Developing a theoretical framework for the use of creative writing as a developmental tool in education and health care.

Sophie Nicholls

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Abstract
This presentation will suggest a theoretical model for a process of creative writing that can be used as a developmental tool in education, healthcare and personal development settings.

My model – presented here in brief – emerged from my recent doctoral research at the University of Sussex. It draws upon concepts from literary theory, psychodynamic object-relations theory and cognitive science but focuses on two key ideas: the neurophysiological evidence for a bodily, ‘core’ self which pre-exists language (Damasio 1999); and the idea that the subject is continually ‘en procé’ between body and language - the semiotic and the symbolic - in a dialogue of meaning-making (Kristeva 1984).

My research suggests that creative writing can facilitate an exploration of this self-in-process, enabling us to ‘let go’ of unhelpful self-narratives and rigidified self-concepts in order to ‘make’ and ‘remake’ new possibilities.

Out of the coalhouse
You might say that the model that I am going to present to you today began in a damp and musty coalhouse in Clitheroe, Lancashire. I will explain what I mean.

I’ve always been aware of the importance of writing in my own life. However, in 1999 my grandfather died, leaving me his memoirs. Several months prior to this, he had locked himself away in the old coalhouse at the back of his house to write. From time to time, my grandmother would bang on the door, plying him with sandwiches and cups of tea, but he remained immersed in his writing, eventually presenting me with around two hundred pages of closely typed memories of his painful – and previously unspoken - experiences of the Second World War. Shortly after that, he died, leaving me fascinated
by his motivations and beginning to wonder about how this writing had been helpful to him.

Since that time, working closely with Celia Hunt at the University of Sussex, I have completed my doctoral research in the emerging field of creative writing and personal development. The findings of this research and my work running workshops in a wide range of settings – including here at Leeds, in health care and with my own private clients – inform the model that I am going to present to you – frustratingly briefly - this afternoon.

**Establishing a theoretical framework**

I have been identifying what Solms & Turnbull (2002) refer to as ‘neuropsychoanalytic correlates’ for the experience of creative writing, beginning by making connections between the work of Antonio Damasio (neuroscience) and Julia Kristeva (linguistics, psychoanalysis) and eventually finding correlates in other psychodyanamic object-relations theories and in cognitive science.

I am finding that:

(i) Creative writing can help us to shift from a more conceptual understanding of self to a more ‘felt, bodily’ sense of self.

(ii) There are three main iterative phases to this process, which I call Letting-go, Making and Being Remade.

Of course, there are also practical issues that need to be considered in terms of how this model might best be applied in education, personal development, health and well-being¹, but today I’m going to focus on the theoretical aspects of my model and why I believe it is useful.

**The shift from a more conceptual to a more ‘felt, bodily’ sense of self**

In my own experience, writing feels as if it begins in my body. When, like my grandfather in his coalhouse, we are deeply immersed in a process of creative writing, something inside us seems to feel different. Czikszentmihalyi (1996) calls this feeling of creativity ‘flow.’ Other traditions refer to it as a practice of mindfulness².

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¹ I make a number of recommendations in Nicholls. 2006.

² Begley (2007) explores recent research into the nature and effects of meditation among Buddhist monks and the possibilities for ‘retraining’ damaged or dysfunctional areas of the brain through a practice of ‘mindfulness’.
The psychoanalyst, Marion Milner, describes it as ‘that fat feeling,’ a pleasurable state of being and knowing that is arrived at by means of some barely perceptible ‘internal gesture,’ through which we abandon more habitual and ‘narrow’ attention for something ‘wider.’ For Milner, this expansive feeling is like pressing her awareness ‘against the limits of my body until there was vitality in all my limbs and I felt smooth and rounded’ (73-74).

The cognitive scientist, Petitmengin-Peugeot (1999) models the way that ‘intuitive experiences’ feel to a group of psychotherapists, artists, scientists and people in daily life and finds not one gesture but: ‘an established succession of very precise interior gestures’ (45) which seem to be ‘deeply anchored in the body’ (47). These are gestures of letting-go, of deep-rooting, of interior self-collecting (59), of ‘going down’ inside the body (61) and sensations of ‘opening’, ‘connecting’ and ‘expanding’ (63).

