writing process. Furthermore, this study addressed the lack of

available qualitative data in the expressive writing field (Lepore, Revenson, Roberts, Prankoff, & Davey, 2015). Knowledge of the experiences that individuals have after completing the expressive writing process may provide some insight into how expressive writing can be physically and mentally beneficial. There is also no existing qualitative data on community college students' experience with expressive writing. It is important to consider the voices of individuals who have participated in the expressive writing process, and by doing so, this study may help other researchers explore how and why expressive writing can be beneficial.

Also, this study could contribute to understanding how the expressive writing process works from the participant's perspective. For example, support can be found in the participants' experiences while complementing previous quantitative data on the effects of expressive writing. According to Krypan et al.'s (2013) study, further investigation is needed to understand the mechanisms involved in expressive writing because they are unknown at this point. In addition, Stuckey and Nobel (2010) mention that more qualitative studies are needed to understand an individual's perspective and description of expressive writing. According to Pauley, Morman, and Floyd (2011), who conducted a study of expressive writing and testicular cancer patients, future studies should "continue to explore the relationships between positive emotions, increased self-efficacy, and health improvements in the context of expressive writing interventions" (p. 213). Merrell, Hannah, Van Arsdale, Buman, and Rice (2011) suggest that future studies should focus on the context of the prompt and analyze emergent themes in college students' writings to understand the possible transitions and life choices they face. Therefore, a qualitative study investigating emergent themes in the writing may help researchers understand how expressive writing experience can promote positive effects on mental and physical health while helping individuals reflect on and learn from a previous traumatic event.

Nicholls mentions that the lack of first-person accounts of “what the experience of writing feels like” would benefit from further research by specifying and exploring writing experiences (2009, p. 177). Hayes and Hefferon (2015) suggest that it may also be of interest “to seek further evidence for this novel ‘bridge’ effect of moving beyond the page and into constructive action, perhaps by closely analyzing those emotions we found to be most strongly associated with this narrative” (p. 92). Lastly, the significance of this study is also supported by Ames et al.’s (2005) contention that future research on expressive writing should examine the content of expressive writing samples to gain possible insight into the individual’s experiences and any new mechanisms that explain expressive writing’s effects.

Positionality Statement

When using qualitative research, it is important for researchers to reflect on their motives, perspectives, and any previous experiences that might influence their study. According to Malterud, “a researcher's background and position will affect what they choose to investigate, the angle of investigation, the methods judged most adequate for this purpose, the findings considered most appropriate, and the framing and communication of conclusions” (Malterud, 2001, p. 483-484). It is important to understand the position and perspective of the researcher to show the motives, background, and reasons for conducting the study (Malterud, 2001). In the section, I discuss how my previous experiences and interests helped shape and possibly influence this study.

As an English professor at the community college level, I heard stories about personal and academic issues from students every day inside and outside of the classroom. Before I began my tenure at the community college, I was a case worker in social services for almost five years. When I began working at the community college, I had many students from different socio-

economic backgrounds in my course sections, and many of these students came to me asking for advice on issues such as handling work problems, improving financial situations, or solving a family issue. Since I was no longer as case worker, I often referred personal matters to counseling. Sometimes, despite my experience, I sometimes had a hard time understanding their issues. Many of my students were first-generation college students. I did not truly understand some of their struggles because I came from a middle-class area where most of the people were college educated. In my family, both my parents had degrees, and my grandparents had degrees. This made me think about how I could help my students and give them a supportive environment where they could learn to adapt and make tough decisions to help them succeed. I was always looking for new ways to help my students overcome challenges they faced in their classes or in their personal lives.

One of the ways I would try to help my students was through journal writing. I always felt that students never have time to reflect, so I could use class time to help improve their critical thinking and journal writing. I used journal writing in the classroom as a way for students to organize ideas for assignments or to help them with enhancing reflection, facilitating thought, or expressing feelings. When I would read through the journal entries, I noticed that my students were quite honest with issues or problems they were having. When I would ask for feedback on the journaling assignments, many students reported that journaling helped them organize their thoughts, feel less anxious about the material discussed in class, and overall, they thought journal writing gave them time to reflect.

When I first began using journal writing in the classroom, I focused primarily on personal themes that would help students delve into the material being used for classroom discussion. For example, if the discussion was about how to organize an argument paper, I might ask the

students at the start of class to write about an argument they recently were involved in at their workplace or at school. This exercise would open discussion on tactics used to win arguments and how to properly use these tactics.

Journaling exercises opened the door for me to explore other ways of helping my students. I found that writing was therapeutic, and I found that many students enjoyed the journaling activities I presented in class. Although many of my students reported that journaling seemed to be beneficial, I realized that I did not know why or how it worked. I tracked some of my students' grades who journaled on a regular basis. These students had limited absences from class and maintained high marks in the class. Yet, a few students did not journal regularly in the classroom or found the task to be difficult. Also, I realized that many students were facing various obstacles outside the classroom. I concluded that there was a need to apply the techniques learned in the classroom to help them in the outside world.

My interest began in 2013 after attending an adult learning conference, and I listened to a doctoral student discuss her research about women in prison using expressive writing as a tool for therapy and education. I was fascinated by her work, and after speaking with her briefly after the presentation, I decided I wanted to learn more about expressive writing and how it could help my students. As I began to research therapy writing, I discovered James Pennebaker's expressive writing paradigm (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Pennebaker's work showed that expressive writing had many benefits in the classroom such as improved mood, overall health, and improved grades (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Yet, as I continued my research, I realized that most of the research only pertained to the effects of expressive writing. The expressive writing studies were limited in understanding the experience of the individual when journaling or when involved in an expressive writing exercise. I wanted to know what the

experiences were like for students in a community college setting. How did they feel? What were the differences between the different types of students? I realized that the one-size-fits-all philosophy for journaling or expressive writing may not help all students. Also, I did not have a true understanding of how my students felt or what they experienced during any expressive writing exercise. As I explored more on the topic of expressive writing, I found that merely using expressive writing and journaling in the classroom was not enough; I needed to know about my students' experiences with expressive writing to gain a better understanding of the causal mechanisms in expressive writing.

Delimitations

Several boundaries had been established specifically for this study. Interviews began in spring 2018, and the location was situated in a local community college in East Tennessee. The criteria for the participants in the study included:

1. Participants must be enrolled in a 2-year community college program.
2. Participants must be able to read, write, and interpret English.
3. Participants must voluntarily complete two expressive writing sessions.
4. Participants must be 18 years or older and sign an informed consent form.
5. The setting for this study must be in a 2-year community college.
6. Participants must agree to two half-hour writing sessions on two different occasions in the course of one week.

Limitations

The participants are limited to the community college population, and findings may not apply to another college setting. Also, findings may not apply to other community college settings across the country. Another possible limitation is outside variables, such as student

perception and attitude. Validity and reliability also play a part in the expressive writing exercise because some students may have certain expectations or ideas of what should be written or not written due to unknown fears or concerns.

Outline of the Study

Chapter 1 provides an overall introduction and overview of the problem, purpose, and significance of the study. Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature on the effects of expressive writing and addresses the lack of qualitative research on the experiences of expressive writing. Chapter 3 outlines the research methods employed in this qualitative study on expressive writing. Chapter 4 presents findings of the study. Chapter 5 contains a discussion of findings that relate to the research question and theoretical framework. Implications for practice and recommendations for future research are discussed in the conclusion of the study.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

Over the last three decades, several studies have been conducted to assess how the power of writing can help individuals overcome stressful and traumatic experiences (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Written emotional disclosure, otherwise known as expressive writing, is believed to allow people “to free their mind of unwanted thoughts” and “help them to make sense of upsetting events” (Frattaroli, 2006, p. 823). Also, writing about traumatic or stressful events has been found to improve physiological and physical health (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). Since the first empirical testing of college students, a large body of research supports that writing about traumatic events can reduce stress, anxiety, and depression (Guastella & Dadds, 2008; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Sloan & Marx, 2004). Previous research provides evidence that the value of expressive writing is to disclose negative emotions, promote self-regulation, and provide a more positive sense of well-being to individuals suffering from diseases such as depression, cancer, and heart disease (Frattaroli, 2006). Typically, the expressive writing process requires that participants describe their feelings in writing about a traumatic experience for 15 to 20 minutes for 2 to 5 days (Baikie & Wilhem, 2005; Sloan, Fienstein, & Marx, 2009). Although previous studies have addressed the potential benefits of expressive writing, some have suggested that the results may be mixed (King, 2001; Wright & Chung, 2001). Other studies have concluded that the overall significance of the effect was too small, and other studies have shown negative effects on the participants such as re-traumatization and higher levels of short-term anxiety (Bonanno & Kaltman, 2001; Frattaroli, 2006; King, 2001). Despite some of the skepticism from the unsuccessful attempts to replicate previous studies, expressive writing is still known to promote health benefits and may prove helpful to certain populations suffering from

physical and psychological difficulties (King, 2001; Ramirez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2006; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan et al., 2007; Smyth, 1998).

Although most of the studies have indicated that expressive writing and written disclosure are generally beneficial activities, recent researchers have questioned how and why writing about traumatic experiences can have positive effects (Frattaroli, 2006; King, 2001; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001; Smyth, 1998). Therefore, the purpose of this study, as previously stated in Chapter 1, was to examine how students make meaning of their experiences by participating in the expressive writing process. In this study, students' experiences through interviews were explored to better understand what challenges these students face in a community college setting. This study may give some insight into how expressive writing works, and it may give a more in-depth view of the expressive writing process.

This chapter begins with the background and previous research on expressive writing, followed by a discussion of the expressive writing paradigm. After the overview, the theoretical framework behind expressive writing is explained. Also, an overview of research on the effects of expressive writing and the application of expressive writing to the college classroom is presented. Finally, possible limitations of current research and opportunities for further research are discussed.

Overview of Background and Early Research

Expressive writing was originally designed as an intervention to reduce stress and anxiety and to improve physiological and psychological health (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Introduced in 1986, Pennebaker and Beall asked three groups of college students to write for 15 minutes a day for four consecutive days about a particular traumatic event or stressful experience while the fourth group wrote about unrelated, trivial topics. During this study, participants were asked to

fill out a questionnaire before and after each essay (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). They were asked to rate their experiences based on nine symptoms and eight moods (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Also, before and after each essay session, the researchers checked the subjects' heart rate and blood pressure (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986).

The 46 participants were randomly divided into four groups: trauma-fact, trauma-emotion, trauma-combination, and control group (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). The trauma-fact group wrote about the facts of a troubling experience without discussing feelings or emotions (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). The trauma-emotion group wrote only about the feelings surrounding a particular traumatic experience (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Participants in the trauma-combination group wrote about both their emotions and facts of the experience (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Pennebaker's main assumption about expressive writing was that "Constructing stories is a natural human process that helps individuals understand their experiences and themselves" (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) main question was whether constructing stories and writing about trauma would have a significant effect on a person's "physiological and disease rates" (p. 274) and if confronting past traumatic events would produce a meaningful learning experience.

In the initial expressive writing study, Pennebaker and Beall (1986) found that both the trauma-emotion and trauma-combination group had demonstrated improved physiological and cognitive function. Also, the long-term effects of the study showed improved student grade averages, lower stress levels, and positive emotional levels (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). The students also experienced increased health benefits that included fewer visits to the health care center and improved awareness to maintain healthy ratings and exercise patterns (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986).

Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) initial study marked the beginning of further research on the potential benefits and effects of expressive writing. Later quantitative studies replicated the beneficial effects for senior undergraduate and graduate students, as well as a variety of other populations in clinical, education, and corporate settings (Sloan et al., 2009). Most of the studies used a similar expressive writing paradigm that consisted of having participants attend at least two sessions for 15 to 20 minutes about either an upsetting traumatic event or a neutral topic (Frattaroli, 2006). Participants were measured on numerous health and well-being variables over several weeks and sometimes months to assess long-term benefits of expressive writing (Sloan et al., 2009). Across these multiple studies, expressive writing benefits included participants reporting fewer visits to the doctor (King & Miner, 2000), more positive responses to treatment for arthritis (Smyth et al., 1999), fewer self-reported upper respiratory problems (Greenberg, Wortman, & Stone, 1996), better coping skills when dealing with stressful life transitions (Cameron & Nicholls, 1998; Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996), higher levels of immune functioning (Esterling, Antoni, Fletcher, Marguiles, & Schneiderman, 1994), and improvement of mood and lower levels of anxiety (Stanton et al., 2002).

Further expressive writing studies revealed that nonstudent populations could also benefit from written emotional disclosure (Sloan et al., 2009). Some of the benefits included reducing post-traumatic stress disorder in female caregivers (Riddle, Smith, & Jones, 2016), helping repair broken marriages and close relationships (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002), helping unemployed corporate businesspeople find jobs (Spera, Buhrfeind, & Pennebaker, 1994), and lowering levels of stress for severe migraine headache patients (McKenna, 1997).

However, some studies that attempted to demonstrate the beneficial effects of previous expressive writing studies were not as successful. One study conducted on widows showed no

improvement in psychological or physical health benefits (Stroebe, Stroebe, Schut, Zech, & van den Bout, 2002). In a study on the effects of expressive writing and stress, participants reported that the written disclosure did not help stop intrusive or unwanted thoughts from previous traumatic events, and participants did not exhibit higher levels of psychological health or lower levels of stress (Lepore, 1997). In Earnhardt, Martz, Ballard, and Curtin's (2002) study on using expressive writing to help overcome negative body image, participants showed no significant improvement on levels of mood or eating habits. Although some of the research on expressive writing shows only moderate, or even minimal, positive effects, the main strengths of expressive writing are that it is convenient, mobile, adaptable, and simple for the participants (Lepore & Smyth, 2002). Researchers believe that expressive writing is a low-cost form of therapy and has limited social repercussions, which makes this process an attractive option for people (Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Smyth & Catley, 2002). Also, expressive writing can be used in a multitude of settings ranging from academic to corporate areas (Lepore & Smyth, 2002).

Expressive Writing Paradigm

As studies progressed into the 21st century, researchers used the expressive writing paradigm to examine the benefits of memory capacity, athletic performance, test anxiety, and job loss and coping mechanisms (Hudson & Day, 2012; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Toepfer, Cichy, & Peters, 2011; Toepfer & Walker, 2009). Although many of the studies used a variation of the initial writing prompt, the following is used as the standard:

For the next 3 days, I would like for you to write about your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie

this trauma to your childhood or to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends, or relatives. You may also link this event to your past, your present, or your future, or to who you have been, who you would like to be, or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or about different topics each day. Not everyone has had a single trauma but all of us have had major conflicts or stressors—and you can write about these as well. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don't worry about spelling, sentence structure, or grammar. The only rule is that once you begin writing, continue to do so until your time is up. (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011, p. 419)

The main premise behind the expressive writing paradigm is that individuals who can write about emotional and traumatic events can improve their “social, psychological, behavioral, and biological functioning” (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011, p. 418). As studies continued over the years, the writing topic branched out from general emotional trauma experiences to topics such as coping with job loss, dealing with academic pressure, or going to college as an international student (Frattaroli, 2006; Krypan et al., 2013; Sloan et al., 2009). Also, different types of expressive writing, such as reflective journal writing, expressive letter writing, and diary writing, have been used in different studies (Davidson & Birmingham, 2001; Frattaroli, 2006; Hubbs & Brand, 2005).

Theoretical Framework behind the Expressive Writing Paradigm

Although past research has shown that the effects of expressive writing are typically positive, the theory behind the expressive writing paradigm has often been disputed (Frattaroli, 2006; Sloan et al., 2009; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan et al., 2007). Researchers today still question the mechanisms behind the effects of expressive writing. Although how expressive writing works is uncertain to some extent, four major theoretical perspectives have been used to explain the process: 1) disinhibition theory; 2) cognitive processing theory; 3) self-regulation; and 4) exposure theory.

Disinhibition Theory

In early research on written emotional disclosure and expressive writing, conclusions were borne out of Freud's beliefs that the benefits of expressing inhibited thoughts from a traumatic or stressful experience would improve physical and physiological outcomes (Frattaroli, 2006). When traumatic events occur and the emotions related to the events are suppressed, individuals are subject to possible intrusive, harmful thoughts that were thought by researchers to increase stress, raise blood pressure, lower immune functioning, and increase fatigue (Stroebe, et al., 2002; Wegner, 1990). Further research by Lepore and Smyth (2002) showed that withholding strong emotions, behaviors, or feelings could result in low physiological and psychological functioning. The possible reason for withholding emotions from a traumatic event could be caused by an individual's development and the social culture in which the individual was either taught to suppress emotion or to never discuss the event (Sloan & Marx, 2004). Furthermore, individuals must confront not only the traumatic event, but must deal with negative effects that may arise when established self-views and worldviews are challenged as a person begins to process the stressful event (Lepore, 1997). By using expressive writing to disclose inhibited

emotions, individuals can release emotional tension, which reduces the amount of intrusive, unwanted thoughts that can lead to lower levels of physiological and physical functioning (Lepore, 1997).

Although many studies showed that inhibition could be a plausible theory, further research suggests otherwise. An early study by Francis and Pennebaker (1992) revealed that participants who refrained from previous disclosure did not benefit to the extent that participants who had previously disclosed their emotions about a traumatic event did. Also, the study showed mixed results regarding the need for the writing topic to be disclosed previously. According to the emotional inhibition theory, many researchers believed that inhibition was the key for success, and the expressive writing paradigm would more likely benefit participants who had not disclosed information previously (Frattaroli, 2006). Greenberg and Stone (1992) tested this issue and found no differences in the benefits between participants who had previously disclosed trauma in writing compared to participants who wrote about undisclosed previous trauma. Greenberg et al. (1996) later found that participants who wrote about imaginary trauma compared to participants who wrote about personal trauma they had experienced still demonstrated benefits such as reduced visits to the doctor for illness. With these findings, the disinhibition theory results are mixed. Although these studies may contribute to the effectiveness of expressive writing, this theory alone cannot fully explain how and why expressive writing can be effective for certain populations.

