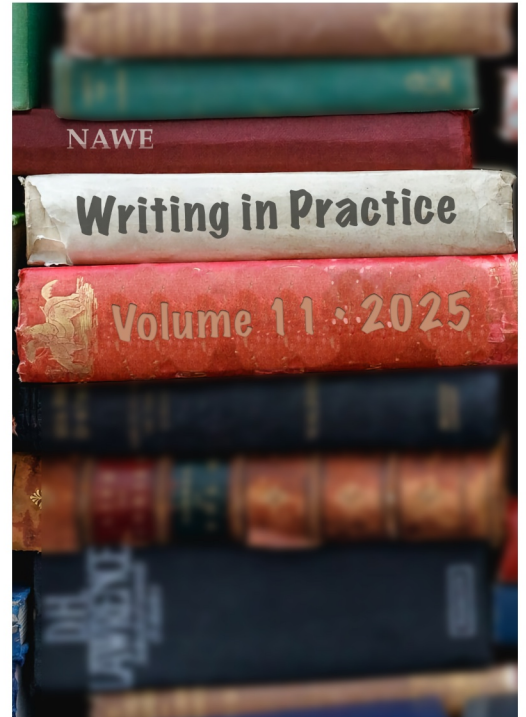




Not Only to Write Well: A Critical Reflection on Learning and Belonging in the Creative Writing Workshop

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ABSTRACT:

'Not Only To Write Well' responds to a question I was asked by a student in an undergraduate creative writing workshop some years ago: "why do we have to write the critical reflection?"

What follows is a both an act of curious attentiveness to that question and where it might have come from and a critical reflection of my own on the ways in which I have taught reflectiveness in undergraduate Creative Writing. I consider three key models of reflectiveness, (Schön 1991, Mezirow 1991 and Hunt 2013) and also consider more recent work (Chavez 2021) on the necessity of reflective practice on the part of both teacher and student as part of the necessary work of decolonialising the creative writing classroom. I further suggest that it can be helpful, when communicating the value of this assignment to students, to consider the critical reflection as a distinct genre of writing related to memoir and life writing and foreground what we know of the potential of composition within these genres to enable (Dunn 2025) and not merely report on 'transformational learning' (Mezirow 1991).

This essay also makes several practical suggestions about how to foster reflectiveness in workshop teaching. These suggestions have emerged from the adjustments I made to my own teaching practice triggered by my reflective engagement with my student's original question and the 'disorientating dilemma' (Mezirow 1991) it provoked in me.

KEYWORDS:

Critical reflection, Reflective writing, Reflective workshops, Transformational learning, Problem-based learning, Reflective commentary, Exegesis, Practice-based pedagogy.

Most teachers of creative writing have been in the position of having to explain – and perhaps even to defend – what it is we do in our workshops and classrooms. In years past, we may have been explaining it to colleagues in distantly or closely related subjects.

More recently, perhaps to cash-conscious parents at open days, or to university management, themselves responding to the crisis in the humanities within higher education and the pressure for all of us to demonstrate that what we do matters. The old arguments about taste and subjectivity, or the murky ethics of teaching students to write well (and charging them for the service) when we know that few of them will make a living from selling their writing have been well rehearsed. While these arguments take on a new urgency when the creative industries for which we (apparently) prepare them are themselves at risk from AI, I want to focus here on a moment some years ago when I was invited to explain myself not by a manager, colleague or parent, but by a student within my own workshop.

We were in the last two weeks of a ten-week term. I'd been working with a class of fifteen on a module entitled "Approaching the Novel." The students had, over the course of the previous eight weeks, shared presentations on their initial ideas, had workshoped each other's creative writing, had considered, through discussions about some set reading from a range of contemporary novels and some in-class presentation and writing prompts, how to select appropriate techniques and experiment with deploying them.

We'd spoken about narrative focalisation, about character and action, about setting and worldbuilding, about scene construction. We'd talked a little about the world of publishing beyond the academy – about literary agents and publishers, about the role of the editor in guiding writers through structural and line-edits, copy edits and proofreading. We'd looked briefly at the ways novels were reviewed, marketed and displayed, experimenting with writing back cover copy and considering the ways readers receive messages about genre from title and cover design. It had been, from my point of view, a good term: the students were attending well, working in a range of genres, giving increasingly more precise feedback to each other. They had started to use the workshop as a tool rather than a tribunal, asking careful questions of their readers as they became more curious about the impact of their edits. With two weeks left to go, I turned our attention towards the other part of the portfolio these students were preparing to submit: a short

critical reflection. And then came the question: "why do we have to write the critical reflection?"

