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Art and Trauma
Danger and Dynamics in the Creative Writing Workshop

Gaylene Perry
Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia

Creativity itself is always risky and can be said to put the practitioner in a vulnerable position. And, in many senses, students can be said to be vulnerable. When a student takes part in a writing workshop, the risks and vulnerabilities increase in significance again as raw creative work is exposed and is publicly worked upon by a group. And if the workshop takes place online, then a whole new set of risks and vulnerabilities may arise.

Now, add the common practice of students choosing to write about particularly personal and/or sensitive subject matter, such as, for example, a student who chooses to write about traumatic personal experiences, either implicitly within, say, a fiction writing workshop, or explicitly, say, in a life writing workshop. Such workshops can become dynamic and exciting spaces for students and teachers. They may also be fraught with ethical, pedagogical and health-related dangers.

How might a fine balance be achieved between the teacher’s professional responsibilities to the individual, the class, and the institution, thereby creating an effective collaborative space for learning and, hopefully, for facilitating groundbreaking creative work?
I would like to cite an actual teaching and learning situation. It involves a series of episodes described in *Lucky*, the memoir by Alice Sebold (2002a), which preceded her bestselling novel, *The Lovely Bones* (2002b). Sebold was raped on campus at Syracuse University at the end of her first semester of college. To the surprise of many, she resumed her studies in the following semester. *Lucky* is the story of the rape and the times that followed.

To put the sections in context—Alice Sebold wrote a poem about her rape, which she submitted to her poetry writing tutor, Tess Gallagher. Gallagher suggested an alternative approach, giving Alice a first line: ‘If they caught you...’ (Sebold 2002a, 106). Alice wrote a second poem, which by her admission ‘wobbles as a poem’ (107), but is nevertheless important to her. Gallagher is adamant that they workshop this new poem in class. Here is what happens.

I passed the poem out and then, as was standard practice, I read it aloud to my fellow students. I was, as I read it, hot. My skin blushed and I could feel the blood rush to my face, prickle along the tops of my ears and the ends of my fingers. I could feel the class around me. They were riveted. They were staring at me.
When I was done, Gallagher had me read it again. Before she did this, she told the class that she expected everyone to comment. I read it again, and this time it felt like torture, an instant replay of something that had been hard enough the first time. I still question why Gallagher was so insistent that I workshop 'Conviction' and that each and every student—this was not standard—respond to it afterward. It was an important poem by her standards, in that it dealt with important material. Perhaps, by her actions, she meant to emphasize that not only to the class, but to me as well.

But the eyes of most of my peers had a hard time meeting mine.

'Who wants to start?' Gallagher asked. She was direct. By her example she was telling the class: This is what we do here.

Most of the students were shy. They buried their response in words like brave, or important, or bold. One or two were angry that they had to respond, felt the poem, combined with Gallagher's admonition that they react, was an act of aggression on her part and mine.

Al Tripodi [fellow student] said, 'You don't really feel that way, do you?'

He was looking right at me. I thought of my father. Suddenly, there was no one else in the room.

'Like what?'

'You don't want to shoot him in the knees and that other stuff with the knives. You can't feel that way.'

'Yes, I do,' I said. 'I want to kill him.'

The room was still. Only Maria Flores, a quiet Latino girl, had yet to speak (108-9).

Maria does not end up speaking. She leaves, instead. A few pages later, we hear more about Maria: 'Maria Flores, from Tess's workshop, fell from a window' (154). Alice goes to visit her in hospital.

A nurse led me into the room. Standing beside Maria's bed
were her father and her brothers. I waved to Maria and then shook the men's hands. I said my name and that I was in her poetry class. None of them was very responsive [...] (155).

The men left the room, and Maria spoke to Alice. This is what follows:

'It was your poem,' she said now. 'It brought it all back.'

I sat there as she whispered to me her own facts. The man and boys who had just left the room had raped her for a period of years when she was growing up (155).

Maria’s ‘fall’ from the window had in fact been a suicide attempt.

