AOSIS

Nurturing inclusivity among Durban University of Technology students through reflective writing

CrossMark
click for updates

Authors:
Rhoda T.I. Abiolu[1]
Linda Z. Linganiso[2]
Hosea O. Patrick[3]

Affiliations:
[1]Centre for General Education, Faculty of Arts and Design, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

[2]Research and Postgraduate Support, Durban University of Technology, Durban, South Africa

[3]Global Migration and Community Development, School of Built Environment and Development Studies, University of KwaZulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa

Corresponding author:
Rhoda Abiolu,
abiolurhoda@gmail.com

Reflective writing is unarguably an essential component in experiential learning. For this reason, its usefulness as a communicative tool in nurturing students' inclusivity, agency and sense of belonging needs further academic engagement. Additionally, the surrounding access, participation and success of students in higher education and the importance of reflective writing require adequate exploration within the South African space, thereby necessitating this study. This article is an inferential experiential discourse on the use of reflective writing as an important skillset acquired by students through the flagship Cornerstone module offered by the Centre for General Education, Durban University of Technology. This article explores using reflective writing for students to freely express themselves, thereby cultivating a deeper sense of inclusiveness and belonging and encouraging active involvement in socialisation and transformative education. The study's setting was premised within the Durban University of Technology university-wide Cornerstone module for first-year students (enrolled in the course for the second semester, 2021 session). The authors employed a self-reflective practice owing to the authors' inferential experiences as facilitators of the module (between 2018 and 2021) in utilising reflective writing in the classroom, along with a triangulation of secondary data from the literature. The study revealed that reflective writing aids a practice of inclusivity that underpins transformative learning. It forms the basis for a participatory methodological approach in educational encounters. It can be leveraged to tackle identity and belonging crises and exclusions by giving a voice to students to express themselves freely and creatively. The authors advocate for more relevant, inclusive and creative educational approaches to tackle societal issues. This can be effective for identity building, a sense of community and belongingness and individual motivation to communicate, creating a space for participation and valued involvement for students.

Contribution: This article contributes to advancing divergent teaching practices such as more dialogic learner-centred techniques available through reflective writing methodologies compared to univocal delivery methods to encourage a more inclusive pedagogy and sense of placement and belonging for students.

Keywords: reflective writing; belonging; identity; higher education; South Africa.

Introduction

Reflective writing is central to experiential learning as an important component in integrating professional experiences with academic learning (Gibson et al. 2017; Ramlal & Augustin 2020). There have been debates on the potency of reflective writing as a communicative channel instrumental for classroom engagement among learners and facilitators within higher education institutions in South Africa (Jonck & De Coning 2018; Reed, Davis & Nyabanyaba 2002; Toni & Makura 2015). In addition, Ramdass (2016) averred that adopting reflective methodology is a feasible means to improve students' experiences of teaching and learning and their trust in the South African educational system. The author noted that the failed trust in the system was because of factors such as a high number of graduates but low employment opportunities, inadequate public funding, social injustices and inequalities resulting in 'unbelongingness'. Considering the configuration of the South African sociocultural space in terms of its unique diversity, the need for 'belongingness', which is in many ways an integral ingredient for social cohesion, is critical. This article addresses how reflective writing, within the context of the Durban University of Technology's Cornerstone module, can focus on one of these challenges: 'unbelongingness' (identity issues).

Methodology

This article, which typifies a participatory exploratory methodology, is essentially a *reflection* of the authors' experiences as facilitators of the Centre for General Education's Cornerstone module

spanning 2018 to 2021. The views are premised on engagements with students and their use of reflective writing as a participatory method for enhancing students' sense of inclusivity and belonging in the classroom. Toni and Makura (2015), who adopted this same approach, concluded that applying reflective practices on the part of facilitators and students alike is a plausible approach that can be 'useful in gaining a deeper understanding of the teaching and learning process in a higher education (Toni & Makura 2015:53).

This article draws from a larger body of ongoing work focusing on the views of first-year students at the Durban University of Technology on reflective writing and gender-based violence (GBV). It is aimed at fostering free and inclusive expression and communication among students while advocating ways in which this can help to mitigate GBV. While these views are not directly reflected in this article, it provides an auto-ethnographical reflection from a participant observational standpoint of the authors as facilitators to argue on the use of reflective writing as a viable instrument for nurturing inclusivity and belongingness in the classroom.

