

Resources for use with reflection or learning journals

Jenny Moon, Centre for Excellence in Media Practice, Bournemouth University and Independent Consultant (Jenny@cemp.ac.uk)

This is the resources section from my new book on learning journals and their use – Learning Journals – a handbook for reflective practice and professional development (Routledge Falmer, 2006 – second edition). The material in this section may be freely photocopied, though it would be appreciated if the author's name and the source of the copy were included.

Resource 1 – Instructions for exercises on the depth and quality of reflection (Resources 3, 4 and 5)

Resource 2 – The generic framework for reflective writing. This framework supports and should be used alongside Resources 3, 4 and 5

Resource 3 - Exercise on starting with reflective learning, and improving its depth and quality: GP's story

Resource 4 – 'The Worrying Tutorial'

Resource 5 – 'The Surprise at Home'

Resource 1

Instructions for exercises on the depth and quality of reflection

The aim of these exercises is to enable participants to see what reflective writing looks like, to recognise that reflection can vary in depth and that there is more potential for learning from deeper rather than superficial reflection. The exercise is developed in response to the observation that students, who are asked to reflect, tend to reflect rather superficially. In the exercises there are three or four accounts of an incident. In each case someone is reflecting on the incident as she might if writing in a journal. The accounts are written at increasingly deeper levels of reflection. From the writer's experience of wide use of these exercises, the subject matter does not matter. It is even disadvantageous to give an exercise with subject matter that relates to the discipline of the group because the group will then tend to put on their disciplinary hats and examine the issues from that point of view, rather than consider the quality of the reflective learning.

The procedure for the exercise is described as a group process, though it can be used individually. The process works best when it has a facilitator, who is not engaged in the exercise. The exercises take around an hour and is best when the facilitator very much is in control of the situation. It is important, for example, that the pages of the exercise are not leafed through in advance other than as instructed and the exercise works better when people follow the instructions – in particular, not beginning the discussions until everyone has read the relevant account. The groups can be told that there are three or four accounts of an incident – according to the exercise selected, and that they will be reading them one after the other, with time after each session of reading for discussion about the reflective content of the account.

- ◆ The exercise is introduced as means of helping the group to see what reflective writing looks like and to demonstrate that there are different depths in reflection and that deeper reflection probably equates with better learning.
- ◆ Small groups are formed (no more than six in each).
- ◆ The groups are told to turn to the first account and read it quietly to themselves considering, what features that they think are reflective.
- ◆ When it is evident that most people have read the first account, the groups are invited to discuss the account and identify where and how it is reflective. They are given about five to seven minutes for each discussion session. They may need less time for the earlier accounts.
- ◆ After the discussion session, the participants are asked to read the next account in the sequence (and they are reminded not to turn pages beyond the account in hand).
- ◆ After the last account has been read and discussed, groups are asked to go back through all of the accounts and to identify features of the reflection that progressively change through the accounts. For example, the accounts change from being 'story' to focusing on issues in the incident. In the later accounts there is more recognition that there are multiple perspectives etc. The groups are asked to list (eg on flip chart paper) the ways in which the accounts 'deepen' – but not just to describe the qualities of each account.

- ◆ In a plenary, the groups share their lists (as above) and discuss the whole exercise. It is at this stage that the participants can be referred to the Framework for Reflective Writing which provides a general guide to features in deepening reflection. The accounts are not intended to accord directly with the stages described, but both are like continua running in parallel.

If the exercise is used with staff, and if they are likely to want to use it later with their own students, it is worth having spare copies available (participants tend to want to mark / underline text on their copies in this exercise).

Resource 2

Appendix 2 A Generic Framework for Reflective Writing **Jenny Moon, University of Exeter**

There are four 'levels' of depth of reflection described below. They do not necessarily accord directly with the accounts in exercises such as The Park or The Presentation – but provide an general guide.

Descriptive Writing

This account is descriptive and it contains little reflection. It may tell a story but from one point of view at a time and generally one point at a time is made. Ideas tend to be linked by the sequence of the account / story rather than by meaning. The account describes what happened, sometimes mentioning past experiences, sometimes anticipating the future – but all in the context of an account of the event.

There may be references to emotional reactions but they are not explored and not related to behaviour.

The account may relate to ideas or external information, but these are not considered or questioned and the possible impact on behaviour or the meaning of events is not mentioned.

There is little attempt to focus on particular issues. Most points are made with similar weight.