When I asked the workshop why they thought they were required to produce this type of essay to accompany their creative work, their answers suggested they considered it at least in part the university's way of ensuring that they attend classes (and receive the feedback they were then required to comment on) or do the set reading (which they are then expected to quote from in the essay itself). It felt to me that there was a suspicion that the critical reflection was a kind of trick-assignment designed to ensure participation and engagement – something we insist on because we think (perhaps wrongly) that while ChatGPT may be able to "do the reading" but, because it has not attended the workshops nor made the decisions about drafting and editing, would not be able to convincingly produce.

And yes, it is that – a little – a way of encouraging engagement, responsiveness, an openness in the student to being altered by what transpires during the workshop. But it is also because reflectiveness and the ability to articulate reflectiveness in a way that is of use to another writer is one of the defining features of creative writing as an academic discipline capable of producing new forms of knowledge. We are here together, I wanted to tell my student, carefully working through the third year "Approaching the Novel" module in a higher education institution, because through practice, creative writers are able to create new knowledges about how art is made and discover together where our assumptions about language, genre, form, style, editorial process and our publishing worlds are limited, untrue or unfit.

Linda Candy is a memoirist and a researcher into collaborative and creative learning processes. She has described both practice-based and practice-led research in ways that are useful and have guided me towards this conclusion. She argues that there is a distinct difference between a practitioner and a researcher and a further distinction between the types of research to which creative practice can contribute. She draws on the work of Scrivener (2002) to further distinguish the 'practitioner' from the 'researcher' and argues that while the practitioner – for our purposes – the writer – may research as part of their creative practice, this research is primarily engaged with "the individual's particular goals of the time" while the researcher seeks to "add to our shared store of knowledge" (p. 2, emphasis mine). How that addition is enacted is also distinguished

between practice-based research, which is knowledge that is manifest in the creative work itself, demonstrated through the output of a creative process: a memoir, a script, a computer game and practice-led research, which results from and is described in reflective writing about practice that has "operational significance for that practice" (Candy, 2006, p. 1)

While it is true that the either/or of this binary between 'practitioner' or 'researcher' and between the 'practice-led' or the 'practice-based' researcher is easily complicated when we consider the PhD in Creative Writing, where the "original contribution to knowledge" can occur in either the creative or critically reflective parts of the thesis and is often located unevenly between both, and where the conclusions drawn from the 'how' of process are performed in the 'what' of product as well as described in the critical reflection, what interests me more is that for Candy, the key factor in defining practice as a form of research is that the fruits of that research can be shared with others in the field – that the contribution is not merely about self-development or the acquiring of technical skills, but about adding to our "shared store of knowledge" – whether that be through exhibition, performance, curation or, in the case of practice-led insight, through publication and dissemination of critically reflective work.

We write critical reflections, I wanted to tell my student, because that is how we communicate what we have learned through the process of composition in a way that is useful to other writers.

My student's question is more meaningful and deserves some further attention than this though, not least because of the surprise and discomfort I felt, and perhaps should not have felt, when I heard it. The module was for undergraduates in their third year and the workshop was comprised of students who all had some experience in and success at writing critical reflections in the first and second year of their programme. Nevertheless, in that moment I realized that if students in their third year were still asking this question, I had not communicated its value clearly enough. What seemed obvious to me was not obvious to them, and their suspicion and reluctance revealed I had more work to do. This essay is, in part, an act of pedagogical critical reflection addressing how I might do that work, my conclusions drawn from experiments in my teaching practice aimed at investigating this question through practical action in the classroom.

I used to think approaching the critical reflection should wait until late on in the



Cover of "Fell" by Jenn Ashworth

module. There's some logic to this. How can a student reflect on a process until it is well underway? As a result of my student's question, late both in the term and in his undergraduate programme, I realized it would be very difficult for him to really value reflective practice unless I designed workshops that facilitated an explicit engagement with reflection so that he could experience it offering something of value to him and his writing from as early on in the course as possible. I've since experimented by bringing in 'reflectiveness' as a specifically articulated concept and teaching it right from the very beginning in several different ways.