Need for the study

As a working definition, this article contextualises reflective writing as describing an event or phenomenon from the writer's perspective and lived experiences. It includes (but is not limited to) a real or imaginary sense of an event, passing thoughts, interaction or personal interpretation of a phenomenon. It is a tool that enables a writer to express themselves without the fear of stigmatisation or any form of intimidation or negative backlash, as the writer is shielded from the need to impress a physical audience. And as Buckingham Shum et al. (2016) put it, reflective writing aids critical appraisal and development. It enables students to understand key concepts more deeply and channel such understanding in their own language. The ability for students to lay out these thoughts in 'their own language' through artistic or written expressions is a hallmark of reflective writing in the Cornerstone module. The eventual section on 'Communication in education: advancing dialogic or two-way class encounters through reflective writing' details how this is achieved in the module.

Because of the growing evidence that proves there is a culture of silence prevalent within the South African society, especially on sensitive topics such as GBV, identity studies and issues around human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and acquired immune deficiency syndrome (AIDS) (Burgess 2016; Hanass-Hancock et al. 2018; Mackworth-Young, Bond & Wringe 2020; Stewart & Ivala 2017), the use of reflective writing as a medium for expression by muted voices in the articulation of self and others, without the worry of stigmatisation, cannot be overemphasised. This culture of silence is reflected even within the educational environment, as only a fraction of students can publicly speak about these societal problems (Hanass-Hancock et al. 2018; Mackworth-Young et al. 2020). Those with great difficulties 'speaking up'

on delicate or sensitive topics are uncomfortable because of low proficiency in English and the feeling of inadequacy in some form. The notion of not being equipped enough with the necessary skills to adapt to social and academic encounters in higher education makes many students resort to keeping quiet. So also, in the words of Shapiro (2020):

> There is surprisingly little research within [*higher education*] into issues of classroom climate … in not talking about the ways that our pedagogies and spaces contribute to social inclusion and sense of belonging. [*Therefore,*] we may be missing an opportunity to highlight the importance and possibilities for [*how academic and reflective writing can fill this gap*]. (p. 156)

Reflective writing is a requisite skillset that students at the Durban University of Technology acquire through modules offered by the Centre for General Education, particularly the flagship Cornerstone module. Emphasis is on the Cornerstone module because it utilises a reflective writing approach to analyse students' understanding of the various topics in the module. It provides a unique way to access and assess students' responses ethically. Through the Cornerstone (ICON 2015) module, facilitators work:

> With the lived experiences of students and raise questions [*on*] how such experiences relate to the formal curriculum [...] Cornerstone works to ensure high levels of safety for students. Inevitably, sensitive issues are raised [*by the students*], including [...] challenging issues that they have faced. Central to this is the negotiation around developing a common set of values that staff and students agree to abide with. (n.p.)

By creating a common set of values, students are assured that their reflections are confidential and can thus express themselves freely. The Cornerstone reflection is an activity that helps students critically analyse the teaching and learning process. In this study, the authors argue that students' experiences can be utilised in describing, questioning and ultimately transforming sociocultural and educational practices for belongingness, especially within South African society. Because reflective writing acknowledges the relevance and importance of the personal responses of those who have cultivated this skill in describing and reporting their narratives or responding to social queries (Macfarlane 2015), it becomes imperative to understand how these perspectives can be effective for inclusiveness and belonging within classroom settings. By this, the learner is recognised as an active participant in improving learning and professional practice; higher education courses aim to ultimately reach the critical level for deep and effective learning (Ryan 2011).

Cornerstone reflections are done mostly after each tutorial class to help the students ponder deeply on the teaching and learning process and concentrate on their understanding of concepts discussed in class concerning their perceptions and individual life experiences. As Macfarlane (2015:345–346) opined, reflective writing 'provides an authentic insight into the links between professional theory and practice and the inner thought processes of students … [which] brings to the fore performative rituals of confession and compliance'. In

this sense, reflective writing is an experiential learning technique that deepens students' analytical abilities and understanding of fundamental concepts while providing a platform for written expression on the individual students' terms (Coleman & Willis 2015; Shum et al. 2017).

This article argues that reflective writing helps students to engage actively with the process of transformative education, breaking away from the traditional roles of lecturer–students and sender–receiver, consequently allowing the communication and feedback role to be accommodating and interactive. This can be effective for identity building, a sense of community and participation, inclusivity and belongingness, individual motivation to communicate and valued involvement (Hagerty et al. 1992). This practice of inclusivity underpins transformative learning and the need for more relevant and creative approaches in education to tackle societal issues (Rapp & Corral-Granados 2021). It also forms the basis for a participatory approach in educational encounters and practices.

