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Finding voice through memoir writing: An exploration of the expression of grief in undergraduate students' narratives

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Background: Memoir writing can be a powerful tool for authors to reflect on past events and express their emotions, especially those related to grief. Research suggests that, beyond narrating stories, memoir writing can fulfil a therapeutic purpose when based on personal experiences.

Objectives: This article explores how first-year undergraduate students utilise memoir writing as a therapeutic means to express grief. In this article, memoir writing is employed not merely to recount events drawn from personal memories but also as a coping strategy that involves reflection upon traumatic experiences through written expression. It acts as a means for emotional expression and interrogation of thoughts.

Method: Data were collected using qualitative approach aligned with a case study research design. The data collection process involved memoirs written by five first-year undergraduate students who participated in a Memoir Writing Project. In addition, thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.

Results: The findings indicate that some students utilised the memoir writing process as a means of reflecting on their past traumatic experiences. In addition, the memoir writing process contributed to enhancing metacognitive skills which are a requirement in self-reflection. It afforded them an opportunity to connect their past, present, and future and consequently, they gained a broader perspective into how loss shaped their personal identities.

Conclusion: This article demonstrates that memoir writing can provide a haven for first-year students to express deep emotions which they might not previously have shared with others. It provides a space in which students feel secure enough to disclose personal experiences and understand that others may have experienced similar life challenges.

Contribution: This article provides a broader understanding of how memoir writing functions as an important tool to help students develop confidence to express their perspectives through writing. It also shows how collaborative writing creates a space where writers feel safe to express themselves without fear of judgement.

Keywords: autobiography; bereavement; grief; memoir; memoir writing; voice.

Introduction

The past two decades have seen a proliferation of memoirs about prominent public figures in entertainment, sports, and politics, who believe that they have inspirational life stories to share. Fass (2006:107) states that this boom has created a source of historical facts. In fact, in addition to providing a glimpse into the subject's personal life journey, memoirs are a historical tool that affords authors opportunities to express their voice. Frayn and Houston (2022) note how historical events such as the wars in the early 20th century have led to an increase in war books, based on personal experiences. In the late 20th century and early 21st century, there has been an increase in motherhood memoirs based on contemporary motherhood and family life (Douglas & Klar 2019). However, these personal narratives, as noted by Fass (2006), Douglas and Klar (2019), and Frayn and Houston (2022), overlook how memoirs express deeper emotions, such as grief or loss. This is the problem that this article aims to address.

In an article that analyses language learning memoirs, Pavlenko (2001) underscores the need to categorise memoirs as a genre rather than simply as ethnographic data subject to content analysis. Generally, memoirs are shaped by complex sociocultural and socio-historic contexts.

Maluleke (2024) argues that memoirs, as an example of personal writing, can be used as a tool to develop students' voices in their academic writing, and students' voices derive from their personal experiences, interests, taste, and views. While grief is one of the themes that emerged from Maluleke (2024), its focus was on how a synergy can be created between personal narratives and academic writing. In this article, by focusing on the grief memoirs written by undergraduate students at an open distance e-learning (ODeL) university, we examine how they use such writing to find their voices while interrogating how certain painful events made them feel and express such emotions freely.

Research has noted how memoir writing can provide intimate accounts of people's traumatic experiences caused by events such as wars. Baines (2017:252) explores the memoir of Clive Holt, a former soldier in the Angolan War, which is 'a frontline account … [*that serves as*] as a window into the world of post traumatic disorder'. In the examination of this memoir, Baines intends to gain insight into the post traumatic disorders and the psychological effects caused by wars on soldiers. Baines (2017:252) calls memoir writing 'a narrative therapy', as it helps writers to restructure and reconfigure their life stories that had been shattered into pieces. However, he does not delve into how such events might have led to loss. This article is particularly interested in gaining a deeper understanding about how life events might result into loss and eventually grief. *Grief memoir* is a popular genre that serves as a tool to express deep emotions that are associated with bereavement (Deller 2024). The terms 'bereavement' and 'grief' are salient in grief memoirs and are often regarded as synonymous because of their conspicuous overlaps and ill-defined contours. Bereavement denotes loss, deprivation, being robbed of something or someone through circumstances such as death, accidents, sicknesses, separation, and divorce, whereas grief entails the psychological processing of loss (Fabry 2024; Małecka & Bottomley 2022). Jain et al. (2019) argue that although grief is a psychological reaction to loss, it is unique to each individual and influenced by the nature of experiences they have undergone. Goldie (2012) explores grief as a mental reaction and describes it as:

> [*A*] kind of a process, more specifically, it is a complex pattern of activity and passivity, inner or outer, that unfolds over time, and the unfolding pattern over time is explanatorily prior to what is the case at any particular time. (p. 56)

In addition, grief may extend over weeks, months, years, or even a lifetime, as individuals deal with the disruption caused by loss differently (Ratcliffe & Byrne 2022).

