

“Letter to you” - Letter writing as a process of (self)-knowledge creation for teaching focused academics.

Development paper - Submitted to knowledge and learning SIG

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This development paper considers how a letter writing methodology might be deployed as a form of peer support to stimulate self-reflection amongst teaching-focused academics to assist with their career development. The paper considers the experience of two mid/late career female teaching focused academics who initially adopted a letter-writing methodology as part of a collaborative research project but found that it had a greater impact than simply helping to keep the project on track. Letter writing was found to support the development of personal reflection, which was amplified through the sharing experience with a peer. The paper is still in its infancy, but avenues for development include co-constructed ethnography, female academic careers and the importance of others in the learning process. Given the challenges currently facing the HE sectors in the UK, we suggest that letter writing could be a cost-effective way of providing peer support particularly for female academics within business schools and beyond.

“Letter to you - Letter writing as a peer assisted mechanism to support the development of self-reflection for teaching focused academics”.

INTRODUCTION

The recent BAM MKE White Paper (Black and Roberts, 2024) highlights the fact that in response to the high teaching load in business schools many institutions have developed a reliance on teaching-focused staff to service students. Whilst acknowledging the existence of academics who are opting for a career focused upon the vocation of education (Cassar, 2022), there remain a large number of academics who have moved into these roles as a second career having come out of practice (Baker, 2022). In keeping with the theme of the conference these individuals are engaged in ‘border crossings’ as they seek to navigate institutional and sector wide performance expectations. This paper has been written by two teaching focused female academics, reflecting the fact that the majority of individuals on such contracts are female (Black and Roberts, 2024).

In terms of career progression, the sector still lacks an established and agreed set of promotion criteria for teaching focused staff and as a result only a few individuals move beyond the level of Senior Lecturer/Associate Professor (Black and Roberts, 2024). To address this need, this development paper considers the following research question:

‘How can letter writing provide a peer-assisted learning mechanism which encourages the development of personal reflection for teaching focused staff?’

The paper reports on the experience of the authors in piloting a letter writing approach to provide career-focused peer support. This approach is particularly relevant in the light of the contextual pressures facing business schools and the wider university sector and provides a potential means of addressing the development needs of female teaching-focused academics.

The University sector in the UK is often described as being in crisis, with crises ranging from the massification and marketisation of the 1980s to more recent pressures around restitution and current geopolitical developments (Macfarlane, 2024:829).

As a consequence of massification and marketisation the subjects of business and management are reported as being in the top 5 studied by international students (Macfarlane, 2024). Given recent reports of a drop in student visas, from a record high of around 484,000 in 2022 (Hattenstone, 2025), this leaves Business Schools exposed financially if demand falls away. Indeed data from an international student enrolment platform suggests that postgraduate entrants in January 2024 were down by around one-third (Bolton, Lewis and Gower, 2024). This is just one of the pressures facing the sector, alongside the level of home tuition fees, the declining reputation of the UK as a hospitable location for overseas and the imminent removal of funding for level 7 apprenticeships.

In many institutions it is teaching focused staff who have enabled the expansion of provision prompted by the increased number of international students in 2022 and demand from level 7 apprenticeships, however these individuals are particularly vulnerable to the threats facing the sector and in the face of cash-saving measures it is likely that career development investment will be targeted towards their colleagues with research portfolios. Even if their jobs are not under threat *“career options and opportunities for those not in traditional teaching and research roles are not equivalent”* (Locke et al., 2016, p. p.6).

Although in recent years there has been a movement towards institutions introducing scholarship oriented promotion routes, more clarity is required around whether the scholarship expected of education focused colleagues differs from that established for research and how it might be evaluated (Black and Roberts, 2024). Aside from scholarship, another way for teaching focused colleagues to demonstrate prestige is through external recognition of teaching/ pedagogic practice (Locke et al., 2016; Black and Roberts, 2024) either through differing levels of HEA fellowship, National Teaching Fellow or other awards. In common with promotion processes these external recognitions typically involve some element of reflective writing, describing one's position within pedagogical frameworks. Therefore, the need to demonstrate self-awareness and to be able to articulate one's practice is likely to be a key requirement for teaching focused colleagues in order to articulate their contribution to more senior stakeholders.

