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Should Creative Writing Courses Teach Ways of Building Resilience?

Abstract: This paper explores some contemporary practices in using creative writing in recovery from mental illness to consider ways in which undergraduate and postgraduate creative writing programmes might integrate resilience-building techniques for those students who may find some writing exercises ‘triggering’ or detrimental to their mental health. The question is also raised as to whether creative writing programmes should and can integrate resilience techniques, as many students draw upon material from their personal lives, and this can often prove upsetting, if not traumatizing. The article argues that resilience techniques might enable students to manage ‘raw’ material and personal narratives in a positive way, and therefore become better creative writers. The article concludes by proposing a creative writing intervention that incorporates resilience and other strategies that support mental well-being.

Keywords: creative writing, resilience, writing cure, pedagogy, mental health, wellbeing

“I write [...] because otherwise I would stand on the pavement and howl.” – *Creative Writing Class participant.*¹

Introduction: Therapy in the Classroom

While chatting with a colleague who was at the time teaching on a postgraduate creative writing degree programme, I learned that he had started to bring a box of tissues to class because the students responded to some of the writing exercises with tears. On further enquiry I was interested to discover that the course involved students writing directly about their personal lives, and that if the act of writing didn’t cause emotional distress, then relating to others’ stories often did instead.

The tale of upset students conjured memories from my own time as a student enrolled in an undergraduate creative writing module. The focus of the course was strictly on poetic form, with each of the students instructed to write a poem using a particular form which they would bring to class the following week for group critique. I should emphasise that we were not encouraged to write directly from our life

experiences, but that is what tended to happen. At no point during my other undergraduate courses – on Shakespeare, Roman Comedy, and Film Studies – did anyone burst into tears, share their personal lives in response to a question about form, or write about their own memories for assessment; but in my creative writing class it happened often.

Says Nat Hardy, ‘in helping students transform the walk of life into the writ of literature, (creative writing) workshops can sometimes border on therapy sessions’.² Hardy’s remark characterizes courses for my postgraduate degree in creative writing, which included emotionally charged sessions, personal revelations, and my own childhood appearing in various guises on the page. I learned a great deal about writing technique and form, and we had several useful talks from editors and agents about the vagaries of publishing. But not once did the course explore those elements of writing creatively that invoke painful memories, the powerful role of the subconscious in creative writing. It has taken many years to understand how to negotiate the wellspring of personal narratives that – consciously or not – my writing tends to draw upon, and much longer to realise that my own writing was a subconscious form of self-therapy.

The links between creative writing and depression are well documented. Says a 1996 paper published in the *British Journal of Psychiatry*: ‘in contrast to people with other kinds of creative achievement, creative writers are excessively prone to depressive and perhaps also to manic disorders.’³ Ernest Hemingway, Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Mark Twain, Edgar Allen Poe, Agatha Christie and Fyodor Dostoyevsky are just a few writers who were arguably as famous for their works as they were for their struggles with mental illness. More recently, writers such as Marian Keyes, Matt Haig, Rowan Coleman, JK Rowling, Liz Fraser and David Foster Wallace have battled publicly with mental illness.⁴

This article is fundamentally concerned with the cognitive processes involved in writing, and how these can be developed into a reflective pedagogical approach to creative writing. By exploring whether teachers should and can embed resilience-building techniques to support students as they invariably confront personal narratives and traumas during the writing process, I acknowledge that tutors are not necessarily equipped to provide therapy. However, I suggest that attentiveness to the cognitive development of writers can provide support and may be considered a form of resilience-building. I propose that some writing interventions for therapeutic purposes

can provide valuable when employed in creative writing courses, thereby empowering the student to more successfully manage the way in which their life experiences impact upon their creative practice.

Creative Writing as Transformative Learning

In 2015, mental illness poses a significant global problem. Depression is the leading chronic condition in Europe.⁵ Mental illness is the largest single cause of disability and represents 23% of the national disease burden in the UK. Also the main cause of sickness absence in the UK, mental illness accounts for 70 million sick days and costs the British economy £70–£100 billion per year. The Chief Medical Officer's 2013 Annual Report drew attention to the increasing problem of mental illness, particularly in terms of healthcare provision: an estimated 75% of people suffering from mental illness receive no treatment at all. Stigma prevails, with shame and discrimination a frequent characteristic of social perceptions of and responses to mental illness. Suicide is an all-too frequent outcome. The report also noted that, despite the increase of mental illness and the noted impact upon the economy, there continued to be a drastic failure to provide adequate funding and resources for mental health.