Dealing with the crises of identity and belonging within classroom settings

The desire for a deeper, thorough and more comprehensive interpretation of identity has been prevalent in society. The innate human need for a sense of place, belonging and connectedness manifests in varying social contexts, such as classrooms and institutions of higher education, which are the focal points of this discourse. To (Hagerty et al. 1992) have:

> [A] sense of belonging is defined as the experience of personal [and valued] involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment. (p. 11)

And evidence shows that descriptions of belonging for students are hinged on factors such as the school environment, relationships with peers or siblings, relationships with teachers or facilitators and the conscious effort to embody positive emotions, feelings and behaviour (Sancho & Cline 2012). Similarly, when students feel a sense of belonging, they are motivated, engaged and more dedicated to their educational pursuits (Greenwood & Kelly 2019). So in addressing the crises of identity formation among students, the article examines a range of academic viewpoints on attaining fulfilment in belonging or association and identity construction, including a high level of inclusivity, through reflective writing as a basis for transformative education and the valued involvement of students in teaching and learning in South Africa.

As a starting point, new students within a new academic environment may reveal concerns that can either facilitate fruitful encounters or hinder active engagements. Trujillo and Tanner's study (2014) explored some of these concerns. Their

study underscored the importance of properly understanding these interests to enhance class participation and safe spaces for students to express themselves. A bone of contention that they identified was feelings. The classroom environment can elicit feelings of anxiety, panic, fear, excitement or suppression, depending on varying factors such as peers in class, a heightened sense of diversity (seeing the multicultural state of South Africa), the facilitator, anticipation of securing good grades and financial stability, among many others. The students also have preconceived notions about outcomes of class engagements, biases and lived experiences that affect their perceptions of life and socialisation. The question emerges: how do facilitators account for these feelings and responses within classroom settings and ensure that students feel some sense of safety and belonging? A vital notion that their study stressed was to engage:

> Students to reflect [...] An in-class quick-write or a written homework assignment is a simple step instructors can take to begin to explore, understand, and monitor [these] affective dimension[s] of student learning in classrooms. (p. 7)

This viewpoint speaks to the significance of this article in creating and initiating a starting point for the discourse on adapting reflective writing to cater to the identity needs of students in South Africa. Therefore, reflecting is an open, ongoing, interactive, two-way process that requires a curious, rigorous, honest and patient analysis of the subject matter and how these affect social interactions (Williams, Woolliams & Spiro 2012). By so doing, a student-centred learning outcome can be guaranteed to foster a common sense of identity and promote agency and self-efficacy among students in South Africa.

Pym (2017) recounted that to widen participation and extend academic learning opportunities in South Africa, there is the possibility of either reproducing or challenging inequalities of experience and outcomes. The academic experiences and levels of preparedness of these students and their disadvantaged situations because of the systems of social injustice and inequality in South Africa can determine either outcome. In this light, Pym's study developed a successful model within the Education Development Unit (EDU) access programme at the University of Cape Town, which was grounded on the cultivation of reflective capacity among both facilitators and students, to stay proactive rather than reactive, well accustomed to student needs and as a gauge for effective communication and learning outcomes. These contributed to students' sense of belonging and identity to achieve wider participation and equal learning culture. The programme embraced complexity and diversity, supported various knowledge approaches relevant to affirming students' identity, promoted student agency and fostered a sense of belonging as part of a learning society. The study recognised the need for a shift from the limited knowledge of simply wanting students to assimilate into higher education institutions to create a deeper connection with themselves and the world in ways that can contribute to transformation and all-around development.

Additionally, the subject of culture is one known to affect identity because it can manifest in several forms, such as racial and linguistic concerns, and become a source of identity displacement within the South African educational space. Racial issues within classroom settings can quickly and easily degenerate into segregated outcomes that increase dissociation, unhealthy power relations and groupings or classism. For instance, Alexander and Tredoux (2010) expanded on some student reflections on how racialised spaces can be reproduced based on sitting patterns of different race groups in a South African university tutorial classroom. The reflections revealed that although the classroom was a space for interracial relations, students expressed a keen awareness of racial differences. This consciousness led to racial tensions in that people were careful of the words they spoke in classes to avoid offending other races or triggering clashes. Because the issue of race extends beyond the classroom, the contact made in class seemed obligatory, superficial and neutral. However, some students reported that these neutral and compulsory interactions made interracial contact easier and even more enjoyable while it lasted. This further points to the complexity of race among South African students as they find their footing and chart their identities within higher education institutions.