Were Tess Gallagher’s actions ethical? Reasonable? Inspired? What about Sebold’s actions in allowing the poem to be workshoped? If Maria’s suicide attempt had been successful: what then? Would Gallagher, Sebold, and/or Syracuse University have borne any responsibility? Or is it impossible to cocoon such a wounded individual as Maria? Does the contention remain that an overly policed writing workshop is not a suitable environment for learning or teaching?

I suspect the answer to this last question is a qualified yes. A writing workshop cannot be a cocoon. Vicki Lindner writes:

Curing the sick and wounded, however, is not the traditional province of university-level creative writing instruction. [...] Writers, who teach for a living, often avow that they can’t and don’t want to be therapists. (2004, 7)

Lindner seems to be suggesting that the creative writing classroom is not the place for therapy but rather for art, although complex overlapping of those activities can and may take place, regardless of the structure of the workshop and the attitudes of the teachers and students. Lindner describes two case studies of her own, the second study involves a horrific experience written by a student about the day her mother committed suicide after having plotted to have her sixteen-year-old daughter be the one to find her body. Lindner coped with this teaching and learning moment by using the attitude quoted earlier in this writing—focusing on the art of the story. The student, code-named Bethany Two, suffered a severe emotional crisis while trying to redraft her story for assessment.

I knew I bore responsibility for what could have been a serious disaster. What I thought I was doing was asking
Bethany Two to construct an effective memoir. Deceived by this feisty young woman’s readiness to reveal her mother’s suicide, her psychological acuity, and resilience, I believed she would be able to objectify the pain she still felt as part of an artistic process, as I would myself. I didn’t realise—actually—that Bethany Two created a detailed trauma narrative without laying the necessary groundwork: years of therapy with a trained therapist. Although my Drill Sergeant teaching tactics had created a safe atmosphere, allowing this student to achieve self-control and mastery, they had not provided her with an easy way out. (12)

No classroom of any kind can be a cocoon. Institutions and teachers have a duty to provide safe learning and teaching spaces, and we should always be aware of that, but we also need space that is tactile and robust enough to allow the testing of boundaries.

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Recently, I designed and taught a graduate unit in life writing that combined theory and practice. I alternated weeks of lectures/seminars on historical, philosophical, and theoretical concepts of life writing with
workshops of set writing exercises and development of students' projects. The unit was offered both on campus and online. I also taught a fiction writing unit at the same level, with some students enrolled in both units.

I approached the design of the life writing course with caution. I was reasonably confident about running the fiction writing workshops; classes could be structured around sturdy theory relating to technique and ideas. Students (and teachers, for that matter) have easy access to an overt disguise when treating personally sensitive material in fiction—after all, it's only fiction, right? But, of course, fiction can be close-to-the-bone, and tutors must be sensitive to the vulnerability of any individual making his or her own creations public.

There seems to be an assumption that creative writing courses are more likely than other courses to be faced with dilemmas of personal exposure and vulnerability. But it can be confidently stated that those situations are not confined to creative writing. As Michelle Payne writes in her book Bodily Discourses: When Students Write About Abuse and Eating Disorders (2000):

> A student’s first year writing course is only one of many in the university experience, and it is humbling to discover that students don’t just choose nurturing writing courses as places to disclose. (116)

Perhaps one key difference is that most subjects outside the creative arts disciplines do not make common use of workshop classes. A student may expose and disclose in a women’s studies or sociology class, but his or her work is usually viewed only by the student and his or her marker. Even if the piece is a class presentation, I imagine that the resulting discussion would focus mostly on subject matter and theoretical concerns, and less explicitly so on expression, technique, and theories of writing. Yet issues of expression, technique, and theory can pose some of the steepest ethical and safety issues in creative writing workshops.
When I taught the life writing unit for the first time, I noticed a slightly troubling dynamic developing, partly fuelled, perhaps, by me. When I designed the course, I had been wary of making it too much like my fiction units. In fiction, we spend half the classes in a semester workshopping full-length drafts. Workshopping is compulsory. But in life writing, I was reluctant to impose compulsory workshopping. It felt unreasonable and possibly dangerous. Nor was I sure that workshopping full-length drafts was appropriate, either, when I could not anticipate what subject matter would materialise, and how the class—and I—would feel about it.

