



Writing for and Because of Lifelong Learning

Tanju Deveci *

Khalifa University of Science and Technology, The UAE

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Abstract: Once a privilege for the members of the elite, writing is now a staple of everyday life accessible to the masses. Despite its significance for individuals' economic, psychological, and educational well-being, it may not always be utilized to its full capacity. This is partly due to reductionist approaches to writing without full consideration of its various manifestations in life. This paper will argue that writing is more than the inscription of letters and symbols on paper (or on screen). The common misconception that highly developed artistic skills are a must for one to be a "good" writer often prevents individuals from engaging in rewarding learning experiences in and outside of formal education contexts. The realization of the ways in which writing in fact is a part of our daily lives and therefore cannot be divorced from learning throughout life will reduce concerns about a possible lack in writing skills. It will also be maintained in this paper that there is complementarity between lifelong learning and writing; just as lifelong learning requires the utilization of writing skills, greater involvement in writing and enhancements to one's writing skills support lifelong learning skills. This paper will also propose that an emphasis on writing across curriculum in formal education settings as well as outside of formal education will help prepare individuals for engagement in continuous learning throughout life.

Keywords: Writing, lifelong learning, critical thinking, literacy, informal learning.

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Introduction

Today's economic hardships make it difficult for many to meet all the exigencies and opportunities for learning in life. Paradoxically, it is often these economic hardships that prompt us to engage in new learning situations. Yet not all learning is initiated due to financial concerns; there are also reasons that prompt people to engage in learning in order to have a fulfilling life. In either case, when the rapidly changing and protean character of technology and its impacts on employability as well as man's continuous search for meaning in life are considered, the premiums placed upon continuous learning will remain more pressing. Demanding though this might sound, the good news is that our potential for learning is ineliminable, and our potential for development makes it incumbent on us to consider a variety of ways in which it can be utilized throughout one's lifespan. One of these is writing for educational, professional, or recreational purposes. In this paper, I will maintain that writing is an intrinsic part of our lives although it may not always be recognized to be so. I will explain the reasons for this, making the case for writing to be implemented in realizing our potential for learning throughout life. I will also describe how writing is deeply embedded within other aspects of lifelong learning.

Writing as an Intrinsic Part of Life

A Literary Crisis

There is nothing so hollow as pens,
There is nothing so gloomy as ink,
When a man is obliged to think of something,
And doesn't know what to think.

* Correspondence:

Tanju Deveci, Khalifa University of Science and Technology, Abu Dhabi, The UAE.
✉ tanjudeveci@yahoo.com

There is nothing so blank as paper,
There is nothing so void as a brain,
When a man has an hour to think up a thought
And has thought for an hour in vain.

I know how a ghost must feel
As he tries with his fingers of air
To convey a mouthful of good beefsteak
To the mouth that isn't there.

The anonymous poet of this piece provides an exquisite description of the extent to which writing can be cognitively and psychologically challenging for a person stuck with no ideas or words with which to express ideas and feelings. Unless approached from an unorthodox perspective, this attitude towards writing can be rather frustrating and demotivating. Only when one recognizes the multitude of ways in which our lives are full of different manifestations of writing can such frustration and demotivation be replaced with joy and determination.

Writing is so powerful that it has been described as “the lens through which literate peoples see the world, feel the world, hate the world, love the world, defy the world, and imagine change... [it] is muddled and mixed up with other things that have their own life – religion, artistic expression, speech, and human thought” (Powell, 2012, p. 10). In this sense, writing is far-reaching and detailed; it includes, but also goes well beyond, inscriptions of letters of the alphabet on paper and/or screen. It is attached to thoughts, imagination, speech, pictures/signs, and nature at large, all of which are essential elements of life. Due to this comprehensive nature of writing, together with its great importance and long history (Coulmas, 2003), it is virtually impossible to define writing in simple terms. Among its several definitions, Coulmas (2003, p. 1) includes the following: a) a system of recording language by means of visible or tactile marks, b) the activity of putting such a system to use, c) the result of such activity, a text, d) artistic composition, and e) professional occupation. Collectively, these definitions point to the role writing plays in our daily lives, including recreational and professional undertakings. As such, it is impossible to detach it from life itself; our involvement in continuous intellectual growth through writing, therefore, can help add to the quality of our lives at any given moment.

