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MY EXPERIENCE OF REFLECTIVE PRACTICE WRITING IN A MASTERS IN EDUCATION

Although I used reflective practice during my initial teacher training ten years ago, I had not seriously considered using it as a postgraduate student until I came across a writing exercise on Gillie's website (www.gilliebolton.com). Reflective writing has since helped me to overcome obstacles, anxieties, and barriers in my research dissertation for an MA in Education. The exercise on Gillie's website was to write a letter to the most compassionate person one can imagine, stating what one needs in life or in response to a particular dilemma. This is what I wrote:

Dear X

I am writing to ask for some support with my literature review. I'll list my questions and then tell you my feelings.

- How do I decide what is in scope and how do I justify it?
- How do I decide what the question is that the literature review will answer?
- How do I select what to read?
- What if I leave out significant texts by mistake?
- How do I justify my choices and searches?

I feel I could do this work, but don't know where to start, and haven't recorded my search attempts in an ordered way. I feel I'm going to be accused of getting it wrong. I did a similar piece of work before and feel I didn't do it very well. I'm worried this will become a barrier and I won't progress from here.

I then wrote a compassionate response:

Thank you for your letter. I think the questions you ask are very relevant and demonstrate that you're thinking along exactly the right lines. These are important issues worth considering, and it's OK that you don't have all the answers straight away. Let's think about some ways you could start to explore these questions and remember you won't necessarily gain simple, immediate answers. This is a complex task.

I suggest you explore the topic of literature reviews before embarking on yours. First I recommend you increase your overall understanding by reading around the subject. Perhaps by going back to the module reading list and marking out some key texts about literature reviews. Peruse them initially in the library in an unpressured way. You could also look at, say, three dissertations and identify their approach to the literature review. Also research the term 'narrative review' in particular, as you have identified this as the approach you will take.

Write reflectively about your findings. It may also help to research your values in education and draft a short biography. This could be another way to introduce critical questions and topics. Having completed these exploratory exercises, you may begin to feel differently about starting your own literature review.

The sympathetic and practical advice I was able to give myself really surprised me at first. I would have felt embarrassed at the time to admit these confusions to my lecturer and wasn't sure who else to ask.

By writing to the most compassionate person I could imagine, I was able to drop my inhibitions and admit my insecurities in a very precise way. By articulating all my questions and purging them, I then felt able to address them. I didn't need an extra tutorial; I didn't spend weeks feeling increasingly worried and frustrated.

Since writing this I have taken my own advice and, furthermore, felt able to discuss ways to approach literature reviews with lecturers, without feeling inadequate. I realised that actually these are perfectly valid questions and it's important to discuss them.

I still don't have all the answers, but no longer feel stuck; I've realised that even established academics discuss such questions. I felt like a weight had been lifted and felt liberated to try out some different ways forward. **What was most empowering, however, was realising that one of my most valuable resources I have is myself.**

I have been using reflective writing in this way ever since. My confidence has risen and I feel freer to ask questions than ever before. I have recently been offered a full-time, funded PhD position and I will continue to write to the most compassionate person, and to reply. I will dare to think I can be successful and I will be supporting myself throughout this substantial challenge by using reflective writing.

Catherine Manning