University of Technology, Sydney and Avondale College

Sue Joseph and Carolyn Rickett

The writing cure?: ethical considerations in managing creative practice life-writing projects.

Abstract:

The autobiographical turn in literary studies has increasingly placed value on self-representation as a strategic means of reclaiming voice, identity and agency. By and large, the narrating 'I' is circulated and read as a storied performance/product which empowers the writer. Typically such texts are often ones that rehearse, record and expiate individual trauma, and also produce a set of readings that textually frame the work as 'therapeutic'. There is a growing selection of texts which narrativise personal trauma now being set for literary examination in tertiary syllabi. Concurrent to the formal reading of trauma texts in the context of literary studies is the narrative impulse to repackage traumatic experience as autobiographical process/literary output within creative practice higher degrees.

This paper seeks to interrogate some of the ethical concerns that arise from students drawing on personal trauma in creative writing contexts for the production of literature that is to be formally supervised and examined. How is the potential risk of re-traumatisation of the student, and vicarious traumatisation of the supervisor/lecturer, managed? If higher degrees are providing an emergent space for catharsis, 'unofficially' offering writing as a therapeutic mode in creative practice, what are the implications of the supervisor/lecturer moving from a role of artistic and scholarly critic, to one of bearing witness? And in this newly formed therapeutic alliance, does an academic need more skills than they have developed in simply delivering a writing or literary curriculum? And what professional frames of support, if any, are in place to sustain both the student and the academic throughout the process? Without well-established professional support and guidelines, is commodifying trauma in order to gain a degree, and or a literary output, ethical professional practice?

Biographical notes:

Dr Sue Joseph has been a journalist for more than thirty years, working in Australia and the UK. She began working as an academic, teaching print journalism at the University of Technology, Sydney in 1997. She now teaches both journalism and creative writing, particularly creative non-fiction writing, in both undergraduate and postgraduate programs. Her research interests are around sexuality, secrets and confession, framed by the media; HIV and women; ethics; trauma; and Australian creative non-fiction.

Carolyn Rickett is a Senior Lecturer in Communication at Avondale College and is completing doctoral research in the area of trauma, writing and healing at the

University of Sydney. She is co-ordinator for the New Leaves creative writing project, an Australasian Research Institute funded initiative for people, or carers, who have experienced or are experiencing the trauma of a life threatening illness. Along with Australian poet Judith Beveridge, Carolyn is co-editor of the *New Leaves Poetry Anthology*.

Keywords:

Voice—agency—trauma—ethics—process—product—supervision—higher degrees

> Writing is a form of therapy; sometimes I wonder how all those who do not write, compose or paint can manage to escape the madness, the melancholia, the panic fear which is inherent in the human situation (Graham Greene 1980: 9)

Overview

Michel Foucault observed that '…we have…become a singularly confessing society' (1978: 59). The autobiographical surge in literary studies places increasing value on self-representation as a strategic means of reclaiming voice, identity and agency. Miller and Tougaw write: 'If every age has its symptoms, ours can be the age of trauma' (2002: 1) and if this is correct, it goes some little way in explaining the emergence of memoir and autobiographical creative works, not just commercially but also within tertiary schools of creative writing, English and journalism.

By and large, the narrating 'I' is circulated and read as a storied performance/product which empowers the writer. Typically such texts often rehearse, record and expiate individual trauma, and produce a set of readings that textually frame the work as 'therapeutic'. James Pennebaker argues that 'converting emotions and images into words changes the way a person organises and thinks about trauma…'. He goes on to explain that 'By integrating thoughts and feelings…the person can more easily construct a coherent narrative of the process' (2000: 8). Jill Littrell, in line with Pennebaker but developing his ideas further, believes that health benefits from the writing of painful memories are derived only when an 'inspiring perspective' is found by the individual (2009: 308). She argues:

> If a person revisits painful emotion and is able to construct some new meaning in the experience or to develop some new physiological response to the emotionally evocative material, then the procedure can result in better health and less psychological stress. (2009: 306)

In looking at the works of Anderson and MacCurdy (*Writing and Healing: Toward an Informed Practice)*, Berman (*Risky Writing*) and Alcorn (*Changing the Subject*), Judith Harris argues that they together 'effectively explore how writing classes can help students to achieve mastery over fear, prejudice and intolerance through self examination' (2003: 669). She goes on to say:

> Freud and his theoretical descendants, even those who have challenged his theories, agree that expression, and its opposite, repression operate as powerful invisible agents in human psychic health. The therapeutic effects of writing are as absorbing as they are beneficial. (ibid)

While there is evidence-based research on the efficacy of writing as a therapeutic intervention in various settings, our focus in this paper is to raise questions around the ethics of commodifying trauma as a means of gaining a higher degree. One of our primary concerns is the potentially dangerous space it can create for both the academic and the student. Sophie Tamas provides insight into the ethics circulating around this pedagogical tension:

> If I am a scholar, my own trauma may offer ideal grist for the mill, a chance to get up close and personal with the gritty and the abject without having to get clearance from an institutional ethics review board, while redeeming my losses by reframing them as sites of knowledge production. (2009)

Her comments raise a polemical discussion about the management of ethical processes of students undertaking autobiographical writing projects that have the potential to cause psychological injury. She highlights the important point that ethical clearance is rigorously applied to research work that involves 'the other' but the same rigour may not always be applied to creative practice projects involving 'the self'. To quote Tamas again and her concerns about this 'ethical trespass':

> While our obligation to the other has been much discussed, there are also ethical problems in how we present and represent ourselves … the discursive and testimonial norms girding qualitative research have broadened considerably, but I do not know how to speak about loss within them without doing myself harm. (2009)

Her 'grappling with the ethics of the autoethnographic voice' (ibid) is one that we reflect on in the following case study. Linked to this concern of potential of psychological harm resulting from the narrativisation of trauma is also the possibility of vicarious traumatisation for academics managing these kinds of student testimonial projects. There is clear documentation of 'vicariously induced PTSD in therapists who talk to traumatised clients' (Littrell, 2009: 308). Witnessing student repackaging of traumatic narrative in a supervisory role might produce the same effect in academics. As Rachel Rosenblum highlights in an informative article on 'Postponing Trauma: The dangers of telling', narrating a "'ghastly tale' may, in some cases trigger not only serious somatic trouble, psychotic episodes but suicide" (2009: 1319).

Case study

The student was studying a Master of Arts in Journalism. The journalism professional practice subject in question was delivered as an intensive, remote delivery class in Melbourne by an academic for three-day weekends, twice a semester, with electronic and phone contact in between. A 22-year-old lawyer, the student presented as intelligent and affable, with a quick wit and a gift for writing. What the academic did not know throughout those first few classes – and was completely unprepared for, both professionally and personally – was her story: that from the age of eleven to fifteen she had been brutally abused, both sexually and psychologically, by a family member.

In May of each year, around the Journey of Healing Day (26th) the academic invited into class a member of the Stolen Generation. In the session the student attended, Stolen Generation survivor Lyn Austin shared her story. Austin came to the class and spoke of the horror of being taken from her mother at the age of ten, compounded by the horror of systematic physical and emotional abuse at the hands of her foster mother. She also spoke of the horror of systematic rape by the son of her foster parents.

Management of re-traumatisation

The academic noticed the discomfort of the usually engaged student and approached her after the session. The student mumbled that 'something' had happened to her when she was younger. The student quickly left, leaving the academic concerned and anxious. Ruth Leys provides an important insight into the process of revisiting and reconstructing traumatic events, noting that: '… the trauma does not undergo a transformation but only in the sense of becoming more present and more real' (2000: 108).

The student, at a much later date, agreed to take part in further research for the academic, conducted around trauma subjects and interviewing and story telling. The academic has since interviewed her about that moment in the classroom:

> She (the student) remembers: "I thought 'I don't want to fail journalism so I'll have to listen to what she's saying' but when she started talking about what her step-family had done to her, or the family that she was put into, and the stuff that happened to her – it wasn't so much what happened to her but hearing that stuff just set off a trigger ... I can't think of her separately as her, and not personalise it. So all of a sudden, all of these memories started coming into my head, you know"... "I remember we had to write under pressure afterwards, an article. So I had to be there, I couldn't go away… ." (Joseph, 2008)

The management by the academic of the trauma experienced by the student was at the most, intuitive; at the least, negligible, because the professionally trained skill base was absent. The academic, realising at the time that the student was troubled, said the only thing she knew, from personal experience – writing about the incident in order to help expunge it. There was no psychoanalytical knowledge involved in the advice and no empirical knowledge to offer – just a gut response to an awkward situation.

