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Writing-based interventions: from Communities of Practice to Life Stories

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In this co-authored essay, we present a theory of applied writing practice which recognises that shared workshops and shared experience of writing can create what Etienne Wenger has called communities of practice or CoPs (Wenger 1998: 73). We contend that participation within these workshops is a form of knowledge development, and that the description of what occurs during and as a result of participation leads to knowledge that can be shared. Such shared knowledge, moreover, can be seen to enhance emerging communities of practice through mutually beneficial social learning and further, it may also have impact on organisational adaptability and change.

In Section I, Siobhan Campbell outlines how insights from writing workshops began to be understood by facilitators and participants as in fact developing communities of practice. Drawing on Wenger's definition of CoPs Campbell demonstrates how applying the tenets of Creative Writing as a discipline may generate the three elements Wenger identifies as emblematic: shared repertoires, mutual engagement, and continual (re)negotiation of joint enterprise (Wenger 1998: 73). In Section II, Jensen links these insights on the collaborative and knowledge-generating power of the writing workshop to Michael Polanyi's trope of "indwelling," thus demonstrating how narrated life experience dovetails into and enhances the strength and power of those communities so built.

I

Safe Spaces

The Creative Writing workshop in Higher Education aims to be, in best practice, a "safe space" for students to share early draft work and receive constructive feedback. In order to achieve those aims, protocols are devised and shared by the facilitator and discussed and agreed to by participants. As a result of mutual engagement and the joint enterprise of reading, debate and discussion, a shared repertoire of writing and editing techniques, as well as approaches to skills such as the handling of tone, character and theme, for example, are generated. We have found that this "workshop model" can function similarly outside of HE, enabling diverse constituencies including military veterans and volunteer charity workers in

the UK, social workers in Iraq and rights defenders at Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Lebanon, to collaboratively generate forms of knowledge that have since been shared as publications, exhibitions and reading events (Campbell 2011, 2012; Jensen 2019).

While certain aspects of the writing workshop may change outside of HE (due to differences in desired outcomes, shared aims or literacy levels, for example) several disciplinary tenets of the writing workshop still remain observable. We have found that the workshops conducted in the communities outlined above demonstrate the following:

- the workshop situations, though diverse in terms of locale and constituency, show remarkably similar operational tropes, both to each other and to the HE CW workshop. Participants identify with the developing ‘shared repertoire’, usually by the second workshop.
- the act of collaboratively creating a “safe place” is understood readily by participants as valuing their potential contribution as important, without making pre-judgements on what its value might be. This shared understanding becomes recognisably generative of mutual engagement.
- the inclusive, and bottom-up, approach in which the voice of the participants is as valued as the voice of the convenor, is seen to underpin group-reflection on practice as part *of* that practice, and through this, situates practice as a valuable process in its own right.
- insights, derived from a collaborative endeavour in which the usual structures of power do not apparently pertain, or are temporarily in abeyance, in the writing classroom or group, allows expectations to be changed about what can occur within such a group. It is from here that an adaptability emerges that allows for self-reflexivity and a ‘re-negotiation’ of how what is happening in workshop can be described.

Given that the characteristic elements of Communities of Practice according Wenger include shared repertoires, mutual engagement, and continual (re)negotiation of joint enterprise (Wenger 1998: 73), and taking on board the above observations, it became clear that our workshops might indeed be creating such communities and looking at how these operate might enable insights that could be used in subsequent workshop design.

These observations are amplified further in the sections below, drawing directly on our experience.

Creative writing tenets and Communities of Practice

As outlined above, the tenets ascribed by Wenger to his definition of a Community of Practice relate directly to the tenets of “learning by doing” and practice as “process-based” learning that also characterize Creative Writing as a discipline (Harper et al 2010: *passim*) These tenets also relate directly to learning, or the generation of knowledge, as embedded in our lived experience of participation in the world by acknowledging that, as social beings, active engagement underpins learning.

Having mentioned the links observable between my own experience of facilitating writing workshops and Wenger’s components of a Community of Practice, I will now outline how these elements may come into relation with one and other, thereby creating an emerging coherence as a ‘community’.