Cognitive-Processing Theory

Cognitive-processing is a way to construct meaning from traumatic events and organize thoughts, feelings, and emotions into a narrative form (Klein & Boals, 2001). Stressful events are often difficult to deconstruct and put back together to create meaning, but research suggests that

expressive writing could help facilitate cognitive processing to help an individual gain a new perspective that is consistent with self and worldviews (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Pennebaker, 1989). By gaining a more positive perspective, Sloan and Marx (2004) believed that expressive writing provides structure, organization, unity, and meaning to past traumatic or stressful experiences. Also, Krantz and Pennebaker (2007) believed that emotions were important to any traumatic experience, but they concluded that cognitive work was needed to put the experience into words and language that could be understood. By organizing emotions into narrative form, participants can understand their issues and cope with past traumatic events (Frattaroli, 2006) more effectively.

In Pennebaker et al.'s (1990) study, participants did not report that releasing previous thoughts of traumatic events was helpful; instead, they reported that the expressive writing process gave them more insight into their traumatic event. Using his own previous studies with expressive writing, Pennebaker (1993) found that participants who benefited the most from experimental disclosure used more causal words like "because" or "effect," and participants also used more insight words such as "know" or "consider." Pennebaker, Mayne, and Francis (1997) found that a combination of negative words and cognitive processing was necessary to gain the physical and physiological benefits that occurred with expressive writing in previous studies. Also, for the expressive writing process to be beneficial, participants needed to write in a narrative form to fully develop their thoughts and to organize the event in a coherent manner to make sense of the issue (Sloan & Marx, 2004). The attempt to create a narrative and freely express one's ideas and thoughts on a stressful or difficult circumstance is part of the reason for the reduction of negative emotion and the increase in positive mental and physical health (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Smyth, 1998).

In addition, some evidence in Klein and Boals' (2001) study shows that expressive writing may free up working memory and reduce unwanted traumatic thoughts. Klein and Boals (2001) reported that a lack of working memory could result in issues with problem-solving, and intrusive thoughts from previous traumatic events could account for a lack of working memory space. Despite the evidence produced from the studies, the cognitive-processing theory is still difficult to evaluate empirically (Sloan & Marx, 2004). Per Sloan and Marx (2004), the supporting evidence for the cognitive-processing theory is mostly correlational, and evidence suggests that there may be other mechanisms of change. For example, Smyth, True, and Souto (2001) found that writing an organized narrative is beneficial to understanding a traumatic event, but the study also showed that the narrative writing group reported more post-traumatic avoidance issues compared to the control group and the writing group who used lists and bulleting rather than a narrative writing style. Other beneficial effects may be the result of other causal mechanisms such as exposure or emotional control (Frattaroli, 2006). Although these suggestions explain part of the theory behind the paradigm, relying only on habit or cognitive processing as a basis to explain the effects of expressive writing would not be effective because benefits from the expressive writing paradigm require not only cognitive change but emotional change, as well (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011).

Self-Regulation Theory

When writing about positive outcomes related to stressful or traumatic events, the expressive form may help an individual improve their ability to regulate emotion and develop positive coping skills (Greenberg et al., 1996; King, 2001; King & Miner, 2000). Lepore, Greenberg, Bruno, and Smyth (2002) suggested that expressive writing could help individuals control their emotions while disclosing their traumatic experience. The researchers thought that

written disclosure would allow individuals to observe their disclosure and control their emotions (Frattaroli, 2006). King (2001) found that expressive writing could help individuals self-regulate by exploring the causes of their issues and getting feedback to set future goals. In a previous study, Cameron and Nicholls (1998) developed a self-regulation expressive writing exercise in which students wrote about a stressful experience and then developed ways to fix problems associated with the event. King (2001) hypothesized that disclosure involved in expressive writing would help individuals gain a sense of control over the traumatic event. Overall, individuals can use expressive writing to become self-regulated by exploring emotions related to the traumatic event, developing goals, and using feedback from the expressive writing experience to pursue one's goals (Frattaroli, 2006).

Exposure Theory

According to the exposure theory, individuals are engaged in repeated contact with emotions and thoughts when participating in several sessions of therapy, and through this repeated exposure, previous intrusive thoughts become extinct (Sloan & Marx, 2004). Exposure was proposed by Bootzin (1997) as a mechanism of expressive writing because the process of disclosure was similar to exposure therapies used with individuals who suffered from anxiety, depression, or post-traumatic stress disorder. Per Sloan and Marx (2004), repeated exposure to the event through expressive writing decreased negative emotions across writing sessions; this effect was likely caused by the individuals confronting the issue and minimizing the ability to avoid previous thoughts. Through prolonged exposure to negative thoughts surrounding a traumatic event, the exposure theory suggests that the repetition of these thoughts would eventually help them dissipate (Frattaroli, 2006).

In support of this theory, Sloan et al.'s (2005) study revealed that individuals who wrote about the same event in numerous writing sessions experienced greater mental health benefits than individuals who wrote about different events at different writing sessions. Lepore (1997) found that expressive writing helped reduce the negative effects of the stress and concern with students taking exams, but they still reported having negative thoughts about taking the exams. Although the negative effects were reduced, the thoughts and concerns were not reduced, and, per the exposure theory, a reduction in the amount of harmful thoughts and feelings should have occurred (Lepore, 1997). Other research showed mixed results such as De Moor et al.'s (2002) study, which revealed no reduction in harmful thoughts and feelings during a series of expressive writing sessions.

Although these theories offer some explanation as to how expressive writing functions, there is still no established or agreed upon theory to explain the phenomenon. Many variables that cannot be controlled play a part in each process, and many researchers have concluded that a combination of certain aspects of each theory would explain why expressive writing has benefits (Frattaroli, 2006; King, 2001; Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Researchers such as Pennebaker (1997), Sloan and Marx (2004), and King (2001) believe that different combinations of psychological, physical, environmental, or social variables could play a part in the benefits associated with expressive writing. Previous studies have shown that a combination of facts and emotions contribute to the therapeutic process of expressive writing, but it is still unclear how these factors affect the process (Hirai et al., 2012).

Effects Associated with Expressive Writing

Although there is no clear-cut theory that encompasses the entire phenomenon behind the mechanisms of expressive writing, researchers have tested various aspects of physical, mental,

and social outcomes with college, clinical, and workplace settings (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005).

This section provides an overview and reviews findings on physical and emotional outcomes as well as mental health issues.

Physical Health

In many expressive writing studies, researchers have reported positive outcomes related to physical health and well-being. In Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) study, psychology students were initially found to have higher blood pressure and a negative frame of mind, but 6 months later students reported reduced visits to the health center for illness. Further research attempted to replicate the results, and studies progressed to clinical settings (Frattaroli, 2006). A study conducted with participants suffering from asthma and rheumatoid arthritis demonstrated improvements within 2 weeks in lung function and immune function, and within 4 months, participants showed a reduction in arthritic symptoms (Smyth et al., 1999). In Pauley et al.'s (2011) research on health and testicular cancer survivors, participants were identified as having improved overall health and better sexual health and functioning. Other studies revealed that writing about negative experiences improved blood pressure and upper respiratory functioning (Davidson et al., 2002; Greenberg et al., 1996). Expressive writing studies with participants who were diagnosed with breast cancer in various stages of treatment reported fewer physical ailments, a decrease in the use of medical care, and overall improved health (Craft, Davis, & Paulson, 2013; Rosenberg et al., 2002; Stanton et al., 2002). Other studies have also found improvements in immune functioning with common illnesses (Booth et al., 1997), quicker healing effects on wounds (Weinman, Ebrecht, Scott, Walburn, & Dyson, 2008), and improved liver functioning and improvement of T-Lymphocytes (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988).

Although many studies produced positive outcomes with various cancer populations, some studies did not replicate the same results. Rivkin, Gustafson, Weingarten, and Chin's (2006) study showed that only some participants suffering from AIDS benefitted from expressive writing; participants who used more insight or causal words reported improvements in physical and mental health. In a recent study, Lepore et al. (2015) found that expressive writing used as a standalone therapeutic intervention with colorectal cancer did not improve overall health or mental health significantly as past studies on expressive writing with cancer patients have shown. Part of the difference in Lepore and his colleagues' (2015) study than previous studies may have been the method used. The focus of the study was on patients who had colorectal cancer, whereas previous studies used patients with different types of cancer (Lepore et al., 2015). Another possibility for the limited success is that different cancer subgroups may have different constraints when writing about their experience; for many patients suffering from cancer, the experience can be different between a patient with prostate cancer compared to a patient suffering from lung cancer (Lepore et al., 2015).

Mental/Emotional Health

Although the physical benefits outweigh the other outcomes, many expressive writing studies have reported possible psychological benefits. Lepore (1997) found that expressive writing can reduce psychological distress with upcoming events such as future exams and test situations. Although Lepore (1997) realized that expressive writing did not reduce intrusive thoughts, the results showed that expressing stressful thoughts could help individuals gain insight into the cause of the stressors. Expressive writing has also been shown to reduce symptoms of depression in people who are diagnosed with major depressive disorder (Krypan et al., 2013). Another benefit is using expressive writing to supplement psychotherapy sessions (Cummings,

Hayes, Saint, Park & Brown, 2014). Researchers found that expressive writing can be used to help promote and track changes in therapeutic growth with clients suffering from depression, and by doing so, it helped promote positive therapeutic changes (Cummings et al., 2014). Results of Cummings et al.'s (2014) study showed that clients felt more social support and increased emotional awareness, while clinicians felt expressive writing was a major component of tracking a client's symptoms and triggers for hopelessness, depression, and suicidal ideations (Cummings et al., 2014). Also, expressive writing can help reduce anxiety issues surrounding eating disorders (Kupeli et al., 2018). By identifying stressors, such as long work hours or family issues, through expressive writing participants were able to curb their negative emotions and regulate their diets (Kupeli et al, 2018).

Expressive writing can also have positive effects when used to help treat individuals suffering from anxiety or mood disorders. Previous studies also showed a reduction in anxiety symptoms for first-year incoming freshman college students (Pennebaker et al., 1990). A recent expressive writing study indicated that individuals who suffered from anxiety and other mood disorders showed a significant reduction in stress and felt better physically and physiologically (Baikie et al., 2012). In a study conducted on women who had been traumatized by rape, symptoms of anxiety were shown to be significantly reduced through the disclosure of emotions by using expressive writing as a supplement to therapeutic treatment (Brown & Heimberg, 2001). In Hudson and Day's (2012) study on athletes' stressors, participants reported that confronting their fears on athletic performance helped reduce their anxiety symptoms.

Although these studies found positive and significant results, other research has shown mixed results due to different variables, effect sizes, and measures used to test the outcomes on mental and emotional health (Frattaroli, 2006; Hemenover, 2003). Expressive writing may help

individuals express emotions that previously could not be vocalized, but studies have shown that expressive writing does not always result in individuals gaining insight into stressors from a traumatic event (Nicholls, 2009). In Gidron et al.'s (2002) study, men experiencing post-traumatic stress symptoms did not improve after disclosure during a series of expressive writing sessions and illness-related health center visits. Kovac and Range's (2002) study showed that undergraduates suffering from suicidal thoughts showed no change in improved health or reduction of intrusive thoughts. However, students did report fewer negative thoughts (Kovac & Range, 2002). Also, in Sloan and Marx's (2004) study, undergraduate students experienced significantly reduced depressive symptoms. In another expressive writing study, postpartum women who completed expressive writing exercises reported improved health, but most participants did not have enough time to write due to taking care of a child for long hours, which made expressive writing less effective as a form of therapy for depression and anxiety (Crawley et al., 2018). Overall, expressive writing may not be as effective with chronically ill populations, but it has had positive benefits for individuals who experienced acute stress or depressive symptoms.

Effects of Expressive Writing in the College Classroom

Most of the research over the last 20 to 30 years on expressive and reflective writing offers evidence that students, regardless of their domains of study on a college or university level, show improvements in their learning, become better at self-assessment, and develop critical thinking skills through reflective journal-keeping (Lew & Schmidt, 2011). Expressive writing gives students an outlet for processing their thoughts, which can be used as a coping strategy to overcome difficult situations (Ramirez-Esparza & Pennebaker, 2006).

Pennebaker and Beall's (1986) initial study on expressive writing revealed that writing for as little as 15 minutes for three consecutive days helped improve the health and mood of their students (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). The long-term effects of the study showed improved student grade averages, lower stress levels, and positive emotional levels (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Per Pennebaker and Seagal's (1999) study on the health benefits of a narrative, expressive writing produces "positive effects on blood markers of immune function," while other studies show that writing is associated with "lower pain and medication use" (p. 1245). For example, students who used expressive writing strategies before taking the Graduate Record Examination had lower levels of anxiety and depression as compared with others who did not participate in any expressive writing exercises (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

Toepfer and Walker (2009) determined that students who completed one session of expressive writing felt positive effects for up to 4 weeks. For the study, student participants were drawn from six classes across three campuses in a Midwestern university system (Toepfer & Walker, 2009). Three of the classes were selected for the experimental writing group, and the three other classes were assigned to the control group (Toepfer & Walker, 2009). The participants in the experimental group typed or hand wrote three expressive letters of gratitude over an 8-week period (Toepfer & Walker, 2009). The students were instructed to refrain from writing trivial, basic letters and instead focus on reflective, expressive, meaningful content (Toepfer & Walker, 2009).

Toepfer and Walker (2009) examined the students' writings over the 8-week period to assess the changes in life satisfaction, happiness, and gratitude as compared to the students' initial questionnaire results. Like previous studies (Lyubomirsky, Boehm, & Sheldon, 2011; Watkins, Woodward, Stone, & Kolts, 2003), Toepfer and Walker (2009) found that expressive

letters of gratitude could positively impact the happiness and well-being of college students. Toepfer and Walker (2009) also theorized from the results of the study showing that expressive writing focused on positive emotion may be a solid intervention to help college students who may suffer from depression improve their well-being and life satisfaction (Toepfer & Walker, 2009).

Further studies on expressive writing interventions by Mosher and Danoff-Burg (2006) support that undergraduates who participated in expressive writing for a week showed great improvement in psychological health in the following 3 months compared to the control group who did not write about any traumatic or stressful events. Mosher and Danoff-Burg's (2006) study was the first to examine the benefits of expressive letter writing rather than the traditional Pennebaker paradigm. In the study, Mosher and Danoff-Burg (2006) examined the potential effects of writing letters regarding positive and negative relationship experiences. Participants in the experimental group wrote the letter to a significant other such as a wife, husband, girlfriend, boyfriend, or relative (Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2006). Participants in the control group wrote a letter to a school official about a trivial topic. Mosher and Danoff-Burg (2006) hypothesized that the experimental group would experience better sleep, fewer days of illness, and healthier lives than the control group. A total of 120 college students were recruited ranging in age from 17-34, and they had to complete a health care questionnaire. Only 96 returned for the final writing evaluation (Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2006).

During the writing sessions, students randomly received instructions focused on either a positive, negative, or control letter writing (Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2006). Participants in the experimental group were asked to express their deepest feelings about either a negative or positive experience for 25 minutes (Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2006). Before and after the writing

sessions, the students were instructed to fill out a measure of positive and negative effect evaluation (Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2006). In addition, the positive letter writing group filled out a measure of frequency evaluations, whereas the negative evaluation group filled out measures of avoidance, forgiveness, and revenge evaluations (Mosher & Danoff-Burg, 2006).

Mosher and Danoff-Burg (2006) indicated in their results that the positive and negative letter groups who wrote about relational experiences were more likely to report better sleep and better health compared to the control group. Results showed that sleep quality for the experimental group helped students improve their physical health, resulting in fewer doctor visits for illness (Danoff-Burg, Agee, Romanoff, Kremer, Strosberg, 2006; Danoff-Burg, Mosher, Seawell, & Agee, 2010). Also, results suggested that exploring relationships in a negative mood compared to a positive mood have the same positive effect on overall physical health (Danoff-Burg et al., 2006; Danoff-Burg et al., 2010).

A recent expressive writing study by Frattaroli, Thomas, and Lyumbomirsky (2011) examined the effects of expressive writing on graduate school entrance exams. The researchers theorized from their previous studies that expressive writing interventions help people free their minds of "unwanted thoughts, make sense of upsetting events, better regulate their emotions, habituate to negative emotions, and improve their connections to their social world" (Frattaroli, Thomas, & Lyubomirsky, 2011, p. 691). In their study, Frattaroli et al. (2011) found that expressive writing significantly reduced the symptoms of depression in the students shortly before the graduate exam, and the study confirmed that writing about deep feelings and emotions improved the performance on the students' graduate school entrance exams. Overall, the research showed that a simple, inexpensive expressive writing intervention helped students perform much higher on their graduate exams.

Possible Limitations with the Expressive Writing Process

Although expressive writing strategies could be used as a positive intervention to help students succeed in the college classroom, there are some possible issues and risks involved with the implementation due to possible past academic or personal issues in a college student's life. One possible issue is that some students may not be comfortable writing about their thoughts because they fear they will be ridiculed by the instructor or classmates (if the expressive writing is shared in the classroom) (Lew & Schmidt, 2011). Students may also be intimidated by the personal writing process, and they may not feel safe writing about personal trauma or conflict (Lew & Schmidt, 2011). In Lew and Schmidt's (2011) study, 690 first-year applied science students wrote a reflective journal at the start and end of a 4-month semester. Lew and Schmidt (2011) found through their literature review process that the impact of reflective journal writing could help students develop learning strategies, articulate connections between new material and their own ideas, and strengthen problem-solving abilities. Although the literature review showed reflective journal writing could improve learning and academic performance, the results of their study revealed that the correlation between self-reflective journal writing and improvement in academic performance was not statistically significant (Lew & Schmidt, 2011). Lew and Schmidt (2011) concluded that students may have been intimidated by the journaling process because they had no previous experience in self-reflection compared to graduate students who had been exposed to or used reflective writing practices (Lew & Schmidt, 2011). Despite the weak correlation numbers, Lew and Schmidt did conclude that reflective journal writing can be effective if the students receive feedback to help them become more aware of the learning process (Lew & Schmidt, 2011).