That is definitely true also of fiction workshops, but I kept reminding myself of the overt mask that materialises as a result of labelling a piece of writing fiction. Of course, any kind of writing comes with a mask or series of masks attached. Nevertheless, I felt that confessing to a story’s apparent truth by calling it life writing could leave a student particularly vulnerable—intensive preambles about theories of subjectivity, identity, self, creativity, and memory notwithstanding.

I decided to use a different kind of workshop to what I had been using in my fiction writing courses—more like a sewing-, or woodwork-, or even a dance-workshop. During the workshop weeks, in life
writing, we looked at short published works and excerpts of life writing and responded to them in conversation and writing, and the students worked on writing activities and exercises set by me. I invited the students to read aloud parts of what they wrote, but there was no pressure to share. I took identical approaches to the on-campus and online cohorts, trying my best to set up an inviting online discussion space—mocking up a self-contained virtual room especially dedicated to each workshopping week.

In the on-campus workshops, a couple of students always chose to read their work aloud, but they rarely seemed to broach controversial or particularly personal subjects, instead using humour and life stories about people other than themselves. A couple of others almost never shared their work with the class. And the students in between were the least predictable. Sometimes they read, sometimes they didn’t, and when they did read, their work was often raw and rough-edged—challenging and disconcerting. It may be telling that these students, the ones in the middle, did not end up with high grades for the unit. As with their workshop contributions and their remarks in discussion, colourful, exciting ideas turned up in their final pieces of writing. But their uneven writing techniques pulled down their overall results.

Online, the workshops were even less successful. Participation was slow, even among those students who were active in the online fiction-writing workshops. I questioned the wisdom of having an online environment for a subject as potentially volatile as life writing. But I am not so sure about that now.

I have concluded that I was wrong to think that I should structure life writing differently than fiction writing. My hesitation about the dangers of overt disclosure caused me to shy away from a workshopping system that was too open. Perhaps my own fear of the dangers of disclosure within the classroom emanated to my students and ended up being the factor that caused some breakdown in dynamics.
Vicki Lindner, a creative writing teacher at the University of Wyoming, recently wrote about similar dilemmas in her own workshops, stating, after several troubling classroom incidents:

My students’ stories are often disquieting; they weigh on my mind, poking their crude horror into my own writing time. Invoking them makes my job more time-consuming and emotionally demanding. What’s more, there are no guidelines to help a writing teacher engage in—and yet steer clear—of a process resembling psychoanalysis. Wouldn’t it be wiser to refer troubled students to a counsellor, as Ann Landers did her letter writers? Sometimes I do. But I also encourage them to write the story I have trained myself to recognise they came to my class to tell, to confide its details, and investigate its levels of meaning with me as a guide. I say what I suspect the students already know: Writing is better than talking or repressing. To transform a painful, life-threatening experience into art, an abiding, transcendent, public testimony, makes its significance available to others while obliterating its power over you. (2004, 8)

Therefore, rather than discourage writing about traumatic events and
experiences—which is simply not possible (where, then, would our discouragement for certain types of stories begin and end?)—and rather than focusing only on matters of craft, Lindner suggests that we can use the power of writing to make effective art. The focus moves from craft to art. This seems to be an extremely useful distinction to keep in mind.

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Theorist and lecturer Michelle Payne writes about the potential for learning when subject matter rather than writing techniques is seen as the main focus of a piece of work. She discusses students who write about physical and sexual abuse and eating disorders, suggesting that if those subjects are banned or discouraged from writing classes because of perceived inappropriateness or hazard, then the student, teacher, class and institution miss out on exciting opportunities for learning.