Writing is also an essential element of communication with others. The so-called “information age”, fueled by advances in computer technology in particular, requires that much communication be performed in writing. Most businesses rely on written communication through mediums such as memoranda, notices, meeting minutes, circulars, reports, and contracts. In the case of organizations doing business spread over geographical distances, it is practically impossible to rely on face-to-face communication (Sehgal & Khetarpal, 2006). International trade has also become reliant on written communication through email since it is the quickest and cheapest way of communication (Pawelzik, 2009). Similarly, the growing interest in using the Internet for communication purposes has resulted in email replacing face-to-face meetings between students and instructors (Biesenbach-Lucas & Weasenforth, 2002). Much of interaction taking place on social media platforms (e.g. Twitter, Whatsapp, Facebook) relies on written communication, too. It is not uncommon to see people using these platforms for social, business, and educational purposes. The burgeoning interest in social media platforms stems from their capacity to enable people to share ideas, ask questions, and set common learning goals, as a result of which they serve as learning environments unconfined to space and time (Kind & Evans, 2015).

Writing in Formal Education

Writing is inextricably linked to students' learning. The argument for this rests on various assumptions (Walker, 2012). First, writing helps students review and remember material they have recently learned; it reinforces learning and assists students in transferring newly learned information to long-term memory. Second, it helps students gain a deeper understanding of theoretical information when they reflect on it in relation to their own contexts and experiences. In this way, teachers receive access to their students' perceptions, comprehension, and personalities. Third, free writing assignments encourage students to think outside the box and explore alternatives. Last but not least, through engagement in writing, students improve their communication skills. This occurs because writing provides a vehicle for expression and communication. There is empirical evidence indicating that “writing activities can provide varied and effective ways for students to think about and reformulate new learning and to integrate new information with their previous knowledge and experience” (Langer & Applebee, 1987, p. 19), fostering acquisition and understanding of new content.

Writing in a Broader Sense of Learning: Lifelong Learning

Learning is a broad concept which cannot be confined to the physical borders of a classroom. As such, implications of the link between writing and learning are more far-reaching than they are for students in the classroom alone. We need

look no further than the very concept of “lifelong learning” to see the extent to which this applies to every individual inside and outside of formal education systems, at any age, and in any context.

One definition of lifelong learning among many is “the development of human potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers individuals to acquire all the knowledge, values, skills, and understanding they will require throughout their lifetimes and to apply them with confidence, creativity, and enjoyment in all roles, circumstances, and environments” (Longworth & Davies, 2013, p. 22). Of particular importance for writing is the emphasis placed on the application of knowledge, understanding, and skills with confidence, creativity, and enjoyment in all circumstances. In this sense, the lifelong learning approach to writing has an enriching influence on “the lens through which [we] see the world, feel the world, ... love the world” (Powel, 2012, p.10), fulfill ourselves, and help create a world worth living in. With its aim “to provide people of all ages with equal and open access to high-quality learning opportunities and to a variety of learning experiences” both “inside and outside formal education and training systems” (OECD, 2004, p. 126), the lifelong learning approach to writing can open innumerable avenues of opportunity for making this possible.

Not all individuals may be expected to possess the knowledge, values, and skills necessary for them to be “effective” writers. However, an inherent part of the above-given definition of lifelong learning is “the development of [their] potential through a continuously supportive process which stimulates and empowers [them] to acquire” what is required to be able to write. The approaches to writing as a lifelong learning described below point to various ways in which this could be achieved.

