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Evoking Desire…and Irreverence: A Collection of Women Writing Women

THE WOMEN WRITING WOMEN COLLECTIVE
University of British Columbia (Canada)

We draw from the diverse life experiences of women who have supported their academic and life journeys through membership in the Women Writing Women (WWW) collective. We come from diverse backgrounds in curriculum, new media studies, drama, english, art, science, creative writing, elementary, secondary, higher and adult education, and bring these multiple perspectives to our monthly dialogues. We explore how writing can evoke desire, longing, fear, reverence, irreverence, joy and awe rather than merely represent. The community offers an emergent space for these deeply personal, yet public explorations into meaning-making. We share personal stories, perform writing, dialogue on the evolution of this collective, and co-create with the audience gathered.

Throughout the four years of conforming, unforming, reforming and transforming within this collective, we have come to understand that the simple and seemingly isolated act of personal and academic writing is a complex social reality. We articulate singularities in our writings and discussions as we simultaneously discover overlapping links within personal and collective metaphors. The paper opens a much-needed dialogue on the complexity of transformational learning communities, particularly within academia. We hope to evoke dialogue and inspire among our readership to also create writing collectives as a form of 'joyful revolt' against isolating hegemonics, opening up a new space to explore collectivity and emergent possibility.

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Introduction

Women Writing Women is a collective of writers, graduate students and academics who come from diverse backgrounds in curriculum, New Media Studies, drama, English, art, science, creative writing, elementary, secondary, higher and adult education. We bring these multiple perspectives to our monthly dialogues as we explore how writing can evoke desire, longing, fear, reverence, irreverence, joy and awe—rather than merely represent what is known, our writing invites new inquiries, enters portals not yet anticipated. The collective offers an emergent space for these deeply personal, yet public explorations into meaning-making (Agamben, 1993).

We presented this paper as a multimedia performative presentation that drew from the diverse life experiences of women who have supported their academic and life journeys through membership in the Women Writing Women (WWW) collective. We shared personal stories, performed writing, dialogued on the evolution of this collective, and co-created with the audience gathered.

Throughout the four years of conforming, unforming, reforming and transforming within this collective, we have come to understand that the simple and seemingly isolated act of personal and academic writing is a complex social reality (Park, 2005). We articulate singularities in our writings and discussions as we simultaneously discover overlapping links within personal and collective metaphors. This presentation opened a much-needed dialogue on the complexity of transformational learning communities, particularly within academia. We encouraged dialogue among members of the audience to create their own writing collectives as a form of 'joyful revolt' against isolating hegemonies (Kristeva, 2002), opening up a new space to explore collectivity and emergent possibility.

Perspectives

Our writing is informed by perspectives in writing process theory (Cooper, 1986, Lensmire, 1994; Park, 2005) and communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Palmer, 1993) as we negotiate our individual and collective identities as creative women academics and writers through our participation in the WWW collective. Within a given time period, each writer reads or shares a piece of writing she is working on and receives responses from individuals in the group. These responses include critical feedback, spontaneous emotional responses, relational connections, connections branching off into new connections and sometimes even silence. Through this process, we develop as writers, academic and otherwise. In addition, we regularly engage in what Natalie Goldberg (1986) describes as wild writing, a timed freewrite together as a group on a chosen theme, topic or word. These are then shared by reading them aloud. It is remarkable how often writing reveals how our individually-accessed thoughts echo within the collective.

Our images, language, thoughts and perspectives are intricately interwoven, overlapping, juxtaposed, creating resonance, a collective emergence of written

neighboring interactions sounded out in our presence. In expressive (and often autobiographical) writing, the appropriation of language, invention, questioning, negotiating new meaning of language and shaping of the self occurs alongside our understandings of how we relate with others, with the world. We have discovered that we co-belong within the openings we co-create (Irigaray, 2002).

In our work as writers and researchers, we weigh and sift experiences, make choices regarding what's named as important or perceived as trivial, what is personal or public, what to include, and what to exclude. The tensions exist dialogically, since relation is always in relation to something. Instead of recording what happens 'next', we become the 'next,' nesting narratives in a meaningful context of our own making. By doing so, we hone our craft, and we write (our) lives (Park, 2005). Our writing has been made in\between relations with hegemonies and relations that we've co-created. As women in various stages of scholarly growth, we also negotiate our identities within and without the academy, as we witness each other's becoming (Bakhtin, 1986; Britzman, 1991): "To experience this co-belonging implies leaving representative thought and letting oneself go in the co-belonging to Being which already inhabits us, constitutes us, surrounds us" (Irigaray, 2002, p. 70).