From the outset, I ask students to contextualise their creative submissions with a 'writer's statement' that not only puts an extract into a context but also asks the student to comment on the process of composition and begin to articulate the reasoning behind their first set of technical choices. I've been influenced in this by the work of Felicia Rose Chavez (2021) who suggests this intervention as part of a broader pedagogical project of deconstructing and decolonialising power in the workshop. She

recommends a writer's statement that includes a concise description of the project, an elucidation of any surprises that arose during the composition process, an account of challenges and successes, and some specific, craft-based questions that give the workshop a working brief.

It has been my experience that some students need help to develop these statements beyond mere description or evaluation of the quality of the creative work (though description and self-evaluation are worthwhile places to start.) While Chavez works with her students prior to the workshop, often meeting them individually in order to develop these detailed statements, I have found it more useful to begin the workshop by attending to these statements with the same care as I would to the creative writing. I do this by asking the writer questions that allow them to expand on and explore what they have written in their statement and encouraging the other members of the workshop to do the same. Workshopping the writer's statement in this way is not only an opportunity to give the writer as much room to verbally reflect and express intention as possible, but also a good way of modelling to all the students in the workshop what the proper subject matter of reflective writing is: a critically informed account of process, and not a technical description of, apology for or literary critical analysis of product.

The act of reflection also begins with the act of watching – of observing the self at work. This involves us splitting ourselves into two or more beings – the one who writes, who edits, who researches – and the one who watches, with a gentle, present curiosity (this is not about evaluation or improvement) what happens. This is a tall order. I started to get more curious about the place that watching and observation had in the creative writing classroom during a teaching observation of another colleague, Oliver Langmead, on an undergraduate Writing Games module. Langmead started a session on interactive narrative design by playing a game of D&D with his students.

The role he took during this game – to teach the rules, to run the game, to comment on what the students were up to as they made their in-game decisions, intrigued me. While the game itself had its own brisk and suspenseful narrative energy he would sometimes interrupt the action to describe to students what they were doing, how they were making their decisions, the ways in which they were responding to each other to co-create an interactive narrative. Langmead's role was to articulate the creative process, making visible what might otherwise remain

instinctive, habitual, or experimental. He observed the students, and in a style that was almost Winnicottian, described what he saw, using terminology that may have been unfamiliar to them, and during creative action they may have been, at that moment, too immersed in to observe themselves.

Donald Schön (1991) distinguished between two types of reflectiveness. There is the 'reflection-in-action' – reflecting while the activity takes place – and 'reflection-on-action' – a period of analysis that takes place after the activity is completed, more often associated with journal keeping, report writing and the critically reflective essay. As always, it is more complicated than this either-or in the creative writing workshop and it is the fact of the workshop and the tutor facilitating it, both involved and separate (like my colleague – playing the game with his students and describing the play for them at more or less the same time) that troubles this binary.

If students can start to do it while frenetically collaborating during a game to which they didn't all know the rules, while rolling dice, strategizing a collaboration to avoid being shot down by a band of orcs, then they can do it while composing a poem. It also matters that in the context of academic creative writing, the student begins their composition knowing that the writing of the critical reflection will take place at some point in the future and this knowledge, carried into the process of composition from the opening, changes the way the activity takes place.

After observing my colleague and still considering the 'why' question from my student, I decided to make some more deliberate room for this kind of watching and again, to facilitate circumstances where the students would learn to value the insights that this watching gave them as early in the course as possible. Though not a games writer, I started to set up group and collaborative writing exercises at the very start of my modules.

I'll ask my memoir or novel or short story students to write a collaborative poem or make a short film, to create a collage or mood board together, to make a PowerPoint presentation on their different editing processes. I assign one of the students to be the 'watcher' as the activity takes place and this watcher is tasked with reporting – either verbally or in writing – how the group went about the task. The group element is important: by working together the students are required to verbally communicate who will do what – to engage with the problem of process first (and during) the activity. What

might have been a solitary, inarticulate process of decision making emerges into the workshop loudly and chaotically.

I have found that this activity does double duty: it requires the watcher to attend to process as deeply as product and introduces the idea that in our time together, we will workshop the way the creative work was arrived at as well as (or sometimes, especially early on in the course) instead of the work itself. It also, as the 'watcher' reports the fruits of their thinking about doing, the other members of the group are placed in the position of witnessing this act of reflectiveness taking place – they become watchers too, and I generally follow up by asking them to add to or expand on the account the watcher in their group, or to engage in a further act of reflection based on their witnessing of reflectiveness itself in-action.

Returning to Candy's (2006, 2018) assertion that for knowledge to be knowledge, it must be share-able, it has become my practice to set writing prompts during the workshop and instead of inviting students to read aloud from the work they have produced during this time – a practice which has limited usefulness to inexperienced writers and readers – give them some time to share their verbal account of the 'how' with their peers.