Throughout collaboratively developed Expressive Writing projects, workshops, whether with social workers in Lebanon or Iraq or with conflict-affected persons in Northern Ireland, are put in place as the result of a negotiated set of parameters, and co-developed with the hosting organisation, to recognise local and/or cultural needs. In the pre-work for these kinds of writing interventions, there are a set of emerging and mutual interpretations that must occur, of the kind Wenger terms “mutual engagement”. Both Meg Jensen and myself emphasise what we see as essential, which is that the remit of our interventions should always be led by the expertise of those local to the situation; we try to build that kind of responsiveness into our research protocols at every stage. Thus, opportunities for writing practice emerge as a kind of “joint enterprise” in Wenger’s terminology. Moreover, having been put in place, the workshops themselves have to retain the flexibility that characterized their set up. As with the HE CW classroom, the very process of workshoping is a continued negotiated responsiveness. Such responses can range from convenors and participants deciding jointly which exercises to do next or which pathways to take through material, to the whole group swerving away from outlined plans toward more improvised options where the group decides that move to be necessary or beneficial. Though certainly led by the convenor, and informed by pedagogic experience, the workshops we have organized with these diverse communities are nonetheless the result of a collective process, explicitly or implicitly a ‘joint enterprise’.

The place of personal story in process-based learning

In working with UNDP on the SIRI (Support for Integrated Reconciliation in Iraq) project, for instance, we began by organising several workshops in London in advance of our collaboration and in retrospect, these essentially defined the ethos of

how the project itself developed. Present at these initial workshops were Sundus Abbas, Gender Specialist, UNDP, and Catherine Kennedy, UN consultant and former director of the South African History Archive. During the course of our discussions, in attempts to define what the practice should entail, we exchanged mini life stories. We found that characterizing our thinking about this project in terms of where we had come from as researchers and practitioners enabled the self-reflexive and iterative approach we then took to the *Expressive Writing in Dealing with the Past* programme we jointly devised.

For my own part, I come from the fractured island of Ireland and I believe that growing up during the Troubles has formed my ideas about practice itself providing a mechanism to subvert and avoid inherited binaries. Having worked in cross-community groups in Northern Ireland where story telling can quite easily devolve into blaming and shaming, I developed exercises which sought to use the four elements as well as natural phenomena (rivers, plains, seas, mountains) as the starting point for work which might come more from shared human experience of the physical world than from entrenched identities.

These exercises form the basis for Expressive Writing projects, which are then adapted collaboratively for each locale, drawing on our research into how story telling can support cultural cohesion in post-conflict society and also drawing on the cultural, social and political expertise of local stakeholders.

In touching on this with the UNDP representatives, we found much to compare, even though our backgrounds were diverse. Catherine Kennedy spoke of working in areas of South Africa where local tribal affiliations and animosities can threaten to overwhelm any arts participatory initiative. She too found that writing-based work was generative of a shared and emotionally safer approach in group situations. We were reminded of working with Asmaa Al Ameen of INMAA (*sic*) Network for Development, an NGO in Kirkuk, Northern Iraq, and we recounted her insights into how allowing women to come to their safe havens to access legal help had to be preceded by visits to outlying villages to show the menfolk that there was nothing to fear from INMAA and that they could feel comfortable about the womenfolk attending.

These story-based approaches fostered the growth of mutual engagement, and led to the adaptation, through negotiation, of our joint enterprise: the creation of bespoke Expressive Writing training materials for the UNDP's team of female social workers to use in the field with beneficiaries across Iraq. We shared both personal experience and good practice ideas without assuming that the exact same approach would work in all situations. We collectively recognised that in most occasions of writing practice, the work has developed, and is grant-supported, because its supporters

believe that it can somehow reflect upon local social complexities. There's also nearly always a wish for the work to be part of emergent groups that might become sustainable either in terms of what they undertake to do next or in terms of continuing to practice in the same ways. This, coupled with the process-based learning that occurs during the practice itself, can be seen to create several sites of learning by doing, of relationship building, and therefore of mutually beneficial engagement.