Since the 1960s there have been many efforts around the world to tackle mental illness via arts therapies. Creative writing in particular poses an attractive adjunct therapy, not least because it requires very few resources: a writing tutor and/or exercises, a meeting room, paper, and pen. Since the 1980s creative writing interventions (commonly referred to as 'the writing cure') have been employed successfully in various therapeutic contexts to assist with recovery, such as expressive writing,⁶ journal writing, control writing,⁷ narrative therapy, fictionalized autobiography,⁸ reflective writing, and poetry therapy⁹. Speaking of their own pilot writing workshop for therapeutic purposes, King, Neilsen and White suggest that the writing workshop participant's 'identity as a [*creative*] *writer* is reinforced, rather than their identity as a person with an illness' (their emphasis).¹⁰

Celia Hunt's seminal work on writing for therapy identifies creative writing as a development tool that enables transformative learning, and as a crucial part of psychodynamic approaches to learning and education.¹¹ Pauline Cooper has spent the best part of a twenty-year career in occupational therapy devising UWaT ('Using

Writing as Therapy’) as an intervention for therapists and wellbeing facilitators. In a recent paper Cooper proposes an important distinction between creative writing and UWaT: ‘[UWaT involves the] gaining of self-knowledge, with loosening or understanding of stuckness [where creative writing is] a means to a product and encouraged aspirations to publication, with need for feedback and importance of the ‘Writer’ title/role.’¹²

As Cooper suggests, very often in healthcare literature there is a distinction made between ‘writing as therapy’ and ‘writing as art’. While there are tensions between the two forms, I’m not convinced that the gap is quite as enormous as some studies propose. My approach to resilience strategies in creative writing draws upon a number of theoretical frameworks. Here I employ the term as defined by Dr Michael Ungar (co-director of the Resilience Research Centre in Nova Scotia):

resilience is both the capacity of individuals to navigate their way to the psychological, social, cultural, and physical resources that sustain their well-being, and their capacity individually and collectively to negotiate for these resources to be provided in culturally meaningful ways.¹³

I agree with Wright and Bolton who say that ‘there is increasing agreement about the need to prepare those in therapy training to be resilient in listening to, witnessing and re-authoring, sometimes extremely traumatic stories. Some of the qualities that make up that resiliency include: optimism, creativity, motivation, flexibility, resourcefulness, imagination, persistence, determination.’¹⁴ In addition to this list, I use resilience as a method of equipping the student with essential skills for best creative practice. Hunt’s notion of ‘transformative learning’ as a result of psychodynamic approaches to creative writing is used as a model here for my proposal of a pedagogy that focuses on the wellbeing of the student.

On closer look at some uses of writing in therapy, it is possible to identify the creative process as offering emotional and psychological resilience and enhancing cognitive development. One of James Pennebaker’s earlier studies involved groups of students who were asked to write about a traumatic event that they had kept secret. Students were told to ‘really let go and explore your very deepest emotions and thoughts... All of your writing will be completely confidential’.¹⁵ Pennebaker’s instruction to students not to stop writing once they began seems a significant part of

the process, and reflective reports showed long-term improvements in mood. One must wonder, however, whether it was the freewriting approach or the reflection on the experience that achieved the elevated mood. Either way, in 2002 Pennebaker states that ‘the essence of the writing technique is that it forces people to stop what they are doing and briefly reflect on their lives.’¹⁶

