

The 'Wicked' problem of developing critical understanding in Creative Writing students.

Philippa Holloway.

ORCID: 0000-0002-3330-6909

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Abstract

The subject benchmarks statements published in 2016 state that 'Creative Writing (CW) is a diverse and still developing subject [...] underpinned by a growing body of research and pedagogical thinking.' (QAA, 2016) and as such writers who teach, and teachers who write, are actively engaging in reflective practice to try and bridge the gap between what has previously been viewed as a solitary and perhaps 'mysterious' practice (Waitman and Plucker, 2009), and what is now demanded in terms of theoretical and critical knowledge of that practice by students.

As a writer and teacher of writing, I have become aware of similarities between Problem Based Learning (PBL) and the praxis approach I use. Seeking out literature on this connection however, has revealed that while many other disciplines (English/History/Sociology) are using CW as a PBL tool, it is little discussed within the subject itself. This study is the first tentative stage in a wider consideration of whether openly exploring creative writing acts and actions as a series of problem solving exercises can help students further understand their own creative practice, and develop not only their creative work but their ability to reflect and analyse their practice through academic research.

Keywords: Pedagogy, Problem based learning, Reflective practice, Praxis.

The Problem with Creative Writing...

...is a wicked one: inventing characters, settings, and plots to express, through narrative, the central idea of a story, while 'utilising knowledge of grammar, literary form and writing processes is a complex, ill-structured type of problem,' in which every artistic and intellectual decision affects all other elements simultaneously (Treckles, 2012; Jonassen and Hung, 2008). I can't tell my students to memorise facts, or explain a standard research method or presentational style and award marks if they conform to it, because there aren't any. I see CW as a 'Wicked Problem' because the actions involved in writing 'often involve high levels of uncertainty, undergo change over time, and require the coordination of a wide range of expertise' (Lake, Fernando and Eardley, 2016), and while the solution, the result of these actions, can be good or bad, they cannot be true or false. Teaching CW involves guided reading of creative and critical texts, listening to ideas and discussing what works and what doesn't, encouraging engagement with the world and experimentation and play with language, form, meaning, structure and content; and all the time I'm hoping that, with the right balance of guidance and freedom, students will make the connections necessary for a 'story' to develop.

Additionally, though, they must reflect on and critically discuss how those connections were made and how they might use this knowledge to develop their understandings of creative practice. Just as my own writing and academic research is rooted in practice, so must theirs be: 'for Creative Writing students, knowledge is embedded in individual experience, internalised and practiced through immersion in creative writing acts and actions, in the methodology of creative writing – the study of writing through writing.' (Donnelly, 2015). There are no right and wrong answers; what works and what doesn't is more of a slow and nuanced series of processes, individual to each writer.

And yet, while I 'keep reminding students that the point is always the writing itself, not mastery of classroom procedures and power relations' (Brophy, 2008), managing expectations that I have all the answers and turning them instead towards the knowledge they themselves generate through their own actions as writers and readers, there are always some students who passively expect to be instructed in what and how to write, or who rely on inspiration and fuzzy external forces to spur them to action, and then find it difficult to identify or discuss their practice in any depth beyond 'I was inspired by...' or 'I had an idea...'

Myths surrounding creative writing, and creativity in general, have abounded through history and are deeply rooted in global cultures. From Plato's assertion in the 4th Century BC that writers express their words not through skill, but when inspired and possessed, (Murray and Dorsch, 2000), through Freud asserting that 'writers often give no...good explanation for their creative behaviour – shrouding the creative writing process in an intriguing veil of mystery,' (Freud, in Forgeard et al, 2012) to more recent academic studies, in which writer/teachers claim 'writing comes... from darkness...[and] some darkness must remain dark,' (May, 2010), or that they personally 'don't think about [creativity] at all. Not for a moment.', Pullman (2012) and even 'I don't know why or how I write...and suspect that if I knew, I wouldn't be able to do it anymore,' (Guest, 2004), the acts of creative writing are often described as enigmatic, unexplainable, and rooted in talent, inspiration or mysterious external forces. These persistent beliefs and preconceptions dog both academic arguments about whether creative writing can be taught (Bizzarro, 2004), and more importantly the preconceptions of students before and during study in HE.