In the college classroom setting, some students found that the analysis and process of dissecting feelings associated with a challenging event was disheartening, which may lead them to avoid writing about their experiences (Worthen & Isakson, 2007). In their empirical overview of gratitude and reflective journaling, Worthen and Isakson (2007) found that students who were overwhelmed by stressful circumstances were more likely to show less empathy and be self-absorbed, which contributed to their difficulty in journaling their experiences. Furthermore, they found that students may not understand the purpose of the expressive writing intervention and view the writing as “busy” work due to the instructor failing to direct the reflective process in such a way that students fail to recognize and appreciate their progress in gratitude (Worthen & Isakson, 2007).

In an adult developmental college course setting, students may find it difficult and uncomfortable to participate in an expressive writing exercise due to having lower reading and writing skills compared to their peers (Kerka, 1996). Kerka concluded in her empirical review that many students who had difficulty understanding the specific steps in an expressive writing activity merely listed descriptive items and gave little care to writing about traumatic or stressful events as a narrative (1996). Kerka also concluded that due to past trauma, students may not feel entirely safe writing about personal topics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or family experiences that reveal personal traits that could be viewed in a derogatory way (1996).

Dyment and O’Connell (2011) found that some students attempted to reflect upon an experience but were unable to connect it to other learning opportunities when participating in expressive writing. Dyment and O’Connell (2011) conducted a meta-analysis of 11 research studies on undergraduate students and reflective writing. The overall sample of undergraduate students from the 11 studies were studying various disciplines, from teacher education to studio

design, and most of the studies included more women than men. Nine of the 11 studies showed only low-to-moderate levels of reflection, while two of the 11 showed high reflection. The two studies that showed high levels of reflection consisted of students in a teaching or nursing program. Although the review of 11 studies showed little consistency on the assessment of reflective writing in the classroom, Dymont and O'Connell (2011) concluded that students might value reflective writing if a consistent approach to assessment and feedback was used so that they may be more open-ended and engage in the process of critical thinking. Overall, the researchers found that students in some of the studies may not have connected their reflective journals to learning material because they did not understand the expectations of the reflective writing process. Dymont and O'Connell (2011) also hypothesized that teaching and nursing programs may have introduced the expectations and understanding of the reflective writing process early in the students' academic studies, which may have contributed to the higher quality of reflective writing.

Expressive writing can be used to reflect on positive experiences, but writing about positive moments in a participant's life can lead to negative effects. In their review of past expressive writing and journaling studies, Lyubomirsky, Sousa, and Dickerhoof (2006) found that writing about positive emotions can trigger a rehearsal of traumatic events, which can lead to a more negative effect on well-being rather than a positive result. Using statistical analysis, three studies were conducted to determine which process was most beneficial to reflecting on a traumatic experience. In the first study, a total of 96 students wrote, discussed their experiences via audio recording, or thought privately about their happiest or worst experiences for 3 consecutive days for at least 15 minutes in each session. In Study 2, 112 undergraduate students from the psychology program at the University of California-Riverside were asked to write,

record, or think for 3 consecutive days in 15-minute sessions about the best or happiest days of their lives, and then were asked to use a 10-point scale to rate their happiness (1 = not happy, 10 = extremely happy) (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). A post hoc analysis was used in Study 1 and Study 2 to find any significant group differences among the writing, audio recording, and thinking groups. They found no significant differences, and the results of Study 1 and Study 2 showed writing about negative experiences increased health benefits, improved social functioning, and improved mental health, which was consistent with previous expressive writing studies by James Pennebaker (1989, 1993).

Study 3 examined the possible mechanisms associated with the positive outcomes, and 112 undergraduate students were assigned either to think about their happiest days, whereas the other half were instructed to write about their happiest experience. Although the findings for Study 1 and 2 showed positive outcomes, the results in Study 3 based on participants who wrote about the happiest days of their lives suggested that the analytic nature of writing can be detrimental even when the participant writes about a positive or neutral experience. For the other half of the participants, only thinking rather than writing about a positive or happy moment produced similar results as Study 1. Although the group in Study 3 experienced some negative outcomes, results showed that expressive writing can be beneficial when applied to participants who have experienced traumatic or stressful events. Previous research shows that participants may experience some negative effects when replaying a traumatic event during the writing sessions, but many studies present a consistent pattern of positive outcomes such as in Study 1 and Study 2 (Baikie, 2008; Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Sloan & Marx, 2004).

Previous learning experiences and cultural background may play a role in diminishing the effectiveness of expressive writing (Meyer & Munson, 2005). Another problem in a diverse classroom setting is that students from different social and economic backgrounds may not have trust in and rapport with their instructor (Kerka, 1996). Without a relationship of trust, the individual may not be emotionally ready to reveal inner thoughts from one's self (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Students who come from cultural settings with limited freedoms may fear such a free, personal style of writing because they may have been previously targeted for expressing their emotions in a place where such freedoms were not permitted (Rodriguez, Neighbors, Young, Tou, & Lu, 2015). Rodriguez et al.'s (2015) research explored the issues of cultural differences and shame in an expressive writing alcohol intervention. Asian and Caucasian undergraduates who drank at least one alcoholic beverage in 1 month completed measures on demographics, alcohol consumption, and the 33-item Marlowe-Crowne Social Desirability Questionnaire (Rodriguez et al., 2015). The overall percentage of Asians totaled 33.2%, and the Caucasian group totaled 66.8%; the percentage of males in the Asian group was 69%, but the Caucasian group consisted of more women at 77% (Rodriguez et al., 2015). The students were assigned either to a positive alcohol writing condition, negative alcohol writing condition, or a control writing condition. Thus, heavy-drinking Asians who participated in the study reported a higher level of shame than the heavy-drinking Caucasians, light-drinking Caucasians, and light-drinking Asians. The heavy-drinking Asians were less likely in both the positive and negative writing conditions to reveal their true feelings, and in the post measure, self-conscious affect survey, the heavier drinking Asians were less likely to discuss their issues with alcohol dependence and deny the need for treatment compared to the heavy-drinking Caucasians (Rodriguez et al., 2015).

In addition to different cultures and backgrounds, students may also differ in personality variables and well-being (Sloan & Marx, 2004). In many of the previous expressive writing studies, typically participants had experienced a traumatic event or had been dealing with psychological or health issues (Frattaroli, 2006; Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Participants vary in levels of stress, anxiety, and other emotional and health issues that can affect an expressive writing intervention or study (Baikie, 2008; Hemenover, 2003). Some participants may not reveal details in the written disclosure due to concerns that the disclosure will affect and possibly change current personal viewpoints and expectations of their own personal lives and environment, resulting in further trauma (Baikie, 2008). Baikie (2008) examined the effects of alexithymia, splitting, and repressive coping style as moderators with first-year and third-year undergraduate students who participated in two sessions of expressive writing within a 4-week period. She found that participants who were alexithymic or exhibited splitting defense mechanisms, which is often a characteristic of borderline, narcissistic personality disorders, reported fewer health illness visits and had positive physical health outcomes. For the repressive style coping group, participants struggled to reveal details of trauma and had difficulty processing emotional material. Baikie (2008) posited that the repressive style coping group may need more sessions and more therapeutic help to trust the process. Furthermore, the expressive writing style may not be helpful for this group, particularly if the trauma is recent or the participants had been in therapy previously that may have had a negative effect.

By writing about past traumatic experiences, students are forced to confront and be exposed to unwanted thoughts and memories that can negate any benefit of the expressive writing exercise (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Additionally, some students may feel that they

already overcame prior traumatic experiences and have moved on in their lives (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Therefore, expressive writing may not be successful for students who cope with stressors in a repressive manner; multiple factors such as personality, trauma history, or social conditions can be issues when participants process emotional material. Although these factors need to be considered, expressive writing produced positive results for the alexithymia group and the splitting defense mechanism group. Personality measures should be considered when using expressive writing as a therapeutic tool for some at-risk populations, but it still proves to be effective for many college students in processing emotional feelings (Baikie, 2008).

Timing can also be a barrier to the effectiveness of expressive writing. Expressive writing may not be helpful to a student who recently had an emotional, traumatic experience (Pennebaker, 1997). The expressive writing exercise may bring back unwanted thoughts that may be too complex to process when a student is in a fragile state of mind, and these thoughts may cause harmful effects on the student's mental and physical health (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Students may also focus on the same story in a ruminative way during the expressive writing period and may not find insight or improvements in their situations (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Depending on their current mood, students may not be compelled to fully participate in written disclosure of their feelings (Lepore, 1997; Lepore & Greenberg, 2002). Mood can be affected by previous stressors immediately before the session, and the stressors could be a distraction to the process (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003). In Lumley and Provenzano's (2003) study, participants were generally at-risk for elevated physical problems. The participants experienced higher levels of stress and negative mood during the 4-day expressive writing study, and some students experienced problems discussing stressors or trauma. The study focused on the effects of expressive writing on college students with physical

obstacles. Lumley and Provenzano (2003) hypothesized in their results that discussing one stressor can lead to the activation of other stressful memories, and the overlap of stressors can lead to problems with processing the experience.

Although many of the participants in Lumley and Provenzano's (2003) study experienced physical issues that may have increased stress and negative mood, the overall results were positive. The participants reported higher levels of stress management, and the written disclosure lead to improved academic functioning and improved physical health. Although timing may be a contributing factor to negative results in an expressive writing intervention, the literature also indicates that the process of mediating and discovering interpersonal conflicts varies in individuals, and despite the initial negative response to the intervention, participants can experience the benefits in future expressive writing sessions (Klein & Boals, 2001; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Sloan & Marx, 2004).

Conclusion

Overall, the literature suggests that expressive writing can be an effective tool to improve an individual's well-being and physical health (King, 2001; Pennebaker, 2006; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Sloan et al., 2007; Smyth, 1998). Since the first study in 1986 conducted by Pennebaker and Beall, expressive writing studies have shown that writing about emotional topics can improve mental and physical health, while later studies have shown improvement in academic performance, learning skills, and critical thinking (Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001; Pennebaker, Chung). Expressive writing is an inexpensive option to help students reduce anxiety, improve memory, and reduce depression (Frattaroli et al., 2011). Further studies have shown that one expressive writing session can improve an individual's health for up to 4 weeks (Toepfer &

Walker, 2009). Through expressive writing, individuals can look at past traumatic events from a different perspective to help create strategies to solve future issues (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011).

Although expressive writing can benefit individuals in a clinical or academic setting, there is limited knowledge about the cause or theory of expressive writing because it is difficult to pinpoint exactly one explanation (Frattaroli, 2006; King, 2001; Lepore & Smyth, 2002; Ramirez-Esparza & Pennebaker; Sloan & Marx, 2004). Expressive writing can be a powerful tool to help individuals with processing past traumatic events, but the construction of a personal narrative can seem intrusive and unwanted depending on the individual's past social experiences (McAdams, 2001). The act of expressive writing requires the writer to try to organize and articulate certain emotions, which can be difficult if a person has recently experienced a traumatic experience (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011).

Many studies clearly support the benefits of expressive writing, but research needs to continue. There is still little evidence to support why expressive writing and written disclosure have proven to be effective, and more than one particular mechanism may account for positive outcomes (Frattaroli, 2006; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Smyth et al., 2001). Many studies had small effect sizes, but some researchers suggest that expressive writing alone cannot replace other therapeutic interventions in clinical settings despite such positive effects (Baikie & Wilhem, 2005). Because many studies are limited due to sample size, the criteria used to gauge the effectiveness of expressive writing are also limited because the information does not rate the students according to ability over a long period of time (Frattaroli, 2006). Although some studies showed a larger sample size, many had students perform the expressive writing exercise once or twice instead of following up in future months (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Yet, many of these studies provide evidence that expressive writing had benefits such as academic improvement,

higher metacognition rates, and improved critical thinking skills even after one session. However, the methodology and causes behind these effects are still unclear (Lyubomirsky, Frattaroli, & Thomas, 2011; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Pennebaker & Graybeal, 2001). Further studies on the moderators and conditions are needed to find specific reasons why expressive writing produces mental and physical health benefits (Frattaroli, 2006).

Also, drawing from a variety of sources over the span of 30 years, few qualitative studies in the field of expressive writing exist. Although there are numerous beneficial outcomes associated with expressive writing, no single theory has been held as the sole reason why expressive writing is effective (Hayes & Heffernon, 2015; King, 2001; Pennebaker, 2004). For example, Nicholls (2009) suggests there is a need for more qualitative research on expressive writing because there are limited first-person accounts on the experience of expressive writing. There is also limited qualitative research on expressive writing with community college students, and research only briefly mentions community college students when examining participant populations such as college-age teens. Although expressive writing may not be beneficial to everyone and may not be the cure to help improve physical, emotional, mental, and social health, a qualitative approach could help build more theoretical support for how, why, what, and when expressive writing can be beneficial to participants (Hayes & Heffernon, 2015; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2009). Expressive writing can be an effective tool to promote many health benefits, but more research is needed to find what makes expressive writing effective.

Therefore, more research is needed to gain an understanding of the experience of individuals who have participated in expressive writing studies in a community college setting. By understanding the experience of individuals who participate in expressive writing studies, the research could be used to understand the impact of why expressive writing is an effective tool for

promoting improved mental, emotional, and physical health. The chapters that follow examine how students make meaning of their experience with the expressive writing process.

CHAPTER 3

Method

The main purpose of this study was to examine how students make meaning of their experiences with the expressive writing process. For this study, the researcher was looking for how the students described their thoughts on the writing process, how the process made them feel about discussing the obstacle, and how this form of reflection affected their viewpoints on the expressive writing process and the obstacle itself. In this study, the students' experiences through interviews were explored to better understand what experiences these students faced in a community college setting. By gaining a better understanding of the students' experiences using expressive writing, this research uncovered some of the strategy involved with how expressive writing functions and a more in-depth view of the expressive writing process. This chapter describes the study method including research design, sample, setting, recruitment, and data collection and analysis. Finally, the researcher's ethical considerations and steps to facilitate trustworthiness in the study are examined.

Research Design

Creswell mentions that researchers conduct qualitative research "because a problem or issue needs to be explored" (2013, p. 47). Since this study explored participant experiences with expressive writing in a natural setting, an exploratory, qualitative approach was chosen as the best fit for this research. Hatch (2002) explains that qualitative research "seeks to understand the world from the perspectives of those living in it" (p. 7). According to Creswell (2013), qualitative researchers use "an emerging qualitative approach to inquiry, the collection of data in a natural setting sensitive to the people and the places under study, and data analysis that is both inductive and deductive and establishes patterns or themes" (p. 42). Denzin and Lincoln (2012)

posit that qualitative researchers “study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of meanings people begin to them” (p. 3). Furthermore, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain that qualitative researchers are “interested in how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meaning they attribute to their experiences” (p. 15). By using a qualitative approach, this study explored the students’ experiences through interviews to better understand what experiences these students face in a community college setting. By gaining a better understanding of the students’ experiences with using expressive writing, this research uncovered some of the functions of expressive writing and gave a more in-depth view of the expressive writing process.

For this exploratory qualitative study, data were collected through an analysis of interviews and observation notes. Hatch (2002) notes that “data usually includes field notes from participant observation, notes from transcriptions of interviews with informants, and unobtrusive data such as artifacts from the research site or records related to the social phenomena under investigation” (p. 7). Merriam and Tisdell (2015) also support this idea by stating that “interviews are usually the main source of data for qualitative researchers, and other major sources of data collection are observation notes and documents” (p. 106). Saldana (2011) contends that some studies may include at least three types of data collection such as “interviews, participant observation, and written surveys, to gather a broader spectrum of evidence and perspectives to enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of an analysis” (p. 31). Denzin and Lincoln (2012) discuss the use of multiple methods of collecting data as an attempt “to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon that is being studied to gain depth and add richness to a study” (p. 5). Maxwell (2013) believes that the use of different forms of data collection can produce a broader understanding of the participants’ experiences and reduce issues with

trustworthiness, bias, and limited results. By using interviews and observation notes, this exploratory, qualitative method was used as a strategy to add depth, rich description, complexity, and rigor to this study.

According to Damianakis and Woodford (2012), qualitative researchers generate knowledge through rigorous research based on holistic accounts and thick description of data that often involve in-person interviews with participants. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), thick description refers to a detailed description and evidence presented from quotes in the participants' interviews. Also, thick description is a detailed account of the patterns and relationships that occur when studying the data, and the recording of details is important to fully the motives, ideas, meanings of the situation (Given, 2008). Shelton, Smith, and Mort (2014) report that "the aim of qualitative research is usually to understand phenomena and processes by considering why and how they occur" (p. 271). Furthermore, Patton (2005) suggests that qualitative research provides findings in natural, real-world settings and allows the researcher to gain further insight into and interpret the phenomena. Since this study is exploratory in nature, the use of a natural setting contributed to the rich description of the phenomena and insight into the participant's perspective (Brink & Wood, 1998). By using this exploratory, qualitative approach, the researcher can look "for new knowledge, new insights, new understanding, and new meaning" (Brink & Wood, 1998, p. 312).

Sample

To obtain a strong sample that represented the student population, the convenience sampling method was used. I conducted interviews until reaching a point of data saturation. According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), data saturation occurs when continued data collection produces no new information for the study, and the analysis has a sufficient number of themes,

categories, and other information for later data collection. For this study, data saturation was reached because no new expectations or explanations were coming from the participants.

Since I was analyzing the data as it was collected, I was able to see firsthand whether there was new information to add to the existing data. For example, the participants discussed how reflection helped them understand their previous experience. The participants all mentioned how it was important to revisit their experiences and the writing process helped them realize the importance of reflection. After analyzing the fourth interview data with the previous three, I noticed the pattern. As I collected and analyzed data on the other participants and compared it to previous data, I realized that the material had become redundant. Since I noticed that similar incidences had been repeatedly reported, and I was confident that I reached data saturation. Also, data saturation may occur when the data, even if there is small sample, begins to replicate, and there is enough information to show multiple examples for synthesis and explanation (Morse, 2015). For this study, I was able to gather multiple examples and include these examples which were coded, put into categories, and then the data was divided into six distinct themes.