Payne steers discussion of writing about trauma away from what she terms psychotherapeutics and toward the areas of postmodernism, feminism, and sociology. One of the students participating in a study carried out by Payne wrote:

This paper was difficult to write because it’s so personal. I had some problems being detailed because a lot of what happened has been blacked out of my memory. I’m glad to get it off my chest. It’s been bothering me this past year. As I wrote about it I discovered that the incident has affected me more than I thought. Please focus on the subject itself as opposed to the grammar. (Payne 2000, 25)

A teacher participating in the study wrote:

I think our college classes here are a safe environment for those papers, and it’s especially safe because we are less concerned with mechanical correctness, we are less worried about modes of discourse, we are more concerned about a personal sense of voice and meaning, and so on. (68)

In Payne’s view, shunning student-writing about trauma is an act of violence and repression: it represents a silencing and alienating of the student-writer. I wonder if she is indeed establishing a very special and sophisticated kind of writing workshop—but one I would not necessarily want to participate in as a teacher or student.
Is Payne advocating the creation of workshops for ultimately unfinished writing? This interests me, because as a writer as well as a lecturer, I know that writing is never finished as such. I have not read my book *Midnight Water* (2004) in its published form—if I am like most other writers I know, I will immediately spy sentences I would now rewrite, phrases I find cumbersome, and so on. I know, too, that I rarely mark a final student draft that is truly finished. Even in those cases when I tell a student that a piece of writing is ready for submission to a journal or the like, it is highly possible that the student will change something of their own accord before posting off the story. Then, editors may suggest changes. And the student-writer is just as likely as the rest of us to look at the published version and wish she or he could delete *that* word or tweak *that* sentence one more time.

So—in nurturing the student’s efforts; taking subject matter seriously no matter what the style or technique; contextualising the subject matter via theoretical discourse and giving it space in the institution—do Payne and her like-minded colleagues have a more realistic approach to the writing workshop than many other teachers of creative writing? A student may leave one of Payne’s writing classes with a draft that is nowhere near publishable—a mess of errors, clichés, and other weaknesses. Yet, with increased self-esteem and a broader
theoretical perspective, maybe the student will go on to write a much more accomplished piece of writing. *Maybe*.

But I cannot find reference to actual grading in Payne’s book. She discusses assessment and includes reproduced student drafts complete with markers’ annotations. She describes meetings where students are asked if they want a particular work to be assessed, and/or workshopped. I keep wanting to know the grades awarded to the students’ work. How does one mark writing that is far from being considered a final draft?

And then, I wonder if my own models are unrealistic and ultimately misleading for students. I workshop, and then I mark a revised, polished draft at the end of the process. I am reluctant to give high grades, awarding them only to stories that are close to what I consider to be a publishable standard. When my students graduate, do they have false expectations of the publishability of their writing? Are some students crushed—not because I did not let them write about personal and perhaps traumatic subject matter; I have no problem with that—but because while I praised their ideas and innovations, I also criticised their style and expression: their capabilities as *writers*? I am not sure if this constitutes a crisis, but it has caused me to recall the words of trauma theorist Shoshana Felman:

> I would venture to propose [...] that teaching in itself, teaching as such, takes place precisely only through a crisis: if teaching does not hit upon some sort of crisis, if it does not encounter either the vulnerability or the explosiveness of an (explicit or implicit) critical and unpredictable dimension, it has perhaps not truly taught...’ *(1995, 55)*

Real learning, the kind of learning that can change students’ and teachers’ lives—the moments of learning that we never forget—is usually the most risky learning. We know how those moments feel—they thrill; they ring our spines; they prick and goose-pimple our skins. That does not come without pushing boundaries and limits—it does not arise without a teacher and a teaching environment providing the impetus for shifting the deeper parts of people’s psyches.

**Resources**


About the Author

Gaylene Perry lectures in Creative and Professional Writing in the School of Communication and Creative Arts at Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia. Her book, *Midnight Water: A Memoir*, was published by Picador in 2004 and was shortlisted for the Australian National Biography Award.

About the Artist

Juan Carlos Castro is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Curriculum Studies at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. His research interests include: the intersection of artistic processes of knowing and art pedagogy, the use of photography and film/video as a means of re/presenting research knowledge, complexity and ecology theories, and social networking, user generated content, and meaning making in online learning environments.

Juan’s own photography focuses on humankind’s impact on the environment and was involved in promoting Maryland’s anti-sprawl legislation in the 1990's. In addition to working as an artist, researcher, and educator, he is also an active freelance and editorial photographer, most recently as *Urban Climber Magazine’s* photography editor (2004-05).