Writing as an Intrapersonal and Interpersonal Activity

There is a complementarity between the intrapersonal communication we engage in during the writing process and lifelong learning. Intrapersonal communication can be defined as “communication within the self, and of the self to the self” (Graeme & Dimbleby, 2006, p. 1). Writing involves ample intrapersonal communication. This is due to introspection or reflective thinking, which requires individuals to be self-directed learners performing intellectual tasks through the use of a myriad of critical thinking strategies (Lewittes, 2009), which is at the heart of lifelong learning, too. Reflective thinking performed via writing allows individuals to apply analysis, evaluation, and application skills enhancing problem solving capabilities. Reflection via writing in non-language classes allows students to integrate different pieces of information and comprehend concepts more successfully (Deveci & Nunn, 2018). This type of writing naturally strengthens the students’ integration of learning and experience, thereby supporting the formation of memories (Dzubak, 2013). One key lifelong learning skill students acquire when engaged in reflection is being able to identify their strengths and areas in which they need improvement, for which they are encouraged to devise learning goals (Perez & Ruz, 2014). As a result, students go through an experiential learning cycle, supporting their acquisition of lifelong learning skills necessary for success in and beyond school (Kolb, 1984).

Writing is often thought to be an individual deed, with *little to no* interaction with others. This is far from the truth. The main reason for this lies in the argument that all writing is interpersonal since writers always refer to other writers’ works or often follow certain writing guidelines set by others (Speck, 2002). Another reason why seeing writing as a merely individual deed is problematic is that students, for instance, often review their own and peers’ writing, in addition to responding to teacher feedback. This allows them to use interpersonal communication skills at meta-cognitive level by evaluating, monitoring, and improving their writing (Ambrose et. al. 2010). This creates opportunities for utilizing each student’s unique life-experiences as a learning source for their own and others’ learning. This points to the role of interpersonal communication as a lifelong learning competence which has been identified by the European Commission (Commission of the European Communities, 2005), according to which individuals need to be able to “interact linguistically in an appropriate way in the full range of societal and cultural contexts — education and training, work, home, and leisure,” for which they need to acquire the skill of “communicat[ing] in oral and *written* forms in a variety of communicative situations and to monitor and adapt their own communication to the requirements of the situation,” and “a positive attitude towards... interaction with others” (p. 13). The Commission also stresses that this skill, among others, needs to be developed “to a level that equips [young people] for adult life, and [it] should be further developed, maintained and updated as a part of lifelong learning” (p. 12). Taken together, these points to the role of interpersonal communication in enhancing students’ writing skills as a lifelong learning attribute.

Although afore-mentioned reflective thinking is a natural human disposition, which is often affected by our communication with others, effective engagement in reflective thinking especially through writing may not be an easy task for some learners. In order to support individuals’ development of reflective thinking skills, a variety of educational activities can be exploited. One which we use in our teaching context is engaging students in seminars related to communication theories. For example, after reading a text on interpersonal communication and another text on intrapersonal communication followed by a seminar discussion, we ask students to reflect in writing on a specific experience in which their intrapersonal experience influenced their interpersonal experience, or vice-versa (Deveci & Nunn, 2018). Prior to writing, students are provided with input sessions on different approaches to reflective writing. Students’ experience of reflective thinking through writing helps them engage in lifelong learning in other classes as well as outside of college.

Digital Competence

Another lifelong learning competence identified by the European Commission (Commission of the European Communities, 2005) is digital competence which involves “the confident and critical use of Information Society Technology... for work, leisure and communication” requiring skillful use of “computers to retrieve, assess, store, produce, present and exchange information, and to communicate and participate in collaborative networks via the Internet” (p. 7). The role of effective writing is inherent in this definition; digitally competent individuals ought to be able to use a variety of linear and non-linear representations in storing, presenting, and communicating with other writers and readers in online environments. They are also expected to be familiar with different writing genres on the Internet. Considering the popularity of social networking sites (e.g. Facebook, Twitter), digital competence requires individuals to be mindful of the varieties of digital writing. Such environments provide a multitude of venues and rich resources for learning that are not confined to the physical limits of classrooms. In this sense, effective use of digital competence allows individuals to immerse themselves in informal learning opportunities, thus promoting lifelong learning.

