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To cite this article: Rhoda Titilopemi Inioluwa Abiolu (2022): Applying Reflective Writing as a Participatory Methodology for “Speaking-Up” About Gender-based Violence in South Africa, *Critical Arts*, DOI: [10.1080/02560046.2022.2122526](https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2022.2122526)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02560046.2022.2122526>



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Published online: 29 Sep 2022.



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Applying Reflective Writing as a Participatory Methodology for “Speaking-Up” About Gender-based Violence in South Africa

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ABSTRACT



South Africa contends with gender-based violence (GBV) and its societal consequences. This study, therefore, engages with discussions around reflective writing as a participatory methodology to foster free and inclusive expression on issues around GBV in South Africa. My study proffers a diverse response by exploring how participatory research and assessment approaches, through reflective writing as a pedagogical practice, serve as viable premises to further debates on opposing acts of violence. It discusses the feasibility of reflective writing as a tool for articulating and understanding human views on GBV. I also evaluate how creating a safe and anonymous space through reflective writing influences how issues on GBV are perceived. I achieve these using a qualitative research approach and applying a thematic method of data analysis. *The story of Fatmata and Mohamed* and the poem *I got flowers today* were the literary pieces used as a springboard for the written reflections analysed in the study. Results indicate that students found it easier to communicate through written reflections rather than publicly speaking about their perceptions of GBV. Their reflections became tools for expression. This can be advantageous for public engagement and a call to action on GBV.

KEYWORDS

Reflective writing; gender-based violence; students; participatory methodology; South Africa

Introduction

Stopping gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa is an arduous task. Such violence attacks the very core of South African society (National strategic plan on gender-based violence and femicide 2020). The rainbow nation – South Africa – grapples with inequality on all fronts; an increasing crime rate, violent outbreaks, and acts of gender-based atrocities put the country’s population in a precarious situation, particularly vulnerable groups such as women and children (Department of Social Development Integrated Social Crime Prevention Strategy 2011). Studies and policies have put forward strategies to curb the menace of GBV, however, impediments remain

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(Graaff and Heinecken 2017; Meyiwa et al. 2017). For instance, the normalisation and an ingrained culture of violence, the 'silence culture' around GBV, prevalent gender inequality, and the unsafe spaces that breed fear and stigmatisation all contribute to the powerlessness of people to express themselves freely. Abiolu (2022) elaborates on the 'silence culture' that envelopes GBV and its endemic nature in South Africa alongside other factors that aid acts of violence. My study determines if adopting writing can be an intervention strategy.

The core of this study advocates for the utilising of reflective writing as an instrument to initiate dialogues and generate discussion to tackle violence in society, thereby contributing to ongoing arguments and suggestions on alternate strategies to diminish GBV. It assesses how reflective writing creates a starting point for students to express themselves and generate solutions, strategies, and interventions to oppose gender-based crimes. The study is situated among students at the Durban University of Technology (DUT) who have enrolled in the university-wide module 'Cornerstone.' The module introduces students to the higher education community and the values and practices that foster self-awareness, social justice, and environmental knowledge. Written reflection is used for assessment and is a weekly class activity required for the Cornerstone module. Students are invited to reflect on subject matters discussed in class. The topics are already set out in the course outline by course coordinators on subjects covered in the module, such as GBV, safe sexual practices, stereotypes, discrimination, identity studies, consent and grievance procedures, etc. Students do not choose the topics for their written reflections because these are already in the course outline. However, they narrate their reflections in a free-flowing pattern, and from these, they can also freely contribute to topics at hand. After the class reflections are submitted, the facilitator assesses and provides adequate general feedback on highlights from the submissions on how their perspectives illuminate class discussions. This is done without pinpointing anyone's reflections in particular. If warranted, individual conversations are held with those who may need some form of consultation and students may be referred for student counselling if thought prudent. The module, thus, takes the form of a dialogue rather than a univocal discourse.

Further discussions in this paper delve into the literature on the prevalence of gender-based violence in South Africa. It then dovetails into the methodological base of the study. This study appraises how creating a safe and anonymous space through reflective writing, within which people are free to express themselves and get help, if need be, influences how issues related to GBV are understood and reported. I achieve this using a qualitative research prism, applying a thematic method of data analysis. The study's data are presented, analysed, and scrutinised, before conclusions are drawn.

