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Liminality and process: strategies for the creative writing classroom

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Abstract
Jeanette Winterson’s Gut Symmetries ‘collapsed’ on her three times during the writing process and she had to throw away substantial drafts. In a Paris Review interview (1997) she states: ‘You really have to have faith the—and it is a question of faith—and you do have to believe, because there is no other way ... There is nothing to say that because you have covered pages in the past that you will cover them in the future. Or that they will be any good. There are no guarantees.’ This can be confronting enough for established writers; how do you teach this to early writers? How do issues of process and liminality sit within the context of tertiary subject learning outcomes? Creative writing pedagogues are subject to the restraints of providing a coherent class structure and this can make it difficult to move writers towards the discomfort of liminality—and yet there are strategies teachers can use to engage students with complications of process. This essay will examine writer interviews and accounts of process before outlining strategies I’ve used within the creative writing classroom to help students track their own processes as they face into writing and revision.

Keywords
craft, creative writing in literature courses, liminality, process, teaching, Writing

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Liminality and process: strategies for the creative writing classroom

Jeanette Winterson’s *Gut Symmetries* ‘collapsed’ on her three times during the writing process and she had to throw away substantial drafts. In a *Paris Review* interview (1997) she states:

> You really have to have faith then—and it is a question of faith—and you do have to believe, because there is no other way. There is nothing objective about this. It is faith and it is belief. There is nothing to say that because you have covered pages in the past that you will cover them in the future. Or that they will be any good. There are no guarantees.

There may be no guarantees, but one would think that as the writer gains experience, their narrative ‘toolkit’ grows and they have more strategies and experience to draw on when complications of craft arise. However, writer Tobias Wolff dispels this hope, saying: ‘After a while you begin to understand that writing well is not a promised reward… No, every time you do it you’re stepping off into darkness and hoping for some light’ (2004). In his letters, Romantic poet John Keats writes about negative capability as: ‘… when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts, without any irritable reaching after fact and reason…’ (1947: 72). This can be confronting enough for established writers; how do you teach this to early writers? How do issues of process and liminality sit within the context of tertiary subject learning outcomes? Creative writing pedagogues are subject to the restraints of providing a coherent class structure and this can make it difficult to move writers towards the discomfort of liminality – and yet there are strategies teachers can use to engage students with complications of process. This essay will examine writer interviews and accounts of process before outlining strategies – student-centric lectures, workshopping and draft-sharing – that can be used within the creative writing classroom to help students track their own processes and consider the nebulous terrain of faith, liminality and trial and error as they face into writing and revision.

Process and the liminal – getting words on the page

Many authors describe the writing process as fraught and unknowable. For instance, critically acclaimed author Jean Rhys stated that she never wrote when she was happy and when she did write, it was a tiring struggle (1979): ‘If you're really in the mood to write, you write
without apparently wanting to. But it doesn't always happen that way’. That is, the mood may strike but it can be difficult to pin down and does not adhere to conscious intention in a clearly delineated way. When interviewed about *Gut Symmetries*, Winterson agreed that writing the book was an ‘uphill climb’ (1997): ‘When it’s written, of course, it could never have been written any other way. You just think, What was all the fuss about? Yes, it was difficult.’ But when a student-writer faces into a project, they do not have a history as a successful writer to draw upon. If they reach an impasse, it can be difficult to gauge how seriously to take it – is this just a matter of confidence or are there larger structural and thematic problems with the work? Winterson compares the writing process to the act of stoking a fire.

To start with you must tend it very carefully; it won’t burn anything you throw on it. By the time it’s a big blaze you can chuck old tires and sofas on it and it will burn. But to start with, that will just put it out.

As she was writing *Gut Symmetries*, she kept throwing too much ‘unwieldy, unsuitable material’ before the project was ‘blazing’, and this meant she had to backtrack.

