

University of South Australia

Claire A Woods

Taking Risks: An invitation to ...

Abstract:

This paper is about encouraging students to take risks as both writers and as readers. The two acts, reading and writing about and creating texts, go hand-in-hand and should be seen as kindred spirits: neither strange bedfellows nor even sometimes as im/perfect partners. Central to this proposition is the notion that to practise literary study as a reader and writer is to engage in a creative and critical process; to write/design/produce a text is likewise creative and critical, whether one writes fiction, nonfiction, poetry, drama, film scripts, or digital story. These are acts of imagining and of performance, of seeking something unexpected. Offering student writers and readers the opportunity to take risks in critiquing/creating enables an appreciation of the activity of imagining as essential to textual culture and practice, whether in reception or production. This paper pursues this idea with the additional focus on opening up response via presentation clearly defined as performative as a key strategy for students as they respond to literature.

Biographical note:

Claire Woods is Professor, Communication and Writing, at the University of South Australia. As teaching team leader, she is a member of the team that in 2000 won the Prime Minister's Award for University Teachers of the Year. Her research interest is in writing and textual culture, literary practice and narratives of war. She is research leader for the Narratives of War Research group, which focuses on representations of conflict and its aftermath and impact on individual lives. Recent publications are included in *Writings of War*, edited with Judith Timoney (2008) and *Remnants of War: Retracing the sites of Conflict and Reconciliation* (2009), Paul Skrebels (ed); both books published by Lythrum Press, Adelaide.

Keywords:

Creative Critical Reading—Risk Taking—Writing and Performance

We live in a ‘risk society’ says Ulrich Beck, a society in which the individual’s relationship to the institutions with which he or she is involved has fundamentally changed over the past century, such that in an educated and informed society, the individual relies not on loyalty to institutions of work and community for a sense of identity, but on the reflexive, projective self as primary agent for asserting and understanding one’s place in the world (Beck 1992). Beck suggests that what has emerged is a ‘reflexive modernity’, whereby the individual no longer needs core relationships with institutions (for example, of workplace, community or church) to establish self and identity. Anthony Giddens too ‘developed themes around the distinctive form reflexivity takes in modernity; about risk and trust; and about the self-creation of identity in late modernity through the reflexive shaping of our own biographical narratives’ (Lash and Wynne, in Beck 1992: 7). As teachers of writing we interact with students who, like us, operate in a ‘risk society’, and though our *métier* involves books and words in what seems like the safe confines of the writing or literary studies class, we cannot ignore, as Beck points out, the threat to the individual in the ‘risk society’ (Beck 1992). While our core curriculum business is not directly with the political and sociological issues raised by Beck and Giddens, we are, nevertheless, involved in enabling students to develop and use their skills as writers and readers, and to do this with an assured and confident reflexivity as thinking members of a global society.

This paper discusses offering students opportunities to experiment—and thus take risks—when they are engaged in literary practice, that is, when they are writing to create their own works and when they respond as creative readers to the work of other writers. I am not concerned with the kinds of risks that come with exploring difficult personal topics (although these are always a possibility), but rather with those that come when students experiment with form or with ways ‘into’ literature as readers. The general risk in writing is what Anna Gibbs describes as, ‘The risk of failure, the risk of speaking one’s thoughts in public, the risk of chance as we are led down paths we had not known we would take by the magic of words themselves’ (Gibbs 2006: 161). There is also a more substantial risk, which she suggests might be classified as ‘dangerous’:

There may certainly be a subjective sense of danger in writing when it comes to represent the possibility of self-exposure – a possibility perhaps particularly present in romantic conceptions of writing as the expression of an individual ‘voice’ whose speech identifies the writer, pinning her like a butterfly to a board where it is frozen on display, permanently exposed to the public gaze. (Gibbs 2006: 161)