The writing could hardly be deemed to be reflective at all. It could be a reasonably written account of an event that would serve as a basis on which reflection might start, though a good description that precedes reflective accounts will tend to be more focused and to signal points and issues for further reflection.

Descriptive account with some reflection

This is a descriptive account that signals points for reflection while not actually showing much reflection.

The basic account is descriptive in the manner of description above. There is little addition of ideas from outside the event, reference to alternative viewpoints or attitudes to others, comment and so on. However, the account is more than just a story. It is focused on the event as if there is a big question or there are questions to be asked and answered. Points on which reflection could occur are signalled.

There is recognition of the worth of further exploring but it does not go very far. In other words, asking the questions makes it more than a descriptive account, but the lack of attempt to respond to the questions means that there is little actual analysis of the events.

The questioning does begin to suggest a 'standing back from the event' in (usually) isolated areas of the account.

The account may mention emotional reactions, or be influenced by emotion. Any influence may be noted, and possibly questioned.

There is a sense of recognition this is an incident from which learning can be gained, – but the reflection does not go sufficiently deep to enable the learning to begin to occur.

Reflective writing (1)

There is description but it is focused with particular aspects accentuated for reflective comment. There may be a sense that the material is being mulled around. It is no longer a straight-forward account of an event, but it is definitely reflective.

There is evidence of external ideas or information and where this occurs, the material is subjected to reflection.

The account shows some analysis and there is recognition of the worth of exploring motives or reasons for behaviour

Where relevant, there is willingness to be critical of the action of self or others. There is likely to be some self questioning and willingness also to recognise the overall effect of the event on self. In other words, there is some 'standing back' from the event.

There is recognition of any emotional content, a questioning of its role and influence and an attempt to consider its significance in shaping the views presented.

There may be recognition that things might look different from other perspectives, that views can change with time or the emotional state. The existence of several alternative points of view may be acknowledged but not analysed.

In other words, in a relatively limited way the account may recognise that frames of reference affect the manner in which we reflect at a given time but it does not deal with this in a way that links it effectively to issues about the quality of personal judgement.

Reflective writing (2)

Description now only serves the process of reflection, covering the issues for reflection and noting their context. There is clear evidence of standing back from an event and there is mulling over and internal dialogue.

The account shows deep reflection, and it incorporates a recognition that the frame of reference with which an event is viewed can change.

A metacognitive stance is taken (ie critical awareness of one's own processes of mental functioning – including reflection).

The account probably recognises that events exist in a historical or social context that may be influential on a person's reaction to them. In other words, multiple perspectives are noted.

Self questioning is evident (an 'internal dialogue' is set up at times) deliberating between different views of personal behaviour and that of others).

The view and motives of others are taken into account and considered against those of the writer.

There is recognition of the role of emotion in shaping the ideas and recognition of the manner in which different emotional influences can frame the account in different ways.

There is recognition that prior experience, thoughts (own and other's) interact with the production of current behaviour.

There is observation that there is learning to be gained from the experience and points for learning are noted.

There is recognition that the personal frame of reference can change according to the emotional state in which it is written, the acquisition of new information, the review of ideas and the effect of time passing.

Material developed by Jenny Moon, University of Bournemouth

Resource 3

GP's story

Account 1

Early January – it is always like that – cold outside, hot and airless inside and the post Christmas ailments come pouring in. I had had a bad night. Our 17-year old had gone out clubbing with her friends and phoned at 2.00am, unable to find a taxi - would one of us come and get her. As soon as the phone was down, Julia, my wife, plausibly argued the case for staying in bed because of her teaching day the next day. (What about my long list in the surgery today?). I didn't argue – just got up and went. It was hard getting up in the morning and it was a particularly long list of the worried well, with coughs and colds and 'flu' being used to hide their family discords and boredoms with work. I'm cynical – OK.

I was getting towards the end when the door opened on Marissa. She came in, – hunched shoulders, grey faced as usual – and clutching her bag in that peculiar way. She is 30, but always manages to look twice her age. Our practice is well aware of Marissa and her aches and pains. I was a bit surprised to see her because she had not been on the list when I first saw it this morning so that meant that Trisha, our receptionist, must have squeezed her in. Trisha's expertise at judging who needs to be 'squeezed in' is usually accurate and would not usually include the heartsinks like Marissa.