Drawing attention to the advances in computer technology and its subsequent effect on the rise of the World Wide Web, Pullman (2016) observes that much of rhetoric is going digital, and he recommends that special attention be paid to developing a rhetoric specifically designed for the digital age. He uses the notion of “lifelong digital learning”, which he considers to be “a challenge that ...[we] have no choice but to accept” (p. xvi). Digital competence as a lifelong learning skill proposed by the European Commission surely helps individuals make sense of ever-evolving online rhetoric and enables them to produce appropriate online writing. Lifelong digital learners, then, are those who are able to solve puzzles and problems, tweak settings to suit their preferences and needs. As well, they are persistent and flexible (Pullman, 2016).

In a recent study investigating the impact of laptop use from the perspective of digital competence in a writing-intensive, project-based course, we found that students' effective use of online environments (e.g. DropBox, OneDrive, We Transfer) facilitated their project writing experiences in teams and allowed instructors to provide instant feedback on student drafts (Deveci et al., 2018). Other online applications (e.g. Glogster) and software (e.g. SolidWorks) were also found to be among the factors contributing to students' acquisition of creativity, organization, and problem solving skills. These encouraged less able students in particular to engage in learning experiences they used to avoid previously. In addition, we found that students' use of ICT skills enhanced their reading through the use of micro-level writing skills like annotating and note-taking. Empowered by improvement to such skills, weaker students –together with more able ones- got more confidence in their abilities to write. It was observed in other studies, too, that digital competence helps students edit and revise their written work more easily, which is an important part of becoming a good writer (Warschauer & Grimes, 2005). Collectively, these reinforce students' confidence in writing skills, and motivation for engagement in further writing activities in other courses as well as in professional life upon graduation. These are particularly important for students writing in a foreign language, as was the case in our study (Deveci et al., 2018). The results of these studies are also important to note since they point to the nature of writing as a collaborative activity in online environments as well as with face-to-face interaction.

Cultural Awareness and Expression

Another important lifelong learning competence identified by the European Commission (Commission of the European Communities, 2005) is cultural awareness and expression. While cultural awareness helps create an open attitude towards different cultures, cultural expression involves “the willingness to cultivate aesthetic capacity through artistic self-expression and participation in cultural life” (p. 12). Self-expression is defined as “expressing one's thoughts and feelings” (Kim & Ko, 2007, p. 326). Just as our culture influences our thoughts and feelings, so does our culture affect how we display our thoughts and emotions. The awareness of how our own culture as well as others' cultures manifest themselves in the formation and display of thoughts and emotions is vital for the effectiveness of lifelong learning endeavors. Words are one of the ways in which self-expression can be accomplished (Kim & Ko, 2007). Successful use of the written word can be particularly beneficial in analyzing the cultural foundations of our belief systems, becoming constructively critical of assumptions and meaning schemes, and planning a course of action for growth. Also, a candid and contextual expression of personal experiences, feelings and thoughts—without losing sight of others’—helps create harmonious relationships. Reaching wider audiences through writing in this fashion allows “all peoples [to] learn about and be influenced by a more capacious variety of values, beliefs, and systems of life, healing and community from cultures around the globe. The result will be greater learning, understanding, harmony, balance, tolerance, and peace” (Tung-Chion & Steckley, 2001, p. 763), thus allowing the establishment of learning opportunities across cultures within a particular country as well as between countries.