Rather than focussing on the writing that might lead to such ‘self-exposure’, I am interested in how we can engage students by building a bridge between what they read of other writers (literary study) and the writing and the modes of representation and presentation they use to respond as readers. Responses might be within the domain of the fictocritical, a practice well accepted if not a given, in Australian writing programs. Undergraduate students might play as they construct texts in response to what they are reading, working the creative alongside the personal-reflexive, and integrating critical

analysis so that a coherent text and well-structured argument result. Making a fictocritical response to reading is fraught with dangers, which, potentially, include a lack of argument, a mismatch of personal/reflexive comment and critical review, or a muddle of genres rather than a carefully crafted work. But it is not only the merged genre or hybrid genre as argument that might emerge when we give students ways into writing a literary response; the result might also be a particularly insightful though conventional academic essay. Thus, it is the stepping-stones that give students the confidence to read courageously and then experiment in response that is of interest here.

It seems axiomatic that to become or develop as a writer one must also understand what it means to be a reader. As Umberto Eco says pertinently: ‘in the story there is always a reader, and this reader is a fundamental ingredient not only in the process of storytelling but also of the tale itself’ (1994: 1). Alberto Manguel says something similar:

we forget that every text is, in a very essential sense “interactive”, changing according to a particular reader at a particular hour and in a particular place. Every single reading carries the reader into the “spiral of interpretation”, as the French historian Jean-Marie Pailleur has called it. No reading can avoid it, every reading adds a vertiginous ascent.

...

There seems to be no Platonic archetype of any one reading, as there seems to be no Platonic archetype of any one book. The notion of a text being “passive” is only true in the abstract ... (Manguel 1999: 268-269)

These comments were made in the context of a discussion about the impact of digital technologies on the codex and on the nature of reading in a digital environment. At that time, Manguel called for ‘not a new humanist reader but a more effective one’ (270). He posed the following question:

in these new technological spaces, with these artefacts that will certainly coexist with (and in some cases supplant) the book—how will we succeed in still able being (*sic*) to invent, to remember, to learn, to record, to reject, to wonder, to exult, to subvert, to rejoice? By what means will we continue to be creative readers instead of passive viewers? (1999: 270)

Creative reading should be a key part of the writing student’s process. Iser’s notion of the interplay between the text and the implied and actual reader is pertinent here, such that in the act of reading, the reader makes sense of the myriad elements and possible connections allowed by the text, but also brought to the text by the reader him or herself (Iser 1978). Umberto Eco makes a further point about the complexity of the reader responding to a text, namely, that there are ‘two ways of going through a narrative text’ (1994: 27). The first model reader reads to find out how the story ends and this can be accomplished in one reading. The second level or model of reading demands a more critical and perhaps repeated reading:

every text is also addressed to a model reader of the second level, who wonders what sort of reader that story would like him to become and who wants to discover precisely how that model author goes about serving as a guide for the reader.

...

Only when empirical readers have discovered the model author, and have understood (or merely begun to understand) what is wanted from them, will they become full-fledged model readers. (Eco 1994: 27)

In this paper, I align the ‘creative reader’ (and the clearly implied ‘critical reader’), of whom Manguel writes, with the ‘full-fledged model reader’, who has the tools to understand what the author and text want of them or what they can take from the text in surprising ways. A challenge for the teacher of writing is to illuminate the process of reading, so that students ‘walk into’ texts to allow for such an encounter. Allowing for the unexpected in reading might then lead to the unexpected in the writing that emerges from that experience. An essential element in a writing curriculum in practice, therefore, is the introduction of ‘tools’ for reading to enable the writer/reader to approach their own work and that of others with the confidence to critique the text with some authority. Melding critical reading and creative process becomes important.

Writing teachers are familiar with processes such as the generative techniques used in writing classes to prompt creative work, e.g. journals, workshops, collaborative writing, automatic writing. To this list, might be added the strategy of presentation (an act of performance) and, specifically, the critical and creative potential offered by inviting students to perform using different modes to take advantage of the technologies available to them. The focus can be, firstly, for students to approach reading texts both creatively and critically and, secondly, to present their work in written form, and with visual/audio accompaniment in a formal seminar presentation. The focus here is not on writing in new media (Swiss and Damon 2006; Smith 2006) but rather on presentation/performance and not just reading drafts in a writing workshop but establishing a command of the audience in a formal presentation, integrating technologies as needed in a rhetorical exercise.

