diverse our interests may be, this desire to actualize the visions we hold is
the common thread that binds us, as students and citizens, artists and
individuals. To this end, the pursuit of voracious creativity and a limber
imagination is fundamental to a liberal education; what’s more, to value
the networks and processes of the mind is to value potential improvement
for ourselves and others, to find delight in the work at hand, and to
make our surroundings and connections more vital.

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Chapter 8
Potentially Dangerous: Vulnerabilities and Risks in the Writing Workshop

GAYLENE PERRY

One of the real challenges for teachers and the institutions in which
creative writing is taught is to remain open to the outrageous, the
ethically questionable, the new, ugly, unauthorised, bodily theorised,
and awkward experiments of young writers.

Brophy 2003 'Taming the contemporary': 295-2.

What happens in a writing workshop can indeed quite often be outrageous,
ethically questionable, new, ugly, unauthorised, bodily theorised, awkward. It can
also be embarrassing, messy, inarticulate, inelegant, astonishing, and
explosive. Definitions of creativity, such as this one from Hugh Lyttten
(1972, p. 10): 'By definition [creativity] is producing a novel, recombination
which is not predictable from general laws', indicate that creativity is
always pushing and crossing boundaries, and is unpredictable. It is not
unreasonable to assume that creativity can be potentially dangerous in its
expansiveness and unpredictability.

In this chapter, I explore the question of what takes place in a writing
workshop and discuss that in terms of vulnerability and the question of
risk management. By risk management I mean that which relates to
student health, safety and wellbeing – which then extends to financial risk
management when potential for litigation is considered. Previously
(2007), I had written about the scenario of student writing that addresses
explicitly traumatic subject matter, but here I am building upon that work
and extrapolating to the riskiness of the creative process itself and the
almost implicit vulnerability of those who write creatively.

The inherent riskiness of creativity does not necessarily sit well with
the corporate style way many international universities operate in these
highly litigious, micro-managed times. The concept of risk management

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Revealing Creativity

Writing classes can be surprisingly quiet, sedentary places if allowed to be. Writers and writing students can be introverted and withdrawn. But as a teacher of creative writing, I am inspired by teaching practices in other creative arts such as dance, music and the visual arts because they each offer me different perspectives on creative practice, and also because students in these disciplines come to class expecting to carry out practical and often collaborative work on the spot. Therefore, when students enter my classroom, I encourage them to think of their classes as being like painting workshops or dance studio sessions. In this space we not only discuss our art form, our discipline, we also actively carry out the practice of the art form.

I teach a class in fiction-writing to postgraduate students. Over the first five weeks of class we focus on the theory and practice of fiction writing, before beginning formally structured peer-review workshops. One of our points of discussion relates to the close relationships between theory and practice. All classes involve some writing practice, and each student is asked to keep a journal that traces their application of theory to practice and vice versa. We learn through theory; we learn through practice; and both aspects are in constant flux with one another. Those first weeks of talking about writing and taking part in writing practice within the classroom help to form dynamics and relationships that allow the peer-review to have a greater likelihood of being valuable. For one thing, the five week introduction allows a basis of knowledge to build up. Given that foundation, students will enter the peer-review workshops with some confidence in their ability to comment on their peers’ work. Also, the practice of having written together in class, in the same space, and having shared responses to the writing exercises with me and with student peers, helps us to get to know one another’s writing and the ways that we work.

We have shared some experiences. So, when we do come to the peer-review workshop, the act of writing is not removed from the more formal drafts produced even though they are usually prepared out of sight of the class. And the act of writing is a highly physical one, complete with its own dynamics and energy. The energy must not be wasted—because it precipitates rich moments of teaching and learning.

Generally, then, I use two different kinds of workshops in my teaching. I call the first kind the hands-on writing workshop, and the second the peer-review workshop.

In the hands-on writing workshop, the students write in response to triggers in the form of writing exercises. We talk and write, write and talk. I ask students to share their responses with the class but always give the choice of reading the work itself or of telling the class about the experience of doing the work without necessarily revealing the content. We do not extensively critique the work done in hands-on writing workshops. What is produced is not draft material as such—these are exercises. Parts of them may be developed into more formal drafts of writing later, but these are not these.

Then there is the peer-review workshop. Here, each student is allocated a week in which to workshop a full-length, rough draft of a work of fiction. The student supplies copies of the draft to the rest of the class and to me the week prior to the scheduled workshop, and we read and make written comments on the draft, and then in the workshop itself the class discusses the draft and (ideally) gives constructive criticism of the draft in its current form and makes suggestions for its subsequent development.