Creative skills developed for cultural expression, according to the European Commission (Commission of the European Communities, 2005), can be transferred to a variety of professional contexts. As regards to one's specific occupation, Holmes (2002) notes that writing to publish papers supports professional development with a view towards lifelong learning in three main ways. First, the amount of research required for publishing a paper increases personal knowledge and intellectual capital by providing an opportunity for individuals learn more about the subject. Also, their lateral thinking skills are enhanced due to an analytical approach toward the material for their papers. Collectively,

these supplement individuals' plans for self-development, which are essential for establishing direction for learning in a host of environments that span their lifetimes. Second, a sound publication record increases people's profiles within their immediate organizations as well as within the wider marketplace. In this way, work-related concerns, often cited as the main reason for engagement in lifelong learning, may be reduced. Lastly, writing allows individuals to reflect on their daily work, leading to new insights and ideas. Once turned into a habit, reflection helps individuals to appraise and amend learning needs and opportunities throughout the rest of their lives.

Perseverance

"Perseverance" is an essential lifelong learning skill writers ought to possess. One definition of the term is provided by Rovai (2003): "the behavior of continuing action despite the presence of obstacles" (p. 1). Writing provides opportunities for the use and enhancement of perseverance skills. It is axiomatic that writing is not always without inhibitions. The eminent author George Orwell (1946), in his essay *Why I Write*, once said

Writing a book is a horrible, exhausting struggle, like a long bout of some painful illness. One would never undertake such a thing if one were not driven on by some demon whom one can neither resist nor understand ... And yet it is also true that one can write nothing readable unless one constantly struggles to efface one's own personality.

Exaggerated a bit though this may be, this quote indicates how formidable a challenge it can be for both experienced and inexperienced writers to write. McNulty (2016) points out a variety of reasons for this. One of these is what she calls "writer's block", which refers to the feeling that the words, phrases, or ideas just won't come. Another obstacle may occur when writers are distracted by ideas that seem more interesting, resulting in an incoherent text, if any at all. The third obstacle may be experienced when writers end up in a tight space where their arguments and/or themes are not consistent. These obstacles, together with others, likely lead writers to feel frustrated. And unless they are equipped with perseverance skills, their experience of writing may be detrimental to self-expression, creativity, and a general aptitude for lifelong learning. Being able to persevere in the face of such challenges requires individuals to approach writing as an experience from which they can learn throughout their lives. It is only through the hardships of writing that they can acquire and practice perseverance skills. An approach to writing as a long-term pursuit will allow them to seek out opportunities for using perseverance skills they can employ throughout their lives in other contexts, too. Such a mindset will help them believe in themselves, increase their confidence, and maintain efforts to produce and impart knowledge through writing.

Teachers can do a lot to help students persevere in the face of challenges with writing. Among various ways of doing this, Manitsa (2016) suggests having high but attainable expectations, helping students set achievable goals for themselves, working from students' strengths and interests, being caring and supportive, strengthening students' self-confidence, and being specific when giving feedback. Collectively, these will help students have greater motivation for writing and believe in themselves when faced with challenges in writing. Continuously supported in this way, students are likely to develop positive habits of mind enabling them to survive difficulties in other learning contexts as well as in their non-academic lives.

Learning to Learn

A corollary to the above-mentioned skills is the competence of learning to learn. According to the European Commission (Commission of the European Communities 2005), learning to learn skills are based on the acquisition of literacy, numeracy, and information technology skills. It is indisputable that individuals with effective writing skills will enjoy lifelong learning privileges *a priori*. They will be better equipped to seek advice from mentors, facilitators, and teachers about ways in which they can increase their knowledge and put it into practice. They will reach sources of information more easily and respond to tasks more successfully. The critical reflection in which they immerse themselves through writing will enable them to become more autonomous and persevering learners. Collectively, these attributes will contribute to their efforts to cultivate learning skills that will be useful in a multitude of learning environments throughout their lifetimes.