Moving on to Wenger's idea of 'shared repertoire', he foregrounds stories, styles, artefacts, tools, discourses and concepts as elements of that repertoire - and while we might immediately think of the pieces of writing produced and shared in workshop as the primary form of this, I would contend that often a more important set of 'shared repertoire' emerges. This would include apparently simple but quite profound understandings of routine (how the convenor puts people at ease, how the workshop time is divided equitably, how all voices are considered important, etc.) that become quite quickly part of shared resources that may allow for further engagement in practice.

In a recent workshop, for example, my opening exercise asked participants to write briefly what 'I want' from the writing practice and also to say 'what we need' as a group to support those individual 'wants'. Their responses included being listened to as well as listening to others, allowing for difficulty (and emotion) should it arise, and also a wish to recognise that the convenors might not always get it right in terms of what we might say in any given situation! Such repertoire becomes part of the self-description of behaviours expected of the group. This may also include events that arise as a result of writing practice which are the surprising, often comedic, occurrences in response to exercises or the suddenly funny but then quite poignant moments of shared experience either within the writing itself or surrounding the writer's articulation of the context of the piece. When asked to complete the exercise 'What I need,' for instance, one participant wrote 'I need my house painted'. Initially feeling that she had 'done the exercise wrong', the group were able instead to express solidarity and encourage her to take off from there in a 'list poem' of aspiration tempered with wryness. Thus, the possibility of tonal play in writing was created by the group working together.

It does seem that when a space is created within practice that values learning- by- doing, the unexpected can be met in spontaneous-seeming ways that are actually part of a developing ability to narrate these happenings as an aspect of the learning, ie. to lend it meaning - precisely because there's an emerging set of practices based on mutual engagement. In this way, 'shared repertoire' comes to mean, in writing-based practice, a kind of ongoing creation of the possibility of emergent meanings

that are not closed off, not required to provide conclusions or the like, but rather valued as one of the resources developed in and through sustained engagement.

Participation-based identity and emerging communities

The writing workshop, in my experience, generates a mutuality of engagement where the ability to engage across the workshop, and respond to the other members, establishes relationships, thus laying the basis for participation-based identity that may have reach well beyond the workshop itself. It does seem that because there is a shared activity, a kind of community enterprise is developed, which means that participants are able to take some responsibility for the group behaviours within the workshop and thereby contribute to its ongoing negotiated emergence as a community. Within the several pursuits toward learning, recognitions occur as to the repertoire and range of what is happening in the group. Because all members' contributions are valued and because of the pre-work done to set up writing practice that dovetails into local needs, there is an emerging capability to make this growing history of practice meaningful both collectively and individually.

The reach of workshop-generated shared repertoire and the kinds of knowledge observable in writing-based forms of interactive practice can also be considered through the CoP prism. Whatever we want to define as 'knowledge', contentious as that is, it seems true to say that workshops convened as part of the wide range of Expressive Writing initiatives provide a context of mutual engagement where discourses on how we learn or on what constitutes knowledge are suspended for a time while the action of participation occurs. Such "knowing in practice" is itself a powerful emergent form of potentially subversive knowledge or learning.

As Sundus Abbas, a partner on the *Dealing with the Past* project, reported to the United Nations, 'In Iraq, the biggest obstacle facing reconciliation is dealing with the past in ways that make a fresh start possible. *Expressive Writing in Dealing with the Past* is a key methodology in achieving community reconciliation in Iraq's post-conflict environment which helps increasing the well-being of groups at risk. Women['s] voices, roles and stories are often ignored; therefore this initiative... reach(es) out to a wider group of women and listens to their stories.' (UNDP Iraq News Centre 2018). Such workshop-generated knowledge, this evidence suggests, may have much to say to our entrenched patterns of operation and/or expectations of what constitutes success across organizations.

