Writing towards empathy: An expressive writing cycle with Central American migrants and host undergraduate students in Mexico

Claudia Chibici-Revneanu

Abstract: The dehumanisation of migrants is an urgent international concern. This article looks at the way intercultural education interventions based on expressive writing can help counteract this trend by increasing empathy towards migrants among host community members. It specifically discusses the innovative model of an expressive writing cycle carried out with Central American transit migrants and host community students in Guanajuato, Mexico. The cycle consisted of two autobiographical expressive writing workshops at a migrant hostel, a workshop with students from the Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores (ENES), UNAM where participants wrote about the migrants’ stories, and a collection of items for the hostel. This interdisciplinary research was based on expressive writing, intercultural education and migration studies. Initial, qualitative results were promising. Expressive writing was experienced as unburdening by all participants. For the students, expressive writing proved an effective way of producing rehumanising and empathic responses, as well as eliciting a wish to help. The subsequent collection, apart from delivering needed goods, further established a nascent connection between migrants and members of the host community. Expressive writing

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claudia Chibici-Revneanu is lecturer of Intercultural Management and Development at the Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores (ENES), at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México. She holds a PhD in Cultural Policy Studies from the University of Warwick (UK), and is a member of the Mexican research programme SNI (I). Her investigations on literary and musical composition as forms of social exclusion and inclusion have been published in book chapters and numerous national and international journals. As a mezzo-soprano, she holds conference-concerts on women composers. In 2017 she won the prestigious Sor Juana medal for female academics of the UNAM and published her first novel, Of Murder, Muses and Me. The present article forms part of a larger research project about expressive writing as a means of studying individual displacement experiences, increasing well-being among different migrant groups and promoting empathy towards movers amid host society members in Guanajuato, Mexico.

PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

In today’s “age of migration”, displaced people are frequently viewed as quintessential “others”, suffering discrimination and other serious human rights abuses as a result. Intercultural education measures may play a vital role in enhancing movers’ well-being, as well as promoting cognitive rehumanisation processes and more empathic reactions among citizens of receiving and transit nations.

This article focuses on the often highly vulnerable group of Central American Migrants in Guanajuato, Mexico. It analyses the potential of an expressive writing workshop cycle with migrants and host society members to increase both well-being among participant movers and empathy among resident students. Although exploratory in nature, the article qualitatively demonstrates the effectiveness of expressive writing interventions to achieve these aims and provides guidance on how to replicate this simple, cost-effective intercultural education initiative in different contexts of migrant discrimination and dehumanisation.
workshops are recommended as simple, cost-effective intercultural education interventions for increasing empathy, well-being and a sense of common humanity among migrants and members of host communities.

Subjects: Teaching Practice - Education; Migration; Intercultural Communication; Literature; Creative Writing; Interdisciplinary Literary Studies; Literature & Culture

Keywords: expressive writing; migration; empathy; intercultural education; Mexico

1. Introduction

The dehumanisation of migrants, which in turn often leads to discriminatory behaviour against them (Utych, 2018), is an urgent international concern. This article looks at an intercultural education intervention based on expressive writing and ways in which such interventions can potentially help counteract this trend by increasing empathy towards migrants among host community members. It specifically discusses the innovative model of an expressive writing cycle involving Central American transit migrants and host community students in Guanajuato, Mexico.

The present research has the following objectives. Firstly, as implied, it strives to qualitatively explore ways in which the innovative method of an expressive writing cycle might contribute to improved relations between migrants and members of a host society, ideally through enhanced empathy and well-being. Secondly, by discussing a concrete intervention cycle, it aims to present a tentative model that can be adapted, improved upon or replicated within different intercultural education and migration contexts. Thirdly, it is also driven by the ideal of producing ethically oriented research which—through the workshops and the collection conducted—helps to make issues of Central American migrants further known and provides at least some assistance to some of the struggling individuals involved.

This article has been motivated by several different yet interrelated factors. Despite ever-increasing research into migration matters, the World Migration Report 2013 stresses a need for more investigations into migrant well-being, as well as more qualitative work that allows migrants to tell their own stories (International Organization for Migration [IOM], 2013, 24). At the same time, the discrimination against migrants from among members of host communities often seems to be a factor that contributes—often tragically, as will be seen—to a lack of well-being among many migrants. This article attempts to provide both a platform for some migrants to tell parts of their tales and for host community members to use these tales in order to become more empathic towards them.

The decision to work with expressive writing is chiefly motivated by the fact that it has already been extensively, if mainly quantitatively, researched as a simple, economical and effective method for increasing both physical and mental well-being (e.g. Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005). In fact, it has already been deployed to improve migrant well-being (e.g. Bernstein, Cho, Cho, Roh, 2013; Chibici-Revneanu, 2016). Although not drawing on expressive writing methods, Losi (2006) also stressed the healing potential of narratives and storytelling for migrants, especially because their movement often results in a rupture of their life-story. Narrative work may help make sense of their experiences and create a renewed sense of coherence (Chibici-Revneanu, 2017).

However, the potential of expressive writing for empathy creation has, with some exceptions including personal research (Chibici-Revneanu, 2016, 2018a) and studies within the field of medical sciences to strengthen doctor-patient relationships (e.g. Charon, 2001; Shapiro, Boker, Rucker, & Lie, 2006), not yet been deeply explored.
The field of intercultural education pays significant attention to the importance of empathy and to educational methods deployed to enhance it (e.g. Neuner, 2012). Also, a notable body of work is dedicated to the exploration of the interconnection between reading and empathy creation (e.g. Keen, 2006; Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015). Nevertheless, there is—to my knowledge—no research into expressive writing within an intercultural education context. Finally, the concrete suffering experienced by many migrants worldwide and specifically among many Central American immigrants to Mexico formed another crucial motivation for the present research, as measures to research and improve the situation from different angles seem urgent.

The article forms part of a larger research project on the use of expressive writing with different migrant groups and members of the host society in the state of Guanajuato, Mexico. The state forms part of a region called “Bajío” which is experiencing several crucial population movements, such as US and Canadian (retirement) migration (Chibici-Revneanu, 2018a), a rapidly increasing Japanese population, largely due to the industrial focus of the area (id.) and two often highly vulnerable groups consisting of internal indigenous movers (e.g. Martínez Mendizábal, 2016) and Central American migrants. Founded on an intercultural understanding of all of these migrant groups—and others—moving through the same space, the project consisted of a total of nine migrant workshops, two of which worked exclusively with host society members, five which brought together locals and migrants, and two—to be discussed during the present article—focused on displaced people only. The analyses of workshops with different groups have been discussed separately to give space to varying migrant concerns (Chibici-Revneanu, 2016, 2018a). Still, some aspects from other workshops held will be referred to in order to grant a broader perspective on the possible connections between expressive writing, empathy towards movers and migrant well-being.