This is problematic for several reasons, the main one being that in the UK, and beyond, students' creative work is accompanied by 'research [which] investigates the process, the genre, and/or the discipline, and results in the contribution of original (new) knowledge to the field of study' (Kroll, 2009). Indeed, the UK benchmarks statement states that graduates should have a 'critical awareness of the context in which writing is produced and how individual practice relates to that of predecessors and contemporaries, peers and established practitioners' and a knowledge of 'the interplay between practice, criticism and theory within their chosen form(s)' (QAA, 2016). Therefore, as a teacher of Creative Writing, my role is to encourage a deeper critical engagement with the actions and contexts involved in writing creatively.

Bean, (2011) says that 'writing is more than a necessary communication skill, more than skillful management of grammar, spelling and punctuation.' In addition to these basic techniques, writing promotes critical thinking: 'when students write, their writing and their thinking improve. When they struggle with word choice, sentence structure and paragraph composition, thinking occurs. Writing forces the clarification of ideas, and the logical assembly of reasons.' For creative writing studies, a metacognition of this process is usually demanded in assessments.

In my institution, undergraduate students begin Kroll's 'research training' from level four, with each creative submission accompanied by a reflection on their own developing practice. These are expected to cover one or more creative practice issues in direct relation to the associated creative submission. This could include analysis of their research approach, the genre within which they are writing and the audience they are writing for, the influence of other creative texts (intertextuality), advice or analyses of other writers about their own working practice and reflections on writing, and often technical problems and solutions they have discovered within the act of writing. This ensures that they are not only developing their communication methods and ability to write towards a specific goal (be that industry specific or audience tailored), but can hone their analytical and academic skills to develop a strong research ability and transferable skills for the wider workplace. The depth at which these reflections are expected to consider and synthesize their own findings with the wider contexts of CW scholars increases year on year, therefore should these students choose to move into post-graduate studies, they already understand the kind of artistic and theoretical questions that would underpin their research.

In second year fiction, the reflection is specifically focused on the short story. The short story as a narrative form is complex, a 'genre in its own right,' (Atkinson, 2003) allowing great freedom for experimentation and linguistic flair while still demanding internal structure or logic. Students are given, throughout the module, opportunities to read and analyse, from a mechanics point of view, a variety of short stories, articles written by writers on writing, and critical essays, to gain an understanding of the form's elasticity and boundaries, structures and poetics. They also engage in writing exercises to generate their own response to these concepts, and receive peer and tutor editorial review on their developing creative and reflective submissions.

In 2016/17 I observed a small number of students who, while critically engaged with studied texts and theory, seemed either overwhelmed by the task of completing the summative creative assignment –to write a complete 3000-word short story- or unsure of how to begin the task. When questioned, several students commented that they were waiting for 'inspiration to strike' or that they didn't know where to begin, how to turn an idea into a story.

In contrast, the most successful students could synthesise the knowledge gained from all activities into a personalised strategic plan for composing their own creative piece, and understanding their own developing poetics. These students also benefited most from the peer appraisal sessions as they had identified early on the kind of story they wanted to write, and had begun problem solving in terms of what and where to research regarding the aesthetic angle, themes, etc.

As a reflective practitioner myself, I recognise the value of meta-cognitive analysis regarding the problems and solutions I negotiate within my own writing; possessing an evolving knowledge of creative theory and an appropriate lexis of terms to express my own practice empowers me to take ownership of my creative and critical development.

These observations led me to consider whether embedding the notion of writing as problem solving would not only kick start the process for those writers relying on some external and indiscernible force to fuel them, but would nurture the metacognitive skills necessary for successful reflection and theoretical engagement. The fact that other disciplines have begun to adopt CW tasks as problem based learning exercises (Van Ostrum et al, 2006) further encouraged me to look at how openly sharing the techniques of PBL with my students might aid not only their creative practice, but their ability to examine how their own creative practice functioned.