As Mark Bracher cautions though, '… being guided by our impulses, by what "feels right", or by our personal and collective fantasies of what is best for our students or for society…' (1999: 8) is neither ethical nor we would posit, safe professional practice.

Bearing witness

Within a few days of returning to Sydney, the student rang the lecturer. The session with Austin had so triggered repressed memories that she was admitted to a psychiatric unit.

Whatever responsibility the academic had felt on that weekend for the student's clear discomfort in class was multiplied during the phone call. The student told the academic some of what she had gone through – the first time she had spoken of her ordeal since its discovery when she was 15 – and the academic got off the phone feeling not so much guilty for introducing systematic rape as a topic into the course but amazed that it had not occurred to her the potential for serious psychological consequences. The academic also felt some responsibility for helping the student

manage to get through the rest of her studies. There was no clear institutional process to undertake in order to gain support for the academic's own feelings of culpability.

The next time the academic was in Melbourne for class, the student, who she had been in regular contact with, handed her 30,000 words of a manuscript. The academic read it, with horror at its content but admiration for the skilled storytelling.

Judith Herman in her seminal work, *Trauma and Recovery*, notes:

> …. the survivor tells the story of trauma. She tells it completely, in depth and in detail. This work of reconstruction actually transforms the traumatic memory, so that it can be integrated into the survivor's life story. (1992: 175)

The academic urged the student to keep writing and then, at the student's request, edited her manuscript. At this stage, the relationship between the academic and the student mirrored a therapeutic alliance, so such a request came with a moral imperative to continue supporting the student and her writing. But bearing witness to the student's gruelling account of her systematic abuse resulted in a vicarious trauma for the academic. As Bracher flags, this relationship creates a potential danger to both student and supervisor at this point:

> …engaging our students' emotional lives is delicate and potentially dangerous, both psychologically and ethically, for both our students and ourselves, and… questions concerning our proficiency, motives, and position with regard to power cannot be ignored. (1999: 5)

The academic found that editing the manuscript raised ethical questions in differentiating between the text as a literary artefact or a testimonial of revisited trauma which caused clear psychic harm to the student. On the one hand, does the supervising academic treat the manuscript like any other, albeit with the knowledge that it is the embodiment of a psychic wound? In editing this student's manuscript, it was clear from the writing and through consultation with the student that it was extremely difficult for her, even though the writing flowed. Ann Murphy highlighted more than 20 years ago the dangers inherent in writing classes:

> For like psychoanalysis, our work helping students to find their voices frequently brings us face to face with a dense array of demons-fears, resistances, angers, and traumas – in our students and in ourselves. (1989: 175)

At this stage, the academic was aware that the student underwent her own personal counselling with a psychiatrist at least once a week, so the psychological well-being of the student was at least in professional hands. The academic did actually request that the student discuss with her therapist the merit of continuing with her manuscript. The therapist left the decision to the student whilst monitoring her, weekly.

Significantly, the student wrote in the third person, as that was the only way she could recount her story. But within the first draft of the narrative, the student did not retell one incident of abuse, so substantially, from one perspective, the text was missing content.

The academic, in an editorial role, felt it was necessary to ask the student if she could revisit actual incidents of abuse and repackage them within the narrative. Asking the

student to recall and recount actual incidents represented literary logic but created ethical conflict for the academic. During a later interview the student said that the only way she could do this was to dissociate during the writing. However, by this stage, the student was so eager to tell her story that she was actively discussing possible publication and agreed herself that these scenes must be included. As harrowing as it was for her, she completed five scenes and integrated them into the narrative.

The student highlighted why it became so important for her to write her story:

> … setting it out in a book, it tells the crimes he committed, and then makes that public. And with that information out there, you're either going to touch more people who need to be warned, the parents who do really watch out for the signs and be careful of who their kids are with. Then there are the people who it is happening to. What you're actually doing is giving them a voice. Potentially you are giving a lot of silenced boys and girls, a voice. (Joseph 2008)

The question arises though, should academics treat voices 'equally'? One of the main thrusts of creative higher degrees, apart from the degree itself, is a publication point. How do academics treat student manuscripts with traumatic autobiographical content, compared to manuscripts without traumatic content? Such questions constellate around the ethics of 'the real' and the performative effects and dangers involved in authoring repressed memories. Joseph Flanagan talks of