The methodology of this article is interdisciplinary in nature, drawing from relevant aspects of migration, intercultural education and expressive writing studies. As previously mentioned, this research is specifically based on a trial cycle of expressive writing conducted in spring 2018 with Central American transit migrants and host community undergraduate students. The cycle consisted of two workshop types and a collection for the participants, to now be separately presented.

The first type of workshop asked participant migrants to write expressively about their lives, migratory projects and displacement experience. It consisted of two workshops—with different participants each time—held on the 14th of March and 25th of April 2018, in a migrant hostel in Celaya, Guanajuato. The present author was the workshop facilitator, assisted in one case by a young woman with ample experience of working with Central American migrants. The core aims of this workshop type were to gather first-hand life-story material and information regarding individual migration experiences and migratory projects for the second workshop type and to ideally obtain some benefits regarding the well-being of participant writers.

The migrants were informed about the objectives of the research at the beginning of each session, including the fact that, with their consent, their writing would be passed on to students. Also, they were introduced to the nature of expressive writing and the many benefits this form of literary engagement usually involves for participants. They were also supplied with pens, paper and, in case they showed an interest, sheets containing exercises should they want to carry on writing at the migrant hostel or on the road.

At all stages of the process, workshop members were given the chance to opt out, whether by suspending participation, not completing a certain exercise, keeping their writing entirely private and so on. In other words, if the migrants felt any part of the workshop—or the workshop itself—would not contribute to their well-being, they did not engage in it. This was repeatedly emphasised for ethical reasons and because any sense of obligation would have interfered with the objectives of potentially benefitting participant migrants themselves.
The writing tasks were based on reflexive and autobiographical expressive methods inspired by and adapted from Pennebaker's classical exercises on writing about personal traumas (Pennebaker, 2018; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014), Adam's insightful notions on the psychological benefits of different writing tasks (Adams, 2013) and theories on the multiple (research) values of eliciting life-story information (Denborough, 2014; Maynes, Pierce, & Laslett, 2008). The migrants were given a hand-out of the instructions (see Appendix I) divided into three sections.

The first section consisted of questions inviting them to write about their reasons for migrating, a personal assessment of their well-being, and negative as well as positive experiences on their journey. These remained essentially the same during all migrant workshops conducted for this project and were intended to grant both an opportunity for participants to potentially "off-load" some of their suffering, perhaps obtaining cathartic effects from writing (e.g. Adams, 2013) as well as possibly move towards gratitude, despite the odds. The latter was based on the fact that gratitude-oriented writing and a focus on the "perceived benefits of a trauma" (id., 8) have also been very positively correlated with increased participant well-being.

Secondly, workshop members were given different expressive writing tasks to choose from: writing a letter to host community students telling them what they would like them to know; writing or drawing their life story in three parts, namely their life before leaving, their journey and what they hoped to achieve; or a shortened version of Pennebaker's classical expressive writing task, which no participant chose to conclude but several took with them.

Towards the end, there was an evaluation asking them questions regarding the perceived effects and quality of the workshop, as well as recommendations for future workshop improvement. The questions were also partly inspired by Pennebaker's post-writing questionnaire (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). However, whereas Pennebaker chiefly elicits numbers, this evaluation involved detailed individual answers and a focus on the workshop experience in general.

The total number of participants varied during each workshop conducted. The first session was attended by four men, three from Honduras and one from Guatemala. Participants during the second session numbered one woman of unknown origin, as well as four men—one from El Salvador and three from Honduras.

The participating migrants were generally of a low educational level, even though the need for achieving a writing intervention beneficial for their well-being did not allow for any further investigation into this matter. Anticipating this, they were also given the option to speak about their experiences, having them recorded and later transcribed—an option chosen by the 16-year old participant from El Salvador discussed below. Also, as mentioned, they were invited to substitute or complement their life-story writing with drawings. This was a popular option during an intercultural workshop with both indigenous and non-indigenous women (Chibici-Revneanu, 2018b) but was not taken up by any participant migrants on this occasion.

Workshop members were selected both through chance—depending on the migrants seeking shelters on the days agreed with the hostel director to hold the workshops—and self-selected, in the sense that only those wanting to participate wrote anything. The migrant hostel itself was decided upon because of its important location on the migration route and the director's openness to the intervention proposed.

Both workshops were held under somewhat extreme conditions, especially for the migrants themselves, many of whom had not slept for several nights in a row, nor eaten for a long time. As a result, it was crucial to take measures to assure that the workshops would not add to the migrants' hardship. Apart from the aforementioned voluntary nature of workshop engagement, food was provided for all the migrants, naturally regardless of whether they chose to take part or...
The second workshop type consisted of one session with students belonging to the host community who wrote about some of the migrant experiences gathered during the first workshop type. It was held on the 30th of April 2018 at the Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores (ENES), in León, the largest city of the State of Guanajuato. It is a public university which forms part of the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM).

The decision to hold the second workshop type at the Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores, León was driven by the school's location in the same state as the migrant hostel and its specific interest in intercultural education. This is manifested, for instance, by its innovative Licenciatura en Desarrollo y Gestión Interculturales, which can be roughly translated as a BA in Intercultural Management and Development, where management refers not to business practices, but to the way intercultural co-existences are to be “managed” and guided. Following a growing emphasis on university level studies of intercultural issues in Mexico (see also Mateos Cortés, 2009), one of this degree programme’s key aims is to prepare students for “confronting and promoting solutions to problems arising from interculturality” (Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores [ENES], 2019).

The participants—who totalled a number of twelve—were those who responded to an advertisement for an expressive writing intervention on Central American migrants and therefore self-selected. All participants were involved in BA programmes at the university, many of them enrolled in said BA.