My experience is, as with the production of writing statements, that these students need prompting to get beyond reporting how 'bad' or 'good' they feel the writing they have just produced is and from me they need some direction away from literary criticism of outputs and towards curiosity about method. Specific questions can prompt this. "Did you start with the dialogue first? How did you decide to play your scene for laughs rather than narrative tension? What made you decide on first person? Talk us through how you made the decision to use the present tense?" and similar have been helpful. Sometimes a 'risks and rewards' question is helpful – asking the writer to verbalise the advantages and disadvantages of any technical decision – omitting to use dialogue – or compositional method – (writing backwards from an ending, writing the dialogue first and layering in action and description later) allows them to direct their attention towards the decision itself, rather than the quality of the writing that executes it.

I experimented with this method of 'sharing the how' after some years of teaching personal essay and the memoir, where writers may need longer than usual to trust the group with the content of the material and where readers, withdrawing in fear either of the subject matter

or of causing offense to the writer of it, can neglect to deeply attend to the writing in the workshop setting. Considering the 'how' of process is not a replacement for discussing the 'what' of subject matter and technique, but, as well as widening the focus of what a workshop can attend to, starting with the 'how' also forms a gentler and more enabling invitation into a discussion of the 'what'. (My thinking about widening focus is developed from my consideration of what a 'wholehearted' workshop might look like, Ashworth 2023.) Students are often surprised when, after a generative exercise, they are asked to explain how the writing came about rather than simply read it aloud. While gentleness is my aim, I want to acknowledge it can also feel exposing and sometimes discomfiting to students whose real creative privacy is explored in the methods of composition and not the subject matter of their texts. If that discomfort arises, we reflect on that too because in workshops where developing reflectiveness is as equally an important learning outcome as learning to write well is, every difficulty, moment of discontent or disquiet becomes the proper object of creative attention.

My reflective investigation sparked by that initial question from my student and the discussion that followed has been influenced deeply by the sociologist Jack Mezirow's ten-stage model of learning. In particular, Mezirow identified the 'disorientating dilemma' which he argued was an individually felt experience of discomfort or disillusionment and identified it as the starting point of a process he called 'transformational learning' – defining learning itself as a process of personal change with the potential for broader societal change. I have had some success in broadening the scope of workshop from a 'fault-finding exercise' to, to borrow and repurpose the phrase from Mezirow, a 'dilemma-discovering mission' by experimenting with deprioritising the writer getting the feedback and instead turning my attention to the readers who are giving it.

While at first this sounds like a return to the old tradition of asking the writer of the work in question to stay silent and take notes while it is discussed – an approach that has been widely and appropriately critiqued as reproducing cultural imperialism, institutional and gender based hierarchies and resulting in cookie-cutter writing appealing to the tastes of the cultural majority (a fuller exploration of these criticisms can be found in Chavez, 2021) what I am suggesting is not that the writer silently watches as the teacher and readers discuss (and misunderstand or misinterpret) their work, but instead, that the teacher models to the writer an

engaged, critical and active engagement with those responding to their work until they are able – with clear scaffolding and encouragement – to take over that role for themselves. There’s a clear and subtle difference here and sometimes I enact it physically by asking the writer whose work is being discussed to come and sit with me at the front of the classroom. I developed this technique after integrating the insights from Elen Caldecott’s attentiveness to physicality and embodiment in the creative writing classroom (Caldecott, 2021) into my workshop practice. When I invite the writer to come sit with me, I am showing them that we will direct the workshop together, and I’ll take the lead until they are ready to take over – often, as the workshop develops, swapping chairs with the writer and letting them ask their own questions from the ‘teacher’s seat’ at the front of the room.

The way I lead this type of work also draws on Schön’s model of reflection-in-action and follows the example of Oliver Langmead’s practice on the Writing Games module as he was both fully involved in the activity and creatively disrupting it in order to describe it to the group. It involves understanding the giving of feedback itself to be a creative activity that can itself be usefully reflected upon and trusting that, given the right conditions, “critique can evolve into a pro-active art form” (Chavez, 2021 p. 105). Chavez uses Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process, which lays out a four-stage framework to facilitate an artist-led workshop (Lerman’s own artistic practice and the field in which she developed this process is choreography) with her graduate level writing students. Others (including Hauptle, 2006) have tested the efficacy of this framework with groups of undergraduate and less experienced writing students and similarly draw the conclusion that “teaching writing is teaching conversation” (Hauptle 2006 p. 162).