What we have certainly discovered, is that allowing for this kind of practice-based knowing can, on the ground, lead to other possibilities of new thinking, to new ways of approaching complex problems, and/or to new groups or communities which themselves may go on to become fully fledged CoPs. Illustrative of this are the responses from those we have trained in the Expressive Writing Workshop

Methodology, from the staff of women's legal charity INMAA in Kirkuk to social workers trained under the auspices of UNDP SIRI project in Baghdad. Through knowledge collaboratively developed in our workshops, INMAA changed their approach to interviewing clients, adopting Expressive Writing techniques. As Beyond Borders, the NGO which facilitated those workshops, reports: 'The project has made clear the extent to which the integration of this approach in the working practices will alter the experience of subjects.' And, after the workshop training of over 100 social workers in Iraq via our UNDP project came this report: 'This will now help women to deal with the past, document their stories, as well as ensure stories of those who...played an active role as peace builders in their communities' (UNDP 2018).

Before these outcomes could occur in any of these settings, however - and this is something we have both had to acknowledge - we had to find a way to build the deep trust necessary to identify shared problems, and the deep interest needed to work together to find novel solutions to those problems. But why and how do these new connections occur? In the next section, Meg Jensen will reflect on critical and theoretical lenses through which the generative power of the workshop may be understood. But first, she will tell you a story.

II

A Story about Storytelling

In the summer of 2015, I participated in a pilot fellowship programme in Edinburgh for women activist peacemakers from Syria, Iraq and Yemen. I was asked to introduce work by Siobhan Campbell and myself on the relationship between trauma, recovery and expressive writing methodologies. My own aim was to look at the potential for future research collaborations with these activists.

I carefully prepared my two hour 'presentation' and 'workshop'. But as I read through the profiles of the women I would be presenting to and their accounts of the daily challenges faced by their communities, I panicked. What did I have to contribute? What did I know about the needs of besieged families in Yemen? How could I support activists engaged in complex peace-building processes in Iraq? How could my research be any help at all to the Syrian activists watching their country be torn apart?

On the first morning, as I waited quietly behind a table watching the fellowship participants arrive, I suddenly thought "I can't do this." Or rather, "I can't do this the way I'd planned to."

And then I froze.

I should explain that I do not, as a rule, improvise. I am one of life's preparers, on time, early to the deadline, well-practised. But that morning in Edinburgh in a room full of women activists who were beginning to shift in their seats I understood that improvise is exactly what I must do.

Without a plan in mind, I moved out from behind the table, and sat down with my hands in my lap. No papers, no presentation. Just me. And I began to talk. I told the women as honestly as I could what had brought me to this room: the story of a violent assault in childhood, of a lifetime of depression and anxiety, but also of love and accomplishment and the life-saving value I had found in storytelling.

I explained how my recent research had enabled me to understand why certain kinds of storytelling had made me feel worse, while other kinds had helped me. I told them that I'd learned that the helpful forms were those that allowed me to express feelings about my past without having to recount every painful detail. I also admitted that there were no guarantees. That I had been helped, not cured. And that nothing works for everyone.

When I finished, one of the women handed me a tissue and at the same time another began to speak, sharing the story of what had brought her to the work she was doing in Yemen. Over the course of the next hour each woman in the room did the same, offering up their painful, ambitious, often traumatic but in every case deeply personal stories of the journeys that resulted in them being in the unlikely setting of a grand 17th century library in a castle outside Edinburgh on this hot August morning. My intimate storytelling had not only evoked empathy, it broke down walls and built bridges.

Rather than the fifteen-minute question and answer session I had prepared, the discussions that began that morning continue today, and the knowledge jointly produced by the women in that room have far surpassed anything I had planned on "teaching" that morning. This experience of collaborative thinking through practice influenced greatly the iterative methodology Siobhan Campbell and I have used ever since in our multiple joint Expressive Writing collaborations.

The Practical Power of Shared Stories

For these collaborative projects to succeed, we found that at some point both convenors and participants would find it necessary to express their stake in the process in story form. In most cases (this being a world of rights work) that stake was often expressed through a personal narrative of difficulty and trouble. Moreover, we found it was precisely such openness and narrative exchange that encouraged and allowed the production of new forms of knowledge. The generative power of that sharing, we now argue, can best be understood as a process of "thinking together": deep learning both provoked and promoted by a joint desire to

dwell intensely on a matter of common interest. In our own experience, life story telling is a powerful research tool that helps to establish, promote and sustain communities of practice that can support and enhance well-being.