> … the distinction between normal narrative memory – the process of interpretation, working out, and analysis – that allows someone to experience an event as past and traumatic memory – in which the event still occurs in the psychic life of the victim and is enacted in the body… . (2002: 392)

His comments highlight the potential danger of re-traumatisation when an embodied subject discursively relives destructive experiences. Each time the student wrote of events, she 're-enacted' her trauma. Lutgendorf and Ullrich argue:

> It is possible that the effects of emotion-focused journaling are similar to the effects of uncontrolled exposure to a traumatic event. Specifically, writers may be able to relive the physiological and emotional activation of the trauma during its recall, but because they are focused on the affective experience, they may not be able to work through the trauma to reach a state of resolution from which they have a different perspective. (2006: 182)

Frames of support

The academic edited the manuscript and finally finished, the student began to send it around to publishers. The memoir was published in 2009, under a pseudonym, and to date it is selling well.

There is much more to this story and as the student herself writes in the epilogue of her book: 'There is an entire book in what happened next'. This scenario, by good fortune rather than by anything other than intuitive skill of the academic and psychiatric support the student was already receiving, had a good result for the

student, who had an enormous sense of literary achievement, not to mention personal empowerment. Littrell contends: 'Expression of distress is useful when accompanied by reappraisal but harmful when a new response is not achieved' (2009: 312). In this instance, the 'new appraisal' was the repackaging of her trauma into a narrative with great potential for publication/circulation and in the student's mind, a voice for other victims.

Murphy flags the obvious dangers of the nexus between managing testimonial student work and analysis. She demurs from any possible combination of psychoanalytical skills and teaching writing arguing that: 'Ultimately, we must recognize that we are simply not qualified to define ourselves as analysts for our students, however true it may be' (1989: 179).

We would posit that Murphy's comments are valid ones. Without a specific set of skills enabling professional and safe handling of both the student and the text, supervision of repackaged trauma as the product of the business transaction underpinning tertiary education is fraught with danger and therefore might be read as an unethical transaction.

Murphy believes the connection between psychoanalysis and supervising writing students must always be 'theoretical and metaphorical, not actual and practical' but does not proffer any way of dealing with the actuality of disturbed or traumatising work. She writes:

> …unlike psychoanalysts – who undergo their own arduous analysis, and spend years studying a complex body of theoretical writing accumulated from a century of work – we often come to our work …via romantic poetry or medieval drama. We are woefully and inevitably unprepared to deal with the explosive personal material writing can produce, both directly and indirectly. (1989: 178)

Conclusion

Since the initial situation where the student became distressed in class, the academic now assiduously flags topics and sessions with potentially disturbing content with classes beforehand, leaving discussions until after a break in class and inviting students who believe they may be compromised simply not to return to class. On several occasions in the ensuing years, this has occurred. Creating a teaching paradigm alerting students to potentially distressing sessions has the effect of including the student in the decision making to exclude themselves from a session, with permission. On every occasion this has occurred since, the student has always approached the academic either during the break or shortly after the class, either in person or electronically or by phone, with an explanation.

In a higher degree supervisory role, where students have been accepted on the basis of autobiographical/memoir applications, the academic now always addresses the ethics' process within the first two or three meetings. The academic also always enquires about support mechanisms, like counselling or friends and family, and talks up front about trauma and revisiting traumatic memory in a narrative sense.

The academic is still to devise a support system for her own debriefings, apart from informally with colleagues and friends, and occasionally her GP.

We would determine that unless due concern is formulated throughout the academic process, it is unethical to expose both student and supervisor to a potentially harmful creative, albeit literary, practice – particularly as the student is paying the tertiary institution for the service. Effectively, without appropriate safeguards from self harm to both student and academic, there can be no ethic in commodifying trauma in order to gain a university degree.

If a formal framework of support and guidelines are implemented, and the narrative 'I' afforded the same level of ethical consideration by tertiary ethics committees as narrative devised around 'the other', it is possible to ethically undertake both the execution and supervision of creative work within a university. As Couser claims:

> Deliberation of the ethics of life writing entails weighing competing values: the desire to tell one's story and the need to protect others… the obligation to truth and the obligations of trust. (2004: 198)

Arguing the case for this kind of obligation, fifteen years ago Wendy Bishop called for further training for teachers of creative writing:

> We should be paying attention to issues of affect and providing teachers and program administrators with a course of study that includes introductions to personality theory, gender studies, psychoanalytic concepts, and basic counseling, even if such study mainly confirms that there are large differences between a teacher/administrator's and therapist's roles. (1993)

Mark Bracher has worked to develop a psychoanalytic model for writing about emotionally fraught issues. While he concurs with Ann Murphy's warning signals above, he believes psychoanalysis and writing have a cross-over nexus.