This process may lead to healing or leave lasting emotional effects. Cholbi (2022) further indicates that grief is a multi-state emotional process during which individuals move through stages such as denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Although grief is commonly linked to loss, it does not always stem from death. Joutseno (2024:1) defines grief as 'not as a procession of uncomfortable feelings with an end goal, but a life-altering temporally ambiguous state'. This article defines grief as a psychological response and an extended process of dealing with loss that arises from traumatic experiences such as accidents, illnesses, death, separation from a partner, and betrayal, which represents a loss of trust.

Against this background, grief memoir writing is described as a 'carefully crafted and curated literary artefact' (Fabry 2024:2), which the authors employ to reflect on moments of grief in their lives. The term 'memoir' originates from the French word for memory. Grief memoirs serve therapeutic purposes as they allow authors to reflect on and interrogate their thoughts through writing, which may result in emotional healing (Ruini & Mortara 2022). Małecka and Bottomley (2022) also observe that such writing provides a sense of companionship for readers and authors. For authors, memoir writing creates a safe space in which they can express their emotions without fear of judgement. For readers, an engagement with others' painful experiences may reinforce the idea that they are not alone in their struggles.

Our article is based on research within the South African educational context. It sheds light on how memoir writing can help writers express their voices and emotions beyond simply recollecting and documenting memories of events. We examine the subtle ways that memoir writing serves therapeutic purposes, as authors share deep emotions that they might never have told anyone before. Students wrote about topics of their own choosing, and their memoirs show how freedom enhances the development of authority and ownership in writing, as well as the confidence to articulate what one wants to say in one's own voice. Although this is not discussed in this article, for first-year students, the ability to express voice confidently lays a strong foundation for their future academic writing proficiency.

Aims of the study

This study aimed to explore how first-year undergraduate students employ memoir writing as a tool for expressing their grief.

Research questions

The following research questions guided the study:

- In what ways does memoir writing enable students to express their grief?
- In what way does memoir writing serve a therapeutic purpose?

Theoretical framework

This article adopts Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which views writing, like language, as a cultural tool developed to serve various social purposes, and whose evolution influences how society develops and operates (Smythe & Klein 2009). The theory posits that learning and development are mediated by cultural artefacts such as machines, objects, activities, concepts, and semiotic tools, such as language and

writing (Alkhudiry 2022; Mohammadzadeh, Ahour & Saeidi 2020; Prior 2006; Simeon 2016). Influenced by German philosophers, Karl Marx, Friedrich Engels, and Friedrich Hegel, Vygotsky rejected (Prior 2006):

> [*T*]he notion that human action is governed by some Neoplatonic realm of rules, whether linguistic rules of English, the communicative norms of some discourse community or cognitive scripts for acting in a particular situation. (p. 55)

The sociocultural theory is premised on the idea that cognitive development occurs within the individual's cultural, social, biological, and historical context (Scott & Palincsar 2013; Shabani 2016; Slavkov 2015). It construes development as (Lantolf & Thorne 2000):

> Processes [*that*] take place through participation in cultural, linguistic, and historically formed settings such as family life and peer group interaction, and in institutional contexts like schooling, organised sport activities, and workplaces, to name only a few. (p. 197)

Against this background, we argue that memoir writing serves an important social purpose, as writers not only document historical events but also express their emotions in therapeutic ways.

Furthermore, the sociocultural theory capitalises on the idea that writing is collaborative in nature. It is shaped through social interactions between writers and a knowledgeable other (such as a teacher or mentor) and among writers themselves (Allman 2020). Through collaborations, authors share ideas about their writing and give each other comments and peer feedback through dialogues (Slavkov 2015). Accordingly, this study is premised on the idea that memoir writing thrives through collaborations and interactions among authors, and meaning is constructed through multiple modes.

Characteristics of memoir writing

Memoirs are often confused with autobiographies, and it is important to highlight their differences although the latter is not the focus of this article. As with other types of life writing, such as autobiographies and biographies, memoirs rely on memory to narrate how events occurred as the subject experienced them. In theorising how memory operates, Rubin and Umanath (2015:1) introduce the concept of 'event memory' to describe 'the mental construction of a scene [*as a single occurrence*], real or imagined for the past or the future'.

According to Ruma (2016), recollections are influenced by individual perspectives and are prone to inconsistencies. Thus, as much as a memoir relies heavily on memory, it is plausible to suggest that certain aspects may be unreliable, as memory tends to fade over time. This raises concerns regarding its accuracy and authenticity.

Memoir writing is generally understood as an act of expressing the 'self'. As explained by Williams (2013:1), 'memoir writing entails more than researching, recording, and constructing the past "self"'. Instead, it involves a set of critical strategies that are employed in other genres like fiction. It is an act of problem solving where the writer makes conscious narrative choices to achieve an intended rhetorical goal. Memoir writing uses the first-person narrative voice, 'I', to bring the author at the centre of the story although based solely on their recollections. Memoirs are often mistaken for autobiographies because of their conspicuous overlaps as both genres rely on memory and a first-person voice. Unlike memoirs, autobiographies are based on verified facts drawn from multiple sources, so that the self that is portrayed in an autobiography represents an amalgamation of different perspectives. Agostino (2023) clarifies that, while autobiographies rely on the narrative voice of a writer who is also the central subject, memoirs, as with biographies, may focus on the life of another individual. Couser (2011:18) notes that 'sometimes it [*memoir*] is used to refer to *any* account of the author's life as if it is synonymous and interchangeable with *autobiography*'. Considering these similarities and distinctions, we define *memoirs* as accounts of events that occurred either in the writer's life, or in the life of another person, based on the writer's memory.