Methodology: This was a small action based study, taking place over the course of two semesters within the level 5 core fiction module. The module is structured to focus on the form, poetics and contexts of the short story in the first semester, and composition, peer review and solitary writing/editing/redrafting for summative assessment in the second semester.

- Students were given a questionnaire near the end of the first semester, to gather qualitative data on self-perceptions regarding writing ability, confidence in approaching the summative assessment task and their beliefs regarding tacit knowledge of creative processes.
- A workshop then introduced the students to the tenets of PBL, explaining the notion of a 'wicked problem', giving clear examples of the nature of such problems, and setting practical

tasks that illustrated the concept. From this they were asked to apply the concept to creative writing and share knowledge within a tutor-led group discussion.

- Groups were then sent away to collaborate to identify the 'problems' the writer might face when beginning a creative work, and potential methods of research/practice to overcome these. These were reviewed and developed in group tutorials.
- During the second semester, students worked alone to produce creative work. During peer review sessions, they were reminded to consider the 'problems' and potential 'solutions' present in the work, and to reflect on their own practice during the editorial stage of composition.
- To embed the PBL approach and encourage focussed reflective practice in each subsequent seminar/workshop I used language introduced in the dedicated workshop throughout the rest of the module.
- The final data was gathered at the end of the module, using a questionnaire to assess whether students felt this approach had improved their self-awareness of personal practice and the development of their creative and reflective submissions.

Sampling strategy: The participants were recruited from my tutor group only. Out of the eighteen students in the group, nine were present for the required sessions, participated in all activities, and completed both surveys. The responses from these nine inform the study.

Data Analysis: Data gathered was qualitative in nature, comparing self-perception regarding awareness of creative actions and confidence in ability to complete a creative piece before and after planned changes to my teaching approach. Focus here is primarily on statements from the questionnaire, however I was vigilant to notice any changes regarding language used in class activities or soft-curriculum engagement, and to compare observations informally with the experiences of other tutors on the same module.

'Magic just happens, it comes from somewhere, I have very little control over it!'

The module starts slowly, with stories. Stories about ourselves. 'Tell me three things about yourself, two truths and a lie...' It's getting-to-know-you-time. I tell my students I've been in a Zombie movie, once brought a man back from the dead, and recently visited one of the most radioactive places on earth. They tell me about being locked in foreign toilets, being attacked by wild dogs in Africa, losing hands to sharks. We are testing each other's abilities to tell convincing tales, weighing up the likelihoods and the evidence, and they've no idea I've already started teaching, and that they've already started problem solving.

Telling a convincing tale demands a multifaceted approach – the character, world and action must, no matter how fantastical, be plausible within the boundaries of the story. The content must make sense regarding itself and its internal structure. Readers, and students eager to make a good impression, can detect a plot hole or narrative flaw from ten paces, and won't be afraid to draw attention to it. The students weigh up the stories I've told against what they already know about me. 'You have a child, you'd never go to a dangerous place...that's the lie.' I counter it with one word: 'Research'. I confess to telling three truths, and we begin discussing how we worked out the lies and truths, who was best at lying – telling stories – and how they convinced us. We do a short writing exercise and discuss what works and what doesn't, and why, and I encourage them to take notes. The first week is easy. They don't know they are learning.

Near the end of the autumn semester the first set of questionnaires goes out, asking them how confident they feel about producing a three-thousand-word short story, and if they agree with the statement 'I don't know how or why I write, but I suspect that if I knew I wouldn't be able to do it

Table 1: Data results – Questionnaire 1		
Confidence in ability to complete task		
Low	Medium	High
78%	11%	11%
'I don't know how or why I write'		

anymore.' The majority agree¹. When I look at their responses, I find statements like 'I feel like knowing why you write could take some of the magic away,' 'the story just comes from somewhere and it feels like I have very little control over it,' and 'it just happens'. These don't

¹ See table 1: 'data results questionnaire 1'.