But unlike Murphy, who does not offer a psychoanalytical model for educators, rather arguing against it, we believe the surge of higher degrees providing an emergent space for cathartic narratives cannot be ignored or refused, based solely on the fact that academics do not have these skills. We believe that there is a strong case for developing a universal model of supervision where the ethical framework of safeguards is expanded further, including:

- a formal support network to help manage self harm, including available counselling for the student and the academic;
- a system of mentoring from or co-supervision with more senior academics, with direct experience of supervising creative projects involving potential harm for both student and supervisor;
- an appropriate process to address issues face to face with possibly vulnerable students who insist on revisiting traumatic memory creatively; and
- formal debriefing processes when and where necessary for both student and academic.

We posit these suggestions as the starting point for discussion around the development of a model and supervisory pedagogy, specifically concerned with autobiographical creative works, dealing with trauma, and with a clear acknowledgement of what Cathy Caruth so succinctly writes: 'The story of trauma, then, as the narrative of belated experience, far from telling of an escape from reality … rather attests to its endless impact on a life' (1996: 7).

Works cited

Bishop, Wendy 1993 'Writing Is/And Therapy?: Raising Questions about Writing Classrooms and Writing Program Administration', *JAC,* 13: 2 (Winter) at http://www.jacweb.org/Archived_volumes/Volume13.htm#Issue2 (accessed 19 August 2010)

Bracher, Mark 1999 *The Writing Cure: Psychoanalysis, Composition, and the Aims of Education,* Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press

Caruth, Cathy 1996 *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*, Maryland: John Hopkins University Press

Couser, G.Thomas 2004 'Vulnerable Subjects: Ethics and Life Writing', New York: Cornell University Press

Flanagan, Joseph 2002 'The Seduction of History: Trauma, Re-Memory, and the Ethics of the Real', *CLIO* 31: 4, 387-402

Foucault, Michel 1978 *The History of Sexuality V1: An Introduction*. Translated by Robert Hurly, New York: Random House

Greene, Graham 1980 *Ways of Escape*, USA: Simon and Schuster

Harris, Judith 2003 'Review: The Necessity of Mourning: Psychoanalytic Paradigms for Change and Transformation in the Composition Classroom', *College English*, 65: 6 (July) 668-675

Herman, Judith 1992 *Trauma and Recovery*, New York: Basic Books

Joseph, Sue 2008 *Voicelessness and the Media: When Sexuality Secrets Become Public Property*, PhD, University of Technology, Sydney

Littrell, Jill 2009 'Expression of Emotion: When it causes Trauma and When it Helps', *Journal of Evidence-based Social Work,* 6: 3, 300-320

Lutgendorf, Susan K. & Philip Ullrich 2006 'Cognitive Processing, Disclosure, and Health: Psychological and Physiological Mechanisms' in Steven Lepore and Joshua Smith (eds) *The Writing Cure: How Expressive Writing Promotes Health and Emotional Well-Being*, Washington DC: American Psychological Association,

Miller, Nancy & Jason Tougaw 2002 *Extremities: Trauma, Testimony, and Community*, Illinois: The University of Illinois

Murphy, Ann 1989 'Transference and Resistance in the Basic Writing Classroom: Problematics and Praxis', *College Composition and Communication*, 40: 2 (May) 175-187

Pennebaker, James W. 2000 'Telling Stories: The Health Benefits of Narrative', *Literature and Medicine* 19: 1, Spring, 3-18

Rosenblum, Rachel 2009 'Postponing Trauma: The dangers of telling', *The International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, 90: 1319-1340

Tamas, Sophie 2009 'Writing and Righting Trauma: Troubling the Autoethnographic Voice'*, Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung/Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 10: 1, 22 January at http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs0901220 (accessed 16 August 2010)

Acknowledgement

Many thanks to the former student whose story framed the case study in our paper. Her remarkable courage in persevering and writing her memoir, and then in consenting to our re-representing her story again in this paper, in the way that we have, is greatly admired and appreciated**.**