In the case of Bangeni and Kapp (2007), their study indicated that students whose first language is not English encounter linguistic conflicts and some social blackout, hindering integration and identity formation. By inference, some students in Cornerstone classes are unwilling to contribute to class discussions because of difficulty expressing themselves clearly and understandably in English. They resort to keeping quiet. Without question, language literacy and development are vital to integration and belonging within classroom environments. Still, to advance a more generous space, reflective activities create the medium for self-expression without the ordeal of harsh comments or social shaming. Similarly, Abiolu, Ramohai and Linganiso (forthcoming) detail the efficacy of reflective writing among the Durban University of Technology students to devise creative alternatives to discuss their social, academic and psychological realities on topics treated in class and how they relate to these within their social milieus. In addition, this article maintains that among South African students, reflective writing skills can be a means to deal with the crises of belonging and issues of identity in classrooms.

Within the Cornerstone module, facilitators experience how these scenarios discussed above play out with students' engagement and reflective writing. At the end of each session, students' reflective write-ups are carefully accessed by the assigned class's facilitators to understand individual students' needs, interpretation of and experiences concerning the topics under discussion. This allows the facilitator to identify vulnerable students that require professional assistance as well as the state of knowledge of each student. Through reflections, introverted students and those sceptical of audience backlash because of language barriers and unpopular opinions or standpoints have the opportunity to fully express themselves in writing, thereby giving their candid opinions without the need to conform to group influences. These practices aid the facilitators' formative and summative assessment of the students and ensure inclusivity within the classroom and a heightened sense of belonging.

Inclusion and exclusion as a theoretical foundation

Luhmann's (1995) approach to inclusion and exclusion is the basis for this article's theoretical perspective. The key concepts of inclusion and exclusion form the backbone of Luhmann's school of thought. They are foregrounded within tendencies that capitalise on notions that can be either involving or segregatory, capable of initiating positive or negative outlooks towards identity formation. Luhmann's theory argues for the differentiation prevalent within every society, as it posits that modern society is made of several units (Schirmer & Michailakis 2015). Such differentiation occurs in several communication systems such as politics, education, economy, medicine, science, law, religion, social help, etc. The theory contends that within modern society, individual identity is determined by the membership of distinct subsystems based on divergent communication structures. In essence, an individual's definition of themselves is inclusivity, and, by inference, the exclusionary tendency is determined by the strata to which they belong (Braeckman 2006). This develops the perception of 'self' and 'others' within different ingroups and outgroups.

Inclusive education (which focuses on students, educational policies and organisations) can be a complex process to achieve and study. Still, the concepts of inclusion and exclusion proffer a framework to situate the ways students encounter association and segregation through various forms of communication within institutional environments (Rapp & Corral-Granados 2021). The Luhmannian discussions offer the necessary apparatus to appreciate inclusion and exclusion in a theoretically acceptable way that is highly relevant to this study (Braeckman 2006; Luhmann 1995; Schirmer & Michailakis 2015). This is because the theory is woven around how social systems are positioned to 'include only the persons they need and only specific aspects relevant to their systemic operations while excluding the rest as irrelevant' (Schirmer & Michailakis 2016:3). By this, individuals can be included on an individual basis and excluded on another. These lines of differentiation are the hallmarks of varying factors that place people at an advantage or a disadvantage because of their own experiences of unequal power relations as oppressors or the oppressed (see Crenshaw 2017 for further reference to the concept of intersectionality). And given the South African history of social injustice and exclusion of disadvantaged groups, especially in access to equitable education and distribution of resources, the propensity for the furtherance of oppression and marginalisation, whether subtly or obviously, is very much a possibility. This is because 'inclusion and exclusion in education are driven not only by the educational system but

also by other systems at the societal level' (Rapp & Corral-Granados 2021:11). And as previously highlighted, racial and socio-economic shortcomings are still the realities of students trying to navigate the waters of identity for a deeper understanding of who they are in comparison to other people and institutions of higher education in South Africa (Alexander & Tredoux 2010; Bangeni & Kapp 2007). Therefore, classroom activities and interactions can create and consist of many different social subsystems (Rapp & Corral-Granados 2021), as well as breeding grounds for inclusion and exclusion.