surprise me – entrenched myths concerning inspiration and writing, combined perhaps with previous experiences of entering into Csikszentmihalyi's 'flow' state (1996)—an experience of concentration or complete absorption with the activity at hand and the situation, often described as 'being in the zone' or 'in the groove' - when writing, are powerful influences on self-awareness. Indeed, one of the descriptors for the flow state is absolute concentration on the task at hand, and therefore it doesn't lend itself to meta-cognitive awareness of what is happening during the state, as the mind is fully absorbed in the 'doing'. This state is also most likely to be experienced during the first draft of a creative piece, where focus is on the exploration of ideas and there is rapid response to the developing story – and during which positive associations with the writing process will be formed (Waitman & Plucker, 2009). Encouraging the 'flow' is a part of my teaching pedagogy – by getting students to write freely, without any need to consider artistic intent or responsibility, they can give themselves over to the 'free-play of language and imagery and sound,' and it can be a 'powerful way to stimulate surprise, especially early on in the process,' (Davidson & Fraser, 2006) - but only a part. The hard work begins when you read it back and start editing, and understanding the complex web of language, literature, creative theory and technique all must kick in to support to manipulation of the piece into something that achieves the writers' goals, whatever they might be.

Among the expected references to mysticism, though, there are also responses like 'you should know why you write,' 'I love to spot patterns and styles in my writing and learn different ways of editing. I think it's useful to get to know your own processes', and 'an awareness of it [how and why] helps me identify where to improve,' as well as the hopeful 'I feel that if I understood why and how I write it might actually help me.'

Students were also asked to list their perceived strengths and weaknesses as writers. Regarding weaknesses, common themes included fear of writer's block, or the blank page, not being 'creative enough' to be a writer, 'waiting to be inspired' due to lack of motivation, still feeling that writing is 'recreational' and therefore not prioritising it on their timetable, and not being able to write to order or force the writing to come. Strengths included editing ability and finishing a piece to conclusion, although these statements didn't explain whether this was at a proofreading level (basic grammar, spelling and punctuation) or as part of the artistic expression (theme, characterisation, imagery etc.).

The findings from these initial questionnaires supported my theory that while these students had already undergone a year of CW study, and produced creative and critical work, often to a high standard, they were still, when asked, reverting to a safe position of 'not looking' at what they were doing for fear of disturbing it – an approach that as previously mentioned, has been perpetuated for centuries by writers and scholars alike. In addition, by 'not looking', they were perhaps suffering from a fear of the unknown – what if the magic doesn't happen? What if inspiration doesn't strike? - and perhaps even relying on basic techniques such as simple editing, to reassure them that they had some level of control on at least an aspect of their practice.

Setting fire to the Genius in the Room

'Put your books and pencils away, it's time to play with fire.' Nothing gets the attention of a group of young adults better than a box of matches in the wrong place.

The myths surrounding writers and where their work emerges from are closely linked to notions of genius (Weisberg, 1986). Of course, a 'genius' can be born in any field of study, but the myth of genius is embedded in similar notions of magic and un-knowable talent to that of the writer's practice. I ask the students what they think a genius is, and they give the answers I expect: someone special, someone with abilities beyond comprehension and beyond the reach of most people. I ask if they think the best writers are geniuses and they think for a moment, and nod. I ask if they think *they* are geniuses and they giggle nervously, shaking their heads and frowning. I tell them that of course they aren't. There is a shocked silence. It's an insult, even though I have only repeated their own beliefs. I then tell them that this is because there is no such thing, and therefore anything a genius achieves, they can too. Relief, intrigue. They can't keep their eyes off the matches.

I begin to debate the nature of the 'wicked problem' with the students. But explaining only goes so far, after all 'what the student does is actually more important in determining what is learned than what the teacher [says]' (Sheull, in Biggs, 1993). So, I use research which deconstructs both behaviourist notions that 'nothing a person does is truly creative' but is either a generalising response to old situations or a random act, and the entrenched belief that creativity is an act of genius (Weisberg,

1986) as the basis for an activity designed to explore creativity (and by extension creative writing) as a series of problem solving processes.