As in the previous workshop type, some specific ethical concerns had to be taken into consideration, in this case especially in relation to the intervention’s similarity to SOTL research (see, for instance, Fedoruk, 2017) and with adherence to ethical principles for expressive writing with students as outlined by Jackson (2014). Again, great care was taken to inform students of the potential benefits of expressive writing and to reiterate the voluntary nature of their participation, which included the option of participating without sharing their writing with the facilitator afterwards. In addition, all writing was done anonymously, and all the texts handed in were assigned a letter of the alphabet which was maintained during the analysis and writing process. This was done to potentially reduce the revelation of private information to the facilitator and during subsequent research procedures.

Again, the author was the workshop facilitator, helped by the young woman with experience working with Central American migrants. The workshop's main aim was to see if this expressive writing intervention would lead to a significant, empathic response from the students. For this, an adaptation of Greenberg, Wortman, and Stone (1996) model of writing about other people’s traumas was deployed. The workshop was followed by questionnaires to qualitatively analyse its impact. The writings produced were assessed through narrative analysis (see Maines et al.) by the author of this article.

The session started off with a brief documentary about Central American Migrants in Mexico, Los Invisibles (The Invisibles, Silver & García Bernal, 2011). Afterwards, the young woman spoke for about 15 minutes about her personal experience of working with “Las Patronas”, a women’s organisation that assists migrants from Central America (see, for instance, Bellinghausen, 2017). This was followed by a presentation of some pictures of the migrant hostel, the participant migrants and manuscripts of the actual writings produced during the workshops in the hostel. As is typically the case for expressive writing, many of the original texts are difficult to read because of grammatical errors, etc., so stories belonging to different migrants were summarised and given to all participant students in a hand-out (see Appendix II). Due to time constraints and to circumscribe the focus of the interventions, only three stories were chosen. These were the account of a 35-year-old man who suffered considerable hardship on his journey through Mexico; the tale of a 16 year-old-girl with two children who migrated in order to provide a better life for her family; and the story of a 16-year-old boy who left El Salvador so he didn't have to join a gang.
The selection was based on the criterion of representativeness in the case of the first story, as the events and risks it describes match many experiences told in other works on Central American migrants (e.g. Ulterras & Solalinde, 2012). Also, it was considered crucial to use this particular account given the great interest displayed by the man who wrote it in sharing it with members of the host society, as will be discussed. With regard to the second and third tale, they were, on the contrary, chosen due to the relative lack of circulation of migration narratives similar to the ones they described. Many female migrants are exposed to even more risks than male movers, as they tend to use “more clandestine forms of travel than men” (Díaz & Kuhner, 2007), their stories, to an extent, also becoming less accessible as a result. Also, male migrants are often considered criminals (Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación [Conapred], 2011b), for which reason the story of a boy trying to escape criminalisation was selected to potentially undermine this common prejudice.

As previously stated, the students were asked to write about these migrants’ lives as if they were their own (see, for instance, Greenberg et al., 1996). After about 20 minutes of writing time, participants were given a brief questionnaire asking them about their workshop and writing experiences.

In order to complete the idea of a cycle and in accordance with Fraser’s notion that many vulnerable groups need both recognition—here the writing—and redistribution (Fraser, 1997), a collection for the migrant hostel which had been the site of the first workshops was launched at the end of the workshop. Participants were informed as to items needed—chiefly clothes, shoes, storable food, medicine and sanitary products, as previously agreed with the hostel—and empty boxes were placed at a secure and central location on the university campus. Moreover, posters announcing the collection were shared with the student and staff community at large.

Evidently, there are several limitations to the present research. In particular, it is worth highlighting the reduced number of participants, which stresses the exploratory nature of this investigation. There were both practical and theoretical reasons for this. Regarding the former, the research aim of focusing on individual stories and discovering how migrants were humanised as a consequence was considered most consistent with the few workshop members who, rather than becoming “samples”, act as individual writers telling their personal tales. In addition, Bryman argues in the National Centre for Research Methods Review Paper, “How many qualitative interviews is enough?”, that life story-oriented research tends draw upon a much smaller number of participants, as it often requires detailed, in-depth analysis of the results obtained (Bryman, 2012, 18).

As to the practical reasons, expressive writing workshops, for students but especially for members of highly vulnerable groups such as the one this article focuses on, need a lot of personalised attention which can best be provided through reduced workshop sizes. Naturally, more workshops could have been provided to increase the overall number of participants while maintaining the individualised nature of the writing sessions, but unfortunately, in this particular case, the areas of interest showed such an increase in crime rates and overall insecurity that the potential risk for the researcher and assistants necessary was considered too great.

The account of the research will be structured in the following manner: To begin with, there is a succinct overview of some key theoretical aspects and general background information underlying the discussion. The article will then look at some texts produced by the migrants and to what extent the expressive writing intervention was perceived as beneficial by participants. Following this, the way the students were affected by writing about the migrants’ life stories as if they were their own will be analysed, and an account of the collection’s results provided. The conclusion of the article will sum up the core issues and point towards the potential applicability of similar expressive writing interventions within other contexts of intercultural education and migration.
2. A glance at the context

2.1. Intercultural education, empathy and literature

Given the changing nature of our contemporary world, including ever-increasing numbers of international migrants, forms of intercultural educations have been regarded as playing a key role for “learning to live together” (Ausco, 2006, 20). Indeed, “the learner”—one may also say “citizen”—urgently “needs to acquire knowledge, skills and values that contribute to a spirit of solidarity and co-operation among diverse individuals and groups in society” (id.).

While discussing the complexity of intercultural education goes beyond the scope of the present research, it is crucial to note once more that the creation of empathy has been regarded as an element of great importance for intercultural education practices. In his work “The dimensions of intercultural education” Neuner defines empathy as “venturing into the world of ‘the others’ and trying to understand it ‘from within’ … Empathy helps us to understand and accept ‘the otherness of others’” (Neuner, 2012, 36).

Within intercultural education and related fields, there has been a growing understanding that empathy, among other aspects, may present an effective means of counter-acting the process of dehumanisation earlier mentioned. The present article’s notion of dehumanisation is closely related to Zembylas definition of the latter as “the process by which people are viewed as less than human … accompanied by a wide range of negative emotions toward them, such as contempt, hatred or fear” (Zembylas, 2007, 208). Moreover, Zembylas comments that the process of rehumanisation can be achieved when a person:

empathises with the “enemy” and finally sees him in human terms. The major function of empathy is imagining the particular perspective of the Other—that is, realising that the Other is like me. Finding commonality through identification … is perhaps the most difficult and yet profound step in the rehumanisation of the Other. (id.)