I welcomed Marissa in. She had a wrenched shoulder this time and she said that it had happened when she was lifting a bed in her mother's house. It was a slightly unusual one for Marissa. She was more of the tummy-ache and headache brigade. I had a quick look and prescribed painkillers. I typed the prescription and looked up, expecting the relieved look, but it was not there and she asked me if the painkillers would really take away the pain. I was a bit perplexed and I asked her why she had been moving furniture. She started to tell me how she had decided to move back to live with her mother. In my tired state at this end of the morning, I prompted questions about her family relationships and she seemed to open up. I felt I was doing the right thing – even felt noble about giving her the time on that morning, but I knew I was not very 'sharp' about it. I thought that just letting her talk for a few moments was probably helpful to her.

Marissa had been born long after the other children and felt as if she had been seen as a nuisance, particularly by her mother. But now she could not cope alone and was moving back in with this cold mother. I had got her talking and I brightened, thinking I was doing a good job. I wondered why I had not let this talk flow before. We ran out of time, and I asked her to come back to talk more. I was thinking that we might be able to get on top of these recurrent visits to the surgery.

I did actually feel better after seeing her. My attitude to my 'success' with her changed the next week. Marissa did come back – but not to me. She chose to come back when Geoff, the senior partner, was on. She was still complaining about the shoulder and she told Geoff that I had obviously thought that her shoulder was to do with her family – but it was not and she needed more than painkillers. Looking at the shoulder, Geoff agreed with her and referred her for physiotherapy. This little incident has perturbed me a bit. It stirred up my professional pride. I had thought I was doing a good job.

Account 2

There was a recent event that made me think a bit about the way I see patients and the manner in which I work with them. I'd had a short night and there were some bad feelings around at home. It was difficult to feel on top of the job and to cap it, was also early January. We tend to get into the surgery lots of patients with the after effects of the Christmas period then – the colds, the 'flu's and those who do not want to go back to work. All this makes me irritable when the lists of genuinely ill patients are almost too long to manage. I am not sure how much this generally bad start had to do with the event – how much has my own state to do with how I function?

So it was the end of this particularly long morning when Marissa walked in. Marissa had not been on the list that I had seen earlier and I was surprised that Trisha (the receptionist) had added her – since it is the 'genuinely' ill patients who are added once the list has been made up. Marissa is a regular with minor aches and pain. Sometimes there is just not time for these patients - but how do we solve that? I welcomed Marissa. She was pale and hunched as usual. She told me that she had a wrenched shoulder from when she had been moving a bed in her mother's house. I had a quick look: I had probably diagnosed a simple muscular sprain even before I examined her shoulder. I made out prescription for painkillers. When I looked up, she was still looking at me and asked if the painkillers would really take the pain away. I was surprised at her question – and clearly should have taken more note of it. Instead, I launched into a little bit of conversation, hoping to shift on to the next patient quite quickly. I asked her why she had been moving furniture and she started to tell me how she could not cope alone any more and had decided to move back in with this mother who did not seem to care for her. As she talked, I thought that she seemed to brighten up and I felt that I must be on a helpful track. I wonder now if I brightened up because I thought I was being helpful for this patient. We ran out of time and she agreed to come back the following week to discuss it all further. I was hoping after that to pass her on the counsellor and we might be able to sort something out that would prevent the recurrent visits.

I felt better in myself after the session. It felt like one of those times when the professional work is going well. Trisha even commented that I looked brighter. 'Yes', I said, 'I did some good work this morning with Marissa'. I wished I had not said that.

Marissa did come back, but she came back at a time when Geoff, the senior partner, was on. She said to Geoff that I had been asking her all sorts of questions about her family and that what she wanted was help for her shoulder. She said that the painkillers were no good – and she had known that at the time I had prescribed them - hence, I suppose, the comment that she had made. Geoff had another look at her shoulder and was not happy about it. He referred her for physiotherapy. And then he told me all about the session with her and I felt very responsible for my mistake. I did not say anything to Geoff about how I had been feeling that morning. It felt relevant but perhaps I should be superhuman. When I look back on this incident, I can see that there are things that I can learn from it. There are all sorts of intersecting issues and feelings tangled up in there. Life is so difficult sometimes.

Account 3

A particular incident in the surgery has bothered me. It concerns Marissa, a thirty year old woman who visits the surgery regularly for minor complaints (abdominal discomfort / headaches). She presented with a wrenched pain that was incurred when she was moving a bed in her mother's house. I diagnosed a muscular strain and prescribed painkillers. I suppose that I assumed that because it was Marissa, it was likely to be similar to her usual visits and that she may need little more than a placebo. She came back to the senior partner, Geoff, a few days later saying that I had not taken her shoulder seriously enough. He examined her and referred her for physiotherapy, as I can now see as appropriate management.