Memoirs as political tools

Over the past three decades, both South Africa and the global community have witnessed a proliferation of memoirs written by influential public figures, especially those involved in the anti-apartheid struggle, following the release of activists such as Nelson Mandela. Nearly every key political figure in South Africa (including Thabo Mbeki, Oliver Tambo, Nelson Mandela, Andrew Mlangeni, Hugh Masekela, and Desmond Tutu) authored memoirs that reflected their traumatic experiences during the struggle against apartheid and colonialism. These works asserted their rights and identities as black South Africans. As Daymond (2006) puts it, memoirs play an important role in giving recognition to the previously marginalised and a space to document their own histories.

Self-assertion is a common theme in memoirs. In his life story, Mandela combined personal memory, historical context, and identity to illustrate how colonialism disrupted the cultures of black South African communities. Mandela began writing the autobiography in 1974 in prison, motivated by his realisation that most books on South African history excluded the perspectives of black South Africans (Xavier 2018). Although the autobiography was written from Mandela's personal recollections, it provides an intimate account of the broader experiences of those who participated in the struggle against apartheid.

A key function of these memoirs is to help South Africans confront and process a painful past (Grzęda 2015). Maluleke (2019:188) conceives the idea of 'memory as a weapon', to underscore the psychological effects of recalling the past, and further asserts that, 'If memory is a weapon, it is a multi-edged sword without a handle. Those who dare to use it will necessarily be wounded by it in the process.' This metaphor

illustrates that memory can either reopen wounds or bring comfort. Tutu and Mandela's memoirs show that, regardless of the emotional cost, memories should not be avoided. As Maluleke argues, 'In order for memory to be managed constructively through forgiveness, there is a need to face the truth unflinchingly.' It can be deduced that life writing by political figures in post-apartheid South Africa plays an important role in the promotion of national reconciliation and healing from historical trauma. While much attention has been given to the lives of prominent political figures, there is an urgent need to encourage the writing and reading of memoirs and autobiographies by ordinary South African citizens so that they, too, can enjoy the benefits.

The therapeutic use of memoir writing

An increase in the publication of grief memoirs over the past three decades has provided individuals with an opportunity to reflect on traumatic experiences. Such memoirs constitute a safe space for authors to express emotions linked to trauma, interrogate personal thoughts, and seek closure (Roodt 2007). James Pennebaker and his colleagues introduced the concept of *expressive writing* as a tool to disclose traumatic experiences (Deveney & Lawson 2022). As Kalianivala (2019:1) explains, '… it was developed from the hypothesis that disclosing traumatic events may improve individuals' health'. Writing is a powerful therapeutic tool because it not only acknowledges the problem; it also enables the writer to interrogate and communicate their thoughts to another person (Pennebaker & Beall 1986).

Ruini and Mortara (2022:23) use the term 'writing therapy' to describe the process of reflecting on trauma experiences though writing. When applied within the context of autobiographical and memoir writing, writing therapy can benefit the writer in reconstructing their self-identities (Ruini & Mortara 2022:23). Den Elzen (2021:219) explores how young widows represent their experiences of grief and work towards rebuilding their fractured identities in 'widow memoirs' following the loss of a spouse. Den Elzen (2021) argues that:

> Autobiographical writing can promote the rebuilding of identity continuity in the dialogical self following a disruptive life event such as widowhood and can offer the necessary space to explore the experience of loss from different perspectives. (p. 228)

Grief or widow memoirs reflect emotional and psychological responses to loss that come because of events such as death, separation, divorce, accident, or sickness. According to Małecka and Bottomley (2022), these memoirs focus specifically on the traumatic period in an individual's life and may be composed during mourning, shortly after the experience of loss, or at a later stage as reflection.

Małecka and Bottomley (2022) conducted a survey with 76 participants from diverse backgrounds to assess their familiarity with grief memoirs. The participants noted that memoir writing helps remove the stigma associated with grief by creating a safe space where they can express their emotions without fear of judgement. While writing a grief memoir, the writer often experiences a sense of connection, as they can share their personal narratives and engage in imagined dialogues with the deceased. Consistent with Snauwaert (2021), Małecka and Bottomley (2022) assert that grief memoirs serve as a tool for emotional healing.