Oral rhetoric is more important than written rhetoric in most public situations. The ability to swing people’s opinions in speaking or formal presentation is what we have to do all the time. Setting presentation or performance as a key strategy for students as they read and write critically and creatively in response to literature, creates for most students at very least generic nerves if not an element of risk; of ‘self exposure’. After all, there is something relatively safe about reading, researching and writing to create an essay or paper. Yet changing technologies have altered the way words on the page are animated, brought off the page, or transformed in relation to the page. As Lunsford has suggested, in a discussion on the changing foci of the discipline of rhetoric and writing:

No change has been more significant than the return of orality, performance and delivery to the field of rhetoric and writing and to the classroom. ... the increasing hegemony of writing throughout the nineteenth century had hidden the body and performance from

critical view and shifted attention away from oral and embodied delivery to textual production of the printed page. Beginning in the mid twentieth century, however, and growing exponentially in the last two decades, the arts and crafts associated with delivery, the fifth canon of rhetoric, have moved to the centre of our discipline. (Lunsford 2007: 7)

To drive home the point she notes:

To view writing as an active performance, that is as an act always involving the body and performance – enriches I.A. Richards’s notion of the inter-animation of words; it is not only that individual words shift meaning given their context within a sentence, but also that words shift meaning given their embodied context and their physical location in the world. (2007: 7)

Gibbs too confirms, citing Shoshana Felman (1980), that ‘Writing is performative’, in that ‘literary writing is a speech act, not simply a statement’ (Gibbs 2006: 159). She carries this further saying, ‘while performativity and representation are poles towards which writing tends’, this idea needs to be extended to include the feedback possibilities between audience and text, thus interactivity (159-160). Lunsford and colleagues at Stanford University have been deliberate in focussing on ‘students’ live enactment of their own writing’, and asking how more performance/delivery can be included in writing pedagogy and in assessment, and thence into a theory of teaching writing (Fishman et al. 2005: 226).

How then to make this happen in the creative writing class/workshop, where the act of reading one’s writing (a form of delivery) is common as a means for encouraging collaborative listening, sharing and feedback? Similarly, in the literary studies class, reading a prepared paper is common enough. There are preliminary steps that might be taken if students are to be given the opportunity as Smith says of connecting ‘creative practice with the poetics of writing via the process of analysing and theorising literature’ (Smith 2005: xii, in Dawson 2006: 28). The additional focus on performance as Lunsford et al. urges extends the opportunity for students to engage in the *techne*, the art and craft of writing and delivery.

To take a close look at this, I describe the way in which these links are created in two upper level writing courses: Literary Practice and Textual Cultures. A starting point with which writing students are familiar prior to enrolling in these courses, is the creative-critical practice of ‘textual intervention’, designed to explore textual differences and preferences, as set out by Pope (1995):

A range of interactive and inventive strategies in which readers are encouraged to engage in structured yet playful re-writing of any text they meet. Such ‘textual interventions’ include: re-centering’; ‘re-genring’, the generation of various kinds of ‘parallel’, ‘alternative’ and ‘counter-text’ (writing with, across and against the grain of the initial text) as well as exercises in paraphrase, imitation, parody, adaptation, hybridisation and collage. (1995: xiv)

With this as a working background, writing students enter these upper level courses in which they are invited to read a wide range of texts and at the same time come to terms with a range of literary theories to apply as they approach authors and texts. They are invited to take a dynamic approach to reading and responding to diverse texts and encouraged to see creative work as being firmly aligned with the reading of other authors' work, that is, with critical and interpretive second level reading (in Umberto Eco's terms). Having prepared their written responses in substantial draft, they are invited to offer their responses in a formal presentation, that is, to perform their work using PowerPoint or any other mode (audio/visual/digital) they choose. Their polished written paper is expected one week later. The impact of the inter-related activities of reading, researching and writing, of designing a presentation and performing and then rewriting for final submission is often crucial to the way they conceptualise and then re-conceptualise their topic. We reinforce the creative impact of seeing reading and writing as operating on a continuum, as Pope asserts (Pope 2005: 198). Of this process, he writes:

Writers in effect re-write the world (including other people's words) every time they set pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. Conversely, readers re-write in their own minds what they read every time they set eyes to page or screen. 'Re-writing' thus emphasises the active and interactive aspects of wor(l)d creation that characterise the open-ended continuum we know as reading-writing ... writing-reading. (2005: 198)

For Pope, the general counterpart is the process of 're ... creation' (his word), in which he includes 'Re-reading', because 'it includes the more receptive and responsive aspects of the process' (198).