Convenience Sampling

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) state that convenience sampling is “just what is implied by the term—you select a sample based on time, money, location, availability of sites, and so on.” (p. 98). Convenience sampling “comes to an end when the total amount of participants (sample saturation) and/or the time limit (time saturation) are reached” (Martínez-Mesa, González-Chica, Duquia, Bonamigo, & Bastos, 2016, p. 328). Convenience sampling in qualitative research is focused on generalizability, and the information gained shows a strong representation of the population being studied (Martinez-Mesa et al., 2016). Based on this knowledge, this study used the convenience sampling approach. The location was already easily accessible when the study

began, and since I already worked at a community college, it made sense to get volunteers from this population.

Participants and Recruitment

Participants were part-time or full-time students enrolled at Pellissippi State Community College. Participants must not have graduated with a previous degree from Pellissippi State Community College or other colleges or universities. A large portion of the student population is required to take English 1010 and 1020 as prerequisites for degree completion. Since the researcher is a member of the English department and has access to these courses, he began his search for volunteers in his field. There are approximately 75 sections of English 1010, and the average class membership is 23. To reduce sampling bias, Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggest that researchers determine the selection criteria to make sure the target population is defined. The criteria for the participants in the study included:

1. Participants must be enrolled in a 2-year community college program.
2. Participants must be able to read, write, and interpret English.
3. Participants must voluntarily complete two expressive writing sessions.
4. Participants must be 18 years or older and sign a consent form.
5. The setting for this study must be a 2-year community college.
6. Participants must agree to an interview and a follow-up meeting on two different occasions in the course of one week.

Setting

Pellissippi State Community College (PSCC) is a 2-year college in Knoxville, Tennessee, with four campuses that have more than 11,000 students, and an average of 4,500 students are located on the main campus. More than 2,500 students are first-time freshmen entering the college ranks. PSCC offers many 2-year college degrees in applied sciences and is one of the main feeder colleges for the University of Tennessee for completion of a 4-year degree. Currently, many students from the Knoxville area and surrounding counties use Tennessee Promise funds, a scholarship and mentoring program that is designed for students who enter community colleges across Tennessee that covers tuition and fees not covered by federal assistance programs such as the Pell Grant and Hope Scholarship. PSCC also focuses on innovative ways to promote student engagement and retention, such as service-learning initiatives and new technology. A diverse group of adult students with an age range of 18 to 60 are enrolled at PSCC, and these adult students vary in college preparedness (Pellissippi State Community College, n.d.). Due to the rise in the total number of Tennessee Promise students, many of the students enter PSCC immediately upon graduation from high school and were part of a college-prep program while in high school. There are also many students who have decided to return to college to fulfill job training obligations, to make a career change, or to return to college after experiencing previous academic issues at either PSCC or other academic 2-year colleges or 4-year universities. PSCC also serves a large group of adult learners who never went to college after high school and are first-time college students.

First, the researcher met with the dean of the English department to discuss the implementation of the study. After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Pellissippi State Community College and the University of Tennessee, emails were sent to

several different instructors in the English department regarding the current study and the need for volunteers. Some of the instructors granted permission for the researcher to attend their classes to explain the study and ask the students if they would like to participate. An information sheet with an email and phone number was distributed. Also, the researcher fielded questions during this time and discussed them with potential participants after the session. After gathering a list of applicants forms were sent by email, which indicated that the study was voluntary, and the participants were free to stop the interview at any time.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study consisted of interviews and observation/field notes. First, expressive writing exercises were conducted with each participant. A similar version of Pennebaker's (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999) prompt for the expressive writing exercise was used for this study:

I would like for you to write about an obstacle or conflict you have faced since attending college. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your thoughts. You may also link this event to your past, your present or your future, or to who you have been, who you would like to be, or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or about different topics each day. All of your writing will be completely confidential. Don't worry about spelling, sentence structure, or grammar. The only rule is that once you begin writing, continue to do so until your time is up. (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011, p. 419)

Participants completed a portion of this expressive writing exercise twice within the course of 1 to 2 weeks in a place where they felt comfortable. Participants were able to choose a study room in the PSCC library or any other place on campus where they felt they could write without any

distractions. The researcher stayed in the room with each participant and timed each session for twenty minutes. Depending on the space of the room, the researcher would move as far away from the participant to allow space. Previous expressive writing studies were conducted at least once a week up to four times a week (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). After the expressive writing exercises were completed, the researcher scheduled an interview following the second expressive writing session. The main reason for encouraging the interview process to progress quickly was that the researcher wanted the participants' memories of the expressive writing exercises to be fresh. Also, if the interviews were conducted close to the time of the expressive writing exercises, participants might be able to provide richer detail and description of their feelings about the expressive writing process.

Interviews

For this study, interviews were conducted face to face with the participants. Interviews were chosen as the best method of collecting data because participants could reveal their thoughts, perceptions, and opinions on the expressive writing process (Kanpik, 2006). The participants' reflection was necessary because data was needed to interpret how different participants engage in the writing process, and the multiple perspectives would give insight to their beliefs, experiences, and motivation (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008). Interviews are also a good source of collecting data when exploring a new research area where insights from participants would help provide a deeper understanding of the study (Gill, Stewart, Treasure, & Chadwick, 2008).

Prior to the interview, the participants reviewed and signed a consent form that included an overview and the participant's role in the study. Interviews were conducted in accordance with the regulations of the University of Tennessee's Institutional Review Board. The interviews

were open-ended to encourage the participants to share their experiences with the expressive writing study and to describe how the experience affected them. The participants were asked the following question: How would you describe your experience with expressive writing?

The other questions referred to material the interviewee discussed earlier in the interview along with other pre-set questions to guide the participants to their previous experiences and feelings about the expressive writing study. During this process, observation/field notes were taken, and each interview was recorded to prepare transcripts for data analysis.

Although the interviews appeared to be informal conversations with the participants, they were conducted using a semi-structured approach, with open-ended questions to reveal the participants' experiences and reflections on their participation in the expressive writing exercise. For this study, interviews were the primary source of information. According to Kvale and Brinkman (2015), an interview "is a conversation that has a structure and a purpose" (p. 5). Kvale and Brinkman (2015) also mention that interviews "are based on the conversations of daily life" (p. 6) and where knowledge is constructed between the interview and interviewee. According to Saldana (2011), qualitative research often relies on interviews as a primary source of data because they are "an effective way of documenting" (p. 33) an individual's or group's attitudes, feelings, or opinions about their own personal experiences and perspectives on society. Patton (2015) believes that interviewing allows the researcher to find information that he or she cannot directly observe, which allows the researcher to "enter into the other person's perspective" (p. 426). Rubin and Rubin (2005) contend that qualitative interviews are important for understanding specific situations or experiences in depth. From a social constructivist viewpoint, interviews focus on how interviewees perceive and interpret their experiences in the world.

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) note that semi-structured interviews are guided by a list of questions that are to be explored, but the wording or order of the questions is not determined before the interview process. Thus, the researcher has more flexibility in how to respond to the current situation while potentially gaining new insight and new information from the participant. Based on the participants' responses, additional questions are asked to probe for more in-depth information.

Observation/Field Notes

For this exploratory, qualitative study, I took notes during the interviews to provide a holistic approach to the data collection method. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) explain that some researchers may want to take notes on the interviewee's reactions to questions during the interview in order to aid the pace of the interview. Also, notes can be used to point to specific areas of information that need to be clarified during the interview. Although the majority of the notes covered observations from the interviews, some notes were taken after the interview to reflect on the data and to begin analyzing data. Merriam and Tisdell (2015) state that "Post-interview notes allow the investigator to monitor the process of data collection as well as begin to analyze the data itself" (p. 131). The notes included the researcher's observations about the interview with the participant as well as the researcher's own ideas and reflections on the interviews.

Data Analysis

According to Merriam and Tisdell (2015), data collection and data analysis should occur simultaneously in a recursive and dynamic fashion. Hatch (2002) describes data analysis as "organizing and interrogating data in ways that allow researchers to see patterns, identify themes, discover relationships, develop explanations, make interpretations, mount critiques, or generate

theories” (p. 148). In the first part of the data analysis, assumptions were specified, and the researcher recorded his own experiences with different forms of expressive writing (Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Data that were analyzed consisted of interviews and personal observations. The interviews were transcribed as soon as the first interview was conducted. Observation notes were used as a guide for each interview, and as each one was completed, it was transcribed and analyzed. After the interviews were completed, the data were analyzed collectively. Each interview was digitally recorded using Audacity on a laptop that had a microphone. After transcribing each interview, the written transcripts were imported into ATLAS software to assist with coding of specific phrases, categories, and themes.

A comparative analysis approach was used to examine the interview data as a collective whole to find similar themes from the participants’ answers (Charmaz, 2014; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Then, the highlighted words or phrases were coded to establish categories. Per Merriam and Tisdell (2015), the researcher coded and created categories by using the constant comparative method. Themes that emerged from the participants’ interviews were identified, and the transcripts and highlighted common words, phrases, and ideas were reviewed. This data organization helped establish emerging themes. Braun and Clarke (2006) describe a theme as “something important about the data in relation to the research question and represents some level of patterned response or meaning within the data set” (p. 82). Lastly, themes were condensed and identified. Participants were contacted to assure accuracy.

Ethical Considerations

Before collecting or validating any data, rapport with the participants was established. The participants were expected to feel comfortable and trust the researcher as being credible. Descriptions of the research process were conveyed to each participant, and they were given the

opportunity to refuse participation (Shenton, 2004). The participants were able to ask any questions or voice any concerns they might have about the process. They were also assured that there are no wrong answers and were encouraged to be open and freely discuss their thoughts and experiences without scrutiny (Hatch, 2002; Shenton, 2004). To ensure that the participants felt safe while discussing their experiences with expressive writing, the researcher informed each one of the them about the safety of the location of the interviews before they began (Shenton, 2004). The researcher ensured that the interviewees understood the interview protocol and allowed them time to get comfortable with their surroundings and with the researcher (Hatch, 2002).

Trustworthiness

Merriam and Tisdell (2015) describe trustworthiness to ensure reliability and to provide guidelines to conduct a study in an ethical manner. Before the process of data collection and data analysis began, the researcher wrote about his own assumptions and biases to show his values and expectations leading in to the study, to temporarily set aside any assumptions, and to help find any preconceptions that may affect the validity of the study (Fischer, 2009; Maxwell, 2013; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Any personal identifiers that could affect confidentiality with the participants in the study were removed when data analysis began. To review and confirm common categories and themes found through the constant comparative data analysis process, a member check was conducted. A member check is a technique for establishing the validity of data or clarifying the interpretation of data for participants from whom the information was obtained (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Morrow (2005) states, “the researcher has the responsibility to learn from the interviewee how well the researcher’s interpretations reflect the interviewee’s meaning” (p. 254). The participants were given the opportunity to check for accuracy in the

transcripts and were asked to comment on how accurate their perceptions were interpreted from the interviews and observations. Maxwell (2013) contends that member checks also help establish reliability in a study because they aid the researcher in limiting the possibility of misinterpreting the participants' views and are a way to identify any possible misunderstandings in the researcher's observations.

Data from observation notes and interviews were compared to increase the validity of the study. Also, member checks were performed and an audit trail was used to provide an explanation of the process of developing patterns, categories, and themes from the data. During the audit trail, a journal was used to record "how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015, p. 253). Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that an audit trail is necessary for a qualitative study to show consistency and a strong, organized process of analysis. A journal was kept to log the process and to maintain consistency in the analysis for this study.

Conclusion

This study utilized an exploratory, qualitative approach to understand the experiences of the students when participating in an expressive writing workshop. This study brought the voices of the students' experiences with expressive writing to the forefront. By understanding the students' experiences, some of the strategies involved in expressive writing were uncovered and a more in-depth view of the expressive writing process was gained. Also, this exploratory, qualitative study using an analysis of interviews and written text provided an understanding of the meaning behind the experience of expressive writing.

CHAPTER 4

Findings

The main purpose of this study was to examine how students make meaning of their experiences with expressive writing. In expressive writing, participants write about a stressful experience and their emotions surrounding the event (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Expressive writing is personal, and individuals are asked not to focus on writing conventions such as grammar and punctuation (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Overall, expressive writing is a way for individuals to express their feelings in a narrative format, and studies have shown that the writing process can lead to potential mental and physical health benefits (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). This chapter contains findings from a content analysis of seven transcribed interviews with community college students who participated in the expressive writing study. The participants wrote about a conflict they faced during their time in college in two writing sessions within the course of one week. Participants were asked to choose their own pseudonyms, which are as follows: “Bob,” “Monica,” “Trinity,” “Joe,” “Finnegan,” “Lisa,” and “Axel.” Findings are identified as themes representing reflections about the participants’ experiences with expressive writing exercises. These themes include “Affirmation of Accomplishments,” “Relief and Relaxation,” “Awareness of Future,” “Writing Concerns,” “Organization and Chronological Order of the Writing Process,” and “Reflection.” Following a description of each theme, key findings of the study are discussed followed by a brief summary of the chapter.

Profiles

To gain a better understanding of the themes that emerged in the findings, brief profile summaries of each participant at the time of the interviews are presented below.

Bob

Bob is in his early 20s and is a first-generation college student. He comes from an ethnic background and is proud of his Mexican heritage. He is recently engaged, and he reports that family always comes first for him. Bob is an honors student majoring in math and physics and plans to go to graduate school. He is involved in many activities at the college, and he worked two part-time jobs to help support his family.

Monica

Monica is a Caucasian female in her mid-20s and has worked in hotel management for the last 5 years. Although she was praised for all her good work in hotel management and sales, she felt the need to help others as a nurse and decided to go back to school. Monica has always wanted to go to college, but her parents are divorced, and she has limited income. Her family lives 16 hours away, but she decided to move to Tennessee because of her previous job. She is currently engaged.

Trinity

Trinity is a Caucasian female in her late 30s and is recently divorced. She has children ranging in ages from eight to 19. Trinity reported that one of her children is also going to college. Her goal is to complete the nursing program. She works a full-time job to help support her children and works hard in college to show her children that they should never give up on their dreams. Trinity loves her kids and wants them to be strong and independent. She feels that college is a second chance after getting married and having children at young age.

Joe

Joe is a 19-year-old Caucasian male who is a first-generation college student. He plans to finish 2 years at the community college and then attend a 4-year university somewhere in the state to finish an engineering degree. He lives at home and works a part-time job close to 30 hours a week and helps with his ailing grandma. Joe is the oldest of his siblings, and he wants to set a good example for them. He is an avid sports fan and is involved in his church.

Finnegan

Finnegan is a Caucasian female in her early 30s who is recently divorced with two children. She is a first-generation college student who enjoys hiking, running, and living in the country. When Finnegan is not taking care of her children, she enjoys folk art and music. Finnegan plans to finish her degree in graphic design at a 4-year university. Her family is important to her, and she reported that her parents were very supportive during her time in community college. When time permits, Finnegan also enjoys giving back to the community by volunteering for various community projects.

Lisa

Lisa is in her early 20s finishing her education degree at the community college and plans on completing her 4-year education degree at a 4-year university. She is engaged and works part-time in an afterschool program with younger children. She loves working with kids and is very involved in community projects and her church. Her parents are very supportive of her. Lisa's mother, who is a retired teacher, home-schooled her during her high school years and helped her become a better student.

Axel

Axel is in her late twenties and is married. She comes from a poor background and was not able to go college at 18 because she had to go to work to help her family. At the time of the interview, she had been married for 2 years, and her in-laws recognized promise in her work and wanted to help her go back to college. Axel is a high-level-achieving student, and many professors praise her work. She exercises and loves to read and spend time with her husband and cats.

Major Themes

This section reports findings from interviews and observations from the seven participants in the expressive writing study. The findings presented in the following pages are organized thematically, and the interrelated themes illustrate how the students made meaning of their experiences through the expressive writing process. Each theme is explained through examples from the collected data. Finally, the connections between the themes and the research question are reported.

Theme 1: “Affirmation of Accomplishment”

When participants were asked the main research question at the start of each interview, they stated that the expressive writing exercises helped them reflect on their accomplishments despite the numerous obstacles they each faced while attending college.

All seven participants recounted that the writing experience gave them a sense of “affirmation” of their “accomplishments.” Lisa, Trinity, Finnegan, and Bob reported that they did not expect this realization at the start of the expressive writing study, and they discovered their accomplishments after they finished the first writing exercise. Axel, Joe, and Monica reported a sense of their accomplishments as they worked on their first expressive writing

exercise. Regardless of whether they began the writing exercises feeling positive or negative about the experiences they chose to write about, each participant reported feeling an “a-ha” moment at some point during the first expressive writing exercise. All the participants reported that they did not expect to have such an overwhelming feeling of affirmation of their accomplishments.

Bob, Trinity, and Monica spoke at length about the unexpected feeling of accomplishment. Bob reported:

I never spent much time looking back at all the obstacles with my life and school because I am always so busy. I never thought of looking at obstacles to see my accomplishments. I never looked at them until this expressive writing exercise—it was like an affirmation of all I had done. It felt good to have this time to see it. (Bob, personal communication, February 16, 2018).

When she started writing, Monica reported that she became more positive after experiencing the initial anxiety and negative feelings associated with discussing her obstacles. She said it helped her accept her shortcomings, but it also affirmed how well she had handled all of her problems. She reported that it felt good to finish both the first and second expressive writing exercises and to learn what she had accomplished. Although she reported that she spent time reflecting on her work, Monica mentioned that she never can see how much she has achieved (Monica, personal communication, March 7, 2018). Trinity had a similar experience and reported that

It helped me accept my situation and it gave me like an affirmation that I have done really well in school.... even when I didn't think I was good enough. It was like talking to a friend, and it gave me an uplifting feeling. (Trinity, personal communication, March 8, 2018).

Axel, Joe, and Finnegan reported that they found a sense of accomplishment, and the exercises affirmed that they had overcome many obstacles while going to college.