Critical Thinking

Critical thinking (to which I gave both tacit and overt reference previously) is at the heart of all the above-mentioned lifelong learning skills necessary for writing. Many aspects of good writing require and reinforce critical thinking skills. First and foremost, the need for individuals to clarify ideas in writing effectively (it may be through the written word, symbols, diagrams, graphic organizers, pictures, cartoons, and the like (Angelis et al., 2016, p. 90)) serves as an opportunity for cognitive operation. This, according to Fu and Hansen (2012, p. 426), helps writers clarify their thinking processes and reach the realization that a certain idea led them to another one, which led to a third one, and by the time they arrived at the end of their thinking, they were someplace where they were not at the beginning. Also, a writer's careful contemplation on how to make his ideas clear using the most appropriate language improves thinking (Applebee, 1984). Collectively, these are evidences of a rich tapestry of learning, which may be first initiated in classroom discourse but are often generated in wider life circumstances. In this sense, writing powered by critical reflection on life experiences as well as ideologies at individual, community, institution, and/or state levels can have

unexpected impacts, some of which may be disturbing but enlightening and emancipatory at the same time. Auerbach (1999) notes that the critical approach to writing is based on such a premise, thus encouraging students to engage in critical reflection on their experiences in relation to broader economic and political relations. She illustrates this with an example of a parents' group in the States concerned about riots in their local community. In the group meetings, they analyzed the issue sharing experiences and feelings and published a book which they distributed in their community to initiate further dialogue. This illustrates the power of writing exercised collectively. Not only does such an experience of action-based learning enhance cohesion in the community, but it also provides new opportunities of learning for everyone involved in the process.

Enhanced by and through engagement in writing processes, critical thinking skills, comprised of a variety of problem solving and reasoning skills, are essential for lifelong learning (Hager & Holland, 2006). Awareness of learning needs and opportunities achieved as a result of critical thinking will allow individuals to utilize learning facilities available to them in and outside of formal education settings. This awareness will also enable them to recognize the challenges in their paths, which they can address by constantly re-educating themselves. This will entail their reviewing, renewing, and adapting beliefs and behaviors that are compatible with attributes of a lifelong learner; the most essential of which is self-directedness. Critical thinking exercised in this fashion will no doubt help individuals transfer thinking across different domains (Geertsen, 2013). Individuals whose intellectual and communicative capabilities have been enhanced as a result of the utilization of critical thinking skills in the writing process will also be able to participate in their local and global communities more effectively, as is illustrated in the example given above. This is a desired purpose and outcome of lifelong learning. Taken together, these clearly show "not just what [individuals] can do as writers but what their writing can do for them" (Kraus, 2014) as well as for their communities.

Conclusion

In this paper, I maintained that an unorthodox approach ought to be taken to writing as an essential part of life. This is partly because writing is more comprehensive than the inscription of letters on paper or screen. It also includes symbols, diagrams, and pictures (Angelis et al., 2016). A different approach to writing is also necessary because writing involves intrapersonal communication through introspecting, planning, composing, and revising, as well as interpersonal communication through reading of and reference to others' written work, adherence to writing guidelines set by various stake-holders, and peer-feedback (Speck, 2002). Collectively, these make writing serve as the lens through which we see the world (Powell, 2012). Its influence is such that it would be wrong to limit the use and development of it within the boundaries of formal education. The zeitgeist of rapid and continuous developments in technology provides ample opportunities to acquire and exhibit writing skills as well as share knowledge, beliefs, and feelings with others in and outside of formal education. However, due to the changes in communication modes and skills required for professional and personal development, we constantly need to bring our knowledge and skills up to date. Just as this necessitates adopting a critical approach to learning that is compatible with how-to-learn skills, it also necessitates competences of cultural awareness and expression, digital literacy, intra- and interpersonal communication, and perseverance. Writing, in its broader sense, can help ensure that such competences be carried forward into future times, increasing individuals' chances of adapting to changes and coping with challenges. Therefore, it is best to gear our teaching and research towards a view of writing *for* and *because of* lifelong learning. Only in this way can we prepare future generations for their need and desire to continue learning throughout life.

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