Disquieting Tensions: A Fine Balance

There is a fine balance in the evocation of community: a negotiating of boundaries, relationships, responsibilities, learning how to hold and behold each other and our work. Through the journey of the collective, these negotiations are not without their perils. We have come to understand decision-making and collective engagement as reflexive and iterative processes where we must take the time to weave the personal and the social aspects and writerly ambitions of our lives together, enabling each of us to find meaning(ful) patterns. We are individually opened to the collective in ways that "complicate definition and give room for the possibility of creatively mated taxonomies and their wildly unpredictable offspring" (Williams, in Ellsworth, 2005, p. 147).

Ours is a fluid community, at times closed to new membership, at other times open to the recruitment of new members. We have found that there is a ceiling to the optimum number of active group members, approximately 12, due to the logistics of meeting in member homes and availability for regular meetings, with no more than 8 coming at a given time. Ours is a shifting membership, where there is a continual renewal of commitment. we have suffered loss: the death of a member, Karen; the unexplained disappearance of another; the leaving of others over unresolved conflict; people moving after graduation; people relocating or turning their attention to new challenges. Our challenge has been to learn how to keep dialogue open, even in the event of painful occurrences, making new decisions on how to move forward together; how to care for each other; how to work together even in absence; how to forefront the valuing of our work; how to live with loss, with reverence and irreverence, with humor.

What can be framed as a hindrance becomes a place of nourishment, a space that nurtures new attention to the nuances of life, thereby intensifying the experience of self,

identity and community. A fresh care of self has developed from our awareness, writing and sharing, and this has broadened our own acts of writing and reading. Instead of being isolated, we become part of a critical co-mentoring, a nurturing social network that contributes to transformative learning experiences individually and collectively.

Educational Importance

Our presentation at the Complexity Science in Educational Research conference opened a much-needed dialogue on transformational learning communities (Mezirow, 2000; O'Sullivan, 1999; Tisdell, 2003), particularly within academia. In our collective experience of WWW, we endeavored to share and educate, moving with the workshop participants towards the experience of 'a lived community of relation' (Irigaray, 2002) and 'a community of truth' (Palmer, 1993), within an embodied, mindful, intellectually stimulating and supportive environment. To set up this environment, we had anticipated creating a welcoming space, with offerings of tea and cookies, a circular seating, with an invitation to engage in our writerly and relational activities and conversations.

We found ourselves booked into a large auditorium, an immovable lecture space with fixed seating, during the lunch hour. Undeterred, we endeavored to creatively interrupt the space, locating ourselves outside the hall, encouraging people to bring their lunches and join us, inviting them to move into closer proximity with us, as our group members gathered at the front of the hall, simulating a regular meeting at one of our homes. Nané perched on the lectern, and Jeannie sitting on a side ledge between the audience, and the others in a horseshoe circle of chairs. Behind us, there was a slideshow consisting of images of our founding apple tree, a writing retreat, dissertation abstracts, acknowledgements of support, poems, rewrites, etc. An invisible barrier seemed to exist between ourselves and the audience, which we tried to bridge through our friendly and casual conversation. This is who we are, what we do, will you join us? The audience was then invited to do a five-minute freewrite with us on the theme of evoking desire. For the writing, Annie moved into the audience in order to cross the barrier between the audience and ourselves, only to find herself oddly unable to rejoin us as the workshop unfolded.

Our choice of our topic, evoking desire, was a dangerous one, opening up a troubling space of intimacy within academic spaces. Our suggestion to write to the topic came from a desire that we experience in our scholarly work: to explore irreverence, and to interrupt the expected. Our experience as we supported each writer as she sounded her writing voice was liberating, simultaneously awed and amazed; we return to our circle: This is our experience; when you receive the gift of others listening to you when you express your voice, you desire to open the space to others, to create a relationship of shared experience that provokes, evokes, a making visible the unsaid.

At the end of the five minutes, the audience was invited to join us in reading aloud our writings. It was remarkable, as each of us read, the overlapping, juxtapositions,

connections, openings, recognitions that emerged in our shared writings. Here we share some of the writing that emerged from this free write.

Annie:

"Evoking desire…and irreverence."
Reading Jill Dolan—she speaks of
pleasure in the classroom—Pleasure
evoked through learning, through
community, through interactions,
through risking…

In theatre, we talk about desire and the
dynamic that connects the actor to the
audience. The actor's job is to evoke the
audience's desire.