The foundations of this process can be illustrated by philosopher Michael Polanyi's formulation of "indwelling" (Polanyi 1966: 195). For Polanyi, "indwelling" is a form of bodily and intellectually harnessed knowledge which, iceberg-like, remains for the most part unsaid: as he famously argued "a wholly explicit knowledge is unthinkable" (1966: 195). Thus, while knowledge may be understood as the "potentiality to act" *knowing* is "using what one knows in practice" (1966: 392). When a group with interests in a common domain practice thinking together, that act enables the indirect sharing of tacit knowledge. This "trans-personal process of shared indwelling" in turn redevelops the tacit knowledge of each member, informing their shared lived practice." Such interactions, of course, require trust (1966: 393). Indwelling and thinking together begin at the seeping edge of vulnerability and openness, after all. When mutually interested individuals tell affecting stories to one another, that practice builds bonds of trust. That trust, in turn, creates the potential for new knowledge and new identities to emerge, for tacit understandings to be unlocked, for meanings re-evaluated and re-negotiated, and finally, for that interlocked knowledge potential formed by thinking together to manifest in *knowing* and using brand new practical solutions and strategies in practice.

In order for shared storytelling to be effective in generating solutions, therefore, it must be improvisational, organic and authentic. When story and insight-sharing develop naturally among interested individuals, it can work in the service of knowledge-growth, throwing open the door to an intimate unknown that can be jointly explored and interrogated. Indeed, the openness/vulnerability/lack of fixity inherent when one offers up personal, affecting narratives enables not only growth in knowledge and understanding but also the potential for changes to one's future sense of self. Intimate storytelling in such contexts, we argue, can become a breaking open, a mode of deep reflection, informed by knowledge collaboratively produced by that process and its enforced openness to new experience, new voices, new ideas. In doing so it enables not (or not just) re-building, but material for developing new structures and forging new bonds.

The Possibility of The New

The writer and theorist Michael Richardson has argued that any act involving a relation between the body and the word - writing, singing, speaking, for example - must also involve a "change-in-transition from one state to another." In that

transitional state, bodies are “most intensely realised,” Richardson observes, as they carry the potential of “becoming something new (Richardson 2013: 155). And the vectors of that potential – the lines that connect *what is now* and *what could become* are affects” (2013: 155). In this way, within any encounter between bodies – whether mother and child, “philosopher and cultural construct, writer and text,” Richardson notes, “there resides the possibility of the new. New potential, new forms, new bodies” (2013: 156). Our Expressive Writing initiatives have shown that the act of sharing intimate self-stories offers just such possibilities “of the new” – as relations between the bodies and words of those gathered transition from what is to what could be.

Similarly, communication theorist Brian Massumi contends that emotion-laden sharing of any kind can be understood as an affecting performance that provides what he calls a “seeping edge,” intersecting actual feeling and its articulated performance. And it is at these edges, Massumi notes, where potential “is found” (2012: 43). In our own experience, the potential engendered by emotion-laden narrative sharing in rights-advancement communities has been positive, active, and solution-seeking. Other research has shown, that the sharing of personal stories across a group with similar aims and experiences may not always be beneficial. Indeed, in some post-conflict, post-disaster contexts, narrative sharing may work to forge the establishment of pathologized group identities.

The work of clinical psychologist Thomas Degloma, for example, has demonstrated that suffering communities often form “trauma carrier groups.” These groups develop when “a broad pool of individuals link their personal stories to a shared traumatic reality.” By linking their own narrative of suffering to the communal one, Degloma observes, trauma carrier groups provide “a means for otherwise separate individuals and communities to establish a sense of common need and shared identity” (Degloma 2009: 107). Degloma warns that the discourse of shared stories in these groups tends to highlight “similarities in the dynamics and consequences of an expanding variety of otherwise distinct events,” (2009: 107) thereby spreading and generalizing “a vocabulary of victimization” (2009:115). That shared vocabulary in turn increases the size of the carrier group and promotes, rather than mitigates, each individual’s psychological suffering (2009: 115). In this way, Degloma argues, the sharing of stories of painful experience produces “affective solidarity” by “providing discursive tools that a growing population of individuals and communities can use to identify with trauma and its consequences” (2009:117.) But by doing so, these trauma carrier groups mask the reality that most individuals who undergo a traumatic event will *not* develop a long-term traumatic disorder (2009: 117). The formation of trauma carrier groups through storytelling, he warns, “makes it possible for virtually anyone to establish their connection to a traumatic event and