To reduce the exclusionary tendencies within the Durban University of Technology classrooms, focusing on the Cornerstone module, reflective writing has been utilised over time to create a safe space for students' expression and opinion generation that does not alienate anyone. Considering the racial and economic configurations in South Africa and their manifestation within the Cornerstone classes, reflective writing exercises provide a platform for the students to give candid opinions on subject matters without the anxiety of negative repercussions or being excluded by their peers based on the need for political correctness. By this, the inclusivity of the class is maintained while factors that may alienate a student from the rest of the class are kept at their barest minimum. For these reasons, it is fundamental for facilitators (as first points of contact), institutions of learning and South African educational policies to endeavour to diminish the sources and points of marginalisation. This article believes that reflective writing activities will inspire positive identity formative tendencies and be a medium for bottom-up communication. By actively involving and responding to students' views on various subject matters, there is a sense of inclusion and importance attached to these experiences because the students will feel heard. On this basis, the discussions in this article dovetail into the relevance of improving two-way class communication within a participatory approach to guarantee effective teaching and learning encounters.

Communication in education: Advancing dialogic or two-way class encounters through reflective writing

Within the concept of Cornerstone's reflective writing, the authors exemplify teaching, learning and student interactions as a dialogue that recognises and stimulates freedom of expression in ways such that students feel a sense of connectedness. It is not dominated by the facilitator or the students and their peers. Still, as advocated in the Cornerstone module, it offers the medium for mutual respect and the consolidation of an established common set of values. A sense of openness and belonging can be nurtured and cultivated, so students feel safe and heard. A few of the social and academic outcomes inculcated through reflective exercises, much in line with the views of Gravett and Petersen (2009), afford the students ample chances to question,

respond and make comments. It also allows for reflective observations and builds ideas essential for continuous and developmental articulation, examination and validation of co-constructed knowledge within the framework of their class submissions.

Before delving deeper into the discourse on how to advance dialogic communication in educational encounters, the concept of dialogic communication is unpacked. Dialogic communication is a two-way interactive method that encourages useful learning where students can question views and get critical feedback and responses to their queries (Innes 2007). These encounters recognise the central role of human experiences in knowledge construction and dissemination. Therefore, dialogic communication is an integral part of a participatory cultural basis, because it underpins the active commitments of disadvantaged groups in creating critical awareness of the relevance of their roles as subjects of transformation and change. This critical recognition is contrary to the awareness of their roles as mere objects (Freire 2005).

Similarly, Innes (2007) affirmed that:

> [S]chool has not been a place where students and teachers come together to discuss important questions. [*The school*] has been a place where students try to guess what the teacher wants them to say. (p. 14)

Waghid (1999), who situated his study within the peculiarities of the South African educational terrain, offered two advantages for expanding and grounding dialogic communication in teaching, learning and identity construction. He opined that dialogic communication:

1. [*Creates*] mutual trust and politeness in the dialogue between teacher and learner … (p. 3)

2. [*Underscores facilitator and students'*] commitment to cooperative learning. [*They both*] establish a level of intimacy and comfort [*to*] acquire a sense of each other's perspectives and interests. (p. 3)

Encouraging active involvement and asking questions via the dialogic route through reflective writings, key practices and delivery methods within the Cornerstone module, bridge this gap. Figure 1 typifies one of the ways the module facilitators strive to create an enabling environment for the inclusivity of students. The figure is adapted from a forthcoming discourse on the Cornerstone-inspired proposed framework for curriculum adjustment to mitigate social injustices within the educational space.

The Durban University of Technology example in Figure 1 showcases how class interactions can be more dialogic instead of univocal and one-sided. Lawrence (2020) stated that such practices would accommodate students' perspectives and promote belongingness and inclusivity. The Cornerstone module's culturally responsive and contextually relevant approaches are enablers for students to engage with examples from their immediate frame of reference. For example, during one of the lecture sessions of
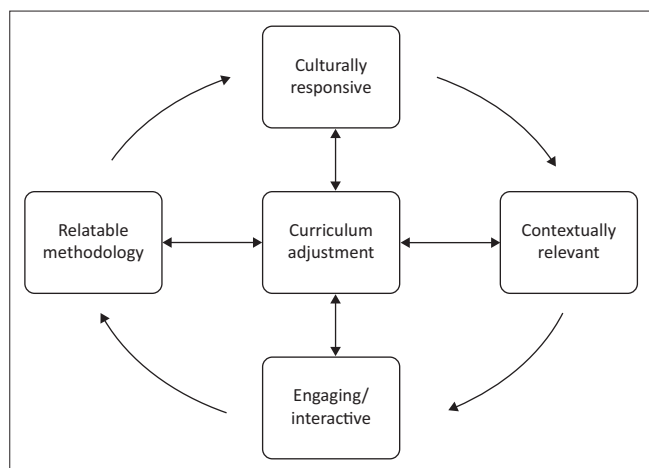
Source: Abiolu, R.T.I., Ramohai, N.J. & Linganiso, L.Z., forthcoming, 'Reformatting educational priorities within online learning in South Africa in view of COVID-19', in K.G Fomunyam & S. Moyo (eds.), *Theorising research, innovation and internationalisation in African higher education institutions*, Sense Publishers, s.l.