In the academy, pleasure and desire are
suspect. I choose, as a woman, to
subvert, convert, divert, the fear of
desire through irreverence—through the
play of words on page, words in air, on
skin—by body filling
spaces with pleasure.

Valerie:

Desire debilitates.
It holds me too long,
in colour, in form in texture,
without language – making me feel
foolish,
emptied of previous experience

Desire surrounds me
I wake up in it. I fall asleep in it
I can ignore it but I never get over it
I can shut it down but it doesn't go
away
I am desire
an undetermined inclination towards
impossibility

Wendy:

The concept of desire has always been
something frightening to me. It evokes a
notion of uncontrollable urges, longings

and pullings beyond cognitive control
or even perhaps awareness. Desire is
something that moves me out of my self,
not my essential self, but my face-the-
world self. The face-the-world self is a
carefully concocted and construed
version of my self, reflected as it is in the
gaze of others, yet controlled and
derived as a protective armor over the
fragile interior that is the essential self.

Giving in to desire means removing the armor,
or at least, allowing for the possibility there
are chinks in it, that loses the protective capacity
and opens my mind and soul to new
possibility—possibility for wandering to new,
unimagined places, playing with new ideas,
ideas that are unfamiliar, challenging or
otherwise unknown at this moment.

The desire to be challenged by others' thinking
and expressions of their own desire is central
to enlarging possibility, causing my own notions
to shift, morph, create or recreate the little
essential self that so often remains hidden and
protected.

Lynn:

How do I admit to desire under the gaze
of an academic gathering?

Are we allowed to desire in the
academy?… hunched over our
computers, sending out succinct
messages in responses to the associate
dean's secretary's requesting a meeting
on either one of the following 5 dates at
the following 15 times is anyone
available—Why do we not simply meet?
Irreverence is marching into the dean's
office and saying " X, we need to talk/
and really talk!…"

What was remarkable as we listened to members of our group and participants read aloud was the resonance, juxtapositioning, scaffolding of ideas, thoughts, feelings about academic loneliness, desire, hunger, isolation. If we touch a stranger, will they allow our

touch? Will they acknowledge our presence? Will we be welcome? How did the landscape of academia become a location without humour, without love? Who hears a child's lament? The desire to belong echoed from one freewriting to the next.

When you create a space and you invite a response to particular words, something happens: connections are made, offerings received, listening occurs that welcomes, and challenges new meaning making. An invitation is tendered to create anew within the presence of others, strangers and those known to us.

Two questions from our presentation/session that we continue to discuss are:

Why do you choose to be a women only writing group, especially in Education when you already spend all day with women?

The women writing women group evolved out of a conversation between a graduate student, Daniel Arsenault, who was then writing her M.A. thesis on women's abortion stories, and her thesis supervisor, Karen Meyer, then Director of the former Centre for the Study of Curriculum and Instruction. Our founding meeting occurred under the apple tree in the backyard of Lynn Fels' house. Fifteen women, all at various stages of their graduate careers gathered together under the boughs, drinking lemonade, and imagined a group of women writing together, who support and encourage each other in their writing and through their journey in the academy. At the time a number of these women were doing research around women's experience. Over time membership opened to include women outside academia, some of who, like Nané Jordan, have since entered the academy. Curiously, as Lynn confessed, the absence of men had not been noticed by her until a participant raised the question of membership at the conference: "Why do you have no men in the group?: This question has opened up a vigorous dialogue, which will no doubt continue as our collective engagement unfolds over time.

How do you give critical feedback to each other, while nurturing the relationship within the group and well-being of the collective itself? How do you separate the personal from the professional, when you are in this long term relationship, meeting within each other's homes, how do you be professionally critical?

We ask members to take the responsibility to indicate the kind of response they are seeking when sharing written work. We have learned from each other to give critical feedback in an honouring and respectful way. We seek not to keep the personal and public separate: they are intimately interwoven, and yet, we recognize the simultaneous tension and richness of the struggle to maintain a fine balance. Our presentation at the conference was the first time that we had opened our circle to the public, and to our relief and delight, the care of questioning and thoughtful exchanges, and the willingness of the audience to participate, shows how this way of engagement is possible in spaces that welcome the relational.

Conclusion

During the presentation, the audience was invited into dialogue with the panel, sharing with us their writing, as we responded to their questions about group dynamics, membership, and how we have navigated that fine balance between caring for the personal while critiquing our writing. With this writing, as with our presentation, we seek to provoke dialogue and encourage our readers (or listeners) to create their own writing collectives as a form of 'joyful revolt' against isolating hegemonics (Bahktin, 1986; Kristeva, 2002).

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