Such self-awareness requires the development of critical reflection, which is often aligned with pedagogy informed by critical theory (Cunliffe, 2002; Smith and Kempster, 2019) that seeks to encourage post experience students and academics to question their own and others' assumptions and challenge their practice (Stead and Elliott, 2013; Hibbert *et al.*, 2022). In so doing, critical reflective learning has transformative potential, with the possibility to change how managers think about themselves, their way of working and their wider world (Baumgartner, 2001; Eriksen, 2009). While critical reflection is recognised as a means to interrogate managerial practice more deeply in order to develop more productive and beneficial ways of working, the potential destabilising effects are also acknowledged (Brookfield, 1994; Smith and Kempster, 2019) and understood as requiring expert facilitation (De Déa Roglio and Light, 2009).

When referring to students, critical reflection is recognized as being hard to teach and difficult to engage with when focused on other academic activities (Helyer, 2015). For education and teaching oriented staff, it is likely to be similarly challenging as most have little workload allowance to allow them to engage in personal development, reflection or scholarship. For women the boundary between higher-status research and lower-status teaching roles is particularly impactful, given that they are more likely focus on teaching and service (Kwiek and Roszka, 2021) and to work in roles with poorer promotion prospects such a student support, teaching, administration and curriculum work. As a result many report feeling stuck and lack any form of mentorship and/or help with career planning (Kandiko Howson, Coate and de St Croix, 2018).

In the face of highly individualist academic careers (Kandiko Howson, Coate and de St Croix, 2018) women need to find their own support networks as they seek to manage their careers. Peer mentoring is one way they might access this mutual support. An earlier study from academic medicine found peer mentoring to lead to improvements in career satisfaction, higher engagement in academic pursuits, and improvements in specific skills, including the identification of funding opportunities, and learning how to apply for academic promotion (Varkey *et al.*, 2012).

Letter writing may be one way of operationalising peer mentoring, in that it has been described as providing an element of conversation aligning with Reynolds (2011) description

of reflection as a process of intellectualizing the past to create order and shared meaning through conversations (Reynolds, 2011). Schön similarly refers to reflective writing as a reflective conversation with the situation (Schon, 1983) which provides the individual with the chance to make sense of day-to-day experiences from within the experience itself (Cunliffe, 2002).

In the section below we describe how we deployed letter writing as a means of supporting our own reflection.

METHODOLOGY – THE LETTER WRITING APPROACH

The paper's authors are two teaching-focused academics working in different institutions at opposite ends of the UK. At the end of 2021 we were introduced by a mutual (retiring) colleague who suggested '*You two should collaborate together, as you have some shared experience and similar interests.*

We found that we did have things in common, a love of dogs – which supported a personal connection and a shared interest in the development of self-reflection and self-awareness for ourselves and our students. Such reflective activities have been linked with critical thinking (Rogers, 2001; Varner and Peck, 2003) as well as professional success, with Adler advocating that leaders buy a journal and commit to writing in it, as a means of finding space to listen to themselves (Adler, 2016). However, it is recognised that reflection is difficult to develop without support or training (Trimasse, 2025).

Author 2 was (and still is) working part time, whereas Author 1 had recently returned to full time after many years of part time working. As such our career trajectories match that reflected by Locke (2016) who states that nearly 70% of part-time staff are on teaching-only contracts and tend to have experience of the world of business practice. For both authors academia was our second career after working in industry.

We were both working on post experience programmes (Apprenticeship level 7) and were both interested in encouraging these learners to develop into more reflective practitioners, whilst also being aware of the need within our institutions (for promotion and external accreditations) to demonstrate our own ability to reflect on our self-development.

We commenced a project to collaboration and review each other's practice looking at different programmes and considering the ways in which our students demonstrated self-reflection through their written assignments. At the same time, we decided it would be interesting to practice what we were preaching and heighten our awareness of our own changing perceptions by writing it down. As one of the authors had prior experience with letter writing this seemed to be a good way of engaging in a form of autoethnography (Kempster and Stewart, 2010) and via collaboration (Dyer *et al.*, 2024; Yin and Mu, 2023) in order to provide mutual support in each other's identity work in the construction of 'the self' (Beech, 2017).