FIGURE 1: Adapted Cornerstone-inspired framework for student inclusivity.

the module (second semester 2021), students were required to respond to the impact of GBV on society. Some students mentioned that dependence on abusive partners for the financial support of victims is a factor that promotes violent acts. This encourages making excuses for the perpetrator and possibly getting involved in a blessee–blesser relationship where women are entrapped in risky sexual behaviour, all for material things and 'supposed' love (Thobejane, Mulaudzi & Zitha 2017). This is a common practice in South Africa (culturally responsive and contextually relevant features). The students also discussed the effectiveness of weekly reflections as a medium to speak about GBV (engaging and relatable methodology). The responses were largely favourable towards the feasibility of class reflections in addressing GBV without fear or intimidation and in dismantling the 'silence culture' around GBV.

To this effect, the implications of a dialogic approach in the reflective activities that are characteristic of the Cornerstone module to emancipate students from the feelings of inadequacies or 'unbelongingness' are beneficial for the students and other social actors such as facilitators, peers, institutions of learning and the South African society at large. These establish inclusiveness within a learning community for these students, in that class discussions and delivery methods are open for improvement. Some of the topics treated in the module span the students' journeys, their understanding of social structures and identities, issues on privilege, power, prejudice, discrimination, diversity, safe sexual practices, AIDS, gender studies, as well as consent and grievance procedures. Facilitators read and provide feedback on queries raised in the submissions and intensify awareness of their roles as change agents. This way, the activities are interactive and relatable, taking into cognisance the need for students to 'be part' of academic encounters. Additionally, the module's reflective writing exercises are equally important avenues for identifying those who may be suffering from past or lingering traumatic events and require

any form of assistance. By this, identified 'students in distress or need' are promptly but anonymously referred to the university's student counselling services.

Consequently, reflective writing can advance the importance and application of two-way, inclusive and communicative pedagogy in education. Therefore, this article thus asserts that the enthusiastic commitment on the sides of both the facilitator and the students should be leveraged in engineering fruitful encounters that advance effective two-way communication and a co-construction of knowledge. To this end, the roles of both parties are acknowledged as primary and pivotal to the success of useful teaching, learning and communication. By so doing, students can begin to enjoy more inclusion in terms of association, identity formation and safe spaces for expression within South Africa's higher educational systems, as compared to exclusionary inclinations (Braeckman 2006; Rapp & Corral-Granados 2021).

Therefore, 'a well-executed course design can produce powerful [and] useful knowledge', (Innes 2007:13), which is the case of the Cornerstone module. It improves students' perceptions of themselves and others in ways only achievable within educational encounters. This is because engagements that would ordinarily not have occurred outside the classroom are aided within such learning communities (as also shown in Alexander & Tredoux 2010). Such student-centred pedagogy is key for identity formation and belongingness, even as this article adds to the debates for more diversified and transformative educational approaches in South Africa.

Conclusion

Staying attuned to the basic need for belonging has been pinpointed as a major advantage of reflective writing skills. This article used participatory experiential analogies to analyse reflective writing as a conduit for student inclusivity in the Durban University of Technology's teaching and learning environment. Within the Cornerstone module, the authors evinced how students can express their experiences, query opinions and perspectives and advocate their agency through words and creative techniques in their reflective writings. This exercise ensures that the culture of intimidation and social shaming is curtailed, thus facilitating a sense of belonging whereby students feel that their voices are heard in a dialogic communicative process. Going forward, this article recommends considering divergent teaching practices such as more dialogic learner-centred techniques available in reflective writing pedagogy compared to univocal methods of delivery to enable a more inclusive pedagogy and sense of placement for students.