To allow the students to generate their own knowledge of creativity in problem solving they are divided into two groups and asked to complete a task, as a team, that involves a candle, a box of matches and some thumb tacks. The challenge is to attach the candle to the wall, and light it (or in this case, to pretend to light it!). Talking aloud to identify and solve the problems this task presented them with is central to the exercise. Both groups manage, with varying degrees of success, to complete the task, and are then asked to explain the series of thoughts and problem-solving strategies they'd employed, and make links between each 'creative leap' in the process. By embedding the learning in in a practical activity, I showed them not only how problem solving and creativity are linked, but also how they can generate knowledge of their own creative actions by considering aloud and reflecting on their practice.

To solidify and extend this learning, and to ensure it was applied to their subject, the rest of the session was devoted, in true PBL form, to getting 'teams of students to explore the problem and identify learning issues based on prior knowledge and the problem to be solved' (Beaumont, 2017) with specific focus on identifying the problems writers face when beginning a task (such as being asked to write a short story), and how these problems inter-relate. They were then tasked with working together over the next few weeks to find potential solutions both through the actions of writing creatively and through metacognitively considering these actions, and further discussing them.

The light is fading, where are the matches?

Tutorials give me chance to check on the progress made in finding solutions to their identified problems. We discuss, with direct reference to the assessment task at hand, their progress in problem solving. One group produces a short but well researched booklet outlining the problems and possible solutions they'd found through research of published texts on creative practice and craft, the rest have generally begun to revert to talking about their approach in woolly terms. I remind them that rather than waiting for inspiration to strike, they might consider what interests them more generally, and then start writing

freely about that topic to generate 'starter dough' for further actions (Munro, 1982), thus scaffolding the creative actions that might lead to the flow state and/or advanced editing to complete a piece. I try not to feel too despondent.

'I know what you're doing...except I don't.'

Peer review during the second half of the module gives students the chance to read the work in progress and provide structured feedback – essentially identifying problems with the work from both an artistic and technical perspective - and also to receive such feedback as an impetus for self-reflective practice and further problem solving. These sessions are designed to create 'an environment that facilitates interdependent learning through a process of dialogue (Bruffee, 1999; Jaques, 2000; Falchikov, 2001 all cited in Greenbank, 2003), and are part of the praxis approach I favour. This is modelled on McLoughlin's subject specific learning cycle (developed from Bloom's taxonomy and Kolb's learning cycle)(McLoughlin, 2008) and ties in with my previous advice to students about generating content, as it begins with action, followed by analysis and discussion, reflection and further action, demanding they engage in a cyclic practice of assessing their own creative work. They have strong opinions, and can identify 'problems' in each-other's work, as mentioned at the start of this article, easily. But as I move between groups there are still issues in terms of the way they discuss these problems. I hear things like 'I was inspired by [insert young adult novel title here]' and 'I like this', but little as to *how* they have transmuted their reading of one text into a new one, or *why* the story they like is 'likeable', what it's artistic or technical approach is and how this relates to the reader response.

I begin to wonder if they are reading enough critical work to help them communicate what are to them, still, instinctive responses and actions (Melrose, 2007). As Paul Williams (2013) describes, 'in Creative Writing and other practice-based disciplines, the student's main mode of expression is [a] creative artefact resulting from practice-led research', so perhaps it's natural that they appear to give more merit to the product, rather than the ways and means by which it was produced. Similarly, as Czarniawska and Joerges (1995) point out, 'Planned changes are often sets of ideas which never materialize,' - within the classroom, responding to both peers, tutor and even applying critical

knowledge and problem-solving strategies can lead to editing of a creative text without a deeper understanding of exactly how and why it relates to their learning or generates new knowledge. They are still struggling to express the reasoning, theoretical positioning and contextual nature of their artefacts, perhaps because they are too engaged in the shaping of the artefact itself.

'I don't know what I'm doing...except I do.'

The second set of questionnaires goes out a month before final submission. The timing is to both capture the students before they disappear for the holidays and assessment period, and to utilise the questionnaires as a learning tool. They are encouraged to use copies, if they think it will help them, as the scaffolding for their reflective commentaries.