Hence, empathy can be regarded as a potential antidote for dangerous dehumanisation processes.

As has been briefly noted, significant research already points to the way literature can help promote empathy enhancement (e.g. Breithaupt, 2009; Corbett, 2010; Keen, 2006; Koopman & Hakemulder, 2015), among other goals crucial for intercultural education, such as providing “reflection on cultural differences, develop understanding of the home culture, and consequently enhance more tolerant and open attitudes towards other cultures” (González Rodriguez & Borham Puyal, 2012, 108). As has been mentioned, however, the question whether expressive writing can potentially contribute to empathy creation, among other aims, is still under-researched. This is a gap well worth closing. Expressive writing is a highly accessible practice that has consistently been shown to increase physical and psychological well-being (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005), as well as contributing to other potential pedagogical aims such as improved overall writing skills (Pfeiffer & Van der Walt, 2016) and enhanced memory (Klein & Boals, 2001). Unlike other literary interventions, it demands very few literary skills, and is therefore regarded as a particularly democratic method (Adams, 2013, ix). Active engagement with democratic values, in turn, constitutes another core aim of intercultural education (e.g. Neuner, 2012).

In order to fully understand its potential benefits, however, it is important to look in more detail at what expressive writing actually is.

2.2. Expressive writing

Although expressive writing can also be used to develop creative writing skills, it differs from the latter in that it has no aesthetic aspirations and there is no need for correct grammar or spelling.
Rather—as the name suggests—the focus is on self-expression and emotional as well as cognitive honesty. Typically, the writing is done quickly and for relatively short periods of time.

Research on expressive writing usually comes from within psychological or literary studies, with many important voices elaborating on its increasing variety of practices, such as Adams with works like *Expressive Writing—Foundations of Practice* (Adams, 2013) or Baraitser, with her book *Reading and Expressive Writing with Traumatised Children, Young Refugees and Asylum Seekers* (Baraitser, 2014), to name but two.

Perhaps the most well-known scholar of expressive writing is Pennebaker, who developed an expressive writing method which asks participants to write freely about their worst personal traumas over four-consecutive sessions of about 20 minutes each (Pennebaker, 1997, 2018; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). This intervention has attracted a lot of attention due to its simplicity and effectiveness. Baikie and Wilhelm (2005), for instance, illustrate its many psychological and physical benefits including:

- Fewer stress related visits to the doctor; improved immune system functioning; reduced blood pressure; improved lung function; improved liver function … improved mood/affect; feeling of greater psychological wellbeing; reduced depressive symptoms before examinations, fewer post-traumatic intrusion and avoidance symptoms (Baikie & Wilhelm, 2005, 339).

This model has spawned many variations. One of particular relevance to the present investigation is Greenberg et al.’s exploration of expressive writing not about personal but other people’s traumas. This, too, has been correlated with significantly improved well-being among participants (Greenberg et al., 1996), showing that it is also beneficial to write about traumas which were not personally experienced. As indicated, it is this model which has formed the basis for work with expressive writing as a means of empathy creation, in this case with Central American migrants in Mexico.

### 2.3. Central American migrants in Mexico

Turning towards the context of the workshops conducted, Mexico, is most commonly known as a country of mass emigration. Nearly 12 million Mexicans reside outside their national borders, with 97.79% percent living in the US (Secretaría de Relaciones Exteriores, 2017). However, Mexico has also become an important destiny for immigrants and migrants in transit to the United States (see, for instance, Carrasco González, 2013, 171). As to (undocumented) migrants from Central America, it has been estimated that around 500,000 people “irregularly cross the southern border of Mexico each year” (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], 2017, 1). Migration authorities detained 188,595 migrants in the same year, 152,231 of whom came from Guatemala, Honduras and El Salvador (id.). Also, in 2016 there were 8,781 people who applied for asylum in Mexico, with the vast majority (91.6 %) coming from Central America.

The growing research field on the psychology of migration illustrates many complex, interrelated psycho-social struggles usually associated with the experience of displacement such as loss of loved ones, identity and a familiar cultural environment—among many other forms of loss (e.g. Akhtar, 2014; Chibici-Revneanu, 2016, 2017, 2018a; Grinberg & Grinberg, 1989; Losi, 2006).

However, for Central American (transit) migrants, it seems that their difficulties often go far beyond this, as they also tend to fall victims to an alarming number of human rights violations. Apart from facing an extremely difficult journey which—as will be shown—often involves days and nights of relentless walking, hunger and thirst, as well as dangerous “train rides” where many migrants have lost limbs or indeed their lives (Ultrañeras & Solalinde, 2012), they are also exposed to the risks of robbery, physical violence, murder, rape, kidnapping and human trafficking (id.). It has been argued that interventions by Mexican and US authorities have often exacerbated rather than solved this situation (e.g. Castillo Ramírez, 2018; Vox; Borders, 2017). Also, many Central American migrants become collateral victims of the violence that reigns in Mexico (Fuentes-Reyes & Ortiz-Ramírez, 2012, 172).
Of course, there are many initiatives, such as the considerable number of migrant hostels, or the previously mentioned “patronas” which demonstrate many people’s wish to diminish the hardship frequently experienced by transit migrants. However, studies have indicated many discriminatory attitudes and beliefs among members of the host society. The “Encuesta Nacional sobre Discriminación 2010” [National Survey on Discrimination 2010]) revealed that more than half of the people interviewed think that the rights of Central American migrants are barely taken into account, and three out of ten that they are not considered at all (Consejo Nacional para Prevenir la Discriminación [Conapred], 2011a, 34). Furthermore, the National Council for the Prevention of Discrimination (Conapred) lists several common negative stereotypes against this migrant group. Central American Migrant women—especially in the Southern border region—are, for instance, often considered as overly sexually available, “husband-stealers” and to be pitied, whereas men are frequently looked at as dirty or involved in criminal activities (2011b, 4). On the whole, as in many other nations (Jones, The Guardian, April 2, Jones, 2014), there seems to be a remarkable lack of empathy towards this group. And while much more research and actions on multiple levels are needed to fully understand and counter-act this trend, the current investigation hoped to at least make a minor contribution to alleviating the problem at hand.