I would have to start the whole thing painfully again with little twigs and bits of paper, and nurse it and make it go until I got to that point where I thought, Right, I’ll just chuck the lot on there and it will be incandescent.

One difficulty with this process, in light of the pedagogical, is that it often takes experience – something early writers don’t have – to tend the fire. On one hand, the writer needs faith they are capable of fire-tending but they also need the awareness to know when to backtrack and start again. The writing process is often two-fold: writers need to face the blank page to capture an early draft, and they need to understand how to revise that draft. I will discuss these each separately, in light of pedagogical strategies I have used in an effort to make these stages more accessible for students.

Turning a blank page into a story demands an encounter with the liminal. Defined here, the liminal operates as the time and space between ‘what was’ and ‘what is next’ – the moment the fire catches and the writer finds momentum. The moment the writing process begins, and the writer moves from idea to written artefact. I use the language ‘dropping in’ to describe the experience – ‘dropping in’ to the world of the text. Education theorists Ray Land, Julie Rattray and Peter Vivian (2014) describe the liminal space as an encounter and integration with something new. This holds for the creative process as well: in committing to the experience of writing, we encounter the newly written text. However, navigating the
liminal, and the writing process more generally, isn’t always a clear-cut, linear experience that can be willed to success. Plotting a successful short story is a different enterprise to plotting a well-argued essay. Will and conscious intention can sometimes impede one’s success in the creative writing endeavour. As writer Andre Dubus III says:

I’ve learned over the years to free-fall into what’s happening. What happens then is, you start writing something you don’t even really want to write about. Things start to happen under your pencil that you don’t want to happen, or don’t understand. But that’s when the work starts to have a beating heart (62).

He argues against thinking too much in those early stages:

There’s a profound difference between making something up and imagining it. You’re making something up when you think out a scene, when you’re being logical about it. You think, “I need this to happen so some other thing can happen.” There’s an aspect of controlling the material that I don’t think is artful. I think it leads to contrived work, frankly, no matter how beautifully written it might be (62).

This idea of the subconscious at work or the unconscious influence is a common theme in discussions about the writing process. As novelist Kathryn Harrison states: ‘For me, writing is a process that demands cerebral effort, but it’s also one informed by the unconscious. My work is directed by the needs of my unconscious’ (110). In the context of her classroom, one of Harrison’s most repeated phrases is: ‘Please stop thinking’ because ‘people really write better without thinking, by which I mean without self-consciousness’ (111). This involves relinquishing control. Dubus III supports this assertion when he says: ‘…characters will come alive if you back the fuck off’ (62). Smiley errs on the side of letting the first draft take shape without the overseeing eye of the internal editor. She states: ‘…you cannot be judging yourself as you write the first draft—you want to harness that unexpected energy, and you don’t want to limit the possibilities of exploration. You don’t know what you’re writing until it’s done’ (252). And writer Amy Tan says she doesn’t ‘decide what to write and carry it out.’ Rather, she describes the process as groping her way toward something, ‘not even knowing what it is until I’ve arrived’ (111).

So how do we help students face the prospect of ‘groping’ towards stories, scripts and poems? How do we support them in facing into the complexities of the creative process? Drawing on Robert French, management scholars Joanna Crossman and Vijayta Doshi state:

The organizational spaces for not knowing and negative capability are unlikely to flourish in contexts where … a societal and organizational culture is dominated by targets, deadlines, control, and performativity. When organizations perpetuate a one sided [sic], negative view of not knowing, development of negative capability is
stigmatized and opportunities to learn about what is not known or for new thoughts and ideas to emerge are lost (2015: 3).

The nature of the classroom is one where targets (learning outcomes), deadlines, control and performativity are all relevant – so making a space for negative capability, where students are allowed the unknowingness of the liminal process, runs counter to the very educational structures in which we operate. Due to space constraints, this article will not critique the nature of criteria-based assessments or the use of due dates – though undoubtedly there is scope for that discussion. Instead, I will discuss strategies I’ve used within the structure of the classroom to encourage students to consider process and the liminal.