A further study (Depraz, Varela & Vermersch 2000) finds that this ‘gesture’ of ‘letting-go or of receptivity towards the experience’ may be triggered spontaneously by external events but can be initiated by the individual himself or herself through ‘exercises,’ ‘self-imposed discipline’ and ‘phases of training and learning’.

In my own work, this idea of ‘exercise’ or self-training seems important because I want to understand not only what might be happening when we spontaneously enter the pleasurable and productive ‘fat feeling’ in our creative writing; but also, perhaps more importantly, what we can do to bring about this gesture or cognitive shift when we find ourselves unable to write.

I want to address the problem that, for many people – and not just those with so-called ‘alexithymic’ conditions – words are things to be distrusted, things that are out there, external to their lived experience; and that, for all of us at one time or another, it is hard to try to squeeze the feeling of ourselves into the stubborn shapes of words.

At such times a certain approach to creative writing can help us to find form for those feelings of self. But what is that approach and what are the mechanisms by which it might be helpful?

In order to understand more about the felt, bodily nature of my feeling of writing, I have been exploring an area of science and philosophy that – perhaps unlike literary studies - has seen a recent movement ‘from the classical, cognitivist view that an inner mind represents an outer world using symbols […] , to the view that mental processes are embodied in the sensorimotor activity of the organism as it is embedded in the environment’ (Thompson 2001:2)

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3 In Nicholls (2006) I suggest that alexithymia may be an unhelpful label and that there are other ways of measuring the ability to express oneself verbally such as the ‘EXP scale’ (Klein et al 1969), based on Gendlin’s concept of Experiencing (EXP) (Gendlin 1962).
A core sense of self

The key theory that I will use to underpin the ‘bodily felt, sense of self’ in writing is that of the neurophysiologist, Antonio Damasio. Working with neurological patients affected by brain damage, Damasio identified a feeling-based mechanism that provides the basis for an early-developing sense of self, a ‘core’ sense of self that can be found intact in individuals with serious impairment of memory and linguistic ability.

This core sense of self is generated by a complex system of object-mapping. Within this system, an unconscious ‘proto-self’, ‘a temporarily coherent collection of neural patterns’ (2000:174) operates at multiple levels of the brain in order to monitor and represent the internal milieu of the organism, moment by moment. As the brain encounters an object, a ‘something-to-be-known’ that might be visual, auditory, gustatory or otherwise somatosensory, it forms an image of that object. This object-image affects or changes the state of the internal milieu of the organism and, at about the same time, another level of complex brain structure creates an image of the changes taking place. According to Damasio, this ‘imaged non-verbal account’, a ‘story without words’ (169) occurring for each and every object that the brain encounters, gives rise to a subtle feeling of knowing that is the basis of our sense of self.

It is this early-developing, fluid and continually transient self, ceaselessly reiterated in ‘a steady generation of consciousness pulses’ (176) or object-mappings, that I suggest underpins something of the bodily feeling of creative writing.

Damasio distinguishes between this ‘core’ sense of self and the narratives taking place in what he calls the ‘autobiographical self’ of ‘extended consciousness’ (17), the conceptual and acquired sense of self, based on permanent records of core self experiences over time, which we memorise and then re-activate in sequence, forming our sense of who we have been and who we are likely to become. This autobiographical self is the self of memory, identity and personhood; the fragmented self of post-structuralism; the self of constructed, learned or imposed self-concepts.

The ‘core’ self and the semiotic

When I began to think about the problem of expressing felt, bodily experience in words, I was excited by the work of the linguist and psychoanalyst, Julia Kristeva. Kristeva (1984) seeks to show how bodily drives and sensations continually find their way into language. For Kristeva, the ‘semiotic’ (the realm of bodily drives and affects, rhythms, pre-verbal babble) and the ‘symbolic’ (the realm of prescribed language, linguistic structure, grammar and judgement) do not exist in rigid opposition to one another. Instead, they form a continuum which Kristeva calls ‘significance’ or signification (1984:22), a

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‘dialectic’ (24) of making meaning. Kristeva thinks in terms of an ‘explosion of the semiotic in the symbolic’ (69). The body’s drives are not represented by symbols; they are instead discharged through them.