We began our collaboration in 2022, with email conversations and the production of a conference paper. This paper focuses on the letter writing element, which we embarked on in early 2023, alongside an exploratory study to compare and contrast how we supported students on two different post-experience programmes to develop their reflective practice.

The letter writing approach provided us with a means of discussing our reflections during the collaboration through a process which was similar to ‘pen friends’ of old.

Letter writing has been used before in the field of management and leadership, and our approach was informed by prior work (Kempster and Iszatt-White, 2013; Kempster and Stewart, 2010; Watton, Stables and Kempster, 2019). Similar co-constructed ethnographic approaches have been reported by other researchers (Dyer *et al.*, 2024; Yin and Mu, 2023) with the writing being described as a process of inquiry (Richardson and St Pierre, 2000) leading to a deeper understanding of self (Kempster and Stewart, 2010; Polkinghorne, 1995).

Letters were exchanged over a 12-month period between March 2023 (letter 1) and March 2024 (letter 14), making 28 letters in total, as each letter had a reply. One of the advantages of letters, over other forms of writing is that when one person writes a letter to another person there is the expectation of a response, (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Although letter 1 comprised an email exchange, the remaining letters were all word attachments to an email, with each letter being considered and replied to by the other.

ANALYSIS

We are currently in the process of finalising the analysis of the letters following an inductive process. So far we have familiarized ourselves with and re-read the data and noted down initial ideas prior to generating initial codes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Taking the 28 letters as a whole, we see that in the earlier letters there is evidence of our conscious self-censorship and conformity (Warwick, McCray and Palmer, 2021). This is not surprising, as at the outset we still did not know each other well. However, over time we became more comfortable with the act of writing and the process of honest disclosure this involved. Interestingly, the fact we are both from different institutions may have been a factor in the success of the approach in that there was no evidence of the potential problem of power dynamics in collaborative autoethnography (Warwick, McCray and Palmer, 2021), on the contrary in this instance the approach illustrates the potential of supportive dyadic relations in the development of learning (Hibbert *et al.*, 2022).

In terms of emergent themes, aside from canine anecdotes. we have identified seven core themes thus far, which we believe are significant in terms of our personal development as female teaching-focused academics. These themes emerged through an iterative and collaborative process whereby each of us read and re-read the letters, highlighting the themes as we went through and sharing emerging ideas for codes, prior to clustering examples under the broader themes (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

We list the main themes to date below, before providing examples in the table which follows. They are presented in order to reflect a transition from what Bloom refers to as lower order thinking, associated with remembering and understanding to higher order thinking which Bloom describes as including: analysing, evaluating and creating new knowledge. (Bloom *et al.*, 1964).

Initial six themes

1. Appreciation of the value of the letters
2. Seeking to 'go public' to enhance career.
3. The challenge of including scholarship in a teaching-focused workload.
4. A sense of 'not being good enough'
5. Being female
6. Power of dialogue and working with others
7. Development of self-awareness

From lower to higher order themes

Theme	Author and Letter Number	Quote
<i>The value of the letter writing process</i>	<i>Letter 10 (Author 1)</i>	<i>"I took some persuading about letter writing, but I am a convert and have found it really useful – even if you don't read them, it helps to organise my thoughts - bit like self-coaching."</i>
	<i>Letter 7 (Author 2)</i>	<i>"One of the things I was reflecting on earlier this week was that I missed sharing the letters, I think the letters have worked for us because we don't see one another very often. If we lived nearer, we would see one another in person more for casual conversations and letters would probably not be needed."</i>
<i>Workload – trying to fit in scholarship around teaching load</i>	<i>Letter 10 (Author 1)</i>	<i>"Starting this letter is another example of a distraction activity. I had been supposed to start coding y'day and wonder if I am putting it off, but I find I need to get my 'house in order' and everything else more or less sorted before I engage with the things that require my concentration – I realise it's probably the wrong way around."</i>
	<i>Letter 7 (Author 2)</i>	<i>"It will definitely need to be next year before we look at the journal article some more."</i>
<i>Managing Career – Playing the Game</i>	<i>Letter 3 (Author 2)</i>	<i>"Some colleagues are 'smart cookies' in terms of managing their profile 'knowing how and what you need to do with some of these initiatives.'"</i>
	<i>Letter 4 (Author 1)</i>	<i>"Reflecting has been a requirement for me to apply for the University Teaching Fellow Scheme. Do you have something similar? As we discussed last time, it is not my style to really bang on about how great I am, but the process insists on this."</i>