consequently explain their psychological suffering” through that lens, however erroneously (2009: 117).

Degloma’s research suggests, therefore, that in order to avoid these unhelpful outcomes, a balance must be struck between the promotion of an “affective solidarity,” elicited by the sharing of intimate stories with strong emotional content and sensitivity to the discrete emotional boundaries necessary for avoiding the stasis of shared victim identity. That balancing element can be found in the active and interactive engagement promoted by Communities of Practice (CoPs).

By definition, a CoP is a group of individuals who share interest in a specific topic, and “gain a greater degree of knowledge on that topic through regular joint experimentation – the practice” (Musteen et al 2018: 3). In settings both physical and virtual, the community, comprising the relationships among members and their sense of belonging and engagement, share a defined area of common inquiry (domain) and set about generating new knowledge about that domain through *practice*: collaboratively devised and shared “knowledge, methods, stories, cases, tools and documents” (Serrat 2017: 581). New learning “entails an investment of identity and a social formation of a person” (Pyrko et al 2017: 389). Communities of Practice provide sites wherein this investment and formation is enabled, with the result that people “mutually guide each other through their understanding of the same problems in their area of mutual interest” (2017: 389). Successful CoPs require “a view of knowledge sharing” where knowledge is not transferred in a “literal sense like an object” but is instead “re-recreated by knowers during those very acts of knowing” (2017: 395). A spontaneous “collaborative learning process of ‘thinking together’” and the consequent indirect sharing of “tacit knowledge” is, research shows, “what essentially bring a Community of Practice to life and not the other way around (2017: 389).

A CoP, therefore, involves “trans-personal processes of thinking together” in which learning entails “an investment of identity in the social context” (2017: 390). Learning happens because these acts of thinking together occur “under non-routine problematic circumstances”: the outcome of the practice enacted by these communities, the solutions and new approaches their discussions generate, *matters* deeply to them (2017: 390). By contrast, CoPs which have been purposefully “set up” in order to “gain knowledge as an output” in business settings for example, often fail, as they ignore the requirement for “learning processes that happen ‘in practice,’” (2017: 390) through a shared set of “frameworks, ...language, stories and documents” (Wenger et al 2002). Research demonstrates that learning that occurs in this manner does not, or not only, involve sharing one’s individual understandings, but participation in a collaborative “(re-)negotiation” of the “meaning of experience” (Pyrko et al 2017: 390). That re-negotiation through practice thus leads both to a

communal repertoire and expertise (Wenger 2002) and to a new subject identity as member of a community engaged in the meaning-making practice of *thinking together* – something Creative Writing teachers readily recognise.

From Edinburgh to Belfast, from Kirkuk to Baghdad and from London to Beirut, our research has found that by breaking ourselves open and making ourselves vulnerable through the powerful medium of life story-telling, we demonstrate our interest in finding effective solutions to problems and our engagement in the joint enterprise of ongoing negotiation to arrive at those solutions. Understandings developed in the HE CW classroom along with the practice of life storytelling were thus the first step in the spontaneous creation of Communities of Practice. These CoPs, with their sharing of tacit knowledge, interlocked indwelling, collaboration, adaptation, spontaneity, and improvisation continue to generate both new “unknowns” and practice-based approaches. As writers and educators, moreover, we have clearly seen how the methodologies we’ve developed in the HE writing classroom can be adapted to have profound impact in community settings, especially when there’s an initial ethical acknowledgment that our own ‘life story’ may be our first and primary arena of ‘practice’ and of self-reflection.

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