What does writing do? Changing the perspective on transformational literacy practices

By Elizabeth Bolton

Early psychological studies on the link between health and writing (Pennebaker 1986; 1997) suggested that writing about traumatic events, particularly when the writing was narrative in form, might be useful as a self-directed, literacy-based tool for healing from past trauma, and even prevent physical and psychological illness later in life. The majority of these studies were based on the quantitative model originally developed by Pennebaker (1986), who rooted his study design in a theory of inhibition and disease. Under the assumption that emotionally problematic memories expressed through (narrative) writing could actually prevent the physical and psychological health problems caused by otherwise undisclosed trauma, Pennebaker asked randomly selected participants to write, in short, timed sessions, about a personal trauma they had experienced. Researchers then measured blood pressure and heart rate immediately after writing and recorded the frequency of healthcare center visits in the six months following the writing tasks. A meta-analysis of 146 such quantitative studies following Pennebaker’s early model (Frattaroli, 2006) concluded that the practice of expressive writing for the improvement of psychological and physical health did work, though only on some people, some of the time, while the influential aspects of the mechanism remained unclear but for the fact that narrative structuring seemed in some cases to bolster healing effects (Low, Stanton, & Danoff-Burg, 2006).

To date, writing for the purpose of healing from trauma has been largely treated as a task, administered where trauma has occurred in nearly the same way a healthcare professional might administer a single dosage of medication, and the reasons for its success are still not understood explicitly enough for the practice to be safely implemented in healthcare treatment settings, or in the context of emotionally supportive literacy curricula. I identify the problems inherent in the quantitative model which pervades the extant literature and suggest that further research in this field utilize methods which are inclusive of various, poetic presentations of qualitative data and respect the organic development and pacing of a devout writing practice. Under these suggestions, phenomenology emerges as a highly suitable methodology for generating rich, informative data on the writing-health link, with a focus on the lived, spatial experience of crafting a piece of writing about the self. I present herein a novel method for a spatially considerate, longitudinal exploration of the transformational writing phenomenon. When writing about the self is treated as a spatially experienced phenomenon rather than as a task, we are also able to consider how different ways of experiencing space in the act of writing might generate endlessly varied presentations of the subtle shifts in a writer’s mental state and overall view of herself, and thus as many different articulations of “improved health” as there are writing humans.