Acknowledgements
Competing interests

Authors' contributions

R.T.I.A. and H.O.P. conceptualised the idea and developed certain sections. L.Z.L. provided mentorship and guidance.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was obtained from the Durban University of Technology's Institutional Research Ethics Committee (ref. no. IREC 064/21).

Funding information

Data availability

Data sharing does not apply to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinion in this articles are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency or funder of the authors.

References

Abiolu, R.T.I., Ramohai, N.J. & Linganiso, L.Z., forthcoming, 'Reformatting educational priorities within online learning in South Africa in view of COVID-19', in K.G Fomunyam & S. Moyo (eds.), *Theorising research, innovation and internationalisation in African higher education institutions*, Sense Publishers, s.l.

Alexander, L. & Tredoux, C., 2010, 'The spaces between us: A spatial analysis of informal segregation at a South African university', *Journal of Social Issues* 66(2), 367–386. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1540-4560.2010.01650.x

Bangeni, B. & Kapp, R., 2007, 'Shifting language attitudes in linguistically diverse learning environment in South Africa', *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 28(4), 253–269. https://doi.org/10.2167/jmmd495.0

Braeckman, A., 2006, 'Niklas Luhmann's systems theoretical redescription of the inclusion/exclusion debate', *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 32(1), 65–88. https://doi.org/10.1177/0191453706059846

Buckingham Shum, S., Sándor, Á., Goldsmith, R., Wang, X., Bass, R. & McWilliams, M., 2016, 'Reflecting on reflective writing analytics: Assessment challenges and iterative evaluation of a prototype tool', in *Proceedings of the Sixth International Conference on Learning Analytics & Knowledge*, Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, April, pp. 213–222.

Burgess, R.A., 2016, 'Policy, power, stigma and silence: Exploring the complexities of a primary mental health care model in a rural South African setting', *Transcultural Psychiatry* 53(6), 719–742. https://doi.org/10.1177/1363461516679056

Coleman, D. & Willis, D.S., 2015, 'Reflective writing: The student nurse's perspective on reflective writing and poetry writing', *Nurse Education Today* 35(7), 906–911. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nedt.2015.02.018

Crenshaw, K.W., 2017, *On intersectionality: Essential writings*, The New Press, New York, NY.

Freire, P., 2005, *Pedagogy of the oppressed*, 30th anniversary edn., Continuum International, New York, NY.

Gibson, A., Aitken, A., Sándor, Á., Buckingham Shum, S., Tsingos-Lucas, C. & Knight, S., 2017, 'Reflective writing analytics for actionable feedback', in *Proceedings of the Seventh International Learning Analytics & Knowledge Conference*, Association for Computing Machinery, New York, NY, March, pp. 153–162.

Gravett, S. & Petersen, N., 2009, 'Promoting dialogic teaching among higher education faculty in South Africa', in *Transformative learning in practice: Insights from community, workplace, and higher education*, pp. 100–110, viewed 21 April 2022, from https://www.globallearningpartners.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/ACADEM-1.pdf.

Greenwood, L. & Kelly, C., 2019, 'A systematic literature review to explore how staff in schools describe how a sense of belonging is created for their pupils', *Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties* 24(1), 3–19. https://doi.org/10.1080/13632752.2018.1511113

Hagerty, B.M.K., Sauer-Lynch, J., Patusky, K.L., Bouwsema, M. & Collier, P., 1992, 'Sense of belonging: A vital mental health concept', *Archives of Psychiatric Nursing* 6(3), 172–177. https://doi.org/10.1016/0883-9417(92)90028-H

Hanass-Hancock, J., Chappell, P., Johns, R. & Nene, S., 2018, 'Breaking the silence through delivering comprehensive sexuality education to learners with disabilities in South Africa: Educators experiences', *Sexuality and Disability* 36(2), 105–121. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11195-018-9525-0

Innes, R.B., 2007, 'Dialogic communication in collaborative problem-solving groups', *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* 1(1), 1–21. https://doi.org/10.20429/ijsotl.2007.010104

International Centre for Nonviolence (ICON), 2015, *Bringing change to higher education*, viewed 21 January 2022, from https://icon.org.za/current/bringing-change-to-higher-education/.

Jonck, P. & De Coning, R., 2018, 'Implementation of an integrated reflective practice model in higher education pedagogy within the context of a South African tertiary institution', *Journal of Educational Research and Reviews* 6(6), 84–93. https://doi.org/10.33495/jerr_v6i6.18.136

Lawrence, A., 2020, 'Teaching as dialogue: Toward culturally responsive online pedagogy', *Journal of Online Learning Research* 6(1), 5–33.