Both kinds of workshop are unpredictable to some extent. And both involve the use of a trigger for developing writing. In the first instance it is a writing exercise; in the second, a student draft of writing. Both kinds can be passionate in mood, noisy, sometimes hostile or tense, rambunctious, possibly uncomfortable and even disorienting or disturbing, even if only momentarily. However, from now on I will leave aside the peer-review workshop and focus on the hands-on writing workshop to demonstrate a particular point about the creative process and the vulnerability of those who participate in it. To begin, I want to share a recent experience of (my own) vulnerability that came about in the beginnings of a collaborative, interdisciplinary creative project and caused me to reflect on the situation of the writer in the writing workshop.

I had initiated the collaborative project with a colleague, a lecturer in dance. As a result of this collaboration, we anticipate the project will culminate in a live performance involving dance and creative writing improvisation. Further, the performance will be used as the basis for a short documentary film.

The first rehearsal was held in a black-space studio on campus, fully equipped with sprung floor, overhead projector and lighting rig. I sat at a computer terminal set on a desk, the computer hooked up to the projector. The dancer, S, warmed up as I checked that the computer was in order, and we chatted, rather nervously, about what the session would
entail. We had expected that we would need some triggers to begin the improvisation work. We had a topic, and I had written a few key words, phrases, sentences and questions in advance, and had printed each out on a separate sheet of paper. We agreed that I would lay these on the floor, randomly, and that S would look at them and begin to respond in movement. After scattering the papers about, I sat at the computer and then I too decided to begin my work with a trigger and took out a spare paper with another couple of words on it and began to write/type in response. S had mentioned that he might pause to read my output on the screen while dancing, or maybe he would catch a glimpse of a word or phrase now and then and respond to it. I would also respond to S’s movements. But we had no real rules or guidelines – what exactly either of us would respond to, and how, was not anticipated or worked out. For example, S could read the words on the paper and screen and respond to their literal or symbolic meanings or to the shape and look of them, perhaps to the sound of them if he spoke them or heard them in his mind. And I knew little about dance and could respond in any way that occurred to me to S’s improvised movements. There were also other possible triggers to consider, such as noise – the typing on a chunky old keyboard, the sounds of S’s feet and other body parts hitting the floor. Breathing, throat-clearing, rustling of clothing, clicking of the mouse, shuffling of papers, an occasional fragment of conversation between us: these were all part of the moment. There was the information of the studio, such as its physical appearance and layout, too, and how that could affect each of us. And there was the situation – two people from different disciplines who had only spoken to one another a few times, suddenly alone in a cavernous, sound-proofed room with all black surfaces, in the midst of a project that was feeling more challenging by the minute.

Perhaps needless to say, the rehearsal was nerve-racking and intimidating, both artistically and personally – if these two concepts can be separated, which they probably cannot.

Early on, after I had composed only a handful of sentences, my computer crashed. Badly. I struggled to get it going again while S kept moving, oblivious at first. But the computer was not going to work, and S caught on and went to get a technician from a nearby office. While the technician fixed the computer, S and I talked about these first moments of the rehearsal. And that led to how the session patterned out. We would improvise for a while, until one or both ran out of puff, and then we would rest and talk about what had happened before moving on to another session of improvisation. We quickly agreed that the conversations between the improvisations were vital to what we were achieving.

I was surprised at how vulnerable I felt during the improvisation. I had a strong taste of performance anxiety and it was not because I could not think of words to write. I often write spontaneously, and thoroughly enjoy the process of leaping from moment to moment of writing. But here in this space I was not just writing: I was also performing writing. I felt enormously self-conscious. I understood that I was nervous here, with an audience of one other than myself, and became all too aware that when the live performance eventually took place, I would be visible to a full audience, on or close to a stage, with nowhere to hide. Everything I wrote would be instantly revealed to all in the auditorium, right large on a screen. This would include, of course, typos, badly phrased expression, cliches, word-clutter – all the stuff that I would normally edit out before revealing my work to anyone else. And then there was the content of what I wrote. I could not know what would emerge. Sometimes when I write, fragments come to the surface that are too personal or simply involve ideas that I do not necessarily want to share with anyone or that maybe I am not yet ready to expand upon and make into writing. Again, in my usual writing practice, this is where the editing processes come in. But on the stage it would be all revealed.