The pedagogical strategy is to take writing students into the world of critical theory and to align this with their writing. In the first assignment, they are encouraged to choose two texts (poems, short fiction or extracts from longer works), which have seemingly little in common. The base resource is *The English Studies Book* (Pope 2002). Students are encouraged to take this as a starting point in choosing texts. Difference is stressed in order that the notions of de-familiarisation, reading against the grain, as well as comparison can come into play. They must also adopt at least two critical perspectives or operate eclectically in relation to literary theory in approaching the texts (i.e. they might approach the text from, for example, a feminist, Marxist, formalist, structuralist, or post-modern stance or a combination of theoretical perspectives). In the final assignment, they undertake an in-depth study of one author, applying the same strategies as a way of reading and responding to the author's corpus. In the process, they are involved in:

- accepting reading as a creative practice—including using the possibilities generated by textual intervention
- engaging in reflexive practice as a writer/reader
- writing to describe and explicate using literary theory/ies

- writing to present/perform to others and then revise for assessment—the latter often an iterative process as the feedback loop and self-reflexivity come into play as a result of the performance.

In their presentation, students must not read from a written paper. Instead, they are encouraged to use audio and visual, digital or kinetic modes to draw the audience into the texts being discussed. This is, after all, an exercise in dynamic involvement, not in passive reading. Thus, students might bring old hardback editions of works to pass around (the tactile experience of the text), play audio recordings, music or interviews, show items from YouTube, or present a miscellany of complementary visual images, paintings and photographs, and then accompany these with readings of works they themselves have generated from their interactions with the texts they have chosen. They might invite their classmates to read or perform also. Given the digital resources now available, the permutations for response are vast.

Opening up the response via presentation clearly defined as performative, offers opportunity for critical self-reflexivity. But with this comes risk. Standing before an audience without the full written text as a prop, and arguing to persuade the audience for many is a real challenge. It is also one which most see as particularly and often intensely personal because of their close involvement in the texts and authors they choose, as much as with the activity of presentation. To illustrate something of this process, I describe (with her formal written permission and review of the discussion here) one student's work and experience, chosen because in terms of the points being made, her work reflects effectively the coalescing of creative and critical reading illuminated by the process of the interplay between the preparation for presentation/performance and the final writing of a paper.

Wendy reviewed the poet and novelist, Luke Davies, reading all his published works, and then focussing on three texts as representative of his work—a poem and two novels, one of which, *Candy*, was also made into a film. Taking a critical perspective based in psychological theory, she examined Davies' focus on 'underlying tensions of multiple and fragmented ideas of 'self' (Raine 2010). To present the review and then write the final assignment, she adopted a self-reflexive and fictocritical approach, being quite deliberate in her use of both 'academic voice' (carried primarily in detailed endnotes) and 'informal narrative voice'. Her paper and presentation took her reader/audience on 'a journey of self discovery', recalling her childhood, describing and showing photographs, and marking significant stages in her life journey with her reading of Davies' works, as well as linking scenes snatched from the film and other available audio-visual resources on the author. She recreated scenes and dialogue with her family including the emergence of a family secret. As she pointed out in her presentation, the re-reading of Davies and the writing/re-writing of the paper came at a time in her life when issues of childhood and adult-self were being re-fashioned for her, as she was in the last stages of pregnancy. She concluded with the performance of a poem she had written to capture her sense of that journey. Perhaps she might have created such a paper without the presentation. However,

her understanding that the audience was to be engaged differently prompted other avenues for representing Luke Davies to her classmates. The safe environment of the classroom meant she could take several risks—personal and academic—in designing her paper—surely an exercise in *techne*, crafting for delivery.