The event stirred up a lot of other things. The context was important. It was a January morning with the surgery full of worried well with 'flu's and the post-Christmas traumas. I came in tired and irritable because of family issues at home. Marissa was not on the list to start with. Trisha (our receptionist) added her because she judged that she needed to be seen that morning. Instead of taking note of Trisha's excellent judgement, I took this as a usual visit. This was a cue that I missed. Trisha knows Marissa and knows her behaviour when she books an appointment. She recognised this as different. This is an aspect of the teamwork that we aspire to in the practice.

Marissa came in and I did look at her shoulder – but I know that I had already made a judgement about it before I examined her. This was Marissa, looking, as usual, pale and hunched – and I saw any symptom as an expression of her state and nothing else. My look at the shoulder was an irrelevant act in the circumstances. I think about the many discussions of how easy it is to get misled by preconceptions and there was I doing just that. I can see that I should have taken the shoulder more seriously. Marissa, herself, asked if the painkillers were all she needed. What would it have taken for Marissa to have said to me that I was on the wrong track that day, and to have brought my attention back to her shoulder? I wonder if she knew that I was feeling 'off' that day. I suppose I did respond to Marissa's persisting discontent by launching into questions about her family situation – in particular her relationship with her mother and why she was going back to live there – things that later Marissa said were irrelevant.

When I stand back now and think of the event like a film, I can see how I was wrong-footed when Marissa questioned the initial prescription and did not seem any happier as a result of getting it. I just grabbed at the story she had given me. When she seemed willing to talk more about her family, I turned it to my favour – seeing myself as 'obviously' being helpful. That day, I think I needed to feel successful. If I am utterly cynical, I would say that I used Marissa's situation to alter my mood. But then again, I suppose, that in turn might have helped the patients whom I saw after her that day.

I need to think, too, about Geoff's role in this and about my relationships with him and the rest of the team. I am the most junior and I tend to look up to them. I suppose I want to impress them. I could talk this one over with Steve, one of the other partners, he might see it all differently.

Account 4

I write about an incident that continues to disturb me. I have gone over it several times and my perspectives seem to change on it – so I talked it over with Steve (one of the other partners) to see how he saw it. The incident concerns Marissa, a thirty year old woman who visits the surgery frequently with various aches and pains (mostly tummyaches and headaches). The symptoms have never been serious, though she never looks well, nor does she seem happy. On this visit she presented with a wrenched shoulder which she said resulted from moving a bed. I did a brief examination and prescribed painkillers. There still seemed to be something bothering her so I engaged her in conversation about her family relationships (this arose from the circumstances of moving the bed). I thought she was responding well and we might be getting somewhere. Time ran out and I invited her to continue the conversation next week. I wanted to get her to a point where I could easily refer her to the practice counsellor. She agreed to come back - but came back to see Geoff, the senior partner, still complaining about the shoulder. He gave her a more detailed examination and referred her for physiotherapy. He told me that she said that I thought that her family was the problem when it really was her shoulder.

I can see that the shoulder was a problem and I missed it and misconstrued the situation, engaging in the talk about her family. This was a multiple mistake. I did not pay attention to Trisha's judgement in adding Marissa to the list, I missed the shoulder problem itself when I examined it, but I also missed the cues that Marissa gave me when she was not happy with the prescription. But I was tired and out of sorts – not as sharp as I need to be when I am with patients. I am human, but I am a professional human and professionalism dictates that I should function well. I suppose that the problem was not so much that I missed one – or even two cues – then I could have put things right. I missed all three at the same time.

I then headed off on the wrong track – getting into the discussion that I assumed was relevant about her family. I think of a consultation with our local GP when I was 14. I did not agree with his diagnosis about my foot - he just said I should come back in four weeks if it was not better. I did not say anything then, though I knew in myself that it needed treatment. I ended up in plaster for six weeks. There is a power thing there. Looking at it from Marissa's point of view, she may have known that I was on the wrong track, but she probably would not have been able to do anything about it because I am a doctor. Someone like Marissa would not question a doctor's judgement at the time. How often were principles like this drummed into us at medical school – and yet it seems so easy to ignore them.