Likewise, I had not particularly thought about my own physical being as it is during writing practice. When I write, I get quite emotional. I sometimes feel traumatised, no matter what my subject matter. Writing is an immersive and especially physical process for me. When I reach that immersive point of writing I am thoroughly engrossed in what I am doing and am not particularly aware of what is happening around me. Or, at least, I am not consciously aware: in fact I may be hyper-aware. And it turned out, as revealed during that first rehearsal, that S could feel similarly while absorbed in dancing. At one point, I followed a train of thought in my writing that made me feel a bit like crying, made me feel very vulnerable. And I noticed then that S was acting out something that looked traumatic, holding his head in his hands, making faces that looked anguished. I got self-conscious. Probably, so did S. Then, we talked about it later, about how this was something we had to work with – the self-consciousness of the moment: both of us were made vulnerable by what we were doing, and creating mutual trust was going to be part of our working process.

Reflecting on the session afterwards it was clear to me that the risk-taking element of this rehearsal was what fuelled its productiveness. I found myself thinking about the processes of creative practice and how, by definition, creativity must include risk-taking and allow opportunities for unpredictable outcomes to take place. This links in to the ways I
structure and operate hands-on workshops for students. Essentially, in requiring students to practice writing on the spot in class and to share that writing with others, I am asking them to perform writing. I am allowing and even encouraging them to enter vulnerable spaces, because in class they have little opportunity to edit what they write before sharing it with others and discussing it. Like me with my new, raw words being projected large in the studio, the students' early drafts are immediately made public to some degree. This is not necessarily how a more established writer (unless taking part in a collaborative exercise like mine) would carry out their writing practice. But these students are not established or experienced writers. In class, I want them to explore many different approaches and possibilities in their writing. I would like these to be tried within the moment and evaluated - acted out - without there being the chance for the students to quash them as they might do if in private. In the workshop there is little room for self-censorship or for falling too easily into old habits or ruts of creativity. The hands-on workshop is quite overtly an artificial space: it's a type of incubator meant only to facilitate particular formative moments in the creative process.

Performing writing in my dance collaboration put me into an exploratory state which allowed me to see my writing-self from a fresh perspective. The writing that was generated in the sessions with S. was unlike anything I had produced before. It was very fragmentary writing and it took up themes and styles that I had not observed in my writing previously. I argue that in my experience of the hands-on workshop, when students set about performing writing, they also tend to generate writing that is more exploratory and less predictable.

As an example of this, in a recent hands-on writing workshop comprising postgraduate-level fiction-writing students, I set an exercise by Deena Metzger from her 1992 work *Writing for Your Life*:

Suddenly there is a knock at your door. A trusted friend enters to warn you that the Dream Police will arrive in twenty minutes. Everything, everything in your life that you have not written down will evaporate upon their arrival. You have a short time - twenty minutes - to preserve what is most precious in your life, what has formed you, what sustains you. Whatever you forget, whatever you have no time to record, will disappear. Everything you want must be acknowledged in its particularity. Everything, to be saved, must be named. Not trees, but oak. Not animal, but wolf. Not people, but Alice. As in reality, what has no name, no specificity, vanishes. (p. 65)

The students worked away quietly on the task and then we had a class discussion. One student mentioned feeling uncomfortable about the exercise because it had brought up 'stuff' for her, stuff she was not comfortable about sharing with the class. It would be revealing, she said. This happened in the week following the dance/writing collaboration rehearsal, and as the student spoke, I remembered how I had felt in the studio. How it had been disorienting, to some degree, to see my raw-edged, undefined writing appear projected onto the large screen. It had been revealing.

Revealing. Is this revelation what is supposed to happen in a creative writing workshop? If so, how, and why, and by whom and to whom? What is supposed to happen in a creative workshop? What does happen?

What happens

In the book *Creativity and Education* Hugh Lytton (1971) wrote: At the heart of creativity lie the creative moment and the creative impulse, the most intensely personal experiences an individual is capable of. It is here that the 'T' experiences - for creating means perceiving as well as doing - and acts following out its own most idiosyncratic ways. By definition, it is producing a novel recombination which is not predictable from general laws. (p. 10)

Lytton touches on elements relating to the essential vulnerability involved in the creative process, in using words and phrases such as *intensively personal; the T, idiosyncratic*. Elsewhere in his book, he acknowledges associations between energy, danger and creativity, stating: The Greeks were aware of the awesomeness, the double-edged nature of creating, for Prometheus who discovered fire was venerated as a benefactor of mankind, raised to the Pantheon, but also, having aroused the envy of the Gods, punished cruelly for his pains. In its most basic sense (to 'pro-create') creating denotes sexuality - of beast as well as man - and hence is charged with all the emotion, the complexes and inhibitions, and the mysteries surrounding our deepest biological urges. (p. 1)

*Fire, Energy, Fusion. These can be perceived in the best kind of writing workshop, but such dramatics are not always immediately evident. Sometimes a workshop does not seem to work well: the students are fidgety and unfocused or even resentful about a particular exercise or...*
about doing the workshop at all. But that is not to say that nothing happens.