Joe reported:

Life can be difficult and no one can always hold your hand, so I have always tried to be the bigger person and be good to others. I always thought something good would come out of it. The expressive writing exercises gave me like some kind of affirmation that I do try to do good, and the writing also helped me see that even if I make mistakes I can learn from them and improve. It just showed that I can overcome problems and be better. (Joe, personal communication, April 4, 2018).

Finnegan reported that she really appreciated the journaling aspect of the expressive writing exercise, and she remarked that the exercise gave her time to reflect and understand her current obstacles. She also reported that she did not view her current obstacles as issues, but instead felt that the exercise justified her sense of accomplishment and excitement for future opportunities in her major. (Finnegan, personal communication, March 11, 2018). Axel reported that she has plenty of opportunity and support for college, but it “affirmed” her hard work and effort (Axel, personal communication, April 16, 2018).

Although all participants mentioned that they felt affirmed in their accomplishments, Monica and Trinity described having strong negative emotions in the beginning of the expressive writing exercise compared to the other participants. Monica reported that the writing was “a challenge at first because it was hard to look at my obstacles because it brought back a particular issue for me” (Monica, personal communication, March 7, 2018). Trinity relayed a similar feeling as she “had been going through so much lately” (Trinity, personal communication, March

8, 2018). Despite these issues, both commented that it was easier to put their thoughts on paper as they continued to write. Monica reported:

I was finally able to talk, even though I got angry. But then I felt relieved, and I could put it all away. I saw that I could do it. I felt sad and angry and resentment toward all of it—not the writing, but all my old feelings came back. And then it just went. I looked at it from a distance and saw that it was over, and I am still doing it. It helped me realize my accomplishments. After I wrote in my journals, it affirmed that I was doing well in my life goals but talking to someone about it afterwards has helped me reflect on it even more. (Monica, personal communication, March 7, 2018).

All participants reported feeling an “a-ha” moment of clarity when they discovered and affirmed their accomplishments. Axel described it as “It just hit me. I am really good at what I do” (Axel, personal communication, April 16, 2018). Joe reported that when he reached halfway through the first writing exercise, he was “amazed and it hit me all at once. It was like an a-ha moment that I just had come so far and look where I am going” (Joe, personal communication, April 4, 2018). Trinity reported that she did not think much as she wrote, but when she completed the 20-minute allotted time period, the “a-ha feeling or whatever positive feeling thing hit me. I realized that all I had done was so worth the struggle” (Trinity, personal communication, 2018). She also remarked that “When I was done, I almost didn’t think. It was like...well...that I was wiped clear of all it. And then it was just different—it hit me.” Monica reported that around the middle of her first writing exercise her anxiety and anger lessened, and she started to relax. She commented:

...all of a sudden, I felt this uplifting feeling. It was like a-ha—I’ve done all this and my future will be better because of all the work—and hard work you know—I do realize that

I can get through it and be successful. I can be something more. It does not matter whether I was successful before or where I came from. I know that if I want to be a nurse I can, and I can be good at it. (Monica, personal communication, March 7, 2018).

The “a-ha” moment was unexpected for Finnegan and Bob because they did not believe that their experiences were obstacles, but they realized that the writing did affect how they thought about the challenges they wrote about.

Bob reported:

I was just writing, and it was just like suddenly there was nothing on my mind, but then I was...well, like...ugh...eager to write about what I accomplished. I have never felt that way before and it was like all of a sudden everything slowed. And then it hit me I could see the process and where I was going in my life. It was like “a-ha” I know what I am doing, and I have accomplished so much. It felt good to sit and reflect and take time to know I have done well. (Bob, personal communication, February, 16, 2018).

Overall, each participant felt a strong sense of accomplishment, and often this affirmation was through a sudden “a-ha” moment. The main difference among the participants was the time at which each realized the moment of the affirmation. Also, participants entered the expressive writing exercise with different demeanors which they believed could have affected their participation despite an overall positive experience for everyone.

Theme 2: “Relief and Relaxation”

The second theme that emerged from the interview data is that participants experienced a sense of relief and felt relaxed at some point during the writing exercises. Overall, participants described the sense of relief as a calming effect that typically occurred after completing the writing exercises. Participants reported that they had let go of their emotions during the writing

process and were relieved to finish the exercises. The feeling of relaxation was described as a physical emotion that could happen at any point during the exercises. Each participant discussed varying emotions that happened before, during, and after the first and second expressive writing exercises.

Bob stated that he was surprised at how he was very relaxed during the expressive writing exercises. He reported that he felt a bit anxious before the first expressive writing exercise, but as he began writing, he slowly became more and more relaxed. He expressed a sense of relief after completing the first expressive writing exercise: “It made me feel...like a sense maybe...that I could move on. It was like I could just write it down and then it was done. It was like I was putting everything away (Bob, personal communication, February 16, 2018).

Bob also reported that as he moved to the second expressive writing exercise he felt “very relaxed almost like I was in a meditative state. It was like I didn’t really have to think about it.” For the first expressive writing exercise, he explained that he was a little anxious about the process, but as he started writing, “I had already written like a page and didn’t even realize it, and it just flowed. I was calm going through it. It was even easier by the second one.” After finishing the entire expressive writing process, Bob commented that he was relaxed and relieved that the writing was finished: “I was able to just put it away and know I had it done.” Bob also reported feeling better for the rest of the day and was relieved that he had overcome many obstacles. Overall, he mentioned that he was more relaxed about his stressful academic demands after completing the activity (Bob, personal communication, February 16, 2018).

Monica described how she was more relaxed and relieved after she finished each expressive writing exercise. She explained:

By the end of the second one, I felt relieved. I have talked about these issues before, but this time I felt like I just put it all out there. I just wrote it all and it just poured like a complete story. I felt just so much better and relaxed after it was finished.

Monica mentioned that she was relieved because she could tell the story of how she overcame her obstacle from start to finish: “It was just like well, I’m done. It’s okay. I’m done with it.” Although she reported having some stress before the expressive writing exercise, she was relieved that she completed the exercises, and she liked reading over her writing to see that she had moved past her previous issues. Monica thought that she was relieved when the entire expressive writing exercises were completed because she believed she could accept her past and move on: “It was like I see the story keep going and then finally end, and then I realized it ended so I felt relieved and finally at peace” (Monica, personal communication, March 7, 2018).

Trinity commented that she was relieved when the entire expressive writing process was finished. She reported:

When I started, I wanted to like resist the whole thing, and I was worried that I couldn’t finish it because I felt it was bringing up a lot of emotion. When I started to write, I felt strong anger towards my ex, and a lot of resentment for all those years. But I do have some great kids, and I found the strength to move on and go to school, and it’s good. It was like all of sudden I was positive as I kept writing. It was like all that struggle was worth something, ya know? I finally felt like I invested in my life. It was a relief to know that I could really do it. (Trinity, personal communication, March 8, 2018).

Trinity also described a relaxed feeling at the end of the entire expressive writing process:

By the second one, I just could write. It just flowed like I already had it all ready. It was kind of weird because I was so tense at the start when I was being timed, but by the

second go-around, I felt at ease. I was relaxed and reflective by the second one. (Trinity, personal communication, March 8, 2018).

Trinity described the emotion as a complete change of worry and anxiety to a feeling of relief after the writing process, and she was physically relaxed after the initial anxiety she felt about the writing process.

Lisa reported it was a “great relief” when she finished the expressive writing exercises. She described the feeling as “a load off my shoulders because writing is so hard for me.” Although she was not as comfortable writing the first exercise, her second proved to be “a bit more relaxed because I already had done it once and I knew it wasn’t for a grade. It was for me.” Lisa described her feeling of relaxation as a surprise because she always had been so nervous about her writing. She reported that as she continued the process, she was “more and more relaxed” and realized that she had nothing to worry about (Lisa, personal communication, April 11, 2018).

Joe described his writing time as a period of relaxation because the expressive writing experience let him look at his obstacles in a constructive way. He reported that he became very relaxed as he wrote, and after he finished the first expressive writing exercise, he was relieved to see he had come so far in his studies and career path: “I felt relaxed and thoughtful during my writing experience because I realized I am doing the best I can and it’s positive. I can sit back and be happy I’ve done so much.” He also described that the start of the writing process was a little tough at first, but he quickly relaxed because he realized that the process was about him: “I started to loosen up as I wrote the first expressive exercise because I knew this was good for me and realized that in my past I did the best I could for that time.” Joe also described a feeling of relief because he realized that the writing was his alone and no one else could criticize it. He

noted that the writing was meditative, and overall, he felt at ease: “I was worried I would not be able think of something to write, but the writing just came out” (Joe, personal communication, April 4, 2018).

Finnegan also reported feeling relaxed during the writing exercises. Although the other participants reported feelings of relaxation during the exercise, Finnegan reported that she is usually relaxed anyway and her past journal writing experiences have helped her to keep calm and relaxed in any writing situation. Finnegan described her experience as “a wonderful, meditative writing opportunity...I just sat and got to write. Writing relaxes me anyway.” By reflecting on her past academic career and examining her future, Finnegan was relieved to finish the writing exercises. Afterward, she realized she had many wonderful opportunities and strong family support while in college. Finnegan described her feelings of relief by stating, “I sometimes feel a bit...I don’t know...maybe selfish...I don’t know...it was just a relief to know that I have such great family support despite some of decisions I made when I was young” (Finnegan, personal communication, April 11, 2018).

Finally, Axel spoke about how she is usually a calm but intense person and has always been on the go. She described the writing process in a positive manner and commented that it “gave me a sense of relief. It was a nice little break.” Axel reported that she had been stressed about taking many hard math exams while completing the expressive writing exercises: “It helped me relax a bit, and before I knew it, when I finished the writing, I found out I did really good on my exams, which is cool.” Axel also revealed that she found not only relief but a sense of comfort from the writing: “I found myself just thinking that everything was going to plan and that I’m going to be fine and it will work.” She also recounted that she felt relieved that she was

not the old insecure high school girl she used to be but a strong, smart woman (Axel, personal communication, April 16, 2018).

Theme 3: “Awareness of the Future”

The third theme emerged partly from a connection to Theme 1: Affirmation of Accomplishments. Participants discussed at length how their experience with expressive writing helped them see their potential in their own future. At some point during each of the interviews, the participants brought up positive feelings about their future, and most of these feelings were linked to positive thoughts on potential monetary benefits and financial stability. The participants echoed the idea that all their hard work and perseverance were going to help them in their jobs and eventually help their families. Despite some minor differences, participants stated that they had many concerns and were worried about their future, but the expressive writing exercises helped them recognize that they could do well because of how they have already overcome so many obstacles while in college.

For example, Trinity reported that during the expressive writing exercises, she felt aware of positive, hopeful possibilities for the future. She explained her thoughts about the future before she participated in the expressive writing exercises:

I always debated whether I was good enough to be a nurse or really anything that was outside what I was used to. I don't know...I guess I was worried because I divorced and didn't have money and never thought I could go back. Maybe it's because I just never thought like I was good or....well, you know, I just had such a bad marriage and felt like I didn't deserve much. It was hard thinking how I'm going to do all this with the kids and no money. I never thought writing would ever help me look at this whole future life in a positive way. (Trinity, personal communication, March 8, 2018).

Trinity also described that her awareness of the future became very clear after the first expressive writing exercise:

After such a rough marriage and worrying about money, I never thought of myself as a student. I mean, I guess I do now...but it is different. After this writing exercise, I don't know, but I feel like I belong here. Sure, I'm older...but who cares...and my children are now interested in college because I am here. It's like I knew it could be good, but I get so overwhelmed with everything, and now it's like I could see that I came so far, and all my plans are starting to happen—and my future as a student is even good because my grades are good, which I was worried about. It's like I just needed to see it on paper to see it. I don't know, but it just made me feel better because I always felt inadequate and now, I feel like I'm going somewhere. (Trinity, personal communication, March 8, 2018).

Monica and Bob reported that they obviously had thought about their personal and professional futures, but both were surprised at how expressive writing helped them realize that there was more to their lives than focusing on their current situation. Bob described the feeling of awareness of the future as “a process of change.” He also mentioned that “I realized that I am capable and could do what I want. It felt good.” For Monica, the awareness was something new for her:

It was a positive thing...don't get me wrong, but it was like, “Wow, I'm going to leave the sales or service industry to be more.” I knew that I was going to help people, and I knew I could move up and get more education. (Monica, personal communication, March 7, 2018).

Monica and Bob reported that the writing exercises were an important tool to help them look beyond their current situation. Bob commented:

By looking at my past, it was just like it was an automatic feeling for me to look at my future. I mean, it's important to see how far you have come and where you can go. It just makes sense to look back, learn from it, and just look at your future. It just makes me want to do better because I can see where I am heading. (Bob, personal communication, February 16, 2018).

Monica discussed how the writing exercises not only helped her to reflect, but because they were positive experiences, she reported that they helped her look optimistically at the future. She said:

Why else would I look back at this stuff...I think that I did all this, so I could have a future, but sometimes you need to stop and think about why and where you might be...maybe...I don't know...but it's good to see where you are going. (Monica, personal communication, March 7, 2018).

Finnegan's whole expressive writing experience was more than reflecting on past obstacles. The writing showed her that there is also more to life than her future in academics and her career. Finnegan explained:

While I was writing, I kept thinking of my kids and that I need to spend more time with them in the next couple of months because they are getting older—I may never get to do it again. My future is them. I may have obstacles, but that is normal. I like to write, and I reflect when I write, but I love to look at what may come because I want to look forward to what I am doing instead of worrying all the time about past stuff. My parents are great at looking forward instead of focusing on the past, and this writing exercise proved that for me. (Finnegan, personal communication, April 11, 2018)

Finnegan also expressed that engaging in any type of creative or reflective writing makes her think about her purpose in the world. After taking part in this study, she reported that she became more aware of the importance of her family. She stated:

After my divorce, my parents helped me and still do. They don't have college degrees, and they are so proud of what I am doing. They are important to me like college is, and I am more aware they are concerned about my future. I have always appreciated my parents, but now I realize how important my family is to me. (Finnegan, personal communication, April 11, 2018).

Joe described the experience as “constructive,” and he realized he has the potential to have a solid career in the future because of his strong communications skills and hard work ethic. He pointed out that “Expressive writing helped me understand that I can learn from mistakes and look forward to the future.” Joe also reported that this experience made him aware of his future possibilities, and he believes that “This experience helped me realize that I can look back on it all and laugh, and I will be ready for the future because there will always be some challenge” (Joe, personal communication, April 4, 2018).

Axel reported that her awareness of future possibilities became clear during the expressive writing exercises, and she became aware that she was progressing well toward her goals:

I had felt at times...like I mentioned before...that maybe I was too old or maybe behind because I'm in college now, but I didn't have the money and my health problems...you get it...it's just that I know I can do it but it sometimes it's just hard wondering what could happen. It's scary, but after writing this stuff, it just kind of came through to me. Not to sound corny, but it's like I was aware that I could be anything because I am doing

so well and following my plan. Of course, my husband helps but seeing this on paper...it just makes more sense to me. (Axel, personal communication, April 16, 2018).

Through the expressive writing exercises, Axel realized that her specific path was important:

As I kept writing, I realized that I have more than just a degree and that I have so many things I can do with it. I also know now that this path was something everything one else at my age felt and that's okay, I can do it. (Axel, personal communication, April 16, 2018).

Axel later mentioned that the expressive writing exercises not only helped her reflect on overcoming obstacles, but also on how she could use her previous experiences to overcome new obstacles. She said, "I may not know what's ahead, but at least I've thought about it and know where I want to go." Overall, Axel reported that the expressive writing study helped her realize that her future is going to be exciting and her hard work is already paying off for her family and career.

Theme 4: "Writing Concerns"

Another theme that emerged from the interview data was that each participant was concerned about their grammar and writing skills. Even though the instructions clearly stated not focus on grammar and punctuation and to simply write about the given prompt for the allotted amount of time, the participants were apprehensive about their writing skills. For most of them, the main concern occurred just before the first expressive writing session. Bob mentioned:

I was concerned that I wouldn't be able to show my thoughts. I was worried because in my past I have had teachers count off for every single comma...I just forgot about the directions at the start of it, but I realized as I went on that it wasn't important. I just needed to share my story, but I also wanted to show my main points. For some reason, it

just stuck in my head when I was about to write and that I needed to worry about my grammar because I wanted to make it clear to read. I didn't want anyone to guess what I was trying to say, and I wanted to make sure I understood what I was writing so I could show my thought process. (Bob, personal communication, February 16, 2018).

Bob said that as he began to write, the ideas became clearer, and he felt it was not necessary to worry about his punctuation or his grammar. By the second expressive writing exercise, he was writing his story from beginning to end, and his concerns about being understood “would not be a problem because it became clear in my head, and as I was writing, I noticed it was clear on the paper.”

Monica reported that when she began the process, she was concerned that her writing would not be understood and that writing about her own personal obstacles in college would be difficult. She said:

When I first started writing, I was worried I would be all over the place and it would be hard to understand because of the feelings involved. As I went through my emotions when I first started writing, I was worried that my anger would come out and I would just be writing like I do in journals...just a bunch of random thoughts, and then I worried that I was not making any sense. And, of course, I was worried about grammar before I started even though the directions said not to worry about it, but I like to try to write well. (Monica, personal communication, March 7, 2018).

In the first few minutes of writing, Monica was no longer worried about making sense. She mentioned, “I just became involved in telling my story, so I just kind of forgot about worrying about everything. It just flowed easy for some reason. Like I said before, it just came out.”

Trinity and Joe had writing concerns, but they were not a large part of their process.

Trinity reported:

I was a little worried about it maybe before it started, but when I was writing, I really didn't think about it. I wanted to make sure that it was easy to understand, but when you are telling your own story, it just kind of flows so it was no big deal. And the directions said don't worry about grammar and punctuation, and it wasn't for a grade, so as long it was understandable, I was okay with it. (Trinity, personal communication, March 8, 2018).