Research methods and design

We adopted a qualitative approach to collect and analyse data, as this method focuses on interpreting human behaviour within natural settings and understanding how individuals make sense of their worlds (Creswell & Poth 2018; Wa-Mbaleka & Rosario 2022). Erickson (2011:33) asserts that 'qualitative inquiry seeks to discover and describe narratively what people do in their everyday lives and what their actions can mean to them'. In this study, the participants were five first-year students who participated in a Memoir Writing Project. They were registered for an English module at an ODeL university. Qualitative data collection methods were employed, which included written texts that were analysed hermeneutically, as well as observations that could not be quantified.

In addition, an exploratory case study approach was employed to investigate how first-year students expressed their grief through memoir writing. According to Creswell and Poth (2018:96), a case study is 'a qualitative approach in which an investigator explores a real life, contemporary bounded system, or multiple bounded systems [*cases*] over time, through detailed, involving multiple sources of information', such as observations and texts. A case may consist of any defined unit such as an individual student, a small group, an organisation, a partnership, or a single event (Creswell & Poth 2018; Denzin & Lincoln 2005). The case under investigation is the students' memoir writing within the Memoir Writing Project.

The participants in this research were students at a leading ODeL university in South Africa with an enrolment of more than 400 000 students per annum, located across various regions worldwide. These students are geographically separated from the university, and access teaching and learning materials through digital platforms such as online blogs, livestreams, Microsoft Teams, Zoom meetings, and other social media platforms. These platforms enabled the students to interact with their e-tutors, lecturers, and one another to share knowledge. The students participated in a writing workshop called the Memoir Writing Project. Within this project, virtual workshops were conducted during which the students produced short memoirs based on their own topics.

Sample

The participants in this study were sampled from a population of 2373 students enrolled in an English module at the university. A purposive sampling method was employed, in

line with the case study research design, to identify 'information-rich cases, [*which*] by their nature and substance will illuminate the inquiry question being investigated' (Patton 2014:264). A call was sent out through the English module online site where announcements are made. The students were sent questionnaires and asked to indicate their interest in participating in the study. Out of the 2373 students, 92 responded, 51 of whom indicated having interest in the project. Eventually, only five students managed to join the project when it commenced. The study was conducted at the beginning of coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic; staff and students were all disoriented and it was difficult for the researcher to reach them. In addition, some students failed to access the project because of a lack of mobile data, and loadshedding that disrupted connections. Thus, the five students who participated were self-selected.

The five participants are first-year students aged between 18 and 40 years and all are South African. The participants speak various official languages, namely IsiZulu, Sesotho, Afrikaans, and English. Our group comprised of four female students and one male student, whose pseudonyms are Nicole, Pinkie, Thenjiwe, Leticia, and Tshepo. Three of these participants (Tshepo, Pinkie, and Thenjiwe) are black, whereas Nicole is Indian, and Leticia is coloured.

Data collection methods

For this article, data were collected using students' written memoirs. The memoirs were written as part of the students' participation in the Memoir Writing Project. In the project, the students attended weekly writing workshops on Microsoft Teams from June to December 2022, in which they were taught different ways of expressing voice in memoir writing. During these workshops, the students shared ideas on how they wrote memoirs and provided feedback on each other's memoirs. The memoirs varied in terms of topics and length. The word count of the memoirs ranged between 450 and 2300.

Data analysis methods

The qualitative data were analysed using thematic analysis, an approach which focuses on understanding lived experiences and how participants interpret and give meaning to those experiences (Braun & Clarke 2012). According to Damayanthi (2019:3), thematic analysis is used to 'to identify themes and patterns of meaning across a data set in relation to a particular Research Sub-Question(s)'. Data analysis followed the accepted conventions such as organising data, coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, and reporting.

Credibility

To maintain credibility (which entails the degree of truthfulness and credibility of the results of a study), we conducted prolonged engagements with the students through weekly writing workshops that were held from June to December 2022. During these sessions, the students were introduced to memoir writing and the ways of constructing voice in writing. They also wrote their own memoirs, which were thoroughly discussed during the sessions. A WhatsApp group was also created where facilitators had easy access to the students. In addition, measures were put in place to avoid personal biases. The students were actively involved in all the sessions. They wrote their own memoirs and had opportunities to provide each other with peer feedback instead of being passive in the construction of knowledge. Data were collected using multiple tools, such as observations of online classes, field notes, and students' written memoirs. These sources of data were all considered to enhance the credibility of the findings.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval to conduct this study was granted by the University of South Africa's College Research Ethics Committee on 14 December 2021, under ethical clearance number REC-240816-052. All ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study through information sheets, and consent was granted to collect data. The participants were informed of their rights, which included their right to withdraw from the study at any time without negative consequences. In addition, pseudonyms were assigned to every participant to ensure anonymity. All data were treated with strict confidentiality and were used solely for the purposes of this study. Access to the raw data was restricted to the researchers and facilitators. This helped maintain confidentiality. The data are stored securely on a password-protected computer and will be retained for five years following the submission of the final research report, after which they will be permanently destroyed.