Theme	Author and Letter Number	Quote
<i>Not being good enough</i>	<i>Letter 3 (Author 2)</i>	<i>"It's also interesting to know that you like me overly worry about presenting. I had the exact same feelings yesterday I prepared well going through the slides several times, then re-reading the paper the evening before.... I sat down in the room and listened to the other presentations and feedback, I started getting more and more worried and doubting whether I had anything useful to say at all! I always feel like other people know far more than I do and that I'm an imposter who will one day be found out!"</i>
	<i>Letter 9 (Author 1)</i>	<i>"Glad you found it useful tonight. I was muttering a bit to myself today about why were we doing it and I spent a lot of time reading the paper we needed to review – which was v professional, but just not relevant. I did feel a bit like the boy in the emperor's new clothes story. Once again, it's a case of not having the confidence to think my judgments are appropriate. So, I was relieved that the editor's feedback seemed to be similar to mine, that the paper needs a different title/ focus and wasn't framed for the journal."</i>
<i>Being female</i>	<i>Letter 3 (Author 1)</i>	<i>"I returned to academia in 2000 and in the first couple of years enjoyed success, channelling the energy I used in my consultancy life, to win research funding from the EU. They were face-paced times and involved multiple collaborations. Things changed in 2002 when I became a parent, and we took the decision for me to work part time on my return to work. I can see now that this has been a factor in delaying my career progress and only in 2020 returned to work full time in 2020"</i>
	<i>Letter 3 (Author 2)</i>	<i>"I'm always intrigued about the dilemma women face in deciding whether or not to have a family and then whether or not to return to work, who does the majority of the childcare by working part time etc. so reading your personal reflections on your path is enlightening. Maybe driven by my first career choice – in the late 80's when you worked</i>

Theme	Author and Letter Number	Quote
		<i>at xxxx you had to leave when you got married, although that was then relaxed you could then read 'you won't be promoted once you are married' mainly because management thought you would want to leave to have a family. I often wonder if this was one of the factors in my decision to not get married – it kept me out of that category and indeed I did get promoted."</i>
Dialogue – working with others	<i>Letter 7 (Author 2)</i>	<i>"There is definitely a benefit to me in having a like-minded individual to share an experience with and bounce ideas around with like the DART and SoTL models."</i>
	<i>Letter 3 (Author 2)</i>	<i>"Like you I often lack the 'push' – I'm not sure push is the right word, it's not quite courage, confidence or motivation either but something along those lines – anyway as a single identity I can lack it, but if I do the same thing in collaboration with someone else it is easier."</i>
Self-Awareness	<i>Response to letter 8 (Author 2)</i>	<i>"I am similar to you in that I usually sit back first, observe, say very little, let things play out before showing my cards."</i>
	<i>Letter 7 (Author 1)</i>	<i>"An interesting theme might be male/ female differences in engagement with reflection– our positionality as female academics on TI contracts. It could be case that we started our project because of instrumental or strategic motivations – getting outputs/ promoted/ profile raising, but I for one have experienced personal development and a change in mind set. This is reflected in a change in behaviour, being willing to share work in progress more readily."</i>

This development paper considers the role of letter writing as a peer-aided learning mechanism to support the development of critical self-reflection amongst teaching focused female academics. Critical reflection has a reputation for being difficult to teach, but our collaboration demonstrated that letters are a useful methodology to support the personal development of academics. The approach appears to enhance self-awareness on the part of the letter writer and receiver with letters providing a trigger to stimulate the process of reflection for teaching focused staff involved with the delivery of post-experience teaching. The outcomes of this type of critical reflection can be wide reaching for example increasing confidence for applying for promotion cases; award applications for schemes such as HEA fellows and wellbeing and personal support around some of the individual challenges facing female teaching focused academics.

A fuller discussion and reflection on the learning from this experiment with letter writing is ongoing, but suggest that in the era of digital communication, this is an approach which could be rolled out more widely to the academic community and also as part of our management education teaching and learning approaches

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