Later in the interview, Trinity mentioned that she felt confident in writing, but after finishing it, she wondered if her writing was easily understood. She stated:

I wasn't sure just because I knew what I was writing, but that didn't mean you or anyone else would understand. That worried me a bit when I finished the second writing exercise and handed it to you. Then again, I went about my usual day of classes and had plenty of things to do with my daughters, so I really didn't worry about it after that. It was fine after that, and I felt I did it well. (Trinity, personal communication, March 8, 2018).

Much like Trinity, Joe mentioned that he had some anxiety at the beginning of the writing process, and he was concerned about whether his writing was clear and made sense to his reader:

I know it wasn't for a grade or anything, but I felt I might learn something. I didn't really have a lot of expectations or anything, but I knew it was important to come across well. Even though I wasn't worried about it after the initial start, I felt...since I was relating my own personal stuff...that I didn't really need to edit. I was concerned after completing the exercises because I wondered that even though I understood my thoughts, you may not or anyone else who read it may not get it. Yet, I felt it flowed well. It helped that the

instructions mentioned not to worry about grammar and punctuation. When I first started the exercise, I was a little panicked because I am not good with commas or sometimes complete sentences. But after reading the directions again, and especially by the second one, I felt at ease. (Joe, personal communication, April 4, 2018).

The main issue for Joe and Trinity was ensuring that their writing was as clear as possible, so they could explain their obstacles and make sense of their expressive writing.

Axel and Finnegan believed that their main writing concerns stemmed from previous writing classes. Axel mentioned:

It was hard to start writing when you realize that you don't have to worry about anything and just write. I had always been taught to be careful with each sentence and then look the sentence over for any punctuation or grammar errors. I have a bad habit of also writing a sentence and then I want to change it immediately. I am a bit of a perfectionist when it comes to writing anything. I always did well in writing back in high school, and I was a good creative writer also. So even if you tell me not to, I'm still going to worry about my presentation. It is just how I am, and I am concerned with something that I write that is out there. (Axel, personal communication, April 16, 2018).

Since she had been expected to edit and proofread in her early school years, Axel said it was “just something I do automatically. I had previous assignments in high school that it may not be listed in the directions, but you knew it better be proofread.”

In the interview, Finnegan remarked that she likes to pay attention to detail, so the directions gave her some trouble during the first writing exercise:

I like to be precise with my work. I enjoy paying attention to detail and making sure it looks right. I am like that when I write in my journals about moments that happen in my

life, and I also try to give detail to my art projects around the house or whatever I am working on. I like spending the time to make it right. Not that it wasn't going to be right and I get what all this was about, but I wanted to really express myself, and I couldn't do that without making sure I was showing what was really on my mind or what was really going on in my life. I think it's important to try to be specific, and I think I tried, well, to be that way. I just wanted to make sure it could be understood, not like a text message or something. I figure this was important, but by the second exercise, my writing kind of flowed, so I wasn't really worried about the look because it just came out like it was already corrected. I know that might sound strange, but it was like it was just automatic. (Finnegan, personal communication, April 11, 2018).

Finnegan reported that she was anxious because she was used to having her written work graded or criticized, so she was concerned with whether or not she was "doing enough and being the way it needed to be for the exercise. I really had never done anything like this before."

Lisa was relieved that her grammar and punctuation would not be evaluated because she believed she had never been a strong writer in school. Lisa stated:

I have never really liked writing, but I thought these expressive writing sessions would prove to be helpful to me. I am always concerned about grammar and punctuation, partly because I was never good at proofreading. I can barely put in commas. I still worried about making sure that my work made sense, but I think this was like telling a story and the words kinda flowed. I was nervous at first, but I got over it. It is just hard sometimes because you want to write well even if you are not a good writer. It is sometimes hard to express myself. It's hard enough to talk about issues, so imagine how it is writing about it. And past teachers used to get on me all the time for grammar and punctuation mistakes

thinking I was just being lazy. And I was really trying hard! I have a lot of anxiety when I write, so it was nice to not worry about it, but I was worried about whether it would make sense. (Lisa, personal interview, April 11, 2018).

Overall, the participants expressed concerns regarding grammar and punctuation or issues with readability or understanding. Although the directions stated not to focus on grammar and punctuation, the participants thought it was still important to ensure that the reader could understand clearly the main ideas and meaning of their work.

Theme 5: “Organization and Chronological Order of the Writing Process”

The fifth theme that emerged from the collected data was organization and identifying emotions. All the participants agreed that the writing seemed to be automatically organized, and it was easy to identify how they were feeling. Also, this process helped them identify and reflect on how they felt about overcoming their obstacles, and for most participants, it was in different ways than they expected. The participants reported that their thoughts and ideas flowed freely, and they thought that it is was easier to focus on the main facts of an incident.

Bob commented that all his past emotions with his prior obstacle were scattered and it was difficult to remember each part of the event. He remarked that taking the time to think and reflect probably helped him with the entire process. By explaining the experience in chronological form, Bob thought other readers including himself could easily understand his ideas because of the format. Also, he believed that the chronological format rather than random brainstorming made it easier for him to identify his emotions when overcoming the obstacle. Bob reported that “The writing was like setting up a math equation...there are steps to it, and it will make sense when you finish.”

Monica found it helpful to see the whole story about overcoming her obstacle without having to be concerned about setting up an outline or even planning for the writing exercise. Monica believed that writing in chronological form gave her control of the details and order of the events surrounding the obstacle. She reported that “It just seemed like it came together and flowed, and for the first time it was like it was understandable. Maybe I was just able to see everything in order finally.” Overall, Monica reported that she had total control of her account about overcoming an obstacle, and the chronological organization made it easier for her to identify the series of events that led up to the obstacle and how she was able to move past the incident.

Trinity reported that once she started the expressive writing exercise, she found that her thoughts about her obstacles while at college became clear and organized. Also, Trinity reported that she was able to see her struggle from a different perspective and identify how she felt overcoming the obstacle. Trinity explained:

As soon as I got started, it was like all my thoughts were suddenly in line with each other. All the details were laid out in order as I discussed how coming back to college and getting a divorce and raising my kids were obstacles for obtaining a degree to make better money. It was like I was able to give background information, so anyone could understand where I was coming from. I also found it easy to recognize the emotions and identify how I was feeling during the process of overcoming the obstacle. I could see on paper the emotion in me as I wrote. I could tell if I was angry or depressed or even in denial. I was able to not only tell what happened in order but my emotions during each part. I just felt close to the writing itself. (Trinity, personal communication, March 8, 2018).

For Finnegan and Lisa, the writing process helped them easily identify their feelings and emotions. Finnegan remarked that the process likely kept the story organized. She reported:

The organization didn't really affect me either way. I just feel any story will be chronological at first and it will come out. I'm organized anyway. And it did come out organized, probably better than I thought it would. I did notice how my writing showed me what I was feeling. It was like I could point to what I was feeling at that moment, and I don't think I could have done that before. At one point, I realized that I was expressing an emotion of denial, like I was denying that I needed a change even though I was scared of going back. It was just things like that I could point to and not just know what I was doing but like what I was feeling. (Finnegan, personal communication, April 11, 2018).

Like Finnegan, Lisa mentioned:

I have always been able to start writing and be organized. I can get an idea going from start to finish and make sure it is organized. Even with academic papers, I have always been the person who outlines every part because writing used to be hard for me when I was little. This was easy because I was just telling my perspective my way. It was easy too because everything I wrote seemed...chronological? I could just get in there and write and not worry about it. I also could tell what my emotions were in each part. I didn't even try to write about my feelings, but it just came out. I knew I had probably felt anger and probably felt frustrated and probably sad, but I could see these feelings right in front of me. Not like I had any major issues happen, but I could just see how I was worried starting class, and then felt relief later as I became adjusted, just stuff like that. (Lisa, personal communication, April 11, 2018).

Lisa and Finnegan reported that they could identify emotions they previously did not realize they had felt regarding their academic concerns while in college because the chronological order of the writing made it easier for them to process the event.

Axel reported that her experience seemed to be organized easily, but she discussed more about how she was able to identify various emotions that were part of the experience. Axel also mentioned that the experience was much different than writing a journal entry about her feelings:

Like I said before, I have written poetry and stuff like that before, and I have journaled, but it was more like a stream of consciousness thing. I thought this would be similar, but for some reason it just came out as this...well I guess...like a chronological story and it described my feelings. It was like looking at yourself and like distancing yourself from the situation, so you could give the details of what you felt. It brought up a lot of emotions, and this helped me look back and revisit some of these things. (Axel, personal communication, April 16, 2018).

Overall, Axel believed that discussing the event in chronological order made it easier for her to recognize the beginning of the obstacle and the moment of when she overcame it.

For Joe, the theme of organizing and identifying emotions was the most important part of the process. He shared:

I already figured that by telling my side of the story...or however you put it...that it would all be pretty organized. I mean...you have a start of what happened, then you tell about what happened, and then what happened at the end. What I didn't realize was that I could see how I was changing as I was writing. I could look at the writing while I was doing it and go, "Well, that's how I was feeling." It was like I could see how I would change in emotions from like not really knowing and feeling a bit defeated to this part of

me who like gained confidence and was able to get together. It revealed that I had like false pride or cockiness or something, but I grew up quick, and I was able to handle things. Looking on this, I realize I can handle those things now and for the future.

(Joe, personal communication, April 4, 2018).

All the participants mentioned that the experience helped them discuss their previous situations from the beginning to end without any issues, and the participants all reported feeling that their writing was organized without even having to think about how to arrange the details. Many of the participants reported that it was easy to identify their emotions during those circumstances when previously it was hard to describe how they felt about their situations. Also, all the participants thought it was important that they could recognize not only the details of the situation but how they felt during that time.

Theme #6: “Reflection”

The final theme that emerged from the data analysis was reflection. For the participants, reflection was defined as an exploration of a prior experience and examination of their emotions and behaviors that came from that experience. One of the most common responses was that the exercises helped the participants reflect on their previous academic stressors and having the time to reflect on those previous experiences. The participants also shared that reflecting on the experience using expressive writing helped them learn and understand how they overcame stressors and how they became better students because of the experience. Also, the participants mentioned that they understand the importance of reflection, but expressive writing allowed them to experience it firsthand.

For Bob and Monica, reflection was the most important part of the expressive writing process because the writing helped them take time to understand their previous experience. Bob

reported that reflecting on his college experience can be used to help him solve problems in the future:

Like I probably said earlier, I just felt like this reflection was helpful. It was like my whole experience was down on paper and I could look at it and go, “Hey, I did that.” I did need to see that I have accomplished things because I don’t take the time to do that. I have reflected on my past before, but this time I could see it more clearly. It was like right in front me. It was this thing I wrote about, and I could see how I changed. I can look back later and say I already know how I got over this problem and now I may have a different problem, but I have reflected and know that I can apply it to any situation. It’s one thing to reflect but to use it to learn from is not something I have done before...or at least really look at something and really try to think about it. (Bob, personal communication, February 16, 2018).

Monica also described a similar experience when reflection helped her recognize her past issues and how it could help her improve her circumstances in the future:

I mean...we all have our issues, problems, whatever...and we can look back and tell ourselves not to do that again. I have journaled in the past and wrote down my feelings and everything was scattered around, but I was able to let it out. The problem was that I still didn’t understand why. Expressive writing forced me to look at what I was doing. Well, not forced in a bad but a good way. After writing it, I couldn’t help but look back at what I written and reflect on it. It was like I could see everything clearly. It was like I knew what I was feeling and that I could see that my accomplishments came because I worked hard, or I spent more time tutoring. Whatever it may be, I have more a sense now

of what happened, so I can apply it to my future. (Monica, personal communication, March 7, 2018).

Monica also mentioned that she used to journal about issues she had overcome, but she had never felt that she could see how she overcame these issues. With expressive writing, she could see the past steps she took to solve a problem and “to see what worked and what didn’t, and then reflect on it, and use it to my benefit in the future.”

Trinity did not reflect on any experience in her recent past, and she was concerned that any reflection on her prior circumstances about coming to college would only bring up negative feelings and emotions. She stated:

I did a lot of things probably a little too early when growing up. I thought it would be hard to look back at it, but I did need time to reflect and this experience helped me. At first, I did this because I thought I would be helping a study and it seemed interesting, but I realized that it was more than just that. It was like a process to see what I really did. I have to say raising all my kids and going to school full time and looking back at how I got here is important. I need to know what I went through, and this may help my kids one day. It’s not only about making mistakes and learning from them and all that, but it’s about getting past all of it and moving on. (Trinity, personal communication, March 8, 2018).

Trinity explained that the most important part for her in participating in this study was that she reflected on her past and gained a better understanding of her circumstances at that time. She also discussed that the experience may have changed over time:

Maybe I’ll look back on it again in five years and it may be different, but I still think some of the main emotions I felt will always be there. It was a rough period in my life,

and I am proud of moving through it, but it is hard to look back and see myself barely making it. I still felt positive though because I'm still here and my kids are proud of me too. This was different than journal writing from before. It is like I was not just reflecting but trying to imagine how I was feeling because I already knew how I felt because I wrote it. (Trinity, personal communication, March 8, 2018).

Overall, Trinity thought that the experience was positive, and reflection was an important aspect of this writing exercise. She could see her life journey in her writing, and she learned from her past personal and academic mistakes from a positive perspective.

For Lisa, reflection was an important part of the exercise although she was concerned it would be difficult to write about previous academic obstacles. As a student, Lisa had spent much of her time reflecting on previous mistakes in her student teaching practice, but she reported that it was only aimed at her teaching practice. Since she had never tried to reflect on her academic and personal experiences, she was concerned about the outcome and the emotions associated with the process. Lisa mentioned:

I'm going for an early education degree, and we always spend time writing about and reflecting on a teaching experience we had so we can look at what we did well and what we didn't do so well. I was worried that I would reflect on the situation I wrote about which was a difficult student in my practicum, but I felt like that this was different. But still, I am not big on writing and never really have been. I don't know why, but I felt like after I wrote about it, and, well, I just accepted that it was a rough student and it wasn't really all my fault. I realized that I did alright, and it just felt better to write down the whole story. It was good to reflect on it. It was kind of like reflecting on lessons as a teacher, but this was more personal because I could see my emotions. Also, another

positive is that I do like talking about my feelings rather than writing about what I think other people are feeling...like my students. That's just too hard to reflect on sometimes.

And, it felt good to get stuff of my chest. (Lisa, personal communication, April 11, 2018).

Overall, Lisa believed the expressive writing exercises were like previous reflection pieces she had to write for her education courses, but she felt that the process of reflection was much easier because it was "less stressful and I wasn't doing it for a job evaluation." She felt like she already knew how to do this type of writing, but she reported that this experience felt more positive. Also, she commented that reflecting on an obstacle faced while in college was much easier than previous teaching reflections because she was telling a story instead of focusing on discussion prompts. Lisa has always felt it was difficult to write and reflect, but she mentioned that expressive writing was a better experience than other reflective writing experiences.

In a different sense, Joe was comforted by reflecting on the experience, and he thought about it for close to a week after the writing exercise. Joe discussed how this happened after completing the expressive writing study:

After I wrote it, I kept thinking about the experience. It was like I reflected on why I was writing it, and maybe what I was thinking when I wrote it and then after I wrote. It was like a flood of ideas came to my mind. And every time I look back and reflect, I just laugh because it's not as serious as it was then. Reflecting on it just shows that I have overcome it and that's a good thing. The process is important, and I can't be entitled. I got to let go and I learned from it and I'm stronger because of it. (Joe, personal communication, April 4, 2018).

Joe reported that expressive writing helped him to revisit past obstacles to not only humble himself, but to learn from the experience, decompress from previous stressors, and relieve his anxiety.

Axel felt much like Joe in that the experience allowed her to decompress, release some anxiety, and reflect upon her experience. Axel mentioned that the experience helped her reflect on parts of her life that she probably would have never thought about before or learned from:

It brought out ideas that I needed to see. I needed to reflect on those things that worried me because now I'm not worried about my body or worried about my chemistry exam or whatever worry I had. It's just that, well, I can see it all now and I realized I have no one to impress. And this exercise forced me to reflect, and I had a positive experience, and that doesn't happen too much when looking at something that I thought was negative at the time. I can get through it, and through reflection I changed my thoughts on it. I'm kind of impressed with how it turned out. (Axel, April 16, 2018).

Overall, Axel realized that the writing exercises gave her the opportunity to look at her current life goals and how she was accomplishing these goals. By reflecting on the past, she recognized that she has completed so many goals and is improving every day.

Summary of Findings

This chapter described in detail the findings of the thematic analysis of seven transcribed interviews of community college students who participated in an expressive writing study. The main themes that emerged from the data are the following: "Affirmation of Accomplishments," "Relief and Relaxation," "Awareness of the Future," "Writing Concerns," "Organization and Chronological Order of the Writing Process," and "Reflection." These themes revealed common thoughts and experiences represented by all seven community college students who participated

in the study. The participants were contacted to discuss the findings and to get feedback to determine how well the researcher interpreted their meanings from the interviews and observations. Only two participants discussed the findings in person and both agreed that the themes reflected their own thoughts about the study. The other five participants did not provide any feedback. In Chapter Five, findings drawn from the research, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research are discussed.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter focuses on findings that relate to the research question and theoretical framework. To conclude the study, implications for practice and recommendations for future research are discussed.

Overview of Study

The main purpose of this study was to examine how students make meaning of their experiences through the expressive writing process. Using an exploratory, qualitative approach, seven participants were interviewed to gain a better understanding of their experiences with the expressive writing process. The participants wrote two expressive writing pieces, each for 20 minutes. Next, they were interviewed about their experiences with the expressive writing process. In an open-ended interview, the participants were asked this question: How would you describe your experience with expressive writing? A constant comparative analysis approach was used to examine the interview data as a collective whole to find similar themes from the participants' answers. The analysis resulted in six main themes from the transcribed transcripts. The findings are discussed in relation to transformative learning theory and expressive writing theories. Following this discussion an overall summary of the findings, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research are presented.