I don’t think it is too much of a stretch to propose that many creative writers write as a form of meditation, as a subconscious way of reflecting upon their lives, and as a form of self-discovery, if not self-therapy. Bestselling novelist Matt Haig took to writing after suffering from a nervous breakdown, and has stated publically that ‘writing became a kind of therapy. A way of externalising things. [...] The process of writing, combined with an increase in self-esteem that being published gave me, has helped more than I can say. It was a defence mechanism. It gave me purpose. It might have even saved my life.’¹⁷ Likewise, Royal Tank Regiment veteran Neil Blower began writing after suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder on his return from a tour in Iraq. A study by King’s College London estimated that up to one in five British soldiers leaving the front line this year will suffer some form of mental illness, while the Forces charity, *Combat Stress* has warned that up to 50,000 British service personnel could develop mental health problems in the future.¹⁸ Conscious of the many comrades who had returned from duty and fallen victim to PTSD – often resulting in crime, suicide, domestic violence, alcoholism, drug addiction and homelessness – Blower wrote a novel about war, and has stated that writing enabled him to escape a ‘maze of darkness’.¹⁹ It was not just the process of writing that facilitated Blower’s recovery, but also what he produced at the end. His novel *Shell Shock: The Diary of Tommy Atkins* is a diary of a young squaddie suffering from PTSD, and was intended to speak to the debilitating trauma experienced by so many. In other words, Blower’s recovery was partly to do with his intended readership, or with the act of writing as a method of connecting with and empowering others who were experiencing trauma.

Similarly, James Withey’s online project *The Recovery Letters* originated from Withey’s own debilitating experience of depression.²⁰ His website invites people who have suffered from all kinds of depression to write an online letter intended for other sufferers ‘to try and alleviate some of the pain of depression, to make the loneliness of this illness slightly more bearable and above all give hope that you can recover.’²¹ The act of writing is promoted here as mutually beneficial to writer and

reader; the writer composes a reflective piece about his or her experience of depression in the understanding that the letter will improve the reader's awareness of their illness in relation to another's experience. The intended reading experience is one of hope, comfort and connection with another person who knows their suffering intimately. Withey identifies the act of writing as a powerful instance of developing cognitive and emotional resilience.

This methodology mirrors what psychotherapist Jeannie Wright describes as 'writing for protection'.²² Wright recounts how she developed her own writing practice as a method of building resilience or protection against the sexual, physical and emotional abuse that her clients would describe to her in their session. Says Wright, 'the pain we witness as counsellors and psychotherapists is sometimes hard to live with.'²³ Having utilized writing as a form of therapy with her own clients, Wright notes that writing provides a highly suitable medium for dealing with 'the unspeakable'. After sharing a poem that she wrote after one session, she states:

I was preoccupied at the time of writing this (and still am) by questions about where we as therapists carry the brutal stories we hear. Is there any parallel with what neuroscience is now discovering about the expression of emotions ...? Where in our bodies does the pain we hear from others accumulate? Can writing about those experiences protect us?²⁴

Wright's observation resonates with me precisely because I believe that, like Haig and many others, I took to writing at the age of six to cope with a violent home environment and an abusive father. Writing provided a form of 'protection' insofar as it permitted an opportunity to express and make sense of chaotic events, and also to construct fictional narratives that subconsciously reinvented myself as safe and loved. In hindsight, storytelling offered the kind of control and empowerment that any child in such an environment would have craved. It is often years later that I can identify the historical, personal events that have replayed in my fiction – that is to say, I did not intend to write directly about my past, but invariably writing has served as a vehicle for processing emotional trauma and facilitating wellbeing.

However, it is well documented that writing can be detrimental to wellbeing every bit as much as it offers emotional protection. For example, expressive writing was found to be detrimental for adult survivors of childhood abuse²⁵ and a group of

veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder.²⁶ In creative writing programmes, exposure to triggering material can result in distress or even trauma, and the ability to develop critical skills may be compromised. Resilience therefore emerges as a vital means of supporting the student not only as s/he unconsciously or consciously mines his or subconscious, memories and life experience whilst writing, but s/he is exposed to potentially triggering work by other students.