Problematising gender-based violence in South Africa

South African society contends with underlying health, economic, social, and political inequalities (Department of Social Development Integrated Social Crime Prevention Strategy 2011). There is also a need to address the multifaceted nature of GBV and its accompanying consequences (Dunkle et al. 2004a). The enormity and complexity of these concerns prompted a microscopic view of the public health interest in

gender-based violence (GBV) in South Africa. Without a doubt, there have been and will continue to be discussions and conversations around GBV and its adverse effects on vulnerable groups and society until the menace is abated or substantially reduced. However, until then, conventional and novel means of uncovering experiences of GBV and advocacy for more suitable, sustainable, and implementable policies are vital.

Acts of GBV in South Africa are mostly characterised as physical, sexual, and emotional, and targeting of members of vulnerable groups, like women and children (SADHS 2016; Statistics 2018). Crime Statistics (2021a, b, c), for the first three quarters of the 2021 financial year, reported 282 women were murdered, 1,467 were raped, and 258 were sexually assaulted in South Africa. In the same vein, 10,895 women suffered from assaults that were intended to inflict bodily harm, while 29,054 suffered from common assaults. From this, it is evident that despite laws and policies being in place to safeguard human rights, some of which aim to protect against human violation and discrimination¹, South African society still struggles with GBV (National strategic plan on gender-based violence and femicide 2020). Hence, the complicated nature of GBV warrants the exploration of alternative interventions and approaches to extenuate this scourge (Starr and Mitchell 2020; Graaff and Heinecken 2017; Garlock 2016). Factors such as male control/dominance, and the role of culture and society generally in the perpetration of violent acts, are matters of great concern and indications of major gaps in policies to protect the vulnerable (Abiolu 2022; Mosavel et al. 2011; Dunkle et al. 2004b; Galtung 1969; 1990).

Educational strategies, interventions, and policies, such as entertainment education, campaigns, sensitisation, and awareness programmes, have been advocated to overcome GBV in South Africa (Graaff and Heinecken 2017; Garlock 2016). In light of these, this study adds to the conversations on utilising educational practices to combat the upward trend in GBV cases in South Africa. Drawing on the educational tool of reflective writing, this study situates itself within a participatory methodological perspective to demystify the divergent views of students about GBV and how reflective writing contributes to the freedom to air their opinions. Bhana (2013) averred that a viable, comprehensive strategy to prevent the perpetration of violence in society is to develop and encourage programmes in institutions of learning where students feel included and view themselves as active agents of change. This can be achieved through reflective writing (Marshall et al. 2012), accentuating the relevance of my study. Thus, adequate interventions that seek to change the attitude of people, formulate additional policies, and encourage appropriate conversations at the school level are crucial (De Lange et al. 2012).

Reflective writing as a participatory approach

Reflections can present a medium for students to express their views creatively through writings or drawings. This is beneficial when discussing sensitive subjects or when people

¹Such as the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences and Related Matters) Amendment Act Amendment Bill (PMG, 2022a), Criminal and Related Matters Amendment Bill (PMG, 2022b), Domestic Violence Amendment Bill (PMG, 2022c), and the Bill of Rights, contained in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act 108 of 1996).

are uncomfortable speaking about particular topics in the presence of others. The outcomes, thus, become the personal narrative of the writer. Issues that may be difficult to discuss, such as GBV, stigmatisation, experiences of those living with HIV, consent and risky sexual behaviour, etc., are addressed in the Cornerstone module.² The module coordinators outline the topics in the course material for students to familiarise themselves with. Students then reflect on these topics as take-home assignments and submit their reflections after the tutorial in which the topics were discussed. It is envisioned that from the reflections, course facilitators and the class (based on the general and summarised feedback provided by the facilitators, which does not spotlight anyone's submissions) are more acquainted with the myriad of thoughts about the topics at hand. But beyond assessing and providing feedback, my paper suggests that students' participation through reflective writing can be engineered by way of encouraging their practical contributions to abate acts of violence, and the implementation of these recommendations at the immediate level, i.e. within higher education contexts.