Findings

The students' freedom to choose topics

Our first research question is, 'In what ways does memoir writing enable/create space(s) for students to express their voice and grief?' The students' responses reveal that the Memoir Writing Project accommodated their diverse backgrounds and provided them with the autonomy to select personal topics. Most of the memoirs focus on traumatic experiences, such as the divorce of parents during childhood, the death of loved ones, personal disappointments, and struggles with depression. Moreso, as Tembo (2020:152) alluded, memoir writing 'inscribe[*s*] pain, anxiety, loneliness, coping with illness, and near-death experiences' which might be caused by loss. These memoirs take a form of what Baines (2017) calls a narrative therapy which helps writers to heal from past traumas. For instance, in her memoir entitled *The last day she lived to fight for us*, Nicole recounts how the divorce of her parents resulted in her mother's death. She recounts an event where her parents met in a magistrate's court because of her father's having abandoned his parental duties. She chose the title because it marks the final occasion on which she witnessed her mother showing strength by fighting for her children. It was also the last day her mother had the strength to do so, as she was admitted to hospital shortly after

and never recovered. This day shaped Nicole's future and serves as a reminder of the pain she experienced following her mother's death, as illustrated in Box 1, Extract A.

Another student, Pinkie, titled her memoir *The dark cloud of misery*, which reflects on the death of her father, whom she dearly loved. In the memoir, she details how she witnessed her father's health decline after a short illness. She reminisces about their relationship and the void that his death has left in her life. The title of the memoir suggests how her father's death has caused her pain and how it has affected the well-being of her family, as expressed in Box 2, Extract B.

Thenjiwe's memoir, titled *Disappointment*, reflects the heartbreak she experienced when her father refused to support her pursuit of further education after she left school.

BOX 1: Extract A – *The last day she lived to fight for us*.

Student: Nicole

It was around 06:00, 10 August 2002. I was woken by my mother's voice calling my name as usual. Today would be different because instead of me getting ready for school, I would be accompanying mom to court. My father hasn't been paying maintenance for a very long time and she is going to fight for us today. I'm going with her, because since my birthday two weeks ago, she has not been feeling well. She is weak and looks sad, but she still has hope, she has hope that the courts will bring us justice.

The weather was dull. It was cloudy, but no rain. We took a taxi to Athlone, passing my school. It was still too early for any of my friends to be there.

We arrive at the courthouse just before 07:00, it's already full. So many mothers, most of them look exhausted. This is obviously not the first time they are here, fighting for their kids.

We sit and we wait, my mom is quiet mostly, the atmosphere is sombre, quiet. I don't remember what we spoke of, if we did. I know she was feeling sick, I said let's just go home but she was adamant to get this done. Our case was finally called by 12:00, the state attorney called my mom to a back room, spoke to her briefly and then we went to sit down. It was my first time in a courtroom. Seeing people in black robes and white wigs on their hair, it felt so surreal, so overwhelming and sad to be there.

My father was called to the stand to state his case. I could not believe him, he was wearing broken clothing, he hadn't cut his hair or shaved for what seemed like months. He stood on that stand and said that he could not afford to pay maintenance for us, he stood there and lied about being unemployed and homeless. I could not believe that a person could be so cruel. He was ordered to pay R100 per child per month, unbelievable. The look on my mom's face was defeat. I will never forget how disappointed she was in him.

Source: Maluleke, S.F., 2024, 'Creating space(s) for voice in English academic writing through memoir writing: A case study of first-year students at an ODL University in South Africa', PhD thesis, University of South Africa.

BOX 2: Extract B – *The dark cloud of misery*.

Student: Pinkie

Truth is the opposite of life is death and that it is not death but dying that alarms us. Here is a little description of what pain is and the how deep it can get. I remember the date like the lyrics of a song, 23 July 2020, I was doing my matric year and I was extremely sick. My father took the responsibility of taking care of me because my mom was working, my classmates were preparing for preliminary exams. I call this month the month of the dark cloud because there really was a dark cloud hanging over the roof and not even a prayer could help remove it. Exactly 18:00 my mother ran a bath for my father, 5 min later he came out and I noticed he has not taken his bath yet let me say something just told me to go check up on him. I then went to his room and found him lying down on the floor, I panicked and called my mother to come and help me pick him up. She did not even waste time we then carried him and placed him on the bed my mother gave me a warm cloth to rub him, as she was busy calling the ambulance, he was struggling to breath[e], he felt nauseous and all I can say is that I felt so useless and hurt at the same time truth be told I do not even know how to explain the feeling. A few minutes later the ambulance came and they took him to the clinic, it was around COVID times so there were new rules that a patient has to get a letter from the clinic first before going to the hospital. Now this is where the dark clouds covered my house, unfortunately the nurses failed to help my father a[n]d he took his last breath, how little we knew that day what sorrow the night will bring, the smile that won so many hearts all gone and we are just left with a picture of him in a photo frame. My mother called and broke the news to me, and I felt my world crushing down, felt this heavy weight on my shoulders and wished someone could tell me it was all a lie. I do not know if I should call it depression or trauma but from that day I knew the definition of both those words.