Furthermore, neither the symbolic nor the semiotic can exist without one another: without the semiotic (energetic drive force arising in the body) there would be no motivation for the signification process; and without the symbolic (prescribed language, syntax) there would be only sounds, nonsense, psychotic babble.

Although Kristeva’s theory of subjectivity is flawed and problematic⁵ what interests me about it is that it is pre-linguistic, felt, proprioceptive. In her early work (1984) [1971], Kristeva claimed that processes of separation and differentiation are operable in the body from very early in our development, and long before we begin to use verbal language symbolically.⁶

We might say that Kristeva’s symbolic realm of language is closely related to Damasio’s ‘autobiographical’ aspects of self; whilst it is in her semiotic realm of language that aspects of our ‘core’ self find expression.

Like Damasio’s theory of selfhood, Kristeva’s ideas about subjectivity resist the unified and fixed. The subject is always ‘en procés’ (1984:22, 37) - both ‘in process’ and ‘on trial’ - continually oscillating between the semiotic and the symbolic in a way that generates a dynamic kind of truth or meaning.

I am proposing that the shift from a more conceptual to a more felt and bodily sense of self can be understood in Damasian terms as a Letting-go of more autobiographical aspects of my self, those narratives and forms that are unhelpful to me or restrict my self-experience in some way. In Kristevan terms, this involves Letting-go of more established or received symbolism in order to allow myself to (re)experience semiotically-charged (and perhaps even pre-verbal) elements of meaning.

A semiotic approach to writing can help us to Let-go of who we think we should or ought to be⁷ in order to rediscover new possibilities of self, a feeling of self, of who we feel ourselves to be and who we might become.

⁵ See Nicholls (2006) for further discussion.
⁶ This was a major challenge to the prevailing psychoanalytic account in which the child acquires a sense of self painfully and abruptly, beginning at ‘the mirror phase’. Lacan had argued that the child sees himself reflected or symbolised in a mirror (or the mother’s face), recognises that he is being represented in some way and thus enters the realm of the Symbolic or language. Language is acquired in consolation for the loss of the mother and thus language becomes associated with a kind of mourning, a mourning for that bodily experience from which we are now forever separated by words.

Letting-go

Letting-go describes the initial phase of my model, a phase of preparation or attunement, an entry or re-entry into the writing. In the ‘Letting go’ phase, I learn to make my own ‘internal gesture’ in order to achieve a shift in consciousness from a habitual state of awareness.

At first, it may be that I only experience the sensation of Letting-go in sudden bursts that I come to associate with periods of inspiration, intuition or heightened creativity; but Letting-go can be learned and practised as a purposeful act. One of the ways in which I can practise doing this is through free-writing.

Best-selling creativity manuals have long counselled this use of free-writing: Goldberg (1991:2) calls it ‘keeping your hand moving’; Cameron (1992:9-18) calls it ‘morning pages’. It is a method to overcome blocks and periods of stuckness, and to restore our faith in the relationship between ourselves and our words.

When I feel ‘stuck,’ I begin to make shapes with the pen, repeating words aloud or down the page. I play with words, repeating them, rhyming them, letting them spill over into one another. At first my writing might be dominated by old tricks (what I call writing ‘solutions’); but, gradually, something new begins to happen. My writing begins to free itself, to become free-writing, writing which freely-associates, allowing a free-flow of thoughts as they arise and I find that I have Let-go into ‘that fat feeling’.

According to Julia Kristeva’s ‘revolutionary’ poetics (1984), this ‘other than meaning’ in our words – sound, rhythm – is, in fact, the other than symbolic meaning and so free-writing can be seen as writing which frees itself of some of the more prescribed and syntactic elements by which we have come to shape, order and know our experience.

I suggest that free-writing – and, indeed, other ‘semiotic’ techniques of Letting-go that I use in this phase of my model – are a transcription of a free-flow stream of consciousness, a way of trying to get as close as possible to verbally translating the feeling of ‘core’ self, or what Damasio describes as ‘the whisper of a subsequent verbal translation of a related inference of the account: Yes, it is me seeing or hearing or touching’ (2000:172).