There is something more there too, though – this is what Steve suggested. That day, maybe I needed to feel helpful even more than usual – I needed more satisfaction from the situation so I was looking for cues from Marissa that suggested that she was pleased with me. I had to make do with the cue that suggested that she was no longer unhappy and I suppose I made up the rest – thinking that the conversation about her family was helpful. Maybe I can be more self critical when I am in a better mood and less tired. Maybe I need less and can give more then.

It is possible, of course, that the conversation was not wrong in general, but wrong for that time. It may be helpful to her in the longer term – I just need to wait and handle the situation more mindfully when she comes back.

I can see that there are lots more issues in this – for example, I need to consider why I was so disturbed by the incident. I know I made a mistake, but I think if it had been Steve whom Marissa had consulted, I would not have been so bothered. It was worse because it was Geoff. Steve would have mentioned it and laughed. Once we have discounted serious symptoms it is not unusual to rely on patients returning quite quickly if they feel that a symptom is not disappearing in response to initial treatment. Geoff preached a bit and I responded by getting into my 'I am only junior' mode.

So what have I learnt?

- I am apt to see things differently when I am tired.
- I should pay attention to Trisha's judgements. She is the point of first contact and is pretty experienced in perceiving a patient's needs.
- I should be more aware about the power issues and how they silence patients. Maybe there are ways in which I can deal with this better. I will think on this.
- It was really useful talking the matter through with Steve. Hearing what I said to him enabled me to get it better into perspective and to see the issues in different ways.
-Etc etc etc (more issues listed).

Resouce 4

The worrying tutorial

Ian is 28. He is in the middle of the final year of a degree in biological sciences. He has worked in an agricultural laboratory prior to his degree programme and has embarked on the programme in order to take a post in agricultural research. Like many mature students, he has responsibilities at home that prove to be distractions to his degree work. He has just seen Pam, his tutor, for feedback on a recently marked essay.

Account 1

I am gutted. I saw Pam this morning. She wanted to talk about my ecology essay. She was blunt. She said that I have not had any 'good' marks for work that I have done for the last year and a half – but none have been as near to failure as this one. She called this a 'hairs breadth pass' and she laid it on the line that I need to put in more effort all round or I will not be getting the degree that I need to work on research at Cummings. If I don't get that job, I could well end up with the same job that I did before and all this money and effort will have been pointless.

It seems that my essay was too descriptive and Pam tried to tell me what she meant by that. The title asked me to discuss the concepts of tolerance and limiting factors in relation to two named wild populations. I used Jencks and Parner's study of *abini culus alba* and Cristom's study of *chyrups dipimus*. We covered the latter in a lecture and were given the reference for the other so I thought they were all right. Pam said that I should have found my own examples. She says that that I write too factually. I need to make it clear that I realise that theories are not the same as facts. I need to think about how I use references. At this level I should question the data that I am working with – I should analyse and criticise it – not just accept it. She says that I'm good at assembling facts but that is not good enough now. Pam said that I should ask Tim if I can see some of his recent essays in order to get the idea and maybe I should go and see the study counsellor. I used to be good at essays. It seems that suddenly I am not.

I did really well in the first year of the degree. I felt that I knew most of the material that we covered - I had learnt it in my day to day work, though sometimes I had to reinterpret it for the this academic context. Essays used just to flow out and I got good marks. I did do some reading and I would add a few references. I am not clear where those abilities have gone to. Suddenly I am not good any more. I suppose that some of it is to do with the baby. Pam and I did talk about how hard it is for me to study since Angie had the baby last year. Angie was ill over the pregnancy and after the birth. I was up in the nights and so tired and now I cannot concentrate at home because the baby is on her feet and all over everything. When I was trying to write the ecology essay she was teething and was not sleeping in the evenings. It is really hard being a student at this time in my life. The younger ones just don't know how easy they have got it.

I feel so gutted that I really don't know how I can go home at present. Angie still thinks that I am top of the class. I could not tell her. She has such faith in me – and I must get the new job in order to justify the hassle and expense of going back into education.

Account 2

Pam, my tutor, has talked with me about the essay I did for ecology and my progress in general. I have to face up to the fact that the mark was poor. If I do not do better, I will not get the research job at Cummings – and will be going back to the same job that I did before the degree and getting the new job was the whole point of doing the degree. I have felt so bad about this session with Pam and what it implies for me that I have not wanted to go home this evening. I know it is because I do not want to tell Angie that I am not as good at study as she thinks I am. She has such faith in me and I know that I am resistant to shaking that faith. However, I can see that I need to make some changes at home and until I talk to Angie, those changes will not make sense to her. What do I do or say?