Source: Maluleke, S.F., 2024, 'Creating space(s) for voice in English academic writing through memoir writing: A case study of first-year students at an ODL University in South Africa', PhD thesis, University of South Africa.

COVID, coronavirus disease.

Memoir writing enables her to revisit this painful experience and demonstrates its therapeutic role in helping her come to terms with it. As indicated in Box 3, Extract C she still asks herself questions about the reasons why her father would not want her to be educated.

In her memoir entitled *Broken pieces*, Leticia reflects on her troubled childhood. The title suggests how she views herself as a child who grew up broken. In writing the memoir, Leticia alternates between the first-person pronoun 'I' (her present self) and the third-person pronoun 'she', which creates distance and to reflect on her childhood. In addition, she uses questions to introspect and gain a deeper understanding of the things that were happening to her as a child. This is shown in Box 4, Extract D.

Students' discussions of their memoirs

During the process of constructing their memoirs, students shared their writing on an online platform, where they could read one another's writings and provide feedback. These discussions created a safe environment that enabled them to express emotions that have been hidden. Through collaborative engagement, the students gained confidence to share their pain and came to understand that it is acceptable to talk about sensitive matters, as they would not be judged. In addition, collaboration created a sense of companionship among the writers, as they knew that their stories would be read and, most importantly, realised that they were not alone in their experiences. This is elaborated in Box 5, Extract E.

Grief in memoir writing

As the students were invited to write about any event in their lives, their memoirs predominantly focused on grief, which was approached in unique ways. The titles of the memoirs represent specific themes of grief. For instance, Nicole titled her memoir *The last day she lived to fight for us*, which suggests

BOX 3: Extract C – *Disappointed*.

Student: Thenjiwe

I could feel the tears in my eyes. I couldn't hold them back. I let them flow down my chicks. Unable to utter words out of my mouth. I cried so loud that I could feel my heart beating slowly. I cried until I fell asleep.

After studying so hard for matri[*c*] and obtained good marks, I was denied opportunity to fulfil my dreams. As I grew up, I imagined myself as a doctor. Even when playing with peers, my character was that of being a doctor.

At school I gained a lot of support from teachers. They had much confidence that I would [*be*] admitted to medical school. I applied to various Universities, and Cape Town University accepted me. I was so excited that my dream would come through.

The results were released, and I have gained entry to any university. I was so happy and so were the teachers. My happiness was short lived as my drop a bomb on me. He was against my dream of studying further. According to him, girls were not meant so study further after matric. He was so old fashioned, and stubborn at the same time.

The teachers pleaded with him, but it was such a waste of time. I tried persuading him but was unsuccessful. He would not burger [*sic*]. That was the last decent conversation I had with [*him*]. I was angry with him I did not feel like talking to him anymore.

I asked myself how he can call ruin my life like this? Was I not good enough to practi[*s*]e medicine? All these questions were useless, they only brought more disappointment in my life. The only thing I could do was make peace and move on with my life.

Source: Maluleke, S.F., 2024, 'Creating space(s) for voice in English academic writing through memoir writing: A case study of first-year students at an ODL University in South Africa', PhD thesis, University of South Africa.

that this was the last day her mother showed strength in fighting for her children before she fell ill. It may also imply that it was the last day she needed to fight, and that she succeeded.

The other students approached the theme of grief more subtly. The title of Thenjiwe's memoir, *Disappointment*, does not immediately allude to grief, but a sad emotion. However, as one reads it closely, one discovers that she experienced grief caused by deprivation as she was denied an opportunity to further her studies. The pain of this loss remained with her for a long time until she expressed it through her memoir. Similarly, Leticia's title, *Broken pieces*, correlates with the theme of pain and brokenness that she experienced during childhood. In the memoir, *The dark cloud of misery*, Pinkie employs metaphor to express sadness, loss, and grief. The phrase, 'the dark cloud', emphasises the sadness and emotional burden caused by death, while the word 'misery' stresses the themes of pain and sadness that underpin the memoir. In a nutshell, the students made conscious decisions when writing their titles and ensured that the titles correlated with the themes they intended to pursue.

Overall, the students used memoir writing to interrogate their feelings and gain insight into why certain events took place. In addition, memoir writing helped them to connect the past, the present, and the future, and to understand how the circumstances that led to grief shaped their personal development. For instance, Thenjiwe's memoir explains how she attempted to gain a better understanding of why her father deprived her of an opportunity to further her studies. She highlights cultural dynamics that influenced her father's belief that women should not attain education beyond matriculation.

Furthermore, she interrogates her thoughts and feelings by asking herself questions about the relevance of certain cultural beliefs that have historically oppressed women (Box 6, Extract F). In addition, memoir writing served therapeutic goals as it enabled her to find closure on this issue after many years. This shows that memoir writing can help writers to find peace.

Memoir writing also allows writers to communicate their feelings. In her memoir, Pinkie describes the impact of her father's death and how she coped with the resulting stress and depression. She uses memoir writing to engage with her father's memory and express her feelings towards him. She uses her own creativity and includes a poem dedicated to her father.