Damasio explains that although we talk about ‘a “stream of consciousness,”’ which suggests a single track, single sequence of thoughts, it is far more likely that the stream that carries consciousness arises ‘not in just one object but in several’ (176) and that ‘each object interaction generates more than one narrative, since several brain levels can be involved’ (176). This multi-track, multi-level streaming is ‘beneficial’ to us as human beings since it produces ‘an overabundance of core consciousness,’ ensuring ‘the continuity of the state of “knowing” ’ (176-177). Free-writing might be seen as a way of

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8 Adapting Horney’s notion of ‘life solutions’ (Horney 1951).
enacting – albeit at the higher-order level of verbal extended consciousness – this multiply-streamed abundance. In this sense alone, free-writing may be good for us.

The importance of the felt, bodily self in process

Not all writing is helpful in facilitating a Letting-go. For Kristeva, writing that privileges the symbolic features of signification – the kind of writing that I am reading to you now, for example – is writing that tries to codify spontaneous pulses of feeling into language. It is writing that rigidifies self-experience.

Perhaps, then, free-writing is one way in which we can allow ourselves to be ‘en procés,’ to loosen up established relationships between what we feel and what we say. Perhaps by free-writing we can free our selves.

The pact

‘Letting go’ and allowing ourselves to be ‘in process’ involves making a kind of ‘pact’ with oneself; a pact that subverts Lejeune’s ‘autobiographical pact’ (1989:119-137) in which both autobiographer and reader are engaged in a quest for truth. Hunt (2000:63) suggests that we give ourselves permission to pursue what she calls ‘personal truth’ rather than ‘the literal facts of our lives’. For an autobiographical writing process to be of value to our self-development, she feels that it is ‘crucially important to allow our material to emerge as freely as possible, and our themes and characters based on ourselves to develop and take on a life of their own, even if we do not like what is emerging’ (163).

This pact to remain in process, allowing felt material to emerge as freely as possible, has its parallels in the process of psychoanalysis. The page becomes Freud’s free-floating listener (Freud 1923:239). I resist making interpretations of my own unconscious material as it flows onto the page. I use free-writing in much the same way as Freud’s analyst and client work together using free-association, in ‘a state of evenly suspended attention’, avoiding fixing meanings or constructing expectations.

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9 Keats talks of this in terms of ‘Negative Capability’ ‘when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, doubts without any irritable reaching after fact and reason’ (Buxton Forman 1947). The poet, Mark Strand (2000) describes it as a ‘desire to forget knowing’ (2000): ‘I confess to a desire to forget knowing, especially when I sit down to work on a poem... Perhaps the poem is ultimately a metaphor for something unknown, its working-out a means of recovery’ (2000). Strand desires to forget a certain kind of habitual knowing in order to arrive at a more felt and bodily way of knowing something. ‘Unknown’ material is something that our bodies ‘know’, but which we have not yet ‘worked out’.
The holding space
This being in process makes certain demands on the writer. The willingness to give up ‘autobiographical’ self in order to write from a sense of self that is fluid, ever-changing and that can only emerge by the holding open of a ‘free-floating,’ potential space, has its risks and difficulties.

Kristeva’s open, ‘undecidable’ but ultimately held space of her psychoanalytic practice is heavily influenced by Winnicott’s ‘holding’ space (1971) and develops her earlier use of the term ‘chora’ (1984:35): a space which is both of the body and external to the body; a place in which meaning cannot be pinned down or abstracted.

In developing my model, I have emphasised the need for a holding space, particularly in the early stages of a Letting-go. This might be provided by a physical space (for example, my grandfather’s coalhouse); a supportive writing group of peers; or in some instances, by the process of therapy; but I am also exploring ways in which the page and the words themselves (as word-things, word-pleasures, transitional objects) can provide this holding (Nicholls 2006).

Making
At some point in the writing, I begin to feel that I now need to move towards making an interpretation, towards finding or Making something.

Objectlessness
According to Elaine Scarry’s study of the human body in pain (Scarry 1985), physical pain is ‘objectless’ (162). Its objectlessness or ‘complete absence of referential content’ ‘almost prevents it from being rendered in language…it cannot easily be objectified in any form, material or verbal’ (162). It is this objectlessness that provides some of the motivation for Making.

Such felt experience threatens to overwhelm us; it may seem that we are the feeling. Scarry’s schema helps us to understand the feeling of release we can gain by giving an objectless feeling otherness, form, meaning, limits, containment; in other words, by Making an object for it10. In terms of developmental creative writing, we do this by creating objects out of words. For the poet, Carole Satyamurti (2003:36), the form of a poem acts as ‘some sort of container,’ providing ‘the kind of release attendant on finding a form for what was formless, something coherent which now exists at some distance from oneself, out in the world, as well as inside one’s head.’