Jasper (2005) argued that engaging in reflective writing not only develops the writer's critical thinking and analytical abilities but also enables a participatory and inclusive culture. The participatory culture within the context of this study involves the creation of an environment where people believe that their contributions matter while there is a relatively low hindrance to individual/freedom of expression (Jenkins 2007). Participatory culture is mostly viewed within community involvement and the online space. Still, it also supports the notion that if people believe that they have an active stake in social transformation and the production of knowledge and culture, their views are as valid in physical environments (Widyastuti et al. 2021). Baruah et al. (2017) determined from their study that reflective writing as a peer assessment tool for students in higher education was effective. The study favoured reflective writing as a valuable component in designing an active learning environment and promoting a strong participatory and collaborative culture among students. Their study's conclusion hinged on inspiring students to apply the skill of reflective writing for confidence building and a positive attitude to life.

Butler-Kisber (2018) affirmed that participatory methods and approaches amplify the voices of marginalised groups or those who do not think their views matter. This is important in order that people begin to view themselves as active agents of change and transformation (Freire 2005). In a similar outlook, MacDonald et al. (2011) relayed the use of reflective writing as a participatory process among young people, lending their voice, and providing visibility in developing and evaluating resources to confront risky sexual behaviour. The title of their study, *include them, and they will tell you: learnings from*

²The Cornerstone module assists facilitators to 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." (ICON 2015).

It is noteworthy to emphasise that the issue of safety revolves around the culture of silence that is prevalent in South Africa on violence and health matters such as HIV and unsafe sexual practices (Abiolu 2022). The culture enables suffering in silence rather than people speaking out about their struggles and experiences of violence. This is further compounded, as noted earlier, by the role of culture in the South African society that favours male dominance and women subjugation. By offering the platform to engage with these topics among students, through this course and reflective writing, the barriers, and limitations to speaking out become eroded.

a participatory process with youth captures the essence of my study, in that participatory methodologies, like reflective writing, create platforms for expression and the airing of divergent views about sensitive topics like GBV. Through this, students can co-create knowledge on how GBV can be stopped. Such participatory methodologies are valuable in providing an inclusive environment for students and promoting platforms for deliberations that can spark social change and transformation from the individual to the societal level (Pithouse et al. 2009). Evidence also shows that “a reflexive [methodological] approach to learning [especially on issues around GBV] enable[s] participants to critically examine both their own and others’ perspectives and actions to increase their understanding of why they do what they do and how” (Shah-rokh et al. 2015, 9).

Through reflective writing, my study emphasises that students’ contributions also matter in the discourse on GBV. Experientially, some students are often conscious of grammatical constructions and correctness which sometimes hampers effective verbal communication because they are less fluent in the English language and more in their mother tongues. Concerns regarding public speaking can be omitted through the use of reflective writing. The study, therefore, hinges on the notion of inclusivity and the creation of spaces for active involvement (Cornwall 2003). This underpins the relevance of participatory educational approaches in confronting societal issues (Abiolu 2022).

Methodology

The methodological focus of this study is on the views of 10 of 66 students who agreed for me to use their reflections. I utilised participatory action desktop research based on those who filled out consent forms and handed in their reflective class activities. The purpose of the consent forms was to guarantee participants’ anonymity and reassure them of the safety of the space we provide through the module for them to express their views. As a course ethos, anonymity and confidentiality are vital components allowing students to freely discuss their opinions through their submissions without the fear of tags or being identified by colleagues. However, they are well acquainted that their facilitators will read and grade these reflections and provide feedback for general class conversations.

To avoid identifiers, I use the pseudonym ‘Participant’ rather than their actual names. This process ensures that their views are treated ethically without jeopardizing the value of confidentiality. In terms of recruitment strategy, I did not have direct/ one-on-one interaction with the students. I sent them informed consent forms via Moodle as set out in my ethical procedure; this ensured safety, confidentiality, and anonymity. Their demographics were not considered; they were only required to be over 18 years and enrolled in the Cornerstone module in the 2021 second semester. As reflective writing is a critical component of the module and is used for assessment, the data was easily available.

As indicated earlier, several topics were discussed and reflected on in class in the Cornerstone Module. I harnessed the participants’ submissions from two class sessions. The first session focused on gender diversity and gender-based violence, and the second session was on issues of consent and grievance procedures. As such, the

class reflected on *the story of Fatmata and Mohamed*³ and the poem *I got flowers today*.⁴ Data generated from these sessions form part of this research.