The focus for Chavez and Hauptle is more often on the quality of the conversation between the writer or artist and the readers or responders: what the teacher should be saying or doing is less described. Sitting with the writer, I regularly interrupt the flow of doing to ask questions of the readers giving feedback about the ‘how’ of their reading, based on my understanding that if the conversation of critique is an artform, it is as worthy of the teacher’s detailed attention as the work originally submitted. My aim with these frequent interruptions is to encourage these readers to not only articulate and critique their assumptions about what makes writing ‘good’ (“What do you mean when you say you ‘related’ to this character? Why is relating a good thing?” or uncover the so-called-problem



Cover of “*Ghosted*” by Jenn Ashworth

that a suggestion is aimed to ‘fix’ (“What do you think would be lost if this story was recast into the first person? What changes if the reader thinks they are reading a ghost story?”) but also to provide challenge and to ‘chase the why’ of feedback until a question (a Mezirowian ‘dilemma’) is arrived at which, if all goes well, is offered to the reader as a provocation to reflective thought and not solely a technical criticism or editorial recommendation.

I discovered that when this kind of reflective workshop practice emerges, two more things happen: the readers of creative works in progress become more engaged by and interested in their own reading, more critical and suspicious of their first responses.

This means no more workshop discussions dead-ended by a general agreement that a piece ‘flows’ without detailed questioning about what ‘flow’ means, how it has been achieved, what a piece that didn’t ‘flow’ might look like, and a ‘chasing of the why’ until we uncover where and when and how we learned that ‘flow’ was self-evidently better than ‘stutter’, ‘jitter’, ‘loop’,

‘meander’ or ‘strobe’. It means no more quiet agreement that a main character is ‘sympathetic’ without a detailed unpicking of what lies behind the tacit assumption that sympathy in characterisation should always be a writerly ambition and what cultural and personal areas for critique and development were indicated by the discovery of the limits to our ability to sympathise. When we workshop the feedback as rigorously as the writing, students become more skilled at using the technical vocabulary to communicate their learning and insights to other writers and more conscious of their own editorial style and sensibility and the way it has been formed and shaped by their own cultures and reading histories. “Where did you learn that?” – is a question I ask often, inviting readers to interrogate where their tastes and assumptions about ‘good’ have come from and make the workshop a place where, in Mezirow’s words the “process of changing our taken-for-granted assumptions to make them more inclusive and truthful” can take place. (2000)

A reflective teacher becomes redundant through the process of this attentive-to-everything presence because eventually, the students start asking these questions of each other, too.

There are other benefits to this way of working. First, that this kind of reflectively focused workshop also makes it more obvious to my students that the act of giving workshop feedback is not merely a favour to the writer in the hot-seat and in workshops where their own writing is not under discussion, they are not merely building up a reciprocal credit and biding their time for their own turn to receive what the workshop has to offer but they are actively developing the critically reflective skills they will need to read their own drafts, and to write their own creative reflections.

Secondly, that the workshop becomes a more hospitable, more creatively nurturing place for the writer – it is more valuable to them because in it, they are valued differently – as a teacher, a guide, as a facilitator of their own and other’s learning. More bluntly: in a reflective workshop, the writer isn’t ever the only one in the hot seat, never the single person whose sentences and ideas are up for discussion, critique and questioning. I follow Chavez’ lead in this, who herself has developed a system of workshopping that addresses one of the main criticisms of Mezirow’s transformational learning framework: students made vulnerable by oppressive societal systems that oppress them on grounds of race, gender, sex, class or disability can be unwilling to enter into the discomfort that engaging fully with the originating dilemma can provoke.

Creating workshop spaces that are hospitable to all students is a prerequisite for this style of learning.

At the end of these more reflectively focussed workshops, I sometimes ask my students to spend a few minutes writing, for their own eyes only, about the moments where they got lost or confused. I ask them to consider what it is about their project or the experience of receiving feedback on it that has made them feel anxious or feel vulnerable to critique or exposure and to describe it as precisely as they can.

While Chavez (2021) considers that the act of writing the writer’s statement can distance the writer from the work, allowing them to leave behind the anxiety of composition and come to the workshop ready to work without it, starting with an invitation to attend (in the first instance privately) to feeling is a conscious decision of mine. Feelings are present in the workshop and the writing room whether we attend to them or not: energy spent ignoring or avoiding them is wasted and showing the students how to listen to themselves and harness the energy of discomfort in their learning can become of the primary tasks of the tutor. The poet and essayist Fanny Howe’s words on ‘bewilderment as a poetics’ (p. 39) have become a writing and teaching touchstone for me and can help embolden the students (as well as their teacher) to go towards what feels most difficult.