The poem enables her to let her father know that his passing has brought pain in her heart. In addition, she expresses her admiration of his strength when he was still alive, 'Rest my love, rest my rock, and rest my gem. You fought and the journey ends today!!!' Here she sees the positive side of having had a father, which gives her solace (Box 7, Extract G).

Leticia adopts an unconventional approach in her memoir writing. Unlike the other students, who express their grief using a first-person narrative voice, she maintains a third-person perspective to describe the troubled childhood of a young girl, who, in fact, represents herself.

Her description of the girl's troubled life is based on Leticia's memories. While the author may use a distant third-person narrative, memoir writing has become a tool to interrogate

BOX 4: Extract D – *Broken pieces.*

Student: Leticia

I met this beautiful girl one morning, we were both very young. When I met her, she seemed kind and beautiful. She was vibrant, her energy made me feel happy and full. I did not know her at all but the more we spoke, I felt I did.

Little did I know, I didn't know her at all. Months went by and I heard what she had been through. She was good at putting up a front to make others happy when at the same time it was slowly eating her on the inside. I started watching her from a distance. I saw how she treated others, with the utmost gentleness. She worried me, I mean anybody would be worried if they knew what she had been through.

She was hurt… they hurt her. Did she deserve it? Did they take her kindness for weakness to get what they wanted? Her heart was of pure gold. Despite how they treated her, she still remained sweet.

I asked myself 'why?'. But it was not my place to answer. I expected her to be cold and hurtful towards others, but she wasn't, not at all. She loved like her heart wasn't broken. She laughed like SHE wasn't broken, but the question remained 'Was she okay?'

I couldn't understand it. I struggled to understand her. Why? Why would she put the needs of others above her own, I asked myself. That is when I realised, she did that because she did not want to be seen. They took her, they used her… they hurt her. Did they actually love her or were they fooling her? I understood why she didn't want to be seen. She tried her best to spread so much love, but I know, I know that she didn't feel loved at all. When you don't feel loved, you try your best to spread as much love and more love than you can give because you know how it feels to not feel loved.

It hurts, and I'm sure it hurt her. Did what happen to her make her feel at war with herself?

She spoke to me like she was the happiest in the world and it confused me. How was she able to do that. I asked her, 'How do you do that? How do you act as if everything is okay when it isn't'. She looked at me and, in the moment, it was as if she knew that I knew everything that had happened. She replied, it's not needed for everyone to know in how much pain I am in, nobody deserves that. She was hurt. She was brutalised. She was abused by two people whom she had dear to her heart, her closest friend, and her boyfriend.

Source: Maluleke, S.F., 2024, 'Creating space(s) for voice in English academic writing through memoir writing: A case study of first-year students at an ODL University in South Africa', PhD thesis, University of South Africa.

BOX 5: Extract E – *The last day she lived to fight for us*.

Pinkie's reply to Nicole

The theme is dealing with pain and survival, because in pain she is trying to survive and yet give out LOVE.

The heading supports the memoir because the young girl is really broken; to a point whereby even when she close her eyes she doesn't really sleep. I believe there is no greater pain than having to hide your pain.

The language is formal and it can be read by many audi[e]nces without feeling a sense of disrespect. The use of rhetorical questions and clear language made it more attractive. I believe any reader can relate to the pain; [*I*] think she should use 'do not' instead of 'don't' for the memoir to look more professional. It is an in-person voice, and the writer can relate to the pain.

Source: Maluleke, S.F., 2024, 'Creating space(s) for voice in English academic writing through memoir writing: A case study of first-year students at an ODL University in South Africa', PhD thesis, University of South Africa.

BOX 6: Extract F – *Disappointed*.

Student: Thenjiwe

I could feel the tears in my eyes. I could not hold them back, I just let them flow down my cheeks. So many question came flooding in my mind. How could he shatter my dreams like this? What have I done to deserve such heartache?

He was supposed to be my cheer leader, but instead he was against my ambitions and success. I was so hurt, I could not face him. I was so disappointed; I felt like the walls of the earth were closing on me. Was my hard work at school for nothing? His stubbornness ruined my life. Why was he stuck in the beliefs of our forefathers? Was it too much for him to change ways of the past and give women opportunity to make something for themselves? There was nothing anybody could do to change his decision. I had to accept it and move on with my life. I had to make peace with it.

Source: Maluleke, S.F., 2024, 'Creating space(s) for voice in English academic writing through memoir writing: A case study of first-year students at an ODL University in South Africa', PhD thesis, University of South Africa.

and deconstruct her own past 'self' through careful narrative choices (Williams 2013). The third-person approach is evidenced in Box 8, Extract H.