Process versus product in creative writing

Bolton *et al* make the following distinction: ‘the focus of therapeutic writing is upon *the processes* of writing rather than the *products*.’²⁷ Bolton goes on to distinguish between therapeutic writing and creative writing (or what she calls ‘writing as an art form’) by stating that in therapeutic writing,

the initial stages of writing need to be encouraged to be personal, private, free from criticism, free from the constraints of grammar, syntax and form, free from any notion of audience other than the writer and possibly the therapist or another reader. Writing as an art form necessitates an awareness of all these at some stage. Therapeutic writing need never respond to the needs of these forces.²⁸

I would argue that what is described as ‘therapeutic writing’ here is actually creative writing, if one is to understand that many creative writers (both students and published professionals) engage in such ‘initial stages’ of writing ‘free from criticism, or freewriting. Furthermore, in a pilot writing project for people participating in psychosocial rehabilitation programmes in Brisbane, Robert King *et al* recount workshops which employed a life writing ‘theme’ but which were technically instructive, and provided feedback and guidance on how to write creatively.²⁹ As Murphy and Neilsen put it, ‘life-narratives are more therapeutically effective if *guided* to be written according to fundamental “effective writing” aesthetic conventions – such as having a regard to coherent structure in the narrative, the avoidance of cliché [...] and writing in one’s own voice’ (their emphasis).³⁰

The ‘products’ of writing as art as indicated by Bolton *et al* are arguably in the form of a piece of finished work, a developed, edited piece that falls into a

recognisable form (poetry, short story) and genre. I would argue, however, that a completed piece of work is a significant part of building self-esteem, and therefore contributes to wellbeing. In other words, if creative writing is to be distinguished from therapeutic writing on the basis of its emphasis on the creation of ‘products’ instead of ‘process’, I find this link rather tenuous. The attention drawn to the potential of writing as therapy has resulted in numerous writing modalities and categories – life writing, expressive writing, narrative therapy, and so on – that seem somewhat to ‘belong’ solely within therapeutic contexts, but I argue that we can understand much more about the potential of writing – both as therapy and art – by examining the similarities between each.

Resilience as Process and Product

These similarities are most visible in descriptions of the ‘self’ (therapeutic writing) and ‘voice’ (creative writing). In *Therapeutic Dimensions of Autobiography in Creative Writing*, Celia Hunt talks about writing a novel over the course of five years, which proved challenging in terms of finding the right ‘voice’ for the book. Later, she recounts engaging in psychotherapy: ‘to my surprise, [I] found myself involved in a process that was in many ways similar to the process of writing my autobiographical novel.’³¹

In creative writing, we talk about ‘voice’ as that ethereal, mystical must-have, the thing that makes any piece of writing compelling and authentic. ‘Voice’ is the ‘self on the page’, to use Hunt and Sampson’s term, and it is interesting that much attention is given in literature on therapeutic writing to creating an identity and finding (or ‘recovering’) the self via writing. I would argue that the act of writing is also irrevocably intertextual, that whether for therapeutic or artistic purposes the act of writing is also the act of reading, of text-making. Whether engaged in a life writing exercise as part of a process of recovery from mental illness or writing a 900-page historical fantasy novel, the writer is always appropriating language and textuality. The writing of the self cannot exist without language and awareness of other writing. Just as a fictional novel can draw heavily upon autobiography, so too can autobiography draw upon the strategies and echoes of fiction.

I see the main argument against the inclusion resilience-building strategies in creative writing courses as the creative element of writing possibly tilting into

psychotherapeutic territory, thus detracting from the technical and formative (and fundamentally creative) elements of the course. Of utmost importance is the fact that creative tutors are not equipped to practice traditional therapy; to do so may result in malpractice. However, an integration of resilience strategies in terms of cognitive development, bringing writers to a fuller awareness of process, and in making distinctions between unformed and formalised work, may enhance creative writing courses. As Hunt observes: 'Creative writing courses...need to allow [writers] to wade through the "murky waters" of their unconscious for a period of time, and to give them support and encouragement in this difficult process.'³² But how to do this?

My proposal of a pedagogy that integrates resilience with creative writing borrows from progressivist, student-centric models, as well as Stephanie Vanderslice's research on metacognitive reflection³³ and Hunt's notion of 'transformative learning'. There are three key areas in which resilience is most important and/or can be developed in creative writing courses:

(1) workshops, where reading other student's work may prove upsetting for a student, or indeed the act of receiving criticism from other students on work that is highly personal and emotionally drawn

(2) writing exercises, frequently used during my seminars, where there is opportunity to facilitate cognitive development

(3) those parts of the course which are devoted to the 'business' of writing, whereby the realities of rejection – and the distress that can follow the rejection of highly personal work – can be positively addressed.