I thematically scrutinised the reflections. Thematic analysis, as a method, identifies, analyses, reports, organizes and describes patterns otherwise known as themes from data (Clarke and Braun 2013; Braun and Clarke 2006). Through this approach, I searched for and examined patterns generated from the reflective writing data, which offered a meaningful framework for unpacking and interpreting the students' views. These enabled me to make sense of and provide adequate analysis of clear and underlying ideas. Braun and Clarke (2006) proposed a six-phase process of carrying out thematic analysis, which is: getting familiar with the data, generating initial codes, locating, and identifying themes, reviewing these themes, defining and labelling these themes, and then compiling the report. This process was employed in categorising and analysing the themes generated from this study's data. Reoccurring patterns were identified and studied to understand better the students' perspectives on GBV and the ways that acts of violence can be assuaged. Latent and manifest content was considered to add to the richness of the data (Vaismoradi et al. 2016). However, this was centred on what was solely relayed from the data, hence, the need for objectivity and not subjectivity.

After becoming familiar with the data, I generated codes from which I could locate and identify themes. The themes and codes are represented in Table 1.

Two themes were derived from the categorisation of codes, sifted from the students' responses. The first is 'using reflective writing as an instrument for free expression on GBV issues,' and the second is 'how students relate to acts of violence in the class materials (the poem and the story'. The codes under the first theme denote the feasibility of this class activity to report and relay viewpoints on gender issues without the fear of scrutiny. The codes that characterise the second theme indicate how reflective writing enables retrospection and the cultivation of a deeper sense of empathy and consideration towards self and the experiences of others. Detailed and in-depth discussions follow.

Data presentation: what are the students saying about GBV through reflective writing?

The data presented in this section are largely based on students' opinions from their class reflections regarding what they learned about GBV. To analyse the reflections, I adopt a thematic process in examining how the students said they felt as a result of their evaluations and interpretations of other people's GBV experiences (from the story/poem), how

³Fatmata lived with her husband, Mohamed, and their three children in a small house near the market. When they got married, Mohamed paid a high bride price to her family and, from the beginning, expected Fatmata to work hard to make up for it. He would often tell her that he had paid a good price for her so she better work and be a good wife, or else he would send her back and demand the money back from her family. Fatmata worked from early in the morning until late in the evening, selling vegetables in the market. When she got home, she would be tired, but she had to cook dinner, fetch water, wash clothes, and look after her young children as well. Mohamed would take the money that Fatmata earned at the market and would go out in the evening. He would not come home until late, and often, he would be drunk and start shouting at Fatmata. He would beat her in front of the children. Sometimes he would make her sleep outside to punish her if the food was cold or not cooked to his liking, and to show the neighbours that he was the boss in his house. Many of their neighbours were afraid of Mohamed and ignored Fatmata. Fatmata was too ashamed to talk with her friends or neighbours about Mohamed. Although they would often see her with bruises on her face, they just kept quiet. (Copied from the DUT ThinkLearnZone Moodle platform, Cornerstone 101). Available in 'gender-based violence training manual' by Chase (2017).

⁴To read the poem "I got flowers today" (Scrapbook.com undated), click the link: <https://www.scrapbook.com/poems/doc/31491.html>

Table 1. Themes and isolated codes from students' responses.

<i>Using reflective writing as an instrument for free expression on GBV issues</i>	<i>How students relate to acts of violence in the class materials (the poem and the story)</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom of expression • Anonymous • Safe space • No fear of public speaking • Activates probing and critical thinking • Easier to write thoughts and opinions rather than expressing these verbally • No fear of being judged • Support 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Empathy • Experiences of others • Personal experiences • Desperate • Dependent on partners

Themes

Isolated Codes

they related to these, and the feasibility of class reflections as a useful method in speaking out about GBV.

The questions that students were required to reflect on were:

- Do you think weekly reflections can be effective ways for people to express themselves more on GBV? Please briefly state the reason(s) for your response.
- Was there something in the poem[/story] that resonated with you? Why?