Discussion

The findings reveal that the students' ability to express grief in their memoirs relied on the pedagogies of writing adopted in the Memoir Writing Project, which allowed them to choose topics for themselves. The findings indicate that the students' expressive abilities relied on a sense of freedom and collaborations with peers. Freedom and collaboration, including peer feedback and engagement, enhanced students' sense of ownership and authority in their writing. This finding confirms Allman's (2020) argument that writing is shaped by interactions and collaborations among writers, who share ideas and provide each other peer feedback. They exercised autonomy in crafting their memoirs based on their unique personal experiences. Their narratives explore grief in different forms such as death, disappointment, and heartbreak. Although some students focused on grief because of death, others expressed grief caused by heartbreak and personal disillusionment.

The students peer-reviewed each other's texts. The ability to take authority and collaborate in text-construction enhanced their growth as writers. Collaboration is one of the principles of the sociocultural theory of writing that perceive writing as a purposeful social activity that is anchored on sharing responsibilities and ideas (Slavkov 2015). These interactions were not limited to technical aspects but centred on meaning and emotional resonance. While students were encouraged to provide peer feedback, they did not seem familiar with the process, suggesting that their prior writing had been individual and did not nurture collaboration.

BOX 7: Extract G – *The dark cloud of misery*.

Student: Pinkie

I realised I needed to lose him to find out how much I love him. The one thing I can say now is that never judge someone if you do not know their situations, I began to have suicidal thoughts right that moment and I could tell I was losing my mind. Slowly the end was linked to the beginning and the story of my life reached its climax. I felt lonely and truth be told I gave up on my matric results right that moment. My father was my number one cheerleader he was the one person who gave me purpose and strength when I was down and losing focus. Allow me to say I felt like God failed me, well that is how I felt, the big question is why did I end up feeling like that? I have been one of those kids who go to church and attend Sunday schools, one of those kids who kneel down and talk to [G]od. I am not saint I make mistakes but I have lived my teenage years dwelling in the house of the Lord but the one time I needed his touch the one time I needed him to intervene he left me.

Rather let me say that is absolutely how I felt, I prayed to God the moment the car left to hospital I begged he who lives to keep my father for me, but he denied me the little opportunity to shine in my father eyes. I just remembered 'he whom the Gods love dies young, while he is in health and his judgements sounds'. Allow me to pour out my heart, allow me to share the poem, the words that came to mind.

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BOX 8: Extract H – *Broken pieces.*

Student: Leticia

I met this beautiful girl one morning, we were both very young. When I met her, she seemed kind and beautiful. She was vibrant, her energy made me feel happy and full. I did not know her at all but the more we spoke, I felt I did.

Little did I know, I didn't know her at all. Months went by and I heard what she had been through. She was good at putting up a front to make others happy when at the same time it was slowly eating her on the inside. I started watching her from a distance. I saw how she treated others, with the utmost gentleness. She worried me, I mean anybody would be worried if they knew what she had been through.

She was hurt … they hurt her. Did she deserve it? Did they take her kindness for weakness to get what they wanted? Her heart was of pure gold. Despite how they treated her, she still remained sweet.

Source: Maluleke, S.F., 2024, 'Creating space(s) for voice in English academic writing through memoir writing: A case study of first-year students at an ODL University in South Africa', PhD thesis, University of South Africa.

Our discussion of the students' expression of grief in their memoirs has shown how such writing provided an opportunity to find closure on unresolved issues in their lives. In line with Ruini and Mortara's (2022) concept of 'writing therapy', this finding accentuates those of Snauwaert (2021) and Małecka and Bottomley (2022) that memoir writing can serve as a tool for emotional healing and therapy. Memoir writing also helped them gain insight into why certain incidents happened and how they shaped them. These are aspects of memoir writing that have not previously been explored. The act of writing memoirs enabled the students to connect the past, the present, and the future. As shown by Den Elzen (2018), memoir writing helps authors rebuild their own sense of self, as they continue to engage in dialogues with themselves to gain a better understanding of their traumatic experiences. Furthermore, it served as a coping mechanism that provided space for students to deal with loss, and, ultimately, as a form of therapy and self-reflection.

Conclusion

This article illustrates how memoir writing can serve as a tool to prompt students to reflect on past traumatic experiences, express their grief and find closure on unresolved issues. Traumatic experiences are sensitive but reflecting on them can help students gain deeper insight into their personal experiences. Memoirs can provide students with the opportunity to understand past events as well as how such events have influenced their identities. In addition, collaborative writing approaches create a safe space for students to open up about their issues. When collaborating through sharing their writing, reading about each other's experiences, and providing comments, students are encouraged to confront long-held emotional pain and begin to resolve grief. As the findings demonstrate, the development of voice in students' memoirs stems from being afforded the freedom to choose their own topics. Allowing students an opportunity to write about their personal stories can give them the authority to construct their experiences in their own way, and they are able to assert their identities as writers.

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CRediT authorship contribution

Sydney F. Maluleke: Conceptualisation, Formal analysis, Methodology, Writing – original draft. Mirriam M.K. Lephalala: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. Deirdre C. Byrne: Supervision, Writing – review & editing. All authors reviewed the article, contributed to the discussion of results, approved the final version for submission and publication, and take responsibility for the integrity of its findings.

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The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, Sydney F. Maluleke, upon reasonable request.

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