The presentation as performance and the subsequent paper are a very particular example of risk-taking in creative practice, which in Raymond Williams' terms is, 'the active struggle for new consciousness through new relationships' (in Pope 2005: 11). It is perhaps not too far-fetched to suggest that the creativity in such a reading/writing/presenting/performing/re-writing exercise was, as Pope says, 'more than mere 'consciousness-raising', but rather, 'the radical re-fashioning of consciousness' (2005: 11). Pope points out that for Williams:

'creative practice' involves grappling deep within the self and within one's relations with others: an attempt to wrest from the complexities and contradictions we have internalised (he uses Gramsci's term 'hegemony') something that helps us *live to better purpose*. (Pope 2005: 11 [my emphasis])

It is the last phrase that resonates when I contemplate providing a curriculum in creative practice (here, writing and/or literary studies) for students who with us, live in the 'risk' society and who will continue to make their way as responsible and critically reflexive members of that society (as Giddens, whom I cited at the beginning of this paper, suggests). A process in writing pedagogy that is founded in *techne* and performance as part of the creative reading/writing continuum offers students a space for a particular creative practice which has a bearing on their lives as 'citizen-poets and citizen-rhetoricians who reshape culture' (Berlin 1996: xii-xiii, cited in Raymond 2010: 385). It encourages students to adopt a role as authoritative agents who are intellectually adventurous and confident when exposed to the public gaze.

Works cited

- Beck, Ulrich 1992 *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans Mark Ritter, London, SAGE
- Berlin, James 1996 *Rhetorics, Poetics and Cultures*, Urbana, IL: NCTE
- Dawson, Paul 2006 'Writers, Critics and Literary Authority', in N Krauth and T Brady (eds) *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice*, Teneriffe, Qld, Post Pressed, 21-31
- Eco, Umberto 1994 *Six Walks in the Fictional Woods*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press
- Felman, Shoshana 1980 *Le Scandale du corps parlant*, Paris: Sieul
- Fishman, Jenn, Lunsford, Andrea, McGregor, Beth and Mark Outeye 2005 'Performing Writing, Performing Literacy', *College, Composition and Communication*, 57: 2 (December), 224-251
- Gibbs, Anna 2006 'Writing and Danger: The Intercorporality of affect', in N Krauth and T Brady (eds) *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice*, Teneriffe, Qld: Post Pressed, 157-167
- Iser, Wolfgang 1978 *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press

- Johnson, Robert 2010 'Craft Knowledge: Of Disciplinarity in Writing Studies', *College, Composition and Communication*, 64: 4 (June), 673-690
- Lash, Scott and Brian Wynne, 1992 'Introduction', in Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: Towards a New Modernity*, trans Mark Ritter, London, SAGE
- Lunsford, Andrea 2007 'Key Questions for a New Rhetoric', in SE Thomas (ed) *What is the New Rhetoric?*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 5-15
- Manguel, Alberto 1999 *Into the Looking-Glass Wood*, London: Bloomsbury
- Pope, Rob 1995 *Textual Intervention-Critical and Creative Strategies for Literary Studies*, London: Routledge
- Pope, Rob 2002 *The English Studies Book*, 2nd edition, London: Routledge
- Pope, Rob 2005 *Creativity-Theory, History, Practice*, London: Routledge
- Raymond, Richard 2010 'Re-Placing Lit in Comp II: Pragmatic/Humanistic Benefits', *Teaching English in the Two-Year College*, 37: 4 (May), 384-396
- Smith, Hazel 2006 'The Posthuman and the Writing Process: Emergence, Algorithm, Affect and Multimodality', in N Krauth and T Brady (eds) *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice*, Teneriffe, Qld: Post Pressed 170-183
- Swiss, Thom and Maria Damon 2006 'New Media Literature', in N Krauth and T Brady (eds) *Creative Writing: Theory Beyond Practice*, Teneriffe, Qld, Post Pressed, 65 -77