Theme #1: “Affirmation of Accomplishments”

Expressive writing can be used as a method to reflect on past negative obstacles or events to learn from them (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). When this finding is analyzed through the expressive writing cognitive-processing theory and transformative learning theory, the conclusion can be made that expressive writing may be a method to reflect

on an experience in order to realize previous accomplishments. The cognitive-processing theory suggests that individuals construct meaning from traumatic events and organize thoughts, feelings, and emotions into a narrative form (Klein & Boals, 2001). After writing about their obstacles in the first expressive writing exercise, the participants reported realizing their accomplishments after experiencing some negative or anxious emotions when recounting their narrative.

According to the expressive writing cognitive-processing theory, stressful events are often difficult to deconstruct and reconstruct for meaning, but research suggests that expressive writing could help facilitate cognitive processing, so that an individual can gain a new perspective that is consistent with self and worldviews (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Pennebaker, 1989). For example, Monica and Trinity reported that they experienced negative emotions as they wrote the narrative, but both reported an “a-ha” moment as the writing helped them discover their accomplishments. Although part of the writing process was at times stressful when recounting previous events, the participants gained positive insights, which resulted in discovering their accomplishments.

All participants reported that once they noticed their writing had structure and a narrative storyline they experienced the moment of affirmation and realized their previous accomplishments. According to Sloan and Marx (2004), participants need to write in a narrative form to fully develop their thoughts and to organize the event in a coherent manner to make sense of the issue. For example, Joe reported that he had a moment of realization when he reached the halfway point in the first writing exercise, once he noticed the direction his narrative was going. For Trinity, the process took longer, but she realized her accomplishments after completing the first expressive writing exercise. Overall, each participant felt a strong sense of

accomplishment, and often this affirmation happened through a sudden “a-ha” moment. The main difference among the participants was the time at which each realized the moment of the affirmation. The structure of the narrative was necessary in making the discovery, which supports Sloan and Marx’s (2004) research.

Another possible connection to the cognitive-processing theory was that participants reported feelings of anxiety, stress, and anger, but the severity of these feelings lessened after they realized their strong accomplishments. According to the cognitive-processing theory, the attempt to create a narrative and freely express one’s ideas and thoughts on a stressful or difficult circumstance is part of the reason for the reduction of negative emotions and the increase in positive mental and physical health (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Smyth, 1998). For example, Monica reported that after reaching the 10-minute mark of her first writing exercise, her anxiety and anger lessened, and she began to feel relaxed and more positive when she realized her accomplishments and began to think about her current and future goals. Also, Trinity mentioned she was emotional before the writing exercise because of recent family issues, but as she kept writing she found it easier to manage her thoughts. Although this finding shows some support for Lepore and Greenberg’s (2002) study on expressive writing and personal relationships, not every participant felt negative emotions before the expressive writing exercise. However, this finding supports part of the theory behind the expressive writing paradigm (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011), and the participants did not specifically label their feelings of anxiety or stress as negative or as positive when beginning the expressive writing exercises. Also, the participants found that the process helped them feel more positive as they continued to write, which supports previous research that there is a positive emotional change in perspective that is perceived as beneficial

when learning from a traumatic event or obstacle (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Sloan & Marx, 2004; Smyth et al., 2001).

Also, these findings align with the framework of the transformative learning theory. With transformative learning theory, meaning is examined and constructed through past experiences that eventually lead to critical self-reflection of current and future events (Taylor & Cranton, 2012). One of the beginning phases in Mezirow's (1994) model for transformative learning is a disorienting dilemma, or a life-event crisis, that triggers reflection. A disorienting dilemma can be an internal or external issue that occurs in an individual's life for indefinite periods of time (Mezirow, 1978; Taylor, 1998). When faced with a disorienting dilemma, learners can use expressive writing to express their thoughts and deep feelings to help release unwanted thoughts and to focus on overcoming a recent negative experience (Frattaroli et al., 2011). The participants in this study wrote about a current or recent obstacle in their community college experience. While they constructed a narrative and reflected on the experience, they not only recognized how they overcame an obstacle but also realized their accomplishments. One possible explanation is that expressive writing helps students in the process of transformation to build self-confidence and recognize goals. This course of action occurs through the process of critical reflection. By using expressive writing, a learner can integrate, organize, and analyze the experience simply by focusing on the reconstruction of the learner's reality (Lyubomirsky, Sousa, & Dickerhoof, 2006; Mezirow, 1991). The simple act of writing creates an opportunity for questioning and considering other details or factors related to the disorienting dilemma (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Mezirow, 1991). By recognizing these details, expressive writing might be used to help individuals make positive connections from negative or stressful events,

which may give some insight into how the participants recognize their accomplishments in a positive manner.

Theme #2: “Relaxation and Relief”

The second finding in this exploratory, qualitative study is that the participants described a calming effect that typically occurred during the writing exercises, while there was a great sense of relief after completing the two writing exercises. For example, Bob reported that when he was writing he felt “very relaxed, almost like I was in a meditative state. It was like I didn’t really have to think about it.” After he completed the two expressive writing prompts, he felt relieved that he had overcome many obstacles and that the writing was finished. Bob stated: “I was able to just put it away and know I had it done.” Monica and Trinity both reported feeling stressed before beginning the writing process, but after they started the first writing exercise, they became more and more relaxed. Monica mentioned that she was relieved because she could tell the story of how she overcame her obstacle from start to finish. “It was just like well, I’m done. It’s okay. I’m done with it.” Trinity reported that the writing exercise had brought up difficult emotions in dealing with her ex-husband and the resentment she had felt towards him, but she reported, “...I was so tense at the start when I was being timed, but by the second go-around, I felt at ease. I was relaxed and reflective by the second one.” Lisa, Joe, Axel, and Finnegan also reported similar increasingly relaxed feelings during the writing process, and each one described a feeling of relief after completing the process.

These data suggest that the participants felt less worry and anxiety by writing about their struggles while reflecting on past obstacles, and by the end of the process, they felt relieved to know they had overcome their obstacles. Also, these data provide some evidence to support the conclusion that expressive writing has positive physical and mental health effects, such as

reducing stress and anxiety (Frattaroli; 2006; Lepore, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986; Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999; Stanton et al., 2002). This finding relates partially to the expressive writing disinhibition theory. Individuals during the expressive writing process can release emotional tension, which reduces the amount of intrusive, unwanted thoughts that can lead to lower levels of physiological and physical functioning (Lepore, 1997). After beginning the expressive writing exercise, the participants repeatedly reported feelings of relaxation, and although the amount of intrusive thoughts may not have been reduced, the participants released previously held emotions that led to reduced anxiety and stress. Yet, the disinhibition expressive writing theory does not necessarily explain the complete sense of relief the participants felt. They did not report that the negative, stressful, or anxious emotions or thoughts were necessarily reduced, and they only mentioned feeling relaxed as they continued the writing process. There is no direct explanation for why the participants were relaxed at certain points of the expressive writing study, yet the disinhibition theory shows some plausibility because participants felt more positive due to disclosing the obstacle they faced.

In relation to transformative learning theory, the participants were able to express their thoughts and deep feelings to help free their minds of unwanted thoughts and to focus on overcoming a recent negative experience (Frattaroli et al., 2011; Mezirow, 1994). The main connection between disinhibition theory and transformative learning theory is that the obstacle the participants discussed in their writing was their disorienting dilemma, and the action of questioning and reflecting on the disorienting dilemma created a sense of relaxation and relief. One possible explanation is that releasing negative thoughts by writing about them might help participants recognize positive goals and, thus, feel relieved.

Theme #3: Awareness of the Future

Each of the seven participants reported how their experience with expressive writing helped them see potential for their futures. Participants reported that the expressive writing exercises made them feel positive about their futures, particularly when dealing with job possibilities and financial security. Although the participants reported having some anxiety and fear about their futures, the expressive writing exercises helped them realize how much potential they had to succeed in the future. For example, Trinity reported, “I don’t know but it just made me feel better because I always felt inadequate and now, I feel like I’m going somewhere.” Axel described the feeling as “I realized that I have more than just a degree and that I have some many things I can do with it.” All participants felt positive about their futures and aware of new possibilities and goals in their lives.

One possible connection to help explain this experience is through the expressive writing self-regulation theory. After the participants reflected on their situations, they became aware of their future circumstances with a positive attitude. Trinity thought about her purpose in life as she wrote about the expressive writing exercise and how she felt positive during the process.

When Bob reflected on his past, he recognized that he had learned to overcome his previous obstacles, and this moment caused him to look to his future possibilities with a positive outlook. Overall, by writing the narrative in chronological form, the participants reflected on the obstacles they had overcome, and at some point in their writing, they realized that they were overcoming obstacles, which will help them overcome challenges in their careers and lives in the future. In connection with self-regulation theory, King (2001) found that expressive writing could help individuals self-regulate by exploring the causes of their issues and getting feedback to set future goals. Although there is some connection to the self-regulation theory, the

participants did not exactly explain their experience in this manner, and there was no feedback given by other individuals. Individuals can use expressive writing to become self-regulated by exploring emotions related to the traumatic event, developing goals, and using feedback from the expressive writing experience to pursue one's goals (Frattaroli, 2006). For this study, self-regulation theory did not seem to completely fit with this theme. Instead of developing goals for the future, the participants merely recognized their potential to be successful in the future and that there were many possibilities to make that happen. For example, Joe mentions that "this experience helped me realize that I can look back on it all and laugh, and I will be ready for the future because there will always be some challenge." Axel reported, "I may not know what's ahead, but at least I've thought about it and know where I want to go." Overall, Axel reported that the expressive writing exercise helped her realize that her future is going to be exciting and that the hard work is already paying off for her family and career.

Although cognitive-processing theory and disinhibition theory may offer some explanation for their experiences of constructing meaning from their narratives, both theories mention nothing about recognizing future possibilities or gaining insight from reflection to look toward future possibilities. Although this finding may not necessarily completely fit into one particular expressive writing theory, this experience may relate better to another expressive writing study. Hudson and Day (2012) found in their study that the participants, after they felt anxious, guilty, and even depressed initially, were able to move past the challenging aspects of their issue and focus on the idea that success was a possibility.

Overall, the simple act of writing creates an opportunity for questioning and considering other details or factors with the disorienting dilemma (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006; Mezirow 1978, 1991, 2000). The act of writing could have facilitated the process of transformation to build self-

confidence with the participants, and through the process of reflection the participants expressed feeling positive and ready to take on future challenges. Expressive writing could help facilitate the later phases of Mezirow's transformative learning theory by providing the individual with the tools to find their own unity and purpose. Through discourse, exploration, and examination, an individual participating in expressive writing can transition into a course of action for future experiences (McAdams, 2001).

Theme #4 "Writing Concerns"

One of the themes that emerged from the data was the participants' concerns about their writing skills, particularly their grammar and punctuation skills, even though the instructions clearly stated not to focus on grammar and punctuation. Some of the participants were concerned that their writing would not be understood, and this issue added to their feelings of anxiety at the start of the expressive writing process. Some of the participants believed this anxiety stemmed from previous coursework that involved extensive writing. For example, Lisa reported that her past instructors scrutinized her work, "thinking I was just being lazy. And I was really trying hard! I have a lot of anxiety when I write, so it was nice to not worry about it, but I was worried about whether it would make sense." Axel reported, "I had always been taught to be careful with each sentence and then look the sentence over for any punctuation or grammar errors." After experiencing some feelings of anger, Monica mentioned that she "was worried about grammar before I started even though the directions said not to worry about it, but I like to try to write well." For all the participants, at some point during the writing process, they were concerned and insecure about their writing ability and their grammar and punctuation skills.

This theme does not connect to any of the four major expressive writing theories, but the concern about grammar and punctuation does connect with the limitations in previous expressive

writing studies. For example, Meyer and Munson (2005) mentioned that previous learning experiences and cultural backgrounds may play a role in diminishing the effectiveness of expressive writing. Also, participants differ in levels of stress, anxiety, and other emotional and health issues that can affect an expressive writing intervention or study (Baikie, 2008; Hemenover, 2003). Depending on the individual, the concern about poor writing skills may affect the expressive writing process, and the individual may not feel comfortable disclosing personal information, which could diminish the positive effects of expressive writing (Baikie, 2008; Frattaroli, 2006; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Sloan & Marx, 2004). Yet, the anxiety surrounding using proper grammar and punctuation did not stop the participants from completing the exercises. In this study, all the participants were able to put aside their anxiety or other emotions as they continued to write. For example, Bob reported that he "...was worried because in my past I have had teachers count off for every single comma...I just forgot about the directions at the start of it, but I realized as I went on that is wasn't important." By the second session, Bob reported that his ideas did become clearer, and he felt it was not necessary to worry about his punctuation or his grammar. Also, Monica reported that "When I first started writing, I was worried I would be all over the place and it would be hard to understand because of the feelings involved." She commented that after she started writing, "I just became involved in telling my story so I just kind of forgot about worrying about everything."

After the writing sessions were completed, Trinity, Joe, and Axel worried about whether their writing was clear and understandable, but it was not a major concern. Lisa was glad to have the freedom of not worrying about grammar and punctuation because she had always had trouble with grammar and punctuation. Finnegan remained somewhat anxious throughout the first writing session but felt more at ease as the writing flowed in the second writing session.

Finnegan reported, “I think it’s important to try to be specific, and I think I tried, well, to be that way. I just wanted to make sure it could be understood, not like a text message or something.” Overall, the participants were able to move past their concerns about grammar and punctuation to complete the writing exercises. For many of the participants, the main issue was making sure that their writing made sense, and although good grammar and punctuation was not a requirement for the writing exercises, the participants felt some anxiety and fear at the beginning of the exercise. As they wrote, the participants were able to overcome feelings of inadequacy regarding their grammar and punctuation skills, although this happened at different times for each participant.

Theme #5: “Organization and Chronological Order of the Writing Process”

All participants reported that their experiences with expressive writing helped them organize emotions. Since expressive writing is written chronologically, the participants were able to reflect on how they felt about overcoming their obstacles. For example, Trinity mentioned:

As soon as I got started, it was like all my thoughts were suddenly in line with each other. All the details were laid out in order as I discussed how coming back to college and getting a divorce and raising my kids were obstacles for obtaining a degree to make better money.

Joe reported that when he has journaled in the past he was organized, but he felt the expressive writing process made it easier to organize his thoughts, which helped him understand how his emotions transitioned throughout the event. Although the participants reported differences in how much organization played a part in their writing process, all remarked that the act of writing about the event in a chronological manner was helpful in organizing their thoughts and identifying their emotions associated with the event.

One possible connection to help explain this experience is through the expressive writing cognitive-processing theory. As was discussed in Chapter 2, the cognitive-processing theory involves organizing thoughts and constructing meaning from traumatic events (Klein & Boals, 2001). Sloan and Marx (2004) believed that expressive writing provides structure, organization, unity, and meaning to past traumatic or stressful experiences. For most of the participants, the experience helped them discuss their previous situations from the beginning to the end without any major problems, and they believed that the writing was organized without having to think about how to organize the details. Since the writing process helped them organize their thoughts, participants reported that it was easy to identify the emotions that occurred during the obstacle or conflict. For example, Trinity reported, “I also found it easy to recognize the emotions and identify how I was feeling during the process of overcoming the obstacle. I could see on paper the emotion in me as a I wrote.” Finnegan reported that she recognized emotions such as denial and could point out exactly when she felt the emotion. Axel noticed that she could identify the change of anxiety and depression to confidence and wisdom. Overall, participants reported that it was easy to identify their emotions because of the chronological nature of the expressive writing exercises. Also, by being able to identify these emotions, participants reported that they could recognize how they felt during that stressful moment in time.

The process of organizing thought also connects with transformative learning theory. After a person has entered a disorienting dilemma phase, Mezirow argued that a variation of different phases emerges, such as exploring new roles and relationships, planning a course of action, and building self-confidence and competence (1979, 2000). With expressive writing, the emotional effects of experiences are more manageable, and learners can find resolution in their issues and organize any issues within their life (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Through

expressive writing, a learner can integrate, organize, and analyze the experience simply by focusing on the reconstruction of the learner's reality (Lyubomirsky et al., 2006). For example, Joe mentioned that he could see how his emotions changed from the start to the end of the experience, and because of this organization, he could identify the emotions he experienced. He and the other participants reported that the organization also helped them recognize when they were able to overcome their obstacles and build new skills.

The participants believed that expressive writing helped them organize their thoughts, and because of this, they were able to recognize triggers and emotions they encountered throughout their stressful experiences (Mezirow & Taylor, 2009; Niederhoffer & Pennebaker, 2009). Through the process of expressive writing, students can examine thinking patterns or belief systems in a structured way, which allows them to review the processes of their behavior (Hubbs & Brand, 2005).

Theme #6: "Reflection"

Reflection was the last theme found in the data analysis. As mentioned in Chapter 4, reflection is defined as an exploration of a prior experience and examination of emotions and behaviors that came from that experience. One of the most common conclusions was that the exercises helped the participants reflect upon their previous academic stressors and gave them time to reflect on those previous experiences. For example, Bob and Monica believed that reflection was the most important part of the expressive writing process because the writing helped them take time to understand their previous issues. Monica reported that the expressive writing exercises helped her reflect on her past and gain a better understanding of her circumstances at that time. Axel realized that the expressive writing exercises gave her the opportunity to recognize her future goals and how she would accomplish those goals. Although

the participants were concerned that expressive writing could trigger negative past emotions, Lisa and Trinity felt that reflection was an important part of the exercise and that it was a positive experience. For all the participants, reflection was important because it allowed them to revisit certain stressful events, process their emotions, and learn from the experience.

This theme can be connected to the cognitive-processing theory because the participants gained new positive perspectives on their goals and accomplishments through reflection (Lepore & Greenberg, 2002; Pennebaker, 1989). For example, Trinity reported that she reflected on her past and gained a better understanding of her circumstances at that time. She also mentioned that she could now reflect on her past personal and academic mistakes from a positive perspective. Through reflection, she recognized that she has completed many goals and was planning on completing more in the future. Joe discussed how reflection helped him decompress from previous stressors, relieve his anxiety, and learn from the experience.