The reflective writing process was a take-home written exercise for assessment and feedback and a continuation of discussions that began in class. The submissions were short individual narrations that followed a free-flowing thought pattern, not more than 200 words. They were uploaded on the learning management system of Moodle as these classes were virtual due to the Covid-19 pandemic. The questions above were triggers and the basis for these students to critically analyse the discourse on GBV while referring to the poem *I got flowers today* and the story of *Fatmata and Mohamed*.

The two themes that emerged from the data, 'using reflective writing as an instrument for free expression on GBV issues' and 'how students relate to acts of violence in the class materials (the poem and the story', are now discussed.

Using reflective writing as an instrument for free expression on GBV issues

Sifting through this study's data revealed that, to talk about their perceptions of GBV, students found solace within the four walls of their papers and pens, or mobile phones and

laptops [as the case was because the Covid-19 pandemic necessitated a shift to online learning (Patrick, et al. 2021)]. Their responses were coded along the lines of the 'safe space' and 'support' that they got through writing (see Table 1), without the notion of being subjected to public scrutiny.

Participant 1 stated,

In my opinion, weekly reflections ... do allow me to express my views so I think they might help others as well.

Similarly, Participant 3 said

I think weekly ... reflection help people in expressing themselves because it's a safe place for people to say how they feel without being judged or looked at in a certain way.

Participant 4 also added that

[for] people [who] are very shy to express their feelings [in] public since they are afraid of being judged ... when it comes to the ... reflections things are different, they do not get judged, their responses are secured together with their identities.

In the words of Participant 5,

I think weekly reflections ... are effective ways for people to express themselves because they give people chance to answer questions which they have never thought about and also give people different perspective[s], views and questions which help to change and create a better living environment.

In addition, Participant 6 pointed out that through reflective writing, "people do not get to be interrogated [but] listened to, I believe some of us prefer writing down our emotions."

Participant 8 mentioned how.

Reflections ... can be an active way for people to express themselves because they will have an opportunity to talk without being judged by anyone, they will even get all the support they need.

However, Participant 2 observed that reflections can be both effective and ineffective,

it depends because if [it] is not anonymous people will not speak truthfully. And also, most people do not [want] to tell people anything as they feel embarrassed or scared so they will keep it all in.

Reflections in the Cornerstone module are used as an assessment for the course. However, the responses reveal that writing enables freedom of expression that may be more difficult to articulate when talking about these particular issues. Due to the sensitive nature of the topic of GBV, it could be inundating to require students to publicly narrate and recount their ordeals, or those that they have witnessed in their neighbourhoods, because of the possible stigma that might arise (Sinko and Arnault 2020). For this reason, anonymity aids freedom of expression. As a course facilitator, I find that orally deliberating on social issues in class can be hindered by factors like stigmatisation, low self-esteem, the culture of silence, the fear of social ostracization and also because many students are not fluent in English but are more comfortable in other South African official languages. Writing solves these issues because students are less self-

conscious as their writing is not judged by the facilitator, while their oral language ability might be scrutinised by the class if their ideas are expressed verbally.

The responses indicate that the students are mindful of how they are viewed by one another. By referring to the judgment and criticism that can arise because of class participation or the nursing of a divergent view about social issues, they were less motivated to contribute during class discussions. Their pen and paper amplified their views and eliminated those concerns. Instead of getting side-lined or shouted at, they were 'listened to' by writing down their emotions and feelings. It is also important to consider that the process helped students access help and support from facilitators and university wellness coaches. This is because, in some cases, students can write that they need help with past or current life happenings or imply this. A call for help enables facilitators to refer them to counsellors. By this, one can identify 'at risk' students from their reflections. Furthermore, as noted in one of the responses, particularly that of Participant 2, the scepticism of whether facilitators uphold confidentiality and anonymity proves vital for the students. However, this inadequacy is catered to within the established 'common set of values' that the Cornerstone module relies on, as an ongoing agreement between facilitators and students, as well as students and their peers on creating safe and confidential class and interactive spaces (ICON 2015).

How students relate to acts of violence in the class materials (the poem and the story)

The manner by which students relate to violent acts as they reflected on the class materials, *I got flowers today* and *the story of Fatmata and Mohamed*, is the second theme generated from data. The codes that link to this theme are 'empathy,' 'experiences of others,' 'personal experiences,' 'desperate,' and 'dependent on partners' (see Table 1).