3. Migrants writing

It is time, then, to turn to the writings produced by participant migrants and present some key elements that arose during the workshops, such as accounts of difficulties on the journey, encounters with the host population and reasons for migration. As this intervention also attempted to potentially improve participant well-being, migrants’ reactions to the workshop itself will also be discussed.

Starting with struggles on the journey, for a 25-year-old man from Honduras, the main problem was: “walking for three days” (H6). Another young man from Honduras of the same age also wrote how: “almost every day I had to sleep on the train lines, putting up with hunger and the cold” (L). Perhaps the most touching account came from another man from Honduras (35-years-old), who initially didn’t want to write but was motivated to produce an autobiographical account when he heard his writing would be communicated directly to Mexican students:

For a migrant who passes through this country life is very complicated, because from the moment you leave your country you have to escape from everyone ... I am in Mexico without knowing that here the real suffering begins. These are inexplicable things, you are escaping from everyone ... When the train comes you think of everything, of the thieves, the police. And above all migration [officials], because if they get you they deport you and the effort is over. Apart from that, most of the time you have to walk ... you get weaker because of lack of food, because you eat when you can, not when you want to, when you find something and you take what you find. This life isn’t easy, but it’s a risk every migrant has to take once you arrive in this country. They [migrants] are seen as strangers, as someone who doesn’t belong here, this is why there are people who look at us with a lot of contempt and they humiliate us (X).

Apart from the multiple risks and sufferings here narrated, it is worth noting how this migrant alludes to a lack of empathy (“they are seen as strangers”) and a certain dehumanisation (“look at us with a lot of contempt”, “humiliate us”) from members of the host population.

Indeed, migrants’ experiences regarding the reception by the host population were mixed. Several others shared critical stories in some ways similar to X’s account. One of the 25-year-old men from Honduras, for instance, also observed how:

In this country, the treatment isn’t good, because you aren’t treated like a dignified human being, they treat you like a criminal, you have to escape from everyone, the police, migration and many people who take advantage of your journey (L).
A man from Guatemala (age unknown, estimated around 40) commented more ambiguously how: “Mexico is a beautiful country, but corruption is very big … one thing I have to say, the humblest people, or better said, the poorest are the ones who have never left us alone” (J). Another man—40-years-old, from Honduras—declared how: “Mexicans have looked at me well [i.e. treated me well], not all of them, but the majority looked at me well, and that’s why I like Mexico a lot” (A)—hence displaying a positive perception.

As to some reasons for migration given, many participants alluded to experiences of poverty and insecurity in their home countries. With regard to the former, the 40-year old man from Honduras stated that he “lived very humbly” and that was one of the key “reasons that bring us here to be a migrant” (A). The man from Guatemala “decided to leave to buy back some ground which I had to mortgage because of poverty” (J). With reference to insecurity in their country of origin, one of the 25-year-old men from Honduras explained how: “There is a crisis that makes us leave, because there is no peace due to delinquency which has grown a lot and this is something that terrifies us and we have to find a different place to live” (L).

One aspect that stands out with respect to these quotes is the frequent use of the plural when speaking about themselves individually (“brings us here”, “makes us leave”). This may be interpreted as a sign of these movers thinking of themselves as closely involved with others—other migrants, but also other people close to them. Indeed, a wish to help loved ones appeared to be a particularly powerful reason for leaving. One of the 25-year-olds from Honduras shared that: “I left my country to grant a better future to my parents, because it is a bit violent, politically … one wants to find a better future for ones loved ones, manage to give them something different, in our country this is impossible” (H). This desire to help others was also displayed by the life story written by the only participant migrant woman, or rather girl, of 16, whose country of origin was not revealed:

I have two children I love. I had my first child at the age of 13 and well, I don’t regret having them at all, I give my life for them. Even though they’re far away, I feel them close in my mind and my heart … my parents and my children are the reason why I live this life, I love them a lot, I have suffered on the entire journey until I arrived here [the migrant hostel] (Y).

A touching account was furthermore provided by another 16-year-old migrant from El Salvador who revealed that he had to leave because he was being recruited by one of his country’s gangs. In his words: “They wanted me to join them … to extort money or kill and things like that. So, I decided I had better leave the country” (Z).

As mentioned previously, this workshop type not only tried to gather participant migrants’ personal accounts, but also hoped to benefit them in the process. When referring to participants’ answers to the evaluative questionnaires, it seems that such as unburdening effect was indeed achieved. The man from Guatemala, for instance, said that he enjoyed the workshop because: “I hadn’t laughed for 45 days and now I feel a lot better” (J). Several participants claimed that the writing—and talking—during the workshop had a cathartic effect on them. One of the 25-year-old men from Honduras said he found the workshop: “Great, because you get relief … it helped me to express what I feel” (H). A 20-year-old from Honduras also stated that the workshop left him with a “good feeling because I expressed myself and I feel relieved” (S).

Some of the migrants also claimed they enjoyed knowing there were people who wanted to help and that their message would be passed on. As the 35-year-old man from Honduras whose story was quoted in more detail wrote:

I learned that there are a lot of people interested in knowing what the life of each of us is like and who want to understand the migrant life more deeply … I am grateful for the
opportunity to share everything I have gone through on my way and spreading the word among many people who have no idea what one is going through here (X).

Of course, a felt need for politeness may have influenced participants’ answers. Also, the man from Guatemala added that, despite the workshop’s cathartic effect “this [what he expressed] was only the first part of all I have suffered” (J). Nevertheless, the reactions imply that the intervention did at least grant some moments of relief to the migrants involved.

4. Students writing about migrants

As was stated during the introduction, the migrant workshops were followed by an intervention which asked students to write about some of the movers’ stories as if they were their own. This section contains a qualitative discussion of the impact this expressive writing exercise had on participating students.

During the theoretical overview, it was observed that “imagining the particular perspective of the Other” (Zembylas, 2007, 208) is key to developing more empathic feelings towards him or her. One element that indeed stood out during the analysis of student texts—although implicitly encouraged by the instructions themselves—was that students tended to use the first person singular to write about their chosen migrant experience. In fact, there was only one participant who chiefly deployed the second person singular and shifted towards the first person plural towards the end of the text (“if we didn’t come from such unfavourable conditions, we wouldn’t expose ourselves to such risks”). All the others, as subsequent quotes will also reveal, adopted an “I” to illustrate that they themselves had “become” migrants.