Vanderslice describes several ways in which metacognitive reflection can develop creative writers enrolled on her graduate courses, particularly in terms of a 'process narrative' that encourages students to chart their own development by writing reflective essays on drafts of creative work.³⁴ In my workshops, students read each other's work before the session and provide written and verbal feedback. Submitters read their work aloud in class, and ensuing verbal feedback is structured according to responses on the strengths of the piece, followed by commentary on areas of improvement. Resilience can be developed by encouraging students to maintain a personal journal throughout the course in which to record their responses to other's work. This dual-response system – shifting between written feedback which is intended to offer constructive criticism for classmates and a journal for personal reflection – is intended to develop students' cognitive development, enhancing their

self-awareness of emotional responses as readers. The journal offers an important way of recording responses to their own creative writing submissions to the workshop, and permits a method of reflective appreciation and implementing feedback. Additional support for this form of reflective writing is found in Kellogg's study of writing processes which asserts that different forms of working memory are called upon by reading and editing.³⁵

Hunt's ideas of transformative learning via autobiography can be useful in developing resilience in class-based writing exercises. Expressive writing exercises that challenge writers to engage reflexively with their personal narratives can positively assist with the intersection of creative work and memory. Nazarian and Smyth's assertion of an experiential model by which the 'processing of stressful or traumatic events is guided by schemas' enables an individual to re-experience stress-related thoughts, emotions and sensations, and come to see the problem in a new –and less threatening – manner'³⁶ can be applied in terms of writing exercises that enable the writer to revisit and reconstruct personal narratives. Writing about life events in third person has been established as offering 'cognitive reconstruct[ion] and release of somatic tension'.³⁷ In addition to class-based writing exercises, regular freewriting can create a space for upsetting memories and ideas that arise. In my own teaching practice, I have found it additionally useful to generate class discussion about subconscious activity during a creative period, which can be distressing, distracting, or exhausting. Encouraging students both to freewrite in a personal journal and keep a record of dreams can enhance objectivity and, over a longer term, boost critical thinking of their creative process. Julia Cameron's proposal of 'creative recovery' via morning pages – or three pages of writing, longhand, each morning, has proved successful amongst my own students in enabling them to more fully negotiate their process, their development of a writing practice, and their identities as writers.³⁸

Whilst it may be regarded as 'outside' the teaching of creative writing, the so-called 'business' aspect of creative writing is crucial in preparing students for what Girgorenko *et al* call 'the emotional consequences of writing'.³⁹ Rejection can be catastrophic for those writers who have not developed sufficient emotional resilience or who have failed to regard their work as separate from their identity. In my experience as a student, the 'business' of creative writing involved crafting letters to agents and publishers, or speaking with editors about market trends – and yet a major element of this 'business' is dealing with the often dramatic shifts that occur between

investing emotionally in a creative piece and in making it a public, and perhaps commercial, enterprise. Classroom-based discussion of these shifts has been particularly helpful for my own students, as has drawing upon the science world in enabling writers to re-conceptualise ‘failure’ and ‘rejection’. Scientists conduct experiments with the expectation that a high percentage will fail. A similarly experimental approach to writing – alongside cognitive recognition of the emotional contexts of creative writing ‘experiments’ – may serve students very well when it comes to publishing their work.

Of course, resilience is difficult to assess, and the intended outcomes – increased esteem, self-confidence, the ability to give feedback in a classroom where material may be triggering, the ability to work through the ‘murky waters’ of the subconscious in a positive manner – are tricky to measure. But given the popularity of creative writing courses and the highly personal manner in which students approach the discipline, it would seem that an address of resilience is necessary in creative writing programmes. Further research remains to be done into the benefits of ‘therapeutic’ approaches within creative writing programmes and pedagogy; however, a model which allows the student-writer to engage cognitively with the self on the page, and which prioritizes the wellbeing and cognitive development of the writer will facilitate empowerment and better writing. The long-term outcome is in the manner of what Dreyfus and Kelly describe here:

‘The task of the craftsman is not to *generate* the meaning, but rather to *cultivate* in himself the skill for *discerning* the meanings that are *already there*’ (their emphasis).⁴⁰

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