Being able to analyse and recount experiences is a reflective skill that students of Cornerstone are exposed to in developing their graduate attributes (Neerputs and Naidoo 2016). In the same way, the Cornerstone module encourages the cultivation of this skill to make the students better critical thinkers who are ethically aware of themselves, their experiences, and those of others. It is, thus, expected that they can relay their stories without the fear of naming or shaming due to the anonymous nature of the exercise. The students' responses greatly supported this notion. Participant 4, for example, recounted his/her experience with GBV and the outcome of the conflict. S/he mentioned that:

the first stanza of the poem takes me back to when I was still young, every time when my dad got drunk, he would have arguments with my mom and that would result [in] them fighting. This other time I was still a kid maybe I was around 4 or 5, my dad wanted to kill both him and my mother for a very useless argument they had. Mom had to run away from home with an infant [on] her back and me with my sisters by her hands. My Dad used to be a very jealous and aggressive person towards my mom, he did not want her to work. This other time I was in grade 5, mom got a sleep in job but dad was against it. He then wanted to beat us up so that mom would come back to find us dead. I was young he wanted to kill himself, I do not know how and when I had [a] knife in my hand but from that day he stopped being the man he was till this day, he is ashamed of the man he was.

This response conveys the personal experience of this participant, highlighting the events that had taken place in his/her life, and how s/he witnessed acts of violence perpetrated

on the mother by the father. Eliciting those memories in vivid detail was achievable through the medium of writing, which could have been a challenge if the student was to verbally narrate his/her ordeal in front of colleagues. It is evidence of how students relate to reflective writing as a narrative tool by tapping into previous experiences.

After reflecting on the poem, *I got flowers today*, Participant 6 said, "I was once in a similar situation, and I use[d] to find reasons to justify his actions." Similarly, Participant 10 recalled that "I experienced physical violence, but the next day I was spoiled to go for shopping. I felt like I'm desperate and dependent." These participants were victims of violence and found it difficult to escape from such entrapments due to emotional and financial manipulations. These are ways that victims of GBV are coerced into silence and the endurance of acts of violence. These are characteristic of the codes of desperation and dependence on partners generated from data.

For participant 3, s/he "felt a lot of emotions because as much as I have not experience [d] it in my family ... I have seen it happen to other people. It is not a good sight to watch, and it never ends well, we also see this in the poem." This links to the code on the experiences of others.

The value of empathy from these perspectives indicates the ability to see things the way the other person does, based on a relatable reference point. It creates a ground for understanding and consideration of the needs of others due to occurrences in their lives that may have negatively impacted them. On this basis, a greater appreciation can be nurtured for individual and collective encounters with GBV. So also, seeing that people's desperation and dependence on partners can be responsible for their continuous endurance of acts of violence is a pointer to the relevance and practicality of reflective writing as a medium of expression.

The usefulness of reflective writing established within this study

Previous sections of this discourse have foregrounded the long-lasting and detrimental impact of GBV within South Africa, as well as the utilisation of reflective writing as a viable means to encourage ongoing debates on how GBV can be curtailed through the provision of platforms for 'speaking-up.' In unpacking and illuminating the diverse notions and perspectives from the students' reflections that were analysed, the two major thematic groupings that are summative of students' use of reflective writing for easier communication are 'using reflective writing as an instrument for free expression on GBV issues' and 'how students relate to acts of violence in the class materials (the poem and the story'. Having stated these, it is proper to delve into scholarly arguments that underpin these discussions in other similar encounters and contexts.

One of the benefits of this study is that the reflective methodology effectively allows people to talk about their opinions on social issues like GBV without fearing being judged or laughed at. Therefore, the students' views regarding their preference for writing over talking about GBV strongly support the application of reflective writing methodologies for sensitive topics to engender a more inclusive and participatory pedagogy. The validity of the claim of this study in grounding the advantages of reflective writing as an approach to talking about GBV is well established in the literature and previous studies (Shahrokh et al. 2015; Puigvert 2014; Pithouse et al. 2009). Reflective writing allows people to narrate their experiences or those that they have heard about without cowering in fear

or intimidation. They can recall experiences or stories (as the case may be) on their terms and in ways that they are comfortable with. This is the novel notion that my study is advancing. Participating in reflective writing creates a space and a world for the writer where s/he can freestyle and actively engage with the subject. It creates a participatory and inclusive environment, as shown in the data, moving away from its use as a tool for assessment only. Results of reflections can be vital in proffering solutions to issues. By this, the conversations can also transcend the 'self' and become context-specific, resulting in practitioner and societal-led responses to social queries to drive change so that action-taking can start at the individual level and diffuse to the societal level (Pit-house et al. 2009).