Julia Bell in her essay ‘In Praise of Bad Writing’ expresses this differently. “Bad writing [...] is where the action is.

Bad writing presented to a class exposes the writer to all the things that they don’t know about the world, and many things they don’t know about themselves.”

Certainly, many first and third and seventh drafts are, by any system of assessment, ‘bad’ but I find it more useful, especially early on in the workshop process, to focus on what feels bad rather than what the more evaluative, critical parts of the students I am working with judge to be bad – the two states tend to lead towards each other and either way, the outcome of going towards the difficulty opens up further opportunities for reflective enquiry. As Bell writes “in creative workshops, when we apply the pressure of attention to this bad writing, space opens up for new, more expansive ways of thinking, richer access to language, a more critical perspective.” Her phrase the ‘pressure of attention’ is, for me, a way of describing critical reflectiveness. It can be a patient and careful work to help writing students feel safe and confident enough to bring the ‘pressure of

attention’ to their reading and writing methods. The process involves working compassionately with shame (including our own) and establishing workshop practices that move away from finding fault and towards ‘discovering dilemmas.’ The words ‘disorientating’ and ‘bewilderment’ transform, under the attention of critically reflective practice, from silencing dead-ends to useful indicators of where the next piece of work is.

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So far, I have been reflecting on the practical ways I adjusted my teaching to help the creative writing student to practice, benefit from and so value reflectiveness as a style of thinking necessary to learning and creative work. This doesn’t obviously correlate in the benefit of writing the critical reflection essay that most forms of creative writing assessment require. These requires an additional set of teaching and learning strategies. Students often need help in finding the subject for these essays, lest they lapse into providing a description or a literary-critical analysis or appreciation of the creative work submitted for assessment.

Returning to the free-writing prompts where the students went towards their bewilderment and working to turn lostness into curiosity is the first step. I ask these students to turn these ‘problems’ into questions. “I am afraid my first-person narrator is unconvincing and boring” becomes “which techniques can I use to create an engaging and narratively suspenseful first-person narrator?” or “how can I engage the reader with techniques other than dramatic incident and so called ‘psychological realism?’”

These questions need not only be technical or craft-based; they can also arise from the personal, felt experience of writing and engage with the difficulties with managing time, finding inspiration, writing across voices, subject positions and cultures and when they do, students are often able to see very clearly where their personal writing problems connect with larger societal questions.

A student who feels their own minoritised experience has been misread or misunderstood can start to ask urgent critical questions about the political and ethical role of exposition in her creative work (as does every member of the workshop who engages reflectively with her process) and start to make decisions that are aimed not at pleasing the workshop or teacher, but in using her writing to invigorate and challenge an impoverished readership. This problem-into-question, or from-lost-to-curious, framework also demonstrates how a writer can

value the inevitable feelings of anxiety and bewilderment in the creative writing process and turn disorientating dilemmas into moments of desire not only for the technical and craft-based training and knowledge other styles of creative writing teaching can offer, but for themselves to become active reflective participants in the creative process, seeking and directing what it is the teacher and the workshop can offer to them.

This framework is a variant of problem-based learning (PBL), developed in medical schools in the 1960s and described by Diane Wood in the British Medical Journal (2003).

In traditional PBL the students are provided with a case-study, scenario or other ‘trigger’ material and work in groups to understand what they already know, what else they need to know, how they might go about learning and researching that, and develop together a shared scheme of work to address the problem presented by the trigger material. (In the creative writing classroom, the ‘trigger’ is the ‘disorienting dilemma’ uncovered through reflective attention to writer’s statement, creative work in progress and the nature of the conversations that respond to them.)

The disadvantages of PBL for medical students that Wood identifies, interestingly enough, include tutors themselves ‘feeling uncertain’ about the move away from traditional methods of teaching that involve more hierarchical systems of knowledge transfer and acknowledge that the loss of enjoyment and satisfaction that can arise from a move away from expertise-led teaching methods can be ‘difficult and frustrating’ (p. 330).

Inviting teachers to embrace bewilderment and remain with pedagogical ‘disorientating dilemmas’ is rarely comfortable. Still, it has become increasingly important to me to dismantle any illusions of teacherly authority or power in the classroom and consider my own moments of difficulty and frustration not as disadvantages of a method, but opportunities for deeper engagement.