Within the framework of transformative learning theory, meaning is “constructed through experience and our perceptions of those experiences, and future experiences are seen through the lens of the perspectives developed from past experiences” (Taylor & Cranton, 2012, p. 553). One major component of the transformative learning process is critical self-reflection (Cranton, 1994; Mezirow 1991). When an individual’s assumptions are changed by people, events, or experiences, the individual may examine his or her assumptions through critical self-reflection to determine whether there is validity to the individual’s behaviors and actions (Cranton, 1994; Taylor & Cranton, 2012; Mezirow 1978, 1991, 2000).

In this mode of self-reflection, the process may lead “to a new way of interpreting the world, and transformation has taken place” (Cranton, 1994, p. 730). For all the participants, reflection was the key to helping them recognize goals and accomplishments while analyzing

their thoughts and feelings during their experiences. Overall, the participants reported having gained greater control over their stressful academic experiences through the process of reflection, and by doing so, they gained a better understanding of the experiences, which could help them overcome future issues.

Implications for Practice

In this exploratory, qualitative study, the findings from the seven participants' interviews could help expand on understanding the individual's experience during the expressive writing process. Furthermore, this study addressed the lack of available qualitative data in the expressive writing field, which researchers have discussed previously (Lepore et al., 2015). Also, this explorative, qualitative study addressed the lack of first-person accounts that specify and explore the experiences of expressive writing (Nicholls, 2009).

Based on the results of this study, expressive writing could be used to help first-year students recognize their accomplishments and learn from past academic mistakes in a positive manner. Expressive writing could be used in the classroom to help students recognize goals for the class, their academic careers, or future employment. In this study, the participants reported that expressive writing helped them realize future goals, understand previous conflicts, and affirm their accomplishments through the process of reflection. Based on this finding, instructors could use expressive writing to help their students process the changes between high school and college, or for older adult learners, it could be used to process the changes of expectations and goals from the workplace to the college classroom setting.

By understanding how community college students have overcome challenges, students may feel more confident in their abilities to complete their coursework and plan for future opportunities. This expressive writing study showed that the participants felt more positive after

reflecting on a past obstacle, which helped them realize they had the ability to overcome future challenges and take advantage of positive opportunities in the future. Academic counselors could use expressive writing with community college students to help them recognize that they can overcome obstacles and become successful. Expressive writing may help students who are confused about planning a course of study or selecting a major by providing a simple, low-cost tool to help them develop a course of action and discover their abilities through the process of reflection.

Incorporating expressive writing in the classroom also may be beneficial because it could help alleviate anxiety for community college students. In this study, the participants reported feeling relaxed during the writing exercises, and they felt a sense of relief after completing the process. Community college students may perform better on tests after completing an expressive writing exercise because of less anxiety and stress. Before entering a difficult exam or test, students could write about their anxiety or concerns about the test beforehand. After completing the exercise, students might feel more relaxed and focused. This process could help improve problem-solving, confidence, retention, and academic success. By recognizing past concerns, students could move past previous issues and focus on positive goals.

This research also suggests that expressive writing can help community college students learn from stressful events in their academic careers, process their thoughts and emotions, and gain a new perspective on their goals through the process of reflection. Expressive writing is a low-cost intervention that could help improve critical self-reflection and analytical ability. Through reflection, students can gain a sense of purpose about their experiences in their coursework. By taking the time to think deeply about their issues and purpose of their

coursework, students may become more self-regulated in their approach to coursework, which could improve motivation, retention, and grades.

Aside from the practical application of using expressive writing in a community college setting, the findings of this study also affect the body of existing research. The themes gathered from the data fit well with the theoretical framework of expressive writing, particularly with the cognitive-processing theory, disinhibition theory, and self-regulation theory. The only theory that did not connect with the themes was the exposure theory because the participants only attended two writing sessions. With this theory, the prolonged exposure of negative thoughts surrounding a traumatic event suggests that the repetition of these thoughts would eventually help them dissipate (Frattaroli, 2006). These findings are important because the information on the emergent themes in the study could add to the growing body of research to help understand and recognize the theory behind the positive effects of expressive writing on mental and physical health.

Also, previous studies have shown that a combination of facts and emotions play a part in the therapeutic process of expressive writing, but it is still unclear how these factors affect the process (Hirai et al., 2012). Although the sample size was only seven participants, researchers now have some additional information about different types of content and emotions involved during the writing process which is discussed earlier in Chapters 4 and 5.

Although the content of the writing was not analyzed, many participants brought up the content of their writing in their interviews, and this data helped shape some the themes. Merrell et al. (2011) suggested that future studies should focus on the context of the prompt and analyze emergent themes in college students' writings to understand the possible transitions and life choices they face. Following this suggestion, this study showed that the participants found future

goals and accomplishments through reflection, and many of their issues stemmed from some common issues such as stress from school to more personal or family issues such as divorce, financial issues, or illness. The findings present insights into each participant's issues and the transition they make to overcome the issue or obstacle.

Overall, this study showed that expressive writing is a transformative experience because the participants reflect on the obstacle, learn from it, and, as a result, recognize their accomplishments and goals for the future. This exercise also helped the participants realize and reflect on their emotions that occurred during a stressful time in their lives. Not only can expressive writing help individuals reflect on the complexities in their lives, but it can be used for problem-solving, and it creates an opportunity for transformative learning (Yorks & Kasl, 2006)

Recommendations for Future Research

As noted in Chapter 1, there are few studies on expressive writing and community college students. This exploratory qualitative research explores the mechanisms of expressive writing and connects themes from the data to the existing expressive writing theoretical framework. Although this study gives some insight into the growing body of research on expressive writing, recommendations for further research are listed below:

1. The data for the current study consisted of community college students' interviews.

Although the interviews were used to explore themes, it might be interesting to analyze emotion and function words used in the students' expressive writing journals to examine how these words may contribute to the expressive writing process. Also, this process could be applied to a larger pool of community college students.

2. While the current study focused on seven community college students, additional qualitative studies on community college and 4-year university students would be beneficial to compare the emerging themes. By comparing community college students to 4-year university students, the results could provide insight on how expressive writing could be used in different academic settings. The data might show different obstacles the students face, and the findings might identify different stressors that affect retention in each group.
3. In this study, one of the major themes was “Writing Concerns.” Some of the participants were concerned about their grammar and punctuation although the directions for the prompt clearly stated not to worry about grammar and punctuation. By analyzing how grammar and writing skills affect the expressive writing process with community college students, researchers may discover whether poor writing skills negate the positive effects of expressive writing.
4. For this study, the writing prompt was changed to focus more on academic challenges. Other studies have also changed the prompt to meet their research needs. There is the possibility that changes in the prompt could affect the expressive writing process or weaken the data. Future research could investigate the effects of using the original prompt compared to using a variation of the prompt Pennebaker created.
5. Another possibility for future research is to analyze different age groups to provide insight into the differences in life transitions and issues in the participants’ lives. The age group in this study consisted of seven participants who were under the age of 40, and most of them were between the ages of 20 and 30. More qualitative or

quantitative studies could explore the differences and similarities on the effects of expressive writing with different age groups.

6. In this study, there was a strong mix of race and gender even though the sample consisted of only seven participants. Thus, additional research on expressive writing with a sample that varies in race, gender, socioeconomic status, and location is needed. It could provide essential information that shows how social factors affect the expressive writing process. A small exploratory study cannot capture all these factors and is only a starting point for future research.

These recommendations for future research may help expand the knowledge of mechanisms that affect the expressive writing process and may provide additional information on why expressive writing can be beneficial in making meaning of traumatic experiences.

Conclusion

The results of this exploratory, qualitative study adds to the limited body of qualitative research on expressive writing. The main importance of this study is that these data provide qualitative support for the theoretical framework of expressive writing and provide multiple perspectives of the experience to give a clearer picture of the mechanisms involved in the process of expressive writing. Also, the analysis of the interviews shows that expressive writing helps students build confidence by recognizing their goals and accomplishments through the process of reflection. As part of transformative learning, expressive writing not only can be used to provide meaning to a problem, but it can be used to help students make connections and create possible solutions to their issues. The resulting themes of “Affirmation of Accomplishments,” “Relief and Relaxation,” “Awareness of Future,” “Writing Concerns,” “Identifying/Organizing Emotions,” and “Reflection” gave insight into the participants’ experiences with expressive

writing. Further study is needed to explore the expressive writing experiences of various populations. More qualitative data will help researchers find a more direct way of understanding how expressive writing can be a useful tool for positive transformation and self-regulation.

Personal Reflection

When I began this doctoral dissertation, I did not realize how much of an impact expressive writing had on my life, having always believed writing was an important part of education. I have always stressed the importance of becoming good writers and arguing their points with plenty of examples and explanation to my own students. Yet, I found that the writing process was a journey and was trying to rush my students to become great writers. I realized that learning to write was never a sprint, but it was a long run with twists and turns and plenty of obstacles. Expressive writing and journaling gave me the chance to help my students enjoy the process and learn from their writing. I tell my students that college is one of the few places where someone gets the chance to reflect and think, and expressive writing is a wonderful opportunity to help make that happen in the classroom.

Although this explorative study provided some strong data that may be used as a starting point to explore future research with expressive writing, I found more joy interacting with my participants from the community college. I enjoyed hearing their thoughts and ideas about their process, and each participant took it seriously. Personally, I sometimes find it difficult to see progress in some students at the community college due to the obstacles they face such as financial burden, family issues, and other factors that can affect student performance. With this study, it was nice to see so many students step up and take part in a study because they were truly interested in helping educational research. After listening to each of the students during the interviews, I was so impressed by the thoughtful reflection and engagement.

Many of the students reported that they were excited about future opportunities because they were working hard toward their goals. When I heard this, I started to feel more excited about my own future. It made me think about what I wanted in life, and despite any obstacle I may have, I still had to overcome so much and have worked hard to achieve this doctorate. The students in this study helped me realize once again that life is a process much like writing. It takes time and many revisions to get to where you want to be, but after it is done, it will be worth it. They taught me the most important part of anything is the journey, not always the destination.

Although these students have probably faced harder struggles than I can ever imagine, I cannot help but think about all the times I thought I could not do it or didn't want to move forward because I was dealing with so many life issues ranging from family illness, a newborn, job, financial struggles, and personal issues. I have been blessed to have met so many kind people and gained so many new friendships and mentorships. Writing is a passion, no matter what form, and it was nice to have so many colleagues support my research. I have spent the last few years wondering whether I was going on the right path, whether I was good enough to do this, or whether I was truly a scholar. The participants in the study helped me realize that we all have fears, worries, and plenty of self-doubt, but the important part is to never give up.

Most of the participants showed me through their own stories and actions that anything is possible, but it is important to put yourself in situations to succeed. Expressive writing has become a way for me to succeed by reflecting on obstacles and learning from the experience of pursuing my doctorate. The whole process has given me hope that many young adult learners are on their way to success, and I am so happy that I was able to hear about their experiences. By reflecting on the past and learning from experience, I can move forward to a better future. I will

miss the rich conversations from the participants, workplace colleagues, and the great mentors I had during this whole process.

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APPENDICES

Appendix A

Informed Consent Statement

Exploring Students' Experiences with the Expressive Writing Process

INTRODUCTION

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Jeffrey A. Russell, a Doctor of Philosophy candidate from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. The results from this study will contribute towards a doctoral dissertation. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you identify as a current community college student. You must be aged 18 or older to participate. Your participation is voluntary. Please take as much time as you need to read the information sheet. You may also decide to discuss it with your family or friends. You will be given a copy of this form.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore community college students' experiences with expressive writing. The goal of this study is to provide educators and social services providers a better understanding of this population using expressive writing. By understanding the students' experiences, I hope to uncover some of the strategies involved to how expressive writing works and give a more in-depth view of the expressive writing process.

INFORMATION ABOUT PARTICIPANTS' INVOLVEMENT IN THE STUDY

You will be asked to participate in two short 15-20 minute writing sessions and one in-depth interview during the Spring 2019 term. During the interview, you will be asked a series of questions related to your experience with the expressive writing exercise as a community college student. To get a complete account of your experience, each question will be built on the next. All interviews will be audio recorded and notes will be taken. The interviews will be conducted at a location that is public and convenient for you, but quiet and enclosed enough for privacy (faculty study room at the Electronic Resource Center is an option). All interviews will be transcribed. After the interview, you may be invited back to review the themes that were found for accuracy and further discussion. Additional questions may be asked at this point for clarification. You will be given a false name (pseudonym). Please remember your pseudonym since all the data collected will be associated with this pseudonym.

RISKS

There is a potential risk for the loss of confidentiality. This risk is inherent in most research studies that obtain or maintain confidential identifiable information; the risk of loss of confidentiality will be minimized by securing all consent forms, audio interviews, transcripts, and data on the flash drive in a locked metal box in the faculty advisor's office. The flash drive will also be password protected.

BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR TO SOCIETY

Your participation in this study will provide the researcher with information on the process of expressive writing and to further explore these variables across research disciplines (i.e.,

counseling, positive psychology, adult education). The data from your experience may help inform educators, health providers, and social services providers in shaping policy and practices to improve the quality of life and access to higher education for future and current students.

CONFIDENTIALITY

There will be no information obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you. Your name, address or other information that may identify you will not be collected during this research study. The information collected about you will be coded using a fake name (pseudonym). You will have the right to review/edit your interviews and written “lived-experience descriptions” upon request. All data and audio files will be stored on a flash drive will be secured by a password, and this will also be stored in the locked metal box. When the results of the dissertation are discussed, no information will be included that would reveal your identity. All audio files and data will be stored and locked in a metal safe for 3 years after the study has been completed and then destroyed. Your name will not be published or shared with anyone outside of the research, including the faculty, staff, or administrators at Pellissippi State Community College and The University of Tennessee.

CONTACT INFORMATION

If you have any questions or concerns about the research, please feel free to contact the principle investigator, Jeffrey A. Russell, by telephone at (865) 318--1588 or e-mail at jrusse56@vols.utk.edu. You can also contact my faculty/dissertation advisor Ralph Brockett at brockett@utk.edu. If you have questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the University of Tennessee IRB Compliance Officer at utkirb@utk.edu or (865) 974-7697.

PARTICIPATION

Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer and still remain in the study. Your grades or other services at Pellissippi State Community College will not be affected whether or not you participate. Your decision whether or not to participate is not academically related so your decision will not impact you academically. Participation in the study will not be part of your experience in any academic program. If you are a former or current student of the principle investigator (Jeffrey A. Russell), you are disqualified from participating due to University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board policy guidelines and potential conflict of interest.

CONSENT

I have read the above information. I have received a copy of this form. I agree to participate in this study.

Participant’s signature _____ Date _____

Appendix B

Recruitment Letter

Dear fellow faculty member and staff (or specific name of professor),

I, Jeff Russell, MA, a doctoral student from the University of Tennessee -Knoxville and tenured-faculty member with the English department at Pellissippi State Community College, am sending you this email to ask if you would be willing to let me speak to your students about an opportunity to volunteer for my research study, *Exploring Students' Experiences with Expressive Writing*.

The main purpose of this study is to examine how students make meaning of their experience with the expressive writing process. In this study, I plan to explore the students' experiences through interviews to better understand what experiences these students are facing in a community college setting. By gaining a better understanding of the students' experience with using expressive writing, this research may uncover some of the strategy involved in how expressive writing works, and it may give a more in-depth view of the expressive writing process.

I would greatly appreciate an opportunity to speak to your class about this research study, and I can meet you in person to discuss the research study. Feel free to contact me at Jrusse56@vols.utk.edu or 865-318-1588.

Sincerely,

Jeff Russell
Assistant Professor, English Department
Pellissippi State Community College

Doctoral Candidate, The University of Tennessee-Knoxville
865-318-1588 (cell)
865-539-7358 (work)

Jrusse56@vols.utk.edu (email)

Appendix C

Interview Protocol for Expressive Writing Study

Pseudonym: _____

Introduction: Thank you once again for participating in this study. During this interview, you will have the opportunity to share with me your personal experience of the recent expressive writing exercise. I want to remind you that your identity will remain confidential, and I want you to feel free to speak openly about your experience.

First question: Will it be okay for me to record the interviews?

Second question: Once I get these interviews completely transcribed, I might ask you to look at the themes I have found and review them for accuracy and further discussion. Would you be willing to do that for me?

Before we begin, I want to give you the opportunity to ask me any questions pertaining to this study or information you would like to learn about me. I am happy to answer any questions, and I want you to feel comfortable discussing the interview process with me.

Interview: Expressive Writing Experience with Community College Student

Time of Start Interview:

Time of End Interview:

Date and Location:

Interviewer:

Interviewee:

Open—Ended Questions:

1) How would you describe your experience with expressive writing?

Follow-up template examples:

1) Could you tell me more about.....

2) You mentioned previously about “.....”.....what did you mean by “.....”?

VITA

Jeffrey A. Russell was born in North Carolina and lived in Canada during his youth. The family moved to Brentwood, Tennessee, when he was young, and he spent most of his teenage years in the Nashville area. After high school, Jeff went to the University of Alabama for three years and then completed his BS in journalism/mass communication at Middle Tennessee State University in 1999. Jeff worked numerous contracts jobs in radio, music, and television, and eventually ended up working a more permanent job in mental health counseling in 2002. After working as mental health counselor, Jeff decided to go back to Middle Tennessee State University in 2005 to pursue a teaching degree. After receiving his state license to teach high school English, he went to Belmont University in 2008 and received his Master of Arts in English in 2010. After completing his master's degree, Jeff continued to work in various roles as a social worker, case manager, and teacher. In 2012, Jeff began working at Pellissippi State Community College in Knoxville, Tennessee, as a full-time instructor. In late 2012, Jeff was accepted into the PhD in the Educational Psychology and Counseling program at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. Jeff is now a tenured associate professor of English at Pellissippi State Community College and is completing his doctorate. Currently, Jeff lives in Maryville, Tennessee, with his wife Jennifer and daughter Ella, and continues to publish poetry and teach composition when he is not researching and writing articles dealing with expressive writing, motivation, positive psychology, and workplace learning.