In the same way that Butler-Kisber (2018), MacDonald et al. (2011) and Jasper (2005) elaborated on the use of critical reflective writing as both an enabler of creativity and a projector of silent voices on cogent issues like GBV, this study has equally revealed these characteristics among the study participants. Within the confines of this study, as presented in Table 1, the notions that encapsulate the feelings of the participants in using the practice of reflective writing as an instrument for participation are:

- freedom of expression
- anonymity
- the provision of a safe space to talk about GBV
- the elimination of fear attached to publicly speaking about GBV and related experiences
- the activation of probing and critical thinking
- the fact that some believed that writing their thoughts and opinions would protect and shield them from the scrutiny and judgment of other people
- and the support they know they can get by finding the courage to speak up and speak out.

These ideas were generated from the codes of the data and can be drawn upon to break the silent culture around GBV. By relaying their stories, these students, especially those who had experiential encounters, dug into memories of how they dealt with acts of violence and the results of those confrontations. Thus, reflective writing in this study became a "participatory process that worked through interactive methods to create a safe and inclusive space for engagement" (Shahrokh et al. 2015, 9).

Secrecy, the "silence culture" attached to GBV is driven through disempowering tendencies such as intimidation, the fear of losing support from friends and family, along with the fear of judgment and humiliation (Abiolu 2022; Sinko and Arnault 2020; Kaviti 2015). This study, as revealed from the data, suggests and strongly advocates for the cultivation of reflective writing among students, not only to improve this as a skill, but also to engage diverse perspectives on alleviating acts of violence in society. The 'safe zone' created by this method can easily be a way to assist in dealing with experiences of GBV. If students or victims can relay their views or report abuse/their GBV experiences by concealing their identities from the public and finding other discretionary ways to ask for help, they can get adequate support. By anonymously stating their narratives and not publicly speaking about these, they avoid being the targets of the abusers because of their reportage of acts of violence. In this sense, a 'silent tip-off'

of violent acts by the abusees ensures that they do not become victims of reactionary consequences of breaking the silence or the “silence culture”. Here, the abuser is unaware of the source of the report, making it possible for necessary institutions to arrest and come to the aid of the abusee without unnecessarily alerting the abuser. This will ensure secondary protection of the abusee from other attacks should the abuser become aware of the action to speak-out. Applying such initiatives through reflective writing supports participatory and inclusive pedagogy, and a conscious call to action to address social ills (Pithouse et al. 2009). This is a transformative educational practice that can promote a deeper and more focused approach in the fight against social vices like GBV in South Africa.

As a limitation, it is crucial to acknowledge that there continues to be difficulty in instigating behavioural change regarding social ills such as GBV. In other words, although this study is important work, the challenge regarding GBV remains huge.