One way to foster an engagement with the liminal is to ask students to articulate their writing processes. At the University of Wollongong, in Australia, where I teach, practice-based creative writing subjects are divided into two modes of delivery. There is a lecture (one hour) and an accompanying tutorial (two hours), where discussion and workshopping take place. All students taking the class are expected to attend the lecture and are then divided into smaller groups (usually between 20-26 students) per tutorial (for a discussion regarding Australian workshop sizes, see Cosgrove 2018). The specific subject I targeted, CACW390 Creative Writing Major Project, is a capstone subject with third-year creative writing Bachelor of Creative Arts students and high-performing Bachelor of Arts students across poetic, narrative and dramatic forms. It is also twelve credit points (double that of a standard subject) and meets for two lectures and two tutorials per week (for a total of six hours per student per week). Lectures are often focused on craft-based topics – such as plot, character development, use of language, etc. In an effort to help students think about their writing processes, I changed one lecture topic to ‘Writing Processes and Stamina’. Given during the Covid pandemic, the lecture was held online synchronously, with the request that student cameras be turned on. I began by citing prominent writers (such as Haruki Murakami, Toni Morrison, Barbara Kingsolver, Claire Messud and Roald Dahl) and their writing rituals and practices. Then, in an effort to upset Paulo Freire’s ‘banking model’ (1972) I asked students specific questions about their own rituals and writing practices. Students responded verbally as well as via the Zoom ‘chat’ function – which meant multiple students and conversations could take place simultaneously. Questions included (but were not limited to):

Does anyone write first thing in the morning?
When is the best time of day to write?
When are you the most productive?
When do you write the most?
What strategies do you use for facing the blank page?
Does anyone use straightening and cleaning up as a prelude to writing?
What do we think about the call that a ‘writer who waits for ideal conditions under which to work will die without putting a word on paper’?
Is anyone strict about their process?
Does anyone start writing, without a clear idea of where the work is going?
Does anyone write extensive histories for their characters before they begin?
How many drafts do you generally need?
How do you start a first draft? How does that change for subsequent drafts?
How do you revise?
Does anyone need to balance writing time with other peoples’ needs? How do you do this?
What’s the role of physical exercise in writing?
Has anyone ever solved a problem in the text by going for a walk?
Does anyone feel they work like a scientist?
Does writing feel creative – or does it feel scientific or mathematical?
Does anyone fantasise about escaping to write in a hotel room?
Where do people write?
How has Coronavirus affected where people write?
Do you let mess take over your writing space when you’re in the middle of a project?
Does life go ‘on hold’ when you’re in a writing frenzy?
Do you write in the living room with a carnival/family/bustle going on around you?
What do you think about writing for 3.5 hours a day? Roald Dahl wrote a heck of a lot. How important is productivity?
Does anyone enter a ‘different’ place or ‘zone’ when you write?
What do we think about Claire Messud’s idea of revision as creative destruction?
How do you get back on a role when you haven’t been writing?
How do you keep writing when it feels like everything you write is bad?

This list may seem ludicrously long but many of these questions related directly to issues raised by the established authors and I wanted a sense that there were an ‘avalanche’ of ways to access to writing process. I also made a very deliberate choice to use the lecture format, as opposed to the more traditional, discussion-based tutorial format as the site for this discussion. While pedagogical work has long questioned and explored the lecture format (Frank, 1995; Goffman, 1981; Barthes, 1971) the traditional lecture continues to thrive, defined here as ‘an educational talk to an audience, especially one of students in a university’ (Oxford Languages) – notice the preposition ‘to’, not ‘with’. Implicit here is the idea of lecturer as expert. It was important to foreground established, prominent writers – and how different those experiences were to each other – to demonstrate the variety of successful ways of writing. But more important than that, I wanted the lecture to situate students as experts of their own processes. That is, by delivering the lecture and thinking aloud about the way they wrote, students enacted themselves as expert in their experiences. One CACW390 student stated in an email afterwards that when teachers spoke of process, it was usually within the
context of the teachers’ experiences. ‘While I loved the idea of setting up a routine, making sure I wrote 500 words a day (like Lecturer X) or spent two hours a night (Like Tutor Y) just did not seem accessible for me.’ She continued:

It wasn't until we spoke about it as a group … did it click that there are 800 million different ways to set a routine, and I just had to create one that worked for me. Having a chance to think about it from my own perspective whilst hearing what fellow students and famous writers did inspired me…

The student went on to find a process that worked for her, writing for an hour in the morning and:

regardless of whether I feel like writing, I sit there. And as the weeks have progressed, I've been waking up and FEELING LIKE WRITING! Like I really want to write! … The best part is, I feel like this is going to last beyond CACW390.

R Lewis-Lockhart (personal communication, October 16, 2020).

It is true that students often don’t have the exact writing experiences of their lecturers and tutors, however this method of showcasing combined experiences gave students ideas for how to approach writing and instilled confidence in mapping their own routines. In talking about process, there was also scope to discuss the discomfort and unknowingness of the writing process, normalising the ambivalence that sometimes accompanies writing.

**Drafting and Stamina**

Encouraging students to engage with the liminal can help them conceive and write early drafts – however, the writing process also involves drafting, something that can require great stamina and self-belief. As writer Joe Fassler (2017) states: ‘There’s no guarantee our works in progress—those hopeful, half-formed things still struggling into being—will ever be worth the time we steal to write them’. The faith that drives Winterson as she faces into revision is not dissimilar to Tan’s experiences: ‘If I am patient and open, at some point, the wordless feeling I’m trying to express will drive the story to whatever the end point is’ (34). Writer Don Dellilo also uses the idea of faith, connecting it specifically with the idea of editing and deleting his work:

Now I look for ways to discard things. If I discard a sentence I like, it’s almost as satisfying as keeping a sentence I like … The instinct to discard is finally a kind of faith. It tells me there’s a better way to do this page even though the evidence is not accessible at the present time.
Rewriting here operates as an act of faith because the writer believes he can do better – this faith is about critical assessment of the manuscript and belief in the self. The self and the manuscript are not the same thing. The novel may not work, sentences may need to be deleted, but better sentences can be found, and the writing self is the one assigned this task. While we touched upon strategies for writerly endurance during the lecture on process, it seemed to me deeper engagement with ideas of stamina and redrafting occurred in CACW390 at the level of the workshop. The workshop can operate as a site whereby students establish community and supportive environments when the experience of writing becomes ‘fraught and unknowable’, to reference Jean Rhys and the introduction above.

The focus on the workshop model, a staple in creative writing classrooms, is something that ingrains in students the importance of revision, as well as the willingness to delete word/sentences/sections/chapters if they do not serve the larger project. Workshopping is the process by which students create a piece of writing, receive feedback from teacher and peers, and then re-work the piece based on that feedback. Much critical work has been written about the workshopping process (Cosgrove, 2018 and 2008; Cowan, 2012; Neave 2012) and inherent to workshopping is that students consider revision and process. As well, workshopping can create a space whereby students discuss the sometimes-disheartening sense that what they have imagined has not made it onto the page. Peter Carey describes redrafting this way:

Often I will reach a stage, say, a third of the way into the book, where I realize there’s something very wrong. Everything starts to feel shallow and false and unsatisfactory. At that stage I’ll go back to the beginning. I might have written only fifty pages, but it’s like a cantilever and the whole thing is getting very shaky because I haven’t thought things through properly. So I’ll start again and I’ll write all the way through and then just keep going until it starts to get shaky again, and then I’ll go back because I’ll know that there’s … something deeply necessary waiting to be discovered or made. (Carey 2006)