Pam knows the difficulties that I had at home in the last year – in particular the distractions that occurred with the pregnancy, birth and with Angie's health. I suppose that my work began to deteriorate from around that time. I knew it was happening. Pam reminded me of several occasions when she told me that I should be doing some reading around the lectures but I somehow thought that I would get through and did not bother too much. I thought that a few poorer marks would not be a problem because I had done so well before and that really I did know how to write good essays.

Maybe I need to think about what Pam said about my essay. She says it is too descriptive and not analytical and discursive. She says that I am good at 'assembling facts' but that is not good enough for now and I should use my own examples – not those given in lectures. I need to think about what she means by that. I suppose that it means that I can write well but that is not well enough now and I need to be more original. What does she mean by analyse and discuss? She also says I need to distinguish between theory and fact. I suppose that there is a difference that I need to consider and that may have something to do with the ways I use referencing that she also mentioned. It seems that I need to change the way in which I see the task of writing essays. I'll ask Tim how he writes such good essays. Pam says that Tim's essays are a good example. She also mentioned the study skills person, some books and coming back to her when I have thought about it.

So here I am, in the middle of my last year and in danger of not doing well enough to achieve what I must achieve for the future welfare of my family. What once seemed simple does not seem simple any more and it is all contorted by how well I did in the first year, and the frustrations (and joys, of course) of having a new baby. There is something about the image that Angie has of me as the great success story. Have I got to change that? All these things are floating around in there. I hope that they sort themselves out.

Account 3

I want to think about the tutorial I had with Pam. It was about my ecology essay and the very low marks for it. It was a seriously low mark. Pam also talked more generally about my lack of achievement. I noted down what she said about it, but it hurts to acknowledge it. Basically Pam says that the essay and my current prospects are both poor and she points out the increasing likelihood that I will not get a sufficiently good degree to get the research job at Cummings. It is the purpose of getting that job that brought me to university with all the sacrifices that has meant. When I look at the notes I wrote, my anxiety levels shoot up and I know I have to act. On previous occasions (not as heavy as this) I have just thought

about it a bit and then I suppose I have gone back to the old assumptions that I would be all right because I am really a good student.

Where did those assumptions come from? I was well ahead in the first year and I had no problem in putting down material that was acceptable in essays. That might link up with what Pam said today about me being good at 'assembling facts'. Maybe that is what was wanted in the first year of the course and maybe she is really saying that doing that is not acceptable now. I am not totally clear from what Pam said what is wanted now – but it seems that most of my classmates do know. I will list the things that Pam said about my essay and work on them until I really understand what I need to do to write a good essay. Pam talked about things I could do. I must do them *

Now I start to think, things begin to link up. Pam and I talked about how disruptive last year was for my studies – with Angie being pregnant and ill, and with Meg's birth. Then, Pam was very sympathetic and even today I got into the 'poor me, how hard it is to be an adult student' stuff again. But then I am thinking that that attitude will not get me the degree and the job I want and I need to see it now as a convenient excuse. I did well in the first year because I knew the stuff, and then rested on my success when everything went haywire. I assumed that I could just re-engage – but I did not realise that the game had changed. What is asked for now is something different – not just the assembly of facts any more.

That brings me to why I am still in the library this evening and it is late and I have not gone home. I don't want to go home and tell Angie that I am not doing as well as she thinks. She assumes that I am still doing brilliantly – though last year she did question how I could be doing so well on so little work. I need a big shift in thinking – fast – and Angie is where I start. I need to tell her honestly about the tutorial, the feedback and my disappointment in myself. I am not the success that both of us assumed. I need her support so that I can get through this next six months and into the job and Angie's turn will come.

I list what I need to do apart from talking with Angie: I need to do to find out how to write a good essay at this stage in my degree. I need to find out what it means to 'discuss' and analyse and to sort out what a 'theory' is in ecology. I realise that I have never quite understood why we have theories about some things and we simply 'know' about other things. It seems that there is something different in ecology from the stuff that seemed 'factual' in the basic biology stuff. I need to think about these things and form them into clear questions so that I can find out what I need to know and how to put it on paper in an acceptable way. I think that the referencing will fall into place if I get these things sorted. Asking Tim may help only if I am clear about what I need to know. I will go back to Pam when I done the thinking as well. Pam mentioned a couple of books and a website and the study skills person (make appointment tomorrow). There was also that research student I talked to in the bar the other night. I think I could talk more with him – but I need to be focussed about the information that I need.