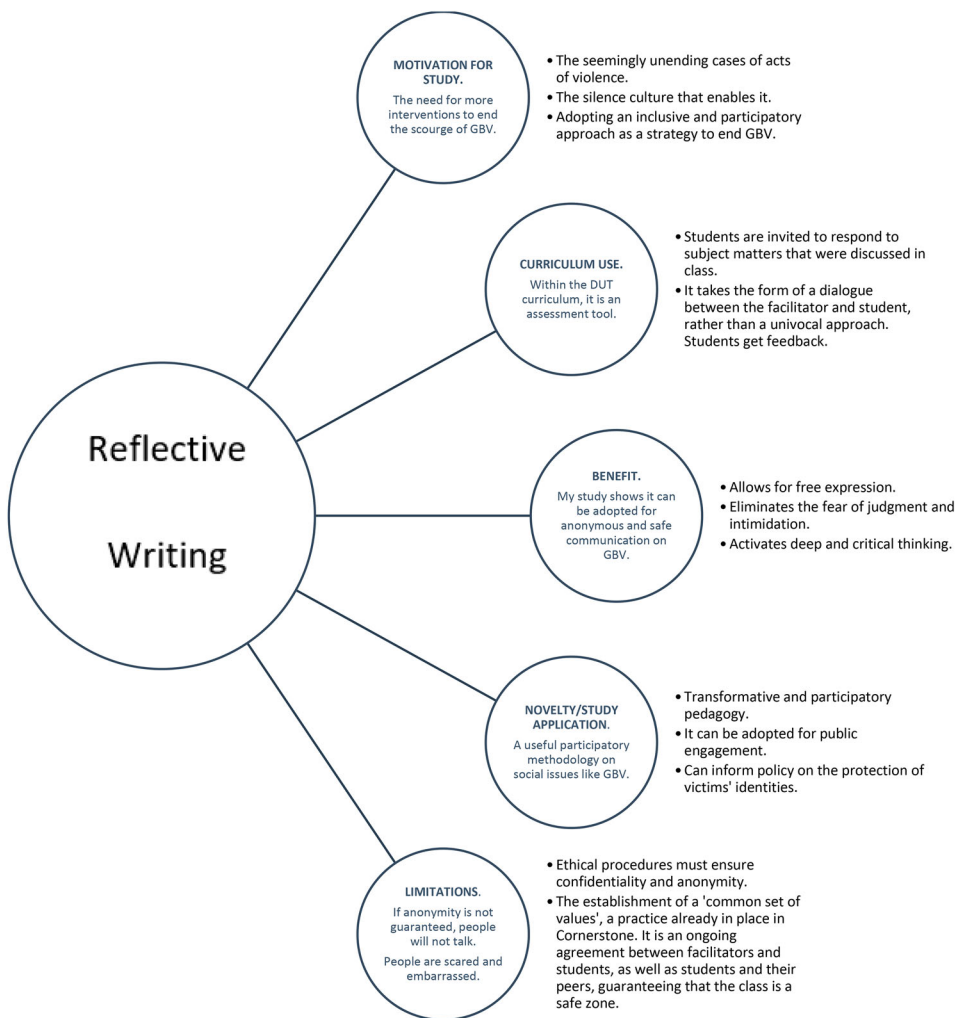


Figure 1. A circular reflective and comprehensive illustration of the study.

Therefore, the data further confirms the complexity and multifaceted nature of GBV within South Africa, which must be checked. Similarly, reflective writing within the DUT context is essentially an assessment instrument, but this study has shown that it can be adapted into a participatory methodology. One of the ways this can be achieved is by encouraging student involvement through choosing the topics for discussion, or the examples that they would like to see included in the course and study outline. Student opinions can be collated through reflections and used to effect topic modifications as suggested.

The essence of the study is summarised in [Figure 1](#).

Conclusion

Reflective class activities can help encourage critical and creative thinking among students to address social issues like GBV in society. These align with developing the DUT graduate attributes of being knowledgeable practitioners, effective communicators, and reflective/active learners who are culturally, environmentally, and socially aware of events and occurrences within local and global contexts (Neerputs and Naidoo 2016). Through these acts of teaching and learning, students can put their attributes and reflective learning skills into perspective.

My study invites educational policy considerations (at higher institutions and governmental levels) into the use of reflective writing as a vital piece of transformative participatory pedagogy. In the same outlook, the practicality of developing reflective writing skills among students can be beneficial in proffering solutions for policy recommendations (particularly on the protection of victims' identities and the views of students/people on GBV) and improved methodologies for combatting GBV in South Africa and globally. Reflective writing gave the students in this study a platform to engage in the conversation about GBV. The importance of a medium of public engagement that offers some level of anonymity and safety for the opinions of people to be aired and heard cannot be overemphasised. This is an advantage that reflective writing presents, and it can effectively be leveraged. Though direct human encounters, cultural, and structural systems propagate GBV, acquired reflective skills can come in handy to be more conversant with people's experiences and the solutions that they can suggest in confronting their challenges. Therefore, everyone's story deserves to be heard because hidden within these points of view are germane resolutions to problematic and lingering matters like GBV.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Funding

This work was supported by South Africa's National Research Foundation: [Grant Number 129643]. Opinions, findings, and conclusions or recommendations expressed in this research are those of the author. The NRF accepts no liability whatsoever in this regard.

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