The students enter the classroom, having read a series of set readings for the class. These include short works of published fiction, and some theory material usually in the form of essays or short articles written by published writers or perhaps some literary theorists or both. I try to keep these quite general, sometimes philosophical, rather than specifically relating to, say, point of view; character; voice, in the way of many how-to-write texts. My ideology of teaching writing includes a belief that students learn such details of technique more effectively and thoroughly if the techniques are put in context, as we discuss inspiring works of fiction and theory material, and experiment extensively through writing practice in the workshop. (To paraphrase Australian novelist Michael Meehan, when students are writing about things that interest and inspire them, their technique improves incrementally). Students know that when they are scheduled to take part in a hands-on writing workshop, they must come prepared to write for at least an hour at a time. We talk a little at the beginning of class, discussing concepts arising from the readings, and then the students are given a sheet of writing exercises for the workshop, which we read through and talk about together before the students begin to write.

I try to arrange the room to be as inclusive and, how can I say — incubating as possible. By this I do not mean that I am trying to protect or shelter the class, rather, that I want to encourage close focus and concentration. I want students to feel open to experimentation. I want the student to see what will happen, as they write. If possible, we push the tables together to make an island in the room, where we are all, I suppose, marooned together. We sit around the edges of the table-island and begin to write. I may do the exercises myself along with the students, or else I work on marking tasks or perhaps do some reading — I find, though, that the students seem more focused on their tasks if everybody in the room is writing. Subtly, I observe body language. Sometimes the workshop dynamics become so palpable, so powerful, that they can almost be traced over with a finger in the air. Some students begin writing immediately and keep going, frantically, furiously, or even languidly, almost indulgently, loving being given the chance to take time for writing. Others will sit and think for a while and then slowly, haltingly, begin to write. Some will work in steps and starts, and may even leave the room from time to time, ostensibly for bathroom visits and the like. Some will appear fearful, frozen, completing relatively little over the hour. Yet all seem to be productive at some point during the hour of writing.

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In that hour, then, lots of thinking and writing is done. Many words are produced. There is no illusion that all, or any, of this writing has intrinsic value as writing — as literature. The students are simply writing — it could be said that they write for the sake of writing, but I do not think that is quite accurate. The work done in the workshop is accumulative. Each student produces writing that is used in one way or another to build up their experience and confidence in the process of writing. Glimpses of ideas appear in this torrent of writing. This growing delivery of words. But moreover, as the word heaps grow over the weeks of workshops, the student grows used to the feel of writing. The student practises — writing sentences, creating form and structure, using punctuation, and experimenting with making voices, characters, styles, voices, points of view, shapes, sounds. The student gets to know writing. By giving that student triggers for writing that they may not otherwise use, the student also gets to know a wider variety of approaches and perspectives.

Part of that involves the physical, material process of writing and the environment in which it is done. In her 1999 article, Barbara Hiander wrote:

The act of producing the text, in turn, affects the writer. The act of writing and making experience into a text has material effects on the writer's body and mind, making other subject positions and storylines available and imaginable to her in ways that were not possible before the writing. (p. 292)

I would add to this the material effects on the writer that come about in relation to the environment in which the writing is done. As with the physical and material effects that I experienced during the dance/writing improvisation session described earlier, the environment and situation of the writer at a given moment adds to the writer's experience and to the breadth of that experience.

Furthermore, in the hands-on writing workshop students share what they write with one another. In the second half of the workshop, students are asked to speak about their writing experience for the day. In this sense, each student shares some of what they have written, but they also in turn share in what the other students have written. This means that they are privy to myriad disparate responses to the exercises. There is an expanding awareness that possibilities for writing are endless.

As mentioned above, when my dance collaborator and I worked in the studio, we found the conversations we had between bursts of improvisation vital to the robustness of the process. The sharing of our experiences of the process added to the dynamics of that process. There is
a certain frisson in this, and it adds to the class dynamics. To reiterate, it may be that very few published, established writers work in environments similar to the writing workshop. Some, if not most, such writers may shudder at the thought. But the students in writing workshops are learning about the theory and practice of creative writing, and there is a great deal to be said for the overall productivity of a good writing workshop, for a developing writer with plenty to learn about the very basics of writing.

Brophy writes in a 2003 chapter, 'A poetry workshop: description is feeling':

Creative writers must risk embarrassment. The curious paradox of writing personally is that more readers will be interested and entertained, and more readers can identify with creative writing when it is most personal. Novels teach us this.