While it is true I often have more experience of creative process than my students, that means I also have more experience of failure, frustration, making bad writing, misunderstanding feedback, speaking without care and listening without skill than my students do. That experience can serve them best if I show my own workings-out too, and demonstrate moments of disorientation in my own writing and teaching practice, and to articulate the questions that emerged from them (which is

what this critical reflection is trying to do: it was disorientating to be asked, as we began to work on the critical reflection, why.) So now, when I ask my students to spend the last few minutes of each workshop writing towards what was bewildering, I do it too. Those in-workshop writing inquiries are where this essay started.

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Over the last ten or so years my students in my memoir and personal essay modules have wondered which sorts of experiences belong in their critical reflections and which in the creative or ‘main’ part of their portfolio – especially for those who have taken the experience of writing and composition as the subject of their life writing. This has been a slippery, intriguing question that has led me to understand the critical reflection as a specialist kind of life writing – a memoir of a writing experience – and it has been helpful, when communicating its value to students, teaching it and assessing it, to bring what we know about life writing to my practice.

Celia Hunt works in the broader field of transformative learning. She adds to Jack Mezirow’s work a greater attention to the personal, bodily feeling and emotional states, and works with students specifically in the field of life writing for personal development.

Life writers, she argues, are invited to “draw the past into the present of writing” (Hunt, 2013, p.105) and that the process of doing this, through craft-based decision making processes regarding voice, form, style, structure, use of image and metaphor, etc, “are a powerful means of subverting familiar patterns of thinking and feeling and increasing awareness of what lies beneath” (p. 106). What ‘lies beneath’, according to Hunt, are some more of those ‘disorienting dilemmas.’

More recently, Lily Dunn is a memoirist and teacher of memoir who argues that for the literary memoirist it is not (or not only) the cathartic splurge of committing personal experience to the page, nor the witnessing involved in being read, or re-reading drafts of one’s own experiences that gives memoir its potential to affect transformation, but the careful and technical decision-making process of telling the story itself (Dunn, 2025).

If we consider the critical reflection as a subspecies of memoir we can also understand where some of the reluctance to take it more seriously intellectual and academically comes from. Carole Angier reminds us that ‘life writers have never been first class citizens in the

republic of letters’ (p.19) and that the memoirist has always been ‘outcast and indecent’ (p. 20) (Cline and Angier, 2010)

When I understand the critical reflection to be a sub-species of life writing and memoir, other things happen.

First, it becomes easier to draw on life writing’s power to transform the individual when approaching the task of writing the critical reflection. The learning that has occurred through the processes of composition, redrafting, writing the writer’s statement, participating in a reflective engagement via feedback and on the feedback itself has already happened. In requiring the student to narrate these experiences in the first person, especially if the writing involves some self-conscious engagement with form, structure and other literary techniques, a second opportunity of change and the further discovery of dilemmas occurs.

Next, if we accept this potential, then it becomes necessary to give the critical reflection the same freedoms and opportunities to explore form as we do to all the other literary genres.

If an essay is to perform the conversation of thinking in the ‘present of writing’ and not merely report on past experiences, the shapes it can take should be capacious enough to hold all styles of thinking. We can encourage variation and experimentation and allow students to submit lists, diaries, visual presentations, mind-maps and charts, podcasts and video essays, collages and graphic-reflections, and for other form of artistic expression that batter at the edge of the genre and reform our ideas of what ‘essay’ can be. If our marking criteria cannot be hospitable to these ways of thinking and these ways of sharing that thinking, then I suggest we rewrite them.

I’ve valued the conversations I’ve had with colleagues at other institutions about how we weight the grading within a module between the creative and reflective elements of the portfolio submission. As with everything else, a diversity of approaches – between programmes and within programmes – is good. Though if we value the teaching of reflectiveness as much as we value craft-based and technical achievement and original thinking (and if we think believe that it is critically informed reflectiveness that makes learning craft and developing new ideas possible – I do) then revisiting our habit of allowing the critical reflection to constitute 20% or less of the total grade for a module may encourage our students to value it differently too. A more generous allocation of the final

grade to the critical reflection may also allow students to submit and reflect on writing that reached for what it could not yet achieve or constituted an ambitious and interestingly failed experiment.