The first few responses still contain sentences like 'it just comes naturally and on its own, although sometimes it doesn't,' and 'the process of how [I write] seems more unconscious...I just see where the thought takes me.' These represent a persistent passive attitude to creative actions and metacognition of those acts, and the responses match, with no sign of changed perspective, their original responses and the entrenched beliefs so endemic in wider culture.

However, overall there was an increased awareness of their actions and problem-solving abilities², as well as improved confidence levels. Comments such as 'I realise that there are multiple solutions to any of my [story] problems' and in more depth '[the PBL approach] allows me to see each problem I face as a new way to overcome and develop my story: it can always be fixed and altered if it doesn't work,' show that adopting the PBL approach has equipped them with a way into thinking about

the technicalities within their craft, and also with the confidence to take risks: 'it encouraged me to look at my process in a different way and not assume a "one size fits all" approach...I've experimented more.' The shift in understanding from agreeing to a statement asserting a lack of metacognitive

Has the PBL approach improved understanding of creative practice?		
Yes	Unsure	No
78%	0%	22%
'I don't know how or why I write...'		
Agree	Unsure	Disagree
33%	55%	12%

² See table 2: Data results Questionnaire 2

awareness of process, towards being unsure if they agree and demonstrating an increased awareness indicates some level of success.

While there is still an almost automatic return to 'not seeing', for some students the PBL approach has begun to light the way, if only by matchlight.

My problem with teaching Creative Writing...

...is a wicked one. I tweak the way I run one session, and it changes the shape of the message, the perceptions of the students, and my own perception of my practice. There's no right answer.

My intention at the beginning of the study was to 'help students to establish what has been called a 'creative vigilance', a critically creative and creatively critical awareness, which they can bring to their work' (Melrose, 2007). I was aware that this small action based study was unlikely to radically overhaul the students' way of thinking, or solve the many, and often conflicted, issues related to teaching what is still viewed suspiciously as an unteachable subject (Flood, 2014), but I was optimistic that for some, adopting this approach would be the lightbulb that would illuminate a route to successful critical engagement in their own creative practice. The data was measured by a shift in the students' own reflective practice as expressed through the use of critical language in both the questionnaires and in their final summative assessment reflective essays, which exposed further use of critical terms discussed in class, and which, when compared informally with colleagues, were absent in the work of other module groups. That for some of the students there was, figuratively, some light shed, if only that cast by the glow of matches, brief and dull, is not enough to judge the study a success or demand systemic change in our teaching practice.

To analyse this study, critically, is to expose its weaknesses. There are differences between the two responses to the questionnaire: the positioning of the first, early in the module, could have directed their responses as they felt they were not expected to know how and why they write, or how to even begin a short story, this being a new module in a new academic year. The second questionnaire, however, could have been positioned too far from the session in which they could generate personal

knowledge of the PBL approach, and a reversion to more entrenched beliefs could have influenced their responses.

While the initial response to being given freedom to take ownership of their own creative actions and understandings of those actions initially brought a flair of engagement and discussion to the group, the long term effects are subject to stronger forces: as theorists such as Amabile (1996) and Hennessy (2003) have shown, evaluation, reward and deadlines can all be damaging extrinsic motivators in regard to experiential learning, and so whether this approach leads to a change in behaviours and values remains to be seen. As Pegg (2013) states in her recommendations on curriculum reform, 'The intended outcomes of change need to be clearly articulated in relation to the institutional philosophy and approach to learning and teaching.' As such, this research cannot be regarded as an imperative for curriculum change or a systemic shift in pedagogic approach. The experiment needs to be repeated over a longer timeframe and with more subjects, and the results here can't be confirmed without examining attitudes towards critical reflection in level six once this method is absorbed into practice. However, it can be viewed a tentative first step toward further action based studies that might, through the accruing of more data and comparative studies into how and where PBL could be utilised within the curriculum, add to the conversations between scholars and pedagogues in the field of creative arts.

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