This can be regarded as significant. Several studies within the field of expressive writing have shown—with their typical focus on participants’ psychological improvement—that pronoun change during writing tasks tends to be indicative of enhanced well-being (e.g. Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003; Fuentes, Kahn, & Lannin, 2018). Interestingly, Fuentes, Kahn & Lannin argue in favour of a shift from first to third person singular when writing about personal trauma, in part because this may imply an increased sense of distance towards the experience (Fuentes et al., 2018). Given that the aim of this second workshop type was to “decrease” the distance between migrants and students by having the latter write about the former’s stories, a reverse pronoun change may be a sign of an effective approximation to this particular objective. Although Keen stresses the complexity of the connection between empathy and literary pronoun use (Keen, 2006), research into writing exercises for medical students has also shown that “first person writing is considered to be a way of moving emotionally closer to the ‘other’” (Shapiro et al., 2006, 101). In fact, even though future investigations are needed to gain a fuller understanding of this, even that one student’s switch to first person plural may reveal such a deepened connection, as student writer and migrant become united in a reiterated “we”. In many ways, then, participants indeed seem to have managed, albeit to varying degrees, to imagine “the particular perspective of the Other” (Zembylas, 2007, 208).

Yet beyond the matter of pronoun shifts, there were also other signs of emergent empathic links between participant migrants and students, including, to begin with, a notion of movers turning into heroic figures. One student, for instance, wrote about the story by the 35-year-old man from Honduras in the following terms:

The journey doesn’t get better, I was wrong, it gets worse, just to watch how others die, are taken away, how they rape women, kill them, all this makes me want to go back, I can’t, I have to carry on for my children (A).”

Here the student displays a strong awareness of this migrant’s multiple sufferings and includes a sense of disappointment excluded from the original tale (“I was wrong, it gets worse”); a sign that an act of imagining and personalising the other’s perspective seems to have taken place.
Moreover, the migrant is portrayed as a selfless hero who would like to return yet sacrifices his own needs for those of the people he loves (“carry on for my children”). Although this is not to say that the student held negative beliefs about migrants before the workshop, this “characterization” is nevertheless notably different from the negative stereotypes about Central migrants previously discussed.

A similar sense of empathy and heroism also surfaced from stories based on the journey undertaken by the young mother of two. As one student wrote:

- there is nothing sadder and more terrible than to know you are alone, and in danger ... what motivates me is the happy face of my children, to be reunited to those I love the most and to know that it was all worth it (Z).

Once again, the words display an emotional acknowledgment (“sadder ... more terrible”) of the migrant’s precarious condition, and the picture of a self-less heroine giving up her own well-being for those she “love[s] the most”. The migrant is portrayed as a figure to be admired rather than criminalised or shunned.

In some cases, the emergent sense of empathy arguably also moved towards what Zembylas referred to as the “most difficult and yet profound step in the rehumanisation of the Other”, namely “finding commonality through identification” (Zembylas, 2007, 208). This can be glimpsed in a fragment of a story about the 16-year-old boy from El Salvador who left his home so he would not have to join a gang:

- I have just spoken to my mother, she wants me to escape and find help in Mexico so I can cross over to the United States ... I’m crossing the border into a place with realities that aren’t that different from my country, hunger and poverty seem to be our shared sin (B).

In this fragment, the migrant’s perspective is again imagined and personalised through aspects such as the allusion to his mother, absent from the account they were given as a basis. But something else occurs here: the migrant’s and the student’s worlds become linked—they share the same heritage of “hunger and poverty.” Furthermore, the word “sin” stands out, highlighting a sense that—albeit migrants are often accused and criminalised—this tragic heritage is far beyond both the migrant’s and the student’s control. Rather, they become shared victims of socio-political difficulties.

If an increased sense of empathy already arose from some participants’ story fragments, it becomes even more evident through some of their evaluative statements. One student, for instance, said that the writing intervention was:

- impressive, because it really allowed me to put myself into someone else’s place, without seeing him as someone else [in Spanish also “the other”], but someone like me, a brother ... It made me a bit sad, but this is something I need to make use of to take measures, actions to help (M).

Another student commented that the effect of the workshop was:

- very strong. It’s unbelievable that there are so many problems, and nothing is being done. I really liked this event, because it wasn’t simply about getting to know the phenomenon of migration, but also about creating empathy about this great problem (C).

Here, the student seems to hint at the writing process as being instrumental in this empathy creation, as this made it an emotional rather than a purely cognitive intervention (“it wasn’t simply about getting to know”).
Two students also commented specifically on the usefulness of the “workshop cycle” method used. Thus, one participant stated that s/he found the workshop effective because the migrants “wrote the stories themselves and what can be better than a person’s own words for achieving empathy?” (B). The other explained quite poetically that: “the written word is an extension of language and human beings are made of words, therefore, getting to know their words makes me know them” (K).

However, the effects achieved by the workshop seem to go beyond an increase in empathy. The previous quotes’ allusion to the need “to take measures, actions to help” and the complaint that “nothing is being done” contain a sense of the urgency to make changes, to intervene. This double reaction of empathetic suffering and a wish to take active measures was also voiced by a student who described the workshop as: “a very powerful experience … devastating on the one hand and on the other very motivating—to create change” (I).

In fact, a wide range of sometimes contrasting emotional reactions to the writing was another recurrent feature that became apparent from students’ feedback. Six participants reported “difficult” feelings such as sadness, frustration, anger and impotence, whereas two primarily sensed empathy and solidarity (E. and M.). Three students highlighted a sense of gratitude and an awareness of their own privileges. As one student put it, the workshop made her/him feel “good because it makes you more sensitive towards others’ problems and makes you see that yours aren’t that big in comparison to others” (G). In a similar manner, M. described being overcome by “gratitude” as well as “respect … love and spirituality”. Finally, for H., it was in some ways comparable to I. quoted above, whose experience was “devastating” as well as “motivating”, and H’s different feelings such as “anger, impotence, love of life, solidarity” coincided.