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10 There are some ways in which my interpretation of this ‘objectlessness’ differs from that of Scarry (see Nicholls 2006).
I somewhat boldly suggest here that these processes of literary object-making and representation might have their origins in biological processes, processes which are ‘core’ to our sense of who we are. It might be possible to explain our need to make literary objects – words, poems, characters, narratives – by looking at Damasio’s model of the neurophysiological processes of object-making: moment-by-moment images continually being made by our body-minded brain of its interactions with objects, internal or external, and the way that our organism is changed by these object interactions.\(^{11}\)

During the course of my research, I have looked at many other ways of understanding this Making. The process of enabling my feelings to gradually coalesce into forms (poems, narratives, characters) which feel somehow ‘right’ – the right shape – for my feelings might be understood, for example, through processes of projection and empathy, of sensual ‘sensing in’ (Thompson 2000). By looking at image schemas in cognitive linguistics, we might understand the body as a container for the emotions, a container that can be opened up in order to share our innermost experience objects (Kovesces 2000:146,170). I have looked at neuroaesthetics and the principles of ‘isolation’ and ‘contrast’ (Ramachandran 1999:16) involved in the emotionally satisfying visual effect of the outline of a poem on the white page. (See Nicholls 2006.) Unfortunately, I do not have time to explore these ideas here.

**Being Remade**

As I Make and remake (craft, redraft) the objects – words, poems, narratives – for my felt experience, my relationship with them begins to change. My Made objects become ‘fulcrums’ or ‘levers’ (Scarry 1985) around which my experience of my self is transformed. The object, and my experience of it, transforms my self-understanding. It Remakes me as Maker. I begin to move back and forth between being the writer and the reader of my words on the page, developing a more reflexive and fluid relationship with them. (Celia Hunt, 2006 has explored the idea of becoming a reader of oneself on the page extensively.)

Satyamurti (2003:40) writes that ‘the process of dwelling in the experience with one’s pen or word processor to hand’ leads to ‘the emergence of something which, at best, has about it a quality of “that’s it” – a sort of surprised recognition’.

Being Remade or Transformation, the third stage in my model of developmental creative writing, is about this feeling of ‘that’s it.’ This is the point in our process where we begin to emerge from our intense involvement in Making and become more aware of the many possible meanings of what it is that we have made.

And so it is that, at this point, the ‘problem’ of capturing felt experience in words becomes transformed by our realisation that we do not need to seek to explain meaning to

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\(^{11}\) Of course, there are many levels of object-making including making composite objects out of simple objects and objects out of non-objects. The relationship of this latter to Damasio’s theory would be an interesting area for further exploration.
ourselves but simply to experience it; to feel that we have made something new and (re)discovered something about ourselves.

But it doesn’t end here. If I want to resist becoming rigidified, stuck, fixed, I need to remain in process, moving through new cycles of Letting-go, Making, Being Remade.

The tension between Letting-go and Making is, then, the tension we feel towards a need for coherence or form on the one hand, and towards the need to acknowledge and accommodate the shifting, ever-changing, multiple nature of our experience on the other.

If we can use creative writing to help people to learn to Let-go and to move freely through cycles of Making, we can help them to begin to experience these two aspects of experience – coherence and fluidity – not as conflicting opposites but as the very signature of self. Developmental creative writing can help us to achieve some kind of ‘spine,’ some kind of fluid shape for or means of knowing the self.

I believe that this process helps us as writers and, dare I suggest, also as people. Creative writing becomes a tool that we can use for self-development and self-exploration.

The model that I have presented to you today is one that I am using – and continually refining – in my work, both with the students here at Leeds and through my work in health care. It seems to be a process that people are able to get hold of and that helps them to ‘hold’ and understand the uncertainties and difficulties as well as the pleasures involved in writing and being. I will leave it to one of my creative writing students to describe what this experience feels like:

‘For me the joy of writing is bound up in not knowing exactly where an idea will lead you but having the courage to go with the creative flow. I feel that I am growing as a writer and as a person.’
Bibliography