By 'personal' I mean specific. I don't mean that creative work must be confessional or must always reveal secrets. I mean that creative work pays attention to what is specifically happening here. What makes my point of view particularly mine? What is it that I notice? What I notice begins to reveal who I am and what I am feeling. In this way I can begin to communicate in more complex ways with other people through my writing. (p. 190)

This engagement with the personal and the specific, as mentioned by Brophy, means that creative writing, when it is most effective, is risky. It entails vulnerability in the writer. Being vulnerable could be seen as risky business for any writer, but when the writer is also a participant in a workshop, that vulnerability has a semi-public dimension. The workshop writer is also a vulnerable among vulnerabilities. All of the workshop participants are working with the personal and specific in the moment of writing and furthermore in the moment of participation and witnessing of the creative work of others in the workshop.

When a writing workshop is working, and real, and when creative work is performed by writers, it is as if they are conducting experiments, and nobody can predict the outcomes because the components and materials are different and to some degree unknowable until they are put together and the experiment put in motion. In the workshop, each participant brings the components of the personal and the materials of the specific to the classroom. The outcomes may be explosive, or toxic, even lethal. They may also be exciting and inspiring, even rewarding.

At its best, the workshop can facilitate dynamic, effective, independent learning. Student-led, experiential learning is very much in fashion in universities at this time, and perhaps there is an irony in the timing. Universities are increasingly aware of risk management and offsetting potential litigation, yet at the same time experiential learning methods are in vogue – and this kind of learning is potentially the most risky and least easy to control and manage, resulting in possibly increased vulnerability for students, teachers and institutions.

Drawing upon 'personal' or 'specific' material in the act of creative writing can be explosive because the personal and specific are powerful. Such power can be both beautiful and terrible when it takes place, and if it happens in a writing workshop, it is easily recognised. Students become animated and noisy; they talk over one another in the excitement. Something has happened. Something has been created. When a workshop works as it should, real, palpable learning takes place and everybody in the room knows it, consciously or not.

It is the potential for such explosive moments of creativity that ensures the viability of the workshop. By explosiveness I am not talking about emotional outbursts, about tears and sobbing and shouting and fury in the classroom. I am referring to creative fusion. It is when enough energy and effort is expended to create something. It happens in the workshop, made possible by the workshop. At the end of such a class, students get up slowly, reluctant to leave, lingering, chatting, bright-eyed and charged with energy. The process has worked.

The writing workshop is most effective and productive when the focus is on the energy of process; on the act of writing. The focus is on the work, not the teacher, and furthermore, the work is indeed a work, rather than a product, and as such it needs working on. It needs to be created.

Barbara Kammel (1999) addresses this shift of focus in stating:

... when a writer puts experience on the page, she relocates it by turning it into a textual artefact; she creates a representation of that experience and of the self. This self is not the same as the 'real person' who is writing or simply her 'authentic voice'; rather, it is a representation, a selection from the linguistic resources and cultural storylines that are available. The resources are never simply copied or mimicked by the writer – rather, they are remade (however slightly) by the writer each time she creates a text. (p. 292)

Similarly, Jerome Burem in his 2000 chapter, 'Teaching emotional literacy', treats the writing as a work in progress when he considers the assessment of autobiographical work: 'I do not know how to deal with the problem of grading students on their autobiographical writing. I know I have to be
Conclusions

The vulnerability involved in creativity is what feeds and energises it. There is plenty of protection for interested parties already in place in the modern-day university: what is perhaps needed is less safety, in a sense. I am not advocating a lack of care. However, as identified by Brophy in the epigraph to this chapter, institutional over-protection can too easily become the greatest endangerment to learning and quality experience.

Far from potentially spelling the end of the writing workshop, its danger is part of what means it will continue to be viable. It could be said that the unpredictable, idiosyncratic and spontaneous nature of the workshop fits neatly into progressive pedagogical practices and policies, thus ensuring its existence for a long time to come. Some may also argue that the recent and continuing burgeoning of the so-called creative industries, and the popularity of the concept of creativity far beyond the disciplines of creative writing and the creative arts generally means that the dynamic workshop model will continue to morph and merge, indeed continuing to turn up in academic disciplines not traditionally likely to use such a model in their teaching.

I suspect, though, that these viewpoints and movements are not especially relevant or significant to the writing workshop and its participants and proponents. There is a maverick quality to creativity in general and to creative writing: it does not particularly care what is in fashion. If it works, it goes on. If it’s interesting, it’s irresistible.

The writing workshop is robust in nature, which is perhaps why it has lasted so long so far, even in the midst of greatly changing institutional environments. The writing workshop has great capacity to keep developing because it is not a static entity. Indeed, because it is underpinned by the very notion of creativity, it is particularly open to re-invention and renewal.

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