This not only points to a powerful affective engagement with the migrant situations the students described, but also to the capacity of this writing task to allow strong emotions to surface and find expression. Of course, this is not in itself surprising, given that even the method of writing about other people’s trauma was initially created to enhance participants’ well-being rather than their sense of empathy (Greenberg et al., 1996). Nevertheless, it is worth stressing that eight students explicitly mentioned how the writing indeed brought them emotional release, as it granted them “the ability to express yourself” (H.), “a form of therapy and healing” (I.) and helped them to “express our feelings … heal and move on” (L). Moreover, for two workshop members it was partially their empathy and identification with the migrants they wrote about which induced these positive emotions. As F. described, writing about the migrant’s trauma allowed him/her to “talk about situations that you cannot talk about, you get them out, it lessens the pain a little” (F).

At a first glance, it may seem as if students somewhat dubiously benefited from an awareness of the migrants’ suffering. However, as these “benefits” clearly coexisted with—and in some cases, as stated, even derived from—empathic reactions towards migrants, the “healing” effect of the writing exercise may actually enhance the rehumanising learning experience (Fredrickson & Branigan, 2005).

Of course, some students were also critical. Two students stated that the time provided for writing was too short. One asked for longer and more explicit stories; and another highlighted that, although the workshop was helpful, it allowed them to see only “a small part of what migrants suffer day after day” (O). This, in some ways, leads back to the statement made by the migrant from Guatemala, who, while enthusiastic about the workshop, claimed he could only off-load a part of all the terrible experiences that had accompanied him on his path. To alleviate the grave situation for Central American migrants in Mexico, many more actions than expressive writing workshops are needed; and yet they may be one contribution by intercultural educative practices towards the problem’s solution.

5. The collection
This sense of partial alleviation as one contribution within the context of needed micro, meso and macro measures may also directly be applied to the final part of the intervention. As previously
mentioned, the student writing workshop concluded with the launch of a collection of items which were then donated to the migrant hostel where the first workshop part had taken place. A trunk full of things—four boxes and four large bags, mainly containing clothes and shoes—was gathered and delivered to the hostel in June 2018, and a photo of the collected goods sent out to the university community via social media. Even though no follow-up studies have as yet been conducted to corroborate how much it achieved, the collection did seem to further strengthen the nascent “connection” of host community members towards Central American migrants. Moreover, it arguably proved useful in channelling the wish to help into concrete actions and partially expanding the intervention to involve the university community at large, as well as other migrants passing through the hostel on their journey. Unfortunately, student writings could not be returned to the migrants whose stories they were based on, as movers’ stays at the migrant centre tend to be very brief. By the time the collection was brought to the hostel, they were long gone.

6. Conclusion
This article explored how intercultural educational practices can be deployed to potentially counteract the dehumanisation of migrants through the creation of empathy, alongside improved well-being. In more specific terms, it analysed an intervention based on an expressive writing cycle which consisted of two writing workshops with Central American migrants in a migrant hostel in Celaya, Guanajuato (Mexico), one workshop with host community undergraduate students from the Escuela Superior de Estudios Superiores (ENES) at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), in León, Guanajuato and a university collection of needed goods which were delivered to the migrant hostel. The migrant and host community workshops were intrinsically interlinked, as some of the expressive autobiographical writing produced by participant migrants formed the basis of the writing to be later created by participant students who, to complete the idea of a cycle, were in turn encouraged to donate items to the migrant hostel.

As explained at the beginning, the research had several objectives. It attempted to qualitatively and tentatively explore ways in which an expressive writing cycle can help improve relations between some migrants and members of a host society through affective aspects such as enhanced empathy and well-being. In addition, the expressive writing cycle carried out was presented as a model which may be used, directly as well as in adapted or improved versions, in other contexts where intercultural education interventions may be helpful to counteract the dehumanisation of migrants. Also, the article is based on an ethical research process which calls further attention to the suffering of many Central American migrants in transit through Mexico and at least partially helps alleviate some of the countless difficulties.

Although only a single case of such a cycle was discussed and, given the intensity of the work, there were relatively few participants, the initial qualitative results obtained were promising. Among participant migrants, the workshops went far beyond “providing material” for later student writing and proved to be an unburdening experience. In some cases, it made participant migrants feel more “cared” about as well as somewhat relieved that the “message” of their intense suffering was being passed on through the second workshop type.

During the latter, most participating students displayed and explicitly affirmed that expressive writing increased their empathy with migrants, as well as their awareness of their frequent struggles, often sparking off a strong wish to help which was then partly channelled into the collection of items previously mentioned. In addition, the writing also enhanced some students’ sense of gratitude and personal well-being through the emphatic link created, which may have affectively strengthened the intercultural learning experience.

It is now worth turning towards some practical considerations as to how expressive writing workshops and similar writing cycles may be replicated and which problems may be encountered.
Given the material simplicity of the intervention, workshops are dependent primarily on a space. When there is no institutional provision of the latter, such as the migrant hostel in the present research, coffee shops, or, to limit expenditure, public parks may be equally suitable for the realisation of an expressive writing intervention. In fact, although this was not practicable for this particular study, workshops can also be conducted online if participants have access to the necessary technology (Chibici-Revneanu, 2016, 2018a). A simple group email may function as an effective tool of sending instructions and sharing writings, discussions and evaluations.

Getting access to migrant groups can be a challenge, especially in the absence of institutional support such as in this case, again, the migrant centre. However, simple methods such as a combination of social media announcements and the strategic location of posters and flyers have proven effective means of recruiting participants for other workshops during the research project at large.

With regard to host society members, the question may remain as to how the latter may be addressed and if they have to be open to cooperate with such tasks in the first place. Although more research is needed to validate this, there was interestingly little difference in perceived impact between the student workshop on Central American Migrants, where participation was voluntary, and the other workshop on indigenous migrants mentioned, where participants were sent by their teachers. This may act as a first indication that the workshop might also work in settings, such as schools, were participants will not necessarily be self-selected, although coercion should evidently be avoided. In fact, and as previously implied, there seem to be numerous justifications for applying expressive writing interventions in educational contexts which go beyond their apparent empathy-enhancing potential, such as their commonly positive impact on participants’ well-being, as well their interconnection with improved memory and overall writing skills.

Also, as indicated—and depending on the particular circumstances—workshops may directly bring together migrants and host community members in the same space. Here, expressive writing methods which focus on the revelation of life stories to be partly shared among workshop participants, or group discussions on migration issues followed by Pennebaker’s trauma exercises, have—again with a relatively small number of participants—been shown to generally increase participants’ well-being as well as strengthen a sense of mutual understanding (Chibici-Revneanu, 2016).