It would allow proper reward for a writer who submitted interesting extracts from an unfinished (and perhaps unfinishable) creative enquiry. It would both encourage and reward boldness and a deep engagement with personal and technical dilemmas and would developing a growing understanding in our discipline that valuable knowledge in our field is both practice-based and practice-led (Candy, 2006) and constitutes an ongoing conversation that takes place both through creative works and the things artists have to say about their own experiences of creating them.

Similarly, and returning to think about my student's provocative question in a different way, I think the reason students don't ask why we ask them to write poems or memoir or short stories or plays or novels is because the desire to write them, to write them well, and to explore what 'writing well' means in the context of forms, genre and the publishing world has been inculcated, not by the course design or the marking criteria (though of course these have their impacts) but by the fact they have read many examples of these and have already learned, to some extent, what the point of them is, why they matter, why they would want to bother. This is not merely an argument about utility, of course.

A novel isn't useful, except that it rearranges our internal worlds and transforms us as we read it: opening a book is saying yes to the potential to be changed. Why not apply this same standard to the literary genre of critical reflection? If we do, how can we expect the students to understand why anyone would bother writing them if the students don't ever read them, rely on them, and have their developing practice altered by them?

Given this, it seems even more urgent to me that as teachers we support and develop ways that students can read versions of these essays produced by writers working within their field. This can be done within the classroom by asking students to offer presentations based on their critically reflective essays, within the broader department, by holding symposia and day-conferences for students at all levels which focus on reflective outputs as well as creative, and in developing and supporting student-led venues where the writing that emerges from critically reflective thinking is published and circulated within the community.

I have reflected elsewhere (Ashworth 2023) on the bonds of care and belonging that lie at the heart of our discipline and how the workshop can be the space where these bonds are formed and felt through a practice of hospitality and wholehearted invitation. As I continue to reflect on the 'why?' that my student presented me with and that I have been carrying with me as my own dilemma for some years now, I conclude that this practice of invitation is not only to belong to a specific workshop, academic cohort or institution. I think we can be more ambitious than that and use critical reflectiveness and the composition and reading of this type of life-writing to invite our students into a broader conversation. Celia Hunt considers the type of transformational learning that life writing provokes as a 'therapeutic education' (2013, p. 166). What happens in our classrooms is as much about the nurturing, maintenance and repair of an ailing culture as it is about personal development and innovation. A reflectively focused workshop and a requirement for students to write a seriously weighted critically reflective essay and the opportunity for these essays to be read and engaged with by other writers makes this more possible. Because the critical reflection rests on the contention that creative practice is an intensely social activity – a conversation between a new text and many other established ones, between the many selves of the writer – each one a new being, birthed by whatever new dilemmas the latest draft has presented, it is a hopeful and inclusive genre and assumes that every writer can contribute something of value to another writer and is capable of being nourished and unpredictably transformed by what other writers have to say about their writing. I hope the next time a student asks me why he should write a critical reflection, I will remember to say because it will form him more fully into a writer, because he's already had the chance to read and be transformed by the critical reflections he has read, because they hook the often silent and solitary process of writing back into the creative communities of which he is a part. Because like all forms of life writing, the composition of these essays both dignifies a self and its own experiences and forges a belonging to a larger, more complicated world that is both nourished and repaired by his presence.

BIOGRAPHY

Jenn Ashworth is a Professor of Writing at Lancaster University, a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, an Honorary Fellow at Newnham College, Cambridge and a Bye-

Fellow in Creative Writing at Downing College, Cambridge. She publishes fiction, memoir and critically reflective work on creative writing teaching and learning. Her work, creative and reflective, explores the north of England as a regional identity, the creative writing workshop as a potential space of radical hospitality and inclusivity, and reflects her interest in sickness and the body, religious and numinous experience and the way we form, and are formed by, the spaces and places we encounter. Her latest memoir is *The Parallel Path* (Sceptre, 2025) and her latest novel is *Ghosted: A Love Story* (Sceptre, 2021) which was shortlisted for the Portico Prize. Her creative-critical memoir in essays *Notes Made While Falling* (Goldsmiths, 2019) was a New Statesman book of the year and was shortlisted for the Gordon Burn Prize. Her essay 'Memoir and Main Character Syndrome: A Reflection' appears in *Creative Writing and the Critical Commentary* (forthcoming with Bloomsbury Academic) and her essay 'Singlemindedness and Whole Heartedness in the Essay Writing Workshop' appears in the second edition of *Bending Genre*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2023). She can be contacted at jenn.ashworth@lancaster.ac.uk or www.jennashworth.co.uk.

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