The exercise: The Surprise at Home

Emma is a student at the beginning of the third year of a degree in Geography. She is at a university a long way from home and has never come home unexpectedly before.

Account 1

I went home unexpectedly last weekend. I would never have thought of flying but it was incredibly cheap. It was Mum's birthday too and I thought it would be a nice surprise. I made a cake and took it. When I got home the surprise was on me – no I should say it a serious shock and I am still reeling from it. I remember walking up to the door, birthday cake, present and card in hand, ready to surprise them. I knocked instead of just letting myself in. I heard Jack barking and Tom, my eleven year-old brother called out to Jack from his bedroom. Then there was a scuffling and I saw the living room curtain move. It was my Mum's face – but she looked different. I don't even think she took in that it was me. A few minutes later she came to the door – and she was different. I have never seen her wearing make-up like that and she had on a short dress with a low neckline. While she seemed genuinely pleased to see me in one sense, she was tense and jumpy but also giggly and several times said she wished I had let her know that I was coming. At that time I could not see why. I wondered why Dad did not come to the door though there was some sound in the background. Thank goodness Jack welcomed me as usual with his very waggy tail – and soon my brother was down in his pyjamas and hugging me. It was nice, but that was not his usual behaviour. Mum even said 'Come in', as if she was inviting a guest into the house. Then she said 'Come and meet my friend Jerry – he is an old friend who has just popped in'. I did not think he had 'just popped in' and I asked about Dad, 'Where is he?', and suddenly my mother seemed even more unsteady and I realised she had been drinking. My mother does not usually drink much. I had never seen her like this before. She seemed not to want to talk about Dad, saying in a clipped way that he was off on business. I know he is away a lot with his new job – but he would not be away on her birthday. Then the man called Jerry came out. I did not like him from the start. I felt as if something massive had happened to my family and that he was at the centre of it – and no-one had told me. We went into the living room. There were signs of a birthday – a mess of paper and chocolates and flowers - and a champagne bottle. It was not a family birthday-sort-of celebration – and Mum does not usually invite me to sit down....

I finally got to talk to my brother. His world was the rugby world cup at the moment. He said he'd seen Jerry a few times, especially when Dad was away and Jerry had been there a couple of mornings recently too. I think my brother knew things were different but he seemed to have swallowed the story of Jerry being an old friend who needed accommodation at present. I think he did know more and had shut it out.

Jerry was not there the next morning and Dad was apparently due back, but when he arrived there was a huge tension between Mum and Dad. It was really hard to communicate with either of them. There were one-word answers to any question and no-one seemed remotely interested in my life at uni. But nothing was said about the situation and I did not know if Dad knew about Jerry. It was like my arrival was more than anyone wanted to cope with.

I am back now at uni – still reeling on lots of levels – and very unsure about how to deal with it all.

Account 2

I went home unexpected last weekend, thinking I would surprise my mother because it was her birthday. It was me who was surprised. I sensed that there is something seriously wrong with the relationship between Mum and Dad and I think that a man called Jerry is involved. I don't know how much Dad knows and I don't know what to do – but I want to do something.

I got home and knocked at the door with the birthday cake in my hand and eventually Mum came out. She was surprised to see me, but not surprised with pleasure but with embarrassment. She was in a sexy dress with more make up than usual and had been drinking. Soon a man came out. She introduced him as 'an

old friend' who had just come round for a visit. When I went into the sitting room, there was a bit of a mess - paper and chocolates and champagne - not seem like a family celebration. My mother behaved differently. She was giggly but jumpy, - not at all as I had expected. I felt hurt when she repeated several times that she wished I had let her know that I was coming. The whole point was to give her a birthday surprise. I did not sense that she was thinking about me at all.

I wondered where my father was on her birthday? I asked about him right in front of Jerry, but it felt as if I was saying the wrong thing. There was a brief silence and then I was told he was 'on business' I was surprised again. I was beginning to guess what was going on, but was I right? No-one seemed to think I had a right to know.