Finally, in a world where humans still inflict so much suffering on other humans, intercultural educative practices can continue to act as a means of alleviation and hope. If we are to improve relations between migrant and host populations, and it seems that we should, then expressive writing cycles can be an effective means of achieving this aim. Perhaps in this manner, in the words of another participant student, the problems of so many migrants can become “human with faces and experiences” (L.), revealing our common humanity.

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Author details
Claudia Chibici-Revneanu1
E-mail: claudiac@gmail.com

1 Escuela Nacional de Estudios Superiores (ENES), Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM), León, Mexico.

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Notes
1. See Adams (2013, 8) on the psychological benefits of writing about life goals.
2. Whereas other workshops for this project, as mentioned, invited host society members and migrants to write together, this option was discarded due to previous knowledge of the likelihood of movers’ difficulties (see Ultreras & Solalinde, 2012) as well as considerations of student safety.
3. However, it is worth clarifying that only some participants were in a previous student-teacher relationship with the facilitator and that the workshop formed part of voluntary extra-curricular activities.
4. As the work of Galli, for instance, illustrates, in the US there is often a tension between seeing Central American migrants as refugees/protectors or individual agents who seek economic opportunities.
(Galli, 2018) and/or have been associated with organised crime. Due to the fact that Central American movers are typically regarded as transit migrants (UNHCR, 2017), in Mexico, the tension seems to manifest itself rather as a division between those who regard movers as individuals in need of assistance and those who reject them as “invasive” forces (Fuentes-Reyes & Ortiz-Ramírez, 2012, 175) and perpetrators of crime. Unfortunately, it could be argued that due to structural problems, many migrants themselves do not seek the assistance they could theoretically obtain. It has been estimated that less than 1% of Central American movers apply for asylum, often because of lack of information with regard to this procedure in Mexico (UNHCR, 2017).

5. Beyond discussions on the liberating side of geographical dislocation, these struggles incidentally tended to become the protagonists of previous expressive workshops with other migrant groups conducted in the area. As discussed in detail elsewhere (Chibici-Revneanu, 2016, 2018a), participants typically elaborated on language difficulties, missing friends and family members, being discriminated against as the cultural “other”, and—due to the local context—fear of ever-growing insecurity in Mexico.

6. All initials are false and were randomly assigned to different migrants. All quotations from workshop participants are my translations.

7. Naturally, Mexico is a large and hyper-diverse country and to generalise about the entire nation’s reaction to Central American migrants would risk precisely the kind of negative stereotyping this research tries to avoid. Also, it is worth emphasising this article’s qualitative focus on personal stories, which convey individual experiences and cannot, as said, act as the basis for generalisations.

8. Despite significant differences with regard to the struggles recounted, participant migrants in the other workshops previously mentioned showed very similar reactions towards the actual writing tasks. They too expressed a great sense of relief at being able to share their stories, express their feelings and being put in touch with themselves through the writing exercises (Chibici-Revneanu, 2016, 2018b).

9. Students are also referred to through the letters assigned to their anonymous texts.

10. This is an aspect that could be taken into consideration for future investigations but was not currently included so as not to directly “expose” students’ previous attitudes.

11. As part of the larger project on migration and expressive writing, a similar writing workshop—including a presentation providing information about migrants and expressive writing on selected life stories—was organised in spring 2018 with 22 Odontology students at the same university (Chibici-Revneanu, 2018a). This time, the focus was on internal indigenous migrants. Workshop participants were sent by their teachers who considered the intervention a possible preparatory measure, as students were subsequently to provide free dental care for members of this group. Results, although they cannot be generalised from two relatively small and qualitatively analysed interventions, were fairly similar. One student described that she “felt as if I was that person” (N). In addition, there was a recurrent theme of gratitude and recognition of privilege (“it made me value that everything in my life has been within my reach without a gigantic effort” [L] and a wish to “try and help” [B]). As one student also wrote with regard to the latter: “we are blind. Our people need us and the only thing we do is to ignore the situation they find themselves in” (S). Note the use of “our people” to indicate a certain empathic link, as with the previously mentioned student who eventually switched to the first person plural in his/her writing.

12. Minor alterations were made to some sentence structures during the first and second workshop to improve their intelligibility. All instructions were given in Spanish and are my translations.

13. The specific migrant stories used were omitted, as these are to be based on individual stories collected during the first workshop type.

References


Appendix I

Instructions and questions used during the workshops with migrants.

1. Reflexive writing:
   (a) What is well-being and happiness for you? How have you been feeling since your arrival in Mexico?
   (b) What was the situation in your home country like? Why did you leave?
   (c) What have been the darkest parts of your journey?
   (d) Which have been the brightest (i.e. most positive) parts?

2. Expressive writing:
   - Option 1: “A letter to students”: Which part of your experience would you like to share with Mexican students?
   - Option 2: “My story in three parts”. Please write about or draw your experiences, dividing your story into:
     a) The time before leaving.
     b) Experiences during your journey.
     c) Your future. What are your dreams? Where do you want to get to?
   - Option 3: Pennebaker’s trauma writing exercise (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014), using instructions for session one, two, and four to reduce intervention time.

3. Evaluation:
   a) In general, what did you think of this workshop?
   b) To what extent were you able to express your deepest emotions and thoughts?
   c) What (if anything) did you learn from this writing workshop? Did it help you? If your answer is yes, how?
   d) What improvements could be made for further workshops?

Appendix II

Instructions and questions used during the workshops with students.

1. Expressive writing instructions, printed on the same hand-out as the three stories presented: “Please choose one of these stories. Close your eyes for a moment and imagine this is your life, your experience. What are you feeling? What can you smell, what do you hear? What thoughts do you have about your past, present and future? What is the worst thing about your journey? What are you excited about? Please connect as much as possible with your feelings. Write for 15–20 minutes without worrying about your spelling, style … just try to put yourself into this situation as much as possible.”

2. Evaluation:
   a) On the whole, what do you think of this workshop?
   b) How did you feel during the writing exercise?
   c) To what extent could you “enter” into the situation you were writing about?
   d) What emotions and reflections (if any) did writing about this situation evoke?
(e) Do you feel that it helped you to better comprehend the situation of migrants? If yes, why? If not, why not?

(f) What (if anything) did you learn from this session in general and specifically during the expressive writing task?

(g) How would you improve the session in general and the writing exercise in particular?