Luhmann, N., 1995, *Social systems*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, CA.

Macfarlane, B., 2015, 'Student performativity in higher education: Converting learning as a private space into a public performance', *Higher Education Research and Development* 34(2), 338–350. https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2014.956697

Mackworth-Young, C.R.S., Bond, V. & Wringe, A., 2020, 'Secrets and silence: Agency of young women managing HIV disclosure', *Medical Anthropology* 39(8), 720–734. https://doi.org/10.1080/01459740.2020.1764551

Pym, J., 2017, 'Voice, identity, and belonging: Making a difference', in M. Walker & M. Wilson-Strydom (eds.), *Socially just pedagogies, capabilities and quality in higher education*, Palgrave Studies in Global Citizenship Education and Democracy, pp. 177–199, Palgrave Macmillan, London.

Ramdass, K., 2016, 'Reflection as a means of improvement: A higher education perspective', in *2016 Portland International Conference on Management of Engineering and Technology (PICMET)*, September, pp. 2197–2204, IEEE, s.l.

Ramlal, A. & Augustin, D.S., 2020, 'Engaging students in reflective writing: An action research project', *Educational Action Research* 28(3), 518–533. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650792.2019.1595079

Rapp, A.C. & Corral-Granados, A., 2021, 'Understanding inclusive education – A theoretical contribution from system theory and the constructionist perspective', *International Journal of Inclusive Education* 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603116.2021.1946725

Reed, Y., Davis, H. & Nyabanyaba, T., 2002, 'Investigating teachers' "take-up" of reflective practice from an in-service professional development teacher education programme in South Africa', *Educational Action Research* 10(2), 253–274. https://doi.org/10.1080/09650790200200185

Ryan, M., 2011, 'Improving reflective writing in higher education: A social semiotic perspective', *Teaching in Higher Education* 16(1), 99–111. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2010.507311

Sancho, M. & Cline, T., 2012, 'Fostering a sense of belonging and community as children start a new school', *Educational and Child Psychology* 29(1), 64–74.

Schirmer, W. & Michailakis, D., 2015, 'The Luhmannian approach to exclusion/inclusion and its relevance to social work', *Journal of Social Work* 15(1), 45–64. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468017313504607

Schirmer, W. & Michailakis, D., 2016, 'Inclusion/exclusion as the missing link. A Luhmannian analysis of loneliness among older people', *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 35(1), 76–89. https://doi.org/10.1002/sres.2441

Shapiro, S., 2020, 'Inclusive pedagogy in the academic writing classroom: Cultivating communities of belonging', *Journal of Academic Writing* 10(1), 154–164. https://doi.org/10.18552/joaw.v10i1.607

Shum, S.B., Sándor, Á., Goldsmith, R., Bass, R. & McWilliams, M., 2017, 'Towards reflective writing analytics: Rationale, methodology and preliminary results', *Journal of Learning Analytics* 4(1), 58–84. https://doi.org/10.18608/jla.2017.41.5

Stewart, K.D. & Ivala, E., 2017, 'Silence, voice, and "other languages": Digital storytelling as a site for resistance and restoration in a South African higher education classroom', *British Journal of Educational Technology* 48(5), 1164–1175. https://doi.org/10.1111/bjet.12540

Thobejane, T.D., Mulaudzi, T.P. & Zitha, R., 2017, 'Factors leading to "blesser-blessee" relationships amongst female students: The case of a rural university in Thulamela Municipality, Limpopo Province, South Africa', *Gender and Behaviour* 15(2), 8716–8731.

Toni, N. & Makura, A.H., 2015, 'Using reflective practice for a more humane higher education: Part 1', *South African Journal of Higher Education* 29(3), 42–55. https://doi.org/10.20853/29-3-489

Trujillo, G. & Tanner, K.D., 2014, 'Considering the role of affect in learning: Monitoring students' self-efficacy, sense of belonging, and science identity', *CBE – Life Sciences Education* 13(1), 6–15. https://doi.org/10.1187/cbe.13-12-0241

Waghid, Y., 1999, 'Designing distance learning materials using a dialogic theory of language', *Per Linguam* 15(1), 1–9. https://doi.org/10.5785/15-1-168

Williams, K., Woolliams, M. & Spiro, J., 2012, *Reflective writing*, Macmillan International Higher Education, New York, NY.