My young brother was there. He was uneasy and really pleased to see me. It was a while before I could get to talk to him alone. On the surface he was 'matter-of-fact' - Jerry had been there a few times - sometimes in the morning too - and those times, Dad was away. I wanted to push my brother further, but I realised that he had to live with the situation and he was more or less coping at present. Was it fair to tell him my suspicions?

Jerry was not there the next morning. I did not do what now seems now to have been appropriate - to tackle Mum about the situation. She just seemed so distant. Should I have challenged her? What rights do I have in this situation? Why didn't she talk to me? Dad was expected and I waited to see how things were. When he arrived, the tension between them was obvious. They bickered on and on and again I felt hurt that they seemed unable to recognise the effort I had put into coming home. I remember Sal (a friend at Uni) having a similar experience with her parents. She said that one of the worst things was the feeling that they lost interest in her and what she was doing in her life at the time. She felt she was set adrift and that was in addition to her worries about the stability of her family and the consequences of potential break-up.

So here I am, back at uni and looking back on a traumatic weekend and thinking it all over again. There are all sorts of things floating around - emotions, hurt, worries about the future for me and my brother. Some of my initial reactions look different now. Have I have got it all wrong? Is my Mum having a little fling? Does that matter? Maybe my Dad is having an affair and that her fling is a reaction to his behaviour. Could I be making a huge mistake? I want to do something and yet I don't know what. What are my responsibilities here and to whom? Perhaps I should leave it for a few days and see how I feel then - though this worry is getting in the way of my work at uni. I could try getting in touch with my brother to give him support but I might get more information and then I can review what I should do.

Account 3

An incident happened, which has left me feeling very unsettled, wanting to take action, but unsure what to do and it is getting in the way of my work at Uni. I went home as a surprise for my mother's birthday. I do not normally go home like that, home being three hundred miles away. I was looking forward to the family being surprised and pleased to see me. When I arrived, my mother had a 'visitor', Jerry. My Dad was away. According to my brother, Jerry has visited and apparently stayed the night several times when my Dad has been away. My mother seemed very embarrassed. She acted oddly, and looked different in dress and the amount of make-up. She had also been drinking. Jerry was gone the next morning and my Dad was due. Mum was more herself until Dad came and then the tension grew and they bickered more than I have heard before. I find it difficult to interpret the situation in any way other than as an affair, but I don't know for sure. My brother lives at home. He is eleven. He did not say anything about my parents' relationship but I could see he was behaving a bit unusually. I felt he was coping and I don't want to unsettle him by asking difficult questions. I wonder if anyone else knows what is happening. Auntie Sue - my mother's sister - might know something and I have always got on well with her.

I try to separate out some of the parts of this. There is a factual side - what seems to be happening. I need to remember that my observations may not be well-founded. While it seems likely that my mother is

involved in another relationship, the same may be true of my father. He was not there on her birthday. There will be two sides to the story whatever is happening – not just the side that I have seen. The ways in which it affects my brother and me are different too. We cannot help but be involved because they are our parents and we are part of the relationship between them. (I write that down and then wonder how they would see that. Maybe they would say that some of their relationship is between them only. Thinking that makes me feel even more unsettled).

There is also the emotional side. I know that one set of feelings that are mine alone are about the welcome that I did not get on making the effort to go home. There is disappointment and a bit of anger that my parents could be so wrapped up in themselves. I suppose that those feelings will go in time and I know that the other things are bigger. I feel desperate if I think that my parents might separate or divorce. I know it is common. I don't suppose anyone ever thinks it will happen to them. If I felt neglected, my brother could feel the same – eventually a lot worse and he will need my support very much.

Then there is the matter of what I should do. I don't want to ask Mum directly if she is having an affair with that Jerry, - I feel a resistance to that in case I am wrong. Talking to Sal and Jules about their experiences of parents breaking up has helped. Jules pointed out that even if things are not as they seem to be, it sounds as if something *is* going on. She is right - my parents were definitely not behaving normally. I am affected by it and my uni work is suffering and therefore there is an issue. Jules thinks I should talk to my Mum and get it into the open. I suppose that I am looking for some facts to go on before I tackle her. I could just tell her I am very upset by what was happening when I visited – without being explicit. Then I will see what she comes out with and where it goes from there. That will help me to understand how to deal with it all. There may be an explanation that is less bad than it seems. That seems to be a useful strategy to start with. If when I talk with Mum, I have reason to continue being disrupted, I would ring Auntie Sue. Whether or not she knows, she will still help me and I need to get someone local to keep an eye on my brother and how he is managing.