When I’ve discussed throwing away tens of thousands of words during a novel revision, students have stared at me, and explicitly or implicitly, the question has been asked: how do I know that what I’m writing will be any better? I can’t, and yet, I’ve never felt I was going backwards in the revising process. Every draft offers deeper knowledge of the characters I’m writing about. As Carey says (2006): ‘Within those successive drafts, my characters keep on doing the same things over and over… But the reasons they do them gradually become more complex and layered and deeply rooted in the characters…’ What is interesting in light of this discussion of writing processes and the classroom is that it is through drafting Carey moves
from idea, to deeper idea, to unearthing something ‘deeply necessary waiting to be discovered’. As Dubus III articulates:

Now dreaming your way through a story is very useful at first—for the first draft, maybe the first two drafts. But once the revision process begins, you’ve got to change your approach … once you dream it through, try to look at the result the way a doctor looks at an X-ray. You’ve got to be terribly smart about it. In the secondary period, you get more rational and logical about what you’ve dreamed—while still cooperating with the deeper truths of what you’ve made (64).

Writer Claire Messud describes revision as ‘a kind of creative destruction’. You condense scenes, if possible, eliminating repetition. If one scene can give the information that is currently spread across three, those pages need to work harder. ‘To have a more efficient and more intense fragment is going to be better. So you compress, the same way that to make something very tasty you might reduce the sauce’ (242-3). After feedback has been given, I urge students to ask each other and themselves questions about the draft in an effort to understand the decisions they’ve made and why something ‘works’ or doesn’t. Writer Viet Thanh Nguyen says: ‘As someone who’s a scholar, I try to rationalize and think about why I make certain kinds of artistic choices. But there’s also the part that’s intuitive and emotional.’ (231).

Of course, there is no way to ensure workshop discussions will be kind, vigorous, critically engaged and/or useful for students. As Hannah Jane Parkinson notes: ‘what if you find yourself in a group with people whose writing is incredibly dull to you? You still have to dedicate hours of your time to their work, when the selfish truth is that you’re better off focusing on yours’ (2014). That is undoubtedly a risk. However, if the workshop is closely moderated – by a teacher who models both support and critical engagement – it increases the chances the workshop experience will be a productive one. The workshop reinforces the idea that drafting is critical for any project – every story or poem or script can improve. When determining workshop groups, I consult with previous lecturers and tutors to try and accommodate for personalities, and if possible, divide groups according to theme and genre. This demands emailing with students before the subject begins, to ensure they have thought through genre and project overviews – but the effort expended here pays dividends throughout the session. Not only am I able to connect students with similar interests, the class is able to start right off the mark with Project Outline workshopping in Week Two of session.

Another strategy I use to highlight the importance of the revision process is to show early drafts of my own work, being ruthless in my self-appraisal. In one example, I show
students how the first paragraph of my novel ‘Freefall’ transformed over two years, complete
with dates. The final version looks nothing like the first and by seeing the incremental
changes and how they evolved, I hope to demonstrate the disattachment needed in assessing
one’s work during the revision process. Because CACW390 students are in the final year of
their degree, I also ask them to find an assessment they turned in during first year and to think
through the changes they would make now if they were to submit it again. The lesson here is
that we continue to grow as writers and there is usually more work to do, even on something
that may have once seemed ‘finished’.

In Conclusion
In my experience, for students who go on to become established writers, it can often take
years – if not decades – to publish and/or produce their works. Often, they hone their skills
through postgraduate programs, mentorships and internships, which means lessons on craft –
while important and necessary at the undergraduate level – may not be as critical as helping
students establish writing routines and strategies for facing into the liminal and the redrafting
process. As Jacob Wigod surmises (1952: 384), Keats’s negative capability involves ‘the
maintaining of an open mind, a capacity for change, and an aversion to forming comfortable–
but in reality unsatisfying–resolutions and philosophies’ and this is a critical point to
emphasise in the creative writing classroom, even if it is complicated by the nature of the
classroom itself.
References


